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Horse of the North, Ship of the South

A Talk with Mr. Hiroyuki Aoki,
the Founder of Shintaido

From a speech and follow-up interview, July 1994
Interpreted by Lee Seaman and Shin Aoki

I am very pleased to have this chance to be here with you at this gasshuku [retreat, gathering], and during this time I have been thinking about the future of Shintaido. I'm impressed by how many long-term Shintaidoists are still practicing in this country. There is a maturity of practice occurring here, and it

*Shintaido can bridge the gap between
two very different ways of thinking*

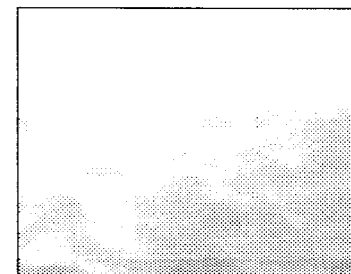
"It's Kind of Hard to Describe"

by James R. Sterling

[James Sterling is the Technical Director of Shintaido of America (SoA), or the "dean of faculty" in the Shintaido "university." But while many of you may know Jim, you may not know his Shintaido background and experiences from the early days of Shintaido in the U.S. So in preparation for our next jump forward— 1996 will mark the 20th anniversary of SoA—I asked him to give us a little perspective from the past— ed.]

Far Out

Geographically speaking, San Francisco was about as far out as I could go in 1976. It was time to escape from a troubled romance and lousy job selling ad copy for a small bi-monthly newspaper. So I sold the old Ford van, bought a plane ticket to SFO and waved



shows up particularly in the most recent issue of Body Dialogue magazine [the previous issue, number 3, Spring 1994—ed.].

I was especially impressed with Faith Ingulsrud's article on warriors and farmers, and how Shintaido can bridge the gap between two very different ways of thinking. This understanding is a basic truth hidden in the keiko [practice]. When Shintaido was first developing, I built in dual images for how God approaches us, the strict, judgemental approach seen in the Old Testament and the gentle, nurturing approach in the New Testament. American Shintaidoists are uncovering that same truth today with the metaphor of the warrior and the farmer.



Mr. Hiroyuki Aoki

The Real Difference

We often hear about the differences between America and Japan, or between East and West. But actually it seems to me that the real difference is between two worldviews. The first way of thinking depends on commands and doing things precisely, and the second has more to do with flexibility. An example of the first type is the warrior, who does what he's told. If he's told to go to the left, he goes to the left, if he's told to go to the right, he goes to the right. The farmer is an example of the second type. Even if he's told to plant grain, he can't plant if it's raining or if it's harvest time. He has to be flexible to the seasons and the situation.

The warrior culture and the farmer culture are very different. In the warrior culture, if you don't follow orders, the whole war mechanism breaks down. People have to do what they're told, when they're told. But in the farmer culture, if it's threatening rain and you don't harvest the barley now, you might not get to it tomorrow because it will be raining, and you'll lose some of your crop. So even if that's not on today's schedule, you'd better go out and harvest it. In that culture, if I

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van, bought a plane ticket to SFO and waved good-bye to Tucson and the rest of Arizona.

I had heard a lot about "SF" from my old college cronies who ended up in the Haight driving cabs and managing to get by with odd jobs or an occasional drug deal. It wasn't my idea of paradise, but at least I had some friends out there. I moved in with (Joe) Curley in the Richmond district and every so often he would go off to some kind of class with Richard (Rappaport), (Steven) Pizzella, T.A. (Tom Abbott) and Chuck (Jones) [all graduates of Hobart College in Geneva, NY—ed.] and come back late in the evening looking pretty beat. He told me he was practicing an esoteric martial art that a Japanese guy living with Pamela (Olton) and Pizzella had started to teach...

After a couple of months looking for work and hanging out at the beaches during the week, I decided I would check out this

*I decided if Shintaido was
able to silence these guys,
it was time to give it a try*

"thing" my friends were doing. When I asked them what Shintaido was, the response that came back to me was always, "Well Sterls, its kinda hard to describe." I decided if Shintaido was able to silence these guys, it was time to give it a try!

The First Time

Hot summer evenings in Golden Gate Park are very rare, so when there is one, it is usually crowded with left over sunbathers, strolling couples (any combination), frisbee catching dogs and lots of mosquitoes. On this particular evening, the baseball fields at 7th and Lincoln were also occupied by 7 or so men and women in loose fitting white pants, jumping, screaming and waving their arms in the air.

