

LIVING DOJO

WROCLAW AIKIKAI NEWSLETTER

Wrocław Aikikai/ Kaszyce Aikikai/ Na Grobli Aikikai/ Krzyki Aikikai



CRACKING SHELL

Wrocław Aikikai Group

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Shell

nr 04/2021

Wrocław Aikikai Newsletter No 04 / 2021

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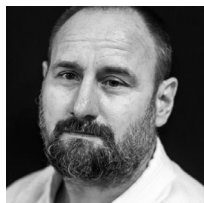
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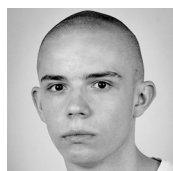
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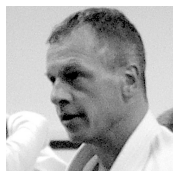
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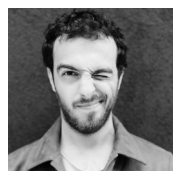
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FOREWORD

PIOTR MASZTALERZ

The original theme of this newsletter was to be our inner animal. Discovering our true nature, dropping the facade. We collected a few pieces, not enough to fill out a journal, but enough to make this theme start to live in us and make us think.

And then I found the picture that we have used on the cover, and the theme appeared by itself. A cracked eggshell that someone had sealed with a child's band-aid. I looked at it, and more and more aspects of the picture came to me. From materials for two issues, one was created amidst the pandemic. The theme of the newsletter had already been chosen. Change, transformation, decision, new life, something coming out of an egg. Progress through painful change. And, of course, training is only a symbol of this, just as physical progression in Aikido is a manifestation of this. Proficiency in techniques, decisiveness in movement, self-confidence. All this is paid for by tearing off layers of illusion, false ideas about oneself and others. This shell breaks every day. Dramas, divorces, illnesses, conflicts, problems at work and in the family. We change, mutate and stay the same. The people around us and our relationships with them change.

I see this picture as someone childishly pretending not to see this change, putting a plaster over something that is no longer there. Because here something new has been born and the egg no longer makes sense. The world of the egg has ended and the world of something that comes out of it has begun. Maybe a beautiful bird or maybe a snake. Who knows? Whatever it is will be truer than the egg, whose time has passed.

Change is the manifestation of a real process, a living dojo, a real training. A war in which some die and others become victims or heroes. A beginner changes into an advanced student, a student sometimes into a teacher. Your body changes and your approach to training changes. Also the dojo, through which so many hundreds of faces and names flow, changes.

Passion appears, passion dies. Trust is born and sometimes it dies. Sometimes someone stops and says, „Now I'm finally going to do it!” And tries. And sometimes someone suddenly stops and says: „Enough, I don't want this anymore”.

That's how the shell breaks and for a shorter or longer moment you see the real person.

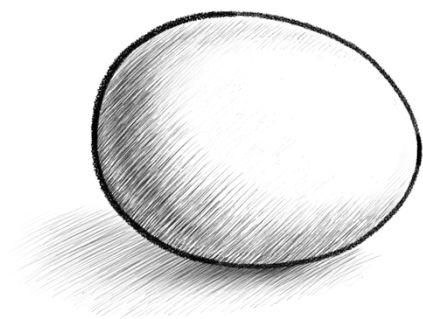
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I
Shell

BREAKING FREE

TOKO JENNY FLOWER

A tiny bird begins its journey surrounded by the comforting walls of its egg, kept warm by the feathers of its mother and for a while nothing is lacking or troubling this small life. As the days pass and its body begins to grow, the walls of its home start to feel constraining, the small bird begins to develop its senses and can hear sounds and feel shifts in sensations from beyond the shell that protects it. The more it grows the more uncomfortable it feels, its wings held against its body and its head tightly curled, hunger starts to creep in, and gradually the shell starts to feel like a prison and it longs to escape from it. At this point in its journey there is no sign from beyond its shell, no assistance from its mother, instead the birdling must expand and take a leap of courage, as what lies ahead is unknown and what is being relinquished is everything it has ever known.

Instinctively it opens its wings and stretches up its head, pushing against the constraining walls, striking with its beak until something gives. Light pours in, it is blinding, and the sensation of the sun and wind against its naked body is shocking and painful. It is bombarded with a rude onslaught of sounds, sensations and stimulation, if it wasn't for nature's wiring the little bird would choose to turn away and return to the comfort of its shell, perhaps expanding it a little to accommodate its developing size. Instead it must weather these changes and grow into this new reality.

How many times has each one of us experienced this need to break out and go beyond a situation in our lives, be it leaving a stagnant job, a loveless relationship, leaving home, giving up a habit, whatever shape it may take. We all go through the period of discomfort required to reach the necessary climax for us to finally act, then the fear and anxiety prior to actually taking the step, followed by the grief, craving, pain and profound discomfort of weathering the change before finally growing into a new reality.

Unlike this little birdling, who like it or not, is completely guided by nature's instincts and has no choice but to expand and move, we, as human beings have all myriad of mental games we can call on to justify not expanding beyond our current situation. Some of the more popular include, "it will change" or better still, "I will change", or, "they will change", "it is not the right time", "I will start tomorrow", "someone else will take care of it", "it's not my fault", and so it goes on. This is where we become trapped by the limitations of our own self-imposed shell, though we may break out once, twice, maybe more the shell remains available, maybe simply expanded and it takes a profound level of honesty with oneself to recognize when the shell is closing in and when not.

Nature compels the young bird to spread its wings and soar high amongst the clouds and it is content with its lot and does not question if it should be this kind of bird or that, if it should fly faster or change its song. And perhaps deeply we are not so different from this little birdling and, if we can quiet the chattering of the mind, and connect to the life that is naturally carrying us through this journey, we too can truly live our lives to their utmost completion with no need for self-imposed shells.



Dwie Jaskółki
autorka Karena Dąbrowska

What would it be to break the shell of myself? What would this entail? What process?

So much is involved in the idea of creating my shell, my protection, my world. Each thought, feeling, or sensation that arises leads to the assertion “I think,” “I feel,” or “I sense.” All these are used to construct an identity of “me.” Everything against this created personality is not me, is the other, the opposite—however subtle it is. Moment by moment—and truly it occurs this fast and is this all-encompassing—a world is created that I label as “me.” It happens so often and so quickly that I cannot recognize its birth. I then seek others who have created a world similar to mine, and avoid others whose created worlds are opposed or very different to mine. I can go through my whole life forging alliances and creating enemies based on this illusion of myself.

When something begins to shatter this view of myself, there is suffering. Even though I myself have built this house of self, it is a house built on a foundation of sand, on illusions. The breaking of the shell of this imaginary self is painful, but necessary. A major tenet in Buddhism is that suffering is created by avoiding what we dislike and pulling what we desire. These two tendencies are based on the belief in an existence of a self with preferences.

In this lifetime, it is fortunate to find another human being—a guide, a teacher—who challenges our shell, our idea of self. The guide cannot break our shell, our false idea of self, but they can help us to see through our illusions. If they are clever and wise, they will help us to see the falseness of this mask and encourage us to remove it.

Only when the self is seen through can suffering be relinquished. Only when this idea of “I” with all of its likes and dislikes, prejudices and bias is seen through will my true nature be revealed. And only when my true nature is manifested will the world become different.

WHAT CANNOT BE SEEN

ADAM SORKIN

We all think of the egg as a symbol of new life, fertility, possibility, even hope. But why do we think this? Because a baby emerges? Yes, this is a wonderful thing. But the power of the egg is in the fact that we cannot see through the shell.

In fact, we can know very little about an egg at first. Indeed, we might not even know what it is when we see it; from a few feet away, it looks like a stone. Even if we do recognize it as an egg and not a stone, the egg might be unfertilized, and have no life inside. And if there is something alive inside, is it an eagle or a chicken? Turtle or alligator? What emerges from the shell is something unexpected, completely different from the round, smooth stone shape.

Similarly, the chick growing inside an egg can know very little about the world outside. The chick pushes and pecks, struggling against the walls of the shell. What does it imagine it is doing? Maybe it thinks that this activity will make the egg grow bigger? Or that when it gets out, it will find itself inside another, roomier egg? When the walls do come down and the world is revealed, it is unimaginably different than life was inside the eggshell.

Maybe you are familiar with the Zen expression, “Climb the 100-meter pole, and then keep climbing up!” Climbing a vertical pole is difficult, even for a meter or two. But a hundred? Then the second part; “keep climbing up.” This seems like nonsense. How can one keep climbing up if we are already at the top of the pole?

