

Holland Spring Seminar Q & C
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C. Curtis

So, here we are once again.

It is always hard to ask revealing questions in a situation like this, for everyone.

Adding to this difficulty is what is known as the "Sensei factor". For instance, during parties held at Headquarters in Japan, we would have a separate round table for Tohei Sensei down at the end of the room and he would sit in a chair behind this table and there were always two or three chairs there as an invitation for the students to go sit and talk with Tohei Sensei. What an opportunity! Often Suzuki Sensei and I would go sit down and talk to him, and one time Suzuki Sensei was doing something else and I went over and sat down with Tohei Sensei to ask some questions about something and he said, "Why does no one come sit with me? What about all of these people?" The others were all drinking and having fun, so maybe they were waiting to get a bit more courage up.

This is the same thing that happens when the Sensei gives us a Ki Test. There is a kind of a false respect there. I mean, of course, it's very important that we maintain the student/teacher relationship with the Sensei, and that he or she also maintains that. That has to continue. Maybe calling the teacher "Sensei" is part of that, but at the same time, that's not to create a barrier or make the person inaccessible. A good teacher should be completely open and accessible to everyone, right? And at the same time you don't take advantage of that openness, as a student. So, I didn't know what to tell Tohei Sensei, except "You ought to know. You're the boss." (which of course I didn't say)

It's always very difficult that way. Occasionally we would have Question and Answer sessions with Tohei Sensei in Japan. Can you imagine how scared people were to ask him a question? When you ask a question, it reveals that you don't actually know what is going on in some way, and you don't want anybody to know that. But do you realize that none of us know what's going on, me included? It's just that with me it's OK not to know. I hope that with you it can be OK too. We don't have to be afraid to reveal this to others.

Many students and even teachers have a very difficult time with this, because in some way, when you open yourself to being criticized, or constructively helped in some way, this seems like admitting that there is some possible part of your life that isn't yet perfect. This is crazy, isn't it? But is there anybody here that doesn't have that impulse?

Of course, we all have that impulse, that sort of self-aggrandizement, that self-protection, "I must maintain my integrity here."

So...that said, I would like to open the discussion to some meaningful questions. And you know, I've said this probably one hundred times, but if you have a question, chances are many other people in the room have that same question. And these talks are recorded and placed on the website, and so thousands of people listen to them, and so hundreds of those people may have that same question. So look how effective this can be. Don't be selfish. Ask your question, so that it can help other people.

Sensei: I have this question about the answering. Every time someone asks something and he gets an answer from a highly qualified teacher, an honorable teacher, he is believing him and he stops questioning. And so he thinks "Well the teacher has told me how it is, so it is that way." You know what I mean?

In the early days, very wise people told us the earth is flat. So when I ask someone, "Sensei is the world flat?" and he says "Yes" I believe him and never question anymore about the world. Because we tend to think that the teacher is always right. Am I wrong?

Is that your question? Are you wrong? What is your question?

Student: The question is, why do we always have the need to ask questions?

Oh, that's a bit different. First of all, if you have a teacher that tells you the earth is flat, you need to find another teacher. That was a few years ago that I believed that, but now I don't say that anymore.

Seriously, man is possessed with the quest for knowledge, because knowledge makes us feel like we have a stable position in our environment. This environment in the dojo, in Aikido, is a very unusual kind of environment, and it is hard to find someone that you can ask questions to about how to act. "What am I supposed to do here? What is training all about?" You know?

I'll say this: I had a discussion with Nobuyoshi Tamura Sensei before he died, in the south of France about this subject. I said to him, "I think I know how you teach, Sensei." And he said, "Oh, I know how you teach too." And so I said, "Well, OK. So why do you do this?" By the way, the way he teaches is to not really allow any questions, and if someone does ask a question, he doesn't really offer any explanation at all. And in fact, he didn't spend any time clarifying what the nature of the practice is. This is normal in Aikikai. It is very different than Ki Society. That's fine.

