

Leading the Mind

The clink of silverware, muffled conversations from nearby booths, and the slanting rays of the rising sun through the diner's blinds; we're at an early breakfast Sunday morning, before the last session with David Shaner Sensei. As I sit with my two traveling companions, a long way from our home dojo in Durango, we are reviewing the teaching and the exercises we've done, digesting the experiences, and waiting on the ordered food. I am perplexed and thinking out loud about a moment yesterday afternoon...

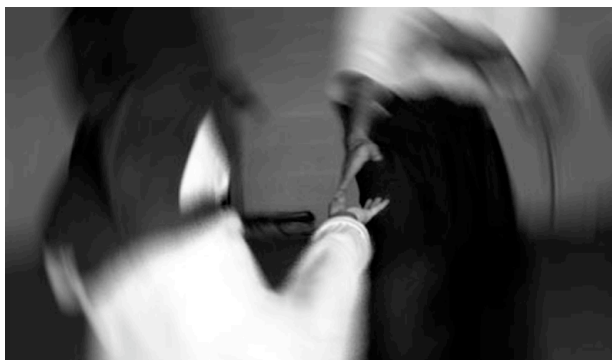
Sensei told me to hold the jo in a relaxed chudan, and then lower it slightly, to under my center (one-point), keeping the jo levelish to the mats. Then I was to hold it firmly downward, so he could not lift it. I did this with him at least three times. Each time he would check me by lifting the jo up into my strength and commitment. It would not budge. Then he would do something... Something, I am not sure what, but something slightly slippery-odd, or strange...It was not a trick physical thing, not a sudden poke or off-angle jerk or leverage trick. It was smooth and irresistible... and I felt the jo slide up and then I was falling and he was standing over me, holding the jo and smiling.

It was so easy for him to lift the jo, rotate it and throw me, that I was sure I had given up or had in some pre-conscious way, suddenly agreed to cooperate with his demonstration in order to make him look good or make the demo successful. Yet each time he did this, I redoubled my commitment to thwart his lift,

the demonstration be damned. I was determined to really test him... And every time I experienced a dislocation in my focus, a blurring of my concentration and there I went, over and down to the mat. It was as if there was a momentary slippage of consciousness; I could not remember what had really happened. There I was, laying on the mat looking up, confused and yet still happy in some peculiar way. A few moments later, disappointed in myself I wondered, "Why had I allowed this to be so easy?"

The next time I felt this perplexity, Shaner Sensei was working with me in kneeling *ko-kyu dosa*. Whenever I grabbed him as the uke, and settled in with my most immovable, grounded self, he managed to move me quite easily. I even felt like I was helping him somehow, like I was a traitor to my own intention to stay immovable. No matter how much I tried, something just let go within me and I was over and down so smoothly, so cleanly.

When it was my turn to be nage, with him grasping my wrists, I felt the seduction of meeting him at the point of contact, of pushing into him to overcome him with my superior mass and center. I would do my best to extend and rotate my wrists into a version of *tenchi nage*, and he would smile and shake his head, "Don't DO anything. Just reach out to touch the texture of my gi...like it was fine silk." He kept telling me to not push into the place of conflict, "Don't meet me there. Don't put your mind on that spot where the skin surfaces were meeting with pressure. Move from somewhere else." Somewhere that he



was not holding. Then I would do just that, just a simple, clean reach to touch his shoulder, and he would go over and shout, "Yes! Just like that!" And in that moment I was convinced he was allowing me to throw him, letting me win so I would not feel bad.

This was completely inconsistent with who I knew him to be, but maybe it was a teaching maneuver or some strategy to get me to do it the right way and then eventually I would learn something. It never occurred to me then, that I was on the other side of one of those blurry, slippery, mysterious moments.

In the diner, the food arrives and as we begin to eat, my friends comment on other aspects of the training: the enjoyable bokken cutting styles, the two ukes, one holding each arm, and the relaxed leads... I suddenly see more deeply into what we were doing yesterday. I ask, "What do you think it would really feel like to have your mind led in a technique?" They consider my question, and before they answer, I offer, "It might feel a bit like you were inadvertently cooperating with nage in throwing yourself, huh? After all, mind moves body and if the mind is being led by nage, one's body will follow the mind, following nage's lead..."