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LETTER FROM THE BOARD

To the Members of Shintaido of America

At the annual meeting of the Shintaido of America Board of Directors on January 12, 1995, a very strange and important event occurred.

For three plus hours we had good discussions and made consensus decisions on issues such as voting rights, fees, insurance, etc. We were feeling pretty pleased that we were about to conclude the meeting when, wouldn't you know it, someone had to point to the rhinoceros in the middle of the living room. You know the beast. The one that everybody studiously tries to ignore, figuring that if I don't mention it nobody else will, and we won't have to deal with it.

The rhino that we didn't want to talk about is the fact that none of the SoA (Shintaido of America) Board members had a clear personal feeling about why we were serving on the board and what we were supposed to be doing other than maintaining the status quo.

Fortunately, we are "half-full" kind of folks. All of us have years, in some cases decades, of experience with Shintaido; we would like to try and define the problem and, with your help, invent a solution.

At the core the problem is simple. In various ways and to varying degrees for us SoA has lost its "meaningfulness."

The two elements that we believe make SoA meaningful are its vision and its goals. That's the yin and the yang of it— what are we doing, and why are we doing it?

We believe the solution is simple as well. Ask the membership to help us define our vision and goals. So, we are asking you. We would like to pose a series of questions (below) and invite

Goal questions

The goals are a little harder to talk about without having a clear sense of the vision, but perhaps if we brainstormed some goals, the vision will come into focus. Please try on these ideas and see which ones fit. We are not married to any of them. Tell us what you think SoA should be doing.

- Should we develop a showcase dojo [practice place] or retreat center as a way of creating and identity and focus for SoA? This could then be duplicated around the country.
- Should we create an organization of teachers who offer short-term classes to corporations, schools, conventions, and the like?
- Should we focus on creating books, audio tapes, videos, and multi-media products to sell to the general public?
- Think about what you believe the vision of SoA should be. What five goals would help make that vision a reality?

To Contact the SoA Board of Directors

Eric Avildsen
tel. (802) 899-4155, fax (802)
863-7152 (office), e-mail
70711.2220@compuserve.com

Connie Borden-Sheets
tel. (415) 695-2888

H. F. Ito
tel. (415) 731-9364,
fax (415) 665-2846

Friedemann Schulz (president)
tel. (310) 396-1426
e-mail wiedumir@aol.com

S. Lee Seaman
tel. (206) 676-8543,
fax (206) 671-1579
e-mail
71341.3440@compuserve.com

Michael Thompson
tel. (617) 492-6536

you to dialogue with yourselves, each other, and the Board in verbal and written form. For the next few months we would like to get the e-mail, snail mail, and fax lines humming. Then, at our next regional gatherings, this summer and fall, we will present the results of our quest to the membership for approval.

Please consider these questions only as a starting point for your responses. If you would like to offer your responses anonymously, that's fine with us. Thank you for helping us make friends with our rhino!

Vision Questions

- How does practicing Shintaido make you a better person?
- How does practicing Shintaido make the world a better place?
- Is Shintaido merely a phase you are going through, or do you see it as being a "life path?" Can you talk about what that path is for you?
- Who should carry the vision of SoA? In the past the vision was held by Ito-sensei, but he no longer has that role. We note that it is difficult to maintain a big vision part-time. What works best is when one or more individuals make Shintaido their full-time commitment, as Ito did. Should we ask him to do that again, or should we create a structure that supports people moving into a full-time commitment, or should we only have a small vision that can be supported part-time?

Shintaido of America (SOA) was established to give practitioners access to qualified instruction. It produces educational materials on the practice and teaching of Shintaido.

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Sarah Prince, Copyeditor

Editorial Office

P.O. Box 22622
San Francisco, CA 94122

Subscriptions/Membership

Shintaido of America
P.O. Box 381672
Cambridge, MA 02238
e-mail: shintaido@aol.com

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Henry Kaiser (advisory member)
tel. (510) 652-4703,
fax (510) 655-8877

David Palmer (advisory member)
tel. (415) 861-0443,
fax (415) 621-1260
e-mail
70411.335@compuserve.com,
and TouchSkill@aol.com

e-mail MT9738@aol.com

For snail-mail, letters sent to the membership office (address below) will be forwarded to the appropriate Board member. We hope to hear from you soon!

