



SHOSHIN

Beginner's Mind

The Aikido of Champlain Valley Newsletter

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WEAPONS AND AIKIDO



Mitsuzuka Takeshi Shihan with Paul Sylvain Shihan

Thrust without Thrusting: Some thoughts on Weapons Training

Benjamin Pincus, Chief Instructor

Do not thrust with the mind,
Do not thrust with the hands,
Let the spear make the thrust-
Thrust without thrusting.

From the Hundred Verses of the Spear

Writing, like aikido practice, does not always come easily to me. I find it particularly difficult to evoke the spirit of aikido on paper. Aikido is ephemeral in the sense that we throw or cut and then move on, while ink lasts forever. My reluctance to describe my training comes from an attempt to escape my excessive preoccupation with thought. I seek to thrust without thrusting, throwing or striking without any desire to achieve anything beyond the martial urgency of that moment. I want to translate this spontaneity on the mat into learning how to live a focused life, unimpeded by doubts, fear and distractions. I sometimes think that I need to "burn the manuscripts" - stop dwelling on thought — to find this clarity. Zen Buddhists, despite copious amounts of religious manuscripts, often express antipathy towards the written word, which is viewed as a poor analogue for the immediacy of experience.

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Donovan Waite Sensei with Benjamin Pincus Sensei at the Roxbury, VT dojo

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Thrust Without Thrusting, cont'd from pg. 1

The 13th century Chinese sage Mumon, with the characteristic pithiness of Zen, says it best:

If you want to express the truth
throw out your words
...and tell me about *your own* Zen.

So I approach writing with some trepidation, brush halfway drawn. If I start thinking too much I lose the passion of the moment. I toss the brush. Ink splatters *dojo* walls. My mind is once again empty of distraction and hesitation.

Perhaps this is why I like weapons practice. The thrust of sword allows little time for discursive thought. If the mind stops, you will be hit. It is so simple in its angles and repetition, yet so difficult in its infinite subtlety — the complex interrelationship between timing, distance, tension, and relaxation.

Kiri otoshi embodies this complexity, and perhaps is the essence

of martial arts practice. *Kiri otoshi* means “dropping cut”: simply described, the attacker strikes for the head or shoulder in a *shomenuchi* (strike to the top of the head) movement with the *bokken* (wooden sword) and the defender steps back, mirroring the same movement with a cut that twists slightly into the sword of the opponent. Victory or defeat is determined by a very narrow margin- if the hip is not properly pulled, the distance is wrong, or the cut is too slow, the encounter will result in *ai-uchi*, literally harmonious strike. Mutual death.

Sometimes people talk while training. As a result, they have no focus and little martial spirit in their practice. However, you cannot talk and execute *kiri otoshi* with any clarity or finesse. It demands absolute attention. Consider how much we think on the mat, and how rarely thought is germane to the immediacy of the encounter. Here is no room for ego - do I look good? Did Sensei see me? Does this work? In reality, there is no time for thought. If your mind is caught, your opponent can attack before you move, because a cloudy mind already invites a *suki* - a gap or opening in one's awareness. What a beautiful, simple practice, and a lesson for how to live!

I am reminded of the Korean Zen story of the temple abbot who refused to show respect to a conquering General. “I could run you through with my sword without blinking,” the General says, angrily grasping the hilt of his weapon.

The Abbot calmly returns his stare. “I could get run through without blinking,” he replies. The General, realizing that he has met his match, bows and walks away. This commitment to being cut, this glimpse of the void, is what constitutes focused weapons practice.

I think the awareness that comes with martial focus is paradoxically an antidote to violence. Violence appears with otherness - a mistaken sense that I am separate from others. But the sword that I cut with also cuts myself, annihilating ego, pretensions, anger and the illusion of autonomy. After all, existence is characterized by the inevitability of *ai-uchi*. Eventually we will all face a great void. It is up to us whether or not we have the compassion and the awareness to join hands and leap (or strike) together.

