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Division 1

I started practicing Aikido at Oberlin College in 1981. In the gym, I saw students walking by in martial arts uniforms. They looked cool, especially the ones in the baggy black pants. I learned that they were members of the Oberlin Aikido Club. I signed up for an introductory class. It was overseen by Frank Hreha Sensei. He was a yondan with a powerful, stocky build. I was amazed by his fluidity of motion. He tossed the advanced students without effort and was obviously having fun doing it. Our club was affiliated with Saotome Sensei; he and Ikeda Sensei were regular instructors. Their grace and ability were even more inspiring.

I immediately liked Aikido because it confronted and taught me in new and non-academic ways. I deeply enjoyed new body movements that weren't connected to the competitive sports I had loathed in high school. The internal challenges of training were also attractive. It was impossible to hide on the mat; abilities and limitations were apparent through motion. This was clear in my peers; it had to be true of me too. Aikido was also a way to learn about spirituality through action. As I trained and developed basic skills, I felt a little better, a little more whole and connected. I relished the discovery that I could grow and learn without the force of my intellect.

I trained at Oberlin through graduation in 1983, and then moved to Saotome Sensei's dojo in Washington DC. I progressed to second kyu before graduate school claimed my time in 1985. By 1990, I lived in Castro Valley, California. When time permitted, I visited the nearest dojo, Aikido San Leandro. I immediately liked Pat Hendricks Sensei, and was drawn to the systematic approach of Iwama style Aikido. I've trained there ever since, growing immensely under her guidance. I've taught Aikido regularly since 1996, and trained at dojos across North America and the Pacific Rim. I've also benefited from Pat Sensei's uchideshi program, which has introduced me to Aikido students from all over the world. It's nice to be an active part of a global community.

My most Memorable Aikido Experience

I cannot point to a most memorable Aikido experience. What means more to me than any seminar or training with any sensei are the hundreds, if not thousands, of small epiphanies received in my training. These insights have been produced by the repetition of technique and concurrent accretion of somatic, mental, and spiritual information. I've also gotten plenty of constructive input from Pat Sensei and my fellow deshi. The union of these sources and its continued evolution has given me an ongoing and fierce joy in practicing Aikido.

My progress as an Aikido student is the path of doing and feeling rather than thinking. My daily work and activities have always been oriented toward the life of the mind. Training has become the main counterbalance to this foremost part of my nature. I have learned through repeated experience that if I try to reason my way through a technique, my mind interferes in unconstructive ways. To name a few possibilities, I can become clumsy, anxious, or indifferent. If I abandon the mental model of what I'm trying to do, my movements are more effective, centered, and creative. Put another way, I've learned – through feeling and sensing - that when my mind is still and at most simply watching, in that moment I have the greatest potential of truly practicing Aikido as O-Sensei conceived it.

As described previously in this essay, I discovered this approach early in my training. My increasing belief and trust in this path transformed Aikido from a physical pursuit into the core of my spiritual practice. Whether I am on the mat, hiking in the Grand Canyon, writing at work, or buying groceries, moving from this balanced place makes me most connected with what I'll simply call "greater reality". I'm not the first person to have followed

this path. However, what's meaningful is to have found it through my own actions; it is original to me in this life.

I've learned things that I did not think were possible. I began to sense the ki flow in my body over a decade ago. I'd extend my arms, and ki would be perceptible as it moved through me and out of my palms and fingers. I wasn't looking for this experience. I'd been told to "extend my energy" many times, and read about such experiences, but I was skeptical that this sensitivity existed. I learned I couldn't force ki flow, nor think it into existence. It's grown stronger as I have practiced. I'm still surprised when I'm teaching and tell a kohai to "just let the ki flow". I never mean to say this, but it expresses what I'm experiencing.

It is clear to me that there is no end to improvement as an Aikido student. There's just more broadening from the concrete to numinous. This is regularly humbling: never a bad thing. I look forward to being on the mat for the remainder of my life.