



The Aikido Center of Los Angeles

道の為、世の為、人の為 合気道

The Aiki Dojo

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Los Angeles Sword and Swordsmanship Society Kenshinkai
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Letter From the Editor by Mark Ehrlich Editor, The Aiki Dojo

As another year winds down, I find myself reflecting on all that we have accomplished here at ACLA, all that we have yet to do, and the very many blessings we have received.

Recently, I heard a notable Christian monk, a well-known theologian and scholar, lecture on happiness. The basic point of his talk amounted to this: happy people may or may not feel gratitude, but grateful people always feel

happy, so cultivate a sense of gratitude for all that you have, and you will discover a sense of joy that will keep on growing.

This argument intrigues me and feels right by the lights of my own experience, so I wanted to share it with you in hopes that, when you look back on your own year, you find those moments where gifts came to you – some small, some unexpected – and helped you appreciate this miraculous puzzle we call life. Happiness may seem frivolous as a goal, yet humans have always spent enormous amounts of time and energy chasing it. It even gets mention in the founding document of our country, where Thomas Jefferson declares that one of humanity's inalienable rights is the pursuit of happiness. I cannot say how many governments have chosen to follow this example of including happiness in their mission, but I would have to say that

whoever does has wisdom on their side. We may never hold on to happiness forever, but the instinct to find it and nurture it within us and within those who matter to us helps move mountains and change lives. Doing what makes us happy can, in the end, awaken within us the desire to help others find a similar bliss and ignite the spark that makes us

not only agents of change, but good citizens of the world in all senses. We simply find ourselves inclined to share the love, as it were, which seems to me an important aspect of what we hope to accomplish through all of our training in the first place.



Happy Holidays from all of us at ACLA!

So, I want to say that I feel very blessed to have such generous teachers in Ito Sensei and Ken Watanabe, such engaged fellow students at ACLA and our branches, and such good friends all around the world who read this newsletter. Please accept my best wishes for a wonderful holiday season, and my thanks for your support. I'll see you on the mat!

Upcoming Events

- December 21st**
Osoji: year-end cleanup
- December 22nd**
Children's Class Christmas Party
- December 24-27th**
Dojo closed for Christmas
- December 28th**
Last intensive/practice of the year
- December 29-January 3rd**
Dojo closed for New Year's
- January 4th**
Dojo re-opens
Kagami biraki party



“Although I am just a human being, I want to model myself after the sword – always straight, always true, and very decisive. Something that doesn’t have an outer obvious strength that we look for today, but something that has an inner strength which is hard to see unless you really know it and really can appreciate it.”

– Reverend Kensho Furuya

Learning to Bow Low

by David Ito, Chief Instructor

For me, 2013 was about changes. 2013 was the Year of the Snake, in which we were supposed to see the snake’s slow serpentine movements coupled with quick decisiveness. That pretty much came true as the year began with the birth of my son Michael, two months early. From that point on everything else was kind of a blur where the dojo experienced some ups and downs, but essentially everything just kind of fell into place and seemed to work.

This year, I started to see a shift in myself. I am not sure if it was a result of time marching on or beginning with the death of Sensei, getting married, and culminating with the birth of my son, but my perspective on Aikido as well as life has started to change. Slowly but surely over the last couple of years, I started to see what people referred to as the Way of Aikido.

It just happened one day, out of the blue, when at a restaurant I saw a little boy with a birth defect playing at the table next to ours as we ate dinner. He seemed so happy and outgoing and I found myself wondering what life would be like for him as he grew up and the bumps and bruises of life took their toll. Would he still be happy and outgoing or would he become jaded and afraid? At that point something cracked in me: I became a little softer, life seemed so much bigger than it had before, and Aikido became something more than just a way to defeat others. I started to see the humanity in all things and life somehow held more meaning for me.

