

Featured Senior Instructor, April 2008



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Division 2

In July 1973 I started as clinical director of a community mental health center. The unit was fairly new with a relatively inexperienced staff of 52. On occasion highly agitated patients came to us via our crisis team. In the previous year several serious injuries had occurred during patient restraint efforts. One of the attending psychiatrists arranged with a local judo sensei to provide restraint training for the entire in-patient staff. With no martial arts experience, or interest, I joined my staff at the judo dojo. There I met Stan Pranin, then a sandan, who was to be our instructor.

Reflecting back almost 35 years, all I can deeply recall was that it was fun! Getting out of the office and away from patients to roll around and grapple was a joy. By the end of the 8 weeks of training I really knew next to nothing. With just the right situation I could probably apply a kotegaeshi. At a deeper level

some hook was set. The philosophy of blending fit perfectly with the concept of attunement in psychotherapy. On the mat I was experiencing clear feedback of my darker side.

After the restraint class ended, Stan started a formal Aikido program at Sensei Babtiste's judo school. Our initial class of 35 rapidly dwindled. Among the core group there was nary a break when we left to set up in Stan's two car garage. We were nearly manic in our training, often three times daily, up to seven days a week. I was Aikido mad, leaping over park benches to practice rolling and high falls or applying nikkyo or kotegaeshi on nearly anyone with an available wrist. In fact, while in Seattle to take my boards in neurology and psychiatry, I returned to my hotel room by doing a forward roll into the elevator.

After classes Stan would hold forth for hours with his films and research on O'sensei's life and spiritual background. Truly those first three years were as near an immersion as I could possibly create while still working.

My most Memorable Aikido Experience

Memorable moments in the art are too numerous to easily single out. What with all the talk of ki, in the first few years I never felt it. Then, as a new shodan, at a gasshuku with Kanai Sensei I was called out as uke for a simple kokyu exercise. Astonishingly in addition to his physical presence I felt this overwhelming weight or pressure forcing me over backward to the mat. Verily I became a true believer that morning. Of course it would be years later, after study of tai chi and chi kung expanded my grasp of ki, before I could readily feel the ki current flowing through me. In the world outside the dojo, my first and only real martial application occurred bizarrely enough at a ski area. For several hours each day, during a week long "T" group training, we would continue the seminar on group dynamics on the slopes of Loon Mountain. A middle manager from Bell Atlantic and I were in intense competition for group leadership, as well as bragging rights as best skier. Given the pressure at the end of the day he snapped. Before I could take my skis off I looked up to see him swinging a ski at me. Without hesitation I moved into irimi nage, immediately dropping him. Equally amazingly he got up and swung again. The result was the same. I don't know who was more surprised, him on his butt or me seeing him there. With a start he seemed to come back to awareness of where we were and what he had done. I left it as "no harm no foul".

The effects of misogi breathing led me deeper into the practice of meditation. With Stan gone to Iwama to study, I became a student of Doran Sensei. Travelling to Aikido West for randori

practice before my nidan, I repeatedly ended up under a dogpile of ukes by making exactly the wrong choices. Doran Sensei seemed to tolerate this fiasco, though I could hardly stand the shame. Meditating on this process I gained profound insight into a very dark corner of my soul. Linked to that was an enormous source of power to liberate. For my nidan randori, one of the examiner's came off the board to join in my testing. Aware of the tremendous power of ki available to me I had no hesitation or reservation. I was not disappointed. I truly appreciated Doran Sensei's brief comment after the test.

For most of the time since Pranin Sensei left the area, Danielle Smith has run the dojo. We have worked well together, surmounting the end of our marriage. She has designated me dojo ho cho or spiritual forger for the dojo. This task of working at a deep level with dan advancement candidates has and is both an honor and a challenge for me. Looking at the darker side of our nature, the shame, anger, and fear flows from my professional life to the students' struggles and back to examination of my own life. Nothing is more rewarding than the Monday night brown and black belt class with several dan candidates and a coterie of eager yudansha ready to add some heat to the forging. I deeply appreciate the work of Danielle Sensei, starting out beginners who are then helped along their way by the other wonderful instructors till they come into my classes. My only regret is that at 65 I've apparently put in my 10,000 high falls and my body is voting to slow down. Yet as Ushiro Sensei describes, with study and practice of ki I can only grow stronger. And hopefully at greater peace.