

Life as a Martial Artist

An essay submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the rank of Yondan

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February 25, 2012

Basics

I have become more fascinated than ever with the most basic elements of techniques. What used to seem complex is now broken down into primary movements and positions. This leads to simplicity, since any technique, no matter how much difficulty it may seem to contain, can be understood in straightforward terms. It also is the key to mastery. Every time I watch O'Sensei videos or attend seminars with one of the old masters, I see minimal wasted motion, and always hear about a profound connection with the most basic practices, such as tae no henko and kokyu ho. I understand those as providing the body orientation and basis for all basic techniques, which in turn allow us to put combinations of interesting positions and techniques together into just about any variation of Aikido repertoire. The more I focus on these elemental movements, the easier it is to train with diverse styles of Aikido and even other martial arts. At some level they all relate to the same set of core principles. This means, ultimately, that every time I take a breath, put one foot in front of the other, or move my body in any one of thousands of ways, I have an opportunity to practice Aikido.

Teaching

I have known since childhood that teaching is my primary talent, and believe it is what God placed me on earth to do. In Aikido, I have found myself in teaching situations since 4th kyu, so I view 4th dan as a new qualification and the latest in a long series of confirmations of my teaching credentials. Now that I have reached this degree of competency I feel ready to start a dojo, which I will do in the immediate future with the blessing of my beloved teacher, Patricia Hendricks Shihan.

A strong understanding of basics is what I value most when teaching. For example, the exact placement of the feet in koshinage, or a focus on precise body positioning and alignment around a center line in weapons partner practices, makes all the difference in the world for a beginning student. The beneficial results are often immediate, and this is a source of real joy in real time! When students discover they can execute a previously difficult technique, Aikido becomes fun for them.

Some teachers believe that very little should be explained on the mat and students should find ways to absorb techniques through silent observation and deep training experience. I respect this view and agree in principle, but this agreement is qualified and deserves explanation: I believe that all students should be meticulous in their efforts to acquire techniques as independently as possible, and should train deeply over many years. I have done this and will continue to do so, and have used my teaching ability to teach myself in ways that only a teacher can. However, I know through many years of teaching both on and off the mat that everyone learns differently. Taking a realistic view about student retention and gradually increasing commitment over time, I often explain things to people so they can readily understand. I withhold virtually nothing from serious and dedicated students. So when I work with students on an individual basis, and they have shown their commitment and desire to truly master the art, I am very generous with detail and discussion if I feel it will enhance or accelerate their learning.

and not hinder their development. I have seen excellent results with this, and do recognize that a combination of these approaches should be applied judiciously. Ultimately, self discovery of Aikido is what leads to mastery, and it is my hope and faith that serious students will become increasingly independent and follow this path. In fact, I hope to see my students exceed me over time and contribute to the depth of this beautiful martial art.

Finally, and most importantly, I want to express the importance of revering one's teachers. One master quoted to me: "Before you can be master, you must obey." I am deeply grateful to all the dedicated teachers who have passed their wisdom onto me, and will continue to seek teaching and wisdom throughout my life. Regardless of the method of instruction, the competence of the teacher, or the personalities involved, gratitude for one's teachers is the first step in being able to receive their knowledge. This gratitude will remain with me for the rest of my life.

Abstract Concepts

I have frequently received instruction involving abstract ideas. For example, as I prepared for this yondan demonstration, my teacher often reminded me to work with the energy of my ukes. Ever since I began Aikido, I have been asked to put into practice such things as blending with others, working with energy, extending ki, and connecting with ukes. Over a long time I have begun to realize that there is a mind-body-spirit connection that is expressed through these abstract and beautiful concepts. On a physical level, for example, working with energy could simply mean identifying and reacting to the dynamic and static physical forces involved with mass and gravity through distance and time. Connecting with someone, on the most basic level, translates to feeling the muscle tension and relaxation and identifying what is happening with tendons, bones, and tissues. There are also psychological connections, such as drawing attention to an atemi while disguising the fact that a throw or pin is about to occur, in order to unbalance and surprise an uke. The spiritual side of this can either be a driving force or a result of such applications, and includes even feeling compassion and a sense of protection for one's training partners or even adversaries. This part is very interesting, and varies between individuals, which is why I believe it is a mark of deep respect and humility by teachers to leave these concepts in the abstract for students to work out for themselves. After all, one student may relate energy to their metaphysical understanding of the universe, another may call on the power of the Holy Spirit to guide them in their training, and another may follow eastern religious practices similar to those of O'Sensei's. What is important is that we integrate these ideas in mind, body, and spirit. I believe these abstract notions go to the heart of the motivations of all students, and to the core principles of peace engendered in this martial art.

Identity

I became interested in martial arts during childhood and engaged in serious training in Tae Kwon Do with Sabumnims Bob Zambetti and Connie Miller from the ages of 14 to 18 (many thanks to both of them for the outstanding instruction they provided!), and have explored several other martial arts through the years. My interest in martial arts never stopped, and I eventually embraced Aikido at the age of 31. I am now 47 years old. What led me to begin martial arts were the typical traumas associated with violence and the fear of suffering further violence, as well as a wish to reclaim my dignity. At some point those fears and original motivations disappeared as martial competence and confidence became hallmarks in my life experience. The question then became,

Why am I still pursuing martial arts?

The answer is both simple and complex: martial arts is a way of life. The path required to fulfill my original motivations required that I fundamentally change as a human being. When I began martial arts I had little understanding of this, though the messages were clearly presented from day one. There is much I still desire to learn and share with my fellow martial artists. As the years go by I find increasing enjoyment of this way of life, and sometimes reflect on the past to assess the present view.

It is who I am, and who I have been all along.

Even when I pursue other interests such as piano or sports, I relate everything to martial arts, from self-discipline, to body dynamics and awareness, to anticipation of the movements of opponents. I use my training to survive and thrive in the academic and professional worlds, to deal with complex interpersonal relationships, and even to work on my spiritual development in religious life. The conclusion is that my identity as a martial artist has defined my approaches to virtually all life situations. A dojo is a home base to me. It is where I prefer to train formally, and where I like to spend time with my friends.

Where am I going as a martial artist?

I don't know the long term answer, but the short term one includes continuing to build my competence and beginning the work to open a dojo and build an Aikido community extending the one that has so greatly enriched my life. My students and I will be dedicated to following the path inspired by my teacher, Patricia Hendricks Shihan, and the lineage that began many years ago with Saito Shihan and O'Sensei.