This sudden revelation actually made me more confused than ever. My whole concept of the art of Aikido up to this point had been wrapped up in myself: I had been the center of the universe, but now everything felt foreign to me. Like all students in the beginning, I started out focusing all my efforts on executing the techniques properly. I was only concerned with how the techniques worked and which techniques seemed most effective. To me, this

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juvenile way of thinking lead me to assume that Aikido was only a way to destroy other people. Now I found my Aikido completely ineffective where nothing seemed to work, but despite that I have reached a deeper, rich place in my life. I’ve started to see flashes of something much deeper, which reminded me of something Sensei once wrote. *To lose or win is only chance and the way of the world – it is typical to desire to win, it is realistic to know that you will lose. It is wiser not to waste your time with such trivial matters when you can use your life and energies for much more worthy efforts.* Many times in the past Sensei had admonished me to grow up when it came to how I behaved and lived my life. Admittedly, I had always scoffed at him when he chided me about my maturity, but now I am starting to see what he meant in one of his articles in *Kodo: Ancient*

Ways about the proverb of the rice stalk: *minoru hodo atama wo tareru inaho kana* (“Young rice stalks stand upright while the mature grains bow low.”).

Today as I find myself the teacher and leader of the dojo nothing seems truer than these words. I used to think that the best definition of strength was purely physical, but I was wrong – winning or losing, being the best, or hurting others are nothing more than a childish game. True inner strength is having the courage to be humble, respectful, and compassionate, even in the face of the modern world that lauds ability over character. I want a dojo that teaches the finer aspects of humanity where inner strength matters more than outer strength. Nowadays, I find the world a bit awkward; things seem a little different, but I know that I’ve found the right direction and wouldn’t change anything for the world. Sensei’s advice was simple: “Do good deeds, think good thoughts.” The Way sounds simple, but following it is hard. Please do your best to treat each other with care and follow the last scroll that Sensei put up before he died – “Be strong, be humble, and always keep going.” Thank you all for all you do for the dojo and your hard work this year. I wish you all a happy and healthy 2014.

The Value of Belonging to a Dojo

by Santiago Garcia Almaraz, Chief Instructor
Aikido Kodokai, Salamanca, Spain

All of us practice martial arts for different reasons at different times: illusion, nonchalance, boredom, desperation, other emotions. And all these feelings determine our vision and practice in every moment. Sometimes we feel very motivated and become very involved with the dojo and seem ideal students, while the following year we may find it difficult just to assist or to take part in some dojo event to show our commitment. Sometimes, we simply disappear.

I thankfully (or, probably, unfortunately) had to start to teach and carry my own Aikido dojo very early on in my career – probably much too soon, but in my city I had no teacher or school where I could go to practice regularly under the direction of a *sensei*. This experience has influenced my attitude when practicing or going to ACLA; I had a strong feeling that my knowledge and my practice directly affected my students. Because of this feeling, I have always had a sensation of great responsibility with regard to what I learned and what Sensei taught.

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Important Lessons

by Shaun Menashe, Aikido Shodan, Iaido 2nd Dan

As many of you know, my grandmother died earlier this year in March, and although she struggled with a myriad of health issues for most of her life, it was still an extremely difficult time for my family and I.

Because my mom had to work long hours, my grandmother was like a second mother to me. We spent a great deal of time together. We walked and talked; she kept me company and was my confidant. Her cooking kept me plump and happy and we became very close. However, over the past 15 years, because she suffered so much, it became harder for me to connect with her. Her ailments became the focal point of our conversations. It was a difficult subject to avoid and her suffering made me uncomfortable.

My grandmother had always thought doctors would have an answer for her pain. Even after months in the hospital, she believed she would return home; the inevitability of death seemed to surprise her even in her last few weeks. She underwent painful procedures that could only extend her life days at most. She definitely wanted to continue living. Surviving was a part of who she was. She endured the holocaust, seven children, and years of hard work. My grandmother clung to life and never let go.

I felt entirely helpless as my grandmother's health declined and, while I struggled to find some way to help her, all my attempts ended in frustration. I desperately hoped that she could come to terms with death and dying. In retrospect, I realized that if she could accept her demise, it would be easier for me to lose her. I was subconsciously driven to resolve this for her and to rationalize her passing. As she was dying, I realized that I had placed her at a comfortable distance all those years ago. I was not ready to accept her suffering because I was not willing to accept my own.

