

The Community of a Dojo

This article was submitted by John Burke of Alameda Aikikai for his Nidan exam in September 2008, and I find it relevant to our training.

This morning after adult class we had one of our periodic dojo cleanups, as usual in the days before a seminar. In addition to about a dozen adult members, there were several children and even a parent or two. Teenage James was climbing like a monkey in the rafters, while others, including some of our newest members, were wielding dusters on long poles to sweep the light fixtures, the tops of walls, and the roof above the kamidana. Dust bunnies rained from the ceiling like snow, defined by slanting beams from the skylights. It seemed as if each mote was the residue of a completed technique: the smaller ones back falls and forward rolls, the larger ones the echo of some selfless sutemi. I felt a pleasure in that dust akin to the fragrant chalk clouds from cleaning erasers in grammar school. Time to start again with a fresh slate, all this dust is just the shadow of everything we've learned, now just hollow cocoons.

I'm currently at my sixth aikido dojo, and the one that feels most like home. Each one has had its unique flavor, independent of size or style, and I've benefited from them all. But I've come to realize that, beyond martial intensity or spiritual depth, it's the sense of community that makes the greatest difference. Perhaps nothing reveals this more than considering souji, or cleaning, as a metaphor for a dojo's vitality and its members' commitment.

My appreciation of this was slow to emerge. In my 20's, a dojo was a place that existed independently and outside of me: I paid dues, trained hard, helped clean when asked, and went home. Later on, the dojo became a location where a community gathers to train together, where engagement was the essential ingredient, though I still assumed a separation between the students who trained and the teachers who paid the rent and managed the operation. With more experience came the inevitable understanding that a community has no such separations; every stage along the way is a reflection of, and is responsible to, the whole.

What is expected is nothing less than the merging of teacher and student roles, the blending of uke and nage, the victor and vanquished ultimately becoming indistinguishable. The Sensei points the way and sets the pace, but my aikido is my entire training community, and whatever it needs is my entire practice.

Even so, some dojos approach cleaning as a lesson in humility, even confusing it with misogi or strenuous ritual purification: taken this way, it becomes a required burden often associated with an atmosphere of criticism. Other dojos take cleaning as an unavoidable inconvenience to the real goal of training, as if bare technique is all there is to a martial art. What continues to impress me about our dojo is the common awareness of needs and responsibilities that is shared among the senior students, and graciously accepted by the entire membership. Whatever is needed or expected is simply communicated and whoever can will rise to the task. This culture of common responsibility can be seen in other aspects of our training as well: participation is actively appreciated, techniques are critiqued constructively with little regard for rank, and excellence is uniformly demanded and encouraged. In my opinion, this broad engagement of the senior students is the single most important factor in a dojo's sustainability.

Every beginner who enters a dojo to practice may have a different reason for doing so. But if they stay long enough, they will soon discover that many more and often better reasons for training become apparent.

This too will be shaped by their relationships with existing members:

are beginners expected to perform menial activities, or do the most senior members quietly demonstrate the community's values by taking on the lowliest and most difficult tasks themselves? Are beginners taught the rituals of dojo etiquette as a practice in subservience, or as reminder to all members that the highest goal is one that an initiate already possesses: that of beginner's mind.

To step onto the mat is literally to enter into the struggle between life and death, and nothing could be more serious. Yet, it is our simple rituals and common traditions that provide the framework that protects our bodies, our psyches and emotions as we learn and grow.

These practices are best appreciated when they are demonstrated by senior members caring for their community out of a respect for self, each other, and the Way that is being traveling together. And they are best preserved when passed on to beginners who appreciate them as gifts handed down in an atmosphere of mutual caring and respect.

Paved by the efforts of everyone who's gone before, the Way is worn smooth by constant diligence, and kept clear so that its direction will be unmistakable to those who follow. When members truly embrace this responsibility, and behave in ways that foster their community, both on and off the mat, and even in the most mundane of activities, their dojo will be certain to thrive.