

# SHUHARIKAN NEWSLETTER

## Yoshinkan Aikido

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### OYAMA PROMOTED

Multifaceted Shuharikan instructor Alvin Oyama was promoted this past spring to the rank of Ikkyo in Muso Shinden Ryu Iaido. He tested before a committee of Iaido instructors in New York City.

Alvin is proficient in Yoshinkan Aikido, Iaido, and Ikebana and is a popular instructor and valued member of the Shuharikan Dojo. We congratulate Alvin on his promotion.

### 3M AIKIDO CLUB TO TRAIN AT SHUHARIKAN

Shuharikan member Ken Yarina has formed an aikido club among his co-workers at the 3M company. He was able to enlist the minimum required number of 25 students to obtain club status.

These students will begin training at the Shuharikan during a special 55-minute session each Wednesday starting September 20, and continuing for 10 weeks.

Ken, Bob Fisher, Pat Gerkey, and Paul Schulstad will divide instructional duties and will concentrate on basic Yoshinkan aikido.



### SHUHARIKAN DOJO

Instruction in Yoshinkan  
Aikido

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## The Children's Class

This is not a quiet time. There is talking and goofing off. The children are sometimes squirrely. It takes three instructors to teach this class. There is a lot of energy pulsating through the dojo on Saturday mornings.

Maybe we are a bit unorthodox in our approach to teaching children. We are not very martial. We are not very strict. We let the kids talk - not interrupt - but talk and joke and even make fun of us a little. We play games. The games always involve aikido principles and skills: balance, cross-steps, forward rolls, quick seiza.

We teach kamae and basic movements and basic techniques. The children learn these to varying degrees - not perfectly, and they quickly forget. But sometimes for the moment they do astonishing aikido. And we stop and wonder, "where did she learn that?"

Probably we could be more strict. Maybe we could insist that the children learn the techniques better and quicker. But we measure our success more in attitude than in demonstration of technique. These kids keep coming back. In mid-week they ask their parents how long it will be until aikido class.

The children may or may not stick with aikido long term. They may or may not become good technicians in aikido. But they are always having fun in class and they carry away a very positive attitude about aikido and how nurturing and supportive an art it is. That's exciting!

## Softening: The Stewart Clinic

Ajen Birmingham

On Saturday, June 10, Shuharikan Dojo held a four-hour clinic featuring Jim Stewart Sensei, 6th dan from Toronto. We started with a small breakfast at Moe's, which provided time for small talk and casual conversation with Stewart Sensei. Besides studying Aikido, Stewart Sensei is a painter and has had his work shown in various cities around the U.S. as well as Canada. I have never seen his work; but after seeing his Aikido, it would be interesting to see if there was any influence from one to the other. After I finished my pancakes and embarrassed myself by trying to sound like I knew something about art, we started talking about self-expression and its connections to thinking. His theory is that clean, pure self-expression can be achieved by passing your intention from thinking with your mind to feeling with your body.

When we think with our minds we must attend to certain rules that our language bestows upon us. Those rules are the boundaries of our mind. When we try to externalize intentions of our soul or spirit through the mind it is hinged on the framework of the mind-words. So for us to properly express ourselves we must unhinge our intentions from the world of words and allow ourselves to fall into an abyss of the body; this is filled with infinitesimal ways to exteriorize the intentions of the soul. Why should we limit ourselves with

products of the mind?

After breakfast we headed over to the dojo to start the clinic. I was very excited to see and feel Stewart Sensei's technique. He started us out with heaven and earth throw from kneeling. Many insights were gained from his explanation. Most important to me was his metaphor of moving uke off balance like tipping a refrigerator. Essentially, if you tip a refrigerator on its side and balance it there, it is easier to move than having it on all fours. This is the same principle that we apply to uke - tip him or her, but not all the way over, just enough to make them easier to move.

Following a light lunch, Stewart Sensei impressed all with his stunning Jump Break Falls. His method of doing this is amazing. Instead of pushing himself forward and kicking his legs out, he pops straight up, sucks his legs in, and rolls out like a number two roll without making a sound. All this gave one who was watching the impression that he was floating in the air like an astronaut.

Near the end of the clinic Stewart Sensei gave time to answer any questions that we might have for him. For about the past two or three months I have been trying to understand soft technique. I thought it might be a reflection of one's personality, thus impossible to gain by some. Or, "Is it a conscious choice or does it just happen with time and training?" Since he has the softest technique I have yet to feel, I thought he could answer this question, and he did.