I am alone in the dojo; silence whispers infinite possibility. It is dusk before a class in midwinter. My feet merge gently with the darkness. Cool mats under my feet while I sweat with the concentration and fatigue of cutting. One cut then one hundred then one thousand as I lose count and my left hand is raw from the abrasion of oak against sweaty palm. I will often only do *shomen* cuts- a strike toward the top of the head or through the face of an imaginary opponent. So simple, yet there is so much involved. The *bokken* must feel alive, like a blade in my hands. It is not a mechanical act, but an expression of my awareness and commitment. I hope I never stop learning. So I never stop cutting, even as the darkness of winter embraces my body.

The *bokken*, *jo* and *iaito* teach me that someone grabbing my wrist does not limit my internal strength. I can extend *ki* beyond this point, through my fingertips. The weapon then taught me how the power of the mind extends beyond my hands on the hilt, and even beyond the tip. Power is unlimited, but we tend to focus on what we hold, rather than embracing the universe. 🌸

Ukemi, Please


Clarence E. Davis

I started my aikido training at ACV last July. I was excited to finally be training once again in a martial art. Four years of intense training followed by a five-year hiatus had left me with a void that conventional exercise could not fill. Yearning to get back on the mat, I called ACV and spoke with Sensei who encouraged me to come in and speak with him and perhaps watch a class. I went in and spoke with Sensei and immediately felt at home. We talked for almost an hour, and at the end of that time I knew that this was where I wanted to train.

I had erroneously believed that I could pick up where I had left off in my earlier training. It would be like riding a bike I told myself, after a few classes I would be back "in the groove." I could not have been more incorrect.

The first class that I took started out easy enough, stretching and a warm-up. Sensei then clapped his hands and said "ukemi, please" I immediately launched into a diving roll and a few break-falls (pretty good I thought after not having done this for a while). Sensei approached me and said, "those were very good, but we don't usually do break-falls in our dojo." Ok, I wondered, how do I get down to the mat? I did not have to wait long for an answer to my question. Sensei very gracefully showed several forward rolls, and sprung to his feet "Ok, you try." Surprise... I tried it and failed miserably, this was not going to be easy. After several weeks of fighting with my ego and my stubbornness, I made the conscious decision to let go completely of everything I had previously learned and open my mind. I had once again found *shoshin* (beginner's mind). At that point things became a little easier. I no longer left the dojo angry and frustrated with myself, I started to relax and really enjoy practice.

Well, it has been seven months since I started studying aikido. In that time I have settled into the rhythm of the dojo and my various training partners. I would like to thank my *sempai* (senior students) for working with me outside of class. Although far from being graceful, I no longer feel like I have two left feet and no longer fear the words "ukemi, please."

See you on the mat. 



Editor's note: Rick Skogsberg has provided four striking poems. By request, they are printed throughout this issue in the order you see them.

The Weapon

His own weight
His own face

His own empty
sucking

well

of nothing you'd
like
to know

and he carries it

everywhere

He goes

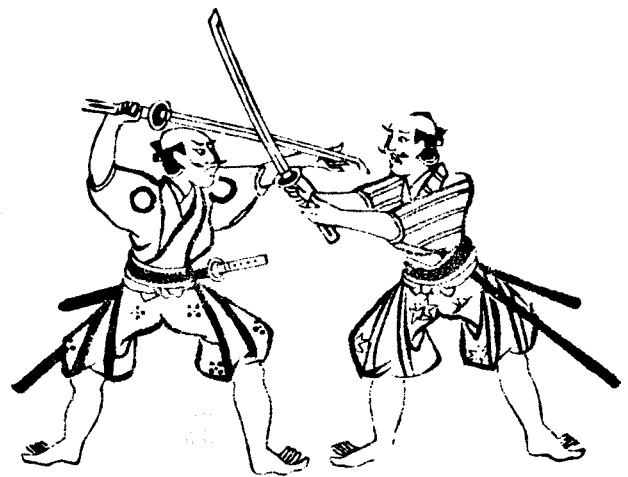


Illustration from Trevor Leggett's book, Zen and the Ways

Remembering Paul Sylvain Sensei

by Benjamin Pincus

My teacher Paul Sylvain Sensei died in an automobile crash with his two year old daughter, Chloe, five years ago on Memorial Day weekend. His van hit a concrete bridge abutment at high speed just when his life seemed so clear: he had a new dojo, a loving wife and three beautiful children. He died in flames, which adds to the myth when I recall his fiery focus and intensity. But more than that, I remember someone who transformed my life, who had a heart (and forearms) so big that sometimes, when he made himself vulnerable, it seemed like he could embrace the universe.

