

**Mastery**  
**HKF Weapons Intensive**  
**Shunshinkan Dojo**  
**Sunday, Sept. 11, 2011**  
**C. Curtis**

Good morning everyone. Well, as it turns out, we have been practicing what I have been referring to as “mastery” for two days. This may sound a little arrogant, but the word came out because of “High Upon High,” the article that was such a favorite of Suzuki Sensei’s, that I read at the beginning of this workshop. In fact, let me read it again here. Tsunemoto Yamamoto wrote this in 1710. Keep that in mind as I read it, because it is extremely current in our practice today.

**HIGH UPON HIGH**

*An old, retired swordsman said, “There are levels in the course of mastery throughout your life. At the lowest level of skill and ability, one thinks of himself and others as poor. He thinks this because he has mastered only a little. Needless to say, a person at this level is not at all useful.*

*At the middle level, one is still useless, but he can at least understand that he and others have mastered only a little.*

*At a high level, since a person has made something his own, he is proud of his accomplishments. And he is also glad at the praise of others. He grieves over the shortcomings of others. This kind of person is at least useful.*

*At a higher level, one pretends to know nothing, yet others understand that he holds an upper hand. The majority of people cannot get beyond this level.*

*Beyond this higher level, there is one further step; THE LEVEL OF THE TRACKLESS ROAD. If you travel deeper into the trackless road, infinite secrets will finally appear. Then you can never see the end of your mastery. Then you truly realize how lacking you are. You have only to go ahead with your intention of mastery in mind. You go forward without pride and without humility.*

*Yagyū Munemori Tajima no Kami (the Shogun’s fencing instructor) once said, “I know nothing about how to win over others. I only know the way to win over myself.”*

*Your life is something you build every day. You must convince yourself that you have surpassed yesterday, and tomorrow you must feel that you have surpassed today. In this way there is no end to your mastery.*

*Tsunemoto Yamamoto 1710*

This is very beautiful and because, at the last moment, I decided to read it yesterday

morning as we began this two-day workshop, then it became a source and inspiration for the teaching and the practice that we did.

As I mentioned before, we often are confused about the difference between the “what” and the “how,” in our practice, in other words, the difference between a result of the practice, and the practice itself. When Tohei Sensei says the purpose of our practice is to be one with the universe, that’s a result. You can’t practice one with the universe. It’s already here. How could you practice it? It is the condition. It is not something that you, as a separate individual, can practice. It is a result, just like the experience of mind/body unification is the result of practicing the Four Basic Principles. The Four Basic Principles; Keep One Point, Relax Completely, Keep Weight Underside, and Extend Ki are the how. That’s how we practice, how we go about it. The what, is mind/body unification.

Again, mind/body unification, just like universal oneness, is not just a result of practice. It is a prevailing condition. It is the nature of our experience. We miss it by a mile, because we are so preoccupied with our selves, with our own ideas about what is, the difference between me and you. Do you have better looking hair or a better looking nose or better looking breasts, if you are a woman, or better looking biceps if you are a man? We are completely obsessed with this stuff. So therefore we see only the difference, so we miss this unification.

So by practicing the Four Basic Principles, which were brilliantly introduced by Tohei Sensei, we are able to experience the result of that how, the what, unification of mind and body.

I’d like also to just mention the efficacy of the meditation practice I taught you this morning, which is very old and was developed over a period of years through my practice, but it was not originally invented by me by any means. There is nothing ever invented by anybody, by the way. It all comes from prior. It’s already here. We maybe discover, maybe we open to it. By caring about something deeply, then you are shown some aspect of practice that’s very effective. And this happens to be a very effective meditation.