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## (Softening: The Stewart Clinic)

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His reply began with a big, wide-toothed grin, "It took me eighteen years to develop a soft technique. It's not a conscious decision." Question answered. KEEP TRAINING.

It was wonderful to see my fellow aikidoists out on the mat, sweating profusely, training hard, and still see many smiling faces. I am thankful to all my instructors, whose hard work brought someone like Jim Stewart Sensei 4th dan, and previous instruction by Jacques Payet 5th dan, to our dojo. In the future, I hope to get the chance to work with more master Aikidokas.

## EFFORTLESS TECHNIQUE

Sheng-Yen

Be soft in your practice. Think of the method as a fine silvery stream, not a raging waterfall. Follow the stream, have faith in its course. It will go its own way, meandering here, trickling there. It will find the grooves, the cracks, the crevices. Just follow it. never let it out of your sight. It will take you.

## BUDO BOOK REVIEW

Glen Giacoletto

Title: *The Elements of Aikido*  
Author: Greg O'Connor  
Publisher: Element Books, Inc.,  
Boston, 1998

"Because of its diversity, trying to describe aikido is akin to trying to describe all of nature, or to explain the universe...Aikido requires one to embrace both nature *and* the universe. Aikido is so abundant in what it has to offer both the individual and society that no one book could ever contain its enormity."

- Greg O'Conner (5<sup>th</sup> Dan, United States Aikido Federation)

Indeed, the secrets of the universe as revealed through the practice of aikido are *not* going to be found in Greg O'Conner's small (127 pages), inexpensive (\$10) but well-written paperback, but it's a start! *The Elements of Aikido* is a sequel to O'Connor Sensei's popular little book, *The Aikido Student Handbook*. The latter was written for the neophyte aikido student, a kind of Miss Manners guide written in a light and amusing style to describe a typical aikido dojo, what a class might be like, rituals observed, dress, and how to behave – plus it has several cute cartoons!

With *The Elements of Aikido*, O'Conner now takes a little more serious tact in describing our favorite martial art. As with most generalist-type books on the subject, O'Conner begins his work by defining aikido, giving a brief history of its origins, then presenting a short chapter on the philosophy and ethics of the art. He follows with a very good discussion on centering, posture, and balance, before probing into every (except, by and large, most of us who practice the Yoshinkan style) aikidoka's favorite subject, ki. The heart of the book is devoted to the actual practice of the art. Aided by simple

illustrations, he describes many training terms that should be familiar to every practitioner: kamae, ukemi, tai no henko, etc. He then does a very nice job portraying several popular techniques that most martial artists normally equate with aikido, among them being iriminage, shihonage, kotegaeshi, kokyunage, and tenchinage. The book concludes with discussions on the practice of aikido as a way of life.

Although he describes and embraces the study of traditional aikido weapons (bokken, jo, and tanto) as valuable training tools, I was very surprised when O'Conner wrote,

"... O Sensei himself used *aiki-ken* and *aiki-jo* to teach *Aikido*. In his later years, however, many of his direct students say that he would admonish them sternly if he found them practicing with these weapons. He told them that it was a waste of time – that he had already done that work."

Amos Parker Shihan (8<sup>th</sup> Dan, Yoshinkan) has a very similar philosophy about aikido weapons.

For those of you who read my last review on Paul Wildish's *Thorsons Principles of Aikido* (Shuharikan Newsletter Volume 4, Issue 1), both *Elements* and *Thorsons* comprise a series of short, paperback books on the fundamentals of various Eastern and mystic philosophies. In that aspect, these books are very similar in how they both present to the curious reader the philosophy of aikido in a simplified manner. As such, they are both starter or primer books whose intent is to give the layman a taste of what aikido is all about, but not to

teach technique. To that extent, they both succeed very well but each with a somewhat different emphasis. Wildish Sensei, like O'Conner, discusses the history and philosophy of aikido in simple, general terms in order to be understood by the non-aikidoka, but he then focuses on the unique aspects of each of the major styles of aikido. O'Conner, on the other hand, chooses to concentrate on the look, practice, and feel of aikido and the benefits of training with nothing written about different aikido schools. In fact, O'Conner makes no mention at all that various styles of aikido even exist. Consequently, although they parallel each other in several areas, these two books can be considered complementary rather than direct clones. *Thorsons* is perhaps somewhat more technical with *Elements* being easier for the beginner to understand – although that aspect may be due to an American (O'Conner) writing style vs. British (Wildish).

