

THE KIAI

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Newsletter of THE AIKIDO INSTITUTE

PERSEVERANCE

or

Training in the heart of despair

Three ruminations

on why it is a good thing to adopt

a discipline that is difficult and challenging.

an essay in fulfillment of a requirement for Nidan

Part 1 – Overcoming Despair

Action is the antidote to despair

- Joan Baez

For some time now, doing the movements of Aikido has given me a feeling of nausea. Usually, it is only a mild nausea; sometimes it's rather strong. Until quite recently however, I've never trained – never done tai no henko, never done any sort of kokyu ho, never done kokyu dosa, never practiced any of the techniques – without feeling at least a mild nausea.

I know that it is the movements themselves that trigger this feeling. It's not always at the dojo, so it's not the feel of the mat under my feet, the smell of sweat, the sound of the clap-in, nor the sight of flowers on the shomen. I was once walking up Bancroft, and ran against a mass of students moving blindly down the street, as bleary eyed undergrads so often do. I two-stepped out of the way of a young man who tried to scoot around some people in front of him, with little regard for who might be coming the other way. The tai no henko worked quite well – no one collided with anyone (proof that Aikido indeed works) – but I then had to sit on a nearby wall to recover, as I was doubled over, fighting not to vomit on the sidewalk.

I don't intend to go into why this is so, other than to say

it is a "sense memory." This is a term used by some actors, and it refers to the fact certain things trigger certain emotions. A certain sight, a certain sound, a certain smell, can summon powerful emotions. Certain ways of moving also act as triggers. The triggers vary, of course, from individual to individual. A piece of music that moves one person to weep hot bitter tears might merely provoke a snort of derision from another.

It's always seemed to me to be a strikingly behavioralistic, quite Pavlovian acting technique – but also pragmatic and not necessarily mechanistic. Just because acting a certain way provokes a certain feeling doesn't make people into pushbutton automatons. Reactions are more nuanced and more chaotic than that.

I also strongly believe that it is possible to reprogram one's sense memories. It's possible to grow to like a piece of music, it's possible to begin to appreciate in incomprehensible style of art, it's possible to suddenly really enjoy particular foods, and I need to believe that one can learn to once again feel great joy and exuberance when performing certain motions. I

have to believe this last point, because otherwise I will never have any hope of ever practicing Aikido ever again.

I'm actually quite certain that this last point is true, because it's happening for me. I've occasionally had practices where I've scarcely felt bad at all, and I've had one or two where I've actually felt good, and only good. I know it can be done, because with me and for me, it is being done.

Time is a critical ingredient. One must allow enough time for the transformation of the sense memory to take place. It takes a while for the reassociation to sink down into the skin, into the bones, into the marrow.

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**5036 TELEGRAPH AVENUE at 51ST
OAKLAND, CALIFORNIA 94609
www.aikidoinstitute.org**

Part 2 – Overcoming a lack of talent.

*The only thing you can do easily is to be wrong
– and that’s hardly worth the effort.
– Mathematician*

(The Phantom Tollbooth by Normal Juster)

No one has ever mistaken me for Fred Astair. I don’t have that kind of grace. No one has ever mistaken me for Jesse Owens. I don’t have that kind of speed. No one has ever mistaken me for ÉI won’t belabor the point, but it is simply a fact that I am not a natural athlete. I was always the last kid picked for kickball. I never did a team sport. I was actually discouraged from doing so by my classmates.

One of the things that I always appreciated about martial arts training in general, and Aikido practice in particular, is that there is a place for non-athletes. A student of the swordsman, calligrapher, and Zen practitioner Yamoaka Teshu never did learn to swing his sword straight, but he eventually became one of his senior students. Bruce Lee was severely myopic, had trouble maintaining weight, and one leg was shorter than the other. Jigaro Kano (the founder of Judo) was very sickly and weak as a child. O’Sensei was also.

