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# 愛氣塾通信

Newsletter of the Japanese Cultural Arts Association  
of Rochester, Minnesota

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## The Appropriate Teacher

*How To Select and Follow a Guide on The Path*

Neil Segal

Proper selection of a teacher depends on one's goals. If the goal is to follow a path to self-improvement, one should select a teacher who possesses some trait or inner strength which she would like to develop in herself. Each teacher has his own style: fast-slow, hard-soft, gentle-aggressive, large-small movements, etc. No teacher will offer students everything all the time, because to an extent, it is up to the student to develop some aspects on her own. Once one selects a teacher, in order to progress, it is important to stay with that teacher for many years. The teacher cannot convey the depth of the art in just a few years. It takes many years just to provide a glance of the breadth and depth of the path. This is because the purpose of Aikido is not to throw or pin an attacker, any more than the purpose of calligraphy is to put ink on paper.

The teacher needs to cultivate the feeling of inner calmness from which movements in harmony with nature can emerge. Whether still or moving meditation, the sense of awareness of the task and focus on blending requires composure. A suitable teacher is necessary to create the atmosphere and provide the guidance which will foster this sense. The teacher cannot directly demonstrate 残心 *zanshin* - persistence of awareness. After the first time one sees frost on the window and snow falling, he may know that it is cold outside. After a few times, he may understand that a coat is needed for protection. After a period of personal experience, he may realize the impact on his day, home, family, pets, crops, safety, transportation, and relationship with the environment, just by seeing frost.

Similarly, it is up to the student to make the jump from 知 knowing (a 1 dimensional awareness of the concept) to 解 understanding (a 2 dimensional incorporation of the concept

into the self) to 悟 realization (the 3 dimensional intuition which embodies the interconnectedness of nature) in following the path. The appropriate teacher will help the student to have the experiences which will contribute to this deepened awareness, but the student also needs to be open to the teacher for this to occur.

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*The inner calmness from which movements in harmony with nature can emerge is a feeling that the teacher needs to cultivate in students.*

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Thus, selection of the appropriate teacher is important to establish a trusting foundation for the teacher-student relationship. The teacher will commit to guiding the student and to the considerable length of time required to provide the necessary guidance and experiences. In turn, the student commits to sincerity towards the teacher.



## お盆

御盆、*Obon*, The Lantern Festival (or Ancestors Festival) is celebrated in Japan around August 13-15. Some Buddhists believe that this is the time of the year that the iron pot is opened and the spirits of ancestors return to their former homes and families. People light fires to welcome the spirits, pray and offer them food. In order to guide the spirits, it is customary to float lanterns. Buddhist memorial services are held for ancestors, relatives and friends, particularly for those who died during the past year. In the past, *Obon* was an important family event for which those working away from home would return.

The service ends with 籠流し、*tourou nagashi*, floating lanterns down rivers to the sea to guide the ancestral spirits back to the afterlife. 盆踊り、*Bon-Odori*, is a religious folk dance, originally thought to provide comfort to spirits. The dance and the music differ by region. Services, lantern lighting and dancing are usually held in temples or shrines near rivers or the sea. \*

# Why practice Aikido?

*Reflections on Busy Times*

Andrea Lynn Thronson

“Should I go to the dojo tonight?” It is a question many aikidoka have asked themselves (myself included) more than once. Jobs, school, children, errands....These are but a few of the many obligations we face each day. With such busy lives comes the inevitable question: Why practice? One might be tempted to respond with the old adage, “Practice makes perfect.” Without question, one’s skill improves with practice. Yet this is the case with any activity. The real question is: Why practice Aikido?

The answer is both simple and remarkably complex: Aikido promotes connection. When we practice Aikido, the connections we have with ourselves, our fellow Aikidoka, and the world around us are strengthened. Unlike some activities which leave us feeling tired and drained, Aikido replenishes our energy and revives our spirits. Imagine the feeling of a well-executed throw. Whatever words one uses to describe it - a buzz, a hum, etc. - it just feels right. This is how we feel when we practice Aikido. We feel a sense of “connectedness” and harmony.

I specifically recall the first time I dragged myself into practice feeling tired and crabby. I only went to the dojo that night because I promised a friend I would be there. Yet by the end of the hour, my negative attitude and pessimistic outlook were gone. In their place was a sense of peace and harmony, a sense of connection.

Without question, there will be times when we cannot make it to practice. Each of us has obligations that demand our time and energy. Yet on those evenings when we can attend - when we consider whether or not to go - we should consider how Aikido makes us feel: at peace; in harmony; connected.



*Editor's Note: Andrea has been an asset to the Rochester Aikido community since beginning training last autumn. Now having successfully defended her doctoral thesis, she will relocate. We look forward to her return and wish her the best on her path.*

## GLOSSARY

合気道家 *aikidoka* - one who practices Aikido;  
有段者 *yudansha* - member of black belt ranks;  
師範 *shihan* - expert level teacher; 二級 *nikkyū* - two ranks before *shodan*; 初段 *shodan* - first black belt rank;  
受け身 *ukemi* - receiving

# Aikido is not “Spatial”

*Memories of Beginning the Path of Aikido*

Bruce Piotrowski

I was 37 years old, going on 58. It was the spring of 1998. Having just quit smoking cigarettes a few weeks before, I was going stark, raving mad and needed something to occupy my time and mind. I also needed to get some exercise, as I was seriously out of shape from 19 years of smoking and a sedentary lifestyle. Work was also contributing to my stress. This was my condition at the time I began Aikido training. I was done smoking, I was sure of that and I understood enough about nicotine addiction to know that what I really needed to do was to change my lifestyle. Quitting involves a significant paradigm change. I figured a good change would be to begin a physical activity and I had always wanted to try “martial arts.”

