

Andrew Tsubaki Sensei Memorial Seminar – Question & Answer
Kansas Ki Society: Laurence, Kansas
With Christopher Curtis Sensei
Sunday, November 12, 2017

Good morning everybody. So, this weekend this is the Andrew Tsubaki Sensei Memorial Seminar, so when we started on Friday, and really, throughout, I have tried to emphasize the importance of course of honoring our teacher, your great teacher her, Tsubaki Sensei. But also, the importance of honoring, again, everyone who came before, whose shoulders you now stand on. It is honoring Tohei Sensei, Suzuki Sensei and the other teachers who have supported you, but not only that. It is honoring each other in this same way, because the seminar experience would not be the same, if any one of you was not here. You, every one of you, change the nature of the experience for everyone else. So, we need to honor each and every one of us, not just the teachers. The teachers are important, of course, and there is a strong point to that, but I want to encourage you to support and believe in and honor each other, and the practice of that begins to melt away, or erode, the sense of separateness and judgement and it helps those of us who act like “know-it-all” sometimes. And it helps those of us who act like we don’t know anything and are shy and worried. In this way, everyone can feel welcome and everyone can feel supported and everyone can enjoy this experience at a maximum level for themselves, and for each other. This is why.

Tohei Sensei always told me that the purpose of the practice is to realize that we are one with the universe. He means that we are one with everything and everyone, that we are not separate. Of course, our senses show us that we are separate, that you are over there and I am over here, and that there is space in the room between objects. So, all these things must be important, and are present, but they are not here, present, in the way that we often think of. What’s actually going on is much more important. Actually, we are not separate from anything. Everything has its existence in the same way, through each of us. For me, I am the very center of this experience. For you, you are the very center of your experience. So, your universe is different than my universe, because of your perspective. But as you grow and develop, and begin to experience mind/body unification and small mind/big mind unification, or personal mind and universal mind unification, then our universes become much, much more alike.

Maybe we should have questions now. Anyone?

Student: On Friday, you shared with us that anything we could be looking for in a practice is here in Aikido. So, if there is something that you are looking for, and not finding here, the implication is that you need to look harder. In many spiritual traditions, religious traditions, there are grief processes to support people dealing with loss or dealing with trauma. I have never been clear if there was something within this training that, in a direct way, supported a grief process. I recognize that, in Sokushin no Gyo for instance, sometimes things arise, and you shared about the purpose of the reading of Norito at the end of the Sokushin no Gyo to wash away things that arise. And in my own sitting, I do experienced things arising, but I have never

been clear how to work with things that are coming up, or how to support others in this way.

OK, thank you. On Maui, we have private sessions in the spring time, and really, any time during the year anyone can make an appointment, and they do. They sit down in my office with me for 30 minutes. The door is closed, and it is private. So, if there is some issue that they are struggling with, maybe we can help to clarify that. The teacher is certainly there to support and to clarify the teaching. The teacher is not there to be a therapist. The teacher is probably not a trained therapist, so he or she has no business doing that, number one, and number two, as a student, you have no business bringing your problems to the teacher in that way. Exactly.

On the other hand, that sounds a little cold. You just have to use good judgement in the way that you do this. Let me see if I can clarify that. Actually, our practice is to show up, open our hearts and minds to whatever is happening, to follow along with whatever is happening, and to accept the results without editing, or attempting to alter whatever is happening. If you have an issue, if you find yourself to be disturbed by what is happening, you are clearly not doing that, right?

Look, there is some degree of pleasure in our life which we like and would like to hang on to and not lose. And there is some degree of pain on our life that we would like to avoid, sometimes at any cost. So, this desire to avoid pain, and this desire to cling to our pleasure, is called “suffering.” This is what the Buddha was talking about. Of course, our practice is to learn to live in this world without suffering, or with at least a minimum of suffering. Therefore, that is why we have this “show up, open, follow, and accept.” That is a guide that helps us to understand how to live in the world without reacting to it, as if it is something separate from us that is having its torturous way with us.

So, that is our practice, to deal with that. That is the “spirit of non-dissension.” This is Tohei Sensei’s teaching, to practice this. So, what I am saying is, be sure that you are practicing that, and then if you still are stymied, then you can bring some fundamental misunderstanding that you have identified through noticing, to your teacher, and seek clarification. What I meant by saying that “you have no business taking your problems to your teacher,” is that you must not just think that your teacher is your therapist, or your daddy, or your mommy. The teacher is not there for that. You take the responsibility. I don’t want to hear a long definition of your problems. You take care of it. Get it resolved. Find out exactly what it is that is your issue, honestly, and then you can bring that and say something about that to me, or to whoever the teacher is.

