

*Time and Time Again*

*by*

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*an essay in support of my presenting for nidan in*

*The World Seido Karate Organization*

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*Osu Kaicho, Osu Nidaime, Osu Hanshi, Osu Shuseki Shihan, Osu Sei Shihan, Osu Jun Shihan, Osu Kyoshi, Osu Sensei, Osu Senpai! Thank you, Kaicho, for creating our beautiful art, and thank you all for sustaining it. It is an honor to be a member of the World Seido Karate Organization, and to present for Nidan. As I look back over my eight years of training, I am grateful beyond words to my teachers, Jun Shihan Nancy Lanoue and Jun Shihan Sarah Ludden, and to the entire Thousand Waves and World Seido communities for giving me such a rich and dynamic philosophical and physical tradition in which to grow. I also want to thank Sensei Peggy Shinner for her thoughtful comments on this essay, which I respectfully dedicate to my partner Michael Moss and to my parents, the three people whose love I cherish more than anything.*

## ***Preface***

I am a pretty lucky person. I am healthy. I have a stable, long-term relationship with a partner who loves and supports me. I have a large, extended family of relatives and dear friends. I have plenty (too much!) to eat, and a safe, comfortable home in which to sleep. At 36 years old, I move through my days with virtually no regular threats to my well-being. But of course my story is just my story; the human condition is a construct of perspective, and we've each got a unique one. In the discussion of balance in my world that follows, I want to make it clear that anything negative I may say pales in comparison to the immense suffering of others that I know infects our species. One of my biggest sources of personal pain is the suffering of others, and maintaining an awareness of suffering in the world is a way I work to keep a balanced perspective.

## ***Balance in my Physical Practice, and in Teaching***

The only time I sparred in a Seido Karate tournament at Hunter College I was a new advanced brown belt. It was not my first tournament experience, but it was my first time sparring in a tournament, and sparring felt quite different than kata. Compared to our kata competition, which had wrapped up a few minutes before, a heightened sense of anticipation and fear (just me?) hovered over our 2<sup>nd</sup> and 1<sup>st</sup> kyu group as we sat on the spongy floor waiting for our rounds to begin. As the fights progressed, many struggled with balance and footing – karateka were crashing to the ground all over the place. Going into my rounds my primary goal had been to score a single point. After watching three people in my division alone fall to the floor – not, as a rule, due to any action by their partners - I changed my goal. Forget the point, Ryan, *just don't fall down*.

I love karate - silly to say, on the verge of my nidan test perhaps. And is it really that simple? Well, actually, yes, for me it is. I love standing in neat lines heiko dachi and punching chudan tsuki – striving for full extension spiraling out through a tight seiken, coordinating it with a twist of the hips, the count of the teacher and the energy reverberating through the room as we kiai in unison. I love the physical contact and the application of basics in kumite, and the aerobic challenge and the lessons about performing under pressure that it provides. I love the beauty of kata, and the stories they tell - ten years ago I never could have imagined how it feels to tell a story through movement. I love the whole-body

tingling experience when boards break, the feeling of energy lingering in my technique in the moments after tameshiwari. I love our Seido partner work - moving in perfect sync with a partner is perhaps the height of practice. I love weapons work and the way it helps me learn more about body mechanics. I love the fear and anticipation and competition and camaraderie of tournaments. And I love watching, helping, and teaching others to do all of the above. On the training floor, I do believe I have achieved balance in my appreciation of all the physical components of our art. The final piece of that puzzle fell into place around advanced brown belt. I just woke up one day realizing I finally loved to fight, after struggling with it up to that point.

Amongst my other duties at Thousand Waves, I teach karate and self-defense, and have enjoyed the ways teaching has impacted my skills in both arenas. My teaching in our self-defense program in particular has broadened my conception of what self-defense means, and has helped me see that, for many, learning self-defense means healing from past wounds – wounds more often emotional than physical - wounds deeper than most physical wounds can ever be.

Teaching physical self-defense has also challenged me philosophically – quite deeply. In our Seido practice and in our Thousand Waves self-defense curriculum, we hold dearly an “Ethic of Least Harm.” The Ethic's ideal expression is obviously a fight that never happens because the conflict either didn't occur in the first place or it was resolved through respectful, direct communication. Barring that, we should do as little harm as possible in any given physical self-defense situation to safely resolve it. But people don't come to self-defense workshops to hear that, necessarily. Perhaps they have been victimized brutally in the past, and they now seek to learn physical skills that can assist them should it happen again. They are proactively taking steps to keep themselves safe, and I want to honor that. They are not in my class to learn how *not* to fight - quite the opposite.

