

**Germany Fall Seminar – Question & Answer  
With Christopher Curtis Sensei  
Sunday, Sept. 14, 2014**

Curtis: Good morning everyone.

I know you all have many questions, but let me say something first. Does everyone know what a *koan* is? It is a Japanese word that refers to a question that the teacher might ask the student that has no logical answer. For instance, “Why did the Bodhisatva go to China?” And the answer might be, “Because of the oak tree growing in the garden.” So that’s a question and answer, the whole thing, and you have to understand. How can you understand this?

So I’ll share a couple of things that reflect the theme of our seminar. A student of mine recently told me this koan was running over and over in his mind, and wondered why. The koan is, a student comes to see the master, the teacher, and says, “Master, I am free now and am ready to go out and teach on my own. So I’ll be leaving the group.” And the teacher said, “Oh, fine, OK. Let me walk you to the gate to bid you good bye.” So they go to the gate and there is a large stone boulder right by the gate. And the teacher says, “Before you go, do you see that boulder over there? Is that in your mind or outside of your mind?” And the student said, “Oh, it’s in my mind.” The teacher says, “That’s going to be a really heavy thing to be carrying around on your travels. Perhaps you should train some more.” So the student puts his traveling clothes away and continues to train.

That’s a short little story that points directly to a profound problem that all of us have at a certain stage in our training, and always don’t recognize it. The question is, what is that problem. I’ll give you one more koan which will provide a large hint about the first koan. A student goes to see the teacher and says, “Teacher, what is the nature of the universe?” The teacher says, “Oh, emptiness.” The student says, “Thank you. I’ll go now.” So he gets up to go and the teacher says, “Excuse me, just before you go, may I ask you, what is the nature of the universe?” And the student says, “Emptiness.” And the teacher says, “No, you are wrong. Sorry” The student says, “You just told me that it’s emptiness.” “Yes, I did,” says the teacher, “but when I said it, it was true. When you said it, it was not.”

That koan reveals the answer to the first koan, and reveals the whole problem that we get to when we begin to get to be expert. When we begin to think we understand, we are in trouble. I said to you yesterday, that I am still lost. It’s just that I don’t mind. When you fall backwards off the cliff, spinning backwards and

never landing because there is nothing there to land on, this takes a little getting used to, this gyroscopic backwards movement. And in getting used to this, learning to live with this, because of the motion which is the movement of the universe, there is no time to know anything. You don't want to go splat!

So those are my two little stories that point to the theme of our seminar this weekend.

I know you have a lot of questions so go ahead please.

*Student: My question is about this seeming paradox, that you try to perfect your technique or the movement, and you say "Don't do anything. You still have to do the movement, but don't add anything to it." So for me, this is still kind of a koan, that I don't hold on too much and try to make everything perfect, and kind of copying the technique instead of experiencing it, maybe, more.*

What is the question?

*Student: The question is how do we get around that?*

How do we get around that?

*Student: Or is it just more experience and then it resolves itself?*

Is the boulder in the mind or not in the mind? Is the nature of the universe emptiness or not?! We long to get our grip on what we are doing so that we feel more comfortable. I am talking about falling off a cliff backwards. Hint: you don't get what you are used to getting. But it's OK. We learn that that is not necessary, that is a false sense of knowing something. It's OK in the relative world. It might get you a good job and earn you respect from other people, money, etc. and that's great. I mean I have a job too, and it requires expertise. But ultimately that is not expertise. Ultimately that is not mastery. The problem begins, and the reason I told you these two koans, when you are working in Aikido or any kind of spiritual practice where personal development is involved, when you hear the teacher say often enough that it's emptiness, and you might even have a couple of experiences, or even a lot of experiences, of emptiness, and so in some sense you know this, but it is very dangerous to THINK you know it.

I read the "Stages of Development" in another dojo recently. The next to the highest level is "pretending that you don't know anything." That's not the highest level. The highest level is the "trackless path," like a bird flying in the sky. It leaves no trace. So what does that mean, "trace?" You leave no mark. You don't claim anything.

So, to answer your question, yes, it can be very frustrating and difficult, but good. Keep training and everything resolves itself in the only way it can. But you have to experience that. It wouldn't do any good for me to tell you, even though I do tell you over and over again. OK?