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As Soon as We Are Born

by Michael Thompson

"Life and death are at war within us. As soon as we are born, we begin at the same time to live and die. Even though we may not be even slightly aware of it, this battle of life and death goes on in us inexorably and without mercy. If by chance we become fully conscious of it, not only in our flesh and in our emotions but above all in our spirit, we find ourselves involved in a terrible wrestling, an agony not of questions and answers, but of being and nothingness, spirit and void."

—Thomas Merton, *The New Man*

I wrote an article for this newsletter a year or so ago about my impressions of working in an acupuncture clinic for people who are HIV-positive. Now, after two years and two months, I am leaving the clinic and wanted to use this forum to try to formulate some conclusions about my experience there.

After you become a kind of fixture in a place like that, people start to get under your skin even though your interaction is limited to a weekly, or at most, bi-weekly greeting and limited social chit-chat — kind of like a bartender, I suppose. After the first couple of months, I didn't even think of them as "people with AIDS," just individuals with various physical complaints including a few who were clearly very sick. After a while, the latter stopped coming and then we might hear that they had died which meant I had to move their folders to the inactive files and mark "d" for deceased in their database file. And that act also served to erase them from my consciousness.

But toward the middle of the second year, people I had gotten

compared to him, perhaps because he was forced to deal with Merton's "agonia" and I was a mere bystander in the midst of all this gut-wrenching human drama.

Ultimately, I couldn't stand the frustration of being a bit player—almost a voyeur—in a major production, although the concrete reason I decided to leave when I did was much more prosaic and had to do with personalities and management styles. A caregiver can at least provide comfort, but what is the value of bystanders, no matter how sympathetic they may be?

I remember a few years ago when the Soviet Union was still intact, some Western writers said they envied their Soviet counterparts because living in an oppressive society allowed them to engage their passions in the resistance. They were roundly criticized for romanticizing repression and torture. I

think some people— and maybe I was one of them—make the same error when they put forward the notion that people with AIDS are somehow lucky because their death sentence gives them a chance to live life fully. Some do but most don't: like the rest of us, they plod along as best they can according to their understanding and abilities, although it may be true that their focus is a little sharper than most because every day is a trial. But despite my inadequacies and frustrations, I wouldn't want to be in their shoes. Their agony is their own and we will find ours

when our time comes— if we do not choose (or rather passively succumb to) what Merton calls a life of "delusion."

At the recent kangeiko [winter retreat] in San Francisco, Jim

I have always felt that Eiko was the heart of Shintaido, perhaps because it allows the ongoing battle of life and death to become conscious and immediate

used to started to grow weaker: a long-time client, a desk volunteer, a colleague, and you got the sense of the approaching end and hoped that it would not be too drawn out or painful. Last month, I learned that my former boss, Michael Banchy, died unexpectedly at the age of 35 or so, following his lover by two weeks. Both had AIDS. When he became Executive Director, he had hopes of dedicating his remaining time to the clinic which he felt provided an essential service to the HIV community. But the job— and an adversarial Board of Directors— proved too formidable an opponent and he had to resign in failing health and died one year later. We

enjoyed a good personal and professional relationship after one intense shouting match and reconciliation cleared the air (ask Bill Burtis about those). I know he respected me, but in fact I always felt quite shallow



James Sterling

felt out there in the open air trying to imitate the movements of this little fellow who seemingly could barely speak a word of English (Haruyoshi F. Ito). I was convinced he could kill me with one kick or punch if I made fun of "Shinturdo" or whatever it was.

After warming up, we all sat in a circle with our legs curled up under our butts in what I was sure was some weird Yoga position meant to cause immediate loss of blood to the entire body. Then we were ordered to point ourselves in the direction of a small hill and began to jump towards it like frogs. I thought, "What the hell, I used to play football,

I'll race 'em." Needless to say, when I was the last to reach the bottom of the hill and when I saw a few jumpers actually going UP, I realized these people were in amazing physical condition, and out of their minds. Seemed like something to strive for.

We ended the evening screaming into the sky and finished squatting down looking into the grass. I glanced around rather exhilarated yet dazed and Michael (Thompson) was standing next to me with big smile on his face. I remember saying to him, "Well we didn't transcend the mosquitoes." He laughed and probably thought, "Wait till tomorrow wise guy!"