I have thought a lot about the differences inherent in teaching physical self-defense skills to non-martial artists. Martial artists, over the course of years, are often able to develop a proficiency with fighting skills that makes them unlikely ever to use them. This probably seems a contradiction to non-practitioners, but the basic idea is that the mental security and discipline gained by knowing how to fight diminishes the ego, and makes it unnecessary to “prove” it. So ego-based confrontations are perhaps easier for us to avoid. Many of the confrontations that we can imagine, *especially many of the confrontations that many men can imagine*, are ego-based. I have never heard of a Thousand Waves Seido Karateka being involved in a physical altercation that escalated from a non-physical confrontation. We walk away, or we de-escalate.

But beginner self-defense students are often on a different path. They are not, as a rule, dedicating their lives to learning a fighting art. They perceive very real threats to their personal safety that do not arise from any action they have or

have not taken. They want to learn how to physically defend themselves in these situations, and I want to teach them how. But I also want to honor my deep beliefs about the harmful nature of all violence, and the circular nature of violence.

Something like 1/4 – 1/3 of women, depending on definitions (Finkelhor, Heise, Koss, Ullman, Randall, all lead authors of separate studies 1990s-2000s, each study et. al) become victims of sexual violence at some point in their lives. In order to impart the fighting skills necessary for a beginner to defend herself against an assailant, we must teach physical techniques developed with the idea that self-defenders can deliver their strong, natural weapons into the weakest, most vulnerable targets on attackers. We also must instill a fighting spirit that, in the most horrible of moments, unequivocally delivers powerful messages like, “I am worth defending,” and “I can do this, with my own body, with what I know right now, in this moment, when I need it.” Without a 100% commitment to self-preserving action framed in this way, the physical self-defense skills we want our students to gain could be rendered ineffective.

So while it's vital for us as martial artists to ground our Seido practice in an ethic of least harm, in our self-defense curriculum it is not nearly as easy to sort out. We definitely teach a “hit and run” style of self-defense – we are not teaching how to prevail in a sparring match, we are teaching how to survive and escape from a life or death situation. Within the context of self-defense for beginners, then, perhaps it is less incumbent upon us to maintain an unwavering focus on the ethic of least harm in our self-defense curriculum. Mixed messages running through the minds of people with limited skillsets might be counterproductive. I've observed time and time again beginners striking tentatively with their palm-heel into a target pad held by a burly black belt uke and pulling back with trepidation, “Was that too hard?” No, it wasn't. Hit the pad with all you've got, over and over again, screaming like a crazy woman, please!

*So where is my balance-point in teaching these skills?*

The discussion is ongoing, both within my head and within our corps of instructors at Thousand Waves, and in the self-defense teaching community as a whole. In addition to the perspectives of Jun Shihan Nancy Lanoue and Senpai Kate Webster at Thousand Waves, I'm grateful for the perspective of Senpai Susan (George) Schorn from Sundragon Martial Arts in Austin, Texas, a perspective she continues to explore via her columns for McSweeney's. Her main point is that we have to acknowledge the realities of violence in the world – that much violence is committed by serial offenders, who often get away due to police and community indifference. If victims can effectively disable attackers, it makes the attacker more likely to be held to account. I've been further stimulated recently on this part of my journey as a participant in Sensei Martha Thompson's IMPACT Chicago Self-Defense program, where simulated attacks by padded male assailants stimulate the production of fear and adrenaline, which are then harnessed by participants who apply full-force techniques into the men's armor. While I have plenty more to think about, I do think that temperance is best in discussing “The Ethic Of Least Harm” in beginner self-defense classes. When violent responses are necessary to counter violent attacks, they are a

manifestation of the basic fact that perfect nonviolent solutions simply do not exist for dealing with humanity's most imperfect moments.

### ***Balance in my Vocation***

When asked what I do for a living at a barbecue a while back I said, “I help run a karate school.” “Really!” My new acquaintance replied, “You have the coolest job in the world, way cooler than anybody else here, hands down - I bet you hear that all the time, huh?” I was taken aback by his reaction. The fact is I don't hear that all the time. More often than not, I think, people are perplexed by young, professional adults with backgrounds like mine who have decided to invest so much of their lives in the martial arts. I asked my new BBQ acquaintance what he does. “I teach 5<sup>th</sup> grade, been doing it for two years, can't wait to quit.” Perspectives indeed.

Since I decided to abandon a pursuit of academia a few years back, I've evolved into a non-profit manager at heart, dedicated to service populations, programming that helps the world, and education. One reason I love non-profit management is that it allows me a tremendous breadth of tasks – a good balance of things I like to do. I love teaching, but don't want to do it all day every day. I love working budgets, but hour upon hour of nothing but numbers makes my head hurt. From that perspective, Thousand Waves is the perfect place for me. On any given day I get to crunch numbers, teach a self-defense workshop to a group of college kids new to living in The Big City, help a new 5 year old tie on her white belt, write an article for our newsletter, and try to sit still for a few seconds thinking about the effectiveness of our latest Facebook ad campaign (so far not much).