*Student: Sensei, my question is, you talk about being present and having your Ki in the whole dojo, and as you are doing exercises with the sword, for example, because I am not so used to these techniques, my mind is constantly thinking about how to do those. And yesterday you said something about, when you learn to drive the car, at first you don't know how to steer and everything, but after you get used to it, you can be more relaxed and then go into that present state. So then it's just more exercise and then be present? Or is it possible to have the presence while figuring out techniques and so on.*

No. This is a good question, a common question. This is a relative thing. In other words, gradually you will master the movements and they will become second nature and at some point you won't think about it any more. Or, you won't need to. You might still be watching yourself to make sure you do it just right. In which case you are not extending Ki. But if you notice, we are all very impatient. Particularly when I am up here telling you to please fill the dojo with your self. Experience the whole universe. And you are like, "Well, I have to pay attention to my feet, right at the moment," right? So if you look at the whole of your training, the period it takes to actually learn all of the techniques is about that [make a small distance with fingers] much. And that's about how important learning the techniques is, about that much. So, so what? Yeah, you've got to learn them. But...? I know you can't help, when you are a beginner, thinking that, "When I've got the techniques I am going to be like, here, quite far along." Because it seems so complex, so difficult. No, when you get the techniques you can finally actually begin your training. When they are second nature, then you can start training. And then you have to be very careful about not watching yourself. But in the beginning, just like learning to drive a car, you have to pay attention.

So should I say, "Don't come to my seminar?" No, because I want you to know, from now, what it is that true practice is. And then, as you are developing, you can give yourself over more and more. In other words, open more and more, and let go of self-consciousness.

*Student: What happens to me very often is, you say something to me like, "Do more." And I try to do more and next time you say, "Do less." I try to do less. Next time, the same thing. It seems to repeat endlessly. What do I have to do to get to the point? It looks like I am getting close, but I never seem to get to the*

*point.*

There is no point.

*Student: I knew it!*

That's not to say that there is no reason. It's just that there is no certain point. What I am doing when I am constantly doing that to you, and please forgive me for my insistence, but I am discouraging you from doing something. Just let it go. I said today, you are the most powerful being in the universe. We can't believe that. We think it must be someone else. That's why we have Superman and Batman and stuff. There's always someone else. We have heroes in our stories, "but I am never the hero. It's always one of those guys." No. You are all there is in your universe. If you can recognize a heroic quality, that means it is in you. That's why you can recognize it. You don't have to do anything to gain that. It's your birthright. It's in you. It's who you are. The question is, do we honor that or not? So that's why I always say, "Sit, sit, sit." Get to know yourself. Have a date with yourself. Sit down, shut up, and listen. And then your self will tell you all about yourself and you will notice, "Oh, wow. I am everything there is. There is nothing that I am not." And at the same time, "I don't exist as such."

Does that help?

*Student: It helps. Thank you.*

*Student: I have a question about Ki Tests. In the Shokushu #22, there is that last sentence, "Thus the person performing Ki Test must truly understand and exhibit oneness of mind and body from the outset, and then perform the test correctly." So now, I haven't experienced that oneness with everything that is, so far. How can I give a good Ki Test? I cannot, I guess. You were saying that if you fail the Ki Test with the teacher, you haven't understood at all. And I, wow, fail quite often.*

So what are we going to do with you?

*Student: Yeah. I'll practice more, of course. I can feel when I test a beginner, I can feel some stages, but then after the third level, I cannot really tell any more.*

OK, well we live in a relative world, with relative conditions. So mind/body unification we were born with, as I was saying. It's our birthright. It's fully accessible. But because of our habit of watching our self and correcting our self and trying to succeed and afraid to fail and so forth, which all are related to self-identity, we sit to try to get to know ourselves better. Because of these characteristics of being human, then we only experience a little bit of this

mind/body unification. In the beginning, maybe we don't even know what it is. And then we see, "Ah, there's a little." I think you said today, "Oh, wow, I've got it." And then, poof, it was gone! And then, through the years of training, you experience more and more of this. And it's infinite. There is no such thing as, "OK the door is open now. I've got it all." No, it's infinite. So Shinichi Sensei, Kaichou, told me that in Japan, every Monday morning, he, Otsuka Sensei, and Kataoka Sensei do this Ki exercise with the bokken. And he said, "I'm telling you this, because there is no end to improvement." And what he means by "improvement," is not getting better at... well, it is getting better at doing the exercise, but what is doing the exercise? Doing the exercise is giving up doing it, and allowing yourself to be free and experience mind/body unification. So, even the top three teachers in the world, are getting together every Monday to check themselves, because it is infinite how much can be experienced in this way. We have no idea, we have just no idea what mind/body unification implies in terms of the way we can experience this life.

So take heart, experience as much as you are able and practice with that. But the main thing is what Kaichou said in the last seminar, learn the difference between mind moving and mind stopped. When mind is moving, you are experiencing some aspect of the dimension of mind/body unification. When mind is stopped, you are blocked from it. So learning to practice correctly, which is with mind moving, then every day we are experiencing more and more of our birthright. So you don't have to commit suicide.