At the time I was in school, in team sports you were not welcome unless you could contribute to the team’s success. You could join only if you were good enough. The Aikido group I joined as a teenager welcomed everyone, irregardless of age, size, gender, or athletic ability. And one of the most important lessons I learned from my Aikido sensei at this time was “If I thought you were wasting your time, I’d let you know. And just because you’re not like Harry doesn’t mean you’re wasting your time.” (Harry was the senior-most student, and very talented and very humble).

I later discovered a few other groups and pastimes that welcome those who are not the creme de la creme. For example, there are a few amateur softball leagues who only want to play for fun (to the consternation of certain other teams in the league). However, since winning is a goal, even in these groups there can be strong pressure to put up or get out. The nearest analog to martial arts, in my personal experience, is running. I had a period when I regularly did 10K, half-marathons, and a marathon.

Running, especially distance running, is rather suited for the non-athlete. There isn’t a great deal of skill involved. There are some considerations of proper form: it’s inefficient to let one’s feet shuffle or drag, how your toes are pointing does matter, and you should keep your upper body and arms relaxed and moving. It’s also quite important to be aware of one’s breathing. (It almost sounds like a certain martial artÉ). But running doesn’t require scads of training. You’ve pretty much been doing these movements all of your life. Probably the most important quality in running is determination – persistence — perseverance. In a marathon, this

quality is most critical around the 20-24 mile mark, when a runner “hits the wall”.

It’s a bit hard to describe to someone who hasn’t experienced it. It resembles an out of body experience; one of those dreams where you are outside looking at your own body. The knees don’t want to lift anymore, the feet don’t want to go forward any more. The breathing is becoming ragged, but strangely, not difficult. There aren’t any aches and pains (that comes after the race) but everything feels heavy, as though moving under water. Movement at this point is purely mental. There is an awareness that your limbs are moving under your direction, and only because you are willing it to be so. There is also an awareness that you must not stop, you must keep moving, you must not stop, you need to put one foot in front of the other, you must not stop. You have become momentum personified.

This is not unlike the feeling that happens when doing a few hundred boken strikes, or a couple of hundred tsukis.

Although there are certainly first place finishers, and a race is certainly a competition between the topmost runners, for the majority of the practitioners, the only competition is against oneself. Post-race, the first question asked is whether you’ve set a new personal best. Even though you are running “against” other runners, the goal for the majority is to finish against your own yard stick. Even when you don’t, can’t reasonably expect, to set a new personal best – that happened in your younger, stronger, faster days, and this course is too hilly, and there’s a noticeable headwind, and the temperature is too hot – you still have a good idea of what would be, to you, an acceptable finish. The yardstick, the definition of “acceptable”, is set by you and you alone.

It’s very difficult to describe what it feels like to set a goal, prepare and train for it, encounter unexpected obstacles (an injury, a difficult hill, an unexpected pain), and then somehow manage to push through those obstacles. Then to pause – to stand still for a moment and consider what you have done. There is certainly a feeling of triumph, of joy, of exuberance, of knowing that you can actually complete a difficult task.

Then there’s the feeling of planning for the next one, of looking forward, and planning to do it all over again.

In all of this, there is again the critical ingredient of time. You have to allow enough time. You have a training plan, and you have to stick to it, and slowly build up your base. It truly can not be rushed, and you have to be methodical and patient.

All of this looks like, sounds like, smells like, tastes like, budo training.



The best thing to do when you don't possess much physical talent is to find an activity with these ingredients: it must be challenging, even to those who are gifted. It must allow for a wide range of participants. It must have the concept of setting a personal best. It must have a way of noting and recording a personal best.

Then, the only ingredients you need to contribute are: a hunger to improve and perseverance.



Part 3 – A few cultural considerations

Fall down seven times – get up eight.

- Buddhist saying.

Sisu.

Sisu is a Finnish word; it is the Finnish national character. Like certain non-English words (like, oh, here is a wild example: 'k'i) it's rather difficult to define, not just because of the denotations (the dictionary definitions of the word), but also because of the connotations (the feelings and sense memories the word evokes). It is often translated as 'determination' or 'fortitude' or 'guts' or 'perseverance in the face of great odds'. The connotations can be somewhat animalistic and fatalistic. (The Finnish tend to have a dark sense of humor. Sometimes it is so dark as to be undetectable to those who are not Finnish.)