The next morning I couldn't even step

Sterling asked participants to join in with groups doing Eiko ["glory"— a basic Shintaido form] according to whether they loved it, hated it, or had a "love/hate" relationship with it. Not surprisingly, most fell into the third category. I have long felt that Eiko was the heart of Shintaido, perhaps because it engenders these deep and conflicted feelings. It allows the ongoing "battle of life and death" to become conscious and immediate. At the gasshuku [retreat, gathering], I chose to join the group of Eiko lovers because no other question really interests me and no other method of dealing with it seems as efficacious. At any rate, it is the point to which I always return whenever I am trying to resolve existential impasses. And, if I engage myself fully, I never have to worry about being a bit player or bystander in a life-and-death struggle. •••

*Hard to Describe,
cont'd from page 1*

down the curb in front of my apartment. My legs were in so much pain that all I could manage were giggles. Had my thighs really turned to jello? Will I ever be able to walk normally again? I kept wondering: how could a couple of hours of running and jumping do this to my body? I really wanted to find out more about Shintaido. Someday, I too wanted to jump up that hill.

Bohjutsu Mornings

I tried to dedicate myself as much as possible even though I continued to have constant doubts about why I was doing this strange body movement. I became fascinated with the story of Shintaido— how its roots lie deep in the traditional martial arts and yet it was

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PRACTITIONER'S CORNER

What You See is What You Get

Observations on Two Decades in Shintaido

by Bill Burtis

I am sitting on my deck with my friend Liam, admiring the foliage and conjuring an excuse for not having written this yet. A flotilla of a thousand leaves, each a different color, proceeds at a stately pace down the river, while on the opposite bank a maple in failing health burns like a wound in the flank of hemlocks. I am watching Liam watching the leaves waving back and forth in a minor autumn breeze, the chroma of their spectacular colors tweaked by the perfect azure of the sky.

He takes all this in without remark; he is not quite four months old, and so it is just another new thing: a week ago the trees were green, as they had been all his life, and now they are orange, red, yellow, purple, and gold. So?

He has beginner's mind, so this view is perhaps simply amazing, fun to watch, but it cannot yet be beautiful. So, I like to think he is at least more interested, even though he cannot know what he thinks is ugly. What I know is that, for him, the spectacle of autumn colors in New England will always be an accepted, expected thing. It will never have the force to take the breath, the way it does for visitors from Santa Fe and Biloxi. I've heard them gasp.

He is developing, here on the deck this day, a preconception. And while it is well within the power of our civilization to so alter the planet that he may someday find autumns very different, it is likely that he will always appreciate them more by accident when, for some reason, nature kind of

minute; I am certain I'm right, he obviously can't see what I'm doing, or he's demonstrated it wrong, or . . .

"Watch me." This is quite clearly audible to every one in the Mission. The class is riveted. He demonstrates, both sides, both directions. "Now, go." I begin to move.

"Nooooooo! Watch what I'm doing!" I do. I do it. I do it wrong, both sides, both ways. Since about the mid '80s, I've been amazed he did not say "Baka!" ["Idiot!"]. He did finally take hold of my legs and put them in the right position, but I still couldn't figure out how to get them there from the starting point. He did not give up, though he spent the rest of that class working with others.

I did not give up, either; now, 16 years later, I can see— most of the time. §

Shintaido was first taught on an on-going basis in the United States in Geneva, New York, by Michael Thompson, beginning in September, 1973. His classes were held on the women's athletic field at William Smith College, and in the gym and dance studio of the Wynn-Seeley (named for a couple of probably gay old dames, phys-ed professors) Gymnasium there. I was not the first student, but I was one of the first.

I have had a love-hate relationship with Shintaido since then. I knew in the way we know things like this that it was good for me, but I also was not interested, for a long



some reason, nature kind of clears its throat for a moment, ahem, and calls attention to Oh My God, look across the meadow. . . . §

It is 1978. Noon, a bright, blue, fog-blown back, warm and eucalyptus-filled day in March. I am in a large building left behind by industry in the Mission District of San Francisco; it is called the Artaud Project, and it has the feel of a discarded part from the set of Blade Runner. The room I am in, however, is large, with polished planking on the floor, dirty windows all around it, and about ten other people attempting to learn the stepping for a particularly convoluted bit of nagewaza [throwing technique].