He was a great man made human by his contradictions: a graceful weightlifter and ex-football player who believed that he was clumsy, a Buddhist scholar turned dad and aikido Sensei. He loved sports, especially basketball, yet spoke passionately about politics and the poetry of William Blake. He was so clear and definite on the mat, but hid his shyness and fear behind a cold-eyed stare, especially around people he did not trust.

He was possibly the first official American Aikido Shihan (awarded posthumously) and 6th dan in aikido, and Shihan and 7th dan in Muso Shinden Ryu iaido. He had so many accomplishments, a big, arrogant man who often felt small and inadequate.

At first, I found these contradictions and his arrogance difficult to swallow, and I almost left his dojo. But over the years I learned to love him with dedication and a deep sense of trust. He was a great teacher because of his contradictions, and his ability to create a wonderful aikido community precisely because he needed this stability. I miss grabbing his giant wrists, his technical precision, and his fire. But most importantly, I miss his presence and his ability to transmit his vision of aikido with humor, love and grace. I wrote the following article shortly after he died. I could think of so many things to say about Sylvain Sensei five years after the accident, yet this piece was directly from my heart, and that is perhaps the most important thing.

Photo by Carol Lollis, reprinted with permission of the Daily Hampshire Gazette. All rights reserved.



Paul Sylvain Shihan throwing Ben Pincus in koshinage

What they undertook to do
They brought to pass;
All things hang like a drop of dew
Upon a blade of grass.

W.B. Yeats, "Gratitude to the Unknown Instructors"

I began training with Paul in 1987, and continued to practice at Valley Aikido for the next five years. Paul's technique, refined over years of training and instruction, was inspiring; I recall my surprise that such a large, powerful man could move so lightly.

An excellent teacher, Paul knew how to challenge his students, always encouraging change and refinement. Yet he rarely praised us, concealing compliments in wordplay that blended approbation with disapproval. He would say, with characteristic irony, things like, "You move like me; the only problem is you are not big enough," or, during a particularly frustrating *bokken* class, "you practice weapons the way you drive a car."

Paul was fond of stating that some of his best (and worst) students came out of Hampshire

College, my *alma mater*. With direct approval so rare, I recklessly assumed that he was acknowledging my progress.

He also was an excellent cook. I recall thinking about food while painting his house in Belchertown in the morning sunlight. I paused on the ladder, wiping the sweat from my brow and Paul called for a lunch break. We ate countless dishes of pickled radish and ginger, scallions, sauteed mushrooms, and *soba* noodles. "Slurp louder," he urged, demonstrating his skill with a particularly fierce intake of noodles, broth and air. In Japan, slurping is a sign of sincere appreciation and hearty appetite. Eating, he
continued on page 9

Fear

is not by far
the worst
of private hells

I mean what with
all the adrenaline
jumping around

there's just no time

to reflect
on one's sins



Donovan Waite Sensei demonstrating kokyunage (above) and ikkyo (below) during the January seminar at ACV



Tantotori Tsuki Rokkyo: 6th defense against a knife thrust to the stomach

Benjamin Pincus, Chief Instructor

I view the Technical Corner as a way for dedicated students to deepen their understanding of technical aikido, and provide inspiration for continued practice. You cannot learn aikido from pictures! The following should not be viewed as a substitute for direct transmission from a qualified instructor.

Rokkyo is the 6th (and last) basic pinning technique in aikido. It is unique because, unlike the majority of aikido pins, it isolates the joint, causing hyperextension and potential strain, tearing and breakage of the elbow. Consequently, one must apply this technique with sensitivity and awareness.

