



AIKIDO CENTER OF LOS ANGELES

NEWSLETTER

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SEASON'S GREETINGS

Born and raised in America, I am accustomed to celebrating Christmas along with everyone else ever since my childhood. (Although my family is traditionally Buddhist, we were raised as Christians since the time my grandfather immigrated to this country.) A year ago in October, I was ordained as a Buddhist monk and I thought it would be the end of Christmas for me because, logically speaking, Buddhists, especially Buddhist priests, don't celebrate Christmas. As we soon entered the Christmas season, I was surprised to receive a Christmas present from one of the other Buddhist monks. I was surprised and asked, "We're Buddhist monks, why do you give me a Christmas present?" He smiled and said, "Christmas is an important custom in this country and it also makes everyone so happy. It is a good custom so why not celebrate Christmas?"

Our world is getting smaller and smaller everyday. Something happens in Kuwait, thousands of miles away, and we feel it immediately in our everyday lives. Like the Buddhist monk who celebrates Christmas, despite race, sex, politics, religion or personal background, we should celebrate and cherish what is good among mankind.

Christmas also coincides with the New Year and this is an important custom in the East, especially Japan. It is customary to have a "Bo-nen-Kai" or "forgetting the old year party" in 1990 and a "Shin-nen-Kai" or "welcoming in the New Year party" in 1991. Our dojo traditionally celebrates with a special New Year's practice by conducting class on December 31st from 11:30pm into the New Year.

I would personally like to wish everyone the very best of the Christmas season and the New Year. Much success, happiness and good health to all my students.

THE AIKIDO CENTER OF LOS ANGELES

Kensho Furuya,
Chief Instructor

Sensei's Message:

"THE VERY BEST STUDENT IN THE WHOLE WORLD"

When prospective students visit the dojo and watch our practice, they, more often than not, receive the impression that Aikido looks very easy, almost too easy, perhaps. When they join our dojo and enter the mat area for the very first time, it is a different story. Aikido suddenly becomes very difficult, very mysterious, and very frustrating. Our feet don't move like they should, our bodies always turn the wrong way, and who can figure out how the hands are supposed to go? Almost all new students, within the first several months, feel some kind of disappointment or frustration at one time or another. And, almost always, we feel, "I wish I was a better student."

If we think about what constitutes a good student or perhaps the "very best" student, what quickly leaps to our minds? I think all of us can imagine the "ideal student." The "ideal" student is young, strong, flexible, quick, understands everything at the first crack, never makes a mistake, and executes the technique skillfully and gracefully. We would all like to be like this on the mats; we would all like to be this kind of student. Who doesn't want to be like this?

I don't think so. This is not my ideal student. Certainly, they are most welcome in the dojo anytime but my ideal student, in my own mind, is like this:

He is not so quick and not so talented and doesn't understand everything at the very beginning. I don't care about this student's age, sex, race or personal background. But, he perseveres in his training and is humble and knows his limitations. He is always polite and constantly thinks of the other person in practice. He doesn't say much and never tries to be the center of the conversation or calls unnecessary attention to himself. He is there everyday at practice, progressing one tiny step at a time. He is trying to fulfill and bring more meaning into his life without trying to impress anybody or accomplish great things in the world. He understands what is true happiness. He is the one who never quits. He is the very best student in the whole world.

Many students come and go in the dojo in their practice everyday and they think no one knows or is paying attention to them. This is a big mistake.

Page 2.

DOJO NEWS

Congratulations to Ron and Junko Hill on their new addition to their family.

Morgan Weisser, black belt senior student, is in Santa Cruz through mid-December working on a new TV project. He was just featured in a TV special, "Extreme Close-Up" and in an episode of "China Beach" recently.

Japan Expo '90

Senior students conducted an Aikido demonstration at the Japan Expo '90 held at the Los Angeles Convention Center on November 25, 1990. The participants were: Mr. Douglas Firestone, Mr. Kazuho Nishida, Mr. Jim Graves, Mr. Victor Rodriguez, Mr. Yasushi Matsuki, Mr. Manuel Almaguer, Mr. James Doi and Mr. Ken Watanabe. Kensho Furuya, Chief Instructor, led the demonstration.