At the moment, Haruyoshi Fugaku Ito is observing my attempts at mastery with a look of displeasure. He has been in the United States now for something less than three years, and American students are beginning to irritate him somewhat, though he is trying pretty hard not to let on.

"No," he says. "San" ["three"].

"No." This is delivered to me in a penetrating undertone, apparently inaudible to the rest of the class. "Shi" ["four"].

"No. Go" ["five"]. He has now moved to a position ahead of me, but perpendicular, and, with his counting flawlessly executes the move, and then observes me.

"No." I am beginning to feel a slight tension in my body now, and my mind is running like a ball in a track around my head, trying to find what's missing.

"Roku" ["six"]. Ito is now stepping each time with the count, and I am certain this time that my step is an exact replica of his.

"No." I am sweating; my heart rate is around 3600 beats per



Eiko no Ken— "sword of glory"

time, in things that were good for me. I was also not keen on the idea of physical pain for any reason. (I had a response to the old "No pain, no gain" equation: the status quo is fine, thank you, and get me another, while you're up.) And I had trouble, too, with someone telling me to do things that (1) were going to be good for me and (2) were going to hurt.

So, one winter evening, as the Hadeishi boys chased tennis balls around the gym, when Michael Thompson suggested we do 20 laps (not lengths, laps) of the gym in renzoku [now "Shintaido jump"], I was not pleased. I can feel myself even tonight in yoi ("the squat before lift off") cringing in anger (and fear), already certain of the horrors of the experience, cursing Michael silently (but visibly).

I can also picture the ceiling of that gym, its white strips of metal, the steel struts, the lights, and remember that I felt that I was going to hit them, I was jumping so high, kind of flying, really, and then it was over.

Done, finished, 20 laps, complete.

I was stunned. How? Then I suspected Michael had cut it short, let us off. But as I lay back on the floor, looking at the ceiling, calming my breathing, I understood what had happened, and it did not make going to keiko [practice] any easier after that. §

In a scene that Bergman or Wells would have used in a minute, we made our way down the misty morning bluffs to Rodeo Beach, California, tiny white flame after flame, processions of living candles snaking down through the scrub and poison oak. In the dark and cold, the ocean alternately growls and hisses. By lunch, there is a camaraderie born only from battle.

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Horse and Ship, cont'd from page 1

say "Why didn't you come to meet me at two o'clock like you promised to?" and you say, "I'm so sorry, it was about to rain, I had to cut my barley," that's an acceptable reason for breaking the appointment.

"North-Horse" and "South-Boat"

Professor Koji Fukugawa has divided the culture of China into two parts: Hoku-ba and Nan-sen. That's literally "north-horse and south-boat." The northern people lived on horseback and ate meat and bread. The southern culture lived on rice and vegetables and maybe just a little bit of fish.

In the northern culture, when somebody broke the law or defied the culture or did something wrong, they were punished. But the southern culture felt that the person had made a mistake because they were influenced by a bad example, or because a bad spirit spoke to them, and they needed to be purified rather than punished. Japanese Shinto shrines have a wand of paper strips which is used like a symbolic broom to sweep the person clean.

The northern culture thinks that things can be broken down into discrete parts: this might be called "digital" thinking. The southern culture is more "analog."

For example, let's take a painting of a man on a boat, fishing. The northern culture sees a man fishing from a boat. For the southern culture, everything would be part of the picture, including the empty space around the man and the boat, while the north side might be more interested in whether it's a good spot to fish and what bait the fisherman is using.

The northern culture draws up contracts and lays everything out very clearly. The southern culture is more apt to say, "Please keep working on it until it's taken care of."

Cultural Misunderstandings

You can see this distinction inside different countries around the world, within the United States or within Japan for example. But it's especially obvious between cultures. I had a friend in Japan who drove his car into a railroad crossing and broke it. At the police station, he kept repeating, "That crossing

possibly draw natural boundaries anywhere that would satisfy people. Because of such great diversity, they have to just draw arbitrary lines. It takes a very digital approach to manage a culture with that much diversity.

Small is Beautiful

Many people are appreciating Native American and Australian aboriginal civilizations today. It's becoming obvious that a culture doesn't have to be big and powerful in order to be important. A tiny, almost vanishing culture may have some great understanding or wisdom that we can't afford to lose. Being big and powerful doesn't necessarily make you wise, or even good. Winning a war doesn't mean you're great, it just means you have more weapons.