I realized that when we are sad or grieving, we undergo a variety of mental gymnastics to free ourselves from that pain. When children lose their favorite toy, few parents ask, "How did losing that make you feel?" More often than not, the common reply is, "We can get you a new one." We are subconsciously taught to replace loss with some *thing*. All of this is seemingly innocent, socially ingrained, and certainly systemic. We learn to talk ourselves out of feeling and to instinctively dilute the pain with thoughts and rationalizations. This pervades everything we do when dealing with loss, from break ups to layoffs to death. Colloquialisms – like *There are plenty of fish in the sea, I have to be strong for the family,* and *Time heals all wounds* – reflect intellectual responses to discomfort. Although these statements are logically valid, they do not belong to the domain of feeling. They are, instead, coping mechanisms which move us from the choppy waters of emotion, to the calmer seas of the intellect.

It wasn't until I watched my grandmother pass in her hospital bed that I realized how contented I felt just being there with her. Even though I couldn't talk her through her transition into death or make her pain go away, I was still able to support and share the experience of dying with her. It was during this process that I learned it was okay not to be okay.

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Courtesy and Etiquette

by Jason Markowski, Aikido Shodan

Recently, I have been reflecting on the role etiquette plays at our dojo. I know this etiquette well, and I am often the first to pull new students aside and explain to them the proper way to do something. It is a responsibility we senior students all share. Following this etiquette is only a small part of what makes ACLA unique, but it plays a very vital part. It is the foundation that has kept our dojo's tradition of integrity alive since its inception in 1974, even after the passing of its founder in 2007.

My thoughts on the topic came into stark relief one day when I was pointedly told that I had not shown the proper etiquette as I entered the dojo. I walked into the dojo and nodded at two senior ranking members, when I should have said "Hello". (Anyone who knows me is probably laughing as they read this, because they know that I tend to be arrogant, that I can be too familiar, and that I mischievously step over the line the first chance I get. If I am making fun of you then I probably like you, or at the very least, I have found some redeeming quality in you that merits my attention. Anyone who truly knows me knows that if you endure my "affection" long enough, you will find someone steeped in courtesy and propriety, and, perhaps someone in whom you will find a lifelong friend.)

Regardless of my seemingly flippant behavior at times, I do take reprimands on my lack of etiquette seriously. I take it seriously because I am the first to notice the lack of it in others. But, more importantly, I am very conscious of the fact that many times the proper etiquette is followed without the prerequisite courtesy. The rote following of an established etiquette without the proper understanding of the courtesies involved is inevitably detrimental to everything the etiquette was established for in the first place. Without the respect that is implicit in courtesy, the most fastidious etiquette becomes meaningless. It renders even the most impeccable etiquette worthless and disrespectful of the memory of Sensei, and everything he spent a lifetime building. There is no integrity in it. It is simply arrogant.

We all have a role to play in maintaining ACLA's high standards, for which Sensei was renowned. We should all take a moment to reflect on how we perceive our roles in the dojo. As students, we learn to observe the subtlest of movements that make Aikido sometimes so elusive and almost unattainable; after a while, this translates into how we perceive our surroundings off the mat as well. This year, more so than others, I have evaluated my public persona in the dojo, and in my day-to-day life, and have found myself wanting. Proper fundamentals and technique will always serve us well when we are not at our best on the mat; as will proper courtesy and etiquette on the mat or off. I hope everyone has a wonderful holiday season and I thank you all for giving me the opportunity to train with you this year, and for many more to come.

One Step

by Reverend Kensho Furuya

To pass on a tradition, you must first receive a tradition from your teacher, so study hard!

In the illustrious and honored tradition of Aikido, it is the great man who makes the rules, it is the lesser man who makes the exceptions and breaks them. In this day and age, I think it is not the custom for people to put something higher than themselves. We always put ourselves at the top. We are Number One, as far as we are concerned, and this is how the world turns.



Many people talk about “tradition” but, more and more, I think fewer and fewer people really understand what it means. We use “tradition” for as much as it fulfills our own needs and wants and the rest we just toss away. In traditional Japanese martial arts such as Aikido, these traditions have a long history of over 800 years. It is an interesting footnote that, in Japanese feudal society, artists sat a class above the merchant class, which crouched at the very bottom rung of society. Today, it seems quite different; we’ve put the business people on the pedestal of honor in our minds and revere them most above all others. We deify the rich and famous!