CORRESPONDENCE

Dear Sensei:

I would like to take this opportunity to thank you and your students for the hospitality that was shown to me during my recent visit to Los Angeles and your dojo.

It is easy for me to see how the Aikido Center of Los Angeles has achieved its reputation as being a premier location for Aiki training. The physical surroundings and quality of instruction were both excellent.

I hope that someday I may be able to repay the kindness shown to me. If you or your students are ever in my part of the world, don't hesitate to contact me.

David Kolb
53 Kingsley TCE
Wynnum K178
QLD, Australia

Dear Sensei:

Thank you very much for your instruction during my week of practice at the dojo. your teaching is always helpful and I'll do my best to remember it.

con't.

I especially want to thank you for asking me to lead a class. Teaching, a word I hesitate to use because of my inexperience, at the ACLA was very special and quite an honor.

I had a wonderful time practicing with my friends. Many of them have become very skillful in just a short time. ACLA students progress so quickly in comparison with students in other dojos.

... On the weekend of Nov. 2, Kanai and Yamada sensei will conduct a three-day seminar in Fort Lauderdale. We expect more than 200 people from the United States, Canada and Mexico. It's a very big event in Florida because many people will be testing for shodan and above.

... I'll be sure to write after the seminar to let you know how it went.

Your Student,

Tony Gonsalves
North Bay Village, Florida

(Tony is a black belt at our dojo who relocated to Florida for his career at UPI. He may be moving back to Los Angeles in the near future. We wish him the best of luck.)

Zen Seeds by Rev. Shundo Aoyama:

"In Another's Place"

An elderly woman who had told me that nothing made her happier than coming to the temple regularly to sing in the Buddhist hymn group was absent one day. The next time the group gathered to rehearse, I asked her what had happened.

"Well, I got ready and I reached the door just as a visitor arrived. She asked if I was leaving. If I had said yes, she would have turned around and gone home. Thinking that would be a pity, since she had taken the trouble to come, I said, 'No. Your timing is very good. I've just now returned. Do, please, come in.' So she came in, and I wasn't able to come to rehearsal."

I had to bow my head in admiration. If that had happened to me, what would I have said? "I'm so sorry you've taken the trouble to come, because I'm just on my way out" or "I'm just on my way out, but it doesn't matter if I'm a little late, so please come in" or some other equally self-centered greeting. I really admire her.

Page 3.

DOJO SCHEDULE

December 16th.

Bo-nen Kai and Christmas Party from 11:45am to 1:30pm after practice. Also, presentation of new kyu grade promotions.

December 25th.

Christmas Holiday. Special morning class only from 10:00am to 11:30am. No evening classes.

December 31-January 1st.

Special New Year's Practice from 11:30pm to 12:30am. Small party afterwards.

January 1st.

New Year's Holiday. No Class.

January 2nd.

Regular training schedule begins.

January 19th - 21st.

Tentatively scheduled. Seminar with Master Hsu. Regular training schedule will change during the seminar schedule.

January 20th.

Dojo New Year's Party from 11:30am to 1:30pm.

January 21st.

Martin Luther King Holiday.

Master Hsu's seminar only.

No regular classes today.

Sometimes We Need To Go Back

By Tony Gonsalves

Several months ago, I decided my approach to Aikido had to change. Something was wrong.

Throwing people who took good ukemi was easy, but throwing beginners and people stronger than myself was too difficult.

The beginners were falling wrong and sometimes injuring themselves or me, and the very strong were stopping me in mid-technique if I became too cocky.

At the time, I was training under an instructor who also had a black belt in jujitsu and taught the art twice a week. Therefore, I had a choice.

I could continue struggling with my Aikido or I could begin studying jujitsu and fold it into my Aikido to "make it work" - especially against my stronger partners.

This is not uncommon in some dojos. I have seen Aikido mixed with karate and jujitsu. The end product is not very pretty but it works. The attack is stopped by inflicting debilitating pain.

