

HKF Shugyo Tassei Kigan Shiki Seminar – Question & Answer With Christopher Curtis Sensei Sunday, February 22, 2015

Good morning everybody.

During this Shugyo Tassei Kigan Shiki seminar, of course the subject has been the difference between keiko and shugyo practice, which we need to always clarify for each other, because there is a lot of confusion about this. Of course keiko practice is very important because that's how we perfect the form, and once the form is perfected, then that gives us the freedom to practice shugyo, to be in the moment without self-consciousness or distraction.

The other thing we are celebrating, interestingly, at this seminar, is the promotion of our long time teacher, Takashi Nonaka Sensei, from the Big Island, to 9th Dan. This is a very rare and honorable occurrence. Of course he deserves this. Let me just mention that one of the best places to notice the nervous, extra things we put into our personality that we are always trying to notice on the mat, is at a party. And last night we had a party to honor Nonaka Sensei. I happened to be fortunate to sit across from him, so I got to watch him all night. And you don't see one extra thing on that man's face. He is just in it. He just sits there in it. Sitting there last night I thought, I wonder if anyone is noticing this, or is everybody too wrapped up in the hula-balloo. This is fine. We are having a party and I am not saying you have to be glued on the teacher all the time. But it was a eye-opening experience, and apropos so much of this seminar subject plus the fact that we are honoring him.

Just because this is being recorded and the fact that it will go on the internet and people may listen to it who have not attended this seminar, and because there is such a wide-spread misunderstanding, in my experience, of what shugyo practice really is, I want to just repeat that keiko practice is everything that we do to improve our condition. This is everything we do, whether it's physical, mental, spiritual (whatever that means), whatever you do to improve your condition in life, internal or external, is all called keiko. There is a popular notion, because shugyo is not understood very well, that shugyo is only the most intense part of keiko. No, no. Keiko is keiko. Everything that you can improve relatively in, is keiko. The practice of shugyo, on the other hand, is the practice of bringing all of our attention, inclusively, to this moment now, and just resting here in this. So obviously you can practice shugyo while you are practicing keiko. It is included. This is your whole life. You have form, and you are doing something – that's keiko. But you are in a state of mind, a presence, we call shugyo. It's very important to understand not to make shugyo some kind of special separate practice. It's just living life completely. That's all.

OK? So please ask a question if you have one.

Student: Sensei, I have two questions. One is personal. The other question is about

extending Ki and helping your partner. I understand that in terms of training sessions. But my question is, in real life, real conflict, do I extend Ki to my opponent? [This is a Vietnam veteran asking this question]

Do you extend Ki? Is that what you are asking me? What would you say?

Student: I would say "no."

No?

Student: Yeah, because that's an enemy, so I'm thinking I'm giving him the ability to utilize my Ki to overcome me.

OK, I see. Well, I'll try to answer. So his question is, as he says, we are learning to extend Ki in class. But when he is with a real enemy, in real life, he shouldn't extend Ki, because the person would use his Ki against him. Is that right?

Student: Yes.

Anybody have any comment on that?

Student: You had an example of this. I don't know if you have related this to others, but you told me once about a party at your house, and a couple of martial arts people started going at it verbally with you, and you gave an example of Extend Ki. That's what I recall.

Yeah, that's very ... that's the kind of story you can understand. Well, we were sitting out on the deck at my home, and one Capoeira teacher and one Gracie Jujitsu teacher were there, and they were sort of questioning me about Aikido. These were big guys, big Brazilians. And they are friends of mine, and they know that I am Hachidan in Aikido and they are just sort of checking me out. This was early on when I first met them. They don't do this any more. So one of them, the Gracie Jujitsu teacher was standing up and finally his finger came up. I was still sitting down. And he was trying to tell me how what he was doing, his martial art, was the best. Which is OK, but it was starting to get a little strange. I didn't know him very well yet. I was extending Ki, because that's how we live, not something we choose to do. So I just stood up and stood really close to him and looked at him. And the other guy grabbed his arm and said, "Let's just sit down." Now, I don't know what they thought, exactly. I was smiling. I wasn't making a samurai face. I just stood up very close to him, because he clearly was not feeling what was going on. So I thought, well, if I got close, then maybe OK. And so he just sat down.

