

Chapter 1 Get Out of Bed

I teach Aikido class on Friday morning from 6 am- 7 am. Actually I get there about 5:35 to stretch out. I hate to get up early. I hate to think about getting up early. I hate having to go to bed early the night before so that I can get up early. The entire idea of getting up early is distasteful.

I remember years ago sitting in a movie theatre thinking about having to get up early. I decided then and there that if ever I wanted to understand this Art I really needed to start early in the morning. So first rule: Get out of bed.

The key to getting up early is not to think about it. The key to Aikido, Zen practice and many other arts is not to think about it. Get out of "thinking, doing mind" and get into "being or accepting mind." My teacher once told me that Aikido is the practice of getting out of the head and into the center and that's why it is so difficult.

When the alarm rings, immediately get out of bed. Do not, I repeat, Do Not, think about hitting the snooze button or lying in bed for another moment. Just repeat to yourself, "just get up, just get up." If you stop to think about it, you are dead. Out of bed, brush the teeth, put some clothes on and out to the Dojo. No thought.

Ego hates to get up early, but luckily, ego is not up yet. There must be thought process for ego to awake. We will speak a lot about ego in the next pages. We will also speak about energy, emptiness, extension, connection, and chi or ki as it is known in Japanese. We will speak about "being" as opposed to "doing." We will speak about Aikido, Zen Practice and some Tai Chi thrown in on the side. We will talk about things that seem to

make no sense at all, at least from an intellectual viewpoint. I am hoping that some of these things will begin to make sense to you as we encounter more and more of them.

If you have ever looked at the Zen Calendar in the store you will have some idea about what I mean. At first view, the Zen Calendar, sold in the store, makes little or no sense at all. Immerse yourself into the teaching and after awhile it is the only thing that makes sense. But first, Get Out of Bed!

Chapter 2 The Zen Master and the Hot Dog Vendor (part 1)

What did the Zen Master say to the Hot Dog Vendor?

Make me one with everything!

Old joke, but highly relevant to our discussion of Aikido.

What the Zen Master meant, aside from his desire for the hot dog was: make me "realize" that I was always one with everything, I am presently one with everything and I will always be one with everything. I use the term "realize" here in a very specific way. It means to understand with every fiber of your being the truth of the statement, not to understand with the mind but with every sinew, muscle and bone in your body. Make me understand, on a visceral level, that I am one with everything; that nothing exists other than self.

Aikido is quite different from other practices. The difference is in the mindset, and therefore in the intent. In other practices there is an attacker and a defender, a subject to attack and an object to be attacked. There are two separate entities. The attacker attacks. The defender blocks or moves off the line of attack and counter attacks. The thought process goes something like this: how dare that person attack me. I need to defend myself. I need to be stronger or faster than this person and control them and hurt them. Kill them before they kill me.

In Aikido there are not two separate entities. I mean there is, but there isn't. (That Zen Calendar again.) There is no defender and no attacker. No subject, no object. There is only energy moving in a particular direction. That energy is no different from oneself. The energy is joined, blended with and either taken down to the mat or projected out and thrown. Ai in Aikido means to join; Ki means universal energy; and Do means the way. Hence Aikido is the way of joining with universal energy.

This is supposed to be done with the least amount of harm to the "alleged" attacker. I say "alleged" because there is no such thing as an attacker. Remember, nothing exists outside yourself. Why don't you beat the crap out of the Alleged attacker? Because you would only be harming yourself. Strange way of thinking (or rather not thinking) eh?

Shunryu Suzuki has a wonderful way of putting this in his book, Zen Mind, Beginners Mind. He says, and I paraphrase here: Before we are born we are like drops of water in an endless river. All the drops are connected and all are part of the river. No drop is separate from any other. After we are born it is as if the water flows over a high waterfall and the drops separate. It appears to the drops that each is separate from the other, the reality being hidden. Once we die we go back into that state of non-separateness. We were never separated to begin with. It only appeared that way.

Same in this lifetime. How can we cause harm to another if there is no such thing as the other? Now this is a completely different way to look at things.

Aikido practice is about how one joins with the energy coming in as if it were never separate to begin with, causing the least amount of harm possible. The two become one. Its not easy. I taught Karate for ten years prior to studying Aikido. I can teach you to be a good karate student in two and a half years. My teachers tell me it takes ten years to be a good Aikido student. I would say it takes at least one or two lifetimes, but then, what's your rush?

Chapter 3 STRETCHING

I got ahead of myself.. That last chapter was kind of tough. Perhaps we can ease into it more gently. I wanted to talk about stretching.

I get to the Dojo about 5:35 a.m., get changed, turn the fan or heat on and begin to stretch. I start with the major muscle groups progressing to the smaller ones. Eventually I finish with the stretching of the wrists, usually in the seiza (sitting) position which stretches out the ankles.

The stretching takes about 20 minutes. I am really stiff! I can stretch out completely and be loose as a goose before I go to bed. I wake up the next morning and its as if rigamortis has set in overnight. I start from scratch again. I don't know why I am so tight, some people just are.

Most Aikido teachers who actually stretch out the class teach the same stretches. Some stretches are designed to limber up the body and some to enable the practitioner (Aikidoka) to better perform the techniques, or more probably, to have the techniques performed upon them. For ex., in the technique known as kotegaeshi the wrist is turned to the outside, so one of the stretches we perform is an outside turning of each wrist. We do lots of different wrist stretches. I have been doing them for years and my wrists are still tight.

So we stretch to limber up the body and to practically enable the techniques. Why else? Picture an electric current traveling through a wire. If the wire is bent or crimped or blocked or tight the current either will not flow or will flow poorly. Stretch the wire out and there will be no resistance and the current will flow freely.

Same with your body. If it is not properly stretched out the chi (ki) will not flow or it will flow poorly. Your body is the wire and the chi (life force, universal energy) cannot flow. The better it flows the healthier you are. The better it flows, the less physical force you need to use to accomplish a given result. (more about this later).

I learned this studying Tai Chi. Tai Chi has always fascinated me and I started studying it seriously about 3 years ago. If my body is stretched and loose and my posture is straight there is an energy passing through the body which you can actually feel. No stretch, No feel.

One of the stretches we do is a rolling of the ankle and a light pounding on the bottom of the foot. Why do we do this? Well, for one, it feels good. Some teacher's have told me that it wakes up the foot. In Tai Chi there is a spot on the bottom of the foot called the "bubbling well." This is the point through which the chi flows in and out of the body, through the earth.

So, open up your bubbling well and stretch out your body.

It's time to do the warmup exercises, but first, I digress into "emptiness."

Chapter 4 EMPTINESS

What is emptiness? Another term which is difficult to explain. Aikido and Zen practice are chock full of terms you can't understand. In Lao Tzu's book, "The Tao te Jing" (The Way of Life), he says, "the Tao that can be told is not the eternal tao, the name that can be named is not the eternal name." (Steven Mitchell's translation.)

What is this crazy old Chinese guy talking about? He says, if you can talk about it, it ain't it. The "it" or ultimate reality is beyond intellectual thought and discourse. Intellect cannot understand it, if it can, it ain't it. Here we go again. How do we get beyond intellect. Once we get beyond intellect or thought there is a treasure trove of understanding, of reality. Trouble is, we never, or almost never, get beyond intellect. We are too busy going to the mall, buying things, going to the movies, watching television. Yack, yack yack. Never any time spent just being present.