I decided to stick with Aikido. Although I wanted to trash the big guys, I couldn't turn my back on five years of hard training focussed on learning Aikido.

My choice made, I took Sensei's advice from several years before, "If you get lost in your practice, always go back to basics and start over."

I began paying close attention to the hand, feet and hip movements of each technique, trying to re-learn what I believed I already knew. During practice I moved slower, watching how my partner responded to my movements. I tried to feel when he was off-balance and weak or standing straight and strong.

I'm still practicing that way today - accept for the occasional let's-kick-butt practice I may have with another senior student.

The stronger men can still stop me and the beginners still step on my feet, but I sense progress.

Moving slower with beginners and paying close attention to technique appears to make them more comfortable, less afraid and helps them to learn. I, on the other hand, can learn how a person with very little or no Aikido training responds to the technique. The practice is less frustrating and more enjoyable for both of us.

Somehow, I believe, all of this is bringing me closer to what O-Sensei is trying to teach us. Although I can't say I understand it, I do feel better.

I also believe my attempt to make a connection with my partner is related to what Sensei wrote in the October Newsletter: "Aikido is humanity is action. How we become humane, caring people is the most difficult training of all. Without this understanding, our strength or skill or rank is meaningless."

Keep practicing.

By Tony Gonsalves, Shodan
North Bay Village, Florida

Page 4.

Commentary on Tony's Article:

All students of Aikido run into the problem of whether the technique is working or not. From many years of experience, I find that usually students are concerned about this too early in their training. In other words, one must first understand and master the correct, basic execution of the technique. The students will begin to understand the power and effectiveness of the technique when they begin to understand how the technique is applied in many different situations. This is the "second" step in a student's training, not the first.

In most types of martial arts training, the attack is very controlled. In Aikido, the attack changes with each partner we practice with. In free sparring which is very popular in many other martial arts today, it is difficult to see if the technique is really working. Free sparring is simply sports competition on a wilder level. And, in this case, the attacks and what you can and can't do is very restricted. Also, there is always a referee present. This is sports, not martial arts.

When we begin to understand how the Aikido technique is applied in many different situations, we understand how it is "anything goes" in any situation. We must understand how to account for innumerable conditions in any circumstance and we cannot do this without a strong understanding of the basic technique.

The technique itself is our defense and a perfect defense is complete understanding of the technique.

During practice, we can jam or stop our partner's techniques. We are not taking advantage of the weakness of the technique itself, we are simply taking advantage of our partner who has not yet fully understood the technique. Our practice should be to encourage each other to understand Aikido, not to discourage our partners by trying to point out their weaknesses.

Finally, when we begin to concentrate on the weaknesses of others, we are forgetting what our own weaknesses are and this is the most dangerous form of practice.

Don't compete in strength but concentrate on the correctness of your own movement and mental state. This is the best way to practice. Have patience with those to try to compete in strength or try to show you how strong they are or how superior they are to you. Attachment to the concept of strength or superiority is the surest sign of weakness and self-defeatism.

After thirty years of training in Aikido and martial arts, I don't care if people think I am strong or weak. Many instructors can be so competitive too and they are always trying to prove to me how much better they are. Who cares. It is too silly.

If someone tries to fight you, just go along with it. Don't fight it, just go with it. O-Sensei said: "To fight means to lose." Someone who tries to prove how much better they are to you, or superior to you, or stronger than you, are very sad, weak people inside themselves, indeed. To try to fight them is too cruel and not humane. Our practice is not to compare ourselves or compete with others, it is to develop ourselves to our fullest potential within the short time we are allotted for our lives.

Only fight the stronger, wiser opponent. And, understand how the stronger, wiser opponent never fights.

When we were building the dojos five years ago, I had such a difficult time because none of the walls or corners were straight or true. How could I match the construction to the crooked walls? The carpenter said, "No matter how crooked or untrue the walls or corners are, whatever you build must be true to the measure. To go with the walls which are not true to the level will only throw yourself off scale."