You know, if you ever have to use physical Aikido in daily life, you have made some really bad mistakes already. No one should ever want to assail you. No one should ever want to attack you. If someone wants to attack you, particularly physically, you made some mistakes. So I say go through life with as open a heart and mind as possible, which means Ki is extended at all times. Ki is naturally flowing at all times. It only stops when we begin to posture and think we need to do something. Whenever we

have the idea to do something, to accomplish something, we stop Ki. This is the “big mistake” I was talking about regarding the many popular “steps to success.” This is the fundamental error of being human. Let’s face it. I mean, there is all of the ignorance and laziness and lethargy, as well as plain criminal behavior, but that is none of you guys here. You people have all climbed out of that somehow, so we are all here together having moved into this position by doing what is not going to work for you anymore. That’s what I am saying. It worked to get you here. But now you’re here. Now you have to sort of switch gears. You can’t drive in first gear anymore. I don’t know if that’s a perfect metaphor but you know what I mean. We have to see the bigger picture and realize that even though, like that story with Suzuki Sensei and my bokken cutting lessons, I never could have gotten to the point without having the goal to begin with. You have to have the goal, the object of your attention, otherwise you will give up. And that’s how you got here. But now, it’s holding you back, when you use that. It’s a crutch that you no longer need. To be free, is to be in object-less attention, object-less awareness. Attention without any need to improve the situation that we find ourselves in. It is exactly right, just the way it is. How old we are, who we know, how we look, how much money we make, everything. If you think something is not right about any of that, then you do not understand what this is about. That’s really important.

Now, you said you had a personal question. I don’t think I heard that one.

Student: Yeah, I have this curiosity about your self. My curiosity is, what inspired you to get involved in Aikido?

Well, I sort of didn’t have much choice. It’s kind of a long story that I’ll try to make very short. I had been in a meditation retreat in my twenties for three years, where I lived alone and just sat every day and did a little yard work and cooked my own food, did my own laundry, and that was it. After those three years I came to Maui, because my family was here. I was living in Haiku, and I was still sitting every day, but wanted some form of training. I wrote my retreat teacher and told him I wanted to join with Robert Aitken Roshi’s Zen center on Maui, and he said that was not for me. He said I would become too intellectual and what I needed was a “Zen based martial art.” So I was down at the Hongwanji in Kahului listening to a talk by a Tibetan Lama one night, and when I went back stage to speak with him afterward, the local Buddhist priest saw me and said, “Are you interested in Buddhism, young man?” I said, “Yeah, but what I am really looking for is a Zen based martial art.” “Oh,” he said, “you want Suzuki, right up there in Wailuku. It’s called Aikido.” And then I remembered, “Oh, Aikido,” because I had met Yamada Sensei in New York City for just one day at a workshop, and I remembered that he had told me about this guy Tohei Sensei, unbendable arm, etc. and I thought, “This is it.” So I signed up the next day. Except that Suzuki Sensei was in Japan for six months training with Tohei Sensei. So I signed up with one of his students, and trained with him for six months before Suzuki Sensei ever came back. And I have to say that, even though I really enjoyed the training, I would not have stayed with this other guy. I would have gone and found something else. Suzuki Sensei is the reason I stayed. When he walked into the dojo, he scared the shit out of me. He scared me to death. I had never met

anyone like him. He was screaming at me, “You have no idea! This is life and death training, young man!” I was not knowing if I even wanted to train with this man, but on the other hand really wanting to train with him. And then, after class, he was handing me a beer and was so much fun and friendly, and I was hooked.

So that’s how that happened, and it just so happened that I was there on Maui at the right time, and so was Suzuki Sensei. There were probably other really good teachers, but Suzuki Sensei and I just had a kind of simpatico. You know sometimes you meet someone and you just know. “Oh, that’s it.” We both knew that when we met each other. That’s what he told me. OK?

Student: How many other 9th Dans are there outside of Japan today, besides Nonaka Sensei.

Zero. Yeah, he’s sitting right over there. There are three 8th Dans, and one 9th Dan, and a number of 7th Dans, though not very many, 5 or 6 maybe, but not even that. How many are there? 3 or 4. Outside of Japan not so many. Even in Japan, not so many. I mean there is one 9th Dan in Japan, right? Just Otsuka Sensei. And there used to be another one, Iwao Tamura Sensei, but he died. There used to be two other 9th Dan in Hawaii, Suzuki Sensei and Tabata Sensei, but they both passed away, and that’s it. Hawaii is the only place we’ve ever had 9th Dan outside of Japan, or ever will have. I mean, when I was sitting talking with Shinichi Sensei about Nonaka Sensei’s 9th Dan, back two years ago, he said, “You understand, this is the last time. We are not giving any more 9th Dan. So congratulations, Nonaka Sensei. You are it. It’s like, the rest of us don’t deserve to move to that level. We can’t ever catch up with these guys. So yeah, that’s interesting.

Student: Sensei, I am just thinking of something I read and your example of cutting with Suzuki Sensei. What I read, it was something like a Tibetan Buddhist text, it said that dealing with the ego is like “wearing out an old pair of shoes.” I thought that you might like that example, Sensei, given recent events. [My shoes had suddenly fallen apart at the dinner the night before] Your example of cutting with Suzuki Sensei, and you know thinking about how to go through this process over and over again...what I would like you to elaborate on once again, is what you think about that.