Emptiness! The first thing you need to know about emptiness is that it is not "empty." Thich Nhat Hanh said it best in one of his many books: Emptiness means to be empty of a separate self. There it is again. The same issue as dealt with in the chapter on the Zen Master and the Hot Dog Vendor. I am empty of a separate self. I am one with everything. How do I realize that? I cannot realize it through intellectual thought. It is only when I am able to get out of my mind and into my center that it begins to make sense. Nothing is separate from myself. Nothing exists outside myself.

We can look again at Suzuki's endless river where all drops of water are part of the stream and part of each other. No drop exists separate by itself. No human being exists separate from any other.

You will see these same ideas in Great Art, be they paintings, poems, rock lyrics and many other places. I am reminded of what did Picasso said while drinking a glass of milk: pouring God into God. In other words, God does not exist separate from myself; I do not exist separate from God.

More on this later. Back to the Dojo.

Chapter 5 O'sensei

I am getting ahead of myself. I need to spend a moment to talk about OSensei (Great Teacher); Morihei Ueshiba.

Morihei Ueshiba was the founder of Aikido. Ueshiba was a world renowned martial artist having mastered the arts of sword, spear, sticks, judo and ju jitsu, among other things. In 1925 he experienced what can only be described as an "enlightenment experience." Think St Paul on the road to Damascus. He had an epiphany! Thereafter he established his Art; the Art of Aikido. In his own words:

I felt the universe suddenly quake, and that a golden spirit sprang up from the ground, veiled my body, and changed my body into a golden one. At the same time my body became light. I was able to understand the whispering of the birds, and was clearly aware of the mind of God, the creator of the universe.

Ueshiba sets forth his 5 principles of Aikido:

1. Aikido is the path that joins all paths of the universe throughout eternity; it is the Universal Mind that contains all things and unifies all things.
 2. Aikido is the truth taught by the universe and must be applied to our lives on this earth.
 3. Aikido is the principal and the path that join humanity with the Universal Consciousness.
 4. Aikido will come to completion when each individual, following his or her true path becomes one with the universe.
 5. Aikido is the path of strength and compassion that leads to the infinite perfection and ever increasing glory of God.
- Strong Stuff! That's quite a beginning. To follow in O'Sensei's footsteps one has to train diligently in both the physical and spiritual practices. In fact, it was only in his spiritual/purification

practice that the epiphany occurred. It was only then, that he understood. In that moment, everything made perfect sense. In that moment he came to the realization (he "realized with every fiber of his being") the way.

Is Aikido the only way? Of course not. There are many paths up the mountain. You can get there many different ways; in fact you are there already, you just don't realize it yet. You will. Have faith.

Chapter 6 Bowing

Bowing is difficult for Westerners. Perhaps it has something to do with the 10 Commandments: Thou shalt have no other Gods before me; or Thou shalt not make any graven images. Perhaps it has something to do with the feeling of Americans that they should not have to bow down before anyone.

Bowing is easier in the East. There is a whole culture of bowing ingrained in the population. In the East, it can be only a sign of respect.

In Aikido class we all sit in the seiza position (on the ankles) facing the front. We bow to O'Sensei and then bow to each other. It is neither a form of worship nor one of respect. It is the same bow that we do in zen class when we bow to the buddah or to each other.

When I bow to O'Sensei, or Buddah, or Christ or you or any other I disappear completely into the universe, into the moment which includes all things. And, in that moment everything disappears completely with me. Everything disappears into that "emptiness" where everything exists as ONE. Osensei says it over and over in his five principles: the Universal Mind that contains all things; the joining of humanity with the Universal Consciousness.

Time collapses. All dualities disappear. Hot and cold disappear; male and female disappear; joy and pain disappear; past and future disappear. There is no difference b/t living and dying.

In that moment of Bowing I disappear completely into that void. Everything is myself. Nothing is separate from myself. I reside in God and God resides in me. O'Sensei is not dead at that

moment. He lives in that moment and he is looking down at me; and he is smiling.

We bow to O'sensei, we bow to each other: a deep, meaningful bow. Class has started.

Chapter 7 Is Aikido self defense?

Well, it is and it isn't. (You should be getting used to this by now.) Western philosophy always seeks an answer as either yes or no. Eastern philosophy is a little different. It could be yes, it could be no. It could be both yes and no. It could be beyond yes and no.

At the tip of the iceberg Aikido is self defense. But, it is so much more than that. As we go deeper and deeper into the practice of Aikido it becomes more of a zen meditation than any form of self defense. In fact it becomes the antithesis of self defense.

IT ISN'T

I have had many Aikido teachers over the years. Howard Paschenz was, and still is my Aikido mentor. People would say, "Howard, is Aikido self defense?" He would answer, "Show me the self that needs to be defended and I will show you whether it is self defense or not." Sounds a little like Yoda. Come to think of it you don't know Howard but he looks a little bit like Yoda. What he means is that there is no such thing as a separate self. Thus, it cannot possibly be self defense. Moreover, if you are treating it like self defense you have already missed the point. Back we go again, to emptiness- empty of a separate self.

IT IS

On the other hand Aikido is very much an effective form of self defense. However, it manages to be so indirectly; sort of through the back door. That is, through effective movement and joining of the energies tremendous power is generated without actually using force. The attacking party is brought helplessly to the ground or thrown with no real idea as to how he got there.

The best practitioners are those who are without great muscle strength or those who have trained themselves not to use that strength. They are gentle and sensitive to the energy coming in. They never try to dominate or control that energy but accept it and allow it to freely flow. They learn, very quickly that they should not use their own force, but learn to rely upon the force of the other, the incoming force. If that incoming force changes speed or direction they have to be sensitive enough to change with it. They learn to accept the incoming energy. They are capable of inflicting tremendous damage; they choose not to.

When I first began Aikido practice I was very strong and powerful but not very effective. It took 10 years to relinquish my strength and use that of the incoming energy. I am getting better at it in the last 6 years. The idea of complete Acceptance both on and off the mat is beginning to take hold but will take some more time. More practice.

Acceptance. Acceptance of energy, acceptance of circumstances. We will read a lot about acceptance of energy both on and off the mat. For now see if you can think about the following: Accept all that comes in. Do not judge it, do not attempt to manipulate it. This is an incredibly difficult lesson to learn.

Chapter 8 String Theory part 1/Beginning exercises

This is a theory I developed, sort of a way of thinking about something called extension. (another difficult term) A metaphor may help. The various parts of the body are all connected to my center by internal, unseen strings. In the beginning of practice those strings are very loose. As one practices, those strings begin to tighten up so that more and more as one begins to move the center the rest of the body moves as a consequence of that moving center.

In the beginning the center or pelvis almost never moves, or when it does it moves separate from the arms or the legs. More likely, the arms will move and the center will not. Practitioners do the techniques with just the strength of their arms and shoulders.

After a very long time the strings within the body begin to tighten up. Little by little the center is doing more of the work and the arms and legs are doing less and less. The arms and legs begin to move as a consequence of that center moving. As the center moves, all peripherals move off the center; (Everything is a peripheral other than the center). The center moves the arms, the legs, the head and the neck.

Eventually, after years of practice, there is no power in the arms. The arms act as a conduit for the power of the center to move through them. Everything else is loose but connected.

There is tremendous power in my center and that power passes through my arms and legs. Each acts as a conduit for that power. In order for them to act as a conduit for that power they must be loose and flexible. (See previous chapter on stretching). If you tighten up relying on strength the chi cannot flow.

How does one develop or tighten up those strings? There is a series of beginning exercises in Aikido that we do before every

class. The exercises develop that strong center. One of the exercises is a “rowing” exercise. The hips basically row back and forth and the arms and hands move off the hip and by reason of the hip movement. It is only by the movement that the arms and hands move. If the hip did not move then the arms and hands would not move. This helps develop moving from the center.

