



Collected articles by Mark A. Shraga

M.A. Applied Coaching

2nd Dan Shodokan Aikido

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Introduction

The following collection of ten Aikido related articles were written at various times across the last eight and a half years since my first lesson. I began my Aikido journey looking for a way to be more at home in my body and was blessed with a way to be more at home in the world.

For me Aikido is the gift that keeps on giving; whether or not I end a lesson having clearly developed a technique, I am always a better person. Again, and again (mou ikkai) I have found myself evolving into a more fearless and accepting human being. Again, and again I find new challenges and ways to push the boundaries of my comfort zone. Subsequently I have found more space for myself within, which has supported my coaching and entrepreneurial activities.

The more that I train the more the patterns grounded on the mat find their way out into the world through my relationships; be they brief or enduring. I hope that you find some of the warmth, joy and illumination in the following articles that I have been lucky to have on my journey so far.

Mou ikkai

Sunday May 29th 2016 I landed at around 10am at Osaka international airport. My purpose for this trip was to train solidly for over 2 weeks with the Shodokan elite with the hope that I might be offered a chance at my Shodan grading. I was on the mat at Shodokan Honbu at 12pm with Sensei Michael McCavish 6th Dan for a private lesson and then joined the main class directly after. From that first moment to the morning of the 9th of June wherein Nariyama Shihan shook my hand, congratulating me on my successful Shodan grading the whole experience went by almost in a blink. Yet I had never trained longer or harder before in my life. My body had never been called on so intensively since my teen years.

The time went quickly but I covered an awful lot of ground, learning new things, unlearning old things, having my Aikido rebuilt in some ways and developed in others. I learned lots of new words in Japanese during this time. None sum up the essence of the transformation engine that is Shodokan Honbu better for me than mou ikkai. Make a mistake? mou ikkai. Not quite got it? mou ikkai. Been doing it for years? Mou ikkai. Not feeling 100%? Come in and train, and whatever you're training: mou ikkai. Again and again and again until I forgot to be self-conscious. Again and again until forgot all my failures. When I returned to the UK I shared many experiences of Honbu, but the one I shared the most was mou ikkai.

Otsukaresama, arigatou gozaimasu.

Mark Shraga, 2nd Dan, Shodokan West London





It's been two years since I opened the doors on two training spaces in West London, where I have been running Aikido classes twice a week. It has been a strangely demanding commitment. Tremendously rewarding, as even with students coming and going over the period, a hardcore group has stuck with it. The progression of my students is humbling and never fails to evolve in me new learnings and insights into my own ongoing development.

I have never understood my own instructor better than I do now. For example: I now know the range of frustrations that come with giving over a portion of your life to others who do not always share the same level of commitment. But this just serves to highlight how special it is when a small collective of dedicated individuals repeatedly deliver on their commitments to their path in Aikido (and in Business, or in anything for that matter).

As I prepare for my second journey to Japan I am reminded of many such experiences from two years ago. I look forward again to losing my smaller self for a while amongst those who train every day; sometimes twice a day or more. In Japan I learned that being a part of something bigger than just yourself was as important as any other aspect of my training.

Otsukaresama desu, or in English "we have trained hard together". This is something you might say to your fellow Aikidoka on the mat at the end of a training session. In saying it you have acknowledged that none of your personal development on the mat is possible without the dedicated efforts of others.

Another Japanese phrase that has stayed with me is moui ikkai which translates simply as "one more time" or "and again". It is used to encourage training partners to switch off the judgemental part of their minds and return to the business of learning and, essentially, transforming ourselves into something better than when stepped onto the mat. More practice with less critical judgement of errors, creating an irresistible process of incremental self-improvement. Working always to gain greater flexibility in both body and mind, and plenty of inspiring memories to stoke the fires for another couple of years.

Post script

My second trip to Japan was wonderful, challenging and immensely rewarding. On the 22nd of June 2018 I was tested for my 2nd Dan and was passed at Shodokan Honbu by Nariyama Shihan 9th Dan. The next article, Mushin Mugamae, is my written response to the question I answered at the end of my grading.

Mushin Mugamae



Mushin Mugamae can be interpreted as 'no heart, no posture'. Mu is a negative prefix and shin is heart or kokoro when read on its own. Gamae is kamae when read on its own, meaning posture. To quote Professor Tomiki:

With a still heart one can access the wonders of nature and by suppressing action one can still the gods of change.

