

Featured Dojo-cho, April 2004



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In 1974, my friend, Jim, asked if I wanted to go see an old Army buddy of his whom he hadn't seen since they were both discharged. I was living in Monterey at the time, which happened to be the same town where his buddy, Stan Pranin, was teaching aikido classes. Jim thought very highly of the guy and had told me a lot about him over the years, so I was curious to meet him.

We arrived at Stan's house before noon on a Saturday. I'd never seen aikido before and as I looked into the two-car garage next to the house where Stan was living, I saw people rolling around, tossing each other to the ground and getting back up. All the while they were smiling and looking like they were having a good time. This scene certainly didn't fit the picture of martial arts that I had grown up with.

There was no grunting and growling, no threatening posturing, no "rip-your-still-beating-heart-out-and-stuff-it-down-your-throat," "kill-'em-before-they-know-what-hit-them" going on. Just people having a good time. (Later I would learn that O'Sensei said to always train in aikido in a joyful manner and that that was precisely what I was seeing: Aikido the way O'Sensei envisioned it.)

After the class, when Stan came out to talk to Jim, he introduced us. Not knowing exactly what to say after witnessing something which I found totally amazing, I fell back on my cleverness. "Can you beat up David Carridine?" I blurted out, not believing what a frivolous question I had just asked. Hey, what can I say, I didn't know I was

meeting someone who was about to radically change my life.

There was a momentary pause before Stan answered, during which I ran through all the "expected" answers: "Yes, I could kick his ass in a New York minute," "You know, all that Hollywood stuff is choreographed so don't get taken in by it," "Who th' hell are you?" and more. All those possible answers ran through my mind like the readout in the Terminator's eye when the desk clerk at the hotel knocked on his door.

I wasn't ready for Stan's simple response, "That's not one of my goals." Then he turned away and picked up his conversation with Jim.

I don't remember much after that because suddenly I found myself lost in my own thoughts. I was confused. My yes-no, either-or, kill-or-be-killed mentality had just been transformed by his get-off-the-line, blend-and-lead, unbalance-and-guide point of view.

I found myself thinking, "What are my goals?" and realized I had none. I was living day to day with no long-term future plans. Stan had totally redirected me from outward ego attacking to inner reflection. I was impressed.

I started training the next day and have kept it up without pause for thirty years. After training almost every day for fifteen years, I opened the doors of East Bay Aikido in 1988. I wanted a place to explore and share my version of O'Sensei's vision

In 2001, I was promoted to the rank of 6th Dan. For a guy who started out with no discernible goals, that's not a bad showing.

I am grateful to everyone who has shared time on the mat with me as I continue to grow, learn and refine my own understanding of what an incredible gift O'Sensei bequeathed to the world. I am fortunate to have a teacher who indulges my sometimes meandering quest and a wife who supports me unconditionally. Thank you, Frank Doran Sensei and Linda Andersen. And thank you, Michael Smith. You kept bugging me until I caved in and provided you with a memorable aikido experience. Overcoming my resistance, reticence and reluctance was not an easy thing.

My Most Memorable Aikido Experience

In my almost 30 years of training, I've had many, many memorable moments, each of which merits telling. But there's one experience that's never far from my heart and mind. I can't help hoping that the wisdom embodied in it will resonate as deeply with each person who

has ever stepped on the aiki path as it has with me.

About a week before an evening class taught by Terry Dobson that I planned to attend, I was talking with a friend who had recently seen Terry at an annual men's conference.

"He's close to death," my friend told me. "And he's in an incredible place where he only tells the truth. He says he doesn't have time for anything else."

Now you should know that every time my path crossed Terry's on the mat, my aikido was profoundly changed. While others struggled with his eccentricities, I always came away smiling and appreciative of the time shared with him. For me, one of Terry's greatest strengths had always been his propensity for truthfulness. For these reasons I was already eager to be in his presence. But now, knowing it would most likely be the last chance I would have to train with him, I was even more motivated. The possibility of being around someone at death's door who could only tell the truth exerted an incredible drawing power on me. Knowing it was Terry Dobson . . . well, you get the picture. I couldn't help wondering how much more boldly he would share his personal insights.

I arrived at the parking lot at the same time Terry did and offered to carry his bag as we walked up the outdoor stairs to the second floor. Terry took his time, stopping halfway up to catch his breath and look around at the view. The effort embodied in his halting, yet determined, ascent humbled me, making me appreciate how often I took for granted the gift of my own youthful vigor.

His teaching that night was classic Terry. For those of you who have attended his classes, you know what I mean. For those of you who haven't, I recommend you check out the video, "Terry Dobson Teaches." You'll get the drift of what I mean.

As the class progressed, it was clear that Terry was physically weak. But it was also clear that his spirit was strong. He was determined to do the best job he could, given his fading strength.

About halfway through the class, he suddenly stopped, turned to the seated line of students and said, "The form of aikido is the enemy of aikido." Then, just as abruptly, he turned back to his uke and continued with what he was teaching.

I was sitting in the middle of the line, right in front of him, and his words hit me like a freight train roaring down the tracks. I know the

comment wasn't directed solely to me, but it may as well have been since I've been thinking about it ever since.

After the class was over, I offered to fold his hakama. He shed it without hesitation. He didn't have the strength or the interest to object or to do it himself.

I took great care folding this extraordinary teacher's hakama, knowing that this might very well be the last time I ever saw him. I thought about all the gifts he had given me over the years and pondered this latest one: "The form of aikido is the enemy of aikido."

Terry lapsed into a coma a couple days later and died the following week. I never got a chance to ask him what he meant. But after contemplating it these many years since his death, I've drawn conclusions of my own.

Most importantly, for me, is a deeply rooted awareness that aikido is a practice of the heart far more than of the body. You don't have mastery if all you have is a set of "perfected" physical techniques. For whether it's in your solitary moments of pain-filled reflection on life's wounding experiences or in the intense heat of confrontation, it's your heart's desire that leads your body into action. It's how the principles of aikido are practiced daily within your heart, that shape-shifting and unwieldy center of divine energy, that propels you forward toward compassionate action or not.

Terry's words: "The form of aikido is the enemy of aikido" may prove to be the most profound teaching ever imparted to me by any aikido teacher. Perhaps his cautionary insight is why I've never been able to find satisfaction through focusing solely on teaching the outward expression of aikido, the physical techniques. Perhaps this is why I've allowed the exploration of poetry and prayer, meditation and music to inspire the way I teach the art of harmonizing with the energy of the universe.

Thank you, Terry, for this teaching and for all your teachings. You are missed.