

Letting Go Discussion – Ch. 15

Threes

Friday, June 18, 2010

Good evening. Tonight is the fifteenth chapter of our book *Letting Go*, entitled “Threes. As I’m sure you’ve noticed, this is by far the shortest chapter in the book, being one and one half pages long, but it’s loaded with some interesting implications.

We always want to be in the best school, don’t we? I mean we want to be in the best group of anything. If you are in the Kiwanis club, you want to feel that your group is better than the Lions club. If you are in America you feel like your country is better than any other country. And even if you came to America from another country and have been here for thirty or forty years, you still have some sense of betrayal for that original country you came from, some sense of it being better, because that’s what you were conditioned to believe.

It’s only natural and human that we like to look at the group we are in as being “the best.” It makes us feel better about what we are doing. It makes us feel like we are making a worthwhile investment, because it’s a lot of work, time and effort, going into your training. If you are a Christian, it’s very evident that you think you are on to the right way and the rest of those guys out there are pagans, and like-wise with each of them. If you ask any group, or even any sect within any group, each group, no matter how small or large it is, always feels that they have a corner on righteousness, on the best way of practicing.

Of course this tends to lead to egocentric, sectarian thinking. But Tohei Sensei mentions in his Thirteen Rules for Disciplinants that we have to be very careful never to speak ill, or even think ill, of another martial art. He says the mountain never disrespects the river because it is low, and the river never envies the mountain because it’s high. Everything is required in this world. There is a reason for everything.

You know, up in Iao Valley where I go many afternoons, if you look sometime you’ll see that there are twelve Coconut trees in front of the Hawaiian hale (house) and those twelve Coconut trees have been there for over eighty years, maybe even a hundred years, but a long time. And these twelve trees are in perfect harmony with each other. There are some that are taller, some shorter. Some of them are in the background, some in the foreground. Some have fuller heads, some this different genetics in them, meaning some of them have a bit of Samoan Coconut in them so they a little fuller frond. But if you look at this grove of Coconuts they are in perfect response to each other. Over a long period of time, as they have grown...of course they have no mind to be something special. Whether they are high or low doesn’t ever occur to a Coconut tree. To be something special, something more or something less, it has no mind like that. Each

one, through the years, perfectly responds to the other trees, so that as a result, over these many years, they've come to be in perfect harmony, in perfect response to each other.

This is something I notice maybe because I'm a landscape designer and a landscape contractor. And there is no way that, as a human, I can take twelve trees and do that. No matter how good my eye is or how perfectly I think I am placing those trees, it's always artificial. It's never the same as this. Maybe after coming back to a planting that I did twenty years ago, I see that the trees have begun this dance with each other. So you begin to see that, but there is still something...I don't know. It takes many years for this to happen because they are such slow growing creatures.

And I was looking at those trees and it is just so moving to me because, you know, we are so preoccupied with our own position in relation to everyone else, both as individuals and as this chapter is talking about, as a group. And this can be very damaging to your individual practice and to the spirit of humility that has to prevail in the group in order for true practice to be happening. To whatever degree there is a sense of exclusiveness and specialness, either superiority or inferiority, to that degree we are not practicing.

So I will read this very short chapter:

Threes

Maybe you have noticed; a lot of things in Aikido seem to come in threes. Kaisho, gyosho, sosho (beginning, intermediate, advanced techniques) is obviously a typical example. Kaisho means the basic, simple motion practicing of a technique, gyosho means the nage interjecting a certain amount of rhythmic centrifugal force into it, and sosho is the natural and full practice that you might do in a demonstration or taigi competition.