This short quote gives a powerful insight into the impact of bringing Mushin Mugamae into our world. With a still heart our attention opens to its fullest, with nothing to fix upon in any direction. From the state of Mushin Mugamae there is no 'kokoro' which therefore means that all that remains is what is aware of the Heart and the Mind and the Soul (all are meanings connected with kokoro); pure awareness. From this state there is also no posture, which means that we have not yet stimulated or caused any changes to our environment or to others in any way. The moment we adopt a posture, even if it is simply to the neutral posture of Shizentai, we have committed ourselves to the physical world and its causes and consequences.

From this place we are still very open and aware and not yet committed in any direction. We are empowered to be highly receptive to external actions, such that we are in a position of advantage should an opponent/attacker commit themselves against us. All directions of movement are available to us whilst the attacker has limited themselves to an unfolding strategy that is susceptible to being countered by a flexible, centred and responsive body-mind. The abiding sense of awareness, prior to any intention to act, of Mushin Mugamae is a powerful baseline for Aikido and life in general. From this state of mind we carry less tension in our bodies, which means we can bring more of ourselves into action in a focused way when needed.



If we reflect on the Shodokan symbol in the light of what we know of Mushin Mugamae it reveals itself to be a kind of diagram. The Shodokan symbol could therefore be interpreted as the white background being the underlying state of Mushin Mugamae. The red centre (rise) being the energy we receive from the sun (our heart). The blue (fall) part being water (our postures in our environment). The directional points of the symbol can be seen as the directions in which our attention can be directed, and in which our bodies can be moved.

Based on this analysis it is therefore possible to see Mushin Mugamae as a place from which all things arise and from where all things are possible. Professor Tomiki stated:

This symbol is composed of red representing fire, blue representing water and white representing infinite space.

We begin our Aikido sessions from Mokuso which can be seen as a way of accessing the state of Mushin Mugamae. At the beginning of all kata or competition our best results can be said to come from carrying a sense of Mushin Mugamae with us even as we move; extensive research has been carried out on the positive influence of Mushin by Manaka Unsui (2017). The effect being a kind of switching off of the smaller (identity) self and an increasing of our fullest potential self (spirit), unrestricted by fears, planning or strategizing. From here there is receptiveness, flexibility, speed and fearless engagement. This quote from Professor Tomiki beautifully sums up Aikido with Mushin Mugamae at its core:

Non-conscious action stemming from a neutral physical posture (in other words, neither aggressive nor submissive – mu gamae), executed without emotion or prejudgement (mu shin).

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Space for Noticing, Space for Respect, Space for the Delivery of Excellence

September 24, 2012 at 11:58 PM

On Saturday morning I attended my 3rd or 4th Aikido lesson post the summer break. My instructor, Dr Erik Dop 5th Dan was clearly refreshed from his break (he doesn't teach Aikido during the month of August) was brimming with mental energy. Or, so it seemed to me – this was of course, a mind read.

However, when he proceeded to match and mirror incongruent states/postures in members of the class... and then, contrastingly, demonstrate congruency/balance, awareness through movement, I had to wonder. Had he actually changed anything in the way he was teaching or had he always been doing this; and I was simply just finally getting it?

The instructor gave us a task of carrying out a standard drill of being attacked by a person with a knife and then avoiding in different directions, followed by swiftly putting the attacker down on the mat (after many iterations of building up to this in stages). He quickly observed that not many of us carried this out in stages, **or a clearly sequenced strategy**. People were getting nicely skewered by the tanto (fake blade), whilst trying to remember precisely which technique they should 'do' to their attacker. Simply getting out of the way, into their own space didn't occur to them.

He then broke down the key components of practically any interaction in our style of Aikido (Tomiki). To do this he utilized the above context i.e. that of a randori-tanto (knife) attack by Uke and the corresponding behavior of Tori (Nage in other styles – the one who performs the technique/throw etc). He then described an attitude, a state of mind that is almost an idealistic concept in Aikido, although I believe it to be entirely real and in fact fundamental to the pursuit of Aikido: **Mushin, without mind or conscious thought: a cultivated inner space.**

Being in a state of Mushin means that you are not communicating anything with your body to a potential attacker/opponent/competitor. You are in an unlimited space of potential. When the attacker commits, you then have more options than them. You can **'match' their movements (akin to getting into rapport)** and then adjust to have greater flexibility. **This is your space.** They (the attacker) are merely tourists here.