With that in mind, we need to spread Shintaido because it can carry some truth to people, and help us bring together the farmer and the warrior, the "digital" and the "analog." The number of practitioners doesn't really matter. What is more important is that there are depths of keiko which we can only access by allowing Shintaido to change our bodies and our lives over the years. Even a really athletic person cannot understand some of the fundamental secrets of Shintaido without practicing for a long time. That requires maturity in keiko and in life.

It's possible to change Shintaido too much in trying to popularize it. Instead, we need to let the keiko change our bodies. Shintaido is a physical culture that we experience and are changed by. The way to transmit Shintaido will be through the changes it makes in us, rather than by changing it to be more acceptable to other people. •••

SOME CROSS-CULTURAL OBSERVATIONS

by Hiroyuki Aoki, translated by Lee Seaman

I've recently come to appreciate some of the great differences between different cultures by looking at differences between Japan and the United States. Japan modernized very rapidly, moving from feudalism to world power in just a little over 50

example. But it's especially obvious between cultures. I had a friend in Japan who drove his car into a railroad crossing and broke it. At the police station, he kept repeating, "That crossing is in a terrible place, it's not my fault, it's the fault of the crossing, it's the fault of the builders, it's the fault of anybody but me." Probably he said that because in his country he would have been fined if he admitted guilt. So he fought with the police. It took a lot of time, and was a serious problem. Ito-sensei was there at the time, and he told my friend, "You mustn't say that. Don't defend yourself. You have to say, 'I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry, I apologize. Please excuse me.'" But my friend was afraid that if he admitted fault, he would be blamed. In some countries, if you apologize, you can be held liable. An apology is taken as evidence that you agree to your guilt. But in Japan, if you apologize enough, the problem will take care of itself.

Law is very important on the northern "digital" side; things have to be precise. On the southern "analog" side, custom is more important, or emotion, or heart. I don't mean that Japan is all on the "analog" side, either; there are many elements of Japanese culture that are strongly "digital."

In art, Paul Klee and Cezanne are both strongly representative of the northern approach, while Van Gogh, Paul Gauguin, and Emile Nolde present a more southern view. I like both—a good picture is a good picture, regardless!

Dealing with Diversity

America is much more multiracial than Japan, and much more multicultural too, with many different peoples all mixed into one country. In a nation like the United States, the southern type of thinking can flourish within a specific subculture. But when different subcultures have to work together in the same country, then they need the northern, digital, contractual-type thinking, or they won't be able to get anything done.

I enjoy maps of the United States. Here's a river, and I think: "That river would make a good boundary between those two states." But the Americans don't put the boundary there, they just draw a line on the map. Or there's a road, and the boundary could go along the road, but Americans just draw a line on the map. I think it's because there are so many different peoples in the United States. The government couldn't

I've recently come to appreciate some of the great differences between different cultures by looking at differences between Japan and the United States. Japan modernized very rapidly, moving from feudalism to world power in just a little over 50 years. There was a tremendous amount of sudden input, especially from England, France, and the United States. That was about the middle of the 19th century.

Until the end of World War II, Japan firmly believed that it was a country protected by the gods, and could not lose in war. After defeat, the Japanese people felt mistaken and misled, and began to discard ideas that had been considered important, or even fundamental. We threw out some very good things along with the bad, and took in even more ideas from other countries.

For example, we gave up the traditional teaching to take care of your parents and teach those who come after you. Our culture used to hold school teachers in very high esteem; we gave that up, too. We threw out too much, actually. Then we tried to copy the United States. But the American people and the Japanese people have very different ways of thinking, so it was quite a struggle!

America has consistently gone at its own pace, doing what it wanted and choosing what it liked. Japan worked hard to copy those choices, to fit in, and that has been a good experience for Japan. But because American culture has been so widely copied, the American people sometimes have no idea how different the thinking of other peoples around the world is. I don't mean just the Japanese people, but Chinese, Koreans, Singaporeans, and the African and Islamic nations, too. When other countries match their direction to that of the United States, rather than having their own direction, stress builds up. And then a country like China or North Korea or Singapore can become very resentful of the United States.