Another beginning exercise is the stepping and turning exercise. Once again we do this so that the center of the body moves the arms and legs as we turn. As a matter of strict construction, I never “step.” In order to “step” I would have to purposely move my leg forward. I move with my center which propels my legs and feet. It is much more like ice skating on the mat than stepping. My hips move forward which thrusts the leg forward; thereafter the hip turns, which causes the legs to turn; always from my center.

The beginning exercises also consist of rolling backward and forwards, and kneewalking.

How important are the exercises? The exercises are inherent in every technique that we do. Break down any technique and you will find two or three exercises. Kisshomaru Ueshiba, son of the founder said that he did the exercises every day. My teacher, Howard says that we do the techniques in order to learn the exercises.

Thus, we train each day doing the exercises in the beginning of class. After many years of practice, more and more we begin to use our center and not our muscles, arms, and shoulders. We learn to let go of our strength and become more flexible and looser; perhaps weaker. Through our weakness we develop tremendous power and also tremendous sensitivity. More on that in the next chapter.

Chapter 9 Sensitivity (The Perfect Date)

Through development of the center the Aikido practitioner becomes softer but more powerful. But, that's not all. He also develops great sensitivity. This sensitivity allows the practitioner to feel balance, energy, and movement, no matter how subtle that movement is.

Shunryu Suzuki says that the way to control someone is to allow them to do exactly what they want. That could be the definition of an accomplished Aikido Master. I don't necessarily control you; my control of you comes about as a consequence of my allowing you to do exactly what you want to do.

First, remember we have built in a great number of techniques over a period of many years. Each one of those particular techniques are designed to be used with a particular type of incoming energy. If you want to move forward we do a technique that takes your forward momentum into account. If you want to move backwards, sideways, up or down we do a different technique. Either way we will use your desire and your energy and you will end up on the ground or in a lock or pin. You will also not really know how you got there.

I like to tell my students that I am the perfect date. I agree with whatever energy you give me. "You want to go here? That's great, so do I." "You would rather go there? That's fine with me." You want to start out this way and then go that way? That's exactly what I wanted." The perfect date. I always want to do what you want to do.

How do we get to this point? Through sensitivity. By developing my center I am able to become more powerful, and, at the same time, give up using my upper body strength. My arms, shoulders

hands and wrists are very loose. The chi is extending through them but there is no tightness in them. Since none of my muscles are tight my body becomes very sensitive to touch. This sensitivity allows me to feel energy and balance.

It's almost as if your energy is the wind and my body is the sail. Any time your energy comes into contact with my body, my body joins with it and moves in the direction it is pushed or pulled. At that point one technique or another will naturally come out. You will get no resistance from me. I am the perfect date.

It is as if the two apparently separate bodies have inexorably been joined together. There is no longer any separation. (There never was.) Once we join together there is no need for any force. The two bodies flow together. Just like they always have.

Chapter 10 String Theory, Part 2

No man is an Island, entire of itself. Every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main...Never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee. John Donne, Meditation XVII.

What is John Donne trying to tell us? Everything and everyone is connected. In String Theory Part 1 we hypothesized that there were strings inside our body connecting us to our center so that, after long periods of practice we only move from our center. In String Theory, Part 2 I am telling you that everything and everyone is connected.

Thich Nhat Hanh says that if you look deep enough at anything you can actually see everything; that everything is connected to everything else. He says it so much better than I can but let me try to explain. I am eating a banana. Let me look deeper. I certainly see the banana. The banana came from a tree so I see the tree it came from. The tree was nurtured by the air, sun, and the soil so they are there as well. It could not live except through the rain. I see the man who climbed the tree and picked the banana. I see all the people involved in the process which brought me the banana; in its production, its packaging, its shipping; its wholesale, its retail. I see all these people together with their families; their joys and their sufferings. I gain nutrition from the banana. I throw away the skin; the skin decomposes and provides nutrition of the soil. I also eventually die and decompose.

Look deeply and you will see that all these things and all these people have a connection with my life. Then apply this thought process to everything you eat and everything you do. Everything includes everything else.

How do we reflect this on the Aikido mat? We move together. Your move initiates a corresponding move by me. I am connected with you. I don't move faster than you. It's not an attempt to be more powerful than you or to be in a better strategic position than you. I move with you; I sort of become you, so that our moves are simultaneous. It's as if our centers were joined and as if there were a body knowledge between us that our intellect is unaware of. The better our connection the better the Aikido technique and the more seamless it becomes.

This is especially true with multiple attackers where all bodies are moving in harmony together. You can see it also in weapons practice; especially where you have a weapon and I don't. Typically in Aikido we will use a wooden sword called a bokken or a short staff called a jo. Any move at all by the attacker initiates a corresponding move. For ex. as the attacker raises the bokken it draws me in and as the bokken reaches its pinnacle before it descends, I am already inside and close enough so that both my hands are on the attackers arms holding the wooden sword. I can complete this technique called Ikkyo and bring you down to the mat. If the sword descends I have five or six techniques to either throw you or disarm you.

In empty hand technique (without a weapon) I have a number of options available. As you initiate a punch, typically you will draw your arm back before it goes forward into the punch. That drawback also draws me in; I lean in off my hips (but keeping my posture) and, as you punch I lean back off my hips. The simultaneous move sets up a false target so that when I move back off my hips I am actually too far away from you to hit. You over extend causing your balance and energy to be too far forward. In the alternative, as you draw back it can allow me to slip in very

close to you (this is called irimi). Now I am too close for you to punch and it opens up a myriad of techniques available to me.

Thus, no matter what we do, as long as I move with you I am in complete control

Chapter 11 Rolling

Why are all these Aikido students rolling around on the mat? First of all, its fun. It feels good. You feel like a youngster rolling around. Its healthy for you as well. My teacher, Howard is 79 years of age and still rolling around on the mat.

In Aikido you get thrown a lot. You also fall a lot. Its not the fall that hurts you, its the landing. Rolling teaches you how to land when you are thrown. The more comfortable you get with rolling the easier it becomes and the harder you can get thrown without injuring yourself.

As part of the beginning exercises we perform backrolls and then front rolls. Backrolls are relatively uncomplicated and can be learned quickly. You can use a backroll to fall out of any technique providing you learn how. We practice backrolls by standing up, placing one foot behind us, sinking on the rear leg, and dropping towards the ground and rolling up our spine. Keep your chin tucked in.

When I backroll I get this sensory massage all the way up my spine. I can feel each vertebrae as it comes into contact with the mat. Over and over as I backroll It feels as if I have my own personal masseuse massaging my spine. As discussed in a prior chapter, sensory input is very important in Aikido. Through practice we awake in us this Sensory Tactile System. We become very sensitive to touch and actually feel energy and balance. Over the years my awareness of my sensory system has become quite acute. You can touch me at any point on my body and, even with my eyes closed, I know exactly where your balance and energy is, and more particularly, where it ts not. Backrolls, and being mindful of those backrolls, count a great deal towards this sensitivity.

Frontrolls, however are far more complicated. It takes a good six months to a year to become proficient in front rolls. Some people take longer. Eventually you get good enough where you can frontroll on the street or cement and not get hurt. Frontrolls take so much time because of "extension" or, more appropriately, lack thereof. "Extension." Once again we have a concept that we touched on in the past chapters but have found difficult to define.