Back into the room, my instructor described and demonstrated 4 key stages (with the starting point for Tori being as close to Mushin as possible):

Tai Sabaki > Irimi > Kazushi > Kake'

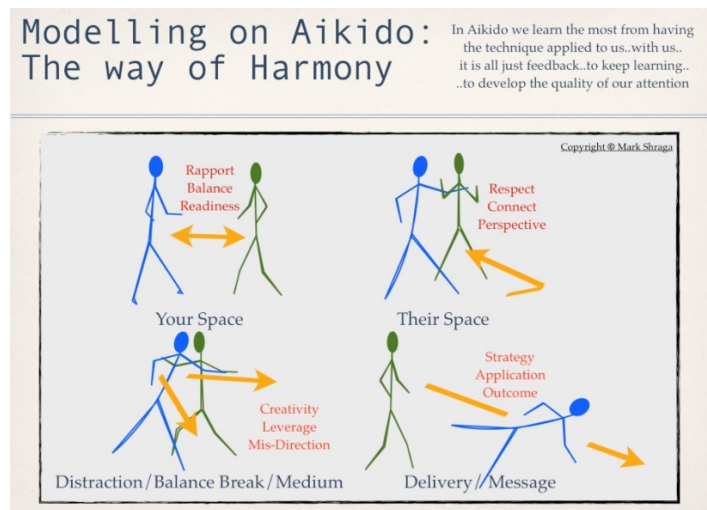
These roughly translate as:

Body Avoidance > Entering > Break Balance > Deliver a technique (complete)

Essentially get out of the way of the knife – but in a way that puts you in position to get close to them. Then enter that space once they have committed themselves fully and cannot change direction. Put them off balance. Deliver a technique that floors them.

And then I started to see them as:

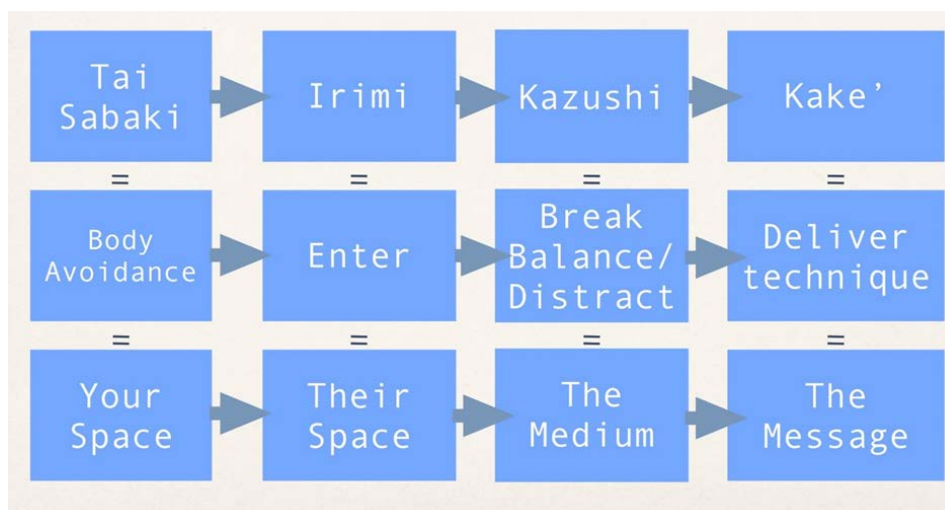
Get into your own space > Enter into their space > Distract > Deliver

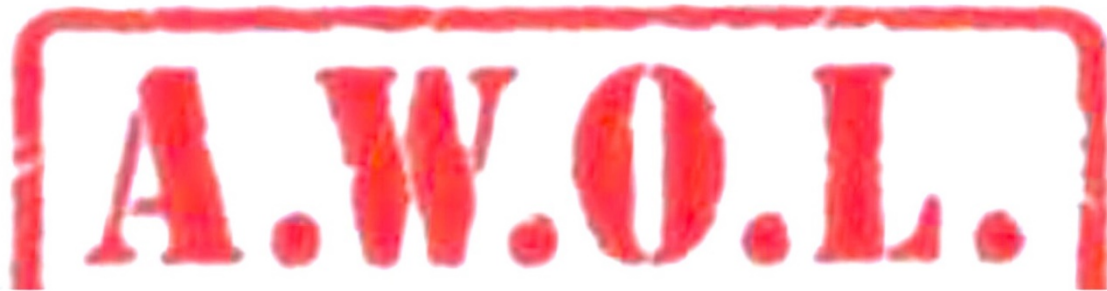


I could then begin to see the potential applications (maybe with subtle adjustments for different contexts) for anyone who wanted to present something professionally, Comedians, Teachers, musicians and even martial artists of course. The following evening I had a coaching client, a Teacher, who had many things to discuss, many of which revolved around a need for inner space; a deep requirement for respecting the value of their own inner space. This person demonstrably valued everyone else's space, but the scales constantly tipped too far in that direction, leaving very little space for them... inside.