Tantotori (defense against knife) training, like all weapons practice, teaches the student how to move under increased stress. Techniques must be performed quickly and economically in order to immobilize *uke*. I believe weapons training and defense is essential for the martial spirit of aikido. Keep in mind that it is difficult to avoid getting cut when defending against a knife attack, particularly against an experienced fighter. Escape is always the best option.

After evading the initial thrust, *nage* brings *uke*'s arm downward and then across the body (step 3). A common mistake is to bring the arm horizontally (like *ikkyo*), which is a weak position, allowing a stronger *uke* to stand up and neutralize the lock. Swoop *uke*'s arm down, as if picking up something from the ground with your hands, and then upward, into a vertical position. Relax the shoulder that crosses over the knife arm (step 6, in this case, *nage*'s left arm) and squeeze your armpit against his arm to stabilize the lock. The knife arm should be

rotated in a state of extreme pronation. It is important that *nage* applies pressure slightly above the elbow (at the base of the triceps) rather than on the elbow. *Uke*'s arm should be completely straight at this point, the elbow hyperextended. Pressure on the triceps causes stress towards the ulna (elbow bone), in particular against the anterior medial collateral ligament and surrounding connective tissue.

Then turn towards *uke* moving from the *tanden* (source of hip power and *ki*) rather than the shoulders (steps 6-9). If you twist leading with your upper body, *uke* will feel the movement in the shoulder rather than against the elbow, diminishing the effectiveness of the pin. As *nage* rotates, pressure against the elbow continually increases to insure maximum effectiveness.

Once *uke* is on the ground, make sure that your right leg (step 9) is cantilevered out to the side, away from *uke*. This provides additional stability for the final twist, in particular if *uke* struggles.



Advanced variations:

Uke attacks with uncommitted slashing attacks and stabs. Try to evade the slashes and look for *suki* — gaps or openings in *uke*'s attacks. Then move in with a *kaiten* or *tenkan* movement and apply *rokkyo*. This is difficult practice so work up to it with committed thrusts in which *uke* does not pull back or change the attack. *Tenkan* variation (see frames 1b-3b) often works better against slashing cuts. 🍃

Technical Corner: Tantotori Tsuki Rokkyo



- 1.** *Uke* advances in preparation for a direct knife-thrust to the stomach.



- 2.** *Nage* raises hand to evade thrust and begins *irimi kaiten* movement (entering turn).



- 3.** *Nage* grabs the knife hand at the wrist and begins to sweep it down and across his own body (detail 3a).



- 4.** As *nage* sweeps *uke*'s arm across his body, he grabs the knife hand with his other hand from below (detail 4a).



- 5.** *Nage* brings *uke*'s arm to a vertical position.



- 6.** *Nage* applies pressure to the knife arm slightly above the elbow, against the triceps, and begins rotating his hips towards *uke*.



- 7.** *Nage* continues the rotation of his hips towards *uke* while increasing pressure on the elbow.



- 8.** After *nage* has completed hip rotation by *kaiten* (pivoting), he continues to apply pressure to the elbow in a downward diagonal direction.



- 9.** If *uke* does not go to the ground, continue rotation and downward movement by stepping forward with right foot. As *uke* drops to the ground, so does *nage*'s left knee. *Nage*'s right knee remains up to provide a stabilizing support for the pin. Continue to apply pressure to the elbow until *uke* drops the knife (detail 9a).



Advanced variation from a slashing cut to the throat (1b). *Nage* evades the attack (2b) through *tenkan* rather than *kaiten* movement (left foot forward rather than right foot - see 3b). Continue technique as above from frame 4.



1b.



2b.



3b.

Weapons and Cooking

John Jorschick

What do weapons training and cooking have in common? Allow me to explain.

I love to cook. One thing has always troubled me- during the preparation of a meal my shoulders and neck would become very tense and sore. I thought this was the price you paid to be a chef. Then along came weapons training - *bokken* to be exact.

