

The Aikido Eye

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PERSPECTIVES

Aikido-Ai Vision

Statement:

“Quality Students– Quality

Instruction”

Aikido-Ai will provide quality instruction

to students seeking personal security,

physical well being and enlightenment

through the disciplines of

Aikido, Tai Chi, Qi Gong and

Zen Meditation

Aikido Teaching Committee:

Frank McGouirk Sensei

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Jason Oxman - Shodan

Melody Oxman - Shodan

John Wong - Shodan

Each one of us has our own perspectives of our art. For several future issues, you will be a part of Question and Answer session that examines individual perspectives of this art. You will read responses to the same questions from our members ranking from the children’s level to the advanced. We will read what brought them to practice Aikido and how they see their art evolving.



Our first participant is Robin Emerson. Robin is an educator and currently holds a 3rd Kyu ranking. The answers you will read have not been changed and are in the format she provided. I hope you enjoy

her perspective.

Thank you Robin for being our first participant and sharing.

1. What brought you to the art of aikido?

I first heard about aikido at a workshop on trauma. The psychotherapist who taught the workshop was an aikidoist who talked about aikido principles in relation to healing, particularly in terms of how attention can be organized to facilitate healing. I had no experience in the marital arts and absolutely no interest in them. But I was drawn to the idea of a rigorous physical discipline that focused on the cultivation of cooperation and harmony.

2. Why did you choose Aikido Ai to train at?

My first teacher was Mateo Sensei who taught beginning aikido classes at Santa

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Monica College. Mateo Sensei had a dojo in Chatsworth where he held an annual New Year's Day keiko.

There were four or five instructors, including McGourick Sensei, who each taught at the keiko. I liked the way McGourick Sensei focused on musubi -- connection -- and I admired his style of aikido which was very flowing.

I studied aikido at Santa Monica College for a little over a year and then stopped for awhile. During the period when I wasn't training I sometimes thought about Aikido-Ai. I knew that I would resume my practice at some point and I had the feeling that I would like training there but I never considered it a real option because I live in the Fairfax district of Los Angeles. It's a 70 mile round trip to the dojo which seemed like just too far to go.

Then a couple of years ago I met Chris Thomson. He was interested in aikido and wanted to know if I could recommend a dojo. When I asked where he lived and he told me Whittier, I laughed and said: "Well, lucky you." Chris started training at Aikido-Ai and every time we'd meet he'd tell me about his experiences, what he was learning, how much he liked it. He kept say-

ing: "Robin, you should come to the dojo, even if it's only once a week." For the first three or four months I just went to the Saturday morning class. Then one day in the dressing room Melody Oxman said: "Why don't you start coming a couple of times during the week too?" Chris dropped out when he and his wife had a baby, but I'm still at it two and a half years later.



3. During your initial training in aikido what did you find the most difficult aspect of your training?

Everything was difficult initially. The total immersion approach that's traditional in aikido can be daunting. I already knew how to roll and I was familiar with the terminology, as well as some of the basic techniques. But even so, when I first came to Aikido-Ai, I felt lost. In the beginning, I often had to rely on my partner to get through the technique even if I'd just seen it demonstrated a dozen times. I felt uncomfortable with that level of dependence on others. It

took awhile to understand that it really is a group effort. If someone's having difficulty, then part of the practice is figuring out how to be with that person in a skillful way. You have something to contribute from the moment you step on the mat, however awkward and inept you feel.

4. During your initial training what came easy to you?

The only thing that came easy for me at first was the commitment -- and sitting in seiza. Everything else was hard. The black belts would say: "Just keep training. It'll come in time." I loved hearing their stories about how clunky they once were.

5. As you are advancing, how has your art changed.

I'm still learning the mechanics, how to move, where to put my feet and hands. But I can tell you about a time when I was able to draw on what I've learned of the art.

I had an experience awhile ago involving a guy who was drunk. I was checking into a motel and this big, red-faced guy was standing at the counter in a cramped little office arguing and cursing at the clerk. A couple had come in behind me and were standing in front of the door and I had this feeling of being

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trapped. Although the guy wasn't threatening me directly, he was extremely agitated and I was only a couple of feet away from him. At a certain point -- probably as I was about to pass out -- I realized that I was trying control the situation by holding my breath. My inner reaction was something like: "Oh for heaven's sake, how's that supposed to help?" Then, out of the blue, I remembered this one day in class when we were practicing shihonage and Mike Castro said: "Face me, you're much safer that way." Something clicked. I turned my body slightly so that I was facing the man. That was the extent of the technique, a rotation of a few degrees, but now my ki was lined up with the situation and the fear I'd been feeling dissolved. I went from panic to fearlessness. There wasn't any bravado in it. The feeling of safety came from being present, from cooperating with the reality of the situation rather than trying to fight it. In fact, the experience was not really about feeling safe -- it was more about feeling open. In a sense I forgot about myself. I was just there.