Here's an example of the difference in thinking. When Christian missionaries came to Japan from the United States and wanted to explain why Buddhism was mistaken, they based their argument on the Bible. Well, naturally arguments based on the Bible support Christianity, because the Bible is a Christian book. But if you read a Buddhist book, it doesn't say the same thing at all. Basing your argument on a text that's already part of that argument seems like a mistaken way of thinking to the Japanese.

Another example: zen rock gardens are admired in the United States now. But I remember during the American military occupation of Japan, some of the occupying forces painted the trees different colors, and the rocks too, to make zen gardens more attractive.

But recently the way of thinking in the United States is changing. Americans are more aware that their way of thinking is not the only right way, and that there are other ideas about how the world is put together. Americans used to think that their country represented a broad spectrum of ideas because there were so many immigrants. But that spectrum may not be not as broad as it seems, because when people immigrate, they tend to match their ideas to the dominant culture. Americans are beginning to realize today that there's much more diversity in the world than they suspected.

It's absolutely essential that we learn from other countries, that we learn from each other now. If we don't, it's like being blind.

What You See, cont'd from page 4

Afterward, discussion in a group of men that we had come to this extreme out of desperation. There was a lone dissenter.

The afternoon keiko is on hard ground, a hard keiko, followed by a high level of exhaustion. Many of us linger in small groups around the dojo [practice place], too tired to walk back to the barracks immediately. On the far side of the dojo, Aoki-sensei has assembled his top Japanese students—the Ito brothers, Minigawa, Toshima, Hokari—and they are attacking him, very sincerely, with boh [six-foot staff].

At first, his receiving is simply fluid, his opponents dancing away alternately to his right, left, rhythmically. I am watching intently now, with Bonnie Cruz, as the pattern changes. Suddenly, the attackers are leaving the ground, lifted and landing what appears to be several feet away. Aoki-sensei's movement has not changed, however. Bonnie and I say nothing, but my mind is full of voices, committees, congresses, arguing.

*Over the years, I learn that crying is
my response to seeing something
I've been taught is not possible*

They're jumping. They're doing it.

No, he's doing it.

He's not doing anything . . .

And so on. Gradually, the argument subsides as it becomes obvious from the trajectory of the bodies that, unless the attackers have an invisible technique for using their boh to pole vault, neither he nor they are doing it.

I begin to cry. Later that afternoon, I will do it again when, five feet away from me, Aoki-sensei flips Minigawa upside down, apparently without motion or effort. He was demonstrating the difference between kaishoken ["open and expressing

out of the way, so I keep stopping.

"Hit me," he seems to scream at me. I am, or remember myself being, in tears, with arms that weigh slightly less than girders. I try; I believe I really try. He says nothing, does not move, only looks at me as if I'm daft.

This makes me angry. Through my tears, I raise my boh and try to kill him.

He disappears, reappears behind me. "Getting better." §

I am on my back, exhausted, gritty, breathing dust, hot, hearing cow bells in a high morning sun. There is around me the sound of breathing and shifting, occasional coughs, groans; hundreds of bodies are strewn across the red earth; one man, sitting cross-legged, leans sobbing over the body of his enemy. Around this battlefield at Les Fourg, France, are pastures where black and white cows clang-clong lazily, no longer watching. They understood from the beginning.

Several days later, I see a perfect red spot of blood on an otherwise snowfield clean pillowcase. Because I am in a state near hallucinatory, having eaten what were not raspberries on a hilltop above Ouhan (La source de la Loue), I understand immediately what this means. We are in an abbey, ancient, recently converted to an inn, where a hunchback helped us grudgingly with bags.

I understand what this means. I bathe very carefully, and wear a clean gi [traditional white attire] to bed, ready. In the morning, I feel physically better, spiritually disappointed.

Now, I understand that I did everything it was necessary to do. §

Durrell Hall, an evening in an icy, cold-wind blown Cambridge, Massachusetts, February in what may have



hand] and kaishoken— not a missprint: the second of those “kaishokens” has a concentration of ki [“vital energy”] in it.

Over the years, I learn that crying is my response to seeing something I’ve been taught is not possible. §

After a boh keiko taught by Ito in a park in London, part of a pre-SSI workshop, people are sheathing their weapons, talking, laughing. Ito asks me to attack him with my boh. I bow and attempt to comply.

“Attack me,” he says, and I raise my boh, cut down and miss. I mean, I miss; he doesn’t move.