I think that this is a very good question, because this is a very gray area. People don’t always understand the function of the teacher/student relationship. And because of that...well, sometimes people say that I can be “frightening,” or “harsh,” or “direct.” But it only seems like that because you are not looking close enough at the relationship between the teacher and student. It is my responsibility to be direct with you, my responsibility to help you to discover what is holding you back. The teacher shows the way, that it can be done. Then, his second job is to identify what it is that is holding you back, and then finally to help you to overcome that.

That's what the whole thing is about. Your job, as a student, is just to do exactly what the teacher says, without editing. How many of you do that? Yeah! Of course, everybody is an individual and everybody has their own way and we must respect that. I don't mean, by saying it this way, that everybody is cut out of the same mold, like a cookie cutter. Not at all. Everybody is completely different, and you have to deal with it as yours. It is your life, they are your choices, your conditioning, your mind and how you use it, where you put your attention, is your business entirely. I cannot affect that. So, how useful the teacher is to you, is really up to you, meaning how useful this process of teacher/student relationship is for you. How it goes for you, how it feeds you, how it supports you, this is up to you. Stop trying to get something out of it. Just be there for the teacher, because that's all he or she is doing. The teacher is just being there for you. That's all. Don't lie back like a little kid and bathe in that. No. You be there for me. One hundred percent. Then the dojo is powerful, and the experience is full for everyone.

Again, this is going back to the subject of honoring. This is how we honor each other. This is how you honor your teacher, by being there, holding him in your mind and heart with love, respect, and appreciation, because that's what he or she is doing for you. And we are all teachers, aren't we? I mean, a lot of you people are teachers, so I hope when you are hearing me say this, you are seeing this is your responsibility in both cases. Whether I am leading the class or sitting in the class as a student, my responsibility is to be open and holding with respect to everyone else in the room.

That was a long answer to a good question.

Student: Sensei, could you talk a little about what John asked? We know to keep breathing and meditation. How did you, in your life, make Keeping One Point an all day long habit? And how does that relate to you being aware of, and taking care of, Suzuki Sensei?

That's a rather broad question, and includes a lot of stuff in there. "How did you learn how to Keep One Point all day long, and how did you learn to take care of Suzuki Sensei, and how does it relate?" Is that the question?

Student: Yes Sensei. We have another hour.

Well, like everybody, in the beginning I thought One Point was a place, a thing, where I needed to concentrate all the time, and that would make me wonderful, make me happy, make me unified. And, you know, I noticed that my "monkey mind" was always getting in the way. And then I noticed that my monkey mind was made of selfish thoughts, selfish demands, selfish requirements, selfish disappointments, little vengeance, little angers and hatreds and disappointments, and lots and lots of desires. And all those things occupied my mind space and kept me from concentrating on this "thing" called the One Point.

So then I thought, "I've got to get rid of this selfish self. I want to be ego-less, and then I can dwell in my One Point all the time." But then, as I watched Suzuki Sensei, I noticed that he

didn't seem to be concerned about this at all. In fact, he never talked about it, about "getting rid of self." There was nothing like that. I never heard him say anything like that. And I would ask him, "What about this self?" and he just laughed and said, "Just Keep One Point, and don't worry!" "Well, but, but, but..." You know I had it all analyzed. I had it all figured out and I knew what had to happen, and "how come he is not teaching me that?"

So, I just hung out with him as much as I could. And that was a lot, because he so often asked me to be his otomo. He told people that I was his "atotori." Atotori means "the one who comes after." And by hanging out with him and watching him at meetings with Tohei Sensei and others, and even other people that might not be treating him as well as they should (other might have been jealous or envious of him, as happened in Hawaii quite a bit), I began to notice that everything was sort of the same for him. He would say to me, "You come with me to this meeting and you watch and listen and learn how to be with people, as a Chief Instructor." This was great. I thought, "Ah, I'm going to get all the secrets." But I would get there and he was just like a very normal guy. And it took me a long time to realize that he was just not reacting to all of these assholes. He was simply not reacting to them. He was just holding them, just supporting them no matter what they do. That's what he meant. Just to be normal. Don't get all carried away with yourself. Don't get full of yourself. Don't know everything. Just be a regular person and enjoy your life completely.

