

**Seminar in St. Petersburg, Russia – Question & Answer
With Christopher Curtis Sensei
Sunday, May 29, 2016**

Good morning everyone. *Dobre utra*. From the beginning of our seminar, I began teaching you about equanimity. When we think about something like equanimity, equanimity means an even-mindedness. It probably occurs to you that this sounds like the opposite of a very busy, nervous mind that reacts radically to something beautiful or radically to something scary. And that's the small meaning. But when I talk about you practicing shugyo in equanimity, this is not the opposite of anything, because the opposite of something means you can measure it. When we are talking about duality, we are talking about something that we can measure, something that has an outline or boundary, it has form, it is identifiable and definable. This is not the case with what I am referring to.

This equanimity is something else altogether. It is a different way of seeing and experiencing life. Tohei Sensei says, "Keep One Point." Since I practiced with Tohei Sensei and Suzuki Sensei, I began to experience One Point. And as that developed more and more, my experience evolved in this way that I am talking about. I could say only, "Keep One Point." But Tohei Sensei would sit like this and he would say, "Keep One Point," and then he would speak for an hour in Japanese. And Suzuki Sensei would tell me, "Even if you speak Japanese, you cannot understand what he is saying." So, because I don't know any other way than to speak from my own experience, and the best way for me to point to this experience as indefinable experience, the best way that I have found so far, is this that I explain about equanimity. With the one caveat, or important point, that it is not a relative practice or experience, but something that cannot be defined accurately because all the words that we have at our disposal are all relative. So I just do the best I can.

It would be really great if we could just bump our iPhones together and, boom, you got it, bump our heads together and, boom, you got it. But we can't do that. So you must practice. And you know I repeat all the time, "Oh, please do this ten thousand times." Of course I don't literally mean ten thousand times. I mean millions of times. I mean do it until the small mind gives up its claim, exhausts itself. Yes, the small mind thinks life is about endurance. But this is so much not the case. Life is about learning to relax completely in the face of all and any adversity.

Any circumstance can be faced with ease and adept mastery. Of course, we have to practice our skills. There are many things, for instance, that I am not very good at. I am not very good at fixing cars, just because I have no interest in

fixing cars and the few efforts I have made have been discouraging. But Jeff, on the other hand, is quite advanced in metal things, driving very fast on motorcycles, and in these like heavy metal cars, and I am sure he can fix them all. That has been his interest. So it doesn't really matter what you think. I mean, the wonderful thing about Aikido, and I am glad you picked Aikido, and particularly that I get to meet you and be together with you, is that we openly and consciously practice the higher level, shugyo practice. Uh, maybe not "higher," but the most inclusive practice. I don't want to use "higher" because really we want to be sure we never think in terms of "better" or "worse," like "our school of Aikido is better than others." This is very small-minded and not very bright. So I bring up fixing cars as an example of whatever you do, Tohei Sensei's principles, mind leads body, and the three principles of the universe,

- 1) The universe is an infinite sphere with an infinite radius.
- 2) The universe is an infinite gathering of infinitely small particles.
- 3) The universe is always in motion.

these three principles and the principle of mind leads body apply to every single skill, approach, practice, habit, whatever you are doing, these principles apply to that.

OK? So, did you have questions?

Student: You started practicing Aikido from 1974.

That's correct. That was your question?

Student: You said you met your teacher in 1974. But didn't you say that you had some Aikido before that?

Well, I met Yoshimitsu Yamada Sensei and trained with him for one day in 1968 in New York City. I was doing a play and they hired Yamada Sensei to come to help the actors with mind/body unification. So in '68, Yamada Sensei had not yet left Tohei Sensei. Tohei Sensei was still his instructor. The split didn't come until 1973. He told me he loved Tohei Sensei very much and showed me all of Tohei Sensei's "unbendable arm" and "unraisable arm," and this holding your thumb and first finger together. If you try to hold together with strength it is easy to pull them apart. But if you just relax completely and imagine a steel ring in your mind, you cannot pull them apart. You can't do it to yourself. You need someone else to do it to you.