*The Elements of Aikido* is a well-done but inexpensive addition to the budding aikidoka's library. Together with *Thorsons Principles of Aikido*, the pair can answer almost any questions posed by the novice short of getting on the mat to experience aikido first hand.

## THE PERFECT STANCE

Gordon Shumaker

Shioda Sensei advised that, if we are to learn aikido, we

must at some point get beyond the techniques. He said that *"the true purpose of the training is to understand the techniques' common principles."*<sup>1</sup> As I thought about that advice, I wondered whether Kancho had in mind some core principle, a central, unifying idea that brings all the underlying principles together. I think he did.

He gives us a clue in his discussion of the importance of yielding:

*If you can look at the other person with an open heart, without ego, you will be able to see the other person's situation: What he is aiming for, what power he is using, where his balance is, what his feeling is and so on – all will become clear. This cannot be understood by looking with your eyes or trying to understand through intellect. You must understand in an instant, with your heart. If you can realize the other person's situation and can guide it, then it is a simple matter to lead it to your own benefit. If you wish to be yielding when you are facing your opponent, you must be in a perfect stance. If you can do that you will feel free and easy.*<sup>2</sup>

Kancho said: *"The most important thing in aikido is what is called 'yielding.'"*<sup>3</sup> And the "perfect stance" is the core principle in Kancho's view of aikido.

What did he mean by "perfect stance"? Because he speaks of seeing with an open heart and becoming ego-less and free and easy, he obviously

did not intend to limit the idea of perfect stance to a physical posture. But because aikido begins with the physical, the perfect stance must begin there as well. And that stance is kamae. Ideally, kamae emphasizes the centerline, and is stable, aligned, and relaxed.

Control of the center is a major goal in martial arts. Actually, there are three centers: yours, your opponent's, and the center of the space between you. Kamae virtually defines the centerline with hands, forearms and elbows fixed along it.

Kamae is stable. Not only doesn't it wobble, but it takes out extraneous movement as well. There is a clear stillness in kamae, and it gives a settled feeling and appearance.

Kamae is aligned. Author Will Johnson tells us what alignment is:

*Alignment is created in our bodies through making sure that each and every major segment of our bodies (our head, neck, shoulders, torso, pelvis, upper legs, lower legs, and feet) is stacked one on top of the other in as vertical a relationship as possible.*<sup>4</sup>

Johnson says that if the body is aligned, gravity supports it. If the body is out of alignment, support is achieved only by tensing the muscles. If that tension releases, the body loses support and balance. In correct kamae, the body is erect, not leaning too far forward or too far backward.

Kamae is relaxed. We often seem to have a tendency to tense and tighten our muscles,

<sup>1</sup> *Total Aikido* - Gozo Shioda

<sup>2</sup> *Total Aikido* - Gozo Shioda

<sup>3</sup> *Total Aikido* - Gozo Shioda

<sup>4</sup> *Aligned, Relaxed, Resilient* - Will Johnson

to hold and guard certain positions. *"Unnecessary tension in the body is like a layer of dust that covers the surface of a mirror, preventing it from reflecting back an accurate picture of whatever is placed in front of it."*<sup>5</sup>

In relaxation we let go and drop down into ourselves. We breathe deeply and we soften. We melt the hardness and rigidity that keep us from being flexible and yielding.

The motionless kamae posture is taken into the dynamics of the basic movements, then into techniques, and finally into a flowing expression of underlying aikido principles.

If we train with full awareness that the kamae posture is essential to the experience of the underlying principles of aikido, we will discover that it is the entry point to Kancho's perfect stance.

## TEACHING AIKIDO

The Unknown Aikidoka

I'm not an aikido teacher. I hold a lower rank and I don't feel qualified to teach other students. However, I'm interested in what good teaching involves and I'd like to share something I read with my teachers and those teachers who visit or who hold clinics.