On the other hand, I hear many stories of how traditional artists are struggling to preserve their art in modern culture. Most can barely make a living and their art will die when they are gone, some have “sold out” and make too much money. Today, can anyone even make “too much” money? Haha!

One of my great loves is the restoration of old Japanese swords to their original splendor. As the years go by, there are less and less styles of lacquer work available, so many important skills have died away with their masters. Recently, I had a sword restored to a rare style of mountings designed and favored by Miyamoto Musashi, the swordsman. These special fittings and blade took me about 25 years to get together. I took the handle to be wrapped by one of the top handle wrappers in Japan, now designated as an Important Intangible Cultural Asset (Living National Treasure) and it took over one year to accomplish. He spent eight months just studying Musashi’s particular style. When I spoke with him, he explained that no one today has ever asked for such a task so no one ever practices this rare, special style. I think with this master, it will also die out. It was only because of his genius that we were able to duplicate it very well, but the new handle still does not compare to the original, which I also have and study. As beautiful and unusual as it is, it fits perfectly to the hand and creates an excellent grip. Beauty and function perfectly meshed; of course, only Musashi could create it. We do not have the mentality, experience, background, lifestyle, life perspective, or sensitivity of

those times to create such a work so there is no way to produce it. I am not talking about superficial imitations here. We will never see this again, so I hope this example can be preserved for future generations to enjoy. (We have become so satisfied with “imitations” and knock-offs today that most of us do not know the difference between real and fake. How much fake food do we eat every day? Pretty soon, fake air and water! And pretty soon, fake lives – we even make fake human clones!)

There is a modern artist named Naruki Issei (“One Life”) who lives in the remote mountains in Gifu prefecture, one of the ancient centers of sword making and a place where the iron is very good. He lives alone with his wife in an extremely Spartan life-

style, much like warriors and artists did 300 years ago. Here, after many, many years, he has revived the old methods of sword guard making. Very painstaking, labor-intensive methods, involving long hours and countless hours of work, produce one *tsuba*. He retrieves natural sand iron to produce iron guards. His simple lifestyle has polished his mind to produce designs just like the ancient artists – this cannot be done anywhere else today because of our modern lifestyles and environment.

He only makes *tsuba* by special order so we rarely ever see his works in the art market. Several years ago, he was recognized by the Sword Museum for his excellent work. My friend, the director of this museum, told me it took years just to lure him out of the mountains into the city to receive such an honor. Nowadays, he is more than 76 years old and I heard from friends that his feet are bad and his wife now does much of the harder initial work for him. He produces fewer and fewer works with age but there is no one to study under him: the work seems much too hard, the lifestyle seems too difficult, there’s no money in it, and it takes much too long to learn this art.

When you look at his work, it is easy to mistake it for a sword guard of several hundred years ago. You will also notice that he cuts his name into the *tsuba* very, very deeply and boldly to prevent others from erasing his name and selling it as a valuable antique. I will be so sad when I hear that he is no longer here. I am sure that I will cry.

In a similar vein, I will tell you another interesting story that happened to me. I had another modern *tsuba* made by an artist in the southern part of Japan who copied the famous Higo sword guards, which enjoy renown for their beautiful gold inlay work known as *Higo Zogan*. The example I had was very beautiful – an exact copy of a very famous early work – and wonderful to look at.

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New Challenges, New Opportunities

by Mike Van Ruth, Chief Instructor
Aikido Renbukai, Surprise, AZ

2013 has been a good year. I like to call it the year of my comeback. In 2012 I experienced a severe knee injury. I have experienced many injuries in my life, but next to a back injury, I think this one could be the worst. I realized that just the act of walking is a treasure that can't be taken for granted. I tried to power through it and keep training, but there was no improvement. I believed that surgery would be the only option to recover.

In 2013 I saw a marked improvement in my knee injury. At first I thought it would vastly restrict my training, and in a way it did: I had to take some time off the mat for a short period and take it easy. These changes brought me to the realization that I am no longer a young man; I had to learn to train in a different way. It also taught me that I have to listen to my body. My days of ignoring things because I think I'm tough are over.

I can't say that my knee is back at 100 percent. It still makes the occasional knocking and popping sounds, but at least the pain is gone. The injury, however, will always be there. I will always have to be cautious about my knee's structural stability. It becomes now just a matter of managing it and strictly adhering to proper movement.