Anyway, Tohei Sensei invented this so you can see the difference between physical (even if you are really strong, with two hands I can pull your fingers

apart), but if you relax completely I cannot pull them apart. Just imagine a ring of Ki. Try it with your partner sitting next to you.

Student: So he caught your interest with this?

Oh yes. I thought, “Oh, I would like to meet this guy, Koichi Tohei Sensei, some day. And then I never heard more about him. Then, when I left the theatre I went to a three- year retreat, which was basically sitting for three years and following a really strict diet and regimen of action. When I finished three years I weighed 165 pounds. Now, last month when I left Maui, I weighed 225 pounds. I probably weigh more now! So that’s like 50 or 60 pounds less than I weigh now. I did this retreat with a teacher who was of a very high level, and he taught me all of this, but I didn’t know what he was teaching me. I didn’t understand.

When I finished the retreat and moved to Maui, I wrote him a letter and said that I wanted to keep training and what should I do. I wanted to go to a Zen monastery because we had one on Maui. And he said, “Oh no, don’t just sit. You need to do some action. What you need is a Zen based martial art.” So one night after I had been on Maui maybe a year or two, I went to listen to a Tibetan teacher, a Rimpoché, give a talk at the local Hongwanji, or Buddhist church. It was very nice, so I went back stage after to pay my respect to him, and he was very nice. We talked for a minute or two and the local priest who was standing there said, “Are you interested in Buddhism, young man?” I said, “Oh yes I am, but what I am looking for is a Zen based martial art.” At this time I still had not connected Aikido or Tohei Sensei to this idea of a Zen based martial art. And the priest said, “Oh, you want to go to Wailuku town and see a man named Shinichi Suzuki. He is the top teacher in the world outside of Japan.” I said, “Wow, what’s he teach?” “Aikido,” said the priest.

So then I went the next day and signed up for Aikido. A long answer to a short question.

Student: Were you married?

Yes, I was married.

Student: And your wife accepted this?

Accepted what we were practicing?

Student: You left your family to go to a three-year retreat.

Oh, the three year retreat! No, no, I was not married at that time. But when I was moving to Maui I got married. So then yes, she was there when I was

training Aikido.

Student: You are interpreting Tohei Sensei's teachings very well. It looks like you totally have the knowledge. Is there anything that you don't know? What is your front line now.

My "front line?" What does that mean? I don't understand.

Student: Do you have the answer to any questions, or is there anything that you don't know yet?

Oh yeah, I don't know anything! I am serious.

Student: But you tell us things.

Oh yeah, because you ask. This is a good question, because...umm. Some teachers memorize a lot of experiential knowledge and then if you go to study with them, that's what they offer to you. Now, it's true that I also have a lot of experiential knowledge, because I trained for so many years. So I do know those "things." But what I mean when I say, "I don't know anything," is that I don't know anything about the most important thing, which is what is going to happen next. The kind of knowledge we have from history, from our past, is relatively useless and ineffective, unimportant, unless it is made alive by a spontaneous response to this immediate condition. That's why, even though I know a lot of "things," I never know before I come to a seminar, what I am actually going to teach. You know, Igor would always like me to give a "theme," or exactly what classes will I teach. I understand this, and I usually help to do this, but then I never follow it. So I hope you will forgive me. This is the way it is for me. I don't know any other way, because to me, otherwise it is dead knowledge. What do you think?

Student: For all these years, what moves you?

This. More than you can know.

Student: It's not just fun?

Oh, it's fun, but not just fun.

Student: Is it a labor?