I could immediately see the beauty of the absolute practicality of starting any endeavor with a healthy respect for being within your own space. Followed by a corresponding respect for other peoples' space. Matching, pacing and entering their space and visa versa; just as in the process of exchanging roles in Aikido, both are equally valid and yet receiving teaches you the most.

The distraction is simply the vehicle you choose to deliver your message; maybe a story could serve this purpose. The delivery is in the understanding of course..





Adults Without Leadership

If you want to develop your business, develop yourself and others

Having worked in lots of different company types and environments my own business environment is the product of various influences. As we at NSN grow in size and move on from being a youthful start-up, now in our 6th year of trading, the influence of some of the larger corporate structures are starting to emerge. Processes, metrics and the management of a larger body of human resource are coming into play. The key employees of today are the middle managers of tomorrow, and this presents both immediate challenges and benefits. In some ways, as a business and life coach, and a business professional I am in my element and have the ground nicely covered. In others I find myself with gaps in my awareness and skillsets, with lots of ground ahead of me to cover in my own personal and professional development.

An environment of openness supports development

As a mature adult it is in my experience more important than ever it was before to be open to learning, and I work hard to create an environment where people can openly learn together, sharing information and questions quickly and easily. We still reach the limits of individual comfort zones from time to time, which is always a journey into the next stages of someone's person and professional development; all the richer for being shared as a community within a business. Sometimes we hit bumps along the way and some adults handle these better than others. In my experience it is those who are open to leadership in these times that handle it the best.

Find leadership where you can and provide it in return

Over the years many different leaders and mentors have emerged in my life, some of them chosen by me, many not so much. The ones that stand out as I look back are the ones who didn't have to provide insights or take the lead – they just did it, whether I enjoyed the experience at the time or not. As I look back I am grateful to all of them, they all had passion and the best of intentions. The ones that took extra time to help confusion turn into understanding are of course the ones that shine the most in memory. But it's not necessarily the case that the ones who were abrupt and hard on me were any less helpful. In some cases leadership comes in the form of a perpetual relay race. For example, when people ask me how I have managed to work so successfully as equal owners in NSN with my business partner,

who works thousands of miles away, the answer varies according to experience to date. What is always true is that we somehow manage to take turns in taking the lead as and when required – not perfectly, but well enough to keep moving forward.

Put yourself in situations where you have no alternative but to model, learn and apply the learning

One of the benefits of being younger is that the ego is a little less set in its ways. As time goes by and we occupy positions of responsibility both at home and work it gets harder for adults to get the feedback they really need to keep changing and developing into the next stage of their potential. This is one of the reasons that around 5 years ago I took up a martial art called Aikido. Subscribing to a fairly merciless feedback space like a dojo is hard for an adult to do as they get older. Picture the white belt on an older body with high grades zipping around at almost half your age; it's a never ending identity crisis unless the adult accepts that this is a space in which the journey is more important than the journey markers, seniority or pecking order. These things exist in a dojo – they just matter so much less than the learning process itself.

Unlearning and relearning are key in the pursuit of mastery

In aikido this is a perpetual process; you will always be outclassed by someone who came before you and there will always be another insight that will make you stop and consider everything you have learned to date in a whole new light. Sometimes taking you all the way back to the beginning in some way or another. The outcome being that you come to understand your chosen endeavour, be it Aikido, or anything in the working environment, at a deeper or more fundamental level. This experience is as invaluable as it is challenging; we as adults so often marry our progression in life with our sense of self - this can make us driven but it can also severely limit our ability to unlearn and relearn. Both of these things are essential in achieving new levels of development and indispensable in the pursuit of mastery.