In retrospect, I think my Aikido has improved due to the injury. Without this experience, I would have continued to move the way I always did. Something had to slow me down so I could look for a different way. I used to consider myself fast and strong. I am now starting to come to terms with having to redefine what that means.

Years ago, I would watch Sensei demonstrate a technique in class or at a demonstration; it was amazing how quickly and smoothly he would move. I wondered how he could do that, being of his age and build. Maybe my injury is the catalyst that will lead me down the path to unfold that mystery for myself. Even if someone had told me the secret back then, I don't think I would have understood. The need for me to know just wasn't there. Now, however, I have no choice but to slow down and see things differently.

As I have been told, "the Way is hard". We all have things in our training we see as huge obstacles. These obstacles can be easily be perceived in a negative light, or we can choose to see them as an opportunity to make us better. It has been a hard lesson for me to learn. Only now that I am finally seeing the light at the end of the tunnel, can I see the experience of my injury for what it is . . . a blessing.

I would like to thank everyone at ACLA for their support and understanding. I would also like to thank Ito Sensei his help in the rehabilitation of my knee. Without his expertise and encouragement, I would not be where I am today – getting better, in many different ways.

Harmony

By James Doi, Aikido 5th Dan, Iaido 4th Dan

Everyone in the dojo has probably, when asked, described Aikido by first explaining what *aikido* literally means. The first character means *harmony*, the second means *spirit* or *energy*, and the last means "the way of"; hence, *aikido* becomes "the way of harmonious spiritual energy".

Perhaps an attempt at explaining what *ki* is and some sort of discussion on the metaphysics of *ki* or *chi* will follow. Maybe a discussion on "turning the attacker's force back on them" techniques will also be included. I doubt that any one of us would want to go into a long discussion of "harmony". The presence of the word and idea of harmony in Aikido seems like a high moral concept, but not exactly essential.

I think to most Westerners, and especially to Americans, "the way of harmonious spiritual energy" sounds like a Google translation of the operator's manuals of inexpensive electronics manufactured in East Asia. As in; ". . . by manually place AA batteries in Part 23 to insurance harmonious eternal working of laser bacon. . . ." (Note: This example is the author's attempt at comedy.) The use of the word "harmonious" sort of makes sense, but is not essential for the manual. Having said that, in this essay I'd like to stress the importance of the nature of harmony in Aikido and argue that harmony is more than a high moral concept; it is a fundamental technique and concept in *budo*.

Martial arts seems to embody the ultimate zero-sum game: it is either win or lose with any tactic fair game. The crude view of martial arts considers them only systems of attack and defense, where bigger, faster, stronger, and meaner wins this game. Yet the amazing beauty of Aikido is that O Sensei figured out a way to use "the way of harmonious spiritual energy" to trump big, fast, strong, and mean. The goal of students studying Aikido is to figure out and learn how the "technique of harmony" is superior to big, fast, strong, and mean.

In Aikido, we use several words and phrases that are similar to or related to the idea of harmony: synchronize, blend, coordinate, align with, don't block, stickiness, balance, synergy, yin-yang, etc. However, the word *harmony* can include all these ideas. Aikido, then, becomes a beautiful poetic name for O Sensei's *budo*, but it is also proves itself a clinically precise description.

I once saw a teacher, both an Aikido *sensei* and a Zen priest, give a lecture on some Zen topic. Even though he had been in the US for some time, he still had quite a heavy accent. It was clear observing the audience, that they really didn't understand what he was talking about, and that they assumed that they didn't understand because of his command of English. I had heard his talk before and I knew that there was probably no other way to explain topic than the way he did.

Focus on the meaning of harmony when practicing.

Important Lessons *continued from page 3...*

Through her death, my grandmother taught me to distinguish between thinking and feeling. In the past, I viewed emotions as something to overcome with proper rationale. Like rushing to treat an infection with the appropriate medication, I thought that the longer I felt, the more sick I would become. Feeling was messy and thinking so sterile that it always seemed like the proper antidote. It surprised me how pervasively I applied this idea. It helped me package my life for comfort and safety. This layer of thought bubble wrap provided an endless supply of reasons to continue operating within my comfort zone at all times.

