



Chaos devolves into order, stillness... a stone is moved; the brass bowl gonged.

I arrived late for an afternoon class being taught by Tom Gambell Sensei at the San Rafael Summer Retreat several years ago. Perhaps because I had already decided to 'sit this one out', I was not concerned about missing the first few minutes - probably just the warm-ups, anyway. But the scene that unfolded before me in the large, gymnasium-turned-dojo was unlike any class I had ever seen.

There was activity all over the mat, but as I tried to make out what technique had been demonstrated and was being practiced, I could not.

The first pair that I focused on seemed to be doing different techniques between them. So I concentrated on another pair only to discover that they were doing something altogether different. Everywhere I looked for a clue as to what technique had been taught only brought more confusion.

And then I realized that people were - on their own - stopping their training and were sitting in seiza, eyes closed, facing each other. Here and there scattered around the mat. At first just a few, then more, until all the confusion, noise, and energy had dissipated and was replaced by a tidy array of aikidoka-pairs sitting silently.

Here was something different as well: there was no talking. There had been an absence of speaking among training partners as they trained, but now there was also no 'instruction'.

Gambell Sensei, sitting in seiza near the shomen, struck a small brass bowl gong and the pattern of 'chaos' returned.

What was this new practice? Where did it come from? Recently, I asked Gambell Sensei to write an article for our website about the origin of the 108.

Here is his reply. [Michael Smith]

The 108 Aikido Meditation Practice

by Tom Gambell

There's an expression attributed to Meher Baba that goes something like, "*Things that are real are given and received in silence.*" As I mulled over the creation of my "108" aikido meditation practice for this article, I realized that, in an unexpected way, this practice has its roots in such silence.

The notion of an aikido practice where one does 108 repetitions of the same technique in a single

training session first came to my attention sometime in the mid-70's, shortly after I started aikido. This tidbit of aikido lore, mentioned in passing by someone who had never done it, nor seen it done anywhere, intrigued me. From time to time over the next 20 years, I would ask senior practitioners of the art about it. I expected one day to run into someone who had done it or who could, at the very least, answer some of my questions about how the practice was done and why.

After two decades of waiting patiently for clues about its history and structure, the silence surrounding my curiosity became deafening. It gradually dawned on me that if I wanted to experience the 108, I would have to create some semblance of the practice myself. So I did. During the fall of 1995, I developed my own version by weaving together silence, movement and seated meditation. When I shared my creation with my students on November 18th to mark the 7th Anniversary of my dojo, East Bay Aikido, everyone loved it. In fact, they loved it so much that we did it again to mark our last training day of that year.

I was thrilled. And worried. It was thrilling to have finally found a way to express the ritual and spiritual part of my practice in such a simple and profound way. At the same time, I was worried that by turning this curious myth into an experiential reality I had - O'Sensei forbid - "made up" something that did not follow the letter and law of tradition that was handed down to me by my teachers.

I didn't stay worried for long, however. My own interest and personal need to bring the spiritual part of my practice to the center of my experience outweighed any concern I might have had that I would offend tradition by expressing my own creative drive. After all, isn't that what O'Sensei did?

Having intuitively created the practice, the next step was to repeat it several times to see if it needed any refining. To accomplish this, in 1996 we began a year-long ritual during which we marked each full moon by doing the 108 aikido meditation practice followed by a "waterfall" misogi outside in the light of the moon. The intensity and beauty of this extended lunar ritual deeply touched those students who embraced its spirit of inner exploration and outer purification.

During the course of the year, it became evident to me that no adjustments to my original format were necessary. Out of the combined energies of silence, curiosity and imagination, a wonderful format had emerged already complete in itself. And over the coming years, I would use it often to deepen my own training while marking special occasions.

The first major "public" offering of the 108 outside my own dojo was in June, 1997, when I was invited by Frank Doran Sensei and Robert Nadeau Sensei to be a guest instructor at their annual Aikido Summer Retreat in San Rafael, California. The response to my Tuesday class where I introduced the 108 was welcoming and encouraging. So much so, that I decided to do it again on Thursday so that some of the students who had not attended the earlier class could also experience it.

In the last five years here at East Bay Aikido, we've done the 108 practice to mark all sorts of special training occasions. We've done it on Tai Sai to commemorate O'Sensei's passing, on Solstices and

Equinoxes to mark the turning of the seasons, on the dojo's Anniversary, on Setsubun for the purification of the dojo, as well as other times when it felt like time to break our regular training patterns. This year I began preparing my junior students (6-13) for the practice by introducing them to an abbreviated format. Although we haven't yet achieved complete silence, nor reached our goal of 108 repetitions, the enthusiasm displayed by these young aikidoka who so eagerly alternate movement with seated meditation bodes well for the future of aikido.

There are many aspects of the format that I love. One of my favorites is the breath-like rhythm of the activity-to-silence, silence-to-activity cycle. The mat slowly becomes quiet as pairs of partners finish each set. Then sound reemerges as everyone rises from their bows to begin another set. It's as though, through our movement and meditation, we are inhaling and exhaling a giant unifying breath.