Choose a space in which to stretch yourself

It is something I encourage in all of the adults that I coach, train or manage in the working space – find a space in which you can be a beginner and submit to it fully. This for me brings great degrees of flexibility in learning and ensures that at least in one space I get the luxury of clear and consistent leadership. It has taken me a long time to appreciate the value of those who continuously stretch my capabilities. If you can find a space like a dojo or a diligent mentor who will give you space to find the understandings you need then you really are in a good place to make mistakes. Mistakes are fundamental in learning and achieving a working body of knowledge that will support you when times are hard and nothing comes easily.

In my experience it is this attitude to making mistakes that will help you to stay flexible in your mind and body, generating the best kinds of learning as you work to achieve your potential.. however old you are.

Personal leadership



It is generally agreed that a good model for leadership is to lead by example. Which immediately raises the question 'what kind of example?'. Do I have to be able to do everything my employees can do, and furthermore do I have to do it better before I can lead them? Personally, I can see quite a lot of advantages in being able to lead so thoroughly with deep knowledge. However, it's a superhuman requirement to expect someone to dedicate their life so completely to their working environment that they might rise to become the best in every area. It's also not practicable given that there are a lot of people that need leadership, and they need it right now.

I have personally worked at all levels of a business from a customer facing perspective and feel that I have a deep understanding of how it works and how to add value there. I have also tried to reach into the other parts of the business from a process development perspective and I have found this to be a helpful short cut to wider knowledge. It still doesn't give me deeper knowledge of the actual people in the other parts of the business i.e. Accounts, Engineering, General Operations etc. What has helped me to get out in front and help clear pathways across the business is greater personal leadership.

My definition of personal leadership might be different from yours, so I will define it further here. Personal leadership is a way of leading by first becoming conscious of one's own values, priorities, goals and furthermore one's own mental and emotional strengths and challenges. In taking the task on of becoming more conscious of these areas we begin the journey of leading ourselves forward, pulling ourselves up by our own bootstraps.

As these areas become more conscious we begin to create a greater capacity for recognising how the lives of others around us can be developed by doing the same. The way we listen to others and what we listen for changes over time, such that we can begin to see pathways ahead of the people we are tasked with providing leadership to. We gain the privilege of being able to walk some of these same pathways with them and the ability to recognise when a fork in the road lies further ahead, and to plan accordingly.

The simplest form of personal leadership is an embodied one, and yet it often speaks the loudest and carries the deepest and most abiding messages. The starting point of leading in an embodied way is to find as many ways as possible to become comfortable in our own bodies. It is also important to find a way to access a centred place where your emotions are undisturbed, whilst your mind is open to new information. For all the expanded freedoms it has created for the mind, the modern work routine is now largely a disembodied one.

We take the escalator or lift rather than the stairs, drive to the shops rather than walk and very rarely, if ever, do anything that tests our body's sense of balance or flexibility. I have found that engaging in a regular embodied practice helps to bridge the gap in our lives between the unconscious pulse that drives us and our mental world with all its tactics, strategies and goals. I don't believe it really matters

which practice you take up be it Running, Football, Yoga, Pilates, Martial Arts, Feldenkreis, Rolfing or the Alexander Technique are all great in my experience. Personally, I chose Aikido to stick with for the long term and have found the journey to be immensely helpful in finding my centre, and thereby increasing my degree of comfort in my body, whilst challenging me to expand my comfort zone in numerous ways. Having a lifelong embodiment practice brings all kinds of tacit knowledge that is impossible to learn any other way.

- Working with your body for any period of time where your heart rate is elevated immediately reveals that your own actions can influence your emotions. This is powerful knowledge for anyone playing the long game in any field of endeavour; taking the rough with the smooth without losing your drive or passion.
- Working with others in an embodied practice reveals what it's like to influence a team's performance and how to meaningfully change it; real time action and physical dynamics in any team game reveal a wealth of personal and interpersonal information.
- Constant maintenance of one's own body in the pursuit of an embodied practice will grow a deep self-knowledge and sense of well being that lets you know that you are, essentially, ok regardless of temporary upsets in your day/week.
- Increased flexibility in the body sets a pattern that the mind will hungrily adopt in times of stress, making you more adaptive to challenging situations/interactions.
- Specifically from long term practice in Aikido I have found that learning how to fall safely has helped me to reduce reactivity and defensiveness in pressured or confrontational situations.
- Above all, the simple and continued act of paying more attention to your own body will leave your mind with greater freedom to handle great complexity (without the persistent multitude of distractions that arise when we are alienated from our bodies).