Tohei Sensei was his teacher as well as my teacher. And Tohei Sensei was not like that at all. I can't say he was like me, but since he was my teacher, and he taught this way, then I tend to teach in the same way. So I asked him, "Why do you do this. Why did you change from how Tohei Sensei taught you?" "Oh" he said, "I have many students. If I taught like that I wouldn't have many students. Because as soon as they think they know the answer they go away. So don't tell them anything. Don't give them any secrets and they will stay around for years hoping someday they will understand." So which is better? I don't think that sounds fair to me.

But on the other hand, this question has a good point to it. I always tell you not to believe me, because I can't actually teach you anything. You have to discover for yourself. I said yesterday that the teacher has three responsibilities. First, I can show you that it can be done. By my presence you can see that following this practice actually has some effect. Right? And then secondly I can show you the practices, the "how-to", how to do Ki Breathing, how to do Ki Meditation, how to swing bokken, how to do this technique and that technique. This is all the how-to. And the more years you practice, the more how-to instruction you receive, the more comfortable you get with all of that. And then, third, as all of us have problems, if you bring them up to me I can help you to move them out of the way. This kind of problem is like not understanding something, or something is always jumping up out of the subconscious mind to get in the way of your understanding. If you have those kinds of problems, this question and answer period is the place where you can say, "Hey, I don't understand this, and it's driving me crazy."

Now, I don't always provide you with an answer. Sometimes I don't even answer at all, I don't say anything. Sometimes I ask you a question in return, to help you kind of look into that a little bit. And sometimes I do a little exploration with you, which is for you to experience the answer, not just to have me tell you the answer. And then sometimes I actually tell you something. But it is a mix of all of these, and it depends upon the relationship of that particular person with me, and that particular question at that moment. Other people on the outside might not see why I am doing what I am doing. OK, but if you stay around long enough, you will begin to see that.

To me, this question and answer session is a very important part of, at least one third of, the practice, and yet we don't devote that much time to it, formally. You, Toby, Jeff and Carlos have plenty of chances in terms of teacher/student relationship because we have plenty of time together. You often have all night to ask me questions. And that's OK. But while you have all of this private time, these other students don't get that time with me. Suzuki Sensei used to tell me to go somewhere else so other students could come and ask him questions. Because I was always there with him, living with him practically.

So, let's give them a chance, OK?

Student: In the book that you wrote, there is a chapter about Cadence Breathing. Let's say, if you are climbing a steep mountain or something, getting into Cadence Breathing is not so difficult. But let's say, if you ride a bicycle it's much more difficult, because the body is not really in a sort of cadence movement. Can you give some tips on that?

I don't ride bikes much. Walking, yes, is a very rhythmic thing to do. I kind of assume that is also the case in bike riding. Cadence Breathing is designed for hiking or walking, or any repetitive physical action. When I walk in the morning in my neighborhood I am always doing Cadence Breathing, so many steps per breath in, and so many steps per out breath. I guess if I rode a bike I could someone see a way to find this rhythm.

Student: Well I've tried it out a couple times, but it simply doesn't work, because the road conditions change all the time.

How about walking?

Student: Walking? I haven't tried it yet. But let's say, walking up a hill, that is no problem. I can do the Cadence Breathing.

Well, there are no hills over here in Holland.

Student: But sometimes you do go to the mountains and so then you can do this.

OK. Cadence Breathing is not designed to help you with endurance or stress. It's to make something that is repetitive that you do into a meditation. Just like when you are practicing Ki Breathing, it is easier, because mind and body are engaged in the same activity, to pay attention, to allow your attention to include both. And so likewise when you are doing Cadence Breathing, that helps in relation to your walking. It coordinates it. Whereas if you are just walking along without doing this, that will be much more difficult. Just check it out when you walk to lunch today. Yami, yami, yami, all the way to lunch, non-stop talking and most are completely unaware of what's happening in the body. It is just a gossip session. Suzuki Sensei used to say, "Don't talk to me while I am walking. I am doing my walking here." And you know, of course I loved Suzuki Sensei, but I thought that was a little odd at the time. But do you know now I do that too? I thought that was weird that he didn't want to just gossip with me, just to talk with me about stuff. I mean, we did sometimes, but when he was walking he was walking, going somewhere. So it's to help you be completely engaged in it, completely engaged in whatever you are doing.