Tohei Sensei always used to say that 25 percent of the people that practice Aikido in the world use brute force. And 74 percent of the people rely upon technique to throw their opponent. And only 1 percent of the people practicing Aikido actually understand how to use Ki Principles to lead their opponent. Sometimes we forget that, no matter whether you are doing kaisho, gyosho, or sosho, or whether you are doing physical Aikido, highly technical Aikido, or pure mind/body unified Aikido, none of these are isolated and independent practices. One does lead on to the next. In other words, the higher levels include everything that comes before them. So even when you are doing mind/body unified Aikido, you still have to use the physical body. It still involves the physical body, even if you are performing "no touch" arts. So we can never say that physical Aikido is "wrong." Everyone who ever did Aikido is doing physical Aikido, at least! In this same way, everyone who does Aikido also does technique, because there is no movement without some form of technique. It is just that, if you are doing technique, you are

also including and valuing the physical, and if you are doing mind/body unified Aikido, you are also always including and valuing both the physical and the technical, or form of movement. So even the most refined level of Aikido training must include all the parts that make up that whole. It is therefore not in any way exclusive of those. It is more inclusive. By definition, it has to appreciate and include the elements that make it up. The point here is that mind/body unified Aikido must not be viewed as “exclusive” in any way.

Many years ago, Tohei Sensei said that when he first came to teach in the west, which happened to be here in Hawaii, he had a great discovery, one of the things that he said most profoundly affected his teaching later in life. He related that, when he was teaching in Japan, he would show the students how to do something, and they would go off and do it ten thousand times, practicing over and over again, never questioning why they are doing it. But when he came to the west, he would give the students something to do and they would try it five or ten times and then ask “Why are we doing this? I don’t see any effect. What’s the point of this?” So this really got Tohei Sensei thinking in a way that he never had, because no one had ever asked him that question before. “Why do we do this?”

Of course, in order for practice to make a difference in our lives, both are necessary. We have to know why we are doing something and we need to be able to do it ten thousand times. And as you well know, different schools of Aikido tend to emphasize more or less of these two essential ingredients to practice. In Japan, and in many schools of Aikido today, it’s expected that you will just continue to practice and practice and never question why you are doing that.

A couple of years ago, a few students and I went to Southern France to visit Nobuyoshi Tamura Sensei. This is a famous sensei who was a good friend of Suzuki Sensei’s and so Suzuki Sensei asked me to go to pay respects to him. This individual is probably the most successful Aikido teacher, in terms of number of students. He has thirty thousand students in France alone. His school is Aikikai. When we were sitting together at lunch I asked him, “So what is your teaching like? Do you help the students understand why it is they are doing what they are doing?” And he said, “Oh, absolutely not. Never give them any secrets. Don’t tell them the meaning. That will only confuse them. They have no chance to understand. If you do that, they will quit. Just keep teaching them the movements and they will stay around and train through the years, and eventually maybe they will get something.” Now, of course, Tohei Sensei was his teacher. So his personal Aikido movement is very much unified, but not necessarily his students. This repetition approach is very important. But it is not common or usual that the students actually do the necessary repetition on their own. Most students, unfortunately, are not able to do this kind of practice. So this business of repeating over and over again is a fine idea, if you do the work. But if you don’t do it, what’s the point? And then if that is all you are teaching there is nothing much left to assist the students beyond that.

Many years ago, when Maruyama Sensei was with Ki Society, he was teaching here on Maui. One evening he asked, "Chris, I'd like you to begin practicing mawashi waza one thousand times each morning. Please do that for one year." I said, "Hai, Sensei." And then one of the other students said, "Why don't you tell us all to do that?" And he said, "Because he will do it, and you won't." So this is a common problem. No matter how good the teacher is, or how long he teaches, how good the student is, how long they study with the teacher, if they don't do their individual practice "ten thousand times" so to speak, there is not much chance of progress. However, even if they do that, that is still not enough, from my point of view.

Asking why and understanding why is equally important because it can bring a student who is having a difficult time staying in a disciplined way with the practice more into the understanding of the art. By "why" we mean, "Why am I doing this? What is my intention?" Of course we are talking about what is your intention, not what is my intention, or Suzuki Sensei's or Shinichi Sensei's. We are not talking about somebody else's intention. We are saying that you have to ask yourself what your intention is. "Why am I doing this?" Naturally, as a Ki Society teacher, I am constantly addressing this question to you. By repeatedly asking that question and looking into that, then your intention becomes much clearer, your motivation becomes much more stable, and you are able to train on a much deeper level. That has two benefits. Number one, it helps you progress in your techniques and the other practices you are doing in the dojo. And second, what is unique about Ki Society is that by asking this question while you are practicing ten thousand times, automatically you begin to see the metaphoric value of the repetitive practice that you do, and this begins to change the way that you relate to the world in your daily life.

