

BATH AIKIDO NEWSLETTER JULY 2007

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Forthcoming Aikido courses and events

Saturday 29th September; Bisham Abbey; British Aikido Board annual gathering.

Thursday 18th to Sunday 21st October; Bath University; Kobayashi Yasuo; £85 for the whole course, £15.00 for Thursday and Friday (1730-1930), £40.00 per day Saturday and Sunday (0915-1530) or £70.00 for both days.

Saturday 27th October, Nakazono memorial event, Neath Leisure Centre, South Wales

Saturday 3rd, Sunday 4th November; David Lynch; Dublin. *At some point in the following week David Lynch will be visiting Tony and joining us at Hedley Hall.*

Sunday 16th December; 1100-1500; Hedley Hall; Bath Aikido annual grading.

News from Jonathan Sharp

I'm off to Iwama as an uchideshi for Hitohiro Saito, really excited, but am expecting to get pasted on a daily basis, slightly concerned about the fearsome humidity of summer (Paul, Roddy youknow what I mean). Still I expect it will be one of those 'character building experiences'. I'm going to maybe try and keep some sort of journal of the training experience so if you're interested let me know and I'll create some sort of mailing list so I don't bore any non-aikidokas. I refuse to consider a blog on principle, even though its essentially the same thing.

An Englishman, an Irishman and a Scotsman walk into a pub.
"Is this a joke?" asks the barman.

Ten Minutes of Sky by the Gaijin Kunoichi, Anna Sanner

Mornings are spent in the park. Seven o'clock is the optimal starting time, but I usually don't make it until about half an hour later. It is difficult to go to sleep at night, difficult to get up in the morning, and difficult to get going. On the run, on the bike, always on the run, and always on too little sleep, but it is worth the effort. There are moves to be learned and trees to be hit. Trees. To bear your weight, you can climb them, spit from them, dangle from them, use them to increase the number of your daily pull ups, look at them as miracles of nature in a desert of concrete and sand. They make you grow. I started with two pull ups. I can now do seven sometimes. I massage their bark, and they harden my palms and forearms. They are good friends, trees. They take your every punch and abuse wordlessly and simply inflict reciprocal pain on their part. They are hard. Yet gentle. The perfect partners.

On Fridays, we get to the dojo at nine, where B-san patiently takes me through my first steps in iaido. Before we start there are usually some little chores to do. Morning chores at the dojo. Hoover the dojo, get the white tape and a pair of scissors from the cupboard in the women's changing rooms and mend the mats where they are torn, or where previously mended places have started to peel off and are sticking up in dirty tatters that need to be torn off and replaced with new tape. The fridge has to be re-filled with new bottles of green tea and juice. The dojo is well maintained. While we clean and mend, Chocolat, pronounced, elegantly, in the French way with the stress at the end, flaunts red ear clips and makes the windows shudder with his psychotic poodle bark.

Finally, we kneel down and bow to our swords. Even this part is difficult. What hand do I use to grab the sword? From where to where do I move it? And how do I keep it from falling out of the scabbard while I do all that? Time for the first kata. And the second, which is rather similar, facing the other way in the beginning. Pull the sword, slice through the enemy's eyes moving forward with a little stomp, cut from above with both hands, sliding forward again, sword to the side, with one hand this time, while the other hand rests on the scabbard, hilt in front of the forehead, slice down from left to right, change legs, re-sheath the sword while kneeling down again. Get back up. Walk three steps back. Finished. A lot of ceremony. A lot of room for mistakes. I forget to be on the balls of my feet. I can't synchronise my arm and my leg movements, or turn the scabbard the right way, at the right time, but gradually, at least, I am becoming more aware of all the things I'm doing wrong. The first steps...and the first women arrive for the 10 o'clock aikido class. B-san takes us through the warm-up, and Shihan comes in for the training's opening greeting.