Well, somebody asked me at a recent Q & A, "Sensei do you get tired from teaching?" And my response was "yes, it is hard work." In some ways I get exhausted. But you know it is also exhilarating. It is so inspiring to me. You know you have to look at my situation. I am so fortunate that you all will allow me to do this, because all of your attention is here. So this is, on the one hand, very

tempting for me to get a big head, which would destroy the experience that I am having, would poison the experience I am having. And, on the other hand, if I can let it go, then this creates tremendous intensity within me, and a great depth of experiencing. So I am a very lucky guy. I want to be sure I don't complain. On the other hand, I remember seeing the Dalai Lama on Maui. He gave a talk and I saw a photo of him right after he taught. He was standing with two or three people and he just looked totally wiped out. And he had taught for 3 or 4 hours. This is the Dalai Lama. So if the Dalai Lama gets tired, I can get tired. It's OK and I don't feel so bad.

People really like the idea that the teacher can teach for three or four days and still he is even stronger than before and blah, blah, blah. This is a human body, you know? It's going to die. It doesn't get to live forever. I still get sick, just like you do. Everything is the same. And I still have habits. It just doesn't work the way people think.

Student: And the notion of mind leads body, this doesn't help you to deal with your habits?

With everything. Yes, my work, for instance. Do you know, when you go into a negotiation session about money? I have a product that I am selling. I design landscapes for homes and businesses. And I have a company that installs the trees and the plants and then another company that maintains, mows the lawn, etc. So often I have to go meet with the owner and maybe we are talking about \$500,000 or \$1,000,000 that is on the table. And always the other person doesn't want to spend that much money, and would like to get more for less.

Student: When I perform in public, I am worrying and it doesn't help to relax and Keep One Point. I forget some parts of text and so on.

Yes, and what's your question?

Student: How to cope with it?

Practice. Do it ten thousand times. You knew I was going to say that! Look, it's very powerful, this nervousness. It causes the blood vessels to contract and makes it impossible for the impurities to leave the body. Right? So it is very powerful and we all have it. The reason it's difficult, and the reason One Point or Relaxing doesn't seem to work, is because you want to use it to get rid of the nervousness. But that's not the right way. The nervousness is a blessing in disguise. That feeling of nervousness is a misunderstanding by your brain of the importance and profoundness of the opportunity that you are having. So instead of trying to suppress this nervousness, we embrace it, because we need it to

perform on the kind of level you want to perform. The finest ballerina, with 20 years of experience, still has that same nervousness, but she knows exactly what to do with it and is very grateful for it. If that nervousness ever goes away, probably you are kidding yourself about something, not being true to yourself. So, of course, in my life now, I don't become nervous the way I did before, but I feel the energy rising. It's just that before I thought, "Oh no, I am nervous." And now I say, "Ah, OK, let's go, let's go." So it is very useful, very practical, because everybody has to perform at some level at some time. OK?

Student: It's about Aikido. When we extend Ki, we can unite with someone. When doing some technique or some exercise, if a person stops the Ki flow, we cannot unite with him, right? We can manipulate him, but we cannot unite with him, correct? What do you think about this?

Good question. I think many people misunderstand. OK, so yes and no, because....OK, so Jesus said "love your enemy as yourself," right? There you go. That answers your question. I am not trying to promote religion. I am just saying that the guy was really smart!

Student: Usually these words are united with other words. "Show your other cheek."

Yes, he means metaphorically, of course.

Student: We used to say, "When he hits your left cheek, turn and let him hit your right cheek." But now we say, "When he hits your left cheek, turn and hit him on his right cheek." (laughter)

This is the Russian version?

Student: Well, maybe we don't know how to turn the other cheek.

Of course you can. You are the center of the universe. You actually are the universe you inhabit. You are not separate from it. The person that stops his Ki, that is a part of your universe, doesn't know this, otherwise his Ki would not stop. Because the paradox about this is that, even though he is a part of your universe, you are also a part of his universe. That is the mystery of this business of individuals and groups. We are all in this together in exactly the same way. And when I cut my Ki, all I am doing is taking myself out of the group. And in order to justify this taking of myself out of the group, and feeling the bad feeling I have as a result, it often happens that I feel myself required to blame you and attack you. And then I feel better. And if that makes you feel better, then you are diseased. This is a kind of illness. A misunderstanding.

