

## TRANSITION

**By Tim Pritchard**

In the year 2000, I set off to Atlanta, Georgia to pursue my lifelong dream - to start my first dojo. I had just received my 2d degree black belt at Sunset Cliffs, under Bernice Tom Sensei, a dedicated student of Morihiro Saito Shihan, the most devoted uchi deshi of founder of Aikido, O'Sensei.

Early in my Aikido training, I recognized the important lineage that preceded me. At that point I put my past experiences aside, and I completely devoted myself to the lessons and principles that comprise the way of Aikido.

After nearly one month of training as a soto deshi (one who lives outside the dojo), I became an uchi deshi (one who lives and trains in the dojo). Of course, the uchi deshi systems in Japan and at Sunset Cliffs are very different experiences, but each one offers an insight into oneself and the world, with an opportunity to grow, both physically and spiritually.

When I moved away from California, my mission was to extend Iwama-style Aikido to the East Coast - to create an East Coast Iwama Association. Ego-driven, I intended to build a successful dojo of 100 students, then, in the subsequent years, I would make and develop important connections. I intended to bring together Aikido teachers once a year for a Gasshuku, with a headlining teacher like Bernice Tom Sensei or Pat Hendricks Sensei.

I began putting my plan in motion. I hooked up with my old Tae Kwon Do instructor. I started running the dojo, but, as I shared the dojo space with a different martial artist, I felt uncomfortable when his students would casually enter the dojo, talking or playing around, oblivious to the more serious tone I was trying to set in my training. I decided it was time to run my own dojo.

The location of my new dojo was not far from the old one, so I retained most of my students. However, after 2 years, poor business management forced me to close the doors, and my preconceived plan came to an abrupt halt.

Suddenly, the thing I had come to love and cherish for more than 20 years had vanished. I was within range of my sandan, so I didn't want to train at another dojo. I trust Iwama-style Aikido, and I didn't want to adapt to another Aikido style, so I chose not to train at all.

As a result of my poor business decisions, I was in a lot of debt. Opening a dojo at this point was not longer an option for me. I became depressed and blamed myself for my dojo's failure. I no longer knew what I wanted in life.

As time passed, I slept a lot, but had no energy. I wasn't the same person I had been. I felt as if I had lost my way. Even my body couldn't adjust to not doing Aikido. I developed a hyper-thyroid disease, which caused my thyroid to become overactive. When I am consistently training in Aikido, I try to improve myself. When I am on the mat, I'm able to release the aggression and tension that build up during the day. Once I stopped doing Aikido, I no longer had a way to deal with life and the stresses that it brings.

Eventually, light appeared at the end of the tunnel - Alice. If not for Alice, I might still be traveling down a dark path of despair. Alice, my loving wife, helped me find my way back to myself.

For a long time, we tried to figure out where my future lay. Having practiced martial arts intensively for so long, I had developed tunnel vision. Slowly, I began to realize that, like everyone, I have other gifts. I now believe that one cannot become too consumed by one area, at the expense of the rest of one's life. This had been my experience. I had focused so much on martial arts that I had neglected the rest of my life.

Alice told me I was a good cook. She complimented both the presentation and flavor of my cooking. She asked, "Tim, why don't you cook?" At that point, I was ready for anything new. That night we saw a commercial for Le Cordon Bleu Culinary Arts College. A week later, I had enrolled, and was a student of yet another art.

During my culinary studies, I noticed that I had changed. Previously, I had not been a serious student. I had been interested in the social aspect of school. Now my attitude was different. I sat in the front row and tried to stay on the honor roll, determined to graduate with honors, and after graduation, to find an executive chef who would teach me his craft.

My standards were still high. Just as I had chosen to study at the best Aikido available under an exceptional teacher, I wanted to work at a fine restaurant under an exceptional chef. I found such a chef at Kyma, a Mediterranean Greek restaurant.

Chef Pano is the son of Pano Karratosis, the owner of the Buckhead Life Restaurants, a group of more than 14 restaurants. During my interview, Pano and I made an immediate connection, because he recognized the discipline I had developed from my martial arts and at the culinary school.

Cooking in a commercial kitchen is a demanding job. I had to prepare intricate food for over 400 people in 3 hours at a 4-star restaurant, where mistakes were not tolerated. I had a hard time adjusting to the demands of this chaotic life. At first, the intense stress of the restaurant stayed with me, and I found myself feeling frustrated, taking my tensions home, and arguing with my wife. I was still not content.