"Getting up and sitting down," he says after we have bowed and asked him to honour us with his teachings once again. "These are two completely normal, everyday activities. Yet, they are of utmost importance. When you sit down, be aware of how you sit. Think: Is my back straight? Are my shoulders relaxed? What are my feet like? Ideally, only your big toes should be on top of each other. It doesn't matter which toe is on top of which. you make yourself

feel comfortable and stable. And this kind of everyday action that is carried out with all the right thoughts, and completely in accordance with nature, is called *kukyo*.

When you tidy up your body, it tidies up your heart, and when you tidy up your heart, it tidies up your body. Both are possible, but it's usually easier to try and tidy up your body first. You can look at yourself in the mirror and see whether you're doing OK, whereas it is not so easy to spot where your heart is cramped up, or what part of it needs straightening up.

Both when you stand and when you sit down, you should be aware of everything that goes on around you. The slight breeze coming in from outside." I become aware of a slight breeze coming in. "The voice of the crows." I become aware of the voice of the crows. "Tenkan. Let's start." I work with Herrn T who is honouring us with his presence again after he has been absent from this class for a while. But today he has made his long way here from his temporary residence in Kyoto for the last women's class before his trip to the rest of Japan. "You are a ball," Shihan interrupts my tenkan, always a thoroughly appreciated initiative. "This," he tells Herrn T, "is the Anna-ball." He sinks my hands down further and reminds me to extend my fingers, stretch my fingertips forward, to extend my ki. Otherwise, it stays too small to move anything. "Be a ball." I am a ball. The Anna ball. "If you're a ball, then your partner has no choice but to become part of your ball, and you can roll him around however you please." I practise being a ball and rolling Herrn T around. Roll, roll, roll. Then we are stopped by the claps dividing the techniques we train, and listen to more wise words.

"Nothing should come as a surprise to you when you walk around, sit, or stand," says Shihan." Everything should always be perceived at any one time. Crows, a bug, a...well, I have to say, sometimes there are things that are just simply hard to bear." He tip-toes to the side a few steps, looking like something has just crawled up the inside of his leg under his hakama. But it is just the re-enactment of a memory that still seems to trigger shock waves of disgust. "Like spiders. Spiders are horrible, that's a fact. But try not to let anything faze you. When you're working with your partner, you are giving special attention to your partner, but really, your partner should just be another part of everything else. And so should you. Now sit down."

We sit down. "This sitting down was very good. Much better than your last sitting down. I want to make a point of these things here at Shosenji. Sitting down and getting up are just as important as practising techniques. Give them your best every time." He says 'best' in English. Then he stalls briefly. "Was it better or best? Which one is higher?" "Best," B-san helps him out. "Hm. To me, better always sounds better. But let's have a look at this over here." He leads us to a calligraphy that shows the 35 strategic principles Miyamoto Musashi set down for his Nitenichiryu (Two-Heavens-as-One School) of fighting, in which he used two swords, one shorter, one longer.

"These here are Myamoto Musashi's 35 principles. But just look at the last one. Banri ikku." Ten thousand principles. One Skv. Ten thousand thins. One

void. Everything. Nothing. Japanese is such an ambiguous language, it creates beautiful layer cakes of meaning in the most concise of kanji compositions.

“Banri, ikku,” says Shihan. “Just remember this last one. The others are just little notes on the way there. This last one, number 35 is what really carries the meaning of it all. Even within the multitude of everyday things and actions, there are units of emptiness. Every little principle and every little thing is part of the one sky we know. So take in everything. Make yourself empty. Musashi said, when you carry a sword, the sword has no heart. It can go anywhere, anytime. You consider little everyday things like sitting down. Standing up. Positioning yourself. Usually with your back to the wall and the floor and the ceiling, facing the rest of the room. But any kamae, or ready stance, that assumes a particular attack to come in is not an appropriate kamae. Musashi said, the perfect kamae is no kamae. Always be ready. For anything.”