We Need Your Help!

This year, we need help in financing our yellow pages display ad to August of 1991 and to replace our mats and carpeting in the dojo. Contributions and donations are most welcome. Ideas for fund raisers and any input to promote a little more income are welcome too. Please help. Thank you.

The attached article, "**The Left Foot-Right Foot Concept Problem**," is submitted by Mr. James Hemsath, a new student in the dojo. Articles and news items (from birthdays to weddings and other events) from the students are always welcome. Please submit them to Sensei.

Soto Zen Journal

Sensei currently edits the "Soto Zen Journal" at the Zenshuji Temple. Although this is a more specialized area for those interested in Zen, there is valuable and useful information for students of the dojo. An annual subscription of six issues is \$20.00 a year. Please see Sensei for subscription information. Thank you.

The Left Foot-Right Foot Concept Problem - 8 Months into a Martial Art

Aikido is the first martial art that I have ever studied (no surprise there). It was suggested to me by an associate who had been studying Aikido for a number of years. Prior to coming to Los Angeles, he loaned me his copy of "The Spirit of Aikido" to read to get a feel for Aikido. For those of you have read the book, you know that the book does not specifically address techniques, but concentrates more on the philosophy or spirituality of this martial art and draws some comparisons to other martial arts. After filtering out for the "Jonestown effect" (don't anybody drink the kool-aid), I made the decision that I would like to make the time commitment to studying Aikido.

I've been here now for roughly eight months, and I would like to take this time to put down on paper some of my thoughts and observations on Aikido, how I've tried to internalize some of the things I've learned, some of my stumbling blocks (pun intended) and some of the unexpected "pleasures" I've had.

For purposes of discussion, I'd like to break down my thoughts into three areas; Technique, Discipline and Family. I'm going to take them in this order because this is how things have evolved for me and try to explain how the areas while separate are interconnected and support each other.

Technique

*Seeing me before him
the enemy attacks,
but in a flash
I am already behind him.*

*Without the slightest opening
No-mindedly ignore
the attacking swords
of your enemies-
Step in and cut!*

*Left and right
avoid all
cuts and parries;
Seize the opponent's mind
and enter directly!*

Master Ueshiba Morihei

Let me see, the left goes where, you want me to do what with the right foot? Hands like a wheel, keep your fingers together and roll. Well it's said that

the journey begins with a single step or in this case a forward roll. Aikido is a physical art, if there is any doubt 10 minutes of irimi nage should eliminate it, and as such much emphasis is given to the techniques. The techniques on the surface would appear to be straight forward and "simplistic", after a 100+ hours of practice I now know enough to know that there is more to learn than I ever thought. After all how much time is spent learning to step off line - redirect the blow and not block, it seems simple in principle. These subtle (and not so subtle) refinements make the techniques all that more interesting and in turn make it very easy to keep a sho-shing or "beginners mind" attitude. This is the first lesson of the "techniques" that should be applied to your job, your family, whatever, that enthusiasm, the ability to look for the subtleties to take your beginners eye and look at life.

A friend of mine back in Ohio asked me to describe Aikido (you try - it's not easy) and the best description in my mind was that it was an engineered martial art, that brute strength did not apply and the techniques were done on the oblique, conserving the energy of the attack and redirecting it to another purpose typically in a circular fashion. As an engineer this appeals to me; anybody can throw up lots of brick, concrete and steel to make something strong, but you have to be a little bit clever to design it with minimum waste, conserving energy and understanding how all the pieces fit together and work with each other. Nothing we do is ever straight ahead, we are always moving off line into the path of "least resistance" and most always with a circular motion. Sun Tzu in his "Art of War" talks about this circular effect in his chapter on energy. He says:

"In battle, however, there are not more than two methods of attack - the direct and the indirect; yet these two in combination give rise to an endless series of maneuvers. The direct and the indirect lead on to each other in turn. It is like moving in a circle - you never come to an end. Who can exhaust the possibilities of their combination?"