This expression is often given as direction during a shugyo, such as shogaku shugyo. The point is that yes, there is a time of very tough struggle. But the experience of breakthrough is unimaginably different than the experience of climbing.

Most of the breakthroughs I have been witness to (and many of my own) are not like coming out of an egg. They are more like a snake shedding its skin, or a crab coming out of its shell. The old skin gets tight, we break out and feel energized, free to move and grow again. This is also valuable, but different. For there to be a true transformation, we have to let go of who we are and embrace what is new.

This is what I mean about the power of the egg being that we cannot see through it. A transformation is not about making an incremental change; it is to jump with both feet into your future, despite not knowing what is there.

As the chick whose eggshell walls have collapsed, we must look at the new world around us, so new and strange, and decide to live in it. As the parent observing a new life coming out of the eggshell, whether chicken or eagle, we commit to raise it as our own. We reach the top of the 100-meter pole, and leap out impossibly into the void.



I cannot put my finger on it now

The child is grown

The dream is gone

I have become comfortably numb

—Pink Floyd, “Comfortably Numb,” from the record *The Wall*

The past two years have been like an endless storm at sea for the dojo. I steer the ship and more and more waves crash against the sides. Each time it seems to be hard, but the next hit shows that it could be even worse. We sail on and pretend that nothing is happening, but some of the crew have been washed off my deck, many have fled on lifeboats, several masts have already fallen.

Eventually the sun emerges from behind dark clouds, the sky turns slowly blue and the sea calms down. All around, the remnants of ships that did not survive are bobbing on the surface.

I look at the broken ship with a small crew. Slowly the refugees return on rafts. We start tying the boat together again with some string and we sail on.

However, something important has broken, cracked.

The pandemic, for someone like me—a professional aikido teacher—was, and is, of course, a challenge on many levels. The community rose to the challenge and we survived financially. We are succeeding, so far. However, many other things have happened and I still don’t know what to think about them.

Aikido, which for most members was just another activity, suddenly became a dangerous risk to life, and the dojo became deserted overnight. People who had been practicing Aikido for years routinely, out of habit, because they didn’t know how to live otherwise. These people suddenly survived two years without training and many noticed that it was not so bad not to practice.

The shell broke. Many who came to the dojo routinely, with no fire in their eyes, realized that they didn’t want to do it anymore. A few fairly important members, even teachers, left the dojo with their first lockdown and never came back. No emails, no phone calls, no answers to questions. These were people I had taught since I was a kid, they were family to us, and they left us in stunned amazement. Apparently that’s the way it’s supposed to be.

The job of a martial arts teacher is to learn from everything you encounter, calmly and without emotion. With a beginner’s mind, watching the process with curiosity. So we look. We look for the mechanisms. We look at the ship, where it has cracked, how places

have strangely survived that we didn't expect them to.

Where great trees grew, new birches and oaks momentarily sprout. The light falls on those who were hiding in the shadows of those who passed away. And immediately some of them hide in another darkened place. Such, after all, is their nature. But some of them bloom and grow. And so the dojo changes. Community. It mutates and is born again.

Every day I wonder, with every decision, if what I am doing is still constructive, or if I am once again using a childish Donald Duck plaster to seal a cracked egg with a vibrant life inside.

How many of these mutations, faces, relationships. The teacher leaves a piece of himself in each of them floating away on lifeboats, and sometimes you wonder if there is anything still left in you.

All my life I have been urging people to practice, and now the time has come when, for the umpteenth time, I say: „I think it's better if you stop, let the egg burst and then we'll see”.

Too soon

It's a simple question to ask a true student—a person ready to answer it. „What do you actually want from this place, training, and from me?”

This is the question that initially bounces off the shell, the shield. I get a nice, comfortable-for-all answer and we start training. Over time we revisit this question again, and sometimes the answers are different. We trust each other already and some can afford an honest „I don't know”. The teacher has the tools to force the student to face his limitations. It is enough to ask every time a student is absent from class about the reason. After some time it will dawn on the student that they are generating their own reasons because, frankly speaking, they simply doesn't want to do it that much. However, the shell or mask will not bear such honesty and the student will leave because they are not yet able to get out of the egg and accept it. It can be anything. The teacher slowly learns honesty and how much of it a person can bear. Because a teacher should be like a dirty mirror that the student cleans for years, to finally see his true, not idealized reflection.

The teacher has the tools to force this process, but then almost always a bird comes out of its shell, incapable of independence, with unformed wings. Often for the rest of his life he feels distrust or even hatred for the teacher.

And it's also true that, not having a conscious experience of my relationship with my own teacher, I, as a teacher, am condemned to a long road of trial and error—I will hurt many people before I learn to help. Well, but that's the way it is.

Too late

There is a documentary about kendo students preparing for the 8 dan exam in Japan. The teacher is 80 years old and the student is 70, and at one moment the master shouts:

“Stop charging like that—we’re not 50 anymore.” Set in a socially understood Japanese hierarchy, the story is charming and teaches loyalty and one’s place.

I don’t know how much their relationship, which had formed over probably 50 years of teaching, was constructive, but there is something about this story that scared me. From the perspective of our cultural background, you can look at it differently. The student who never evolves into the teacher. They both assume their roles for life, as if freezing that relationship. Such are the dead dojos—places where the teacher pretends to teach and the student pretends to study. And so they go on for decades hiding in feigned modesty and posturing.

Like collecting birds’ eggs, in each egg is spelled the slain future of free creation.

Is disintegration, conflict, departure a sign of constructive growth? Sometimes yes, the egg must crack or it will rot.

What happens if you bury the eagle like a hen? Maybe you will raise an ostrich, or maybe one day an angry eagle will peck out your eyes and fly away?

It’s a snail, not an egg!

Supposedly we all have arms and legs and supposedly we are all governed by similar reasonably logical emotions. Maybe so, but we are still so different. If my goal is to witness this new-born creature coming out of its shell, I may find that I have before me a creature that needs a shell to survive.

I tortured people for years as they fled from one excuse to another. They created mazes of rabbit holes, hiding in them with panic.

School, exams, family, birthdays, name days, tutoring, girlfriend, boyfriend, cold, marriage, kids, interviews, child’s cold, divorce, new girlfriend, getting ready for vacation, vacation, rest after vacation, making money, no money. Etc.

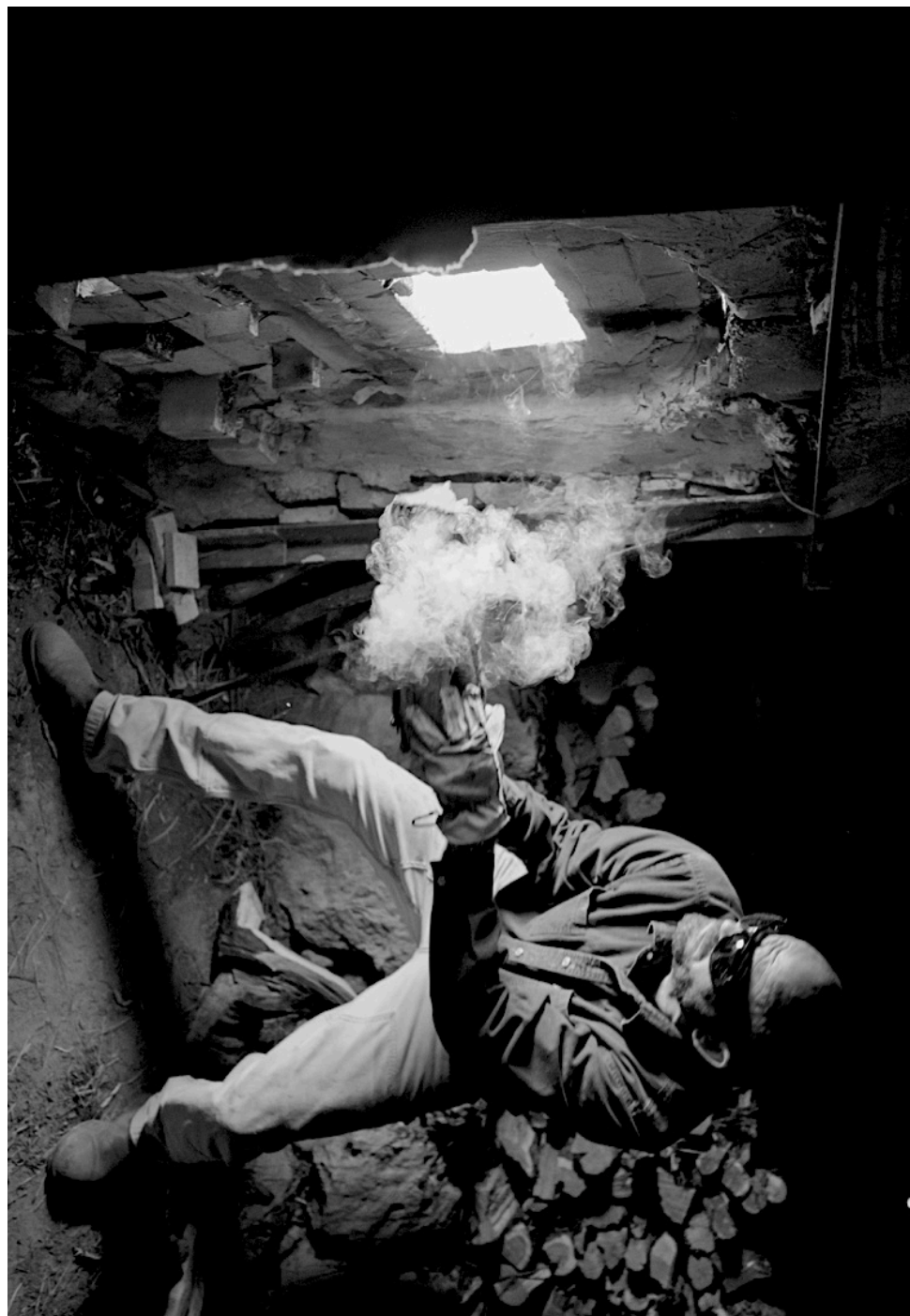
There is a type of person who escapes into the corner of the eye, endures only a little attention. Such a one should be recognized and not pressed. It is not an egg, it is a snail. It just grows out of its shell and quickly finds a bigger one. Without a shell, something will eat it right away.

