

Maintaining Connection: Training with a Contemporary Life

By Nick Kolick

Many of the newer students on the mat at Shinjinkai may not know my name, or have only seen me from time to time. I have not been a consistent fixture in the dojo for the past year or so, but this is my very reason for writing this type of article. I hope to share my experience of the various challenges and opportunities in my life and how I was able, in spite of them, to maintain connection with my family, my career and aikido. I hope, in some way, this may help you make some connection in your life's journey.

Before I start my ramblings, I would like to thank Moore Sensei for creating an atmosphere and environment for our training. I believe we are extremely lucky to be associated with an organization which brings traditional values and discipline into our training regimen. There are many schools which take liberties in changing technique and watering down acceptable levels of competence and advancement in an attempt to keep student interest. Moore Sensei has always spoken of making aikido your own and using the technique to fit your body and personality type, but has pushed us all to make the skill one which will continue to be martial in execution. Aikido at Shinjinkai is not a business venture or commercial enterprise. It is an avocation and devotion by all who participate within Shinjinkai, working together to continue our training in the most sincere way.

New Martial Art:

Like Jim Tabor, author of the article "Shinjinkan Training Memories", I began Aikido at the original Shinjinkan dojo with Moore Sensei in 1994. I had studied other martial arts for a number of years (karate, tai chi and wrestling in high school and college), but had been impressed with the skill, discipline and talent of Toyoda Sensei and Moore Sensei. During my initial 6 week introductory course, I got a new respect for the "soft" art of aikido. There were a few other aikido dojos in the western suburbs or park districts, but I had not seen any with the intensity displayed at Tenshinkan and Shinjinkan. My interest peaked and I decided to sign up, but still had some apprehension about joining, not because of any skill level but rather my ability to attend class with my busy schedule.

During those early years at Shinjinkan, classes were conveniently close to work and a portion of the week I trained during lunch hour. I was able to break away for three days per week. While not quite a shugyo lifestyle, training was intense when I could be there, and taking cold showers in the dojo after lunchtime class was always something that kept me awake during the later half of my day at work.

My later career path and personal life placed me in the suburbs. My job required extensive amounts of travel over the years. I had begun my training in aikido and felt the initial connection between myself and this new art. There was something about aikido or the training that resonated with me, though I could not explain it at the time. Even though travel time to the dojo was now at least one hour away on good days, I continued making every attempt to get there.

New Family....New Job...New Dojo Location

We had two additional children since starting aikido, and any extra time went to raising children (for all who have yet to talk this path, Time, Energy & Money will be constant challenges, but well worth the cost). Decisions on parental availability (always having a parent at home to raise children) required additional effort and time to be spent on work and less on training.

I should say here that my wife Lisa is very supportive of my interests. We have maintained our own connections in many ways, through our kids, through similar interests and even through our individual pursuits of career or personal aspirations. She will always go out of her way to let me get every chance on the mat that I can. For this and many other reasons, I want to say thank you. It is more often other diversions which keep me from being a regular fixture at the dojo.

However during all of this, I was still able to maintain a connection with the dojo. While the time spent at the dojo was reduced, I was able to keep up and make small improvements. The advancement to a new belt was never the goal. The goal was always to continue on the path no matter the obstacle.

In 1996 I was transferred to London for six months, away from any type of aikido training. Upon returning I renewed my training regimen. During this time away from my family as well as aikido, I began to gain a renewed understanding of choices and their effect on future paths. It was my responsibility to maintain connection to things which kept me grounded and centered. I was away from my family for much of the year. Even when I was home, 14-16hr work days were not uncommon.

I found that aikido and work had many things in common and complemented each other. Challenges at work strengthen mental and physical resolve...even if not on mat. Mental awareness gained on the mat comes in handy at times away from the dojo. Keeping a clear head, staying relaxed in stressful situations and having the discipline to push through challenges served me well.

Goals are usually part of most modern aikido student's thoughts. We hope to make advancement in our technique, in our careers and our relationships. Is it the goal or the journey that counts? We must analyze why we pursue any path. It was during this difficult time in my personal and professional life, away from home, that I made the decision to continue to push myself in aikido. At this time I was in my late 30s, peak years for training in a new sport or martial art.

Returning from London, and after a year without consistent time on the mat, I was now able to get back to some normalcy and to a daily schedule which would allow for more time to train. I was able to practice for a period of time with regularity. The timing was coming back and the connection was again made. Old friendships were renewed and new ones made. Many of the friends I started with were now a few ranks ahead of me, but no matter. The real reason was the journey of self improvement (although being more Type A personality, I do have to continually remind myself). The ranks would eventually come.

Ryoshinkan was a new location in the western suburbs, although still 45 minutes away. The location in a strip mall was actually a very good one, with new training partners and the excitement of spreading aikido to a new group of students. It is always good to train with new people as well as advanced students that are familiar training partners. Different body types and skill levels require one to always acknowledge the connection with your training partner. Understanding how your body type and structure blend and connect with others is a skill we all need to work on. As your skill improves you connect in better ways with the new aikidoka so that their training will advance.

Just when I had made a number of advancements on the mat and was settling in to being a regular attendee at class, my professional career threw another opportunity/ road bump at me. We were now in a merger with another major competitor. This would require extensive travel and again time away from family and friends. I again made a decision which took me away from my training. It was a very successful decision for me professionally, but it had again pushed me away from the dojo.

Still the love and need for aikido to be back in my life would lead me to again renew the connection to Ryoshinkan. Toyoda Sensei's new international headquarters was being built in Palatine. It was an opportunity to re-establish my ties to aikido. While I had continued to train, it was very sporadic. Many of my friends were now Yudansha or very near. I was glad that I could continue to help them get to attain their goal and be part of their training. I was also envious, but realized that my decisions were my path.