6. What aikido technique do you enjoy the

most and why. The least and why?

It's hard to say. I never met a technique I didn't like. Some techniques are easier for me than others, but I enjoy practicing them all. I'm fascinated by ukemi. The idea that falling can be raised to the level of art, that someone can become a "falling artist," seems like the best kind of joke to me. Ukemi gives you a way to play with being vulnerable and to find the freedom in that. As uke, you fail in your original intent, but if nage can see something bigger in you than the attack, you fall into something better. That's one way to look at it.

7. Was aikido as an art what you thought it would be.

I once overheard an interesting conversation at a dojo in LA where I had gone to observe a class. One of the senior students was in the sensei's office telling her that there were some visitors today including a man from out of state who wanted to train. The sensei asked his rank and when the student replied that he was 3rd kyu the sensei commented: "Ah, so he knows some of the etiquette." It surprised me that that was what the rank of 3rd kyu signified to her. Some of the etiquette. It got me wondering. I've taken that overheard comment as an aikido "koan."

8. Has your training

influenced other aspects of your life, ie. your work or your personal relationships?

Training has a calming effect on me. It's restorative. In my work as a psychotherapist I'm a caregiver. It's a little simplistic to put it that way, but my point is, like everyone else, I need to have ways of taking care of myself, of recharging my batteries, so to speak. Aikido nurtures me. I think it has something to do with the way in which Aikido is basically played. It's a serious form of play, but it's still play. Play is different from entertainment or recreation. It touches a deeper part of us. I think it's really healthy to have that in my life.

9. Any final thoughts you would like to share?

I'd like to say thank you to Sensei and the instructors and my training partners at Aikido-Ai for their continuing inspiration and support. Domo arrigato gozaimasu.

HILLS & VALLEYS.. Our personal journeys

Many of us are familiar with the phrase "the hills and



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valleys of life". This usually represents the easy and not so easy moments in our daily lives. In Aikido, we also experience the "hills and valleys" in our training. It is not uncommon for us to experience times when our training is going great, techniques are flowing, center and ki are good, and times when things just do not feel right.

As someone who has been fortunate to train for many years, I can tell you that I have also traveled through those hills and valleys. During the difficult times of your training, it seems as if you cannot get things right, and everything is a major effort. I can recall one my first valleys came during the early years of ukemi practice. Somewhere I picked up a habit where the side of foot (right side if I recall) was hitting the mat rather hard. This was rather unusual as I had been training for at least two years and felt I had a decent sense of proper rolls. Needless to say the habit became problematic as my right foot began to experience painful soreness. I tried several things to fix it, but to no avail. The harder I concentrated on it the more I could not correct it.

One day, I remember expressing my frustration during after class practice, and one my siempi inquired as to the problem (I believe it

was Tom Williams). After explaining the problem, he solution was "just forget about it, and keep training". Following his advice, the problem soon corrected itself and went away.

Sometimes in our efforts to continue to improve in our art, we create our own valleys. It is human nature to be harder on ourselves than other people are on us. During your travels thorough these valleys, continue to train and allow yourself to make mistakes, but never stop. It is very easy to stop your training. You say to yourself, "well things are not going well now, so I'll do something else today". Before you know it, days turn into weeks, weeks to months, then months to years. Think about all your hard work to get where you are, regardless of your rank. Also, rely on your siempi to assist you. It is very likely they have experienced what you are going through.

The dojo also experiences "hills and valleys". These can be seen when classes seem less full, and/or when members seem to go away for a while. Much of this can be attributed to changes in our daily lives, where our presence is required elsewhere for a while (work, school or personal matters). Rest assured that the dojo always rebounds!

During this time, new people sometimes enter the dojo and bring in that extra ki, or other members seem to step up their presence and leadership. If you are a person who is fortunate to be able to keep training, do that! Keep training and assist Sensei wherever you can. Things will return to their original state, or a new and improve state is born. If you are one of the persons who departs, Sensei and the rest of teaching staff understand, and we look forward to your return!

Something to Share?

Submit articles or questions to The Aikido Eye (MS Word/handwritten). Send to:

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Thanks!