So again, what we do in Ki Aikido is to always try to emphasize this part of the practice. It's not to perfect yourself just in the dojo. Yes, please do so, but it's not just to become a dojo expert. What's the value of that if your life doesn't change? The point of any kind of practice, (I hope for all of you, it certainly is for me), is that we see that it is changing our lives. This continually goes on. Some of you here are *Yondan*, *Godan*, and even *Rokudan*, and even though you have been practicing for ten, twenty, twenty-five years, still to this day you see changes happening in your life all the time because of this kind of practice. So that is the great value.

One time I was in Japan, and my son, who was at Waseda University, wanted me to meet one of his professors because she was an *Aikikai* student and he thought it might be interesting for us to meet. So he took me to the school and we sat in the office with this woman, and I talked with her a little bit about Aikido. I asked her, "Why do you do Aikido?" And she said, "Oh, I just love to get out on the mat and mix it up with those guys, I love to throw them down and love to get thrown by them. I love the physical aspect of training." And I said, "How old are you." She responded that she was forty-six. So I said, "I'm fifty six. Do you know what is going to happen

to your body, when you start getting older?” And she goes, “Oh I know, I’ve heard. I can see.” I said, “So what are you going to do when that begins to happen, if you say the training means this to you?” And she said, “I’ll quit. If I can’t do that physical workout, then I’ll quit.”

So there’s another pitfall of training in that way. I won’t say “in a certain school” because I don’t know about every school. But this is definitely a pitfall of your training when your intention may be very clear, but very shallow, very limited.

I think what ever we do in our practice, we want to promote the most possibility for ourselves. And any kind of feeling of exclusivity or specialness limits those possibilities. So anyone that comes to this dojo, no matter what school or dojo they are affiliated with, we always welcome them to train with us and enjoy that. I think that is very important. And likewise, when you go out into the world and travel to different places, please don’t hesitate to go into a dojo of any school. You don’t want to carry a negative judgment of any school. Of course, as I’ve discussed here, there are different ways of training, and I am training in this school because I like the way we train. I think it’s very effective and I like it. But on the other hand, there are Ki-Aikido instructors that don’t actually train this way. And there are instructors in other schools, like Tamura Sensei, who are quite accomplished at moving with mind/body unification, and in their personal lives may be quite liberated.

A student emailed me the other day. He has been studying our discussion groups, reading all the material that Tracy puts on our website. He’s read Tohei Sensei’s books and he wants to train with a passion. But where he lives there is no Ki Society dojo. He has a good job and a family and is not able to move. The other day he emailed me and said that he had found a *Daito Ryu Aikijujutsu* dojo nearby and wondered what that was like. He has no real experience, so he doesn’t have any basis to make a judgment, and he asked, “What do you think? Should I go train there?” So what do you think? What should I tell him? I mean, I don’t know who that instructor is there. Of course our knee-jerk reaction is that is a very rough school and they don’t talk much about meaning. But that may be completely wrong. Maybe that particular instructor has somehow discovered everything that I’ve discovered through Ki Society practice through his own Daito Ryu practice. Who knows? We can’t say. It’s not the school, necessarily, that makes the difference. I was going to say that it is the teacher, and that is true. But finally it’s you. You make the teaching valuable or not. You can have an excellent teacher and not do the training and not have any awakening. You can also have not that great of a teacher and really do the practice for yourself, discover yourself through your own practice, and then still it’s OK.

So, like I said, this chapter is kind of loaded, because of the implications. And these are things that we don’t want to talk about. You know, it’s often pushed under the carpet. And we don’t want to talk about it because all of us tend to harbor feelings of exclusivity and preciousness.