It's from a book titled *Aikido-Exercises for Teaching and Training*, by C.M. Shifflett. This is what he says about basic teaching skills:

1. Remember what it felt like to be a beginner
  - Remember the confusion, clumsiness, and feeling of incompetence. Structure your classes accordingly.
2. Study "How to Teach"
  - Learn the timing, pacing, proportion of lecture to exercise. Learn how to correct errors and give feedback.
3. Relate to the known, then build on that foundation.
  - Teach something simple at first and when the students learn that progressively add details.
4. Correct in the positive, avoid the negative.
  - Our subconscious minds do not recognize the verbal negative.
5. Be aware of the learning process
  - Learning involves several distinct steps. Actual learning occurs when the student recognizes how to do something. Then that recognition is reinforced through repetition so that the task becomes reflexive.
6. Emphasize basics and drills over flourishes and frills
  - The basics are what make up the most advanced techniques.
7. Tie the basics and drills to the actual technique.
  - Show that the magical throw the student hopes to learn is just the arm-dropping exercise he has been doing as a warm-up.
8. Observe and employ the range of sensory modes
  - Most people have a preferred sensory learning mode. Some are visual, some auditory, and others tactile. So in teaching you should show, verbally explain, and let the students try movements and techniques. If you only do one method, you will lose some of the

students.

Finally, I like Shifflett's statement that

*Good teaching is not just "get." Neither is it purely "Give." Ideally it is a two-way flow. Student is teacher. Teacher is student.*

I think teachers should evaluate their teaching from time to time. I hope this helps.

## TEACHING AND LEARNING

1. Rely on the message of the teacher, not on his personality;

Rely on the meaning, not just on the words;

Rely on the real meaning, not on the provisional one;

Rely on your wisdom mind, not on your ordinary, judgmental mind.

The Buddha

2. *"Does anyone have a question?"* asked [the teacher]. *"If so, let him ask it now. But the instant you open your mouth you are already way off."*

Zen Story

(Note: Shouldn't you try a technique before you start asking questions about it?)

<sup>5</sup> *Aligned, Relaxed, Resilient* - Will Johnson

## The Journey

Jon Sharratt

*The longest journey begins  
with the first step . . .*

### **The Road Not Taken**

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,  
And sorry I could not travel both  
And be one traveler, long I stood  
And looked down one as far as I could  
To where it bent in the undergrowth;  
Then took the other, as just as fair,  
And having perhaps the better claim,  
Because it was grassy and wanted  
wear;  
Though as for that the passing there  
Had worn them really about the same .

..  
I shall be telling this with a sigh  
Somewhere ages and ages hence:  
Two roads diverged in a wood and I -  
I took the one less traveled by,  
And that has made all the difference.

- Robert Frost (1916)

Two profound pieces to be  
contemplated on many levels...

We have been drawn to the  
path of Aikido from many  
different roads. Something  
about the art first piqued our  
interest and we took the initial  
plunge to explore this multi-  
faceted art. Possibly for the  
simplest reason of all, "*I just  
wanted to see what it was  
about.*"

At first for me, it was the  
uniqueness of doing something  
completely different than what I  
had ever done before. A  
physical activity, where I could  
train within a supportive, and  
yet challenging, environment,  
trying to master the basic  
movements and at the same  
time trying to incorporate these

into the seemingly impossible  
variations of techniques.

I believe that the unknown  
"tip of the iceberg" was what  
kept my interest and further  
drew me into the art and  
challenged me both physically  
and mentally.

As I reflect back on more  
than a decade of training, what  
is below the surface and  
unseen is the part that keeps  
me chasing the elusive, "*What  
is it?*"

One unexpected benefit I've  
received during my training is  
that the dojo has become a  
place to reconnect with myself  
and the friends I've made. I  
think of it as a way to recharge  
or replenish the spirit. By this I  
mean it has offered me a wealth  
of support, challenging in a  
multitude of ways, and hopefully  
giving me a greater  
understanding of myself and my  
training partners, both in and  
outside the dojo. The  
friendships and individuals I've  
met over the years have come  
to be more precious than the  
actual physical training because  
we've become friends and  
family, through our connection  
to Aikido. This is regardless of  
the rank one holds or even if  
they are training or not.

I believe this is the most  
profound piece that Aikido can  
offer to us. When one  
undertakes an activity for the  
self, and the outcome is a  
greater understanding of  
oneself and the creation and  
growth of long-term friendships,  
you cannot ask for more than  
that.

Enjoy the journey and  
friends you make along the  
way. These are the true  
treasures of a life well lived.

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