

A Life Lesson in The "Gentle" Way

September, 2008

Jamie Swanson - Northern Alberta Aikido

My aikido journey began in 1995 as an eager, naïve, and martially motivated individual who cared only for inflicting damage to evil-doers after having far too much time on my hands and had watched far too many Steven Seagal movies. Clearly my mind was still one of martial and confrontational thinking. The concepts of blending, redirection, center, and harmony were unclear to me. I thought only of training with bigger and stronger Uke with the intention of seeing how quickly I could make them wince or tap out. Adrenaline rushes, Nikkyo, and purple welts were sources of sustenance to my fresh mind.

After having studied a few more years and reaching the rank of 3rd Kyu, talks of Peace and Harmony were beginning to become more of an interest to me. After all, I had proven that I could become harsh and strong and the "painful bastard" that my fellow students had come to expect. I had still yet to understand the meaning of being "gentle". Gentle? I had bruises to dispel this myth. How can this be perceived as "gentle"? Clearly this description is made up from sado-masochistic individuals who relish in the idea of giving/receiving eye-crossing torment. Perhaps some professional psychiatric intervention would be justified for those referring to the concept of "gentle". I soon learned a valuable lesson that would begin to help me understand the path of "gentleness".

I was working as a locksmith for several years and had been working the night shift for the Alberta Motor Association. I had received a call to head out to see a customer at 2:00am who had apparently lost the keys to his vehicle and had needed a new set made so that he could go home. Upon arriving at the address given by the dispatcher, it turned out that the customers' vehicle was at a sports pub that was closing for the evening. After I had parked next to the vehicle that had matched the description, the pub doors swung open and I was soon greeted by the owner of the vehicle in question. "Hey", he called out. "I'm the one you're looking for". The distance from the vehicle to the pub door was about 50 feet. After watching him take 15 minutes to walk that distance, which included him bouncing off of every other vehicle in the parking lot, it became clear to me that "keys" were the last thing this guy needed. "Thanks for getting here so quickly", he said. "Let's get this done because I have to go home and get up for work in the morning". Clearly putting this man behind the wheel of anything right now would be foolish. I was left with no choice but to take responsible aikido-like action.

Nage - "I'm sorry Sir, but I can't make you keys and let you drive tonight".

Uke - "Why the Hell not"?

Nage – “It appears you’re in no shape to drive tonight Sir”.

Uke – “(Lots of incoherent remarks and belligerent insults)”.

Nage – “Perhaps you can take a taxi tonight Sir and we can do this tomorrow morning for you when you're able to drive”?

Uke – “(Insert expletives and several references to the marital status of my parents upon my birth here)”.

Nage – “I'm sorry Sir. We won't be doing this tonight”.

Uke – “Then I'm gonna kick your a** and beat the s*** out of you”.

Here we go. This is what I had trained for. Bring on the welts. With a strong center and a fixed intent, I walked up to him face to face. We stared each other down for what seemed a long time. Soon a rational thought was beginning to seep its way into my mind. It was something I had not experienced in practice before. I was Nage. My job is to protect my Uke, not destroy him. This man needed my help and I am choosing to confront him rather than protect him. An aikido-like mind begins to prevail;

Nage – “Where do you live Sir”?

Uke – “That’s none of your damned business where I live”.

Nage – “Why don’t you let me drive you home? I don’t mind”.

Uke – “Huh??”

Nage – “Sure, it's no trouble. I can even come back once you're at home safe and I'll make the keys for you. I can drop them off at your house in the morning. I'm working all night anyway. What do you say?”

Uke – “Why would you do that?”

Nage – “Because you have no other way of getting home and I'd like to make sure everyone stays safe tonight. It's the least I can do after driving all the way out here”.

Uke – “Wow, ummm..... okay.....sure.....I guess so.....thanks”.

Nage – “No problem. Hop in”.

We drove off and spoke very little about the evening’s confrontation. We chatted briefly about his work, the weather, family, and what kinds of sports teams we enjoyed watching. I was able to open the lock of his house and let him in for the night. He thanked me for bringing him home. His demeanor was

much different now. No longer did he appear to be confrontational or want to do battle. He was kind and appreciative that someone went out of their way to protect him and take care of him. My mind was clear and focused. I had no fighting mind. I had no need for confrontation. I had practiced aikido. When my Uke attacked, I drew him in, I protected him, and I redirected his attack while causing him no harm. I was being "gentle". Is this the concept that we are trying to uncover? Had I actually practiced aikido in its simplest and purest form? It was an understanding that I was very eager to take back onto the mats and incorporate into my training. Anything that makes you feel this good about your training, and with this type of outcome, can't be a bad thing.

I've learned numerous lessons in aikido over the past several years. Some good, some not so good. However, the number one most valuable lesson this young aikidoka has learned, is how to begin to walk the path of Peace and Harmony. It's a lifelong journey that opens new challenges, experiences, and life lessons with each step. A journey that I look forward to each day for the rest of my life.