As my center develops I am able to relax more and more in my upper body. My shoulders and arms become very loose, no rigidity at all, no use of muscle. However there is chi running through my body, extending out through my arms, hands and fingertips. I am able to extend the power of my lower body and my center (and the earth) through my upper body without using muscular force. Like all Aikido principles, it takes time.

The first time I noticed my own extension was when I was helping my daughter ride her bike. We had to cross a field by riding on the grass. She always had trouble riding on the field. I would help her by riding next to her, a little in front and pulling the handlebars of her bicycle with my right arm while holding my own bicycle handlebars with my left. No wonder my right shoulder hurt.

About a year later I was riding with her across the field. I rode right next to her and instead of pulling her handlebars with my right hand I placed my hand on her handlebars and used the power of my center to move her bike across the field. There was no power in my right hand, arm or shoulder. I could not believe how easy it was. I extended the power of my center through my right shoulder, arm and hand without using any force. This realization took me completely by surprise. It was my first understanding of extension.

When I roll, I bend down and place my hand in front of me on the mat. I roll up my pinky to my wrist, up my arm to my shoulder

and then down diagonally across the back to the opposite hip. Each and every part of my body, from my pinky to my opposite hip comes into contact with the mat. My other hand is also involved. My two hands make a soft circle, like a bicycle tire or wheel. My center is the hub of that wheel. The spokes, which are unseen, connect the hub to the wheel. Those unseen spokes are the extension.

When beginners roll on their arm, their mind does not believe that their arm will hold themselves up and they collapse on their arm, sometimes landing on their shoulder. Ouch! As they progress they roll but use an awful lot of strength in holding the arms rigid. Advanced students hold their arms softly in a circle and roll gently up and down. As the student develops extension the power extends from the center, through the arms, across the unseen spokes and right to the bicycle tire. The advanced student rolls very lightly and gently on the outstretched arms. Everything is very soft but very powerful.

We have spent some time talking about extension in the rolls but extension is much deeper than that. We shall take it up again in the next chapter.

Chapter 12 Extension, part 2.

Mind extends. You may think that it is locked up carefully in that pretty little head of yours but things are usually more involved than as first perceived. Think of an endless pond that has no boundaries. It has no physical boundaries. It goes on forever. Its existence is also not limited in space or time. Drop a pebble into that endless pond and watch the ripples extend out in widening circles. These ripples are your mind. The ripples spread out to infinity including everything that they encompass.

Your mind extends out in this way. In the beginning there is narrow mind which is all about "me." It is locked up and directed full time to my own selfish needs and desires. It's me, mine, my kids, my house, my friends, my technique, my practice, my country, etc. In an Aikido context if you do a technique with a narrow mind you may accomplish the result but will have to use large amounts of strength or power. Your chi gets locked up in your muscles and strength and thus, cannot flow.

However, mind can extend. Let's call it Big Mind. Big mind includes everything. There is no such thing as me or mine in big mind. In an Aikido context the technique will simply flow without any excess use of energy. The attacker will find himself on the floor with no real idea as to how he got there. OSensei says that "to practice Aikido you must calm the spirit and return to the source."

You will need to spend some time with this because it is quite complicated to the intellectual mind. Ruminates upon it for a few years.

Mind extends from the center or "hara." It extends out of the body and starts to include more things. It includes the space between us. It includes you. Once it includes you, then the two have

become as one. Thus "me" has disappeared into "us." No longer are we separate beings. Mine has morphed into ours. Its now our interests, not only my interests. My interests now include you and yours. Mind extends further. It includes all the space within the room. It includes all persons and objects in the room. It fills the entire room. It extends beyond the room into infinity; beyond past and future. I have become one with everything. The two or more have been joined into the present. It extends beyond male and female, hot and cold, seen and unseen. It extends and encompasses all dualities. It is "emptiness supreme." It is empty of a separate self and in that emptiness it includes everything. It extends beyond neighborhood, religion, race and includes the entire Universe and beyond. O'Sensei would say, "When you attack me you attack the Universe."

How do we allow the mind to extend? It extends naturally if we only let it. We can sit meditation. Be open. Accept that which life brings you. On the Aikido mat accept all energy that is given to you. Do not attempt to force it or bend it to your will. Stay away from "Do" and pay more attention to "Be" Don't do the technique, allow the technique to naturally flow from the energy you are given. It's a beginning.

Chapter 13: Throwing mind, not body.

We learn lots of throws in Aikido. We practice throws (and landings) for many years. It took me many years to learn how to throw. I have finally come to the conclusion that I throw mind, not body.

That's a strange idea. (You should be getting used to strange ideas by now.) Rich, "how can you say you throw mind, not body?"

First one needs to have a thorough understanding of Aikido technique and a good working knowledge of "Mind." Mind travels, as anyone who sits Zen practice can tell you. We call it a "monkey Mind" because it jumps from one thought to another as we are trying to meditate. I like to play a game in class called, "where is your mind." If you grab my wrist tightly your mind will most likely be on my wrist. If I step on your foot your mind will travel from my wrist to your foot. Mind cannot be two places at once. If, when you grab my wrist I put my fist in your face, your mind will quickly move to your face. In Aikido this is called an "atemi." An atemi is to take your mind. I don't have to hit you in the face for an atemi, I only have to catch your mind.

When you grab my wrist, where is my mind? For most people it is on their wrist being grabbed. Thus we have two minds both on the same spot. This can lead to a struggle where the strongest or best positioned will prevail. But what would happen if, when you grab my wrist, your mind were on my wrist but my mind was not on my wrist but in my center. I don't struggle at the point of the wrist. My mind is either in my center or extended, as in Big Mind. You can't feel my wrist or arm b/c my mind is not there. It is as if you were grabbing on to a stream of water from a faucet. You can

see the water but there is nothing to be grabbed. I give you no resistance and thus can move wherever I please.

I watch mind quite frequently during class. I watch my mind and watch yours. If I grab both your hands behind your back I usually can see your head drop forward. Its as if you are trying to look behind your back to see the grab. I know at his point that I have grabbed your mind, not your hands. Try it. Try having a friend grab both your wrists behind your back. Where is your mind? Where is their mind? It's fun.

Anyways, I belabor the main point of this chapter. I have learned that before I throw you your mind is already on the ground, that is your mind is already on the spot upon which you will land. I have already thrown your mind. Now I just need your body to catch up with it.

Once I have joined with you or blended with you (the Ai in Aikido) I am connected with your energy. Your energy and mine are now the same. From an emptiness standpoint I don't exist as a separate entity from you. "There is nothing to grab and nothing to be grabbed." I stay with that energy and use it to unbalance you or lead that energy to a position where you are off balance. At this point your rear foot usually comes off the mat and I have you on your toes. Gravity is helping to bring you to the ground. I have your balance and it is leading you into a fall. I give you no resistance so that you have nothing to hold on to. Both your eyes and your mind move to a spot on the ground. You have already been thrown. Body just needs to catch up with mind. To throw without throwing.

So many of our problems in this lifetime are caused by people or things grabbing our mind. Television, marketers, violence, pornography all attempt, and usually do grab our mind. Just try not watching a tv set that is on nearby. It's nearly impossible.

