

Ready To Begin

Mark Hurwit / Shodan / April 12, 2008

There is an Aikido aphorism that I've been taken with since the first time I heard it— one that most readers here are probably already familiar with:

“When you get your black belt, you are ready to begin...”

I've spent a lot of time pondering what that meant, trying to find my way to the answer: “Ready to begin... *what?*” Over the last year, as this shodan exam approached, I've felt the beginnings of an understanding. But as this sense has expanded in the last few months, I've been forced to reconsider it all again. Clearly there's more to it than I first thought; it seems to just keep going...

I'm reminded of a famous picture of O'sensei in his later years that looks out over our training mat. One of my teachers commented that, at times while sitting in front of it he's tried to “stare O'sensei down”... chuckling that he always loses. The longer one stares into O'sensei's eyes in that picture, the more one is drawn into something larger than oneself... inevitably reflecting something far deeper than what was originally suspected. It just keeps going.

So I've been experiencing this recognition... that there is something being reflected from “the outside,” from the practice itself, that has the potential to illumine important qualities within. This internal aspect of Aikido —what is sometimes referred to as its “spiritual” dimension— is hard to talk about. But moving into a region that is partially characterized as being “beyond technique,” I wanted to give it a try.

For me, at this moment in time, one of the things that's been repeatedly reinforced as primary to Aikido is *Zan Shin*. I've heard several different definitions of this phrase —abiding mind, extended presence, continual awareness— and in these late days of training before my exam, this “concept” has come up a lot. I believe it relates to something larger that we all share, and it is only now that I remember how often it was stressed at Aikido of Jerusalem, where I trained for many years. (I still go there whenever I go back to visit, and —though of course I can't include everyone— would like to express my thanks here to some of my principle teachers, Daniel Herman Sensei, Errol Wahlhouse Sensei and, of course, the inimical Assi Assaf Sensei.)

At North Bay Aikido in Santa Cruz where I began my training, Linda Holiday Sensei (a beautiful, sensitive and powerful human being) used to conduct a *kangeiko* every year. During this “winter training,” we would all rise early and gather at the freezing cold dojo for a run and then a morning practice from 5:30-7:00 am. At the end of the week, any participant who trained without missing a morning would receive a piece of Japanese calligraphy penned by Linda personally. It was a very special thing, and I still have mine, framed, as part of a small shrine. At the time, they were passed out in a “random” fashion, but I still find it meaningful that the kanji on the page I received were the symbols for *Zan Shin*... Unbroken Awareness. So this theme has been with me for a while. (And I can't help but also remember here all the help I received from North Bay's amazing senior instructor, Glenn Kimoto Sensei).

The place where *zan shin* is perhaps used most often is in reference to that moment just after a technique has been completed. Many times, we'll have a bit of a lapse of awareness or presence... almost as though the effort of concentrating on the interaction with uke has temporarily depleted our mental stores, and something inside us has to quickly recharge. But as the recent reminders from my gracious training partners began to make their way in, I started noticing that while I could shorten these moments of unawareness, there suddenly seemed to be a *lot* of them. All of a sudden. Hmmm.

I guess I maybe should've been grateful at the brevity of the lapses, but the large number of them was rather disconcerting. I began to --blip-- feel as if I was --blip-- running too many programs on my computer --blip-- and with not enough RAM to process everything --blip-- and there was this jerky, overly staccato-like quality to my movement and interactions with my --blip-- partners. I was feeling perpetually "behind." (Sorry for the computer analogy; I'm a geek by training.)

So, here I am watching this blipping (and, of course, now that I've tuned into it, I'm seeing it everywhere), and I start to extend this concept of *zan shin* to my entire time on the mat... not just when I'm being attacked, and not just between attacks. Whoa! Let's see here: ninety minutes of training, and continual awareness... for *how* long?? (Mark Kruger, a sandan at our school who teaches frequently, also has my thanks for helping maintain perspective.)

Another analogy: I have been a musician for many years, and see a great many parallels in the practice and performance of Aikido and music. (My main instrument is drums.) There is an early level that all trained musicians are familiar with, where we have to think about what we're doing the whole time because the intuition and skills have not yet become ingrained enough to be able to relax and trust that the music can (and will) happen without *making* it happen through an intensity of focus. Especially with the effort of all that "trying," it doesn't take much to throw you off; one little blip in awareness and suddenly you're lost and have to stop to regain your connection to where you are in the performance. And how many times have I heard (and said): "You can't just stop playing! The music keeps going, and you have to find a way to maintain your connection with it, even if you mess up."

This idea —that there's something that just stays awake throughout *whatever* is happening— really started to grow in my mind and in my watchfulness. And I started to notice (perhaps you have at some point noticed this, too?) that the sensitivity to ma'ai and the ability to really enter (irimi!) gets numbed by these lapses... by even just the tiniest moments of getting (in time) behind uke's attack, so that a rushed, trying to "catch up," uncentered feeling results. And I realized that the diminished smoothness and overall effectiveness of my movement —that quality which is, I think, a large reason I continue to train in Aikido— was much less a function of my technique than the fact that I was, however briefly, not *present* just a moment before.