There was also a man who turned to me and growled: „Leave me alone, this shell does not protect me from you, only you from me!” And there are such people, too.

It is a stone, you fool!

There are stones, too. And it is not their fault. They just have a lousy teacher who, like a demented hen, for years tries to hatch a stone instead of an egg.





AIKIDO AND FIRE (SUBURI OF FIRE)

DR MICHAŁ PUSZCZYŃSKI

When the firebox door opens, the first thing you need to learn is to get off the line, do not stand in front of the fire. If you don't do that, despite the gloves and leather apron and safety glasses, you will start to feel everything starting to burn. If you stand straight on for too long, mesmerized by the fire, you won't even notice yourself start to burn until it's too late. Within a meter of you, there is a temperature of 1350 degrees Celsius and raging flames. You have to stay on the side, turn, grab the wood, move to the fire, stick it inside in one motion, back off, turn and go to the other side, take another piece of wood, move, and put it inside. By turning and moving, you can work longer, you won't get burned and you can load a full load of wood, close the door, and finally have a moment to catch your breath. In a few minutes, all the wood will be burnt, the door has to be opened and the process started all over again. Grab the wood—Irimi tsuki, put it inside—Tenkan. Take another piece, Tenkan—Irimi Tsuki, stick it inside—Tenkan, take another piece . . . Suburi of fire.

Wood is humanity's oldest fuel. Its combustion produces the thermal energy necessary to transform clay into ceramic during the firing process. It is a durable and hard but extremely fragile material that can survive for millennia. Even though today electricity or gas are used as fuel to carry out this process, some effects can only be achieved by using technology dating back more than 2,000 years.

Centuries ago, in the Far East—initially in China, later in Korea and Japan—potters learnt to build special wood-firing kilns that allowed them to control the fire and achieve temperatures exceeding 1350°C. Pottery placed inside the furnace, after reaching a high temperature and having fly ash melt on the surface, achieves a unique type of glaze. The color, texture, and appearance of this glaze depend on the type of wood used, the type of clay, the temperature, and the duration of the firing process. Some kilns of this type are fired for two weeks non-stop, consuming a tremendous amount of wood and labor. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, thanks to contact with Japanese art and aesthetics, the technology and the results obtained were appreciated by artists from different parts of the world. Contemporary techniques of firing anagama or noborigama kilns and the masters who use them can be found in the USA, Europe, and Australia. Like Aikido, the aesthetics, and philosophy of wood-fired ceramics, due to the harmony held in it and the idea of searching for beauty in nature, has found enthusiasts worldwide.

The process itself is extreme, and its success depends on many factors. The kiln is a narrowing tunnel made of heat-resistant bricks and clay, with a chimney at its end. Pottery, sculptures, and vessels are carefully and slowly placed inside the kiln on heat-resistant shelves, considering how they will be positioned within the flames and embers. It is a three-dimensional puzzle, where the space left between the pots for the flow of fire and ash is significant. Depending on the size of the kiln, this process takes between two and six days of tedious teamwork.

There are several dozen to several hundred pots, sculptures, and forms inside the kiln, made mainly by people who participate in the entire firing. After everything is loaded inside, a firebox is built at the front with an opening that is covered by a door hanging on a chain. The fire will be stoked with wood passed through the hole, depending on the size of the kiln and the expected results. This process lasts continuously from three to eight days and nights. The firing begins slowly, gradually gaining a faster and faster pace, progressing from a small fire to preheat the pots to a wave of heat and fire that passes through the entire kiln and causes sheaves of flames a couple of meters above the chimney.

It is around-the-clock work for two- to three-person teams in four- to six-hour shifts. When the kiln reaches 1350 degrees Celsius and enough wood has been burnt, it is sealed up tightly with clay and sand and left to cool for two weeks. When the pots and the kiln are cool, it is possible to unload the pottery and sculptures carefully. At that moment, you learn whether the several months of preparation, hard work, and the massive amount of burnt wood have brought the expected result.

For over 20 years, I have been practicing wood firing. Since 2006 I have been running a program at the Academy of Fine Arts in Wrocław, Poland, where students and invited artists from Poland and abroad can participate in this unique process. Since I started the Aikido way, I have had many reflections on how many features these two disciplines have in common. It would be a much more extended essay if I wrote about how Aikido influenced my life and art. Here I would like to answer the questions Sensei asked me in the context of Aikido and my art practice.

Piotr Masztalerz: I am interested in your approach to the unpredictability of firing. The work you have invested so much in, in the kiln, regardless of you, may fall apart or become even more beautiful. What's behind it? Do you take this responsibility on yourself, or do you accept this unpredictability? How many pots did you have to destroy before you learned to create the conditions where most of them survived?

Michał Puszczynski: Unpredictability is somehow permanently integrated with this type of firing technique. Of course, with time, along with the experience gained, you know how to set up pots, control fire, and carry out the ensuing stages of the process to achieve what you expect. For teaching purposes, when working with students, it is important to clearly explain and show what you are doing and what effect it will have—the whole process can be defined as a set of physiochemical processes. It relates to combustion, oxygen and fuel ratios, conversion, radiation, heat emission, temperature, and atmosphere control in the kiln. However, centuries ago, no one passed on knowledge in this way—knowledge was passed down from generation to generation by masters to students who eventually became masters. They added the accumulated skills and subsequent experiences that made up the knowledge of a given technique and technology.

It took tens of years of practice to really get to know what I was dealing with. There is a saying in the Far East that to learn pottery, you need 10 years to learn how to prepare

clay, 10 years to know what to make of it and 10 years to learn how to fire it. It is a very long perspective. I have been studying the firing process for many years to get as close as I could to what I wanted to achieve. At some point, I stopped controlling it. It's like playing an instrument and improvising; it starts playing by itself if you know it well.

In the kiln, apart from my sculptures, there are works by students or other artists, and what I want on the surface of my works will not necessarily have a good effect for them. I am increasingly interested in what is happening on the edge, on the verge of destruction, and I accept that my works may not survive and may end up wholly melted, cracked, smashed. However, that would be crazy for someone who is experiencing this process for the first time. It is as if you started beginners' class with koshinage and broke all the students at their first training. I have learnt a compromise. There is a zone in the kiln firebox where the highest temperature prevails. The works are constantly in danger of getting hit by the wood, so there is a significant risk for them, but amazing effects might be achieved there. I always place my works there and if students want to do it, they can, but I always warn them about the risk. You can win a lot or lose everything. My sculptures are built to survive the entire firing period in this zone, but sometimes they break. The more you push boundaries, the more potential losses and dangers there are. Probably like in Aikido. I have years of experience and practice, I know the process and the material, but every time I start firing, I know I have to be fully present and focused. I have to believe in my skills and intuition and be humble towards fire because it is an unpredictable element. I need to keep an open mind and be prepared for anything. Just like entering the dojo.

P.M.: Do you sometimes get something even more beautiful or different than you expected after firing? Are these expectations limiting you, or are you expecting them?

