

I Come Here To Train: Nidan Essay

by Suzette Hodnett

What is this small square space in a strip mall on a side street in uptown Whittier that has changed my life? What is this room where I spend hours waving my hands, playing with sticks, and sitting on a pillow?

I didn't know what the word Nidan meant when I walked into Aikido-ai 8 years ago. I had never heard the word Sensei. I didn't know what a kyu was, much less that it would be a type of exam. And I couldn't tell you the definition of a dojo. Am I changed for knowing this now? Simply, yes.

Few things come along in life that resonate deeply and somehow connect with who and what I am. Aikido-ai is such a place.

I come to the dojo to train. I have spent years practicing Tai Chi, dabbled in Aikido, sit Zen and do Qigong. What does it really matter if I am holding a stick or a sword in my hand? If I am in horse stance or in hanmi, on the mat or in Sensei's office, watering plants on the deck or away at a seminar? What is the difference if I am learning half a form or it's entirety? If I am learning a move that I will never do again or will perform over and over again?

The Heart Sutra says... "Form is emptiness and emptiness is form." I have learned 38 forms for my Nidan test. There are more forms I know and more that I will learn beyond these. But it is never forms that I am learning. I train to understand emptiness, to not be, to disappear, to blend, to bow, to let go, to step aside, and to experience that nothing matters and that everything is important. This is the real training.

My learning curve is not the next move but to stay open, hold on to the edge, and enjoy the ride. It is enough for me to be at the dojo, open my heart, make my contribution at whatever level I can and gratefully bow to it all. This is my training. To put it all down and step on the mat.

Moment to moment I come to the dojo to train and now I test for Nidan. The more I see, the less I know. Second degree black belt could possibly sound impressive to someone. But what it really means is that I have stuck with something long enough to go deeper and wider and have it become a part of who I am. It has been said that if we do what we love it will become a part of who we are. What greater gift than to someday become tai chi.

Nidan? BA? Masters? Ph.D.? Rungs on a ladder that doesn't exist. To me it is not whether I am Sensei or student, Nidan or beginner, garbage worker or Ph.D. O'Sensei says "I am the Universe". There is no separation. My training at the dojo and in life is not about the box I am put in but the space I create within it. The Tao says..." We shape clay into a pot, but it is the emptiness inside that holds what we want."

It is what holds the form together, what holds the dojo together, and what holds me together that I seek in my training. If I am deepening in compassion, in love, in generosity, gratitude, balance, harmony and discipline, then I am truly training. If I can be present, feel my energy extend inward and outward, open time and time again, and somehow move with the gentle expansion and contraction of life, I am practicing Tai Chi.

I not only come here to train, but I come here to train with others. I am part of a community of people. I feel connected, dependent, and grateful to everyone in the dojo for my training, my growth, and my ability to give and to receive. It is easy to see one person and not all the links in the chain. The face of Aikido-ai truly changes with every person who walks in and every person who decides to leave. And my face changes as well.

Several month ago I went through a valley in my training. I felt like I was a stranger in a strange land. I felt silly on the mat. I asked... "What am I doing in this strip mall, in this little room, waving my arms, sitting on a blue pillow, and wielding a stick?" I could be spending time unfolding into any number of other possibilities. But like much else that is important to me, what matters is that I continue to do it when the doing it seems to border on the ridiculous to those outside of me, and sometimes even to me. In fact, It seems that most things in which I give my time and intention usually involve passion and a high degree of insanity. But some kinds of insanity can be truly grand. And so I continue to return to the mat in the same way I continue to return to life -- without condition, without expectation and with an open heart and a willing spirit. This is my training.

Thank you Sensei for this little square space in a strip mall on a side street in Uptown Whittier where I come to train. Thank you everyone in the dojo for being a part of my training.