Breath is the key to life. Breath is the key to clarity and breath is the key to the power of our heart, our love and passion, the power of our expression, our speech and our actions, and the power of our insight, our direct knowing. This is all controlled by breath. So we incorporate the breath into this meditation by following the movement in our lower abdomen, and then allowing our attention to shift into the heart region and feel the throbbing and movement of the breath there. Of course you can remain at that

level for as long as you like, two minutes, two hours. And then move up to the throat, still maintaining that experience in your abdomen and your heart, you include in your attention your throat region and feel the throbbing and movement of the breath there. And then as you include that in your experience, add in the *ajna*, or what is called the “third eye,” the area slightly above and between your eyes. You allow yourself to feel the pulsing of your breath there in your forehead. And soon the experience is that the whole breath is breathing the body, the whole body is experiencing itself as breath.

This is a very powerful, effective, and simple meditation. Everyone can do this. So I hope that everybody will practice this, and if you have any questions about it, ask me.

OK? That’s my introduction. If you have any comments or questions or concerns, please go ahead.

*Student: Sensei, in speaking about breath, is there a time in our arts on the mat when we should be dealing directly with our breath?*

Well, yes and no. I mean if you are self-conscious about your breath, or conscious of the movement of your breath, then that becomes a place where your mind stops. Breath is natural. We don’t have to think about breathing to breathe. It is just natural. When we exert ourselves, we breathe out. And in between, we breathe in. So there is a natural rhythm and movement of breath.

I think I would go about discussing it a little differently. If you practice this kind of breathing that Tohei Sensei taught us, Ki Breathing, and if you practice this kind of meditation that I just showed you about using the breath, the more you practice this kind of incorporating breath into your meditation, the more you learn to be a part of the breath, to follow the breath. In other words, the breath works naturally through you.

You might think that it works naturally through everybody all the time, in any case. But actually, when you lose One Point, or become upset in any way, your breath becomes disturbed. Everyone knows this. When you have tension in your body, your breath becomes disturbed. When you are having a difficult time with that lock, or art, or knife movement in the dojo, that *shihonage*, yeah. Your breath is disturbed. But on the other hand, you cannot say, “OK, I’m going to keep my breath calm right now.” Because that is just shifting your preoccupied stuck mind from your hands to your tummy. No. You need to practice more, and more deeply. Breath must become you. You must become breath. And this bellows becomes, of course, much more powerful and you become much more sensitive to it, so that when you are expressing yourself in word or in action, then your breath is always naturally moving, as long as there is no tension. When you are practicing the Four Basic Principles, you don’t have a problem with your breath.

Your breath takes care of itself. It follows the rhythm that is required in the moment. For instance, when counting in Jo, if your counting and hence your breath, is off, it means that you are preoccupied with watching yourself. This creates tension out of desire to succeed, which in turn disturbs the breath. You cannot exactly say to just go to your breath and fix it. But we have these exercises, these meditations, Ki Breathing, Ki Meditation, Following the Breath, and this Mastery meditation I showed this morning that I just described. And of course there are many more, but how many does one person need? Mainly do the practice. And then you will find, when you are on the mat and moving, that your breath is always empowering you in a relaxed and sincere and humble way.

*Student: I was reading recently about mediation, and he said to be careful because breath can become a crutch. This is Chogyam Trumpa Rimpoche. So it nudged something in me, but I don't know what.*

So is your question, what did it nudge in you? Or is your question, how is it that breath becomes a crutch?

*Student: Well, yes, I think the question is how would you say how it is that breath becomes a crutch?*

What is your understanding of what he was pointing to there?

*Student: Well, it was just a nudge as I read it, and now it keeps coming back and I know it means something to me. Maybe I'm using breath this incorrectly. For instance, when I have pain, I can go into the breath so much that the pain is no longer there. Maybe that's not good. I don't know.*

Oh, I think you are making more of it there than need be.

What he is referring to, from my understanding, is not just breath, but the principle at work. We turn everything into a crutch. We turn everything into a thing that is the answer. That's why lately, when teaching Ki Breathing, I've been telling you, "Just take a deep breath and relax." Don't get wrapped up in doing the breath exactly right. The think is, people tend to watch them selves breathe. That's what happens. The breath becomes an object, and when it becomes an object, then it's a crutch that keeps us from intimacy, that keeps us in a very shallow state. That's why I said, when you are breathing, to be in the breath, to put your attention into it, not on it. In other words, not looking at it.