An example: He is lying on the ground, face down, blood streaming from his face, nose, and scalp. A vicious kick to the ribs. A voice sneers "Give up yet? Had enough?" He pushes himself up to his knees, manages to pull one knee forward, shakily stands up. Swaying back and forth, blinking the sweat and blood out of his eyes, he rasps one word: "No".

An example: She walks away, not looking back, staring stonily straight ahead, not blinking, not daring to let tears come. She knows her child will have a better life, she knows her child will have a longer life. She knows she will never see her child again. She can feel a hard stone forming in her chest, she can feel the turmoil in her stomach. She can feel her face becoming an unsmiling mask. She strides away, not saying a word, not screaming, not making a sound, only going on and forward because she knows the value of, and her feelings for, what she has left behind.

Sisu is when an animal chews its leg away to escape from a trap, because to remain trapped is unthinkable. Sisu is when a soldier continues dragging a comrade on, because to leave anyone behind is unthinkable. Sisu is when anyone continues, even though in the heart of despair, despite having been betrayed, even though being mocked, even though alone, even though heartsick, injured, and nauseous – because to surrender to the despair is unthinkable.

There is a certain animalistic stubbornness in sisu.

There are certainly moments of joy, after having survived a bad situation. Sometimes there are friends to congratulate you and praise you. But just as often, there is no reward whatsoever, no acknowledgment whatsoever. This is the most essential ingredient, this Sisyphean element. It's critical to persist, to continue, to persevere, without any expectation of any outcome whatsoever.

The heart of sisu is doing what is right, simply because it is right.

The heart of sisu is to persevere, because not to is unthinkable.

Conclusion

We think in generalities, but we live in detail

- Russell Whitehead

Mathematician and Philosopher.

"If I can do it, then anyone can"

As with most cliches, this is absolutely true – but through overuse, has become absolutely meaningless.

So, this is my detailed way of assigning a personal meaning to the cliché. The very first day we walked into the dojo, near the benches on the right hand side there is, framed, the dojo's logo and motto. I was struck by the motto: 'awareness', 'humility' and 'perseverance'.

To put it another way: You don't have to be Finnish to exhibit the qualities of sisu.

LARS ERIC HOLM



WHY DO WE DO GAMES IN THE JUNIOR'S PROGRAM?

It's a very sneaky way of teaching them basic Aikido concepts. They think it's fun; you get their full attention; and it's educational, not only in learning the basics of Aikido but skills they can use outside the classroom. And that's what it's all about. How can we learn things, as adults and children that will follow us out the door into the real world?

These skills are not only physical, but mental as well. We learn body control but we also learn how to deal with different people. Some kids come in hyper, some come in exhausted, and some come in just to play with their friends. It's a blending of very different personalities. Adults have problems the same way, so it's fun to see the kids try to deal with other kid's eccentricities. They are so honest about not wanting to deal with it.

Things start jumping the minute they come in, take off their shoes, and hop onto the mat. This is when the initial bonding occurs between the students. Some take the time to practice techniques and others just want to let out steam and

try to see how many people it takes to make a pile before I come over there to rescue the victim on the bottom. Every day is different. Some days it's very quiet and other times I have to line them up early so they don't hurt each other or put a hole in the wall. You never know what is going to happen. There are rules that I have to tell them repeatedly, but all in all they remember for only a few minutes.

I begin the formal part of the class with getting them to put themselves back together. This includes trying to find the line to put their knees on and to put their gis back into some order. This can be quite a challenge for some kids. Some kids' gis never fall off and for others, there's little hope. After bowing and clapping in, we start the class off with running around in a circle. This gets their blood really pumping. But it's really interesting to see that all of a sudden they have no energy to run. All that energy they had before class has mysteriously disappeared. We then try to form a big circle with arms length room between each other. I think this is one of the hardest concepts to achieve. I must admit that if my daughter is next to me, I do try to poke her from time to time. We do all the stretches and movements just like an adult's class. The only exception is that there is a lot more laughing and talking than in the adult's class. Some kids are really good at keeping a conversation going and going.....