Of course, I was training with him all the time, so that my over-analysis of everything was getting me in trouble all the time. I couldn't hear what he was saying because my little brain was running around on the treadmill trying to place everything where it is supposed to go, and get everything all figured out, so that my philosophy was full and complete, and I would know what was going on. So, you have to let that go. I learned to let that go and just listen. He kept telling me, "I want you to listen to me like one big ear. That's all you are is just a big ear. Just listen." And then I started hearing him completely differently. My relationship changed with him, as a result, and so my relationship changed with everybody. And then, of course, gradually I began to notice that I was resting deeply with a sense of great satisfaction and completion all the time, not just when I was sitting. In the beginning, of course, it was just when I was sitting, and then more and more I began to realize that I am the center of the universe I live in.

That is a great responsibility, but it is also a great gift to realize that everything that is being done, everything that happens in my world is to help me wake up. That is amazing to realize, don't you think so? And the same thing is true for every one of you. It's so simple, and we make it so complicated and difficult, with all the "shoulds" and "should nots." That's about it.

Two or three years ago, I was asked by a Danish psychology professor at the university in Copenhagen to write a...well, she was putting together a book of different teachers and what they have to say about self or no self. So, she took several prominent teachers, much more prominent than me, and among them she wanted at least one teacher that was actually living this process, not just thinking about it. She asked one of my students, who happens to be her teacher in another school, and he said she should ask me. She did request this of me, and I wrote this thing. The process of writing that greatly helped me to clarify what I just said to you.

And then I read what everybody else wrote. You will probably never see this book, because it is only available on line and it costs like \$47.00. But you can look at the articles on line, if you like, at <http://the-self.com/website2/index.html>. I did read what everyone else said, and the other teachers did pretty much what I had been doing with Suzuki Sensei before. They just provided an in-depth philosophical analysis. I just told a couple of stories about my teacher and said that it is not what people think, and that was it.

Student: You had a story about this amazing woman who was wrecking your dojo.

Right. She taught me. How I loved this woman.

Student: I wondered if she is still in your dojo.

No, she has passed away, I am sorry to say. That was a long, long time ago. Did you have a question about that?

Student: That was the question. I just wondered if she was still training.

OK, well, I guess I better tell what you are referring to. So, this woman was an artist who had been in the dojo since before I arrived, and she was already in her 50's, but I was 30 so I thought that was old. Little did I know that it is quite young. She loved Suzuki Sensei. She was obsessed with Suzuki Sensei. She was also an obsessive sort of person and was easily angered. Aikido apparently had not done much for her emotional state. For instance, she had a spot in the dojo where she had to sit, and if you sat in her spot, she would make you move so she could sit there. "That's my spot!" And she would often get angry at Suzuki Sensei, if he did not treat her in the way she felt she should be treated. This was not a normal student. She didn't quite yet have the idea. And she was always trouble with other students, fighting with people, and generally pissed off. So, I would always tell Suzuki Sensei to get rid of her, because she was so much trouble. And he would always say it was OK, fine, and for me not to worry about it.

Finally, one day just after class, as she walked by Suzuki Sensei's car, she "keyed" (scratched with a key) the whole side of his car. Screech! This echoed throughout the dojo. That was it! I said, "Sensei, that's the last straw. You have to get rid of this woman." And he said, "Oh, I see. What I see is that you don't understand my teaching at all. That woman is the most valuable student in this dojo."

A week later, I was teaching Friday night class, she was in the class, and she was causing trouble. And, by the way, I had now promised Sensei that I wouldn't ask him to get rid of her again, that I would contemplate and try to understand. So, after class I was in the changing room, and two of my guys were there, and they had been really rough with her that night, and had told her off a couple of times. So, I said to them, "You guys, listen to me. I don't want you treating her like that. She is one of the most valuable students in this dojo." And one of them said to me, "You are so full of shit. You feel just like we do about her. I know it." And I just did not know what to say.