In summary, if you want to lead effectively start with bringing your self onboard, no other special knowledge is required, and furthermore most people need leadership from centred and grounded people. Being led from 'how' a leader is, rather than from 'what' they know sets the widest and deepest frame for whatever specific content needs to be shared. Whatever challenges may arise being grounded and centred in the body means that you will have space inside to work on the questions that present themselves in the moment. It also means that the people you are leading will feel good about being influenced by you. And it is a long-acknowledged truth that people remember less about what you said and more about how you made them feel. Therefore, feeling grounded and centred is primary to personal leadership. From there developing the space inside to meet new challenges in a balanced and flexible way will position you extremely well to be an effective leader. The learning never stops, the comfort zone never extends far enough and the space inside could always be a little bit larger. Living at the edge of these aspects of one's self is arguably the edge of personal development, and arguably the best place to be leading from.

The day of the Zombie Executive



Aikido and the Practice of Being a Business Person

Over the last 18 years of living in London I have watched people crossing the bridges across the Thames or shuffling into, through and out of tube stations in the mornings. If you take the time it is impossible not to notice the way many people not only drag their brief cases and laptop bags with them, they seem to drag their bodies along too. It's like watching a bad B movie called 'The day of the Zombie Executive'.

People have picked up the habit of living in their heads and forcing their bodies to comply, treating their physical selves like their car; you drive it like an extension of yourself, have it serviced occasionally but have absolutely no idea how it works let alone have a clue how to maintain it or fix it. The main reason for this is virtually nothing most business people are required to do on a daily basis has anything that requires us to do so. We spend most of our days sitting down, using mostly our finger tips to make a living. Utterly disconnected from the vital yet silent majority of ourselves. The sad fact is that most people only hear what the body has to say when they take a holiday and then it's quite common for it to tell you how badly you have ignored it and how unhappy it is.

Before I took up Aikido just over six years ago I had been doing the sporadic gym session here and there and some running in the mornings. I even took lessons in the Alexander Technique to try and get my body to behave how I wanted it to. All of those things were fine but they didn't have a purpose, discipline or a set of benchmarks to be tested against. Mostly they just perpetuated the problem of treating the body like a rented car and not a valued loved one and the only home most of us will ever own mortgage free. I would of course experience periods of improvement, better wellbeing etc but then always a slip back into being a business-mind dragging a body around with me. Gravity consistently winning the battle until, at the end of each day, I would crumple into bed and have less than enough sleep to face another day without my body fully on my side.

Six years later I found myself in Japan doing an intensive 16 day training program with a possible black belt grading ahead of me. I had to maintain my body and fix it in order to make it to the next days' training sessions, let alone those scheduled for the following week. After

about four days I found myself moving with my body and not 'dragging' it. My body started to regularly give me more than I could have asked for. It got me up in the morning and told me what it needed in order to be sustained, really clearly. It prompted me to stretch and to practice when not in the dojo. I found it easier to manage more than one thing at a time in my life than ever before, as I did not experience a conflict or dissonance between them. I also just stopped focusing on a bunch of stuff that isn't really important, like what people might be thinking about me. Believe it or not I actually took up Aikido to get this from it and had seen glimmers of it along the way.

Do I think you have to take up a martial art for 6 years then travel to the other side of the planet to immerse yourself in a full time training program and be tested at the end in order to get this? Essentially no. I have however learned some things that I strongly advocate – here are 5 of them that I think could be very helpful if this article has connected with you.

1. Take up a practice in a martial art or some kind of physical endeavour that requires you to use both your mind and your body, and that can be pursued weekly over the course of your life; even into old age.
2. Choose an activity that has both a program of measuring your development by an instructor but also agree with yourself why you are doing it and have one of those reasons to become a better person (i.e. fewer of your decisions are influenced by fear).
3. Check in with yourself regularly and contrast how your relationship with your body is changing and if your relationships with others are being affected in any way, good or bad.
4. When you experience positive changes along the way look at how they can be of benefit to others and spend time applying what you are learning in the working and home environments. This can serve to further integrate developments in the body and yourself as a whole in the training space and with who you are becoming in other areas of your life.
5. Enjoy the new developments and insights when they come whilst also taking the plateaus as a reassuring investment into the quality of your future life and the lives of those closest to you. This kind of ongoing personal development cannot fail to improve the quality of your own life without having positive effects on everyone around you.