Well, good luck with your bike riding. You are lucky you don't have any hillsides and you

can just enjoy yourself gliding around. I don't see anybody pedaling hard in this country.

Student: We have some wind.

Wind? Oh yeah, that's right, wind must be an issue.

Student: You said to us, "Accept what is presented." And sometimes, in very close relationships or in the earthquake and tsunami that just happened in Japan, I can't accept some things, or I have no equanimity. Even in close relationships, sometimes I don't want to accept what is presented.

OK. That's a good question. I think a lot of people might have that question, particularly with the tragedies that have happened recently in Japan, and of course elsewhere in the world.

When we say "accept with equanimity," what we mean by that is "don't make it worse than it already is." Of course when someone we love dies, it hurts. So there is pain. But there is not necessarily suffering. If you say, "Oh, what am I going to do without that person? It's going to wreck my life, I don't think I can go on," etc, if you do all of that stuff that you see people doing at funerals, that's making it much worse for yourself. Yeah, it hurts. It doesn't mean that you have to hide that from anyone. I mean it's fine to cry. I cry. I cry in movies. I'm a crier. It's OK, I think. So far it's still going OK. That's not making it worse.

Let's say it this way. We tend to cause pain to others and to ourselves, without meaning to, through our own unobserved habits. Our habit of perception, habit of speech, habit of emotion. And that's always making bad worse. There's a lot of really tough stuff in life, tougher for some than for others, but still everybody has tough stuff. So you know life is hard. Just don't make it worse.

Like everything else, of course, there are levels and levels of this. As you progress you will begin to see things differently. When you ask me that question, it is a very self/other question, a subject/object question, a very dual world question. How do we deal with the suffering in the world? As you train more and more, it begins to leak into your awareness, into your experience, that things are not the way they seem to be in this world. And it can be very disorienting and confusing for a while. Every time you open up a new chamber, deepening your experience, then it is very difficult for a while, before you get back in balance. You may think, "Wow, you mean it's not what I always thought?"

I know you have all experienced something like this in the past, because you are

studying Aikido and that happens often in some ways, right? But you have to really get into deep inquiry before that's going to radically change the way you see the world. When I am teaching Aikido, if you haven't noticed, sometimes it's noticeable that what I'm teaching is pretty radical. But I don't want you to just believe it. I want you to experience it for yourself. And I'm only here as a kind of coach, or a cheerleader. I want to show you this is how you do it, and now please do it, so that we can dive deeper into this experience of life together.

You know, there are things that I can talk about with Jeff and Carlos, because they've been training for so long with me, that I can't talk about with general students. So let's get going.

Did that answer your question?

Student: Yes.

Student: Sensei, I just heard you say that what you are teaching is pretty radical. I don't find it radical. In a way, you are putting words on concepts that have been with human kind forever, dealing with the idea of death, understanding what life is about. I don't find this radical. Of course, the fact is when we are at work and in the every day life, and we are not surrounded by people who are necessarily asking these kinds of questions, then we are influenced by that and come to the dojo with this. And then you confront us with these kind of contradictions. But if we look into what you are saying, it's not radical. It's giving some clues, actually, some interesting clues. And I would even say, with the little I know, that some philosophers have been looking into that direction, it seems to me, in the past.

Thank you. Absolutely, nothing is original here. You're right. Of course, this is old news. The question is, have we been paying attention through the centuries, and for most of us, no, we haven't been. So we come to the dojo and it is only radical from the outside looking in. Of course, if you are experiencing it and you become sort of familiar and comfortable in this different way of experiencing life, it doesn't seem radical all the time. However, as I said a little while ago, I can talk about some things with my close students that I can't talk about with everybody. And this is not because of intellectual difficulties. It's not about the brain. I am talking about certain experiences, and when they are known then they can be included in the teaching. Whereas I don't so much do that for everybody, even though sometimes people think I am too radical.

I don't really have too much more to say about that. I mean, my experience, as I have grown through the years, every time I come upon something new, it's so radical I don't know how to deal with it. And then it becomes just the way it is. I think that what you

are saying is that if you are in it, it doesn't seem so radical. Is that right?