I left the dojo, and driving home I was extremely upset by his comment, because of course he was right, and I didn't want to hear it. I got home, and went to bed. At that time we had a tiny bedroom and there was no place to sit in the morning, so I would just sit up on the bed. So I went to bed, but I could not sleep. And in fact, it was getting worse. So I sat up and must of sat for 2 hours or so, and suddenly I had a vision of this woman. I actually saw her face in my inner eye, and she was sobbing. She said to me, "Please, help me." That's all she said. And then her face, the image of her, started spinning, faster and faster, and it became a sword, a katana. And I was mesmerized as I watched this thing spinning before me, and suddenly it went "shunk" and it sliced my heart in two pieces. Then everything dissolved.

I was pretty useless for a few days after that. I must have just fallen asleep after the event, and I woke up and the air was thick, like honey, and I could see every mote in the room. I woke up and my world was completely changed forever.

So, this was quite an experience for me, and it was all because of this woman, and the whole process of my judgement of her, and Suzuki Sensei not being willing to listen to that nonsense from me. It was perfectly logical, it seemed to me, and everybody else had agreed with me, of course. Sensei was the only one in the dojo that said she was a valuable member, and he is the one who had his car keyed. He was the one she was hardest on. So, I will always be deeply grateful to that woman, for what she taught me, and of course to Sensei. That's the story.

Student: I have one more question. You wrote on the board, "The universal, it's so close you can't see it, so fine you can't know it, so deep you can't fathom it, so small that you can't detect it, and so simple that you can't believe it." Was that all of them?

You memorized that? I don't even have that memorized. That was a long time ago. That's the thing about this life, isn't it? It's so difficult to see what's going on because it's so near. It's going on right here, and we have all of these assumptions about it. But it's just too close. And if you try to get back away from it, to see it better, that's not it either. You are out of it. You are then just observing it as an observer. That's not it either. You have to be in it completely, and know it for the first time. It's like that poem by T.S. Eliot. You are not going to go somewhere else. You are not going to see something that you are not seeing now. This is home. But you are going to experience it for the first time, and know it for what it is.

My first teacher...I went to a three-year meditation retreat in my late twenties, just before I began training Aikido. I asked this teacher, "What's it like to get enlightened? I would like that." And he said, "Oh, it's nothing. It's just the same as the way you are now." I said, "What are you saying? It should be completely different, because I am clearly not enlightened now!" And he said, "Oh, you are. You just don't know you are." That's very important. Please take that to heart.

Any more questions?

Student: I was just thinking that, because this is the Tsubaki Memorial Seminar, and it started

after he had gone, I have never had the privilege of knowing him, or knowing anything about him as a teacher. I wonder what he would want us to know, or to share with us, since we are here to celebrate him.

Well, I am not nearly as qualified to speak about the wonders of Tsubaki Sensei as Andrew LeBar is. And from his wife, Lily, of course, you might hear different kinds of wonders from her than from him. I just happened to really like him personally. I never saw him teach much, but I have heard tons about how he taught, from Andrew. I just knew him as a friend. He was a kind of a peer, I guess, but he was also older than I was, so he was a kind of Sempai to me. He was always doing nice things for me, asking if he could help me in some way. We would meet in Japan all the time. He was from there, and so he would help me that way too, because he not only spoke Japanese, but he understood the culture, and so I could take questions to him.

For instance, I used to really like this certain kind of Japanese slipper. They were not cheap, and they were very nice. I thought I always had to have a nice pair of these in those days. On this occasion, I had to return to work on Maui, and was not able to accompany Tsubaki Sensei to Tokyo, so he offered to get the slippers for me. And I said, "Let me give you money," and he refused, saying he would send them to me.

So, I agreed and three weeks later, in the mail, comes this package, and I opened it up, and inside were the slippers, except they were like, lizard skin. I mean, this was his idea of a joke, I am sure. I couldn't wear them anywhere. So, he had a great sense of humor, and was a wonderful person. He was very didactic. Things had to be a certain way.

Do you know, he was a college professor of Noh theatre, he not only knew about all the dancing and so forth, but he could also do it all himself. In 2001, we in Maui had a huge grand opening of our new dojo. Many of you were there. Tsubaki Sensei was there, and we have a film of him dancing with this naginata spear in our dojo at this opening. He gave a performance where he spun this spear and danced, and...well you have to know it to imagine. He is such an imperious person. But he is so kind and generous as well, and I just loved him.

Like I said, if you want to talk to Andrew later, he will fill in lots of details for you. Tsubaki Sensei could be a tough task master, I understand. But for me, he was always just really nice to me.

I think that is enough.

Thank you very much.