

Godan Essay
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A poem:

*dry rice paddies beneath a full moon
silence
piercing shattered bone and marrow
reaching down
I close
your
eyes.*

In 1971 I was wounded climbing out of a helicopter in Viet Nam. I was with the 173rd Airborne Brigade, "The Herd", and a nineteen year old medic replacing another young medic who had been killed earlier in an ambush. I landed in the middle of a fire-fight. I was young. I was naïve. And within twenty seconds, I had my Purple Heart.

A few months later, after my company had lost some more men (if eighteen year old and nineteen year old boys can be called men), in a moment of despair, I asked myself why this was happening, why were people killing each other? The words that then came out of my mouth were, "Things aren't what they seem to be." It was a peculiar moment. I was worded out, my mind was blank, and those words came, as of their own volition. And when it happened, it felt like a rocket shot up from the base of my spine and exploded out my crown *chakra*, although at that time I did not know what a *chakra* was. It was as if I was walking several inches off the ground. This feeling lasted for several hours. The next morning, I tried explaining it to the others in my platoon. I said to them that in reality, things were not what they seemed to be, that the moon was not really the moon. That elicited some laughs. One guy wanted to know what I had been smoking, and another said, "Yeah Doc, and we're not in Viet Nam." Later, my platoon sergeant just said, "Doc, you're weird." So after that, I pretty much kept my thoughts to myself.

My naiveté died over there and I have been struggling with that ever since.

In 1986, I was studying *aikido* at Northcoast Aikido, under Tom Read Sensei. Doug Knox, Read Sensei's most senior student and a gifted sensei in his own right, was working me through a very difficult and painful process, in getting me ready for my *shodan*, or first-degree black-belt exam.

Doug had John Williams, an ex-student of Read Sensei's, and at that time a student of Koichi Barish Sensei, attacking me from behind. I kept failing miserably in completing any technique. After several attempts, as John was once again attacking me, Doug said, "You're climbing out of a helicopter in Viet Nam." At that moment, I saw, superimposed over the *dojo*, Viet Nam. I was stepping off a helicopter. Bullets were hitting the ground at my feet, and the grass in the dried-out rice paddy was being blown down by the prop wash of the helicopter. I turned and looked at John Williams. He looked at my eyes and stopped his attack, saying, "I'm not going in there." It was a *shin ken*, or live blade moment. Very much so.

Immediately, Doug had John attack me again, from behind. This time, just before we engaged, Doug said, “You are holding your wife in your arms.” I turned at the right moment, engaged John, and threw him. The throw was powerful, but the feeling was very different.

Doug had John attack me one last time, again from behind. As we engaged, Doug said, “Now find the source of both of those.” For a split second, I felt and I saw it, the source of both. For a split second, it was there and then it was gone. I successfully threw John, but by the time I threw him, that feeling and awareness was gone. It happened so fast.

So there were three attacks and three distinct experiences. One was lethal. One was “loving”. And one was very ordinary, but potentially extra-ordinary. It was a severely intense training session. A dear *sensei* and friend, who for six years was wanted for draft evasion, was assisting a Viet Nam vet, as yet undiagnosed with post traumatic stress disorder, in coming to a deeper understanding of a pivotal life experience. It’s laughable. I don’t think that Doug, John, or I really understood what was taking place at the time.

So, returning to Viet Nam in 1971, in the middle of a very painful and ugly circumstance, I discovered that things are not what they seem to be. It has been an experience that has affected my whole adult life. For years, unconsciously, I had been asking myself, “If things aren’t what they seem to be, then how are they?” It has been a conscious study for some time now.

Another poem:

*walking the winds of light and dark
going ever deeper into the dark
darkness within darkness within darkness
until there is only dark and no light
within the dark
one spirit
two words
I choose
 I choose
 I choose*

It is a remarkable thing to see what happens to eighteen and nineteen year old boys, who only a year earlier were high school students, and who find themselves in a circumstance where they are forced to see friends killed or maimed, and are required to kill or maim others, themselves. It is a remarkable thing to see. It is a remarkable thing to experience. And once again, the question comes up, “Why do people do this to each other?” “Why?” Going ever deeper into the dark, again after I was worded out, the following words came to me:

Picture if you can, a newly born infant, a child. Picture if you can a sphere in which that child’s mind, that child’s body and the outer world are one reality: “The Unitary Reality of an Infant.”

