

At Sandan: Lessons From The Sliding Wood Door  
Be Here Now • Relax Under Pressure • Love

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*Be Here Now* was central to the seminar turned profession I began in 1975. Then in 1997, I broke my hip. I was forced to slow down and months of reflection unfolded. During that time it became clear to me that *Be Here Now* was the prime lesson of the prior 22 years. Profession became life-study. Last week Richard Strozzi-Heckler Sensei used *Here/Now* to link each breath as meditation for our evening classes. I don't recall him ever bringing such focus to *Here/Now*. I do recall, however, that on one of many training days at Taiwan Aikido HQ, I asked a young shodan-ho fellow what his main focus was and he answered, "I try to make it through each class by paying attention to every single breath I take." Since then I've tried that myself and succeeded just three times. Today *Be Here Now* is my #1 Important Lesson. Simply words. Easily spoken. Intense training, particularly so when taken to action involving body, training partners, and what surrounds me inside the dojo.

*Relax Under Pressure*: my #2 Important Lesson. From the time I was kid it has been important for me to be able to relax. Years ago, I didn't give it much thought. But now, looking back, my making music, hunting, fishing, running cross country and track, the profession I took on, writing – for all of these the more I relaxed the got better I got. It was important to surviving the violent hair trigger dynamic that was always on the verge of erupting from my dad when I was a kid. Later, during my Army days, being able to relax was a fundamental ingredient to being effective as a soldier and a leader. Today, sixteen years after taking my first stepping onto the aikido mat I recall that "to relax under pressure" was the first practice Richard Sensei addressed at me.

2016, especially the latter half of the year, has been an arduous time. On a July drive to Santa Cruz I declared to Sensei that I was going to move forward this year to test Sandan. At that time I had no idea what would transpire over the next few months.

Training and Practice: distinct, one from the other: through action they join.

Inside the dojo. Outside the dojo. Also distinct; through action they have the potential to join, but the joining is not guaranteed. That joining is my responsibility, always an individual thing.

My training inside the dojo illuminates my practices outside the dojo. Some of these I want to move forward with. These aren't martial art practices; they are practices for living a good and simple life. That said, my training inside the dojo also illuminates practices that I've become habituated to. Some haunt me and are destructive - ones that I want to leave behind. Examples: I can quickly self criticize. I carry arguments for long periods of time – some are decades old. I'm making ground on reversing this. A few Wednesdays ago I was asked to demonstrate on the mat. Everything I did was a mess. As Grayson asked me stop he said, "What are you practicing?" I grinned and replied, "The joy of f--king everything up!" It felt great to say that, and it still does.

"For the sake of what?" = a question Richard Sensei often puts in front of us. If I walk that dog of life backwards, my answer is: For the sake of Love. Not Love as a feeling, or Love as a concept, but Love as a daily action that I can take in many forms. I'm coming to think of Love as only meaningful when put into action, a life-long experiment that responds no matter what is dished up. It can be a murky, dirty, dusty, dank, dark, slippery, sloppy road to walk; but so far when I've been able to return to Love as an action, it's illuminating and full of wonder, and worth living.

Can I be a person of Love? Can I live a life of Love? That's a "for sake of what" that I feel is worth engaging in for the long haul. It's certainly my BIG conflict. In the midst of daily living, can I return to Love?

A poster used to hang inside our dojo kitchen, and it had the image of a person striding largely through life. It read, "I am in this world to change the world." I understand the need for that idea,

but I'm considering that I'm not in this world, nor have I ever been in it to change it. I'm here to be in it. I'm not separate from the world, its symphony of plants and animals, waters and stones, sky and lightning, disease and ease, and its people. I want to live in it and get to know it - this bold little concert. *My* universe so insignificant to *the* universe. I want to sing my own song of life, yes. I want my song to be good music for the what and the others I touch and that touch me.

I don't always feel that way. BUT, I don't always TRAIN that way either, nor do I always PRACTICE that way.

I've trained aikido (the martial art) all over the world. So far our sensei is the only sensei I've encountered who integrates poetry during class to illuminate on-the-mat and off-the-mat lessons. Poetry stimulates connections between the small aikido we train inside and with the large life aikido we live and practice outside. He doesn't tell us how to interpret the poems he reads. He leaves that to us as individuals to do. Interpretation is an individual dynamic.

A favorite for me is called *The Way It Is*, by William Stafford.

The poet writes:  
*There's a thread you follow. It goes among  
things that change. But it doesn't change*

At Two Rock Aikido dojo we train inside a small old barn. A sliding wood door separates the dojo *inside* from the dojo *outside*. The within and the without are connected by this sliding wood door: a point of entry and a point of exit. I've visited lots of dojos around the world. Very few enjoy rolling hills, grass and wildlife, cows and sheep and turkeys, brilliant greens and warm sunshine. Few are heated in winter solely by a wood stove and the warmth of bodies swirling around the space. Few feel winter's tempest: wind and rain slamming against wood walls and rattling a rafted roof when stormy days come. But all dojos, inside and outside, have people.