Games can come up anytime during the class but mostly they come near the end of class after they've been really trying hard to concentrate on the technique of the day. There's only so much they can handle before they fall apart. When a game comes the energy level goes up again. All the energy you saw before class has mysteriously reappeared. Ah, but there's a lesson to be had. Sneaky isn't it?

I like to do line drills with two lines. You can throw all kinds of things at them. You can make them roll, shikko, crawl on their belly. You can turn on their other senses by asking them to close their eyes and try to find you while you snap your fingers.

Another game that I like to do is done with a piece of insulating conduit or a swimming noodle. This teaches them movement and timing. If they don't time it right the noodle will clip them. It gets their body and mind to work as one. You can see it on their faces as their bodies start to move back and forth as the noodle goes back and forth. They have to time it just right, kind of like the timing needed for certain techniques like a direct irimi nage. If you don't time it just right, the technique cannot be executed properly.

There's another game that teaches balance and connection with your training partner. Two kids stand facing each other and are at arms reach and feet parallel with their shoulders. They place their palms together and they try to unbalance each other. You have to set and explain the rules clearly. They are supposed to be learning balance and connection, not how fast and hard they can get their partner to fall.

Other games that we implement and their purpose are:

GAME/TECHNIQUE	PURPOSE
Two step partner practice	Blending/Coordination/Timing
Hands pushing/following	Balance/Connection
Line drill	Everything
Dodge ball	Blending/Balance
Balloons (in the air/between bodies)	Cooperation/Focus

There are many other games that we play and some of them come from the students themselves. They are always more than willing to ask that their game be played next. But alas, the class is over and it is time to try to get them back into shape and again find the line for their knees.

But it's so rewarding to see their smiling faces. And even if they came in a little depressed or under a lot of stress from school or home, you can see that practice has generated a smile on their cute little faces. And that's really what it's all about.

MARTHA EVANS-HOLM



HELP!!

(or memoirs of a 4th Kyuu)

There I was minding my own business when suddenly, during the spin cycle, I realized that there are two things in Aikido that drive me up the wall.

The first is asking for help. I'm a New Yorker. We never ask for help. It's a sign of weakness. Although, living in the Bay Area now for some time, I've come to realize that it's wonderful being from New York and living someplace else. That way you can have all the advantages without any of the disadvantages.

I must confess that the thought had occurred to me of joining a dojo far, far away, where I can learn to do a decent back roll, then come back to my real dojo and not seem like such a clutz. But I guess that would defeat the purpose and would probably just compound the problem. The truth of the matter is that whenever I have asked for help, even from the most graceful uke, the request has been met with great charm and eagerness to help. It seems that even though asking for help exposes vulnerability, most aikidoists want you to improve. In the long run, it makes them stronger too. So if you work with a partner and you get to know them through training, and you both want to help each other improve, then I guess Aikido really is a martial art of peace. Way to go O Sensei!

The second is the phrase "work it out for yourself." WHAT DO YOU MEAN "WORK IT OUT FOR MYSELF!" I come to class. You're supposed to tell me! Well, not necessarily so. I remember one time after a test, when you're in that tiny back room with all of the instructors, I commented to god (Kim Sensei to you) that it was amazing that all of the instructors, when doing the same technique, somehow do it slightly differently. God responded in his thunderous voice saying "THAT'S WHY IT'S CALLED A MARTIAL ART." I agreed with him immediately and made sure not to bump into a burning bush during my hasty departure.

After thinking about it though, it does make sense. Aikido is a gorgeous art form. As with any art form, you have to make it your own. You become one with the art. That not only takes practice, it takes time. And that's probably what I notice when I see the senior students train. They have worked it out for themselves and have become one with their art. And everyone does it slightly differently. And why not? After all, it is called a martial art.

EDDIE GUARDARRAMAS



BOOK REVIEW

Sensei: a thriller, by John Donohue
Thomas Dunne Books, St. Martin's Press, 2003,
\$23.95
ISBN: 0-312-28812-3

A well-known sensei is found dead in his dojo in Los Angeles. On the wall, written in blood, is the character for "Ronin," a masterless samurai.