Picture if you can, a state of being, where there are no answers, where there are no questions; a state of being in which there is a “Thus ness”, an “I Am that I Am ness”: where when you are happy, you smile, you laugh; and when you are sad, your cry. Nothing more. Nothing less.

Picture if you can, that moment, when that child’s Unitary Reality is broken; the “Thus ness”, the “I Am That I Am ness” is no more; and is replaced by a separateness, replaced by an “I/Thou” relationship.

Picture if you can, the wound that results from that initial experience of separateness, and the impact it would have on that child. Picture that.

Now picture, if you can, that wound being followed by another wound, and another, and another. Wound upon wound, upon wound. Until eventually, that child knows fear. Fear, upon fear, upon fear. Until that child knows resentment. Layers and layers of resentment. Until finally that child knows anger, which in due time can become rage. Rage, which on a grand scale can become war.

Picture that. Imagine that. Imagine that and know. We are all that child. Each and every one of us.

Again asking the “Why?” question, and again after being worded out, the following came to me:

It has been my experience that one of the most difficult and challenging obligations that a human being can undertake is defining, and then reconstructing, internally, the succession of psychological responses that lead to acts of aggression. In other words, one renders precisely, inwardly engages, and then intimately contemplates the path that leads to conflict. The challenge lies in accepting the premise that conflict is centered in individuals, and that a human being, as an individual, need look no further than herself or himself in coming to an understanding of all acts of aggression, and of war itself.

So, in turning inward, with the most honesty that I could muster, I discovered that as a result of my own hurt, fear, resentment, anger, and rage, I have hurt others, even those dear to me. I saw it in Viet Nam. When we finished a mission, all of our ordinance would be taken from us before they would allow us on helicopters to take us to the rear for stand-down. This was so that we would not take out our rage on each other, on our own officers, or on the local Vietnamese near our firebase. (You have to understand that, except for my platoon sergeant, my platoon leader, and I, my platoon was totally composed of Black, Chicano, and poor white draftees who were already barely maintaining their rage at being over there in the first place. It was ugly. On inventory, out of thirty-two people in my platoon, twenty-eight were smoking pot, ten of them smoking it regularly, and four were using heroin. All were abusing alcohol, except one. That is how they dealt with the pain.)

Which brings me once again to this martial art called *aikido*. According to John Stevens, in his book Abundant Peace, the founder of Aikido, Morihei Ueshiba, or O’Sensei, referred to *aikido* as “the manifestation of Love”.

“Love”, what a mysterious word.

What is “love”? Is it an emotion? People talk of being “in love”. Now *that* is an incredible emotional experience. *Is* “love” an emotion? If so, then how can we explain the pattern of people who are “in love” turning on each other after having been hurt? It is not that uncommon of an experience. So is love an emotion? I don’t think so.

Is “love” a thought? Early on, John Lennon said, “All you need is love.” Later, in the depths of his despair, he said, “God is a concept by which we measure our pain.” If I were to paraphrase Lennon I could say, “Love is a concept by which we measure our pain. Would that be true? Is it a concept? Or is it something more? What would Lennon be saying today if he had not been killed? Look at the last five years of his life and the experiences he was having with Yoko and his son. He never stopped searching and learning. That was his beauty and his quest, trying to make sense of it all. I watched him walk point, for many of my generation, back then in the 60’s and 70’s. Point is a very dangerous place. And he was cut down.

Tom Read Sensei once said, if I recall correctly, that trying to define *ki* is like trying to define electricity. You can describe electricity’s properties. You can describe electricity’s uses. But you can’t really say *what* it is. It remains a mystery. I think it is the same with “love”. We can talk *about* it for all it is worth, but that is just talk, just metaphor. What *is* love?

Back to Viet Nam. As a medic, I had to detach myself from what was going on around me in order to properly function. I had to do what I now call “emptying without collapsing”. All emotion would dissolve and I would do what was necessary. Sometimes it was easy, to enter into that “empty” state, and sometimes it wasn’t so easy. It is still that way, sometimes easy, sometimes not. Only another combat vet would understand that pain.