*Student: Oh, I'm not. I wouldn't do that.*

OK.

*Student: Our question is, on the one side it is said that mind/body unification is our birthright, that Ki is already extending, that everything is one, and things like that. And on the other side, we have these petty wars, separation, misidentification, failing Ki Tests, and things like that. Does the teaching of Tohei Sensei include any explanation of why this is so at all? If everything is connected, then why do we need to experience separation at all?*

OK, good, good, question.

We need the experience of conflict, separation, because we think we know something, because we are self-satisfied. That's why we were born into this body. We came to this conflict ridden globe to learn the fruitlessness of struggle, of suffering. This is separation. If there was no conflict, the world would be useless. Wishing for no conflict is like wishing for dead relaxation or dead calmness. No. True calmness, true peace, is in the midst of the heaviest level of

conflict. The absence of conflict is not peace. The absence of conflict is dullness, boredom. The world is never going to change and become heaven. Earth is earth. It's here for a reason. It works really well in that way. It's like the earth really knows how to do "wrong way" exercise. And even in the dojo, we do wrong way exercise so that we can learn the difference. The question is, how to we live in this world, in other words, in what state of mind? Not, what do we do to try to make things different, but how to we live, what state of mind to we live in? And that determines what we experience.

*Student: You say "Earth is earth, it's here for a reason." So this means that, if I get it right I hope, that some kind of orchestration of all these individual consciousnesses that are here...OK, I will take one step back...*

Be careful, because you are smart enough to tie yourself in a knot there.

*Student: Maybe that's what is happening. What's the reason for existence of this kind of world at all?*

I just said. You asked me the same question twice now.

*Student: Yes, but...*

Did you listen to what I said?

*Student: I did listen, but maybe I didn't hear, I suppose.*

Life is showing us, in every moment, the reason why we are here. You have to notice. Of course, that's why I am always saying "Sit more. Breathe more." I want you to notice more. When your mind is more calm, then it's more clear. Remember what I told you about the pond. When the mind is clear, the reflection is clear, as Tohei Sensei always says, "The moon and a flying bird are reflected." Yes. But that's not all. That's the beginning. The rest of that story that I told you, seeing down into the clear pool, into the depths of the pool, and the slipping and falling into the pool yourself, and seeing that there is no separation. There's no one looking into the pond.

This is the thing that we have been working on all weekend, and I keep noticing that I am not communicating, not getting through. What you are looking at is part of you. When you ask me questions, it's always subject/object. But if you see that this is all you, this is all me, then... Yeah, I can't explain it to you, but you can experience it. I think maybe you should sit more.

*Student: I will. Thank you.*

*Student: Sensei, in Aikido, when you take a sword, a bokken, this is like going to*

*do some hunting. How can you have a bright and easygoing mind, a happy mind, when you are going to take a life? How is this working?*

Hmm. We find ourselves in all kinds of difficult situations in our life, right? Most of them, well all of them, we never planned, particularly. And even if you plan, when you get there it is different than you thought. You cannot control what position you are placed in, in this world. Some people are butchers, some people are warriors, some people are professors, educators, some people are artists. And all those people change those roles back and forth all the time, too, sometimes in one lifetime. You are many of those, maybe all of those, at some point in a lifetime. When we talk about the principles of bokken, for instance, the last one of which is "You are bright and easygoing," we're not talking about you being bright and easygoing because the world is full of butterflies and strawberries. We're bright and easygoing because that is our state of mind, no matter what. It's your body, your mind, your sword, and your enemy. You tell me what you think you are doing. You are living your life, completely.

Yeah, people want to be morally judgmental about others and about themselves, ourselves. We do this. We are horribly cruel, and in an incorrect way, merciless. I am always telling the students, "You have to be merciless with yourselves," ruthless that means, pitiless. Don't let yourself get away with bullshit, is what that means. But on the other hand, don't beat yourself up for no reason at all. Whatever situation we find ourselves in, we have to live to be bright and easygoing. And it's probably the most difficult thing there is to do, you know? But you fall down and crack your head against a wall, then just get up and be bright and easygoing!

You know, I had to have this new knee put in, and then I got cancer in my eye, and they each took a year or two to recover from. There was a lot of pain involved. So I practiced being bright and easygoing, no matter what. I didn't succeed all the time, but that's the practice. I'm not telling you that I am good at that. I am just saying that's the practice, no matter what. And you really learn that when you are standing with a bokken and you see the whole implication of that. Does that help?

*Student: I think so, yes. Thank you.*

Any other questions? Did I leave anyone out?

So that time is up. Thank you very much.