M.P.: Beauty is relative. I have often been surprised when I open the kiln, unable to believe what I see, but someone else would not necessarily find it beautiful. After many years, I try not to have expectations, I try to be open to everything when unloading pots. Of course, I am a lecturer and a teacher, and I must somehow pass on my knowledge on evaluating the obtained results. The first stage is whether the work has survived without cracks or damage. We discuss whether the effects that arose on the work strengthen their artistic expression or build some new value with what they are associated with, or whether they require further work, processing, adding other material, etc.

The aesthetics of wood-fired ceramics is not an easily acceptable beauty. Just like Aikido will never be MMA, this field of art is also appreciated by a small group of artists, buyers, and collectors. This art requires appropriate predispositions both from those who practice it and those who enjoy it by collecting and exhibiting it in galleries.

P.M.: These are all a direct comparison to working with a human who transforms during training. Every so often a person leaves Aikido after confronting himself, and I sit speechless because I was trying to fire a cup, and an ashtray came out...

M.P.: Many times, I have had students who made average pottery but were irreplaceable in the preparation and execution of the entire firing process. And the other way around: students who had outstanding ceramic sculptures but had so much ego and self-opinion that it completely prevented cooperation and teamwork. Working with a group of people, especially when conveying something as subtle as art, is complicated. For most people, participating in firing ceramics with me is such an extreme and challenging activity that it is the only time in their life that they participate in it. I know it, and I agree with it because I believe that it is a significant life experience, and it gives a lot of knowledge about ceramics and who you are.

I do not expect any of the students to follow my path; when that happens, I am happy to share my knowledge on a profound level. But this is very rare. Nevertheless, it does not absolve me from working with everyone equally and reliably sharing everything I know. I assume that we are on the same path and going in the same direction, both the students and me. It is essential to meet on this path at a certain point in your life. I was fortunate enough to be a student of artist Seung Ho Yang as a 23-year-old ceramics student. I have fired his kilns in Korea, Switzerland, and France for some years. My approach to art and the teaching method is the result of my academic education and the experience of a real student-master relationship.

When I was firing a kiln with Yang in Switzerland, he did not use any gloves, aprons, or safety glasses when it was time to load the wood. With smooth, sure movements, he stoked logs with his bare hands. I once asked him why he didn't get burned.

„Hard training will make your life easy,” he replied.

This sentence is universal both in the art of fire and martial arts.



Heraclitus of Ephesus, in his search for the truth about the cosmos, recognized that the principle of the universe is fire. Fire is life; when that fire leaves a person, goes out of him, death approaches. Fire lives the death of what it burns. According to Heraclitus, the universe was not created—it exists in an eternal cycle, from one great flame to another. These great fires are separated by a time of constant change.

I often think of the Earth, of our planet, of how proudly, believing in our own greatness, we stamp on its shell, shouting that we are the masters of creation. That it was given to us, that we know how to make it obey us. Then in my imagination I fall, like Alice in Wonderland, into a hole, a deep burrow, and I run, I fall, without a body, with my thoughts, looking into the depths of the earth. I pass the roots of grasses and trees and rocks and underground rivers and caves to reach the place where the hot heart of the planet beats in the liquid lava. Live fire. These kilometers of crust exist to protect us. This fire is so great that it takes thousands of meters of rock for life to flourish on the shell. This fire inside is what makes life possible. I imagine this burning core as pure love that must be encased in a shell so that it does not burn the life it gives to the world. Sometimes the shell breaks here and there, and clouds of billowing fire churn out. The fire burns villages, covers cities with ash, covers forests with fiery breath, and changes everything it meets on its way into coal, into ash, into peat. It destroys life to give place to the new, because the world is undergoing constant change. Finally, where the lava freezes, it forms a crust even thicker to protect us even better, on the surface, from the eruptions of this burning love until the next burst, when the crust breaks open elsewhere.

The fire inside us is what makes us alive. We burn the world with every breath. This is not a metaphor. In the mitochondria, furnaces rattle one hundred percent, they constantly burn everything that circulates in our body and is suitable for burning, and they turn it into energy, into action, into what we call life. Our mouths and noses, and our entire skin, like factory chimneys, expel carbon dioxide and take in oxygen, so that the temperature in our cell furnaces does not drop. When the fire of the body goes out, death comes, said Heraclitus.

I track this fire hidden in the people I work with. The biological one that causes our eyes to open wider after a good, intense training; the colors become brighter, and the whole body somehow lighter, faster, more intense. I also track this deeper hidden fire. This fire pushes us to act, to fight for dreams, which gives us faith that we can live in our own way, in harmony with our interior. Sometimes this fire is muffled, sometimes it is barely smoldering, and sometimes it flares up and goes out. I see it as my task to look after it, to let a bright flame shoot out. Very often, in order for this flame to flare, it is necessary to break the shell and supply oxygen. This breaking of the shell can be

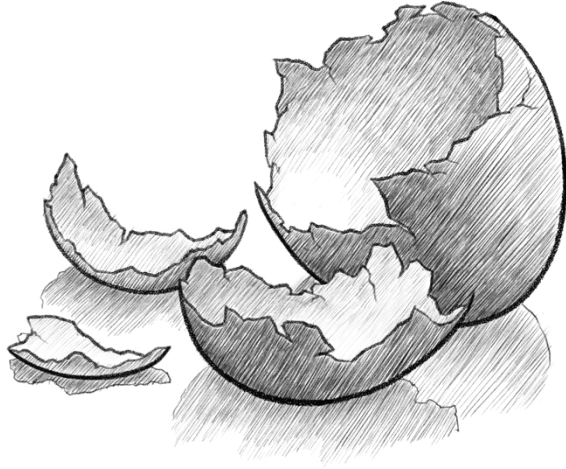
joyful and revealing, sometimes painful and fearful. You never know what kind of shell you will face. One should carefully observe the fissures that appear: some should widen, while others will allow themselves to heal, fill with lava, which may strengthen the crust. Thanks to these scars, the shell grows, stops tearing and protects again. In the Japanese art of repairing broken porcelain—kintsugi—fissures, scars, are first filled with lacquer and then with gold. This process is long and delicate, requiring great attention, patience, and skillful selection of the precise course of action for each phase of the process. As a result, objects become even more beautiful than before they were broken. Scars are formed that can be worn with pride.

The Ember

The theater workshops that we have been running for years at Studio Kokyu are an expression and effect of the desire to track and strengthen this fire in people. To awaken them to their own selves, to passion, to the inner truth that, as artists, they are obliged to share. For me, the very important question is how much of my fire I can give someone to allow him to ignite and burn without him being burnt.

How to play with the thickness of your own shell? How much can I allow myself to crack, and where should I make sure the shell is solid, not only for my own safety, but also so that I don't burn those closest to me, even if it's a fire of pure love?

I think about the Earth and try to learn from it. I look at my life and see that the many of the cycles that Heraclitus talked about are in it, that I operate on a micro-scale from crack to crack, from fire to fire. I have already learned that, on the ashes of what has burned down, another, often very beautiful, life grows. But sometimes the shell breaks, and the fire consumes what I should have been protecting. Over the years, perhaps the only thing I have learned is that when I feel the crust starting to crack, I have to be careful because I don't know what's behind that cracking.



II

What came
out from
inside?

WHAT ARE YOUR INNER ANIMALS?

FELIPE CABRERA, PAMELA TRONCOSO

Within psychology there are several schools or complex theories that aim to describe, comprehend, and predict human behavior in various possible scenarios.

The English philosopher John Locke argued that children are a blank slate, a blank page on which society „writes.” For his part, the Swiss philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau believed that children were born as „noble savages” who develop following their positive natural tendencies, if not corrupted by society. Mechanistic and organicist models emerged from this debate. The first considers development as a series of predictable responses to stimuli. People are like machines that react to stimuli from the environment. On the other hand, the organicist models consider people as active and growing organisms that start their own movement.

Thus, when analyzing the human experience, we must be clear which paradigm we will do it from, since the questions we ask ourselves and the answers we find will depend on it. This analysis depends on the observer and his way of interpreting the world; under no circumstances would we have the audacity to try to summarize or pretend to understand the multiple existing visions. Our knowledge is limited.

Sensei Piotr often refers to the fact that people have an animal inside them, hidden behind a mask. We do not intend here to explain, justify, or dismiss this vision, as it is a valid and unique way of understanding the world. We only intend to deliver our own interpretation of that vision, and for this, we will base our reasoning on social constructionism. Basically, social constructionism states that everything we take for our reality is considered the product of a relationship, a social interaction.