For the past four years I have been practicing the way of the *paqo*, or practitioner of the Q’ero pathway. To the Q’ero people of Peru, direct descendants of the Incas, the cosmos is the *kawsay pacha*, or “world of living energy”. The *kawsay* manifests in two ways: as *sami*, or light energy, and as *hucha*, or heavy energy. Only humans create *hucha*. And probably the most fundamental Q’ero exercise is the release of *hucha*, and drawing in of *sami*. I was drawn to this system of practices because I was already experiencing it. Where I called it “emptying”, the Q’ero would call it releasing *hucha*. And my teachers in this discipline, Juan Nunez del Prado, Stephen Victor, and Val Nistrath have been most helpful.

Back to love. I cannot say what love is, and I have been trying to understand it for quite a while now. But this I do know. Sometimes, when on the mat, or when I step into an emergency situation, or even when I am just sitting, I “empty without collapsing”, and then something beautiful happens. It is not the current of energy shooting up my spine and out my crown *chakra* like I experienced in Viet Nam. It is something much more simple. There is an awareness shift, a slipping into an altered state of heightened receptivity. In this state, I experience a nurturing component that is most beautiful and is doubtless. In this state simultaneous “emptying” and “filling” occurs, and when action takes place, I cannot say I am doing it. Although I call the state beautiful, it is a dispassionate, but wondrous.

Again, back to 1971 and Viet Nam. That day in Viet Nam, before I could be medevaced, my senior aid man, Doc Fairchild, was wounded. We medevaced him and I stayed. After having

been wounded, patched up, and assigned my platoon, the first order given to me was, “They’re over there, start shooting.” I had never seriously thought about actually killing someone. I was a medic. I had only prepared myself to save lives, not take lives. At that moment, I was afforded a luxury that very few people got over there. And believe me, it was a luxury. I looked to my left at the M-60 machine gun crew and others who were firing, and then I looked to my right at still others who were firing. I then asked myself if I would kill in order to save members of my own platoon, and I said, “Yes.” And I started shooting, dispassionately.

I have struggled with that decision and other combat memories for years. In *Apocalypse Now*, Francis Ford Coppola speaks of the “Horror”. It’s not about the “Horror”. It’s about the pain. In my struggle, I have come to intimately know hurt, fear, resent, anger, and rage. Layers and layers of it. I have hurt someone I care deeply about, and I can never undo it, never. I still struggle. And I have learned that there is nobility in tears. Incredible nobility. I thank Doran *Shihan*, my *sensei*, for affirming that for me. There are times when I just cry. And I’m not alone. The whole world is crying. Just look beneath the wars.

Through years of martial arts training and years of practicing various meditation processes, I have learned to facilitate that shift in awareness, that “emptying without collapsing”. As a result of this I now understand that this shifted awareness occurred at times when I would dispassionately function as a medic in Viet Nam. Was acting from that shifted awareness an act of love? My intent *was* to save lives. Nothing more. Is love an “empty” act based on intent?

And when I shot with intent to kill, I was shooting in order to save the lives of the members of my platoon. My intent was to save lives. Nothing more. Can “emptying” and then dispassionately shooting with intent to kill be an act of love? Can it?

Christ said, “Be in the world, but not of it.” What did he mean? If I am not of it, then what would I be of? When it all falls away, what is left? Hanging on the crucifix, Christ said, “It is finished. Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.” At that moment what really happened? Do we really understand Christ?

Insights I gain that seem to be worth anything to me usually come to me when I am worded out; when I ask, “Why?”, and find no answers. Sometimes, when I am empty, answers come of their own volition. It is as if I am in the way and once I get out of the way, the answer comes.

When I get out of the way, is it only then that love happens?

Am I capable of love or am I only a vehicle through which love can happen?

O’Sensei talked about Love and God. Love and God. God and Love. Are they the same? Is *aikido* truly *aikido* without Love and God?

Have I been so jaded and cynical as a result of my western and eastern religious experiences that I won’t even go there? I have said, numerous times, “To hell with God and to hell with love.” Although, “To hell with ...” are not the words I actually used. But if *aikido* is truly a manifestation of love as O’Sensei said it was, then shouldn’t I look into it? Don’t I need to go there?

