

The Path

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When I first stepped on to the mat in 1998, I was curious. I had seen a couple of Dan exams and had felt the energy in the room, saw the commitment the candidates had to Aikido and also how the dojo community supported them. As I attended the beginning class, I felt clunky, but I also felt like a kid again - moving and rolling around the mat, I had no expectations on what I could or couldn't do. It also felt like no one else did either, which was such a contrast to my work environment. It was so joyful, so freeing! By the time I finished the beginning class sequence, I couldn't imagine Aikido not being part of my life. I had started on my path.

As the years went by I came to realize that Aikido was informing every aspect of my life, as my teachers and Sempai guided me along my path. Aikido was changing the way I walked, being more conscious of my center. It became my primary stress relief. You have to be in the moment, completely present when you're training, so within five minutes of stepping on the mat, that frustration from a day at work, followed by fighting traffic on HWY 85 and 17, dissolves into spirals. The frown dissipates and I find myself smiling. Aikido has also taught me how to relax and let the energy flow, which I hadn't really appreciated until I tried running again for the first time in many years. It had become so much easier, my gait was natural and unbelievably, I enjoyed it! I now regularly run 5 and 10K events and have been inspired to consider some long distance trail runs.

Being able to relax and channel energy in the face of an attack, to keep your center, or recover it quickly is a really important skill to develop. In 2011 I had a serious mountaineering accident that after a 1500 foot slide / bounce down the side of Mount Shasta, resulted in an open tib / fib fracture high on the mountain. No medics or helicopters could get to the place where someone had arrested my slide. My foot was twisted 180 degrees the wrong way and I had significant bleeding from the open fracture on the inside of my lower calf. As the people who came to my aid called 911 and put a plan together for my rescue, I fought hard to remain conscious. I focused and managed my breathing, like we do in Aikido warm ups, consciously relaxing as much as I could and imagining ki flowing down my leg to my foot, which was rapidly losing feeling and blood flow from being so twisted. And when it came to the Guide putting traction on my leg and rotating it back round (remember, no medics here, no pain meds), I tried to ground, let my breath out, relax and not tense as he rotated my foot, drawing energy from the earth like in Kokyu-ho.

I was getting colder lying on the ice. People donated down jackets to wrap around me as we waited for the Rangers to climb up with a back board to strap me to so that they could carefully lower me down the mountain to June Lake, a frozen depression at about 10,000 feet where they hoped they might be able to get a helicopter in for me. I could feel my body starting to go into shock and I knew with great clarity that I might not make it if I allowed that to happen - I was a long way from a hospital. I kept breathing, kept trying to find my center again, visualized ki flowing, fought through the pain fog - I just had to stay conscious. It was a long trip down to June Lake and I got even colder with not being able to move and the blood loss. The winds were still too strong at June Lake for them to land so they had to carry me lower, then transfer me to a ski rescue sled to get me down the mountain. I tried to remain focused and aware, every painful bump making my breathing ragged. Then I tried to relax into it, just accepting this path that I was on. Eventually in the trees getting close to the trailhead, they were able to land and get me onto the CHP helicopter and take me to the hospital.

I was so grateful to finally be in the hospital - it had been seven hours since my fall. I could now let go, and I welcomed the cloak of anesthetic and break from the pain. This was the first of ten surgeries over the next two years. As the journey started, I had similar feelings as I had on the Aikido mat. I didn't know quite where this path was going to take me, but trusted those around me to guide me along it, just like my Sensei and Sempais guide me along my Aikido path. But it was my path to tread, and how I walked along that path and the attitude that I had would affect the outcome. I wasn't aware at the beginning how long a path it would be. I couldn't see the phases of my recovery, that it wouldn't be an easy fracture to mend - I'd lost 1.5" of bone and had a tea cup sized hole in my leg down to where the missing bone should be. Within the space of a few minutes I'd gone from being a strong, fit, active woman, to being someone who couldn't even use a bathroom, had to keep my leg horizontal and had become completely dependent on those around me for everything. I truly believe that the acceptance, the patience and willingness to be on a long path really helped me to get through those long years of recovery. Even at the time, that path felt familiar, like the Aikido path. Only here I was training in pain management, training my muscles and limbs to move again, learning to walk again, learning how to live with a cage on my leg and exploring what my injured body could and couldn't do.

Aikido has also helped me to embrace my own spirituality. Aikido's connection to nature, the purification practice of Shin-kokyu and chanting the Norito have enabled me to explore a part of myself that previously had no outlet or expression. I have some amazing memories of practicing Bo on top of one of the temples in Tikal Guatemala, Shin-kokyu on Chukung Ri below the faces of Lhotse and Everest, with the prayer flags flapping in the wind, on top of Clouds Rest in Yosemite, to a remote beach on the Bay of Bengal. And now as I went in for my surgeries, even if it was prone on the back seat of the car being driven to the hospital, I would do Shin-kokyu. It helped calm me, helped ground me. I felt more tied to heaven / air, earth, fire, water and to nature - all of which sustain us. I felt I needed to draw on those energies to help me through those surgeries, especially the 8 and 10 hour ones. It was a long, five year journey to recovery. I am so grateful to be able to stand on two feet again, to be able to roll and to run.

The Aikido path is never ending. There are so many layers to see, feel, then try to emulate, with each layer being progressively harder. This keeps me curious, keeps me exploring not only on the mat, but also off it, and how I can interact with nature and people differently. I feel so much gratitude for O Sensei, my teachers and my Aikido community, which has now spread across the oceans. As I am finishing up writing this, I remember that the calligraphy that I received from Linda Sensei on passing my Shodan exam was The Way: the Path. It has certainly been quite a journey both on and off the mat since then. I am still curious where this art of love and peace will lead me next.