

A Shodan Essay – Walking the Path of Peace

By

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In 1970, when I was 18 and the war in Viet Nam was still raging, I was contacted by the Selective Service System of the United States. Like almost all other 18 year old males in the US, I received a letter in the mail notifying me that I was subject to the draft and required to register. Up until that time, I was aware of and politically opposed to the war but it was a somewhat naïve, impersonal stance that was mostly based on the popular culture. That letter brought the matter home. It jolted me out of my relative complacency and put a small but unavoidable tear in the soft cocoon of my sheltered life. Even though the war and protests against it were well publicized and frequently discussed, prior to that letter arriving my mailbox, it felt remote as if I were standing outside and watching a show on television through someone's closed window. Suddenly my sense of separation evaporated and I was forced to consider questions about whether I wanted to kill someone or be killed or face serious injury.

I registered with the draft board and applied to become a conscientious objector. I got more Selective Service forms and learned that I would need to provide letters from people who knew me that supported my application. Those letters were to provide evidence or documentation of my true nature as someone who abhorred violence who had established a verifiable history of a life commitment to peace. Since my primary interests at that time were surfing and hanging out with my friends, having grown up in a relatively wealthy and safe Southern California beach town, I had never before felt any sense of urgency about the peace movement. Other than attending a few anti-war rallies at my high school, I hadn't taken any initiative or felt sufficiently motivated to publically demonstrate

my views about non-violence or peace. In spite of the fact that I didn't have any measurable evidence of a commitment to non-violence, I did have sympathetic older friends who were tax-paying, established members of the community. The priest at the Episcopal Church where my family attended was one of these. He and a few others gladly wrote letters of support for me. They encouraged me to pursue the avenue I was taking.

When I discussed this topic with my Dad though, I got a different response. While his reaction was not altogether unexpected, it was quite disappointing to hear. Hearing his comments did, however, cause me to think and eventually to develop a deeper, more personal sense of commitment to my values. He told me that he thought I would use violence if I was ever in a situation where I believed it was necessary for my survival or to protect someone I cared about. Therefore, he didn't really consider me to be a true pacifist. Because he didn't think I would choose peace in all circumstances no matter what the outcome or who might be involved, he would not write a letter of support.

On one hand, I could see that he might be right. One can imagine horrible circumstances and feeling compelled to do something violent in response to those conditions. Undoubtedly, it is possible that I, like millions of others throughout the history of the human race, could arrive at a moment where the options appear to be limited and violence suddenly seems to be the best or only choice. Although I might be able to conjure up visions of life threatening situations, I definitely didn't want to accept non-real, theoretically possible mental imagery as my limiting factor.

That particular conversation with my father and my subsequent internal assessment proved to be a turning point. It caused me to consider the meaning of pacifism. I began to question whether I was or could be a "real" pacifist and what that meant. In the end, I had trouble believing I could live up to some set of ill-defined, idealistic standards that might establish the essential qualities and behaviors of a true pacifist. I was certain, however, that I didn't want to acquiesce. I didn't want to embrace the notion that killing may be necessary or par for the course. I wanted to find a path that would allow me to pursue non-violence even though my heart and thoughts might not be totally pure. In that

state of self-evaluation and uncertainty, I found a thin thread to grasp. Initially it seemed too simple and therefore too weak, but like a small spider suspended in the breeze by its silk, it supported me and I was able to land in a place where I could live. An unsophisticated and uncomplicated tenet became my foundation. I simply decided that I didn't ever want to put myself in a situation where by accident or choice I became involved in killing another person. This goal fit me. It gave me a sense of hope. It afforded me the possibility of choice. I was not permanently locked into some externally prescribed, rigid code. If I made choices that were well considered and intelligent, or even if I just made lucky choices, I had a reasonably good chance that I could avoid those situations or relationships where violence might seem inevitable. My choices, made one at a time, whether made in the moment or made with great deliberation, would allow me to blend and continually discover the pacifist within.

Over thirty years later, I was introduced to Aikido. Deciding to try it and eventually becoming a regular practitioner had much more to do with luck than intelligent or strategic planning. The truth is, related to learning about Aikido, I only made one well informed, intelligent, peace-oriented choice and it was to pay attention to my wife, Meika. Not too many months after Meika had enrolled our then 4 year-old son, Kion, in an aiki-mites class, she was invited to an introductory women's class. When she returned home after the class she suggested that I try it. She thought I might find Aikido to be interesting. At the time my thoughts were: 1) I had absolutely no interest in studying a martial art; and 2) if I try it once then I can say that I tried it. After which, I could safely express my disinterest and avoid being criticized for being unmotivated or inflexible. Having taken that stance, I of course, did no research and had no knowledge of O'Sensei's philosophy or teachings before I took the plunge.

The obvious part of this story is that I went, and in spite of my initial prejudice, or lack of motivation to change my routine, I became enthralled. I was truly surprised that Aikido practice stimulated me on so many different levels. From that first practice I remember being amazed at how challenging it was to move my own body in such seemingly simple ways. Moving with sensei and other students and momentarily glimpsing the possibility that I could learn to blend with and somehow exert a peaceful yet compelling influence on their movements

verged on the fantastic. The unifying sense of calm that I derived from those meditative movements reawakened the deeper, peace-oriented, universally connected part of me. It was something I had been needing even though I had not been conscious of the need.

In concluding this essay, I want to say that although Aikido is intriguing on many levels for me, the idea that we can acknowledge the aggressive and fearful aspects of our nature while practicing to peacefully harmonize from a place of inner strength is truly a curious and fascinating dichotomy. That we are engaged in the physical practice of a martial art which can be used for violent purposes, but we choose to focus on the need to care for others and while following the path of peace is a challenging conflict to reconcile. On at least one facet of this matter O'Sensei's words are direct and clear, "To injure an opponent is to injure yourself. To control aggression without inflicting injury is the Art of Peace."¹ I have sensed this truth at different times throughout my life including the time when I had to contemplate the possibility that I might be drafted to fight in Viet Nam. During that same period I absorbed a similar message, which was presented from a different perspective by the poets/philosophers/musicians, the Moody Blues, who sang,

And when you stop and think about it,
You won't believe it's true,
That all the love you've been giving
Has all been meant for you.

It is my goal to continue on this path, in part through my Aikido practice, for as long as I am able.

¹ Excerpted by William McLuskie from *The Art of Peace* a collection of quotes by Morihei Ueshiba translated by John Stevens.