In 1991 my son was born. Eight hours after he was born he nearly died of heart complications. They stabilized him and two days after he was born he underwent open-heart surgery for pulmonary stenosis. Afterward, for twelve weeks, I treated him at home for an infection in his sternum, first with oral antibiotics and then with intravenous antibiotics. They allowed me to do that because I had been a medic in Viet Nam. *That* was incredible, treating my own infant son. My mother was there to assist me the first time. She wiped the sweat from me. My father, a WWII vet, had to leave the house because it was so intense. I could not run from this one. He was my son. In the end, the antibiotics did not work. The night before the surgery to open him up to see what was causing the infections, he and I had an experience of looking into each other's eyes for an extended period. It was one of those moments where time stood still. The next day, after they had discovered the source of the infection and started repairing it, another team of doctors stopped by the waiting room and informed me of the success. After they left I found myself shifting, "emptying" into that altered state. And again, a poem came, unasked:

*wrapped in your blanket
warm and secure
red hair
blue eyes
no answers
no questions*

Christ said, "Become as little children."

Looking into my son's eyes the night before his last surgery, I witnessed that state, that "unitary reality of an infant". The "thus ness" and the "I am that I am ness" was right there before my eyes. Was my son's state at that moment love? Was that what Christ was describing? That innocence. Do we have it and lose it? And are we able to get it back? And if so, how?

Just what was it that Morihei Ueshiba discovered? Again in [Abundant Peace](#), John Stevens quotes O'Sensei as saying, "In true *budo*, there are no enemies. True *budo* is a function of love. It is not for killing or fighting. But to foster all things and to bring them to fruition. Love protects and nourishes life. Without love, nothing can be accomplished. Aikido is the manifestation of love." O'Sensei also said, "The essence of God is love..." What was it he discovered? What was his *budo*, or Martial Way about?

The Japanese word *shin* can mean several things, depending on the context. It can mean body, mind, heart, spirit, truth, and God. What would happen if our body, mind, and heart aligned with spirit? Could a truth appear, a *Dai Shin* or Great Truth? How would God manifest in that truth? How would Love manifest in that truth? Can Love Manifest without God? Is God Love?

I have heard practitioners of *aikido*, or *aikidoka*, question whether *aikido* really works as a martial art. Probably all of us have asked it at one time or another, because we study under an agreement. Take away the agreement and what happens? But I think we are asking the wrong question. Maybe the question should be, "Does *my aikido* work?" If it doesn't, then maybe I need to go deeper into *my aikido* and deeper into O'Sensei's *budo*.

I am grateful for the *aikido* teachers who have greatly influenced me: Read Sensei who shared with me for almost twenty years. Knox Sensei who spent countless hours with me, delving into my Viet Nam experiences. We trained a lot and drank a lot of beer and whiskey in those days. Holiday Sensei, who manifests for me the grace and power of *yin* energy. Heiny Sensei, who enters into vulnerability with the courage of a lion. Wara Sensei, a personification of Coyote or “trickster energy”. That Irish rogue Terry Dobson Sensei, with whom I got to spend a very short time and who showed me a way to face life and death. I am so grateful for Chuck Hauk, my *aiki* brother. And I am now grateful for Frank Doran Shihan, a Korean War combat veteran, who told me that sometimes you just have to cry; and who once grabbed me by the arms, looked me in the eyes, and said, “We are brothers.”

And there in lays more pain. I have discovered that I am a brother to those very people I was actually fighting in Viet Nam. More so to them than the people I came home to. It took me over thirty years to figure that one out. It is a pain I still struggle with, alone, and with the help of dear friends. We kill our own brothers. But then who is not our brother? Who is not our sister?

So, for me, there are questions: What is *aikido* about? What was O’Sensei about? What is Christ about? What are all of the world religions about? I’ve been a Buddhist monk. And now, rather than running from my cultural heritage I am facing it. What is taking place in this world and why? There is war taking place throughout this world, on so many different levels. As people, we continue to hurt each other. What can I do about it, if anything?

Maybe, in the end, there are really only two questions worth asking: “What is love?”, and “How is it manifested?” And then maybe I need only “empty” and open up to the answer, which is much greater than me. Maybe Love loves and I *can* be a participant. It’s worth looking into.