Frequently, there is the notion of a unique and deeply ingrained and hidden self, covered by layers of socialization. However, from a constructionist paradigm, the idea of a unique self is discarded. We are not independent of the relationships we have. If our relationships are multiple, a unitary self is not possible (Gergen, 2006).

Therefore, our identities will appear according to the various contexts of relationships in which we find ourselves. Traditionally we seek the integrity of the subject and do not allow other areas (or internal voices) of people to express themselves. Moreover, when we observe these contradictions in behavior, we tend to point them out and confront them in order to seek integration, the consistency of the human being. However, if we use the concept of a self that has adapted to the context, we free ourselves from that demand for coherence that presses us, and we give way to the versatility of the human being.

Thus, the image of internal animals helps us describe ourselves and understand our reactions to various contexts. We can be fragile like a canary or become a skilled hawk. Or an unscrupulous vulture.

The demands of the environment in the face of stress can also generate the fight-or-

-flight response. Like a mouse cornered by a cat that can either flee, hide, or defend itself. Even though it may die trying. This mouse: calm, gluttonous, and friendly, can transform into an indomitable beast with claws and teeth.

If we look at our practice as aikidoka, we can observe how different animals have expressed themselves at different moments of our lives, which have manifested themselves with respect to relationships in that context. The same animal does not always emerge. It will depend on who we are interacting with in that situation. For example, there are times when our practice partner puts pressure on us to such an extent that an internal anger similar to that of a bull arises. Other times, in the face of that pressure, we feel like a puppy playing, looking to be able to enjoy it. The same can be observed when looking at our fellow practitioners. There are days when they come to the tatami feeling like they are in a bullfight and other times like puppies looking to play with each other.

When a Sensei visits us, animals also change and emerge in multiple ways. Each of us in line expresses an animal or several animals in response to who is in front of us. It is interesting to see how we change our way of training, our way of behaving, our way of relating, depending on the teacher in front of us. Clearly we are not the same as in our daily practice, and these changes of scenery allow us to „bring out” other aspects of ourselves. Each Sensei invites us to allow different animals to emerge at that moment, showing us new forms of our selves.

Complex psychophysiological processes occur in extreme situations or under different types of stress. The internal animal emerges, and we may not like what we find.

Not every self or identity is adaptative. Likewise, not every characteristic of the animal is positive. There are several tasks for us as we consider our tendencies when they produce unadaptative behavior. First, we have to get to know it, then accept it and finally, try to work with it. On this perspective, our training forces to deal with unpleasant parts of ourselves.

We can then ask ourselves, what are our internal animals? Which ones are our favorites? Which ones do you feel more comfortable with? Is your animal today the same as in last week's or yesterday's training? Talking about our internal animals thus allows us to observe the various identities within us and listen to what each of them tells us about ourselves in the different scenarios where we may find ourselves. Our invitation is to appreciate each one of them.



A Dojo

BARTEK WOJTYCZKA

When you look at the world, you don't analyze how long it takes to build something. A lot of time, a lot of sacrifices, many victories, but possibly even more losses.

While building something, you can lose everything with one unnecessary move. So, you have to keep it up. Cherish it. Take care of it.

Whether it's a dojo or a state of mind.

A dojo is a place you come back to, but also a group of people, a community dedicated to aikido training. A dojo is a place in your heart. Without people, it's just an empty building. But this building is necessary. So that there is somewhere to come back to.

Looking at a dojo, I forget that it wasn't built in a day, a month or a year. It just exists.

I would like to teach good aikido, leading to the physical and mental development of each student, which will improve the lives of people all over the world. That was the idea of the dojo.

You want to think like a master, like a teacher, you already have plans in your head, you already know what your training would look like. What your dojo is supposed to look like. And then you do your best. And it is not working.

Lublin was supposed to be my starting point to build something much bigger. The city where I was born, lived, spent my childhood and youth. A permanent dojo that would attract people like a magnet. A permanent place and people. Disciples.

I was sure that I could manage. That it would work. I accepted this opportunity and, carried by a wave of self-admiration, I spread the word. I flooded my friends with information.

The reaction was amazing. A very high response. I felt that something would come out of it.

While waiting for the machine to start, I planned a show at the school. It was an amazing day. Great interest. Cheers of delight. Heaps of leaflets. The children came several times. They assured me that they would be training that day.

And then you're on the mat. You are sitting in seiza. You are waiting. Training one, training two, training three. Another one.

And nothing. No more Lublin. My outpost is gone. The shell did not break. Nothing new was born.

I DON'T KNOW HOW TO START

JAKUB BUTKIEWICZ

I don't know how to start . . .

Seriously. It was the same with Aikido. I had delayed starting the training for a long time. But it finally worked. I come, I train, and I have a lot of fun. However, one by one. I am writing from the perspective of a guy who has experience with martial arts as such. Ten years of traditional Karate training, very small experience in Boxing, Capoeira, and BJJ. I always wanted to be able to fight (I emphasize, to be able to—not necessarily to fight). I've always enjoyed competing. I loved to work as hard as I could in training and to come back home all bruised. At one point, training became an inseparable part of my everyday life, so much so that I couldn't imagine a day without it. I trained every day because I wanted to be the best. I wanted to prove to myself and the crew that I was just fit for it, that I was tough enough. There was no question of any compromises. Either I would be the best or the training just didn't make sense.

And then, the pandemic came. The core of my daily life was taken from me. I wasn't going to the dojo out of necessity. Initially, I was still practicing at home, but in confinement, my enthusiasm gradually weakened. In the meantime, there was a shift at work, which additionally disturbed my organization. Then, one of my closest relatives fell seriously ill. Training gradually ceased to be a priority. Returning to training was a torment. I stopped taking real pleasure from it, and attended the dojo out of a sense of duty. I lost not only the will to exercise but also the „common language” with the people with whom I had been training for years. Initially, I tried to ignore the inconveniences that appeared, identified them as excuses. I was gritting my teeth, but it was getting worse every week. I struggled with myself for a long time, looking for some compromise (previously there had been no question of compromises), but it was a no go. Something had changed in me and I did not notice this change. I was trying to save a part of myself that had long been dead. Or was it never really alive? The crazy pace at which I lived did not allow me to stop and see that Karate was not my Way. In training, I was never able to hit someone with full force; I always held myself back.

In retrospect, it is clear that lockdown has created an opportunity for me to “settle in” more deeply. At that time, I really did a lot of *zazen*. I realized that I do not want to fight or compete with anyone. There has never been such a need in me, or rather an artificially sustained desire to be who I am not. In the end, I made the decision to give up my Karate training. However, I did not want to be left with nothing, and so after a short time of trying various activities, I finally found the Aikikai Dojo in Wrocław.

I came to the first class with a very skeptical attitude. And how long did I take to this coming... Aikido has always appeared to me as something extremely impractical, something that simply does not work and is not applicable in real combat these days. „What on earth is it about grabbing the other person's wrist? And why should I hold it so tightly? Why does this guy let the other person abuse him? Is it definitely a martial art or

dancing?” With a head full of prejudices, I decided to give it a try. After the first training, I was simply surprised. „Ten years of Karate training, and what?! Why the hell can’t I roll backwards?! After all, a child can do something like that! How do they make these flips that they don’t bang their backs on the floor? How do they fall so lightly? Why the hell does everything hurt so much? I’m not even tired...” I have always considered myself quite fit. One hour of Aikido showed me, however, that there was still much to be done. I also saw that Aikido can be effective in real self-defense. It all depends on the way you train, the way someone trains you. While leaving the dojo, I had a short conversation with Piotr Sensei:

— And? Do you have any questions?

— A lot, but today I would like to ask only one. With all due respect, Sensei, I’ve heard that Aikido is simply not effective . . .

— Of course it is ineffective! But that’s not the point. It’s about doing something with your life. You don’t sit in zazen because it’s effective, right? How much have you trained Karate?

— 10 years, Sensei.

— How many times have you used it on the street?

— Not once.

— Exactly. So many hours spent training punches, kicks, hardening the body to get ready for some imaginary enemy to come.

This conversation gave me a lot to think about. And don’t get me wrong. It is not my aim to discredit Karate or any other „combat” systems. I still think Karate is cool. I just know it wasn’t my cup of tea. Less than six months of training in Wrocław Aikikai made me realize that I can simply play with movement. That flips could just be flips. That you can practice forms with a wooden sword and not necessarily want to repeat them with a real sword, in real combat. That I will, my dear Tori, hold you by the hand, because you simply want to learn something and spend this hour well. And I, as a still mediocre uke, do not want to hurt you or prove anything to you. Even though I still don’t „feel” some things and I often don’t know what the instructors are saying to me (Japanese names for techniques in Aikido are hard as hell), I really got hooked. First of all, I see Aikido as the perfect complement to my Zen practice, but that’s a topic for another essay.