The poet writes:  
*People wonder about what you are pursuing.  
You have to explain about the thread*

Inside the sliding wood door sensei always begins each class with these words: "let's train aikido" - or "let's practice aikido" - or sometimes, "let's practice being in harmony with the universe." We can set our clocks to these overt requests, his standards. We bow in and he says, "Thank you for coming. Let's train (or practice) aikido." He never assumes it. He always speaks it. The speaking begins a transformation – idea shifts to something tangible.

As said, it's a worthy use of time – the noticing that what I am training is distinct from what I am practicing, especially when it comes to an aikido that is bigger than the aikido that is just a martial art. I can learn about me from what I'm doing with the martial art. But I don't walk outside the sliding wood door to do martial arts. I rarely identify myself as being a martial artist. I walk out that sliding wood door to be in my life, to sometimes live with my family and friends and sometimes with those who are not my friends, to engage with challenges involving age and ex-wives and colleagues ... but to always engage in the stream of my internal conversations. A lot of those conversations are not very loving.

The poet writes:  
*You have to explain about the thread.  
But it is hard for others to see*

When our inside-the-dojō warm ups are complete, and before the first uke is called to help demo the evening's first technique, Sensei speaks three requests: (1) That we all give thanks to the Earth; (2) That we all give thanks to the Heavens; and (3) That we all give thanks to People. Occasionally his third request ends with the words, "... all People - without any exceptions: your worst friend and your best enemy." This thing about thanking People – nice words, but for me

it's a big chew especially when I confront my personal reality, my personal conversational stream. Sometimes I succeed. Sometimes I fail. This is worthy practice.

The poet writes:  
*While you hold it you can't get lost.  
Tragedies happen; people get hurt  
or die; and you suffer and get old*

I have been on the aikido mat thousands of days since May of 2000. Some of my friends say, "That's a long time". Truthfully, when I started I didn't think I would last this long; and really I'm only a beginner. But these days I'm noticing the leaves on my life tree are changing color. October 1<sup>st</sup> I wrecked my car. I could have died, but I didn't. I'm struggling with that one. I always thought Nick Anast would be around to train with on my Sandan journey, but he isn't. Dean Welsh and Steve Parker have also gone spirit walking before their time too. My son's girlfriend is only 23 years old and she shouldn't be facing a huge illness, but she is. My son, her boyfriend, has had more than enough crap for one person's lifetime. So what? On the flip side -- Friends and family have gotten married: Roy & Ania, Carly and Nick. Another grandchild, Teddy, has been born. This week he started crawling. Beautiful friendships, never considered, have blossomed. A partnership has expanded to grow in places where I've been planting seeds for two decades, but also growing beyond my capacities or desires to further manage. I find myself asking the question, where will I live? I don't know. But I do know that I'm going to live only as long as I will, and I deeply want that living to grow in Love as action beyond feeling.

The poet writes:  
*Nothing you do can stop time's unfolding*

Frequently our training evenings end with another of Sensei's acts of will: deliberate and focused. Students stand in a line along the mat's edge to individually and collectively send thoughts of healing, thoughts of love, thoughts of wellbeing toward people we hold as being in need. With this act we are reminded that soon we will to step through the sliding wood door and go off into our outside separate worlds as individuals. There we have opportunities to practice, or not, the lessons of what the larger aikido has come to mean.

The poet writes:  
*You don't ever let go of the thread*

On that July ride to Santa Cruz Richard Sensei asked, "What is this test for you?" He asked me the same question a few weeks ago. I didn't want to give hip-shot answers. I needed time to think and look at what life's been telling me. Most people probably don't know how deeply I listen to them and how deeply appreciative I am for having them in my life.

What is the test for me? Be Here Now. Relax Under Pressure. Love.

If I don't practice the large aikido outside the sliding wood door then it means very little that I train the martial art aikido inside the sliding wood door.

When I walk down a street, step into a market, cross an intersection or an international border, sip coffee at a café and engage with the wait staff ... when I consider my worst friends and my best enemies ...

Will I practice zanshin? Stay alert, aware and present to what's going on inside me and around me?

Will I aiki? Blend to see, hear and feel others and learn from them.

Will I kuzushi? Respect myself and others enough to insert myself when opportunities open, especially conversational opportunities, so that I am heard; me, the kid who had to remain silent in order to survive.

Will I tankan and irimi? Turn to look from the perspectives of others, and stay forward oriented and moving when faced with the fears associated with the good and the bad?

Will I attend to ma ai and de ai? Keep the boundaries I set for me, respect boundaries of others, and yet stand close enough to be a true friend - to give, receive and have Love - and to attend with good timing to my needs and the needs of others.

Will I touch the in-the-moment shisei? To be a simple upright human being.

Will I practice TAPPING OUT? Give myself and others permission to screw things up or not, to take time when needed to stop, shut up, take a breather, use fewer words, listen instead of talk, talk instead of listen ... to step away from my norm or habituated when it's clear that's what is needed at any moment in time?

The Sliding Wood Door. It defines a line that separates and joins the inside dojo and the outside dojo. I pass through that door three or four days each week. I train inside so that I can practice outside.

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things that change. But it doesn't change.  
People wonder about what you are pursuing.  
You have to explain about the thread.  
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