So, knowing this, you are free to love everyone, no matter what, you can be one with everyone.

Student: But can I move with them?

You know, what Shinichi Tohei Sensei says, if somebody gives you this (a hand with no Ki – just stiff) for a Koteoroshi, as your uke, just go home. He doesn't want to train with you. He wants to dominate you. He is not an uke. He's got a problem. You want to attack me? Then attack! This is a complete misunderstanding. How many of you did that in just this seminar?

Student: Everybody go home.

Everybody go home.

Student: If this happens, that I am an instructor and I have to show the technique, then what?

OK, well you have to help your students understand. So you teach them this, like I taught you. How to be uke, how to be nage. Help them understand what you are doing. Don't think you have something you have to prove. There is nothing you have to prove. This is, by the way, the difficulty of being a professional, because you have to have students. You have to make money. You are making your living, teaching Aikido. There is nothing wrong with that. Don't misunderstand me. Shinichi Tohei Sensei makes his living this way. There is nothing wrong with that. But Suzuki Sensei told me, "Don't ever take money for teaching Aikido. They can pay expenses and so forth, but don't take money and put it in your pocket." But he also said, "It's fine for others to do this, but not you." I said, "Why?" And he said, "Because it affects the way you teach them, because if you take money, then there is a secret, subconscious need in you to keep them as a student, because you need the income."

But I think, knowing you, this is not a problem. If it's not right, you can just say "no," at least from now on. You teach them the truth, never mind. If somebody does this stiff fist to me, I'll tell you what I do. If I am demonstrating I bring a big guy up in front and tell him to give me that stiff fist, then I whack that fist and knock him down. But just once. After that he always says "OK." Then I tell him "Now I will teach you how to do this so it doesn't hurt so much."

Student: The question was, is it a manipulation or is it unification?

Both. But just once, so he can see the natural result of stupid thinking. Then you become his best friend. Of course there is some manipulation there, but your intent is to become one with him. And of course, while I am doing this, I feel

good, no problem. I could hurt him much worse than that. I don't break his arm. I don't send him to the hospital. I am a nice guy! OK?

Student: If you take money you can't do that.

I don't understand the question. You cannot do what?

Student: If you take money, you shouldn't be rough with them.

I don't see how that relates. Well, Kashiwaya Sensei takes money. He is a professional. And he can be pretty rough.

Student: On Facebook, he said that he never hurt a single person.

Well, I never hurt them either. I said, I never sent them to the hospital. And whatever Kashiwaya Sensei says about himself is fine.

Student: You were talking about bad habits. I wonder, do you just accept it, or do you regard it as a "weakness" and just allow yourself to have "weaknesses?"

None of the above. I just don't think like that. I am not trying to figure it out, but on the other hand I am not ignoring what is happening. I am here, OK?

Student: Good habits makes your life longer, but bad habits are much more interesting!

Maybe

Student: I have to teach people. And sometimes I try to say the same that you say, or what I read your books, in my own words. Sometimes I face the reaction that I am quite a young person. I look quite young. It's like I am trying to teach about profound things, and people seldom want to listen to me. It's much easier to break a hand than to tell them those things. Does it make sense for me to tell them or just mention a book they can read about this.

Well, OK, so I try to go by the rule, as far as teaching goes, that I don't ever teach anything that I am not currently, personally experiencing. If I try to teach something I read in a book, or some teacher taught in a seminar but that I cannot experience, then it sounds to other people like....well, they can tell. It doesn't ring true, you know. So I don't think it's your age. I mean, just think, if you were old you wouldn't be so handsome and charming.

Student: When we read books, watch movies, listen to music, and not educating books but fiction, just fiction. We like them. Do we experience the present moment while we watch movies and listen to music.