A NICE PERSON

AGNIESZKA WRONA

In the school of life—ever since I can remember—I have specialized in being nice. I can confidently say that at times I have come close to perfection. And, as they say, „to the point of puking”. Occasionally literally. Especially when the smile on the facade—joyless, automatic, a quarter of a second too long held—causes internal tensions beyond measure.

Sometimes I use the mask of niceness. Even if the price is that it wears me out. I hold myself in too tight a grip. Why do I do this? It's one of my proven adaptation mechanisms. Everyone has one. Though fortunately for me and those around me—I'm becoming more and more aware. I have consciously started to put an end to this destruction.

The mask of a nice person has its advantages. It covers nerves that are sometimes too exposed. For a moment it makes difficult decisions, conversations, actions and confrontations less likely. Nice does not encourage, does not provoke—because it does not exert pressure. It gives an illusion of peace and security. I speak when I pretend to be less smart than I am. I don't speak when I know well; and sometimes even better. But is that the point?

The sobering up came uninvited. Unexpectedly, slowly, without appeal. Several months ago, with an irresistible inner call, I followed my soul's longing and began to fulfil a teenage dream. I entered the Way I have been walking for a long time. I found myself with Aikido.

So many years I've lived and still, almost every step I take is some kind of amazement. The first step and the first shock—that it is possible to cross a physical boundary, to interfere in someone else's situation, to create a new whole together and not fall apart at the same time. The second—that if you voluntarily get on the mat—then (what a surprise!) you should do it. And the third—that this action can make a difference. I started to strengthen myself from the inside.

So that what I am doing on the mat is getting closer to what I think it is supposed to be—I am also applying strength to the movement. I am still at the stage of finding the right kind of force. I'm testing limits and possibilities. The animal in me is reluctant to admit it, but sometimes it „smells blood” and groans with satisfaction. Such is the privilege of the enthusiasm of the ignorant novice.

I make an impact with words every day. You can touch the very center with it and „live” with it. And yet, at first I was surprised to cross a physical boundary. Only after some time I understood that it is a very effective way not only to get to know one's own abilities in action but also—in mutual relation—to create space for further development. I am grateful to all my teachers for this journey together. Thank you!

I ceremonially perform bows in the dojo and increasingly bow (in) life. We bow to what is best in us—as Sensei Masztalerz wrote. A few words and as much sense as you

want to contain in yourself. Exercise. The animal in me pays respect to both you and me. Here we go again. Whatever happens.

Seiza. We look. A stirring of air, a rustling of hakama, a quickened breath; we feel the flow of energy in the space created by our presence. The smile of perplexity of the kind beginner, stretching her face under the onslaught of surrounding power, slowly—with more hours worked on the mat—fades. I am more and more present. Is this a sign of the taming of the wild animal in me, or, on the contrary, of getting more in touch with my own nature? I don't know. Maybe both? I participate in the training and feel that it is as it is supposed to be.

A few months ago there was a good moment, so I asked: Sensei, I'm here—how do you see me? —"You hide and be nice." And after, a shout.

How in the school of life do I pass the practical test? Because being nice has various (re)shadows. As Sensei perversely said—maybe I am too educated for some things? How much does one have to learn in order to unlearn . . . Time passes; I want to believe that I am also changing. And the animal inside me is purring.

There are moments that especially stand out. My child, following his own imagination, continues some of the exercises brought from training at home. Boldly and joyfully. The movement doesn't hold back. On a hard floor. Sometimes with a ball, which is still too big to grow. Surrounded by things and accessories. With the eyes of my imagination, I see various possibilities . . . In similar situations, I look at myself as in a mirror. Sometimes an overly caring duck looks back at me. Then I remind myself (according to my own limitations) not to clip the delicate child's wings. I want the wings to grow strong and the exit from the nest to be free. The animal in me pays respect to all of Creation. To the wonder and mystery that I do not comprehend, but that I acknowledge. I do my part; the rest I let go and allow it to have its rhythm. And when that, too, is sometimes too difficult, I close my eyes with confidence.

One day, the image of an animal parent carrying a baby popped into my imagination. The adult, presumably as needed and not a step further, carries its young in its mouth, holding it by the scruff of its neck. Mother Nature gives as much as needed. At the right moment, she releases the embrace, lets the baby go into the world from her embrace. When I consciously focused my attention on the place where the head connects to the body, I clearly felt that I, too, could regulate this embrace. Noticing the key place for energy flow changed a lot, and significantly. Another piece of the puzzle came together into a larger whole.

When I step into a professional role, I work with the whole person by choice. The animal in me instinctively senses what's in front of me; on top of that, I'm skilled with words, so I can touch precisely and effectively. The perversity of the situation is that I live mainly in my own head. And a further trip is like a journey beyond the horizon. Nevertheless, I'm getting more and more courageous to check what's going on there, too. The separation of the word from the body. Me from you. And aren't they one and the same?

Yet something else „goes by itself." When I am alone and the animal inside me feels

the need—it speaks from deep within; without asking permission. Mother Nature speaks in a loud voice, granting me my own in the process. It is such a moment that even the mask quivers, and is moved.

When you meet an acquaintance who is „nice” and get the impression that he seems to have changed—think maybe it’s a miracle of transformation. He is happening every day. Right before our eyes. Let’s be attentive. To ourselves and others. When the animal in me recognizes the animal in you—the chance for mutual understanding increases.

Different situations weave inside me and create a living stream of daily experiences. How many animals do I have inside of me? And how many masks accompany them? Do they have me or do I have them? Who chooses? What gives rise? Some say that energy follows attention. In my trainings, I start it with focus. And then it flows through everyday life.

Time is my ally. A nice person gets stronger from the inside. I put on the mask less and less often, and I am more and more cordial and kind by choice. Excessive layers are slowly fading away. The discipline I have adopted gives shape to the everyday and the search for beauty in action is an expression of a deeper longing. The animal in me is speaking more and more, including with my human voice. And I like what I hear.

Born in 1977, the Chinese year of the snake, I'm older than a tree by uchideshi standards. However, I travelled to Poland in the middle of a global pandemic to become an uchideshi for a month. I had read before on the web the testimonies of many that preceded me, and it was remarked many times that one of the consequences of the experience was releasing the inner animal and showing the true self through the intensity of the training and the relation with the sensei. With my age, I have had enough years and experiences, good ones and bad ones, to be aware of who I really am, so engaging this kind of journey shouldn't have been a way of finding myself; but, maybe, some kind of effort to try to become a different self. Of course, one can dream about leaving one's actual self behind in one's house to reach an improved 2.0 version of oneself, but the harsh reality is that it tends to find a way of hiding inside your luggage, within your keikogis, as a stowaway, or, even worse, to be already in your destiny, waiting for you to arrive.

When you train as many hours as an uchideshi does, there will always be a moment when you are so tired and in pain that it is not possible to pretend to be something different from what you really are, so this experience exposes your true self not only to your own eyes, but also to everyone else. Sensei told me a few times that being nice, smiling too much, could be the mask I used to protect myself from being harmed, or a mechanism to try to fit in. I don't really think that's the case, but that appreciation made me wonder whether there would be an amount of truth in it. He also talked to me about cows and horses, chickens and eagles. And there was also one mouse as guest star during a short period of time. That led me to question which animal would be the one hidden deep inside of me, willing to go out.

Truth be told, in my opinion the animal that best represents one should be named by the people that see its characteristics in you, not by oneself. After all, we all would like to be defined by something cool like a wolf, a falcon, a shark, a bull or—why not—a dragon, and we will probably search unconsciously for things in ourselves that could match with them. Anyway, it is interesting to ponder about which one would I be.

Would I be a snake, imposed by the year I was born in? Or an elephant, cursed by a too good memory for the bad things I've done? Maybe a dog, loyal even when it's badly beaten? A duck, always keeping its place in the queue? Definitely neither a fox nor a racoon. So which one, then? I have two koi carps tattooed on one side of my body, and a small sign in my desk that says 'Only dead fish go with the flow'. For me, this doesn't mean that I have to be a rebel or go against the mainstream to feel alive—in fact, I consider myself pretty conventional—but to keep on swimming no matter the adversities. But while thinking about the things that I was going to write about the subject that Sensei proposed me, I realized that a more accurate meaning for me would be to go against the flow of my own self. I guess that I would be happier if I just accepted who I am instead of trying to become

something different, but, as the scorpion said to the frog, it's in my nature. So, if I had to choose my inner animal I guess it would be a salmon, swimming up the river and trying to find a beautiful rainbow at the end of it—or, at least, hoping not to be brought back to the sea by the force of the stream. A salmon that, in his fight against the river, eventually has to deal with the claws of a bear.