Watch your mind very, very, carefully. Be very careful what you put into it. Whatever you put in will come out. If, in your practice you desire to dominate or control another, that will come out in your practice. If you are angry your anger will become part of your practice. If you put violence in, violence will come out. The opposite is also true. If you put in peace, kindness and love that is what will come out. I will leave you with the Indian story of the Grandfather talking to his grandchild:

A young Indian boy was filled with anger toward another boy he felt had done him a personal injustice. Patiently his Grandfather listened to the story. After a while he said "Let me tell you a story. I too have felt a great hatred for those who have taken so much, with no sorrow for the wrong that they do. But I have learned that hatred eats at you...inside...and does not hurt your enemy. It hurts only you."
"It is like taking poison and wishing that your enemy would die from it. I have struggled with those same feelings many times. It was as if there were two wolves fighting inside of me. One was good and did no harm. He lived in harmony with all around him and did not take offense when no offense was intended. He would fight only when it was right to protect himself and his family. But the other wolf... Ah! He was filled with much anger and the smallest thing would set him off into a fit of rage. He fought with everyone, much of the time, for little or no reason. He could not think because the anger and hatred gnawed at him from morning till night. It was difficult to live with these two wolves battling inside of me because both of them tried their best to dominate my spirit. But, after many years and much soul searching, only one of those wolves ultimately survived." The boy looked up at his Grandfather and asked, "Grandpa, Which one of them lived?" Grandpa

looked at his Grandson and answered, “The one that I fed.”

Be very careful what you feed into your mind, be it pornography, violence, anger; or kindness. You feed your mind through what you watch, what you read, what you say and who you hang around with. I try always not to hang around with toxic, negative people. The toxicity poisons all who come near it. On the other hand when people live in harmony with all things, are peaceful loving and kind those traits also are contagious. Each day I battle against my own personality to personify these traits. Perhaps some day we can hang around together.

Chapter 14 The Zen Master and the Hot Dog Vendor, Part 2

You may recall in Chapter 2 the Zen Master said to the Hot dog vendor, "Make me one with everything." The Zen Master paid for his lunch with a ten dollar bill. He asked the hot dog vendor, "Where is my change." The Hot dog vendor replied, "Change comes from within."

How true. Change comes from within. As you train deeper and deeper in Zen and Aikido there is a change that takes place inside you. It is a slow change that takes place after some years. Allow me to offer a helpful metaphor: The Rock Tumbler.

When my children were young I bought them a Rock Tumbler. Basically it consists of a cylinder which is powered by an electric motor which turns the cylinder around and around. Into the cylinder is placed jagged rocks, sand and some water. The cylinder then turns this mixture around and around for weeks and months. It is very noisy. I had to bury the cylinder in a box, in a closet and cover it with blankets so that we did not hear the noise.

Over a long period of time the jagged rocks lose some of their jagged edges and begin to become smooth. After what seems like a couple of months the rocks actually become polished like fine gems. A miraculous transformation.

Aikido or Zen practitioners are very much like this. In the beginning they are the jagged rocks that grind against each other (or in zen practice against themselves). I remember my friend Paul Costello and I when we first started Aikido. Both of us were accomplished karate practitioners. Every Monday night between 8 and 9 p.m. we basically beat each other half to death in a dire attempt to blend together doing Aikido techniques.

It was ugly. It was nasty. It was noisy. Our teachers should probably have put us in a closet in the basement and covered us with blankets. But then, over time, something wonderful happened. We started to smooth out, to blend together. We began to learn how to work with each other, to accept each other's energy instead of pummeling each other into the ground. There was less pulling and less yanking. How long did it take? At least 4 years.

Something else took place that was even more marvelous. We started to smooth out in our relationships at home and work, with people we knew for a long time and with people we just met. There was, and still is, a certain peacefulness and centeredness that we carry along with us. The transition took place both on and off the mat. Don't get me wrong, I still have my days. Just ask my wife and kids. But, overall, there has been this added dimension. The change came from within. I doubt if it would have without the Aikido and Zen practice.

Chapter 15 Techniques, Generally

Finally, we get to the techniques. There are hundreds of techniques in Aikido. There are techniques used to lock, trap, and pin the attacker. There are techniques to throw the attacker. There are techniques to employ in the event you are attacked by two, three, four, and even five attackers. There are defensive techniques against a knife, gun, tire iron, bottle, stick, etc. There are techniques we use if we have a weapon and someone tries to take that weapon away.

We train continually in these techniques. We build them in so that we do not have to think about them and when the appropriate energy comes in from an attack, the appropriate technique magically appears. The defender accepts the energy, moves within it and the attacker finds himself on the ground with no real idea how he got there. How long does one have to train? One of my teachers told me it takes a good ten years to become a good beginner. O'Senei says: "In your training do not be in a hurry, for it takes a minimum of ten years to master the basics and advance to the first rung." Ten years of training in techniques. You can actually become quite proficient in the technique after a couple of years to defend yourself. The magic takes quite a bit longer.

Why do we do the techniques? Well, first of all they are fun. You have to have fun on the Aikido mat. If its not fun, its not worth doing. O'Sensei said that there must be joy in your practice.

Also, the techniques are very, very effective. You can easily defend yourself (if Aikido was self defense). After a while you become quite proficient and even quite dangerous. You are capable of inflicting great bodily harm but you choose not to.

Other changes start to take place both on and off the mat. You interact with people differently. Your affect changes. Things that

used to really bother you no longer do. You become more patient and kind, perhaps more accepting and more compassionate.

However, the reason we learn the techniques is far deeper than any of the above. Is it fun? Lots of fun. Is it effective? Very effective. Do you learn self defense? Absolutely. Anything else? Well, yes but you will find this next part very strange. I am not sure that you are ready to hear this. I am not sure that I am ready to tell you. However, since our repeated discussions of emptiness, non-separation, string theory and mind expansion you may be ready for it. Here goes.

Techniques are the medium through which we experience "ultimate reality." They help us "get to the other shore." You may say, "Rich, this time you have gone too far. You are truly out of your mind." Trust me, I have said this to myself many times. I don't even talk to my wife about this stuff. Up to now there are a limited number of people I have shared this with. We experience "ultimate reality." We "get to the other shore." How do we do that? Next chapter.

Chapter 16 To Get To The Other Shore

In our Zen practice and most other forms of Buddhism there are certain chants that we chant during the practice. These chants are typically in Japanese or Sanskrit or even, in these days, English. Probably the most chanted sutra is the Heart Sutra. The edited version goes something like this: As the enlightened being was experiencing the Great Wisdom he realized that Form is emptiness, emptiness is form; that form is nothing other than emptiness and that emptiness is nothing other than form. The last portion of the sutra is translated as: Gone, gone, gone, to the other shore.

That other shore is emptiness itself as we have been discussing in these past chapters. To be empty of a separate self is to include everything as oneself, no difference, no separation between us; to disappear completely so that there is no difference between self and other. O'sensei says: "Cast off limiting thoughts and return to true emptiness. Stand in the midst of the Great Void."

Aikido techniques, with the appropriate understanding, will take you to that other shore, that place that already exists within each one of us; the Great Void of O'Sensei.

Aikido does not have a monopoly on this. We see the same thing in other practices. For example, the Japanese Tea ceremony is not about drinking tea. I mean it is but it isn't. The ceremony is the medium used to allow the practitioner to experience the phenomenon of emptiness. In Zen and the Art of Archery we realize that the target has been hit before the arrow is drawn from the quill. There is such a connection between the archer and the target that they are one before the arrow is drawn.

I like to use this same thought when describing what I like so much about football. The Receiver has caught the ball even before the quarterback has even thrown it. How can that be? The connection is so strong between the quarterback and the receiver that they are "one." There is no separation between them. Does this take practice? Lots.