Then we all grab a bokken, wooden sword and stand in a circle. “Try to find a way of holding it that is so comfortable to you, and you could move yourself and the sword in any way and in any direction at any given point in time.” We all experiment with our grips and stances, sliding our hands up and down the smooth wood, shuffling about, sinking our feet deeper into the white mats. “Now, number one. Step 45 degrees to your right, then back with your left foot, and cut down from the side. With this, you fell your opponent’s trunk from the shoulder down. Number two. Step 45 degrees round with your left foot, then cut straight down. With this, you cut your opponent’s hand off, through the wrist.” We follow his instructions. “One.Two. One. Two. One. One.” We follow. “See. When you put Musashi’s principle into action, your concentration skills are amazing. You don’t think: the last move was one, so now he will say two. As soon as you do that and assume a particular outcome of the situation, you are not aware anymore, you are not empty. Create the emptiness you need in yourself to let totality in. Empty your heart and let the world come in.” After training, I pay my 5000 Yen for June and join for a long round of irimi-nage performed on Herrn T under B-san’s instructions, as a farewell present from this group. N-san has been to Miyamoto Musashi’s grave and birth place in Okayama, the neighbouring prefecture of Hyogo, which is next to Osaka. She was really there for the hot springs, but took the opportunity to see the Musashi sites and kindly bring us back some very nice Musashi tenugui hand towels and peanut cookies featuring Musashi’s portrait on beautiful wrapping paper. I pass the cookies and get changed as I have to hurry to my first class at one a clock. Although today, the sky is cloudy, and I can’t listen to my pulse-and speed accelerating running and getting-to-work-as-fast-as-possible playlist. Instead, I try to catch the heartpiercing lyrics of Tom Waits and Leonard Cohen while cars thunder past me on the left, and idle shoppers and other cyclists drive me mental on the narrow pavement. I am so absorbed, I almost crash into the sinking barriers by a train crossing as they come down. But luckily, as usual, I am surprised by my own last minute manoevers and make it to Juso in one piece. Albeit tired. And struggling to focus on the content of my own lessons. After the first class, I go to the post office to pay a bill and the combini for lunch. Salad. Onigiri. Sugar free chocolate. COFFEE. BLACK. The usual fare.

When I get back, I have twenty minutes before I have to expect the first students for my infant class to come in with their mothers. I take my futon cover, brought to the school for the kids' playroom to teach "sleep" and "wake up", and put it outside on the big roof terrace. I put my suit jacket on my teacher's chair, take my i-pod and mobile alarm clock from my bag in the office, open the big window in my room, and I jump through it onto the roof terrace. Time to lie down, a simple every day action. Doing it here makes me remember the beauty of it. I lie down, and let my mind drift into the clouds breaking to reveal the odd beam of sunshine. I listen to more heartbreaking beauty. In my secret life I die for the truth. I think of the song I want to write. That has a soul already but no body yet, that still needs structure to be sung. Ten minutes of sky. They don't last long. But what the hell, I'll go back in. We're all going to be dirt in the ground. So what's teaching another batch of biting, screaming, kicking kids. I like reading. I like playing tag. I like making a snowman. I like flying a kite. It will get them through the year.

And I have my ten minutes of sky in my head. Ten thousand things. One sky. Ten thousand chores. One little space of emptiness. But emptiness, no matter how small, absorbs everything. And everything, no matter how big, fits into emptiness. And the last minute of the day will come. And the manager will say, let's empty the bin. And once again, I can get up from my office chair, sit down on my bicycle, and lie down in my bed. And try to dissolve the day's ten thousand things into the black emptiness of sleep. Heaven.



Why is Sunday stronger than Friday?
Because Friday is a week day.

If Men Are From Mars, Then Aikidoka Are From Venus, Mark Sharman

Since its creation Aikido, like Christianity, has become subject to a number of rifts. These rifts reflect a variation of philosophies felt by the sensei's', or 'splitters' as they are known colloquially, who felt it necessary to break with the orthodoxy of Aikido as it was first conceived.

This branching of ideas and teaching methods is part of the natural evolution of any belief system which achieves a certain size or influence and perhaps can even be seen as a necessary way of keeping the art alive and vital. There are now many different heretodoxical schools practicing around the world and this is often a source of confusion to many martial artists. In order to alleviate the stress this confusion causes here is a quick guide to the major heresies or 'schools' of Aikido:

- Yoshinkan Aikido - hurts more.
- Ki Aikido - mysterious exercises concerning a concept that no-one is able to articulate in English.
- Tomiki Aikido - dildo competitions.
- Iwama - pyjama.
- Furo ryu Aikido - insanity training.