ANIMAL

ANDRZEJ KALBARCZYK

A cat is an animal close to my heart. I wrote „animal” for a reason. —This word reflects my level of subtlety well. I am rather an ordinary male cat, not a small tin-pot. Nevertheless, I am a cat, and I can play and enjoy simple things. In aikido we work on the body through movement, and there are some simple rules to keep in mind, but certainly aikido is not chess. I try to remember about safety, provided by proper distance; stable movements with balance, which can be kept thanks to correct posture and good breathing—achieving these things allows me to enjoy the training longer. Many times, the joy I feel from movement is incomparable to the joy derived in other ways.

Perhaps I don’t take training seriously enough . . . I train fairly regularly, yes, but maybe I could be better technically, and certainly I would be fitter physically by training with more focus, not dissipating energy for joy, just . . . The question has always been here: why do you do what you do?

In addition to securing a level of material comfort, I am aware that some measure of happiness is self-satisfaction. Not in the sense of being good or even better than others, but the awareness of being in good shape. Satisfaction with a well-functioning body, satisfaction felt after training, when you were not necessarily the best on the mat, but a suitable partner for other practitioners and together made a few more steps on the road together.

The focus on oneself and one’s needs comes from this feline selfishness, the failure to pay attention to the outside world, to its needs and turmoil, at least until they get too close. In the case of Aikido, this world outside the mat distracts from training, takes up valuable time—many Aikidoka struggle with this problem. Not having a nugget of talent, and wanting to get better and better on the mat you have to be a little selfish; do things your own way and insist on it, don’t let yourself be pulled away from your chosen direction. This applies to any passion beyond the 2 to 3 hours set aside each week.

Cat-like stubbornness in Aikido can be doing techniques your way, despite one, another, and another trying to help and improve. I try to curb this stubbornness and avoid thinking that I have been practicing for so long and I already know something. However, you can’t close yourself in your own world and you have to listen to others, especially teachers.

However, this picture is incomplete. There is no denying that I also have a less sympathetic side. There is still a hyena in me, the darker part of my character. It also has something of a cat, but a venomous one. He likes to tease, sometimes he bites, he notices other people’s imperfections only rarely, looking at herself in the mirror. Although he

does not disturb the movement on the mat and sometimes only giggles devilishly, he only waits for the end of training, and joyfully grinning fangs, starts to play immediately.

I try to make sure that I don't bite the sensitive individuals, but tease those who can deliver blow for blow. It can be great fun, and it teaches you to take a distance from yourself—you can't be offended by others doing to you what you do to them. It's a good exercise for the ego—and I have a rather well-developed one—and for limiting its influence on my own actions. If I can respond to my own biting remark with a good, pertinent retort and appreciate the brilliance of others, rather than simply pretending that nothing has happened and actually harboring a grudge, it opens the door to many positive things: Pointing out mistakes to me turns out to be constructive criticism that reveals places for improvement. When someone is better, I try to catch up with them not to be better than them, but to be better at what I do myself. The effect is similar to when we always try to win, to be first, but there is a significant difference—losing doesn't become a toxic problem, it becomes a motivation to improve.

This may sound a bit high-minded, but it is meant to be honest: It is true that a pure heart, not poisoned by envy, makes life easier. However, there's no denying that the hyena provides me with some amusement, and I try to hold it back just because it's not necessarily as fun for the other party.

There's also a third . . . something. What it is, I don't know. I don't want to know and—I hope—I'll never find out. Maybe it's some kind of wolverine? It's hard to tell, because it's only raised its head a few times so far, but it's quickly gone back to its depths. I'm counting on life continuing to work out in a way that doesn't provoke it to leave its lair for much longer, which I wish for myself and others.

I came across an Aikido class about two years ago. And it all started with my younger son, who decided to practice something in pajamas. Then somehow it turned out that I myself began to take part in harai and zazen and conditioning classes. But I avoided Aikido training itself, because, as a long-time practitioner of Chinese martial arts, I felt that I should not roll on the mat in this funny outfit (which was, by the way, very uncomfortable then). Besides, I knew these Aikido techniques; they are present in virtually every kung fu system (we call it Chin Na), even in Taijiquan. But over time, it turned out that the techniques themselves are not everything. That that's not just why you come to the dojo. It turned out that the greatest treasure here is people with whom you can share pain, fatigue, and fear (this also appears in training). Well, I start going to Aikido trainings, which started to draw me in... maybe there is something in it... I evaluate techniques based on my previous knowledge, I hide in the shell of my previous skills, I try to „practice”, but clinging to what I have been doing so far. I repeat that I do not practice this Aikido, I am here by accident. And so I would probably have persisted in the world of my imagination, if not for one small, almost completely insignificant detail. It turned out that I was not able to do a forward roll. I mean, I'll do it, but then I have motion sickness for three days (to put it mildly). Hello... after all, I practice so much, I am an instructor, I had my own martial arts school... and here, the basic roll? And there's a lot of me, a lot more than there was before. And they do such cosmic things in the room. And they had been practicing a third of that time as I did... And what can I do about it? I can stay in my comfort zone, recognize that it's not for me, because I've already proven that I can, I have sports achievements, now I'm an instructor, I'm not going to force myself to do such strange things anymore. Or, let me get out of the shell. Admit to myself that this is not the end of the road, but beginning of the new path. Wear this funny outfit. Bow my head and politely start training. And so I did. I lost kilograms and at the same time I gained self-confidence. I do things I hadn't even dreamed of. And most importantly, at a very difficult moment in my life, even a breakthrough, Aikido classes became a real anchor for me, the only constant thing in all this madness. And the dojo itself is a place of escape, breath, safe space ...

And all this thanks to the fact that I dared to get out of my comfort zone, I broke my shell. And so that it was not that I came to it myself, it was thanks to all those around in dojo, which effectively helped me to beat my shell... Which does not change the fact that I still have a problem with the forward roll...



First training of the year; a bit of a hangover and a warm welcome to the coming year. We started with warm-ups, some ukemi, and then techniques. I'm training with an uchideshi, everything is okay. One moment Sensei approaches us and then takes me as an uke. I'm a bit nervous and excited to work with him. He doesn't say a word. He does the technique. I fall. I get up. I approach him again. He doesn't say a word. I fall. Before I manage to get up, he has started to approach me already. I have to be fast. I get up. He is in front of me already. He does the technique. But this time it's different. He does something else, I did the same. I fall.

I get up, I see his punch coming, I dodge and again he is on me. I fall. As I'm falling down I notice he is already coming towards me. I need to be faster. He is in front of me. He doesn't even wait for me to come to him anymore. Again, I fall. How the hell he is so fast. "10 minutes wrestling on the knees," he announces. He is on me. I'm tapping, he is shouting "Tapping for what, I'm not doing anything!" I have no power. I cannot fight back anymore. "Fight back." I cannot! "Back to technique." We start again. He doesn't even let me breathe. I'm on the floor again. "You can't die on the mat, get up!" I'm trying my best to take the ukemi but he doesn't let me. "Make it properly, I'm not here for you!" This happens for at least 10 minutes non-stop. He is shouting and throwing me to the mat and I'm falling and falling. Every time I fall, somehow I get up. Every time I get up, I say to myself, "I'm done, can't he see?"

"I'm going to give up."

"What happens if I try to punch him?"

"What happens if he really tries to punch me?"

"I can't feel my body, probably I'm having internal bleeding."

"Why the fuck I didn't punch that boy from my high school when he was bullying me?"

"Maybe I did something to upset him."

"Am I still breathing?"

"Is it my nose or my lips bleeding?"

"Why do I believe 'being able to survive' in this condition is the best I can get? When did I decide I already lost?"

Then everything starts to get blurry but I'm not sure if it was the sweat or the tears first.

That day, every time I hit the mat, I confronted myself. My traumas, comfort zones, weaknesses, fights that I avoided . . .

Every time I hit the mat, I felt like I was an onion which was dropping its layers, one after another.

Later, Sensei patched up all those layers up for me, so I could be a proper onion.



TWO SWORDS

ŁUKASZ ROKICKI

Due to the circumstances of nature, the first thought I had right after my arrival to Brzezinka, was that this place reminds me of my childhood home. The farm buildings, the proximity of the forest and the brook that could be heard all night long - it evoked pleasant memories. The most beautiful thing in all this however, was the momentary disconnection from the world rushing at a crazy pace. The year 2020 seems to be taking its toll on all of us from the very beginning. World pandemic, national panic, forced isolation and progressive polarization of society, fueled at every step by political wars. All of this was already so mentally exhausting. And finally Brzezinka - a place located literally in the middle of the forest, with so limited access to the network that you could safely say that there was practically no GSM coverage. The longed-for information silence. Here it turns out that deprived of this mass of everyday information, with all the differences that may divide us, in a few days we can build a dojo as beautiful as if it has always belonged to this place.

