

Sandan Essay

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Title: Observation

As soon as I earned the rank of Nidan, Patricia Hendricks Sensei began telling me, **“Observe.”** She clarified this by saying that I should engage in a period of observation about what was happening. So as I observed what was happening with Sensei, the sempai, my partners, and myself, I began to understand some fundamental ideas:

- 1. Techniques are meant to be executed in motion: they are always dynamic.**
- 2. The energy and stability of a technique originates from the center of the Earth.**
- 3. Every interaction has a unique context, which means that every application of a technique must be uniquely tailored to the interaction.**

These fundamental insights led me to work on following and utilizing the actual dynamic motion of an attack and the technical response. I began to understand that the interaction between uke and nage should never be interfered with: uke should deliver a meaningful and committed attack, and nage should allow the technique to occur in its most natural and efficient state according to the unique context of the interaction (“henka-waza”). The continuous flow of energy in this type of practice, often called “ki-no-nagare”, has been pointed out by Sensei and my sempai as central to advanced training.

I have realized that I need to harmonize with what is actually happening. My goal in training has been to work with the energy and form of the partnerships without trying to interfere with them, and I have observed that it is actually very relaxing and beneficial on a number of physical and psychological levels. I believe this happens because uke is not expending energy trying to interfere with their own attack, and nage is not expending energy trying to interfere with their own technique. This has led me to understand that such harmonious practice, in its ideal form, is the essence of non-violence.

I have also observed the fact that Sensei and my sempai consistently demonstrate the energy and stability of techniques that obviously emanate from the center of the Earth. I have realized something fundamental once again: to use the center of the Earth, I must be **completely** grounded. (This is nothing new, but my understanding of grounding has progressed to a deeper level.) In other words, I understand how useful it is to stop interfering with the natural form and energy of my own body, and to learn to stand up in the way Mother Nature intended for me. This concept has become clear over a long period of time, and became most obvious when I attempted kaeshi-waza with especially sensitive and advanced ukes: when I was not completely relaxed, grounded, and dropped, my ukes were able to sense my counter-techniques. As I became more grounded, the kaeshi-waza became much more of a surprise to my ukes.

I am now keenly aware of alignment details and breathing, and have observed how many of the portions of my body contribute or interfere with this concept, such as the crucial role the ileo-psoas muscle plays in one's ability to stand up straight. The feet are the connection to the Earth, and the ankles, calves, knees, thighs, hips, back, shoulders, arms, hands, neck, head, eyes, and face all contribute to one's ability to feel grounded. This has led me to believe that the whole body is involved in kokyu. I began to integrate many of the basic body alignment precepts into my training, and began to feel that techniques were happening with less effort. I learned that the goal is to harmonize with my own body and the Earth. For example, consider the trajectory of the jo in the last movement of the second ken-tai-jo. The body moves around the jo, and simultaneously provides the impetus that propels the jo in a simple pendulum swing toward uke. The left hand on the jo is the tae-no-henko point, and the complete alignment and grounding of the body makes the movement efficient and strong. All of this is encapsulated in a feeling of kokyu throughout the body and spirit.

Now that these lessons have begun to sink in, it is becoming increasingly obvious what is needed in the interaction with my ukes: to completely allow what is actually happening in our partnership, without interfering with the technique or my body's relationship with the Earth.

I have committed myself to a new period of development in my training: I have observed that there is energy in every interaction, and that breathing has a profound effect on energy. I look forward to more discoveries along these lines.