There, I hope that clarifies things a little. Unfortunately this overview does not do justice to the complicated web that is Aikido today with more schools and affiliated philosophies appearing all the time. And this brings me to my main point. I have discovered the existence of a previously unknown school of Aikido during one of my many research trips to the library. The philosophical and even physical implications of this school are profound. It would appear that the third Doctor Who (a dashing and imperious chap) was an expert of the martial art of VENUSIAN Aikido!

This discovery has already caused some excitement in the martial arts community. Tony Bristow is determined to go dojo busting just as soon as we can ascertain exactly where the Venusian dojo is and how to get there, whilst Paul Mitton has denounced them all as wimps and declared war on all extra terrestrial Aikido practitioners. Of course the very existence of an extra terrestrial martial art begs certain questions, such as 'how does a cotton gi withstand the excessive temperatures and corrosive atmosphere of Venus?', 'how does the difference in gravity effect a decent forward rolling break fall?' and 'if the Venusians have more than the normal two arms how does this effect shiho nage?'. All these questions and more need to be addressed as a matter of urgency and so I intend to approach the venerable and wise council members of the British Aikido Board at the next general meeting in the belief that only their profound understanding of the universe can unravel these mysteries for us. In the mean time if any of you spot little green men wearing hakamas please notify me immediately.

What do you call a coat with no buttons and no pockets?
Paint.

Difficulties With Weapons, Mark Sharman

When O'sensei devised the martial art of Aikido he could scarcely have anticipated a more inept student than myself. I am, I confess to you all, reluctant, lazy, forgetful, fearful, uncoordinated, out of shape and irritable. what's more I seem to have a peculiar sort of learning difficulty which applies only to weapons.

I can only vaguely remember the first time I picked up a bokken and started waving it around but I am fairly certain that my reaction was something like "cool! I finally get to be a samurai". this reaction I firmly blame on watching too many Kurasawa movies. Anyway it didn't take too long for me to realise that weapons were NOT my forte, in fact I began to loathe them.

Quite why my brain refuses to cooperate when it is asked to learn some basic movements with a bit of wood is still a mystery to me, but the feelings of frustration and annoyance are all too familiar. I think it all started with the dreaded eight-direction-cut exercise, something everyone seems to have more or less mastered but which baffles me to this day. The first four cuts are fairly easy but after that I become as lost as a woman with a road map (oops! Sorry ladies.)

Even worse than this was the proposal by Stuart North one Friday night that we do a thousand cuts with the bokken. This, he assured us was entirely possible as long as we employed the correct technique using the hips instead of our arms. I knew right away that I was screwed and indeed only managed half the amount of cuts before I had to stop. The pain in my back and shoulder were too much to continue but worse than this I found myself getting more and more angry and resentful until, by about the four hundredth cut I was entertaining fantasies about clubbing Stuart to death with my bokken.

Towards the end of 2005 I was missing almost all of our weapons sessions and kidding myself that I was just a bit tired and would go to the next one. Of course avoiding all weapons practice just made the whole situation worse.

I think the turn around came for me during the Tuesday night classes at the university. Jonathan had been drilling us on the thirty one step Jo kata and, despite having done it before, I was still having difficulty making it stick in my brain. Gradually, however, I found that the repetition was having an effect and eventually was able, for the first time, to complete the whole thing unaided. To what do I attribute this minor miracle? I think it was three things; firstly Jonathans stubborn drilling of the kata each week. Secondly some insightful help from Paul and thirdly, much to my surprise, I started to relax and enjoy it!

This was not my only recent weapons triumph. Last year Stuart decided that we should do a thousand cuts again and this time I (and everyone else present) managed it. The strange thing was that the first few hundred cuts were just like the last time. I was in a fair amount of pain and getting angrier by the minute. I was convinced that I couldn't go on much longer when suddenly, at about eight hundred, the pain vanished and the cuts became

smooth and easy. When we reached one thousand I felt like I could go on to do another few hundred.