You see the same thing over and over whether its golf or baseball, basketball or hockey. Wayne Gretsky use to say that as he got older he would feel and see the entire rink and always know where everything and everyone was; that he actually felt that everything was a part of him. Basketball's Phil Jackson of the LA Lakers wrote a book called Sacred Hoops where he describes the 5 basketball players playing together as one unit. In The Peaceful Warrior, Dan Millman describes the same things in the context of Gymnastics.

It may be easier to understand if we use the metaphor of the artist and her Art. A true artist uses art to express ultimate reality. A really great artist allows others to experience that reality through the Art. Great art is a conversation between God and the canvass and the less the artist has to do with it, the greater the art. The Artist is merely a conduit. The question then becomes, how do we improve the conduit, the connection?

The Artist must train in paint, brush and canvass for many years in order to become highly proficient where he does not think about these things. Eventually the Artist disappears into the painting and the Art is the result. This disappearance is very much like the zen practitioner who disappears into the emptiness. Time collapses. A friend of mine is an artist who tells me that she can go into her studio in the morning and not come out until the evening and have no idea where the time went. There is however a new painting. She is not quite sure how it appeared.

Aikido practice, through the techniques, allow one to experience this same phenomena, this ultimate reality. The two, practitioners, formerly separate entities disappear together and join together as one unit. As they reappear together as separate units, one of them finds themselves on the ground with no real idea as to how he got there.

The Aikido techniques are the brush, paint, and the canvas of the Artist. It is through the medium of the techniques that the Art appears.

An Aikido practitioner needs a firm understanding of the techniques before he is ready to make " Art". The Art that is made lasts but a moment and then separates only to be joined together for another moment once again. It doesn't last, but then what does? Nothing lasts forever. Its the first law of impermanence. Nothing lasts forever, everything changes. But then the two are once again joined as one.

Practice, Practice, Practice. Train for years and then it is possible that something magical will occur. You can lose your sense of separateness and join together with that which you formally thought was separate from yourself. Come practice with me. Let's make Art together.

Chapter 17 Nothing to Grab; No One to Grab On To

So, we have practiced our technique for some time. How long? About 10 years. What's your rush? You have at least this lifetime and probably many more. You are ready to move beyond the techniques and into the realm of emptiness and ultimate reality.

First Rule: Accept everything. Energy or circumstances that come in are neither good nor bad. They are merely energy. If the energy pushes in allow it to pass by or turn and go with it. If the energy pulls out go with it and enter. If a locomotive is coming towards you get out of the way; don't stand on the track. Gently step to the side and allow the energy to pass. You can even help it along the way if you want to.

What if someone grabs you by the hand, wrist or arm? In our normal way of thinking someone could grab one or both wrists, either from the front or behind. Hopefully our understanding of Aikido has changed from when we first stepped into the rock tumbler. Intellect screams out, "someone has grabbed my wrist." Intellect has no jurisdiction here. Zen practice tells us: there is nothing to grab.

If intellect is involved with the situation there is no way, absent strength or technique that you can get out of the grab. The opponent has grabbed your mind. Once your mind is grabbed you must struggle. If you calm your mind and allow it to be in your center there is no reason to try to get out of the grab. There is energy in the grab and if you are calm and centered you can work with that energy; miraculously, if you let go of your intellect and center your mind, a technique will appear.

I have done techniques where each of my arms are grabbed by separate "attackers." If you struggle you have difficulty because it is their two arms against each of your one arms; you are greatly

overpowered. If you let go you can easily prevail against both. I have done techniques where two attackers grab each one of my arms and a third strangles me from behind. Once again, any struggle and you are doomed. If you can keep your mind in your center and feel the energy you can prevail with little or no strength. It isn't easy and takes some time. Remember, there is no one to grab and nothing to grab on to. Nothing exists other than self and energy. Don't get caught in the grab.

I used to call my teacher (Howard) "the man who wasn't there."

The poem goes something like this:

Yesterday upon the stair the stair I met a man who
wasn't there;
He wasn't there again today; I wish, I wish, he'd go
away.

Grabbing on to Howard was like grabbing on to a stream of water. I could see him and almost feel him but I could not grab on to him. It was as if he didn't exist as a sensory object separate from myself. I mean, he did exist; he was right in front of me. But he didn't resist. He didn't pull back or push forward. He just wasn't there. His mind was not in his wrist and thus I could not grab on to him. He disappeared completely within me. If I pushed forward I ended up on the ground by reason of the technique that I fell into. If I pulled back I ended up in a separate technique. The technique magically appeared and I had no idea how I ended up where I did. My own energy created the technique. All that Howard did was allow it to happen by not resisting. I had no idea how he did it.

Now I know. It took about ten years to figure it out and another five or six to get good at it. Howard accepted everything I gave him. He did not resist at all. The only force that was used was my own. He worked with it; allowed it to circle if it wanted and down I went.

I am getting better at it. I have become more gentle, more kind, more accepting of energy and circumstances.

Oh how difficult it is to accept what life throws into our path. One must have a great faith that all that is given to us is for the good. This is what Aikido is designed to teach us. Accept everything. Don't get stuck. At the end it will all make sense.

Chapter 18 FRUSTRATION

This might be a good time to talk about frustration. My friend Nora Pontacalone asked me to consider a chapter on frustration. More about Nora later.

Frustration is rampant in Aikido practice as it should be. Life on the Aikido mat is a reflection of life off the mat. Everyone's life is filled with frustration. If you can come to terms with it on the mat it will help you in your life.

There is frustration in Aikido practice at every level. If you ever feel comfortable with it, this is a sign of a problem. There is layer upon layer of understanding which never ends. Be careful when you feel like you know it all.

The beginner is always frustrated. So is the intermediate student, also the advanced. As a beginner you are attempting to learn maybe 8 or 10 basic techniques. The energy always feels wrong. You are never on the correct foot or in the right place. The beginner does all the techniques using muscle and power. This is one of the major reasons the techniques don't work. Techniques need to be done from a relaxed, centered position, without muscle and power. In addition the techniques do not work because the practitioner is moving the arms and legs without moving the center. Remember, ten years to be a good beginner.

When I first began Aikido one of my teacher's told me to "make friends with your frustration." That didn't make any sense to me at the time. I didn't have a clue about the meaning. In fact, I resented the statement as coming from one who knew what he was doing. Now it seems to make sense.

As a beginner there is no way you will master the technique. The Rock Tumbler works slowly, but it does work. In the first 10 years

I practiced a lot. It was not unusual for me to practice 7 days a week for months at a time, many times more than one class per day. I trained with 4 or 5 different teachers. I began to become proficient in technique. I was a good intermediate practitioner. But, frustration is rampant in the intermediate student.

I trained frequently with the head of our dojo, Howard. Howard doesn't care much about technique. He cares about connection, about energy, about blending. I trained with Howard 3 times per week for ten years. The first couple of years was ugly. We trained together for two years before he said to me, "good." I said, "what did you say?" He said "good." I said, "Howard, I have trained with you for two years and you never said "good" to me before." He said, "That's because you never were "good" before."

I was frustrated even then because it took two years to get a "good" and I had no idea what I did differently to get that "good" in the first place. And that was how it went. Intellectually I couldn't understand the difference between the "good" and the not so good. I was terribly frustrated because I didn't know what I was doing wrong. I was a pretty good technician and here was this 70 year old man not letting me do the techniques I wanted to do. The problem was that I wasn't blending with the energy. The blending and the connection aspects of Aikido take years and cannot be understood by the beginner. They must be understood at a body or sensory level. Most, if not all people are rarely in touch with this sensory level. There is an innate wisdom in the body that we cannot understand. We have lost the understanding of this wisdom through nonuse. The intellect has taken over our lives.

