

Living Aikido
By Diana Hedstrom
July 2006

John Ruskin said, “The test of a truly great man or woman is their humility. I do not mean by humility, doubt of their own power. But really great people have a curious feeling that the greatness is not in them, but through them. And they see something divine in every other person and are endlessly, foolishly, incredibly merciful.” During my eight years of Aikido training I have had the privilege and honor of training under and with men and women who have, by living Aikido, demonstrated true humility and provided me with examples to strive to emulate.

As a 5th kyu, I attended my first out-of-state retreat at the California Aikido Association’s Summer Camp in California. I knew that the retreat would be attended, in large part, by yudansha; I wasn’t even sure if there would be mudansha present other than those from Aikido North. My brother Joe, a student of Aikido North, encouraged me to attend and to challenge myself by training with other Aikidoka attending the seminar. I finally agreed, surreptitiously thinking that I would train with the other Aikido North students who would surely take pity on me. The first day on the mat a yudansha bowed into me, smiling. I did the best tenkan blend I knew how; I was focused so intently on performing that I broke into a sweat from the mental and physical exertion. Immediately following that class, the same woman came up to me and politely asked how long I had been training. I’m sure that it was quite obvious to this yudansha that I was a novice. She then asked if I would like to work on some basic moves between classes. I couldn’t believe my good fortune. Not only did she work with me during class but she was willing to meet me on her “breaks” between classes, to spend her valuable training time with a 5th kyu. On that day, Yuki Hara, then a 5th Dan, empowered me with the belief that as a middle aged woman I could learn Aikido. She understood that to many older women there is a tendency to have a negative self-image – to doubt our ability to accomplish all that we are capable of doing. Yuki Sensei proved to me that women could be accomplished in Aikido; she also demonstrated one of the basic tenets of humility, selfless service. Not only did she take me under her care, she did so with the spirit of love and compassion not out of a sense of duty or a desire for recognition. Since that day, Yuki Sensei has remained, as my female mentor, “...endlessly, foolishly, incredibly merciful” and has exemplified for me the true nature of Aikido.

Koshiyama Sensei, my teacher, also epitomizes humility. Reverend Donna Byrns once said, “Humility gives the power to perceive situations, to discern causes of obstacles and difficulties, and to remain silent. When one does express an opinion, it is non-critically with an open mind and with recognition of specialties, strengths, and sensitivities of the self and others.” Koshiyama Sensei personifies this tenet. As a mudansha there were times that I discussed my “concerns” about the dojo with Sensei, confident in the righteousness of my position. Many times I was dismayed when my feelings or beliefs weren’t validated by Sensei. Oftentimes he would merely sit quietly and smile; occasionally he would interject another point of view. While he was always willing and available to discuss my “concerns,” I left these discussions bewildered. I am ashamed to admit, for a number of years I couldn’t understand why he didn’t validate and support my point of view. As time passed, however, I began to reflect on some of my “concerns” and realized that my “concerns” were based on my deficiencies. Sensei could

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have directly answered my questions or given me specific direction, but he patiently waited for me to have my epiphany. He realized that self-reflection was critical to my growth as an Aikidoka and that by giving me direction or correcting my “wrong thinking,” my misconceptions, he would be inhibiting my growth. He accepted me with all of my misconceptions and patiently waited for signs of maturation.

Both Koshiyama Sensei and Yuki Hara Sensei have provided me with a safe, nurturing and unconditionally positive environment for growth. I have nothing worth offering them in return, nor do they expect anything from me and yet I owe them a debt of incalculable magnitude. By personifying Aikido, they have helped to shape me into the person I am today and have provided me with examples of the type of person I would like to become. Whenever I see an opportunity to assist an Aikidoka or to do service for our dojo, I am happy to volunteer so that in some small way I can emulate them and contribute back to the art of Aikido.

Thank you, Koshiyama Sensei, Yuki Hara Sensei and my entire Aikido North family for all of your support. I would like to offer a special thanks to my brother, Joe Fischer, who introduced me to the art of Aikido and to my husband, Derek Hedstrom, who has supported me through my highs and lows.