We want to be in the right situation. So when the subject of another school comes up, even sometimes other Ki Society schools, we give them a little raspberry. We tend to think that what we are doing here on Maui is something very special. That's all very nice, but look out. This is not about me. My own practice is for me, but your practice is for you. If you say you have this excellent opportunity in this wonderful dojo with the wonderful teaching and we have this great specialness here on Maui, then are you sure you are taking full advantage of it? Do you say that out of one side of your mouth and then actually take it all for granted out of the other side of your mouth? See? This is why I say we have to be careful.

OK, so questions?

Student: So Sensei, your sentence at the end says "The point here is that mind/body unified Aikido must not be viewed as exclusive in any way." And yet if only one percent of the people practicing Aikido actually understand how to use Ki Principles, is that not very exclusive?

That would be considering our selves to be quite exclusive, yes. When I first wrote that about 25%, 74%, and 1% it was in the first book, Ki-Aikido on Maui, the training manual. And I received quite a response from some guy who was very upset that Tohei Sensei was not more generous with his allowances there. Well, to begin with, as I wrote, this is something that Tohei Sensei used to say. And there is a point to it. The point he is trying to make, (and I will admit that I am perhaps being a little liberal here in my interpretation of what his meaning is), I would say that he is talking about in any Aikido school in the world, not Ki-Aikido schools versus other schools. In other words, in any Aikido school in the world, it would be lucky if more than 1% of the people in that school really understand mind/body unification. Who here can say they've mastered that? Right? So that's not so far off. It's not so unreasonable.

Student: Well, I can identify with the woman in Japan, because my favorite part of Aikido was the waza part, and I can't do that anymore. I really miss it, and yet I am not going to quit Aikido because I can't do that.

So she said she was going to quit at that point and you didn't quit. Why not?

Student: Because that is only one part of it. There's a totality that I experience in the teaching of Aikido that still nourishes me in a way that I want to continue.

So that probably points to a really important part of the training. And again I am not going to say that that is completely unique to Ki Society. It depends upon the teacher. But it is very important that the teaching offer something beyond mere technique, or we'd all quit when we hit forty or fifty.

I will admit that I too miss some of the physical intensity of the training that my body cannot do now at sixty-six. But I am much more deeply into my experience of Aikido now than ever before. I mean yes I enjoyed jumping around on the mat and throwing and falling and doing all that with Suzuki Sensei and with other students. But it was quite shallow. It is fine for what it is. There's nothing wrong with that. But it took me years and years, and it really wasn't until I wasn't able to do that so much anymore that my practice began to deepen in any kind of profound way. Although I would not have admitted to that when I was younger.

I think it is important to understand that, just like we believe in equality here in the United States, that is not denying the uniqueness of each individual. That doesn't make everybody pabulum. That doesn't white wash the differences. Of course Ki Society is a very unique teaching. But unique doesn't mean exclusive, as in some kind of special club. Because you just can't judge others. You don't know what level others may be practicing at. And just because their form doesn't look like the form we are used to doing, you cannot surmise from that, or you do so at your own risk, that therefore they are inferior in some way. They are just different.

Student: Thank you.

Student: Sensei, I don't think we all do have a feeling that our way is the best. And I do think that, through the maturing process of our training (some of us have been training for many years) we do feel very much like we respect other countries, other ethnic groups. One of the things that I have liked about Aikido since I joined back in 1981 was that women and men trained together and there didn't seem to be any difference. And I think that we as a group here in this dojo mostly are people who do accept and respect differences between other groups. You started out by saying that all of us think that our country is the best. Well, I think a lot of us don't have the feeling, that we feel we are residents of planet earth, that we are citizens of the world, and we feel ourselves to be a part of a greater thing than just America or even Hawaii or Ki-Aikido. But that's probably a process of maturation. What would your comment be about that?