I also enjoy the more formal, ritual aspect of the practice. Sometimes my daily aikido practice becomes a bit, how should I say, casual. At such times, doing a 108 reminds me of the deep respect I hold for my training, myself and my partner. The frequent bowing and then sitting facing each other reminds me how important each person is to my training and how lucky we are to have been given this gift of aikido from O'Sensei.

Over the years, a lot of people have commented on the practice, sharing their feelings and impressions with me. Out of them all, my favorite is a comment by someone from the Tuesday 108 during the 1997 Summer Retreat. Right after the practice was over, I noticed someone weaving their way through the group toward me. He had a big smile on his face. He waited while I finished speaking to another person and then when I turned to face him, he just bowed and said, "*Thank you. Thank you for that practice. That's the first time in the 2 years since I started aikido that I've spent an hour on the mat training with no one telling me what to do. It was great just being able to do the movements. I loved it!*" I smiled back because that's another one of the aspects that I also love about it. By the way, he was one of the first people on the mat for the Thursday 108.



For those of you who may wish to do a 108 practice, here's the format that I use:

Everyone chooses a technique that they will do for the entire training. Any technique may be selected. However, if this is your first time experiencing the format, I suggest choosing a simple technique that does not require an elaborate pin. (Or leave the pin off.) Also, I suggest

that if your technique has an omote and ura version, that you choose either the omote or ura version and stick with that for the whole time. Simplifying the movement part of the practice allows one to focus more deeply on the inner aspects of the practice. Also, choose a technique that you are at least moderately familiar with. This is not the time to "learn" a new technique. This is a time to "deepen."

After a short warm-up, we do a bit of tai no henko to settle the energy in the room. Then the meditation bell rings once. Everyone sits down in seiza where they are, facing their tai no henko training partner.

Space yourselves evenly on the mat, with enough room between partners to bow easily. When the bell rings again (ONCE), everyone bows to their partner, gets up and does their first set of techniques together. A silent gesture at the beginning of the set indicates which grab or strike is desired (e.g., a fist toward ones stomach indicates "mune tsuki," pointing to one's shoulder indicates "kata dori," etc.)



A "set" of techniques is when each person has done 4 techniques. However, instead of the usual "4-4" pattern where you do 4, then your partner does their 4, the 108 format is 1-1, 2-2, 3-3, 4-4. You do your first one, then your partner does their first one; you do your second one, then your partner does their second one; you do your third one, then your partner does their third one; you do your fourth one, then your partner does their fourth one.

When both people have completed this alternating set of 4, they sit down where they are, face each other, bow, and wait in silence until everyone in the room has finished their set and is also sitting. After a short pause the bell rings (ONCE). Everyone bows to their partner, gets up and does a second set with the same partner. At the end of the second set, you sit, bow, and wait for everyone to finish their second set. After a pause, the bell rings again and everyone gets up to do a third set with the same partner.



At the end of the third set, after everyone is sitting, there is a pause and then the bell rings TWICE. The two rings let everyone know that it is time to bow to their current partner, then rise and change partners. Once a new partner is found, everyone sits in seiza spaced evenly on the mat and waits for the bell to signal the start of the first of the next three sets with this new partner.

This pattern continues until a total of 108 techniques have been completed. (Everyone will have a total of nine different partners.) At the end of the 108, the bell is rung THREE times and everyone does kokyu dosa with their last partner. After each pair completes one set of kokyu dosa (we only do one set here), they wait in silence until the final bell rings ONCE. Everyone then returns to the line and we bow out.

During the training, I use rocks from under our shomen to keep track of the count. I place one rock on the mat at the beginning of each set. When three rocks have been grouped, I know it is time to ring the bell TWICE to signal a partner change.

Initially, I tried to keep the count in my head, but I quickly learned that too much of my attention was absorbed with remembering the count. I wanted to feel more of what was happening in my body. So I

began using rocks. Letting the rocks keep track allows the practice to move much more deeply within me since I can slip into the timelessness of the moment without worrying that we will do 1,008 techniques before I notice. I also enjoy the soft clicking of the rocks as I arrange them in groups of three. Nine groups of three rocks each signals that the training has come to completion.

During the seated meditation parts, drop deeply inside yourself just noticing, not judging, your experience. Pay attention to your breath and notice any feelings you might have in your body. If a thought appears, let it go and come back to your breath. Some people like to close their eyes during this time and some people prefer to keep their eyes slightly open and cast downward in the space between them and their partner. Either way is OK.

The 108 takes about an hour to complete - sometimes longer, sometimes less. During the training some students may need to sit out for a while or get off the mat for some reason. That's OK. It is not uncommon for someone to feel dizzy, lightheaded or overheated. That's OK. The 108 tends to bring things up - especially energetic things.

Remember, the 108 is meant to be an edifying ritual, not an agonizing ordeal. (Although, it can be intense.) If you need to sit out for a while or get off the mat, take care of yourself. You might not complete all 108 techniques, but you did enter into the spirit of the ritual. And after all, this willingness to "enter in" (irimi) and open to new experiences may be the most enlivening aspect of our practice together.

If you have any questions or comments about the 108, feel free to contact me either by email (sensei@eastbayaikido.com) or by phone (510-531-0303). I would enjoy hearing about your experiences.