In the last few days of my grandmother's life, I opened my heart to her and felt the full panoply of emotions that her passing brought to the surface. I felt crushed at the thought of losing her and felt very scared that, after all these years, she didn't know how much I loved her. Yet, instead of trying to justify or rationalize this discomfort, I shared it with her, even when she was apparently unconscious. It was in my moment of accepting these feelings that I experienced a bond that felt incredibly rich and connected. It was a feeling that I will never forget.

A Busy Year's End

by Paul Major, Aikido 2nd Dan, Iaido Shodan

The end of the year is upon us, and I have never felt so stressed, overwhelmed, and strangely content all at the same time. There are more projects I'm participating in, and more choices I've made for the direction of my life (particularly in these last couple of months), than in any other period of time in my history. One of my touchstones, a lynchpin to keep me grounded through all of this happy madness, has been the dojo.

So much mental chatter comes up naturally in practice, and let's not forget the acute frustration that can arise when an instructor offers a simple correction. If any outsiders peeked into any of our personal experiences on the mats, I'm sure they would ask, "Why do you do it?!" And I'm equally sure each of us would answer in our own individual way.

For me the dojo has been, and continues to be, a place where the outside world must take a back seat for the present moment. All of those finicky thoughts and emotions I haven't been skilled in addressing in my vocational life can bubble right up to the surface when I'm being tossed around or corrected as I try to perfect some technique or movement. Physically, practice also offers an outlet for the stresses of the day, and illuminates areas where calmness would be beneficial.

Many believe that emotions are stored in the body and I've found that wisdom to be true for me, generally. I'm also frenetic and accustomed to bouncing around several subjects at once, in my mind – vocalizing what's in my head to anyone would sound unintelligible. Training encourages a sort of smoothing out of these frequent peaks and valleys and I've found, at least in my own practice, that I have a better dialogue now with what my body is going through at any given moment. I think this is directly due to the focus on the pre-

Because she never let go, my grandmother taught me that no matter what the circumstance, life is truly worth living and that even if we suffer, experiencing life's ups and downs is a priceless gift unto itself. Whether she knew it or not, my grandmother was one of the most influential people in my life. She proved to me that our true strength lies in our hearts and that our true value lies in our ability to extend that love and compassion to others without expecting anything in return.

I thank my grandmother from the bottom of my heart for giving me the gift that only her death could bring. I can only hope that she knew how valuable and transformative this lesson was for me and how much it meant to me to connect with her in those last few moments. She was truly worthy of being a role model and my life would not have been the same without her love and tenderness.

I thank all of you who have supported me throughout my grieving process this year. Thank you for being there and thank you for helping me experience my life in a deeper way. I wish you all a wonderful holiday and I will see you in 2014.

sent moment that we must apply to our training in order to learn, and also directly due to the awareness and efforts of our instructors.

Of no less importance (and perhaps of greater personal value), the dojo is also a community of people I count as friends and comrades. We are all quite different people, but we share a real interest in developing ourselves, and within that desire is a bond that I believe we should never take for granted. We know each other in a way that some of our closest friends and family do not know us; that's an inevitability of training together.

This year has been fraught with challenges, personal and professional. A dear relative passed on, I produced a short film at a professional level, my attitude towards training shifted ever so slightly, teachers came and went in various areas of life, acting opportunities sprang up consistently as if by magic, I gave notice at my day job, one non-profit was formed and more responsibility was accepted within another. . . . In the context of the phrase 'feast or famine' it has truly been a 'feast' year – sometimes for the worse but mostly for the better, and not just for myself.

Helping me through all this has been you, the reader. Your audience continually inspires me, and reminds me that many of us share this journey, whether you're a fellow student at ACLA or a casual observer that knows of us through our words in print and on the Internet. You help form our nuclear family and our broader readership. To read a newsletter like this is to be curious at least, and curiosity is a great place to start.

But the year's not over yet! There's much work to be done and training to engage in, whether it's on the mats or off, before this year closes out properly. In that vein I'll share my persona mantra: "Stay aware, show up when you can, breathe, calm down, keep going." Thank you!