"This quality of non-dissension, of not meeting the conflict, force against force, even with skillful physical leverage and angles and twists... Of not moving the small part that is gripped, but moving something else, something uke does not control... Maybe this is where the magic happens. Perhaps

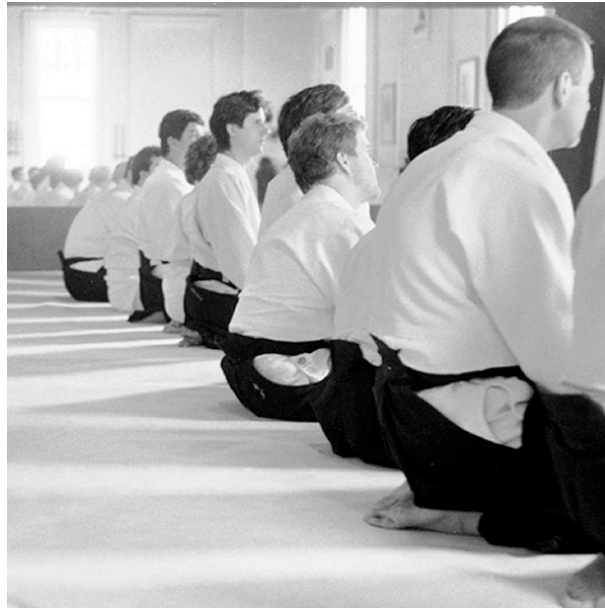
Sensei was showing me how the mind can lead and how once uke's mind is following nage's lead, everything is really over. Once the mind falls the body follows." I sit back, the eggs and hash-browns forgotten. "By not engaging uke at the point of contact, the

place where uke's mind is focused, by extending my attention elsewhere and moving what uke is not holding, I do not enter into a direct mind to mind conflict with uke. I simply do not agree to conflict."

This was like a huge sun rising in the gray morning of my mind. Suddenly so much fell into place as I explored the implications and nascent un-

derstanding. "Of course I would feel like I was going along with him, my mind was being led so well, it had the feeling of cooperation. And he was moving from a perspective oneness, where there was no separation between him and I. Thus as he moved I moved along with him. Clearly, I might experience a mental dislocation as my mind was captured by his non-dissension lead. In that moment, I actually, in fact, forgot my intent to resist, no matter how committed I might have been a second before."

I remembered that the same thing happened to him when I was able to move from that space of simple, oneness and non-dissension, and just reaching... It would feel like he was going along with me, because, in a sense he was. In other exercises, where I thought the ukes were being weak, it was possible that they might not have been. They might have simply been led well and



as body followed mind, I felt them go down easily. I had concluded that they were simply falling for me. Now as the light of insight spread, I could see new depth in all of my techniques. I could see deeper into what Imaizumi Sensei had been demonstrating for years, but I had not been available to see beyond the level of physicality into what was happening.

I continued as breakfasts disappeared, "Uke attacks with focus and intent. This is his or her undoing. The focus on the grip or strike puts uke's mind at that point, in a sense, offering their mind to nage. Also, uke's attack is a subject-object action. For uke there is something other than himself to be attacked, so there is separation. If nage engages the situation at this level, it becomes a test of skill, rhythm, and strength, not what we are here to learn."

"But if nage does not engage at the level of uke's attack, if nage does not put his mind at the point of conflict and does not agree to uke's subject-object perspective, then something else is possible, something that seems to me to be the essence of ai-ki-do. Nage moves within a perspective of no-separation between uke and nage, they are one. Nage does not enter into a conflict between discrete objects. Nage does not focus his mind on the point of contact, but moves from his or her one-point, completely independent of any potential clash. And since the situation is one, not two, nage moves and uke's mind moves with him, in this unilateral, non-dissension perspective and uke is led to an appropriate, compassionate conclusion, usually landing on the mat. At least that is what I see right now."



I also note, "I am so thankful that I felt that smooth and obliquely mysterious lead from Sensei as many times as I did. Without the accumulated experiences, I doubt I would have noticed the odd gap in my awareness, the momentary shift from focused resistance to inadvertent acquiescence. It really is a mind-body phenomenon. We can talk about it, but the talk is not it. I really had to feel it again and again in order to even to notice that something odd was happening. It is so subtle. I hope I can begin to practice this and realize what I felt and what I can only begin to articulate."

As the bill arrives, I grin, "What a magnificent transmission from Shaner Sensei! Once again, my aikido is transformed and I see from a completely different level." As we pay, we all agree this has been a wonderful weekend for many reasons. Looking forward to the morning's session and the esoteric *misogi* chanting practice, we load up and drive to the dojo.

Steve Self

May 2006