Weapons are still difficult for me but I finally feel like I am beginning to make some progress and, despite some setbacks (like leaving all my weapons in the bar one night never to see them again), will continue to practice them.

If there is a moral to the above ramblings I think it is this; whatever you are struggling with, no matter how much it pisses you off, PERSEVERE! You will get there in the end and may learn some useful things about yourself on the way.

What do you call a man whose life is in ruins?
An archaeologist.

Ki musubi

First, some definitions:

From the Aiki News Encyclopaedia of Aikido:

Joining or tying together of Ki. 1. Term commonly used in Aikido to refer to blending one's energy with that of the partner. 2. A sword blending exercise taught by Morihiro Saito.

From The Spiritual Foundations of Aikido by William Gleason:

Musu means "birth", "becoming", "generation", "creative power", "fecundate", as well as "ferment", "brew" and "percolate". It is the abbreviation of *musubi* (*bi* signifies the "wondrous light" of the vital force, much like "And God saw that light was good" of Genesis 1:4). *Musubi* links all things together in an interconnected web, a web that extends without beginning or end. *Musubi* "ties the knot" and is a symbol of marriage and coproduction.

Musubi transcends the distinction between self and other and thus leads to the wholeness of Aiki, the "harmonious force" that reconciles and blends opposites, and calms all discord. *Musubi/Aiki* is a dialectical process that binds together such elements as the following in a seamless unity:
Fire & water, male & female, in-breath & out-breath, front & back, extension & contraction, expansion & absorption, diversity & unity.

When our hands are placed together, the physical (the right side) and the spiritual (the left side) parts of our constitution are united. In Buddhism, this gesture is called *gassho* and is often accompanied by bowing; in Christianity, it is the form of prayer. In Aikido, as in Shinto, it is known as *musubi*, tying together the yin and the yang. All Aikido movement is prayer, a method of uniting one's will with that of the universal will.

Second, some thoughts for the martial artist ...

Much of the solo work with weapons, the *suburi*, is designed to prepare us for *ki musubi*. As such the seven sword *suburi* can be viewed as symbolic gestures, serving exactly the same function for an aikidoka as does making the sign of the cross for a Christian. It is a symbolic gesture that prepares one's mind for prayer, for things of the spirit, for the divine.

The test in the dojo is to blend with the opponent / partner in the dynamic web of action, reaction, interaction. The test is the spiritual exercise. The action of blending with the attacking energy is *ki musubi*. And sometimes we achieve this better than at other times. Sometimes our prayers are answered, sometimes not.

The test in the world (the real practice) is no different and again our actions are the test and the whole meaning of the exercise. Each time is not a rehearsal, it IS the event. But in the wider world the arena is so much more real than in the dojo. It is so much more real, more complex and more unforgiving. In the wider world there are so many more forces, more dynamic patterns to recognise, synthesise and with which ... to blend.

In the real wide world there are all those 3-second-fights that you can lose before you even know you're engaged. There's grief with your partner, pressure from your children, politics at work, your health, the weather, temptations of all descriptions. All of which you are now expected to tie into a healthy pattern with your understanding of *Ki Musubi*.

Ha ha...

In the calm of the hurricane, blending with the whirlwind, surely that ugly scene outside the chip shop will be easy to sort? Ah well, perhaps its just trying that counts.

In the fight and the training all the foundations of Aikido hold true – distance, stance, entering and turning, concentration of power ... all these are surely training for life? They are the templates for the bigger arena. With these tools you can strive to produce the map that will guide you to that state of *Ki Musubi*. And so they are useful, just as an Ordinance Survey map is useful, and will sometimes save your life. But just possessing the map does not make you master of the mountain. For that you must also sweat, get lost, panic, lose your fear, persevere, in extremis, lose sight of the map, regain your composure ... and survive ... each and every time.

Why are big people lazier than small people?
They lie longest in bed.



Why did the hen refuse to cross the road?
Because she was chicken