One Step *continued from page 4...*

One day, I happened to send a photo to my teacher in Japan to get his opinion of this *tsuba* because this artist's teacher was very well known. My teacher didn't say too much and was not impressed and told me the secret. Discouraged with this *tsuba*, I sold it to my friend who had wanted it very badly for a long time, and I heard that he sold it again for very big money, three times more than the price of a Naruki *tsuba*! My friend laughed at me for being so naive and I only smiled and laughed to myself. Ah, my poor teacher is so old-fashioned, he doesn't know the current market or trends, but I don't care, I still feel so proud of him and respect him so much. Even though I lost money!

I will share the secret he told me with you today. He was discouraged with this *tsuba* because, he said, this artist is not a real artist, but a wealthy butcher who only took up making *tsuba* as a hobby. If you look very closely, the old Higo *tsuba* have exactly the same gold inlay work, but they use gold dust delicately pounded into the fine grooves to produce the intricate design. This artist, if you look closely, like other modern artists today who try to imitate this work, uses gold wire. This one change at one step in the process makes a very big difference. Using gold wire seems much easier than controlling fine gold dust into the grooves. So why did they use gold dust? Because in ancient times, it was easily possible for the gold wire to dislodge and injure the hand of the user in the heat of battle. There is no possibility of this happening, however, if you use gold dust. This artist does not follow the true tradition and therefore can be discounted, since he only produces imitations for his amusement.

Of course, today, there are no *samurai*, and there are no people who wear and use swords, so no one is aware of such a sensitivity as

The Value of Belonging to a Dojo *continued from page 2...*

A long time ago I had the great luck of knowing Sensei, and for me our relationship became a great inspiration. I learned to help myself, and many things besides the technique of Aikido and Iaido. Sensei respected responsibility and a willingness to sacrifice for the sake of the art and for the sake of one's students. Because of his example, I consider ACLA as my family and everything I do inside and out of it and my own dojo becomes my responsibility, since I represent my dojo and my students. Nowadays, so many students choose to train in places like gymnasiums, sports centers, or other places that distract from the traditional pride and responsibility towards their dojo; it makes me very sad, because I believe that those who follow that path of commercialized training lose an important part of what make the martial arts martial in the first place.

We have the great luck of belonging to this small group of people who practice in a true dojo, one the values of which we need to support and nurture, since otherwise our practice and our words will become inconsistent and false. I feel very grateful to Ito Sensei, who makes an extra effort in supporting the high level in the dojo

this. This is the difference between real tradition and most imitations and knock offs today. It goes the same with Aikido and other martial arts as well. Only those of the old school, like my teacher, a real *samurai*, know this and they will soon all disappear.

We talk of practice and training, but we are only playing. Of course, we have our priorities: we have our careers, families, jobs, and on and on, and this is very important too. But, at least, it would be nice if we could keep one part in our lives where we can touch the past. Nothing will grow without strong, healthy roots; please don't forget this! Please come to our dojo often to train, for how long will it be around?



We feel very clever today because we can make compromises and deals, whereas the warrior never compromised anything! I don't think, like everyone else, this seems very smart, but yet this remains a part of his greatness too. There are easier ways to produce *tsuba* and we do not have to work as hard as Naruki. But only his *tsuba* will be around for the next 500 years, not this other stuff.

In the Sixties and Seventies, I think, there was a sci-fi TV series known as "One Step Beyond" about improbable events with improbable people. I was thinking about this the other day but in a different context. I thought, "I wish my students would go 'one step beyond': one step beyond in their thinking, in their training, and in everything they do in life!" Take it one step further, refine it one step more, think one step deeper, one degree faster, do it just one step better! But alas, it is all just science fiction, isn't it?

Merry Christmas and Happy Holidays!

Editor's Note: *Sensei originally published this essay, in slightly different form, to his daily message board on December 12, 2002.*

that Sensei began. To keep these values alive has taken years of hard work not only from him, but all the instructors and black belts at ACLA as well.

We martial artists must do our best to ensure that what we think, say, and do all resonates the same thing. True practice is not merely the work or play of an hour a day, nor does it involve speaking about a few values or attitudes that we ignore the second we step off the mat.