So I'm glad you got nudged, because you brought it up and that's good. Because others,

I know, not just in this room but in other parts of the world where people are training, others do use breath incorrectly in their practice, in the Ki Breathing method and in other breath meditation, by making it an object of their meditation. When the breath becomes an object it is not helpful, not useful. It's not organic, no longer a part of us.

*Student: So it's not necessarily just the breath.*

Using breath incorrectly, like anything else, makes it a crutch. This is what he is saying.

It's always useful to read people like Trumpa Rimpoche and other great teachers, to listen to their recordings and read their wisdom and teaching. But always we have to be careful to de-code what they are saying. And you only can do that, not through your intellect, but through your own experience. Whatever rings true in your own experience, take it and use it. The same thing goes with what I say or teach you. If it doesn't ring true in your experience, then let it go for now. Maybe it will later, maybe it won't. But no matter who is teaching, it is your path and yours alone. And every single path is completely unique. There is overlap of course. We are all practicing Aikido for instance. But everyone has their own path and so it's wonderful that you bring this much assistance to your practice by reading and listening and so forth.

*Student: In your answer to the last question, Sensei, I was wondering if you could clarify. What is the feeling difference between having your attention on your breath and being in the breath?*

OK. You are holding that microphone. Put your attention on the microphone. OK, now let that go. Now, put your attention in the experience of seeing the microphone. A very different feeling, right?

*Student: It's subtle.*

Well yes it is. It's like yesterday I said, when you listen, when you really reach to hear something, like I am listening to the people down in the tennis court right now, this kind of listening, this kind of opening is in a sense this same experience. By listening carefully to the wind or the sound of the rain we become non-separate from it. We carefully experience the sense of listening, or opening. We do this automatically when we go out in nature and we are all alone, and it's silent. But if there is somebody else there we usually go, "Oh, look at that. That's so beautiful. Isn't this silence great!?" You know, we do this. So then we are very good at killing our own awakening, as it were.

So yes, how you look at something makes a huge difference in how you experience it. So Joni's question is very important. If you are looking at the breath, basically you are

making an object out of it, putting it outside of yourself, which is not useful. But if you are in the breath, and not separate from it, that's a whole different kind of experience.

*Student: So you mean, Sensei, that the point is not to have objective thoughts about your breath, but to feel it. But I just wondered if there was a subtle difference between experiencing it as an object and otherwise. I mean, if you just relax and experience your breath, is this enough? Or is there another level that I am not aware of?*

Well, for now, I would suggest that you practice, as you say, relaxing and experiencing the breath, and see what happens. Practice that meditation I gave you this morning and see what happens in your heart, see what happens in your throat, see what happens in your head, and see what happens overall in your body. And then maybe "whoop, what happened to Mele?" Just see what happens, OK?

*Student: Thank you, Sensei.*

*Student: Sensei, yesterday morning you said we have to accept all of ourselves, the good, the bad, and the ugly. So when you do get disturbed, do you re-focus or just re-settle?*

The way we say it is "don't add insult to injury." In a sense, we can practice this in a social setting. But within our selves it is very difficult. We are very hard on ourselves. We are actually much harder on ourselves than we are on other people. That's why we say, first you have to learn to accept yourself, then you can accept others. You can't start by accepting others, if you haven't accepted yourself. That is impossible, because those others are just a reflection of you. Once you accept everything, then it changes every body else, because the reflection changes. It's just a mirror universe.

*To ho ka mi e mi ta me* – "I use the sharp sword of my will to penetrate the mirror universe, and polish my character like a beautiful crystal ball."