“Attack me.” I love him when he’s like this.

“Try to hit me with your boh,” he says without patronizing. I keep trying, he keeps insisting. But he’s making no move to get

been 1986. The little keiko (five people) is over, and Michael has invited me to attack him.

I reach saturation rather rapidly, passing from the ineffective precision of intellectual earnestness to the ineffective punch of anger to the whimpering flail to the final spearing rhythm of exhaustion. The latter is coming close, once finds its mark, and then Michael disappears. He is there momentarily, in the corner of my eye, provoking a turn (lunge) in a given direction, to encounter air.

I begin to cry, but it comes out as laughter. §



“Kumite” — partner practice

continued on page 7

Hard to Describe, cont’d from page 3

seen as revolutionary with its emphasis on cooperation, vulnerability and kumite (“partner exercises”) between men and women. I often imagined Rakutenkai members’ keiko [practice] starting at midnight and lasting into the early morning hours [Rakutenkai, literally the “enjoy heaven group,” was the original interdisciplinary research group that developed Shintaido in Japan— ed.]. I looked forward to the day when I might meet Aoki-sensei, the “mad artist” who started the whole thing. I suppose there was a fanatical aspect of myself that was hooked and needed exploring.

I got a job working from 3 -10 pm so I decided to attend bohjutsu [six-foot staff technique] practice which was held in Golden Gate park three early mornings

a week. Every Monday, Wednesday and Friday, I would strap my boh [staff] to my bicycle and ride over to Shintaido “headquarters” at 776 7th Ave where Pamela, Steven, Michael and Ito lived. I still have fond memories of going up the stairs into the living room. Usually, Michael would be sitting in his chair sipping tea, eating his toast with jelly and reading the Jerusalem Bible. Ito would shuffle down the hallway, brushing his teeth quietly preparing another day in what he called the “do it yourself” culture.

The three of us walked silently through the winding dirt paths of Golden Gate Park until we reached the big baseball fields. It was much later I realized this was the actual preparation and beginning of our keiko.

We warmed up quickly and when I was unable to follow or became completely confused, Ito or Michael corrected me. There was rarely any conversation at all. I was told, “Just copy, watch and study.” Everything was so new that each boh warm up technique was a fresh experience. My favorite (still is) was the boh toss where we would move farther and farther away from each other, sending this magical stick through the air.

The remainder of keiko was very simple and rarely changed. Boh Eiko, either back and forth 10 times, or around the fields 5 times. Jumping as far as I could go and then back to where I started. Basic techniques repeated again and again.

That was all, and it lasted forever. •••

What You See, cont'd from page 6

On a large, warm, sunlit field in New Hampshire with more than 100 other people, I learn wakame taiso ["seaweed exercise"] from Aoki-sensei. My first experience is intellectually interesting.



"Kaishoken"—hand of opening and expressing

My second partner, however, turns into an angel, complete with glowing wings of light and a halo flaring from her head in bouquets of flame. I have never seen anything, anyone, so beautiful.

Too late for me, Aoki-sensei warns us not to fall in love with our partners. §

I have nothing to lose; I am relatively

old, out of shape, out of hard practice; the dojo in Western Massachusetts is an exquisite billiard table of eternal proportion; I am about to take my boh exam to join the advanced boh class, taught by Ito, populated by people with advanced ranks in the one- to three-dan range. But I have no expectations, no concept of what this will be like, except that, at some point, I am going to get to appreciate the true beauty of the billiard table and the extreme good fortune of all the white balls on it.

The instruction is high level and complex. I watch, I listen, I choose a partner based on nothing at all, and we begin to practice. From behind me, I hear Ito's voice, encouraging people, correcting them with humor and precision. Then, very close, I hear: "Oh, that's good. You've got it."

He's talking to me.

It occurs to me later that I had finally taken advantage of "Beginner's Mind", nearly 20 years after I began Shintaido. Even when I was a beginner, I had no beginner's mind, because I was always too full of preconceptions to release myself, consciously, from their bondage. What a joy it is to be able to begin again, not empty-handed, but empty-headed.

Thank you all. •••

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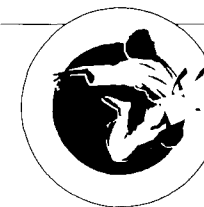
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Life Burn (\$20)

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