My body knew what it was doing. I just didn't know how to allow that wisdom to surface without trying to control it with my intellect. There was a knowledge, beyond the intellect that was starting to take place. Maybe, at the time the technique worked out once in a hundred tries. The more I trained the better the ratio

became: 3 out of 50, 12 out of 25 till more and more it felt right. It was only after an additional 8 or 10 years of training that my mind understood enough of it to make sense. Only then could I try to explain it to you.

Frustration is also rampant in the advanced student. At least, it should be. My technique is relatively good considering my getting on in age and a bad right shoulder. I understand, on a body level and an intellectual level blending, balance, connection, no-separation and energy. And yet, I still miss the mark more often than not. Don't get me wrong, the technique works well but the perfect connection is not always there.

When I visited Barcelona I spent some time at the Picasso Museum. Picasso painted thousands of pictures in his lifetime. At his best he only hit the mark a small percentage of the time. Major league baseball players only get a hit one third of the time. Maybe my percentage is not so bad.

Make friends with your frustration. Take a moment. Take a break from yourself. Step outside yourself and watch what is going on. Be mindful of the goings on in your own head. Look at your frustration and watch it take root in your body. See how it affects your personality, your temper, your actions. Be gentle with yourself. Have a sense of humor. Have compassion for yourself.

You may never master the intricacies of Aikido. As soon as you are comfortable with one step a deeper layer appears. (Hopefully) This is the reason that there is frustration at every level. May it always be so.

Chapter 19 No Incorrect Techniques

After training for about 4 years I went to a seminar and trained with a high ranking black belt, Tom Collings. We were supposed to be doing one particular technique. All the class was doing this one particular technique. For some reason I was doing another. I don't know why but my body just naturally flowed into this other technique. I looked at my partner who outranked me and had about 20 more years of experience. I said, "I am sorry I am doing the wrong technique." He said to me, "There are no incorrect techniques."

What did he mean by that? It took a long time to understand his comment. We were told to do one technique but my body was reading the energy and another technique came out. I was not consciously trying to do one technique or another. It just seemed to flow from the energy I was getting. He meant choose energy, choose flow. Be with the energy flow. Any technique that naturally arises through the flow of energy cannot be an incorrect technique. O'Sensei says: "Ultimately you must forget about technique. The further you progress, the fewer teachings there are. The Great Path is really No Path."

Do not have a preconceived notion of what technique you must be doing. Try not to control the situation but accept what is and flow with it. This is true both in Aikido and in your life. Build in 50 techniques and when the time is ripe and the energy flows in a particular direction one of those techniques will naturally flow out. If there is a choice between following energy or doing a particular technique, I always choose energy.

Well, one may argue that we are not "doing" the particular technique that the teacher told us to do. That is exactly correct. We are not "doing" anything. We are experiencing "being", not "doing." There is a great difference between "doing" and "being."

If I were to force the technique I would be "doing" it. I would be controlling or dominating my partner and forcing my partner into that particular technique; almost like fitting a square peg into a round hole. You can do it but it requires a reasonable amount of force. My alternative was just to "be," just to accept that which came in and allow it to move to its natural conclusion. No domination, No control. "Being" personifies the absence of dominating or controlling. You are still in control but only by allowing it to happen. There is nothing extra. The Tao Te jing says: "When nothing is done, nothing is left undone." Do nothing, accept everything. When you accept everything, everything will take care of itself. There will be nothing left to do.

We are accepting that which comes in, not doing something extra. I don't need to do anything extra. I need to be sensitive enough to feel energy, accept it, and allow it to flow naturally. As westerners we are not used to allowing and accepting. The way is simple but so difficult.

There are many who would disagree with me. They would like to train so that they can completely control or dominate the other. This will certainly work and be effective as far as domination goes. You will be able to inflict severe harm. But you would be completely missing the point of Aikido. "Ai" means to blend; "Ki" means universal energy; and "Do" means the way. Aikido is the way of flowing with universal energy. There is no room for domination or control in it. The need to dominate or control stems from fear and ego because the ego sees the other and fears the other as separate from oneself.

Accept all that comes into your life, be it on the mat or off the mat. To accept is to "be" (or is it not to be; that is the question). No need to do anything. The being will take care of itself. The self defense will naturally follow as a consequence of acceptance of

energy. Once you learn to flow with the energy there are no incorrect techniques.

Chapter 20 Randori Practice

Aikido practice mimics our life practice. We have this practice called randori practice. In this practice more than one person is attacking you; sometimes four or five. Energy is thus coming at you from four or five different directions. Isn't this so much like our busy lives. We are running out the door, late to a meeting when we get that phone call that we have to take. We spend our last 20 dollars and our daughter tells us at 11 at night that she needs 50 for a trip the next day. Things are always pulling at us from 5 different directions. The Randori practice teaches us to stay in our center while dealing with each attack or each problem. We do this by staying in our center, mindfully and without judgment whether the energy is good or bad. Energy flows in and energy flows out.

Randori practice takes some time to get comfortable with. In the beginning our technique is pretty much like "the deer in the headlights." We freeze and get klunked by all the attackers or problems. This is not the best method of dealing with these things. As you get better you use all of your physical strength and muscle 2 or 3 of the attackers (problems) to the ground. The problem with this is that you are quickly exhausted and, once again, get klunked by the remaining attackers. The key to Randori practice is to allow that energy to flow both in and out. Let the attack come in, flow with the attack and let the attack flow out. Too often we grab on to the attacker in an attempt to control him. Breathe him in and breathe him out.

Life's problems will always come in and go out. Too often we invite them to lunch. We grab on to them and hold on while another pulls at us. I learned this while I was sitting zen practice. We were sitting in the summer time and it was hot, really hot. I was sweating and very unhappy about the situation. My teacher said to me, "when its hot we sweat, when its cold, we are cold,

nothing more." My problem was that I was doing so much more; I was inviting the problem to lunch instead of allowing it to come in and go out. I was thinking, "Boy, its hot, I am really sweating; I may pass out; I've never been this hot before; What is wrong with these zen people, don't they know about air conditioning; I am going to sweat through my pants; Why do I have to wear these robes?; etc" As you can see it was a little more than "When its hot we sweat." (Just because I can tell you about it doesn't mean that I am good at it). I was inviting my problem to lunch and discussing with it all the variable issues of the day. I was stopping the problem in mid flow and getting caught up in it. I was holding on to the thought. I was attached to it.

This is very much like the zen story of the two monks, walking down the road. These monks were not to have physical contact with women. They came to a stream and there was a woman standing on the side trying to cross it. One of the monks picked up the woman and carried her across the stream. About an hour later the other monk who was very angry with the first monk violating the precept and had been steaming about it said to the first monk that he was very disappointed that the first monk made physical contact with the woman. The fist monk asked, "Why are you still carrying the woman? I left her on the other side of the river" The second monk was caught by the issue and couldn't let it go.

.I am trying to make peace with my temperature issue by staying centered and watching my mind complain about such things. Let it come in and let it go out. Do not hold on to the thought or the attacker. Do not invite them to lunch.

My Aikido teacher tells me that everything is your teacher. Whatever happens to you, either on or off the mat is merely there as your teacher. Don't get caught up in it. The best method is to stay centered and watch it in your own mind.

Chapter 21 Who Should I Train With?

Black Belt Snobbery. It exists in every dojo. Higher belts don't want to train with lower belts. Higher belts believe that they need to train with those of the same or higher rank in order to progress in the Art. I believe that the opposite is true. In order to properly progress, both spiritually and technically you need to train with lower belts, preferably beginners.