Well, story telling is the oldest form of entertainment, and also happens to be the oldest form of education. I love stories. Whether it's a movie or television or a book or a magazine. I don't care what form it takes. But the best are Suzuki Sensei stories. And I really like my own stories. I like to tell stories, because it is so much the easiest way to communicate.

In ancient times we didn't have movies and books. We sat around the fire in the evening and took turns telling stories. That was the way that young people learned from old people. So, I think it is really wonderful that we now have all of these forms of story telling. Of course, you must Keep One Point when you are listening.

It's very much like life. You know it's an actor. They are not really in love with each other. He didn't really get shot, but you still cry. You walk out of the theatre, you don't think that the person is really dead. So then you have to learn to treat life this way. This is a story. What you see, this is a story. It's a dream. You are acting out an idea that you are convinced is happening. This that I am teaching you, sharing with you, is radical. What most people consider reality is just pretend. It's not accurate. Of course, it is life and death, but even that is not what it seems.

Student: I tell the stories, and I transmit my experience. But you have a huge experience. It's like this enormous knot, and we take a single thread out of it. But you cannot undo this whole knot, just pulling one small thread. What are the ways to transmit your experience, other than telling stories and showing techniques.

Everything I do here is the same. Soku shin no gyo. Watch me cut bokken one time. If you can see this, if you get that, then this is everything. That's what the stories are all about. You read a book or see a movie, you have to be able to read between the lines. Like, when you listen to music, don't listen to the notes. Listen to the silence between the notes. That's where the good stuff is. Even the person who wrote the book or is telling the story may not understand the source, the meaning of this story. Some writers just write as it comes out of them, poetry like. And maybe even they never understand, or they go back and read it and go, "Wow!"

Student: We started talking about music. I would like you to share with us, what are your favorite pieces of music?

I really like Chopin. And I like the Swedish composer that wrote Finlandia, Jan Sibelius. And I really love Flamenco. That's my favorite of all. I used to play Flamenco, but gave it up for Aikido. It's huge. You cannot do it just for fun. You

have to do it completely.

I like music, like to hear music. But I don't really like really loud, clanging music, some of which my kids like. My wife and I don't have the same taste in all music. She likes different kinds of music. It's a little loud for me. But maybe it's a weakness. Maybe I am too easily disturbed. See, she is sitting right there and laughing, because she thinks it must be a weakness! "What's the matter with you? This is good music!" she says.

Well, music is all wonderful, I am sure. Something for everybody.

Student: You personally trained with Tohei Sensei and Suzuki Sensei. Can you say how their practice changed towards the end of their lives?

Well, I experienced the end of both of their lives, and I watched them both age from 1974 until 2009 and 2013. In both of their cases, they became softer and softer as they got older. Tohei Sensei told me one time, "Don't read any of my books!" He said this because he had written them a long time ago. You know? It happens to all of us. All that training that they both did when they were younger, and they continued to train, sooner or later they started to say, "Oh, wait a minute. It's not about all that stuff." When you are young, it's like, "Come on, let's do it, let's mix it up, show me the stuff, I want to do the fancy moves, fly in the air, etc." And that's fine. But as you get older you mature. And then if you are actually practicing on a deep level, you begin to see through this apparent solidity. It isn't like that at all. I just live here. Do you see what I mean? So, yeah, both of them were remarkably changed, through the years, and really fun to know.

Student: We do practice various techniques. Why is weapons practice preferred to Kiatsu practice? Why is it better? Why don't you practice Kiatsu, but you practice weapons? Or, maybe it doesn't matter. In some other groups in other countries, people tend to get rid of some parts of the training. Like, "I don't like Kiatsu. I don't do Kiatsu." "I don't like Misogi. I don't do misogi." "I like weapons. I don't like Ki Meditation." This kind of thing.

What's the question?

Student: Can we choose and get rid of some things?