Yeah, I did say that. And I think that when I say that I am pointing to a general human condition. I am very happy to hear that you have moved beyond that human condition. But even for those of us that have embraced a more world-centric view, probably if we look closely, there is still some sense of identification lingering. And it just takes the right challenge, or just the exact right contradiction in the right time and the right place for it to spark and come out of us. That's why we sit. Of course we don't sit in any sense of satisfaction that we are as mature as we are. Maturity is a wonderful thing. And I admire it in you, personally. And it is always nice to consider with faith and clarity that our cup is half full, not half empty. But that said, our

practice is to discover what yet remains to be discovered. And so, I say things like that, in some sense, to maybe even provoke a little bit of response. And I think I did, in fact, provoke just such a response in you.

Student: Yes, I think you did. I see that. Thank you Sensei.

Student: Sensei, for me, my experience was that I fell into Aikido at the right time in my life. But I do wonder sometimes about the “good old days” when you say they used to really “mix it up.” And I wonder, what about the twenty five year old that’s out there who doesn’t see the value in what we are doing. Maybe they’ll see it some day, but how do we get them to come? We maybe just look like some kind of peace group to them. If I was twenty-five I probably wouldn’t be here, but now I’m at this age and it fell into my lap at the right time. So I guess it is timing, for this dojo anyway, when you arrive. But I always think about the kid out there who could really use it and who needs it and who doesn’t know.

Well, you were once twenty-five and you weren’t here. And there are many twenty-five year olds here on Maui who also are not here. And I won’t say it’s tied completely to age, although as you point out, it’s likely that in a younger person that level of maturity is less likely to be there to cause them to come into a group where, even though there is a lot of physical movement and action and we do have students who are young and enjoying that, that’s not exclusively what we are emphasizing. And even when we emphasize the physical movement we are emphasizing why we are doing that movement, what it’s coming out of, why we practice in this way. So it takes a certain level of maturity, or at least disappointment in what an individual has been trying to use every day to get by. There was an article in the paper this morning about a fellow from Maui that was being put in jail for beating up people a couple of times. And he was very upset, very emotional in front of the judge because he is going to prison for a long time. He was saying to the judge how sorry he was and how he realizes now how unfair that was and how foolish, how unproductive, and how crappy that he is going to have to go to prison now. It is a tragedy, not just for the people he beat up, but it is a tragedy for him. But with that mind set that he had, there was no way that he could have come and practiced with us. However, if he had the chance today, he might choose it.

It takes some life-transforming event to get us to the place where we are motivated. And as you well know, even if you had been motivated by a sense of emptiness or lack in your life to come here and practice, once you get here you see that you still have plenty of resistance. And so a good deal of the practice itself is this maturity process that Mele is talking about. And that’s what I mean when I talk about acquiring a clear intention by asking that question again and again, “Why am I here? What am I doing here?” And there are a lot of possible answers, and you have to get down to the one that allows you to train on the deepest level. And that might not

happen the first day you walk into the dojo. That might not happen for a while. Some of us here have come and trained for years, and then lost that clear intention, became confused or disoriented in some way, and left the dojo. And then later realized what they lost and come back again, and come back that much more mature, and with that much clearer of an intention. This is not uncommon. It's not just one or two people in this room. Even some students that didn't maybe physically leave, but went through a period of dryness where they are questioning over and over again, "Why was it that I am doing this?"

So this is something that I am always asking you to sit with all the time, and bring up to yourself. "What am I doing here? What is my intention, and what am I expecting to happen here? And how does that happen?" It's not just "What do I want?" but "Why do I want it?" And does that justify the kind of practice that I am doing. Or does what I want not come from the two day a week half-assed effort that I put into it? And maybe that will be a very frustrating thing for me down the line if I keep expecting to have some kind of awakening into the true nature of my experience of this life when I only glance at the nature of this life twice a week for a couple of hours. That is a little unreasonable to expect. And when you see that, that's when you start getting up an hour earlier in the morning. "OK, then now I better re-double my efforts. If this is why I am here, then let me practice commensurate with this kind of result or change that I want to see happen in my life. Maybe it's not just a change in behavior as much as a change in perception, seeing what is actually going on in my life, realizing that what counts is what I haven't seen yet, not what I do see. What is plaguing me, what is causing me to suffer and struggle, is what I haven't yet seen."