I understand that especially for newer students these attitudes can seem a bit rare, confusing, and probably demanding; but in the way that I learned the martial arts, the respect to our dojo plays an important part in our formation as students of the martial arts. In the end, I do not consider myself to be a great teacher or anyone's *sensei*, but I like to think of myself as a good student of my own dojo. Therefore, I like to be the first one to put on my *keikogi* before practice, to help new students, to clean, or to help the dojo to grow a little bit as a community. This, I think, is the best present that I can give to my students. Happy Holidays!

Aikido TRAINING SCHEDULE

Sundays

9:00-10:00 AM Children's Class

10:15-11:15 AM Open

Mondays

6:30-7:30 AM Open

5:15-6:15 PM Fundamentals

6:30-7:30 PM Open

Tuesdays

6:30-7:30 PM Advanced*

Wednesdays

6:30-7:30 AM Open

5:15-6:15 PM Fundamentals

6:30-7:30 PM Intermediate

7:45-8:45 PM Weapons*

Fridays

6:30-7:30 PM Open

Saturdays

9:30-10:30 AM Open

10:45-11:45 AM Advanced*

6:30 AM Instructor's Intensive:

last Saturday of the month by invitation only.*

* These classes are not open for visitors to watch.

Iaido TRAINING SCHEDULE

TRADITIONAL JAPANESE IAIDO SWORDSMANSHIP

Saturdays

8:00-9:00 AM

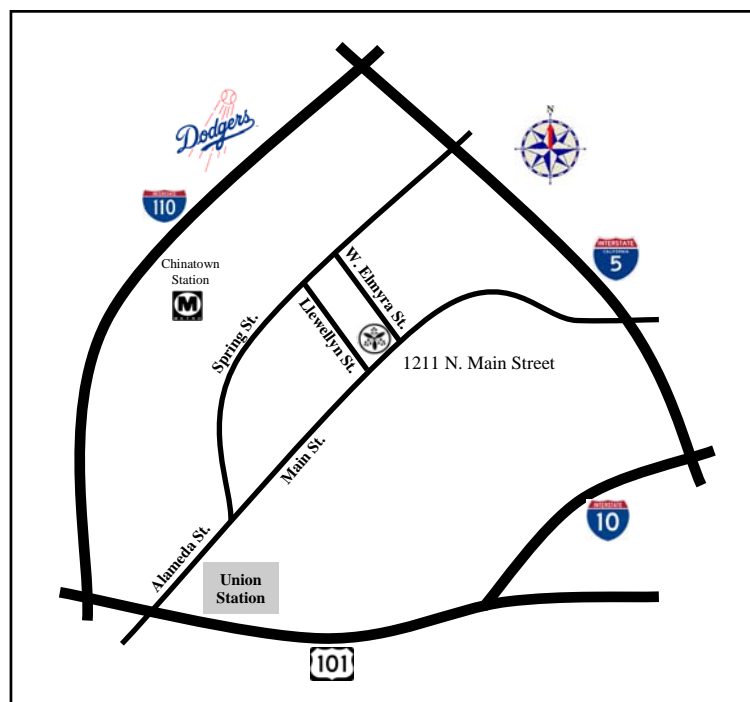
Sundays

7:45-8:45 AM

Thursdays

6:30-7:30 PM

No weekend classes on the last weekend of the month.



We are directly affiliated with:

AIKIDO WORLD HEADQUARTERS

公益財団法人 合気会

Aikido Hombu Dojo - Aikikai

17-18 Wakamatsu-cho, Shinjuku-ku, Tokyo, JAPAN

We are committed to the study and practice of the teachings of the Founder of Aikido, Morihei Ueshiba and his legitimate successors, Kisshomaru Ueshiba and the present Doshu Moriteru Ueshiba.



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We are a not-for-profit, traditional Aikido Dojo dedicated to preserving the honored values and traditions of the arts of Aikido and Iaido. With your continued understanding and support, we hope that you also will dedicate yourself to your training and to enjoying all the benefits that Aikido and Iaido can offer.

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Finding Our Dojo

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We are across the street and one block northwest from the Chinatown Metro Station.

The entrance is on Elmyra Street.

No appointment necessary to watch classes or join:

You are welcome to visit us any time during any of our Open or Fundamentals classes. Please come early.