These few days in Brzezinka gave me the opportunity to touch things that, under normal circumstances and with the daily rhythm of life, slip beyond my reach. Aikido, Iaido, weapon training - this is what I do on a regular basis, but I rarely have the opportunity to practice the Zazen in dojo or take part in Harai. While I have some indirect contact with Zazen, because during the day I am looking for that moment of silence, when I can distance myself from the world, from the multitude of thoughts and look at it from a different perspective, Harai is a completely different matter. I don't like Harai. Without going into very details, it raises a moral conflict within me. Bowing down in a ceremonial I don't understand and reciting texts the meaning of which no one can explain to me, is definitely not something I would be interested in. Before Brzezinka, driven by eagerness and curiosity, I took part in Harai once. Each time, and there was not much of it, it was usually an incident or result of a car that was blocked by someone else's car, where I couldn't leave the dojo but also didn't want to cause a problem to the person whose car was blocking mine, because at the end I will endure these 30 minutes of sitting in seiza. That is exactly what this practice was for me - to hold out in seiza and scream. I do not deny its effectiveness, especially today, but I did not look for anything more than that, and I consciously chose a different path to my „inner enlightenment”. Before the camp began, at least a few people made it clear to me, that my presence at Harai would be more than welcome. I treated it along with the occasional „patting” on the back as a kind of game. Internally, I set myself up for three mornings, where I would have to sit out and scream out, probably tearing my throat in the process, but I wasn't looking for any deeper meaning in it.

My seiza is bad, so if I know that I will not be able to change positions for a long time, I try to sit as deep as possible and cut off the feeling in my feet as quickly as I can. After that, I focus only on not moving my foot, not changing the body weight distribution and not allowing the normal blood circulation to return to my legs. The moment when

blood circulation comes back is the worst. Finally, I look forward to the moment when the frequency of the shouts increases, because that means it's almost over - the entire survival strategy. That's how I got through the three mornings, happy it is over. Somewhere during the afternoon break, I heard about some idea for „Ichimando” on Sunday morning, but I neither knew what it meant nor was I worried about it. After Saturday's last training session, it was officially announced. The practice is absolutely voluntary for those who want to try it and exclusively obligatory for Uchideshi and people who went through the Shogaku - fine from my perspective, if not for the fact that Mateusz had to mention my name in a role of an involuntary volunteer, so I also ended up on the list of “obligatory volunteers”.

Ichimando - A practice consisting of a 45-minute Misogi Harai session, a 30-minute Zazen session, and another 45-minute Harai session. I am aware at this point that this is absolutely nothing compared to what a person who undertakes Shogaku has to go through. Apparently, it is an individual experience for everyone and everyone goes through it in their own way. Even less so, I was not preparing for any special experiences related to Ichimando. However, I was not ready at all, for what was to come. My mental preparation ended on Saturday morning, because that's how I defined the rules of the game. For the rest of the day, I was devising different strategies for getting through this - better, worse, but all stupid. I didn't sleep through the whole night, because I was focusing only on the fact that I would not have to attend in this, if my name was not be put on that „absolute voluntary” list, despite whether I liked it or not.

The first session went unexpectedly easy for me. I sat up well, muscles and tendons arranged well so that I was okay. I guess even for a moment I felt satisfied with what we were doing. In the vast majority of Zazen sessions was also a pleasant experience, until I realized the passing of time. At that moment, I was just thinking about we still have another 45 minutes of Harai ahead of us. The third session went wrong from the very beginning. I was seated in the front center - previously I had deliberately sat down as close to the door as possible. I did not manage to relax my legs, feeling that I was sitting badly, I wanted to improve my position, thinking that maybe it is not too late for that, but it was. Blood circulation returned, thousands of needles were tearing my legs in all directions, and that was just the beginning - panic ensued. The first contraction, a rush of thoughts and an outburst of emotions. Something inside me started to crack. Emotions literally flooded me - I can't put this into words, but there was nothing good about them. There was an adrenaline rush and out of all this mixture was born an intention that now terrifies me and which I detest - the intention to kill! To kill for being here, where I didn't want to, for the fact that it hurts and because everything inside me is falling apart and I have no control over it. There was a second contraction which made me lean forward and put the weight on arms resting on the mat, I got a zafu pillow - „now there is no more excuses”. There were no emotions anymore, except for the one that I gripped the most in panic - pure hatred. I have already decided! I know where he is sitting, I know that there are two swords on Kamiza, I know how they are placed. I know and I'm ready except for my legs, which won't listen to me! I am beginning to feel them, but they are as if not

mine. I'm collapsing, but I know I'll be able to move in a moment. I am looking for help in fear and desperation - Archangel Michael, help me!!! I feel like I'm falling. I guess I stopped screaming. I felt a blow to my back, the second, the third - „shout is fine, shout!“ Now I scream and catch this scream, afraid to let go of it. Everything burst, spilled, I don't think about anything, I don't want anything, my emotions are gone - I'm here and I'm just screaming.

When Ichimando was over, I wanted to be alone. I felt ashamed and disgusted with myself. I was afraid to meet the eyes of others, I was afraid that now they would see what I intended to do. I was afraid of condemnation - human trash! The more of the situation's absurdity reached me, the worse I felt about it. I cried and it gave me a sense of relief - you can hide a lot under this mask. What could the person next to me who saw me like this at that time think? - Maybe he is crying of pain, is weak and physically unable to endure. What others would think now did not matter, as long as they did not see the truth behind all of it. We sat straightening our legs, while Sensei, with a hoarse voice, was explaining something. I heard his words but was unable to listen to them. I just wanted to leave. Memories about how I tried to gather myself up are somehow blurry, I acted automatically - you have to bring tables, glasses, cups, bowls and lay out chopsticks, because breakfast is about to start. I didn't want to eat. At the table, I sat somewhere near the group from Slovakia - language barrier, maybe they won't ask about anything and they didn't. After breakfast, Sensei called me outside. I honestly did not want to talk, but I also knew that it was all far too much for me and I would not be able to hold it within myself anymore. Without looking into eyes, I said what I felt and what I intended to do. What I almost did! He laughed. Then I just wanted to get up and walk away, but I looked at Sensei and a thought hit me - he didn't seem to know what to say right now. I guess that surprised him too. Our conversation continued, and with each subsequent „what, how, and why“ question, I felt more and more how absurdly I nearly lost control. It occurred to me that I didn't really need to do this from the very beginning. In the end I heard - „You should tell him“ and I knew that I should. That only a sincere conversation with Mateusz would be able to extinguish this burning internal heat that is tormenting me. We talked, and this conversation will remain between us. It was definitely not an easy conversation, but it brought a lot of relief - I neither want nor hold a grudge. Ironically, the next thing that awaited, was Mateusz's Iaido classes. Somehow it happened, because no one else started it, that during each of his classes I was doing reiho and I felt obligated to finish it. The training was about absolutely basic things, but it was by far the truest Iaido training I have participated in so far. I didn't have to imagine any opponent. My would-be target was in front of me all the time, and together we tried to catch and act in each other tempo, by presenting another exercise - beautiful and terrifying.

Very important, in addition to these two conversations, was the kindness I received and continue to receive from many people present at Ichimando, especially from those who have gone through their inner Shogaku hell. Przemek's words have of great value for me, for which I am more than grateful, because they were the first ones that pushed me to look for answers to what led me to this and no other state. Thank you all!

Brzezinka turned out to be a great surprise in many aspects. A special place where I expected a few days of intense training and discipline, which of course I got, but also a place that raised many difficult questions I have to face. I have already found answers to some of these questions, and still try to answer others. There are also questions that I don't feel to be ready to answer yet. Brzezinka swayed me and broke inside. Made me to look straight into the abyss within me. I physically left this place. Several days passed, and a few tries before I even started writing these memoirs. It goes hard, I get lost and stutter looking at the void. Since my return, I have been acting like an automaton, functioning only by programmed reflexes and routines. Anything that goes beyond the routine seems to be almost impossible. In the corner of the apartment hangs a freshly washed hakama, which I can't put together for the fourth day - I think I'll finally do it today.



Wrocław Aikikai/ Kaszyce Aikikai/ Na Grobli Aikikai/ Krzyki Aikikai