Student: Tracy Sensei asks us "why?" in the beginning class a lot. In the beginning it was because I saw something spiritual in my life. And then also, when I see Fincher move, and knowing he's sixty, then I want to move like that when I am sixty. So the why does change a lot at time goes on.

Yeah, Fincher said to me the other day, "Sensei, I have finally come to terms with the fact that I am never going to be able to move like you. But you know what? It doesn't matter. I've finally realized that it doesn't make any difference at all." That's not what he is here for, in other words. So that is getting clear with your purpose, clear with what you expect to get out of this investment you are making. So balancing that is really important. And of course, being willing to change, because the more you practice the more you see, and so the more you see requires for you to practice more. Any kind of awakening you see, any kind of seeing, carries with it automatically a responsibility to be true to it. And that plagues us. Because we always want to get that new goody, that new awakening, and then bring it back into our normal every day way of seeing things and use it as a power structure to make us more powerful, something special.

And I want to emphasize again, you might listen to this and think that there are people like that but that is not you. Let me just suggest that it is you, that there is no one free of this. And if you assume that you are, that's dangerous.

Student: Sensei, in this chapter you start off talking about the threes, and you give examples of how they lead to each other or relate to each other. And then when you were talking about other types of schools maybe not offering everything that our school offers, is that by comparison, not separating ourselves from them a little bit?

I may not have been as clear as I meant to be as I was discussing other schools, and part of the reason is because I am not very knowledgeable about other schools because I never practiced them. I only practiced Ki-Aikido seriously. But I would like to say that other schools may offer many other things that our school doesn't offer. I don't know. I see that they do techniques, because that's obvious. But with other teachers they may be offering other kinds of things that our school doesn't offer. I don't know.

I came to Maui and this was the Aikido that was on Maui. You know I practiced for six months before Suzuki Sensei got here, because he was training in Japan with Tohei Sensei. And I was ready to leave. Yet the teacher I had during those six months was a very good technician. I was enjoying myself physically, but that is not why I was here, really, and I knew that then. I was looking for something that was going to change my life in a much more dramatic way. And so when Suzuki Sensei walked into the dojo, I knew I had found the man that was going to change my life in a dramatic way. Most of you knew him and you know what I mean by that.

I have trained with other people from other schools, often actually. Often they come here. And when I've traveled to other places I saw other schools. Sometimes I just watched, but on occasion I trained with them, and many of them attend my seminars now. In the old days I always found that strange and difficult because they were doing a very different kind of thing than what Suzuki Sensei was teaching me. But I was intrigued by it, and I still am, in a sense, interested. I am always interested in what's out there. But my personal practice is so all consuming now that I would never consider, I don't think, running off and trying to learn something new. I have just barely scratched the surface here, and I see the more I learn the more I see I just don't understand. I do not know. And in fact I don't think that it can be known in any kind of concrete sense.

Student: So then by your explanation right there, every day is new for you as you go along.

Yeah, very much so. I mean I am practicing, so as much as I have the capacity, every day is new, every moment is new. But I am still practicing because my capacity is not there yet, it is

not enough yet. I have to practice more. Suzuki Sensei used to say, “So, I die tomorrow? Fine. Next life time begin again.” Keep practicing. Maybe next life time the capacity reaches a level where true liberation, complete freedom, can happen. I don’t know.

But I do know that Tohei Sensei’s vision and experience, as he expressed it and taught it to me through the years, is still the most inspiring and challenging teaching that I have ever come across, because it is so inclusive, and so not exclusive. It so includes everything. I’ve never, and I’ve studied a lot of different spiritual disciplines, and none of them come close to the inclusiveness of this kind of practice. Which is why I’ve chosen to stay with this and do this kind of practice.

Student: So then this is the best.

Ha! OK, we’ll close on that note. Thank you very much.