On December 25, 2006, my life took a new turn. That Christmas morning, my family - my 1 and ½ year old son, Elijah, and my fiancé, Alice Alicea, sat together, enjoying

ourselves, laughing and opening our presents. One of Alice's gifts was a box that contained letters of the alphabet scattered loosely about. She cautioned me, "Careful, that is your next gift." Curious, I immediately arranged the letters to discover the word "Gasshuku"! Alice watched with tears in her eyes. To her surprise, rather than reacting with joy, my face became expressionless.

I knew how people perceived me when I was living at the dojo. I knew that I had a reputation that preceded me. If I were to attend the Gasshuku for just the weekend, my peers in Aikido would notice that I had changed - not just physically, but in my facility with the techniques. I recognized that this was an opportunity for change.

I telephoned Bernice Tom Sensei and asked if I could come out before the seminar to prepare for my sandan. This was a first for me. I had never before asked to be tested.

Technically, I should have taken the test several years earlier, but my dojo troubles had distracted me. I had subsequently found ways to pay off my debt, and managed to save money, and asked my sister's husband, a successful businessman, to help me develop a business plan. Now, to further my new plan, I decided that training for my test would catapult me forward, allowing me to focus my mind and start afresh.

Bernice Tom Sensei graciously agreed to allow me to test for my sandan at the Gasshuku. I set aside my previous prejudices about training at other dojos, and immediately began training. I went to a dojo that I used to frequent when I visited from California. They tried to change my Aikido, but now I was more flexible in my beliefs. My breakthrough came when I recognized that there was more than just one way.

After a few classes, I felt, "Okay! I'm back!" Knowing my trip to San Diego was approaching, I backed off my training during the last couple of weeks so that I could spend some time with my wife and my son before the trip.

Arriving in San Diego brought back some great memories. The moment I walked through the back entrance of the dojo, the phone rang. It was Sensei. Her timing could not have been more perfect. Sensei welcomed me, and then helped me to get settled back in the dojo.

My first class with Sensei started out great. My technique felt good, but I quickly ran out of breath, and had to leave the mat for water. I drank so much water, and hyperventilated so much, that I vomited. I was clearly not in the same physical shape I had been in when I left Sunset Cliffs in 2000. Frustrated by my performance, I knew I had to make some changes.

Sensei was away from the dojo for the next week. I used that time to analyze and adjust my technique. I had another breakthrough. Before, my interpretation of Aikido was that no matter how fast or slow someone attacked me, I thought I had to blend and throw at that exact speed. This was no longer my experience.

At first, in response to strong attacks, I would blend and adjust to their speed. I noticed however, that although I could handle the attacks, I was still out of breath. I discovered the problem - breath. I wasn't breathing correctly. I had been allowing the attacker to dictate how I used my energy. As I blended with my attackers, I adapted to their tempo. It was like trying to run their race.

Once I came to this realization, I changed my approach, adjusting the attacker's tempo to suit me. I maintained the important principles of Aikido that I had practiced so many times, but now I no longer focused on the techniques. I allowed myself to trust my technique and concentrate on the moment.

This was a liberating experience. I was able to get on the mat and no longer worry about putting my hand here or my foot there. I was able to just be present and in the moment with my partner's energy. Once I made that adjustment, my movements felt effortless.

Although I was eligible for my sandan many years earlier, I recognize that this is the appropriate time for me to test. I needed the opportunity for the mental and personal growth that could only come with time and life's experiences.

In conclusion, I rallied the uchi deshis together, knocked out some major cleaning responsibilities, and got the dojo looking great. At the same time, I tried to impart to the uchi deshis a sense of renewed dedication and devotion to what is an opportunity of a lifetime. Now, as I walk around the dojo, I'm taken aback in awe.

"Wow! Look at this place!" I say to myself. The people here are so lucky to have a wonderful place like this where they can do such a unique martial art. To the uchi deshis and the soto deshis, I say, "take a look at where you live and train - appreciate where you are and who you are around, because there are some wonderful people here."

I was without Aikido for a while. It was a very long time for me. Training again has reawakened my mind, my body, and my spirit, and rekindled my love for Aikido and my dedication to Sunset Cliffs Aikido and the Iwama lineage of Morihiro Saito Shihan.