Well those shoes that I wore out last night are pretty useless now. I can’t use them as shoes any longer. So it might not be the same, that metaphor there. You know, I just don’t know any other way to look at it. Trying and trying to fulfill your own idea of what awakening or enlightenment is, and positing it as a goal out there in the future, as a state of mind that you will achieve at some point. It’s not that this doesn’t happen, exactly, but it never can happen the way you think about it, because the one who is thinking about it, isn’t awake. The one who’s thinking about it is self-obsessed, and only wants it for itself. It wants it to improve itself, as a commodity, to make itself a greater commodity, a salable commodity. It’s disgusting what we do to ourselves in the name of “God,” or in the name of enlightenment, or in the name of spiritual training. It is ridiculous, yes, it’s insanity even, but it is really, really sad.

However, can we exist without it? No. We have to have it. Because otherwise, we probably wouldn't continue to train. So that's what I learned from that experience. And the whole idea of wearing out, yeah there is some wearing down going on, like an old pair of shoes, I guess. I know you thought of that because of my shoes last night. There's some wearing down going on until finally you snap. We call this "illumination in surfeit." That's what that means. At some point you have had it. I just wasn't going to go for it any more. Like I had some sort of authority. But all I really had was my big fat self, sticking out all over. I didn't even see it. I had my hands on my hips and I was looking in the mirror and shaking my head. But it was like I had an angel on my shoulder. I don't literally mean that, but somehow it was time that, instead of hanging on to that anger, the closer I got, as I drove down that day to my teacher and the dojo, the strangest thing happened. My whole anger went away, and it just began to be "Oh" and it was so incongruous to what I had projected it was supposed to be like. I had had other awakenings, kensho, experiences in my life, so I ought to have known. But you never know, because the one who remembers it is not that one who had it happen. The one who remembers it is the history piece, the ego piece. You cannot remember awakening accurately. It is either here, or it ain't. But you can't say, "I had this awakening experience." Bullshit. The one who is talking didn't have it. It happened, and there is somebody who remembers it, but just like everything else in this world, whatever you remember, you're wrong. That did not happen to the one who is remembering it. It happened to the real you. How about them apples? Ask five people what happened in an accident. Everybody knows. You get five totally different stories. We aren't very good at remembering because the one who is remembering is not the one who had the experience. That's why we want to live in attention in the moment, now, so that we can be the one, all the times. This is one universal state of being – *Reiseishin*. And of course, the minute we want to stay in that state of mind, it's gone. It vanishes all by itself, because we do that to ourselves. It's so illusive.

You can ask another question, because I could go on and on all day about this, as you know.

Student: Would you please discuss the exercise of looking at yourself in the mirror?

The "Hall of the Ancients?" Did I tell you about that?

Student: No, I heard tell of it.

OK, so this also came from my 3-year retreat. My teacher taught me this. You know, when you are sitting in meditation, eyes closed, and you are trying to just be in attention here, and your mind keeps going petink, petink, petink, off to all this different stuff? Does that happen to you? Yeah it happens to everybody. Well, that is very amorphous, because we can't grab the mind. You can't see it. You can't touch it. So this exercise is designed to be the same thing, except that you have a visual image to work with. So you make sure you are in a private space, go in the bathroom and close the door. It's best if you just take your clothes off, so you don't have anything in the way, and just gaze in the mirror. And you will see your mind cannot be in attention on the image for

more than a fraction of a second. Petink, petink, petink, off it goes. It can't do it. It won't do it. It's terrified to do it, is what you soon realize. "Oh my god, I'm scared to look at who I am." You never do look at who you are. Do you know that? When you look in the mirror, you look at an imagined image. You don't actually see yourself, unless you do this exercise. And it takes some practice to do it. So you have to stand there, usually for about a half hour each time. That's about as much as you can stand. It's not easy to do. It's the same thing that you are doing during meditation, but you have the added crutch that you can see the image. It's called "The Hall of the Ancients" because as your mind stops tripping, meaning flicking away, and starts to rest, then you begin to really see what is here, and you will see images. You have to get all these images that you have, not of self, but of human. And they are all in here. And you don't get to see what's really here, until you look through all of them. That's the Hall of the Ancients. And it can be pretty scary. That's why I only give this exercise to certain people. I don't just teach it in class and say, "Everybody do this." Not everybody is ready to do this. If it freaks you out a little bit, don't do it. Wait. Take it a little bit at a time. It's very interesting. And if you are ready, you get to see something that I can't tell you. Like, how can I tell you, when you are sitting in meditation and you experience musoku. Well, if you ask me, "What is that?" There are no words. If I told you a word, it would be wrong. So what do you see? What's behind the Hall of the Ancients? Whatever it was that I said would not be correct.

Ok, one short question.

Student: At this seminar, in my experience, I have seen a shift in everyone. But is that happening, or is that just my experience? I don't know. I just noticed that everyone had a shift, but is that just me experiencing that?

What do you say, everyone? Do you also notice? Yeah. So the answer to your question, as usual, is "yes." Is it this or is it that? Yes.

OK, thank you very much.