

Practicing with Joy

Sandan Essay
by
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Tomorrow I'm going, if all goes well, to do my sandan exam. Tonight, some of my aikido friends are driving a long way to have dinner, stay in a motel, and be there for my test. In the last few days I have heard from others who also will be taking the best part of the day to come from out of town. There will be only a short, warm-up class; there is no reason for them to go to this trouble except to support my dojo, my teacher, and me, and to spend some time with friends.

At my fairly small dojo, my cohorts have been helping me prepare for this for months. They have met outside of class regularly, taken many, many falls, refused to fall, listened to my worries and my theories, given me feedback, asked my advice, and kept me company. And then there are my teachers.

I have heard it said so often that one ought to practice with a spirit of joy. What does that mean? I enjoy training very much. I love to move fast. I love to practice the basic forms and get them a little better. I love to feel powerful when I throw, and I adore taking ukemi (at least when I am not too sore). I love the dojo spaces I have trained in, the special light at each one. But sitting here tonight I am realizing that the greatest source of joy is the people I train with.

I had a very different essay ready for tomorrow, one I've been working on for weeks. It was full of big ideas and complicated metaphors, but it just wasn't feeling right, it wasn't what I really wanted to say. Right now, the heart of practice seems much simpler to me. The joy of aikido is the chance to touch, to connect with other people, to give and receive. If I can do that tomorrow, I will be happy with my test.

I have been feeling anxious that my friends and teachers will be disappointed with the show I put on, after they have taken the trouble to come. But I think that my test will be fine, and it will be fine because of all the people who will be there, making it happen. The showy, technical part is like the hard shiny wing-case of the beetle, crawling on the ground. The soft, folded, nearly invisible wings underneath; the loving energy of friends; are what you use to fly.