In New York, Connor Burke, the narrator, is going about his life: training with Yamashita sensei and working as a part-time instructor at a small college on Long Island. His older brother is, conveniently for the story, a homicide cop. Micky, the brother, is working on the murder of a martial arts instructor, and one of the instructor's associates has fingered Connor for the death, so Connor is involved. Since he can read Japanese, he translates the characters written on the wall of the crime scene: "Ronin," as in Los Angeles, and also: "I am here."

Once Connor is cleared of suspicion for the New York murder, his brother uses him as consultant on the martial arts aspects of the crime, and the story builds to a final climactic duel. The plot is not the main reason for reading this book; it's designed to incorporate the author's opinions about martial arts, using a fictional character.

Donohue writes the training scenes very well. He has studied oriental martial arts for twenty-five years, and has

written non-fiction books about them.

Fairly early in the book, Connor says "In Japan, white is the color of emptiness and humility. Many of us had started our training in arts like judo or karate where...the gi were traditionally white as a symbol of humility...a gi is not an expression of individuality. People wanting to make statements should probably rent billboards."

Or: "The nonverbal elements of communication and perception are highly valued by the Japanese; they prize their ability to grasp the essence of people and things using methods we can only guess at. They call this ability haragei...On days when he's really cooking, it seems as if Yamashita can actually read your mind."

I think most aikido students would enjoy reading this book, in spite of the fact that aikido is mentioned only once: "Aikido in general is a beautiful and, in highly trained hands, somewhat effective art." The man is entitled to his opinion.

ALBERTA HANKENSON



ADVANCE HEALTH CARE DIRECTIVES – THEY ARE NOT JUST FOR “OLD” PEOPLE

Have you thought about who you would want to make your medical decisions if your doctor considered you unable to give "informed consent"? An Advance Health Care Directive is the best way to make sure that your health care wishes are known and considered if for any reason you are unable to speak for yourself.

A number of Advance Health Care Directive forms have been drafted to implement California law. The California Medical Association (CMA) has produced a form with which doctors are familiar. Therefore, it is a good form to use. Kaiser provides them for free to its members. They are available from the CMA for \$5. The CMA can be reached as follows: phone - (800) 882-1CMA; fax - (415) 882-5195; internet . Or I can provide you with a CMA form for a nominal charge (\$1.70) to cover my costs.

The CMA form explains what an Advance Health Care Directive is and answers questions about who you can appoint, what s/he can and cannot do, etc. But in brief, the form enables you to give authority to another person to make decisions about your medical care if you become unable to make these decisions yourself. You can and should also name alternate "agents" aka "attorneys-in-fact" in case the first person you name is not able or willing to act for you. The agent you name should be someone that you trust to carry out your wishes and to get the information necessary to make your medical decisions; someone that is not afraid to take on the medical establishment, if need be.

The form also provides you the opportunity to express your wishes regarding continuation of life support if you have a terminal condition or are in an irreversible coma. You can be as specific or general as you want.

You never know what may happen and when. There is no downside to doing an Advance Health Care Directive. It gives you the opportunity to determine who you want speaking for you. You can change it or terminate it at any time.

The CMA form is straightforward and simple to use. You should be able to complete it yourself. However, I would be happy to answer any questions you might have about Advance Health Care Directives or completing the form.

KATHY MONTGOMERY



SHOW THEM AIKIDO

For me, aikido is not about words, it's about action. Whenever someone who has never seen aikido asks me about it, I want to show them aikido, not tell them about it. The old saying, "A picture is worth a thousand words," says everything when it comes to my feelings about aikido.

So, how would I explain aikido?



Aikido starts in hanmi, a balanced stance that allows movement in any direction.

Aikido techniques use both throws...



and pins...



Aikido teaches you to roll and fall without injury... usually.



Aikido uses several weapons to teach movement and balance ...



... and to show that the weapon is secondary to the person wielding it.



Above all else, aikido is beautiful.



PHOTO ESSAY BY STEVE KILMER