Then I began to imagine... What would it be like to be so connected to my partner(s), so aware and in-the-moment and in my body, that I could sense the growing intention to attack before it actually manifested? What would it feel like to be able to respond without using strength, or

even speed, to get my partner to go where I wanted? What would it be like, in fact, to (as nage) be beyond “wanting” them to go anywhere at all —*following* uke as much as guiding— to be, in awareness, enough ahead of the dynamic to not really have to *do* anything? Is there a place where just being present and centered and blending really *is* sufficient?

A month ago, I was standing alongside some first-timers in a weapons class taught by Barbara Knapp Sensei (one of our excellent instructors), practicing shomen strikes with a bokken. I was feeling a little sleepy and bored, waiting to move on to the next thing, when Barbara came over to me and said, “Mark, you’re... outside yourself.”

All of a sudden, my reality shifted. She had nailed it right on, and I *felt* the difference between having my attention “out there” and having it *in here*. I settled back and realized, in a second, that my attention really is out there, so much of the time, and that my progress in Aikido (and in life) is completely contingent upon not only maintaining an awareness and effectiveness in the world, but doing it from this wholly other, internal place. —It sounds really simple to say (and I’ve said such things myself many times before), but it really hit me that day.

I suddenly *knew* that there is, as a real possibility, a combined place of inner and outer awareness, of *continual* awareness... and that this is a great deal of what Aikido is really about. And by Aikido I mean here, specifically, not the philosophical or idealized *essence* of Aikido, but the PRACTICE. Because I believe we were put on this earth to be people, who (by definition) have all kinds of things in our day-to-day lives, as well as personal histories, that get in the way of our being completely aware and present. If *zan shin* was something we could already maintain, there wouldn’t really be a reason to train.

Our senior instructor, Daryl Berlie Sensei, has a little joke in which is enclosed an enormous piece of wisdom. While explaining some of the philosophical and theoretical underpinnings of Aikido, he has often referred to “not doing.” Settling back into the *yin* or receptive part of the balance in any technique or interaction, a place of emptiness, he’s explained that “he” does not throw anyone but the technique just happens of its own. It’s an incredibly beautiful and effective thing. He calls it the “Not-Daryl.”

But then, in an effort to replicate that, he found himself trying to *do* the “Not-Daryl.” And in sharing this with us, we could all see and understand this thing that we *all* do... how small aspects of our ego/humanness appear, “trying” to do Aikido... and in that, revealing how to proceed and transcend ourselves. Of course it’s a little different for everyone, but we could all relate as he continued to speak about his renewed efforts on the mat, working at a solution he calls the “Not Not-Daryl.”

I have always sensed this Taoist aspect of what Aikido is really about, and the growing perception could not but bring forward the third level of *zan shin* I’ve been observing... the abiding mind in the rest of my life, *off* the mat. Suddenly that seemingly-long ninety minutes began to look like what it is... an easy and attractive place to practice and train, a place to enjoy both the successes and the failures and the learning *in motion*. And to carry that out into

the wider world, experiencing (and being *willing* to experience) all the realities that are daily revealed in Aikido.

How much do I force rather than blend? How much do I just see where a person “is at” instead of perceiving where they’re “coming from?” How much do I allow myself to be affected by things, when just “getting off the line” would do? How often am I late for appointments in my life, living with the feeling of trying to “catch up” instead of arriving early, with presence and calm, and completely changing the nature of my experience (and others’) as a result?

At the end of a seminar, years ago at North Bay, Linda Holiday Sensei passed a sacred urn around a large circle of attendees, who each had the opportunity to express something about their experience. When my turn came, all I could say was: “Aikido is... *all* the time!” And this continues to be increasingly true.

The final thing I would like to say about *zan shin* is that until now I’ve been addressing issues relating to my *own* awareness; but there are levels beyond the personal. As Chuck Hawk Sensei, dojo cho at Aikido of Eugene, wisely observed: “At this shodan examination, it is *all* of us who are testing.” (Phew! Big relief for me.) There is a connection between the practitioners and a “group field” that grows as we all, as individuals, do. Knowledge, experience, sensitivity, and all the principles we learn as part of the Aikido path... these continue to expand and develop.

I’ve felt this viscerally as my shodan has approached. I wasn’t aware at first of the “hole” left in the dojo’s dynamic energy as our last two 1st kyus took their black belt tests. (And not because they left; one of them in fact, Matt Lowes, has become a wonderful teacher in his own right.) It is said that “Nature abhors a vacuum,” and it started becoming clear that I was filling it... and that *everyone* was advancing, moving upwards. I experienced a feeling of being lifted—like a sailing vessel with the wind at my back—and this feeling has definitely been more than a “sum of the parts” of our training together and the assistance I’ve been given.

There is something deeply satisfying about this feeling... that we are all in this together and that this thing, this progress in *zan shin*, is not an individual path but a shared one, where “blending” happens on many levels and everyone both contributes and receives. I think, ultimately, we do not progress in Aikido, but in Being. — But it sure is nice to have a path to walk...

So I stare into the eyes of O’sensei, focusing on the “Not Not Mark.” Though he still wins every time, I *am* ready to begin—and for that beginning to remain ever new.