To retain my connection at home, I joined a related group at another dojo, Itsushinkan, held through park districts near my home. This was very different from the training I was used to. While the instruction was good, the facilities and aikidoka were very different. Tumbling mats pushed together created gaps which many times caused broken or stubbed toes. Many students would take one session and then move on to the other sports in the district. No matter, I was doing aikido again on a regular basis and making those connections I missed during the past year.

I was also seeing more of my family. My children were also able to see me practice near home. This connections allowed my son to see the art and my attraction to it. My son has become extremely interested in martial arts. His interest was peaked with the weapons practice. He would help me practice my jo and boken kata at home.

New OrganizationNew Connections/Old connections

While training at Itsushinkan in 2001, I had learned that Toyoda Sensei had died. I had not trained personally with him much, but I remembered that he and Moore Sensei were the two reasons I continued to train. It was watching their technique which peaked my interest to try this martial art. It was time for me to re-connect with Moore sensei.

Moore Sensei was just getting ready to open Shinjinkai and I was more than happy to re-establish the connection. When I first saw the dojo, I was amazed. He had done such a great job getting the right atmosphere for us to train. I renewed my focus and decided that there was time in my schedule to make a big push. The class schedule was such that I could train in the mornings two days per week which would allow me additional time with my family during the evenings. The meditation classes before training were also extremely helpful to maintain focus in my life.

I was extremely proud to be one of the first groups to test in the new Shinjinkai Organization. Teaching at Genshinkan and Shinjinkan was another way to connect with other aikidoka. Being uke with new students is one of the most important connections we make early on. Making sure that we are safe but direct in our technique, we connect with new students so that they can progress in falling properly, executing effective technique, and having the proper martial spirit. When instructing, you must connect the group to create the right atmosphere for training. The proper focus, intensity and intent in attack allow us to execute technique. Making the connection with the attack and re-directing that energy is what we do.

It has now been 2 years since I had been teaching with any regularity. I miss it very much. Again, I have not had the time to train consistently. My career has again made additional requests on my time, but as in previous years, I am looking for the opportunity to renew my connection and my training schedule. I hope that this will happen soon.

Your connection.....How will you handle the challenges?:

The real message in the article is not my path to the training, but your connection to the dojo and your training.

Your choices in life, there will be many, may divert or challenge your ability to train intensely in aikido. We may not all be ready to make aikido, zen or iaido our profession, and in reality it probably will not be a profession for many. Times are different than 300-400 years ago in Japan. We should however find the connection in the techniques we perform on the mat and how they help us in everyday life. The connections I have made on the mat, have made a difference in my family and my professional life. Recognition of these skills and development, continue to bring me back to the dojo.

My wife and family have made the connection and see the benefit. It has changed their “way” and how they approach their path. The dedication that we put to our art, add much to our personal relationships.

This journey is not something that we do just to get a black belt. This is just an acknowledgement of the time and dedication to the art and ourselves. The real benefits may be making the connection and applying what we learn to the rest of our lives. As you continue to train, focus and dedicate your training, another measure is how well you eliminate attachment to things that create obstacles to dedication to aikido. These same attachments may limit your career advancements or personal relationships.

In the book “ The Life Giving Sword”, Yagyu Munenori speaks of Muto, or “No Sword” techniques. We have this as part of our curriculum in Aikido as well. This is not just an understanding of how to take a sword away from another person. If it were it may not have any meaning value in today’s society. We do not walk around with swords today. It is an example on how we engage in the intent of others and the situation at hand. If the attacker does not want you to take the sword, you will probably not be able to do so. His focus though will now not be in cutting you, which is victory itself. Should his intent change you will then be able to perform the technique. Do not be attached to the intent of taking the sword if the attacker is not intent on cutting you.

We have a statue of Fudo Myo-o in the dojo. The symbolism of the Sword of Wisdom, Rope of Discipline, and Fire always pictured with him, tell us of the connections we need to make in our training.

- Cut through your delusions and ignorance. Attachment to old ideas and views, may hold you back.
- Control your emotions and passions to know that our training in the dojo and life will throw us many challenges which will test our resolve to continue our training.
- Keep the fire and intensity to continue your training now matter what the obstacle.

There may be many instances which challenge your time on the mat. Continue your connection as you move throughout life. Aikido is not just the first introductory class. It is not just the first couple of test requirements that you feel like you have a understanding of aikido as a martial art. It is not the black belt and hakama that you get to wear, somehow telling you your achievement is over and now you can go on about you other goals in your life. All of the these examples are really just milestones in a particular path to self discovery. Continue to refine your connection on and off the mat. Use what you learn in all situations to move yourself forward.

The connection is always here. The dojo is a place where you have an opportunity to re-focus your training and your life. There are a number of “Ways” we are able to do this at Shinjinkai. Aikido, Iaido, Battodo, Zen and Ikebana will allow you to focus yourself in ways that work for you. While on the mat, you have no time to worry about other issues in life. If you let your mind

wander, you may actually find that there are consequences. The atemi of the attacker, throw of your nage, the whack of the keisaku or “zen stick” will propel you to make that connection and refocus. Make this your purpose, make those connections and continue your life training. While performing other functions in life, do not let your mind wander, as there are likely consequences just as in the dojo.

I hope this article will let you see that others have traveled the path you may be taking. There are many events or thoughts that will test the connections we make. There will be many times that we need to re-evaluate those connections. Sometimes this is daily, monthly or yearly. You may not know where to find those connections. Look inside! Look for the things which you already know, but which often get “Lost in Translation”.

I hope to see you on the mat more often in the future, as I am again looking to re-establish this connection again and again.

Ganbattel!