Triggers Broom & My Aikido



I was recently reminded of a wonderful scene in the TV show Only Fools and Horses. The scene in mind featured the character called Trigger talking about getting an award for having the same broom for 20 years. For those who don't know the scene this is what happens:

Trigger, Del, Rodders, Sid and Boycie chatting in Sid's cafe.

Trigger has just been presented with an award for saving the council money.

Trigger: "And that's what I've done. Maintained it for 20 years. This old broom has had 17 new heads and 14 new handles in its time."

Sid: "How the hell can it be the same bloody broom then?"

Trigger: "There's the picture. What more proof do you need?" (Trigger proudly shows a picture of his broom to the others)

Whilst this is clearly a gag that derives its humour from the deadpan straight guy persona of Trigger. He clearly identifies so closely with the 'idea' of his broom that he doesn't get that with all the changes he has made to it, it has long since ceased to be the same broom.

Something about this stuck in my mind. It reminded me of what continuous learning feels like. The constant making and unmaking of mind and body over time. Generally experienced as a sense of being continually crap at what you do, triggered by criticism from a mentor or senior, or our own internal voice.

In Aikido, every stage of the way from white belt to black belt is a lot like the process of sketching with a pencil; you start with the broader outlines then work towards finding greater accuracy and a clearer representation of the thing you are working on. It's all still Aikido and it's all still you, but with every iteration subtle adjustments are made and newer versions of both you and your Aikido emerge.

Even at the point of achieving a black belt in Aikido the mountain that had been ascended turned out to be a hill with several higher peaks ahead. A year and a bit since my own 1st Dan grading and I am only now starting to get comfortable with being a continually corrected and changing being. I count this as the most tangible and valuable achievement on my Aikido journey to date.

In the areas of my life in business and when training others in the working environment this piece of awareness has really helped. I have had a greater appreciation for how other people experience feedback and why the learning experience is tough at times for everyone. The main thing is that whilst the broom is always changing, it survives the changes refreshed and ready for the tasks ahead. The key difference for us is that, with every unmaking we are remade with greater potential for mastery and self-knowledge than ever before.

The take away then is that we should be content with the 'idea' of our best version of ourselves as being the thing that is continuous even as we let go of our old sketches of our previous selves. Becoming less defensive, and in doing so becoming more open to becoming the very best version of ourselves that we can. At whatever stage of the journey we are at along the way.

The double-edged sword of mindfulness



The classic perception of mindfulness is as a relaxing and grounding way of finding our centre and bringing great attention to our sense of being. It is generally pursued through a variety of meditation approaches, most of which are usually experienced in short order as being quite other than relaxing or grounding. Meditation mats and cushions largely end up in a cupboard, Reiki CD's in the attic and occasional yoga classes recede into distant memory like the flexibility of youth.

Ironically, people engage in mindfulness more often than perhaps they are aware. The main way that people engage in mindfulness is oddly enough not meditation, it's most often when beginning to learn something. Those first few steps into disequilibrium, out of ones' comfort zone and into an array of confusing new information turn up the volume and brightness on the world around them. Sometimes overwhelmingly.

As a temporary member of the Consciously Incompetent we face our greatest challenge. The challenge to our own sense of self both internally and socially. In fact, the whole experience is often compounded by the social element; as if the volume and brightness of our discomfort were not already turned up high enough. We unavoidably see our maladaptation, from multiple perspectives, in the eyes of others.

As adults, we must run the gauntlet of potentially being stigmatised, classified as unfit for certain levels of social sign off and approval. Yet at no other time are we so exquisitely attuned to learning, nor our senses so keen or our processing powers as super charged than when we immerse ourselves into a learning rich environment.

The deep power of the unresolved sense of reality that a healthy dose of confusion can bring is in its ability to open up our mental models and make room for new data. The practice of meditation, for the average human being, can be an exercise in self-torture as it is a pure pathway to heightening our awareness. Anything going on in our psyche at that moment in time will immediately become brighter, louder and generally enhanced in every way possible.

The stuff deep inside us that meditation raises so powerfully to the surface is best dealt with through active learning and using the entirety of our being. Processing our demons through creative endeavours helps us to knit ourselves larger and more encompassing, such that we are increasingly less frightened by our own shadows. The shadows simply recede as our attention and our being grow and occupy the dark spaces, and it is from these dark spaces that we draw energy and insight for where we go and who we can become next.