During my first couple of *shomen* cuts, Sensei smiled and said “too tense, relax your shoulders.” What was Sensei talking about? He must have seen the puzzled look on my face. He then demonstrated what I was doing wrong. Aaaah shoulders too tense, I see. Not becoming tense is hard, especially when tensing seemed the natural thing to do. It’s a difficult habit to unlearn. Sensei had been talking about relaxing the shoulders throughout all his classes, but for some reason *bokken* class had driven the point home. Perhaps it was the repetitive *shomen* cuts (too tense, shoulders get tired) or any of the *bokken* techniques where one must move quickly to avoid getting your hands hit (too tense, fingers get sore). I came to understand that you cannot have tension in the shoulders and execute the technique properly. If you’re tense you do not sense the movement of your opponent, you see it and then it’s too late. Tension can cause a loss of connection. Weapons training has helped me to relax my body and to release the tension.

Thanks to *bokken*, I no longer feel the pain in my shoulders and neck when I cook. I stay relaxed. 🌸



Benjamin Pincus Sensei demonstrating tsuka-ate (hilt strike) with Jason Pepe

Remembering Paul Sylvain Sensei cont'd from page 4

implied, should be a manifestation of our awareness.

Perhaps this was my most important lesson: that training, even during ordinary moments, never ceased. During my years with Paul, I realized that aikido was not simply reducible to technical prowess. Instead it is about how to become a student; how to become receptive, sensitive, and open to new challenges and experiences.

In the Japanese martial tradition, the sword embodies both the capacity to take life — *satsujinken*— and give life — *katsujinken*. I think that Paul's ability to blend these two elements and his commitment to aikido is what made him such a wonderful and difficult teacher.

Two memories of Paul illuminate this notion of taking and giving life. I recall the time he applied *nikkyo*. I had only recently joined the *dojo*, and I already thought I knew something about aikido. I resisted, and he glared at me.

"I could break your wrist like a twig," he said. Training with Paul was always intense; he was powerful and intimidating, and there was always an element of sharpness, of danger.

Yet I always felt safe. He recognized my emotional and physical limits and I rose from the floor with a sense of strength coupled with lightness, a defiance of gravity. This feeling reflected the other side of Paul: his ability to wrestle with private demons and contradiction within himself and still transmit joyful energy; his integrity, humor, and love of his students and children. He played with his children with an incredible sense of joy, as if he wanted to give them the love and lightness that he never had for himself as a child.

My final memory of Paul captures some of this softness. I was about to leave for India, and wanted to stay in touch. After class, I said goodbye and gave him a gallon of Vermont maple syrup.

"The kids will love it," he said, and quickly, almost shyly, received the container. And then, in the silence of his office, he gave me a sudden hug, something he rarely did. I felt off-balance, surprised, and pleased.

"Take care," he said, and that was the last time I saw him.

I think about Paul often. Especially during quiet, reflective moments: in the flat light of early morning, or in the kitchen at sunset. I prepare *soba*; I smell ginger and sesame oil and gaze past steam rising in the air. It is so green outside, so alive; lilacs are in bloom, and the recent rains imbue the grass with a diamond-like clarity. I take all of this in and swallow hot noodles, slurping as loudly as possible. 🍜

"Domo Arigato Gozaimashita, Sensei."

Thank you with all my heart, Paul, for everything you have taught me.

Benjamin Pincus
June 15, 1996

Mastery Jr.