I recalled a newspaper article which mentioned a local club that practiced something called Aikido. I remembered that it was the martial art practiced by Steven Seagal Sensei so I figured it had to be cool. Shortly after this I decided to try Aikido. I observed one class and then started lessons through the Community Education program. I thought it was very interesting and challenging, although at the time I thought it was nothing like what I thought I had seen in Steven Seagal films.

I found the non-competitive nature and spirit of cooperation in Aikido very appealing. Everyone was working together to help each other improve. I especially liked that while I was on the mat I did not think about anything other than Aikido. The serious practice of Aikido tends to make it impossible to think about anything but the task at hand. Of course, thinking too hard about the task can be an impediment. I have found that this mental conditioning is very relaxing and that practice of Aikido can be a moving meditation.

However, initially it did not flow so easily. Nearly 20 years of smoking with no significant exercise left me easily winded. The added challenge of tremulous hands due to nicotine withdrawal did not help matters. Nonetheless, I persevered and even began supplementing with aerobic exercise to get in shape for Aikido. In my fifth month of training, I heard that members of the club would be going to a seminar at the Twin Cities Aikido Center where Akira Tohei Shihan would be instructing.

Up to that time, I had not had any exposure to *yudansha*, much less a *shihan*. The highest ranking students here in Rochester were recently promoted to *nikkyū*. As a result, I was pretty nervous about the seminar. Fortunately, I had no reason to be— seminars are just like regular practice, only with more *yudansha* and less room. That seminar was especially memorable for me, because it was my only opportunity to learn from Tohei Sensei.

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I was too inexperienced to pick up much technique, but I do recall Tohei Sensei speaking at the end of the seminar. Unfortunately, due to his limited English and strong accent, I could not understand much of his lecture. However, at one point Tohei Sensei said "Aikido not spatial". This made me pause. "Not spatial? I wonder what he means by that?" He continued to explain that some people who practice Aikido tend to act like they are samurai and strut about the dojo. He then mimicked this behavior by walking about the room with his chest thrust out. Suddenly, it struck me. He was not saying "spatial"—he was saying "Aikido is not *special*." He then explained that Aikido is about breathing, walking, living every day life, working, eating, opening a door, climbing stairs. It is ordinary, not special.

I think about this on occasion. At the time, I did not understand Tohei Sensei's point. How could Aikido not be special? It appears extraordinary, magical even, to observe someone who has practiced for decades demonstrate technique or take *ukemi*. I still may not understand Tohei Sensei's point completely, but I hope that I now have a greater understanding than I did then. At this point in my training, I believe that Aikido is not special because it involves cooperation and not competition. In that sense, it is like any other ordinary human endeavor, such as building a house, developing a business or raising a family. Aikido is not special because it involves straightforward physical concepts, like a circle, or a spiral, or moving off of the line. There is nothing fancy. Aikido is not special because it is about being aware...and breathing.

Aikido is not special. Aikido is about living one's life.  
Aikido is human. ☸



大仏 — 鎌倉

*Daibutsu - Kamakura, Japan*

*Kotokuin* is the Jodo Buddhist temple with the "Kamakura Daibutsu." *Daibutsu*, large Buddha, is an 11.31 meter-tall bronze statue, begun in 1252. Originally covered with gold leaf and housed indoors, disasters have repeatedly destroyed the building, leaving the statue outdoors today.

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## SUBSCRIPTIONS TO AIKIJUKU TSUSHIN

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**\$30 for 1 year for non-members**

**Free to members** who are enrolled in courses for Japanese language, Calligraphy, Aikido training, or other cultural arts.

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## COURSES

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### *AIKIDO:*

#### **THE PATH OF HARMONIOUS SPIRIT**

Aikido is a path of discipline aimed at perfection of the spirit, through flowing with the natural energy of the universe. The art and path of Aikido was discovered and taught by Morihei Ueshiba, known as O'Sensei. Through practicing circular movements for the restoration of harmony out of conflict, the aikidoist develops sensitivity for flowing with universal energy. Classes are ongoing with group and private lessons available.

### *SHODO:*

#### **THE JAPANESE ART OF CALLIGRAPHY**

Through focus on the basics, students will learn the joy of expressing one's *ki* through ink brush to paper. Lessons will be held 1-2 times per week and will begin with the fundamentals of holding a brush, forming basic strokes, and hiragana. Private Lessons are ongoing.

### *NIHONGO:* JAPANESE LANGUAGE

Two courses will be offered this term. One will focus more on introducing terms used in Japanese arts, such as Aikido and *shodo* and will enable students to develop a deeper understanding of common concepts in Japanese culture through understanding of the language. The other will be a more formal course aimed at developing proficiency in reading, writing and speaking Japanese. As language and culture are linked, students will find greater satisfaction in their other studies with a basic knowledge of language.



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