

出会い
Encounter
(Shodan Essay)

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「へー、カリフォルニアでアメリカ人の先生から合気道習ってるの。
面白いね！」

“So you have been studying Aikido in California with American teachers? How interesting!” With those words and much curiosity, people at the Honbu dojo, the Aikido World Headquarter in Tokyo, Japan, welcomed me into their class a few summers ago. The portraits of Osensei, his son and his grand son (the Doshu) were displayed in the front of the big tatami room. I remember feeling extremely self-conscious, thinking that every move I make might be watched closely. I felt it was very important that I would do everything “correctly”—even though in my mind I knew that would be impossible—and somehow leave good impressions on these people’s minds and not leave any “stains” on my sensei’s name back in California.

I know that people from all over the world visit and train at the Honbu dojo. The difference between those visitors and me, however, is that they are considered to be "foreigners" and I am not exactly a foreigner. I come from California, but I grew up in Japan and speak the language fluently. My exposure to Aikido was next to nothing while I lived in Japan. I knew Aikido was one kind of martial art. Once I watched the regional Japanese police force demonstrating Aikido as well as Kendo and Judo as a part of their New Year's martial art demonstrations. I must have thought they were impressive, yet it did not trigger any further interest. My true encounter with Aikido took place many years later one evening when I walked into the one time only women's special class held at the dojo in San Luis Obispo, California.

I have often wondered why I did not meet Aikido sooner, especially since I grew up in the country where Osensei started it. Some things are so close, yet they can be so far away. Sometimes they have to be cast in just a perfect light before they jump into your eyes. My encounter with Aikido cannot be explained in any other way. Had I continued to live in Tokyo, it is highly unlikely my life would have crossed paths with Aikido.

Perhaps it was the male dominant image of Japanese martial arts in general that kept me at a distance. Or maybe it was because Japan is a relatively safe country and I did not see the need to learn anything even remotely related to self defense. All I know was that something like Aikido was not at all within the realm of reality in my life. Thinking back, I was very fortunate that the door to Aikido was open for me at Mary Tesoro sensei's dojo.

Aikido has become such an integral part of my life. So much so that I feel that I am able to live and maintain my sense of balance because of some of the basic principles in this art that I try to follow. Aikido reminds me of how to breathe and feel the ground. It shows me how to claim my space and twirl or spiral from the center. And it encourages me to watch the life force and blend with it. Aikido is also a very intimate means of communication. As I learn to locate my center, I meet that of my partner and feel where they are. It is intriguing how one can blend with an opponent's energy while maintaining one's balance.

Practicing Aikido commands my full attention and presence in the moment. I have learned this to be one of the most joyful elements of Aikido. It sounds simple enough, however, everyday life is riddled with ample distractions that often it seems to be next to impossible to indulge just being in the moment. When I am fully present in the moment, my mind enters a quiet place where I am freed from fretting over how to move properly.