Anger, Aikido and Clean Language



In September 2012 I attended Sue Knights NLP Trainers training in her home in France. The materials for the course largely consisted of her own book *NLP at Work* and some peripheral texts on Provocative change and Clean Language. My background at the time was largely in NLP and Psychology. So, whilst I had a good grasp of NLP and had a natural affinity for the Provocative change work, I had completely blanked Clean Language. This wasn't a problem until half way through the course Sue decided that she would like to see me present on Clean Language the next day. The upshot was not exactly a classic clean demonstration, and rather more of an innovation that utilised 'Clean'.

I spent a frantic evening studying the material that I had with me on Clean Language and the use and nature of Clean questions as best I could. The gears started to shift for me when I tried out the patterns from Clean for myself, roleplaying internally different scenarios. In some ways it reminded me of some of the sensations I had from training in Aikido. So, I decided to use the Aikido format of two partners training, one as an attacker and the other as the one who uses the methodology of Aikido (blending with and then developing movements away from you) to neutralise an attack, as opposed to aiming to beat the other person.

The structure of the exercise was as follows: Person A was asked to remember a time that someone had made them very angry, perhaps in an argument, and they were encouraged to really vent their issues at Person B. Person B was given a card with David Groves clean questions on it and the only way they could respond to Person A was by asking a clean question. The results were profound and quickly became quite humorous. Whilst initially watching someone publicly relive a heated argument was uncomfortable, the energy committed to the exercise really made the impact of the clean questions even more powerful. Example from the exercise:

Person A: Argh you just always do that, you always push push push!

Person B: and when push push push is there anything else about that push push push?

Person A: yeah! I just really hate being pushed on things when I'm not ready!

Person B: and really hate being pushed on things and not ready.. ready.. that's like what?

Person A: well ready is when I'm doing things, it's when I'm making them happen..

What I observed in this and subsequently numerous other examples was that the clean questions had the effect of moving the angry party (Person A) from within a trapped and low comprehension state to a freer and more rational one.

As clean questions do not project assumptions the chances of further inflaming the angry party are reduced as (a) they will not feel misunderstood or negatively labelled (b) Person B's fears and insecurities are not adding to the conflict (c) clean questions enable the angry party to shed light on the unconscious drivers that are stuck; causing and exacerbating frustration and insecurity.

This was a useful exercise in another way in that it helped me to develop a better understanding of anger and its function. It revealed itself to be at least three things (a) a stuck emotional state (b) a pattern interrupt designed to force change in a situation (c) a high intensity focusing lens for our attention with a side effect that it also cuts one off from additional resources or new information. The upshot being that anger can have a great practical function in that it releases a lot of focused energy in the service of breaking an unwanted pattern/situation.

On the other hand, as the stuck emotional state is cut off from new information it is a bad state from which to make judgements or decisions. Invariably decisions from an angry state will lead to regrettable outcomes as the causal chain of outcomes is hidden from the perceiver whilst in that state.

About the author



Mark began his coaching journey in 2008 setting up Brighter Lives Ltd to focus on developing an integrated approach to Coaching business executives. Following on from an NLP Master Practitioner qualification in 2010 and an NLP Trainers Training in 2012 Mark began to develop innovative group workshop events. In 2016 Mark graduated with Merit from the University of Derby with an MA degree in Applied Coaching.

Mark Qualified as a Level 1 Coach with the British Aikido Board in November 2015. He subsequently opened the Shodokan West London club on the 29th May 2016 to bring Aikido closer to his home in Ealing. Mark graded to Shodan on the 9th June 2016 at Shodokan Hombu, Osaka, Japan by Nariyama Shihan 9th Dan and Sakai Sensei 6th Dan. Mark was graded to 2nd Dan by Nariyama Shihan and Sakai Sensei 6th Dan on 22nd June 2018.

The focus of Marks' MA degree was the design of a new and exciting Coaching methodology which works with the clients' entire neurology, body, mind and emotions, to awaken them to consciousness choice. This exciting new generative approach is called Neuro-Somatic Coaching. NSC is only available from Brighter Lives and is an integrated methodology with elements from Aikido, Alexander Technique, NLP, Clean Language, Symbolic modelling and journal work. Mark is currently working on a book to help busy people find more space in their lives: 'A short walk in a long moment; a journey into the space between'.

Mark is also a telecoms entrepreneur with business interests in the UK and South Africa and lives in West London with his wife and daughter.

www.brighterlives.net firststep@brighterlives.co.uk www.shodokanwestlondon.com