

A New Start

Sandan essay

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Some years ago I had surgery for a slipped disk. Before the surgery there had been years of irregular aikido training. So when I had my restart, eight months after the surgery, it was a bit like starting all over again.

I have had restarts before in my aikido life: Two short breaks after giving birth to my children, but before that I had a really long break. In fact, I started my training in the seventies when I was sixteen. I trained aikido for only one year then. Perhaps I was not really ready for aikido at that time. Aikido was only physical training for me, although I felt there was more in it. Maybe I did not get the guidance I needed to understand aikido in a deeper sense, but I never let go of the thought that I once would go back. After thirteen years I found my way back to aikido and this, my second start was the real one. So I was nearly thirty when I became an aikidoka.

My second restart, after the surgery, was both easier and harder – easier because of a better understanding of aikido and harder because of my age. (Everybody at the dojo was of course happy that I was back and I have never in my life felt so welcomed before.)

At first I had to rediscover ukemi: How do I receive techniques and how do I take falls. These, once so simple things, I had to think sincerely about before I even could start training in the same way as I did before. And this was, I think, good for me. Good for my own training and certainly good for the relation to and understanding of my partners. I learned to be more humble towards other people and their diversities.

Besides ukemi training I had to think about my techniques. At our dojo, under Patrick, the aikido was always dynamic, but too easy I fell into doing things in the old way. I went back into kihon like I was taught as a beginner. Too often Sensei had to tell me: “Not quite right ... There’s no flow in the technique” and “You have to be more flexible”. And under his guidance I reached the level I was on when I had to take the break.

I was a shodan when I came back and had no thought of testing for anything more, but one day he told me it was time to start preparing for my nidan test. “I’m not sure I’m ready. I’m quite happy as it is now”, I said. “But you will be ready in three months time”, he answered. There was no way to say “No I won’t”, and of course I felt honoured.

Shortly after obtaining nidan I had a relapse, a slipped disk again – the same as before. This time I was better prepared. I felt it immediately and I knew better how to handle it. I knew what it means to start all over and aikido was too important for me to take another break. I thought, I would never give it up again. For three months I built muscles around the injured disk with the help of a physiotherapist and in order to keep aikido alive I instructed the beginners.

Teaching beginners is an excellent way of getting to understand what aikido is about. You have to start thinking about what aikido means to you, how to receive your partners attack, how you move, how to take his balance, and how to connect to him and turn the attack into a technique. I learned a lot during these months and I felt appreciation from my students. There were some young females in the group and knowing that I was an example for them and that studying for me encouraged them, not only in the dojo, gave me so much feedback.

When it comes to my own studying I have learned to not only focus on details in the technique. I try to get the “whole picture”, and finally, I have learned to focus more on the uke and how he is affected. I try to think about how I can act to affect my partner in the same way as Sensei does, and at the same time to deal with the differences of my partners.

Some months ago Patrick Sensei told me to start preparing for my sandan test. Am I ready? Do I feel comfortable with it? I, who thought that I would never again do any tests, am now going for a sandan. Since he asked me I have been listening to him, watching him, asking questions and trying to focus mentally on the task. I am grateful to him for all that he gives during class and for believing in me. I am grateful to all my friends at the dojo and their help in my studying. A dan test is not only for yourself – you do it for your sensei, your dojo, your students and friends.

This is not the essay I thought I would write. I wanted to write something really deep and give philosophical reflections on aikido. But it came to be more like the story of my life. Things happen, like in aikido, and you deal with that. If you are studying a technique, and your partner does something unexpected, you might have to deal with it in a different way than you are used to. Or when you are teaching a class and have everything planned, but you have to change your plans because you realize that the students need something else. Aikido is to have an open mind and to be flexible – to deal with a situation as it turns up.