You know, Confucius said that if you want to bring peace to the world, first you have to bring peace to your own country. If you want to bring peace to your own country, first you have to bring peace to your own community. If you want to bring peace to your community, you have to bring peace first to your family. And if you want to have peace in your family, you have to have peace in yourself. So it always starts here. When you can tell me you have peace, you have accepted everything about yourself, then you can go out and bring peace to someone else.

Of course that is a rather black and white way of looking at it, and it would keep all of us in the cave, because who has accepted everything about them selves? Maybe for some

perfectly enlightened being, which must be very rare, this could be possible. So obviously I am not practicing what I am preaching here, because here I am helping other people and I'm not perfectly enlightened. Things still come up for me. So yes, as a principle you have to understand that what counts is the work you are doing in your own practice.

This teaching is my practice. So if, as part of your practice, it happens that you are teaching, then OK. There is an important distinction here. Someone assigned this to me. I didn't say, "Oh, I'll be the guy." No. Someone, my teacher, came to me and said, "I want you to do this. I want this to be part of your practice." So this became part of my practice and now I am sort of stuck with it. So, if it is part of your practice, and maybe it's also important to say that you haven't chosen it for yourself, then OK. You haven't taken it on yourself to think that you will go to save the world. No. If someone else comes to you and asks if you can please help, then you help. So I think that is an important distinction, just to keep us all honest.

*Student: This is a comment, I guess, more than a question. My comment would be if you realize something about yourself, then beating yourself up about it is not useful. You have no real choice except to move on. This has been my experience lately. You know, I do something stupid, and then, OK, I just continue on instead of thinking that I am not learning this, not getting it. And I would like some feedback on this. I've read recently a quote from Dogen, and it has been quite puzzling to me. He said something to the effect that, "You must attain enlightenment before you attain enlightenment." I have some ideas about this, but I'd like to ask for your feedback.*

There are two kinds of motivations in this business of self-development. Most people's motivation is to improve them selves. And so during their lifetime of training, they are always very concerned with how they are doing – progress report. And so it is very easy to insult this kind of person if you underestimate their level of development, and very easy to suck them in with praise, because they are very susceptible to that. Anyone who is very concerned with their level of development is very susceptible to being crushed, or led somewhere that they might not be ready to go.

One time, many years ago, I came into the dojo and Joni said, "What motivates you? You come every single time. What is it?" I said, "Oh, I don't have a choice. That's why." And I remember this so well because I had never said that before. Until she asked me, I didn't know that, somehow. And then afterward, I considered this, deeply, and realized that's something about this life, I have no choice. This is not because someone told me. I just find that I have no choice. I don't see any other way to live. I can't live without it. That's not living to me. It's not like there is a choice, like I could be rich and famous or I

could do this. No. Whatever I do, it's going to become this. There's no choice.

And this is what Dogen is referring to. Otherwise whatever awakening you experience will get turned from medicine to poison. It will turn on you and you will become proud of it, and then again, you are even more easily crushed and more easily led astray by your pride. Does that help?

*Student: Yes, Sensei, thank you very much.*

So that is just about enough time for this. I just want to say that when we are having these discussions, you do everyone a favor when you ask a question. It is not just about you. These talks are recorded and Tracy puts them on the internet, and they go all over the world. You know there is a section below each podcast where you can make a comment, and not very many people use that because it is so very public. But when I go somewhere to teach, or even here on Maui, people either email me privately or they come to me personally, and then I realize that they are actually listening to these. They tell me that they are so happy that so and so asked that question, that they had that question too, and it was answered for them. So in other words, you are doing a favor to whole bunch of people. If you have that question, chances are there are others who have that question. And when you are in a situation like this you may be thinking that you can't think of any questions. But like I said to you the other day, if you are on the edge of your training, there is always a question. It's what's happening right in the moment. If you don't have a question, what's going on with you? Are you just asleep? Are you present? Some of the things I say are pretty radical and challenging, and yeah, some of them are sort of designed to tweak you a little bit. So don't be shy and selfish. Share.

OK. Thank you very much.