Student: I guess I am possibly confusing the word "radical" with something else. Because my perception of what you give us and what you say, is that you do it in a very kind and soft manner. And despite the fact that the topics and the clues you are giving are in essence radical, because they contradict some of the stuff we experience elsewhere, etc., my perception is that if we accept this understanding or looking into this new direction, we see our contradictions. But I don't find it negative to be faced with these contradictions, somehow. Even though somewhere in me there is frustration, maybe.

Yeah, it seems that you are inspired by that kind of view. Thank you.

Student: I have a question about intension. I find myself not constant in my intension, because I'm very easily distracted by emotions. I am very aware of them, but it's a big wave, and it comes to me, and I lose my intension and then I am fully in the emotion. And that's sometimes a problem for me to keep my path.

Can you give me an example?

Student: Yes. My son left the house. He is nineteen years old and he is living in Indonesia right now, and I have very much emotions with that one, that I have to let him go. He is finding his way and that's OK, and I really support him. But for me it's very difficult to deal with. And then I am wondering by myself, I did a lot of training, but it seems like I am losing control of everything, and where am I? I don't know where I am any more.

Good. Maybe you are getting closer.

Student: OK. But I don't know what's going on, and I don't know what's happening.

So what's the question?

Student: Well, maybe it's not a question.

It's just a complaint? You want to register a complaint here with with Complaint Registry?

Student: Yes, it's a kind of complaint as well.

Well, sure. It's difficult. Things are not the way they used to be. They're different now.

Student: I'm leaving the comfort zone.

Yeah, you're leaving the comfort zone. So, what's the problem?

Student: Well, maybe there's no problem. But it feels so scary, and I don't know where to go, and I don't know what's going to happen with me. I feel so strange.

Yeah, we're all alone here. There is no one who can hold your hand. No Mommy or Daddy, right? We're beyond that now. We are alone in this. This is why practice is so important. It's not for the times when we are in our comfort zone, but for when things start to get really shook, and it just seems like everything is now in the air and all crazy, like the inside of one of those glass snow balls we shake. And of course you cannot control any of that. When things are going well and we are in our comfort zone, we like that, because it gives us the feeling that we are in control. But actually we are not. We're just going through a lucky period, where everything seems fine. But as soon as something gets screwed up, then "I'm not in control any more. What happened?" Well, you were never in control.

Student: I knew this by my mind. But right now I am experiencing it.

As I recall, you have some sitting practice in addition to your Aikido practice?

Student: Yes, yes. I practice yoga.

Sitting also, sitting? How's the sitting going?

Student: Not very well, at this moment.

Why is that?

Student: Well, that's the losing my intension that I am talking about.

OK. Why is it difficult for you to sit right now?

Student: It's not difficult to sit. But I just don't think about it.

It doesn't occur to you?

Student: No.

Can I write you a note?

Student: For a long time I practiced every day. But right now it's not coming up.

Do you live with other people in your house, or are you alone?

Student: No, I have a family.

Well, make yourself a stickup note and put it on the mirror, you know? Just say "Breathe, Breathe, Breathe! Suzuki." And when you get to the mirror, "Oh, right, I am supposed to sit." Brush teeth, brush hair, sit.

I mean look, what can I say? It's your life. You know, people are always asking, "Why am I not sitting?" Well, I don't know. Why aren't you? You aren't sitting because you don't want to sit. That's why you are not sitting. It doesn't occur to you, because you don't really want to. "No, no, I want to, but I just don't."

Student: But I did it for so many years, and suddenly I left Aikido. So I am here for the first time again. But when, this morning, you spoke about the challenges in life and being there with those challenges, well it touched me really by the heart, because there is of course a correlation in my life.

OK. Go to the dojo more often. No one can do anything for you, but you can. Just coming to the dojo is inspiring in this way. I mean this is a perfect example. You came to the seminar and "Oh!" It's not something that you didn't know already, but just the way it was said, somehow something within you went "Oh!" And you are not going to do anything about it until you get fed up with things. And you are now getting close. That's why I said "Good."

Student: OK. Thank you.

All right. Thank you very much. I think that's everything. Thank you to everyone.