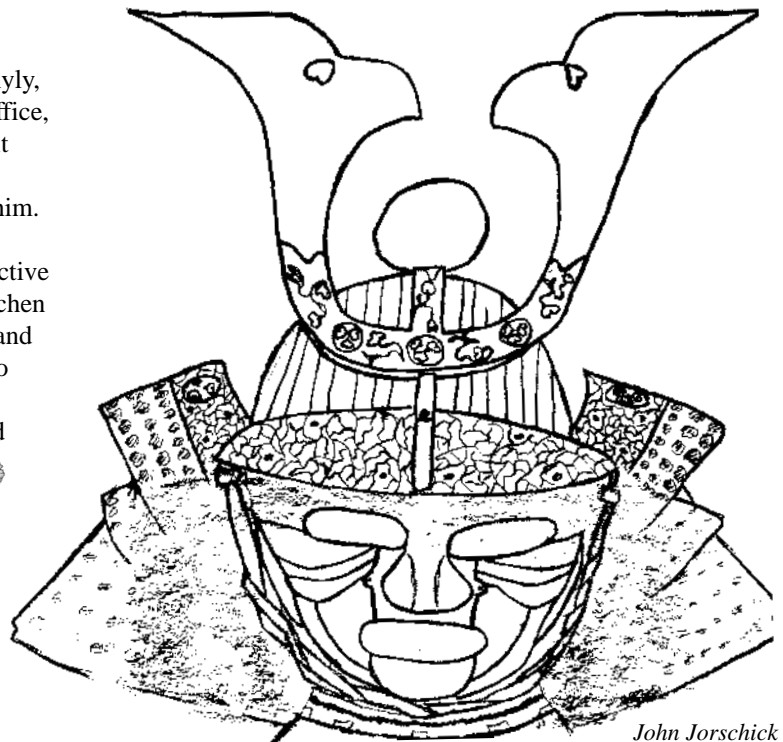
smile that bites
the cord

go forth gently

and be nice to
yourself



Benjamin Pincus Sensei demonstrating maki-otoshi with Heidi Albright



John Jorschick

ACV Kids on Aikido

Isabel Sullivan
Age 10, Green Belt

Aikido gets you prepared for when you get older. It teaches you to say no to drugs and smoking, but only if you focus on it and not goof around. Aikido gets you to know the techniques well. Also, if someone tries to rob, murder or kidnap you, the techniques will help you. It is not something to go around and say, "you better not mess with me because I know aikido." No way, you will just pick a fight. Aikido helps you in school to focus so you learn and pay attention. 🦋



Isabel Sullivan, throwing her brother Blake

Editor's Note: In order to pass the final children's test (brown belt), an essay on the meaning of aikido is required.



Sensei with Leo Christian-Tabak

Harmonizing

Alden Ladd
Age 13, Brown Belt

Aikido can be translated to mean "the way of harmonizing with the spirit of the universe." I interpret this to mean that aikido is the way of understanding and accepting the things around us. This does not mean that through aikido you will gain knowledge about everything, but that aikido helps us to put ourselves in another person's shoes and understand them and their feelings. Moving with a person, as we learn in aikido practice, helps reduce the damage of conflict. This is what I think aikido means by harmony. Understanding is the key to non-violent resolution. If we understand that a person is angry, and this anger is what caused them to act in a certain way, our understanding helps us to be less angry with them and to not come into conflict with them. This is true even with animals. If we realize that the bee stung us because it was acting from instinct, then we don't take offense and we don't strike out.

Although in aikido this is not what we're being shown directly, it is definitely the mindset that we learn. My years of training have helped me to do this. I think that through aikido I have learned to understand and harmonize with other people. 🦋

Dojo News and Current Events

Congratulations to all who tested!

Promotions on March 5th:

5th kyu: Clarence Davis

4th kyu: Dan Brown

3rd kyu: Andre Messier

Shawn Hatin

Bruce Hennessey

2nd kyu: Debi Hron

Brent Lyman

Promotions on July 7th:

5th kyu: Eric Columber

Tom Hicks

3rd kyu: Dave Mendenhall

1st kyu: Jason Pepe


Children's Promotions:

6th kyu (Brown belt): Alden Ladd

Benjamin Pincus Sensei taught a seminar at Aikido Schools of New Jersey at Roselle Park on June 24th. Thanks to **Rick Stickles Sensei** and his students for making us welcome!

Farewell to **Maria Hazen**, a foundational member of the dojo, as she is moving to join her fiance, Karl, in Long Island. We will miss you, Maria!

Our next issue: Family and aikido training: the challenges and the joys. All contributions from ACV members and their spouses, partners, parents and children are welcome! Deadline for submissions is Oct. 1.

Visit the ACV website at www.aikidovt.org or call the dojo at (802) 645-6999 for information about classes and workshops on aikido and conflict resolution. 

Julie Stanitis