Let's tackle the spiritual growth first. The brown belt believes that technique, and only technique matters. We know better. The technique is only the raw material; the alphabet that we need to learn in order to understand the Art. Connection and blending are far more important and far more difficult to understand. How do we join together so completely so as to eliminate any difference between ourselves? This is the hard part. Remember where we come from in prior chapters: there is nothing other than self. When I help you I am only helping myself. When you help another, especially a beginner it comes back to you tenfold. If I see you helping a beginner I will go way out of my way to teach you. When I see a higher rank helping a lower rank I see the makings of a future teacher. A teacher must be patient and kind and understanding; he must value the student more than his own technique.

I teach a class once a month in Patchogue, Long Island. At one time I was working with a beginner named Jerry. Jerry was about 50 years of age and very stiff. He was quite worried about falling and didn't quite know how to roll yet. We were doing a technique where he was immobilized and taken down to the mat. Needless to say he expressed great fear, both verbally and in his body language. He became even stiffer than usual because he was afraid that he was going to be hurt. I told him, "Jerry, your safety is far more important than my technique, I will not hurt you." At hearing that he was greatly relieved and actually loosened up. Since then he has made great strides in his practice. He told me

two years later that the statement that I made to him was so important at that time in his practice.

The Art takes many years and is quite complicated on many different levels. Practitioners who practice black belt snobbery are selfish, concerned only with their own progress and cannot properly advance in the Art. They become good technicians but they haven't got a clue about what is important. It is far more important to cultivate kindness than it is to cultivate technique.

Technically speaking your actual technique will improve greatly when you work with beginners. An advanced student will give you what energy is necessary to do a technique; thus things are simple and don't require much thought or work. A beginner has no idea where to move, how to move and has no concept of energy or balance. When dealing with a beginner you take whatever you get and learn to deal with whatever you are given. You learn to accept the energy and not get locked into doing a particular technique. You accept what life throws you instead of trying to control events.

An advanced practitioner doesn't think about technique. She reads energy and flow. When working with a beginner the advanced student takes whatever energy the beginner gives, and many times, a different technique comes out. The beginner asks you why you changed the technique and you show them that the energy was going in a different direction. You have to stop and explain to the beginner because in most cases the beginner doesn't know that they gave the wrong energy.

It is always fun to work with a beginner, especially one with lots of strength. In many cases they test you either on purpose or because they don't know what energy to give. In my last class in Patchogue I worked with Tom; six foot three and 260 pounds of muscle. The technique was going to the left while Tom's energy (not purposely) was going to the right. Like most beginners he

was top heavy and leaning ever so slightly to the right. Since it was going to the right I did not do the technique at hand; I joined with his energy, went to the right; and took him down to the mat. I didn't need any strength since his weight and gravity was already taking him down. The technique was completed using two fingers and little if any power. What followed was a discussion about reading energy and balance. We also continued the discussion of Aikido being a metaphor for life and always moving with what life gives as opposed to living our life kicking and screaming. This both reinforced the learning within me and gave me a chance to enunciate it and explain it to Tom and the class. We all learned more because Tom was a beginner.

Nora Pontacolone, (remember Nora) has taught me more about Aikido than almost anyone else. I love her dearly because I believe that one of the many reasons she was put on this earth was to teach me. She taught me, not because she was an expert, but because she was a perpetual beginner. For the first 5 years of her practice she managed to do most everything incorrectly. If there were 12 mistakes to make in a particular technique Nora made 15. Her energy as attacker was always off. Her movements as defender were worse. Each time we worked together I had to diagnose the myriad of problems of why it wasn't working. I would have to fix the largest problems first and thereafter some of the smaller ones. Some of the issues could only be cured in time. Much of Aikido is like that. It takes years to develop extension and once you do your entire technique, balance and stance are different. But Nora made me analyze what problems there were, prioritize them, use my teaching abilities to communicate what was wrong and fix what I could. Because of Nora I have become an excellent diagnostician. If anyone has a particular issue or problem with almost any given technique I can usually help them. Nora is the only reason that I can. I tell her she has "funcky" energy. I have read many spiritual books over the past 20 years. Many of them have formed the basis of my understanding of Aikido, Zen Practice and Life. For

some odd reason as I look back on these things I have found that many of them were given to me or suggested to me by Nora.
Thank you Nora.

Chapter 22: How Far Apart Can We Be To Do The Technique? (Howard on the phone)

In the realm of physics scientists have found an unusual phenomena Two electrons, miles apart and seemingly separate and independent are somehow connected. When the physicist changes the path of one electron there is a direct result upon the other. They are somehow connected; almost like identical twins who can feel each other's pain though separated by continents.

I am connected with you. You are nothing other than me. Our connection is ancient extending outside of time; beyond past and future. We have always been together and always will be together. What does this mean as far as Aikido techniques are concerned?

Remember that the Aikido techniques are the paint, canvas and brushes of our Art. The Art itself is the realization of the interconnectedness of all beings; the understanding that there is no such thing as separation; that nothing exists other than myself. How do the Aikido techniques manifest that reality?

On the Aikido mat I connect with you immediately. We move together as one unit even before we make physical contact with our bodies. Essentially the technique is completed long before the bodies come into contact. In addition, the connection is still present long after the technique is completed. Even though you may be on the mat rolling away after I throw you, we are still connected.

As the connection between the two improves the completion of the technique is even sooner. The question then becomes not

how can I better complete the technique but how do I improve the connection. Much of my Aikido practice is concerned with improving that connection.

How close together must the parties be for the technique to work? In the beginning of your practice the parties have to actually be touching. As your practice matures the technique can be completed from a short distance apart. This distance gets further apart as your connection gets better. My teacher Howard and I could do a technique on each other from about ten feet away. As I moved towards him, his body somehow picked up my move. He then began the technique and for some reason my body reacted as if he were doing the technique while physically touching me. The two of us were joined together before the technique took place physically. It was almost as if his body made a strong hypnotic suggestion to mine and mine reacted accordingly. Strange!

Anyway I have this fantasy about doing technique to Howard on the phone. I call him up and when he answers the phone he immediately falls to the ground. His wife asks him, "Howard, what's wrong?" Howard says "Rich did kotegaeshi (outside turn of the wrist) to me on the phone. His wife gets on the line and says, "Rich, stop doing kotegaeshi to Howard on the phone."

How far apart can we be for the technique to work? Is it only physical distance in our own mind that separates us? How do we bridge that concept and go beyond intellect? Is it only physical distance that separates us? How about chronological time? Are we still connected to those that have passed before us? How about those yet to come? Zen practice tells us that time is just an illusion; neither past nor future matter.

Live each day of your life as if you were connected to all beings and nonbeings. (Because you are). Take care of each other. Take care of the earth. We are with each other to the end of the days, and then some.

CONCLUSION

There has to be a place to end this book. Everytime I take an Aikido class or a Tai Chi Class, or if someone makes a comment to me in or out of class I want to write another Chapter. Things that come to mind are the following: weapons practice; setbacks, injuries; bullies on the mat; how I got into Aikido; etc.

There are so many ways that Aikido has changed my life. The rock tumbler continues to churn; perhaps the stones are less jagged and rough now but they are still stones. Round and round it will churn until there is nothing left; nothing but emptiness where the stones turn into that which has no separate self.

I will leave you with one of my favorite poems by the English poet, William Blake:

To See The World In A Grain Of Sand;
And Heaven In A Wildflower.
To Hold Infinity In The Palm Of Your Hand;
And Eternity In An Hour.