

Lisa O'Donoghue
San Dan Paper
May 21, 2007

Being in the Moment

On choosing a topic for my San Dan Paper, I knew I wanted to write about my biggest obstacle while preparing for my test. My Sensei as well as many of my sempai seem to have been telling me the same thing, "You're too much in your head," "Your form is good, now stop thinking about it," "Trust your technique and just be present." My problem was that I was not being in the moment.

How could I not think about it?! There were months of corrections I needed to figure out, the test to memorize, and I had to think about changing all my basic forms from static to motion. There was always something on my mind. As weeks went on, I was getting more frustrated with my training. I kept thinking to myself, "Why am I not getting this?" "Why do I feel so disconnected with my uke?" The more I practiced, the less prepared I felt. There was a lot to think about.

A few weeks ago, it dawned on me that the same frustration I was feeling on the mat was the same thing I was feeling off the mat and in my daily living. Being a teacher, I am always in plan mode. It's like a chess game where you need to be five steps ahead of your opponent (175 middle school students!). There are a million things to think about like lesson plans, grading, meetings, parent phone calls, projects, tests, homework, etc... The list goes on and on.

My day doesn't end, however, when the 6th period bell rings. Everyday after work I rush home to take care of my disabled brother. My brother Al, whom I love dearly, suffered a cardiac arrest about 2 years ago and due to a lack of blood flow and oxygen to his brain, is now suffering an anoxic brain injury. He is immobile and is at the lowest levels of functioning which requires him to have 24-hour care. Another set back is his short term memory loss. He can't remember things from 5 minutes ago which leaves him in a state of confusion most of the time. Needless to say, I'm thinking about him all the time and making sure he gets the best care.

What's interesting about his condition is that there are moments (not very many) where he becomes clear. When we catch those moments, it's just like old times again. We laugh and sing and joke around until we have to catch our breath. Unfortunately, those moments don't last very long and they go away just as fast as they came around. Sometimes we have to wait for weeks before those moments of clarity come back, but when they do, it's awesome!

When I thought about this recently, I realized that this is what it means to be in the moment, not thinking about the past, not worrying about the future, just embracing the essence of this beautiful moment. Once I realized this, I felt like there was a huge weight lifted from my shoulders which was quite liberating. I've been carrying this mental noise in my head which has affected every area in my life, whether it is at home, work, or on the mat. Maybe this was due to a fear of loss or a fear of failure, whatever it

was due to, I knew I had to work on that inner stillness and connectedness of being in the moment.

A few years ago I bought a book called “The Power of Now” by Eckhart Tolle. At the time, I thought it was an interesting read but never really applied any of its practices to my life. As I grabbed it off my book shelf and flipped through the pages, it started to make more sense to me. Reading lines like, “Forget about your life situation for awhile and pay attention to your life,” or “Completely accept what is” helped me understand what it means to live for the moment. “The present moment is all you really have” is a line that I live my life by now.

This has been a great learning experience. I now see why being in the moment was such an important lesson that my Sensei and sempai wanted me to understand. I can’t judge whether my Aikido has gotten better, but I can say that I feel a sense of freedom when I train. I feel less frustrated and definitely more connected with my partner. Most importantly, by being in the moment, I’ve let go of all the pre-calculated thoughts about my form and technique which has brought joy back to my training.

Preparing for my San Dan Exam and writing this paper has literally been life-changing. By living in the moment, I appreciate things and people and sounds and tastes and most of all relationships. Whenever I have spoken to people going up for their next kyu or dan exam, I have always told them that the day of their test isn’t really their test. The test is what you get out of the hours of preparing for it. This was my test.