All right, let me answer. So right now I am speaking to you. This is Kiatsu. I don't mean that this is "like" Kiatsu. This is Kiatsu. If you think that my speaking to you in this way is different than Kiatsu, then you don't understand Kiatsu. That should be a sufficient answer to your question. It is an understandable question.

So let me just add this. Tohei Sensei gave us all of these different things to train, and I have been known to say that you really should do them all. In my case, we do them all. I have taught all of those to you here. But if there is some part that you don't like, just be sure that you are not missing something. Sometimes I have said, "If you don't like that one, then please do that one anyway." Because it probably means that the person has a misunderstanding and doesn't see that every practice is exactly the same. You know, we could come for three days and do this (holds his thumb and first finger together). You would think, "Curtis Sensei is now crazy." But it would have the same meaning of everything else. It's just not as much fun. It's not fun to do that for three days, and I want you to come and enjoy yourselves. And so did Tohei Sensei. So he said, "Well, you can do it this way with bokken, or this way with Kiatsu, or this way, speaking to people, this way Sokushin no Gyo, this way Oneness Rhythm Taiso, or this way, technique, or then this technique or that technique!" All the same. We are doing the same thing. When you are driving a car, it's the same thing. OK?

Student: When we talk about calmness, it can be approached as the opposite of emotion. And we are talking about raising the level of testing, we are talking about raising the level of our calmness. Is there a contradiction between emotions and calmness?

I'm sorry but I didn't really understand the question. What's the first thing you said?

Student: We regard calmness as in opposition to strong emotions.

Who does? What do you mean? Who said that? Did I say that? No

Student: No, I mean they can be regarded as opposites.

Ah, but that's not true calmness. Tohei Sensei told us that true calmness is not a dead calmness. True calmness exists in the greatest intensity of conflict. This is true calmness. Do you know, sometimes when I am teaching, I become very emotional. But do you think I am not calm? I am calm. That's true calmness.

Beer? TV? This is not calmness. Tohei Sensei calls it dead calmness. That is the opposite of intense emotion. True calmness includes everything. So there is no contradiction. I'll bet that's what you wanted to hear.

Student: But when you drew on the board...?

That's picturing agitation. You know, when she is nervous, that is agitation. Or angry, that is that. But when you are calm, anything can be happening and it changes the nature of it. That's why true calmness is not the opposite. I know,

when I draw it on the board, it looks like that is an opposite. But that's because I can't do anything but point to it.

Student: When you are talking about levels of testing, you say that the one who gives the test with the increase of testing levels, has to be more and more calm.

Deeper level of calmness, yes.

Student: What do you mean by a deeper level of calmness? We are always the same. We have the same calmness. There are not different calmnesses.

Oh yes, there are. A more intense level of calmness.

Student: Can it be that a person just thinks that he is more calm?

OK, I think it's getting too late here. Yes, I suppose that people can think all kinds of things.

Student: What did you feel when you came into Suzuki Sensei's dojo?

Wah! Well, you know in the beginning he wasn't there. I came and trained for six months while he was in Japan. So it is more like what I felt when he walked into the dojo six months later. I expected a small, peaceful, kindly old man that would touch me on the forehead and I would see stars and wake up. Really. And this big guy with this big voice (in Japan they used to call him "thunder lips") came into the dojo and picked up a bokken and chased us all into the corner, and I am the big guy in the middle and I am thinking, "He is going to kill me." And he is screaming at me, "This is life and death training. You don't understand at all!" He told me that I didn't understand at all many, many times. So, he scared the shit out of me. But, some little voice said, "Well, I thought you were looking for the real thing? Maybe not." So, "OK, OK, I will stay."

So, I am very grateful that I got to meet him. And if you talk to any of my students who also trained with him, everybody says he was the most wonderful man they ever met in their life. So we were all very fortunate.

I am going to say that this is enough, because it's now quarter after. Thank you very much for the whole seminar, and I love you all. Thank you!