This blending with your uke is one of the most unique things about Aikido, there is no "opponent" in the traditional sense who attacks and you counter. There is instead a "partnership" between uke and nage that allows each to play out their role but emphasizes the mutuality of a common goal. A technique cannot be learned without an uke and the uke is not there simply to supply an arm to be twisted. For uke and nage to learn a technique requires both their participation in the movement. Uke and nage must move as one. The application here is obvious, never treat an "opponent" as someone to defeat, look for the partnership and a way that "both" of you can move together to a common goal.

Doshu in his Spirit of Aikido mentions that aikido is a way to global harmonization. When I first read that I thought that was a little lofty, perhaps he was thinking that if everyone was working out they would be too tired to fight. Looking back at that thought in light of the partnership between uke and nage; of the movement where two "opponents" enter from

opposite sides and "merge" into a circle moving together, the concept of groups, or countries looking to move together rather than colliding isn't that bad an idea.

Discipline

Like the techniques we learn in our Aikido classes, the disciplines associated with a martial art are many and varied. In my case it began with the simple discipline to come to class on a regular basis. This may seem fairly obvious, but it is much harder than you might think. It's fairly easy to talk yourself out of coming to class - "I'll skip tonight and go to two tomorrow" - and before you know it you've missed a week or a month. So the first discipline that is learned is one of commitment.

An unexpected discipline for me as part of class is "awareness". This is reflected in the simple things such as lining up, and keeping the dojo clean. To the more complex awareness of uke's foot placement, seeing where the attack is coming from and how you're going to blend with it and the awareness of where everyone is around you. This is what Sensei is always pointing out when he talks about paying attention to the small details, and it's something we should strive for in everything that we do. I feel that the intent here is not to be paralyzed with minutiae, but to be conscious of the cause and effect relationship that we have in everything that we do. Some act that we take will have an effect on someone else, this could be changing lanes on the highway without looking or not being aware of where your ukemi will take you during a fall. Awareness is something that seems to be singularly lacking in our society.

Relax, patience - for a "type A" engineer, these are two words that are foreign to my vocabulary. These have been the two most difficult things to learn, they continue to and will always be difficult for me to master as to some extent they are contrary to my personality. These two principles have both a physical as well as mental aspect, with the physical one the easiest to learn. I'm just now starting to relax during the "application of techniques", but I have to emphasize that I'm still just beginning this process; there is such a long way to go.

Aside from the actual "physical" aspect of Aikido, the thing that I am trying to get the most out of my training is this mental attitude of being able to relax, be patient, not to get excited when something "happens" but to follow the attack, work with it and reach my objective. This is not to say that in my work I would ignore deadlines or schedules or allow them to be ignored, but there are times when you can't force things or drive things to a conclusion. You have to be calm let things take their course and reach their natural conclusion. You have to work with a problem, not try to go head to head with it and overwhelm it. But rather, step off line bring it into your "rotation", relax, take your time and stay calm.

In the introduction in Spirit of Aikido a 16th century master swordsman and

author, Yagyū Munenori (1571-1646), is quoted from a book that he wrote. The following excerpt, in my mind, summarizes what the intent of discipline is in a martial art:

... the goal of training in the martial arts is to overcome six kinds of disease: the desire for victory, the desire to rely on technical cunning, the desire to show off, the desire to psychologically overwhelm the opponent, the desire to remain passive in order to wait for an opening, and the desire to become free from these diseases.

Family

Serendipity is defined as " ... finding valuable or agreeable things not sought for". As many of you are aware, I have what could be described as an unusual work situation, I work in L.A. but I live in Cleveland, Ohio. It's an interesting commute, I work here for two full weeks and then I go back home for a week. Because of this commute, the family spirit that I've found in the dojo is more important to me than I would have expected. Actually, what I expected was people coming to class, working out and then going home. I did not expect the "caring" atmosphere that prevails here. This feeling fills a void in my life that is caused by my work schedule and it is something that I have found here that I would never have expected.

To the members of the Aikido Center of Los Angeles, I'd like to say thank you for letting me be part of your family here in the dojo.

James Hemsath
October 1990