The other day I made it part of my job to go hear the Dalai Lama speak on nonviolence at Loyola University on the north side of Chicago. His Holiness was in town for a gathering of Nobel Peace Prize Laureates, and he spoke at length about humanity as a species and about our capacity for compassion, which he took great pains to rhetorically root in our mammalian biology (mammals die without the compassion of their mothers was a key point on that front). But to realize our full capacity for compassion, *we have to teach it*, he says. He says we should teach compassion “like we teach math,” making it compulsory for grades K-12.

The Dalai Lama's idea hit me like a train; directly teaching compassion is what I've observed Jun Shihan Nancy and Jun Shihan Sarah and our dedicated corps of teachers at Thousand Waves doing every day, be it with a child throwing a tantrum in our lobby or with a senior community member in need of support through a serious illness. Teaching compassion, and its close kin respect, is also what I've observed Kaicho doing when we take the time, say, in the pouring rain at Gasshuku, to bow to every senior student present, insisting we get their names right. Teaching compassion is what our karate-do does for us when contact errors occur in kumite and we are able to let them pass without negative judgments

about the intentions of our partners. I am proud that part of my job is to try to steer us all in the direction of a greater compassion for our fellow humans. In trying to help others think critically about these concepts, I feel fortunate to have a vocational reason to focus on compassion daily.

### ***“Losing It”***

Of course sometimes it's not so easy for me to assume the best intentions of others, and to extend compassion to all of humanity. One significant area where I have struggled with balance is in my tolerance for religion, and I have written about it before in my promotion essays. The nature of religion as a force for good in the world is something I've struggled with mightily for many years. My struggle is rooted in the Fundamentalist Christianity with which I was raised, and my break with that faith tradition when I was about 18 years old. It has also come to be rooted in my perceptions of the negative influence of most all religion in world geo-political conflicts, in its influence in inhibiting universal human rights, and in its tendency to squelch scientific inquiry and independent thought.

In my ambivalence about religion, even the Dalai Lama has not escaped my criticism in the past – I have pondered the historical lack of a female Dalai Lama as an example of the world's “great faiths” supporting patriarchy and tradition over the well-being and inclusion of all individuals. That judgment was weighing on my mind quite heavily as I sat listening to the Dalai Lama speak at Loyola University. It's not that I don't still wonder about the force of patriarchy in Tibetan Buddhism; I surely do. But that faith tradition has chosen, in the Dalai Lama, a man to guide it who is far more interested in the similarities between us that enable human compassion and community than in the differences that divide us.

At one point during his talk the Dalai Lama said, “I could stand up here and say, 'I am Buddhist; I am Tibet,' but all that does is divide us.” That quote was literally the only thing he said during his talk related to the longstanding conflict over Tibetan sovereignty for which he is so well known. I am greatly inspired by a man who represents a people driven to exile by oppression and hardship, who steps outside of his own experience to focus on extending compassion toward others. He consistently emphasized the commonalities between all of humankind, and belittled divisions like religion and nationality and race, believing all those differences to be about as significant as individuals having bigger or smaller noses (yes, that exact example).

In my shodan essay I wrote about my struggles with religion as they pertain to the problems of the world, and my desire to look at groups who fight mightily *against* things I fight mightily *for*, and to blame them. I have blamed them in discussions with friends and family, in public forums like Facebook, and I have occasionally been loud about it. I have continued over the past few years to learn about that part of myself. I know that practically nothing in this world is black

and white, that shades of gray cloud everything we wish were simple. Seeing and accepting the fact that balance is rooted in a gray worldview is a continual struggle for me, and, to quote myself from that shodan essay, “I fail time and time again.” Well, here's my nidan essay, and still I fail, time and time again.

It has been especially difficult for me to be patient with the population of my country as it adjusts to working toward accepting gays as full members of society. I will say, however, that recently I have been able to see the profound successes of our movement over the past several years as ascendant, versus dwelling on our setbacks and our challenges. Similarly, the progress we have made toward the elimination of the death penalty in the United States over the past decade has been immense. But really, decades now after the brilliant, non-violent activism of Rosa Parks, what is “the middle way” of protesting injustice when police gun down black kids at the rates they do on the south side of Chicago? When *kids* gun down kids?

Unpacking the baggage that weighs me down about understanding and confronting the problems of the world will likely always be a struggle for me. I feel especially deeply the struggles of young gays who to this day remain as I was, trapped in cultural and faith-based communities where even imagining the full, wonderful life they can achieve is impossible due to the constraints imposed on their brains by their worldviews. So while I'm inclined to lash out at that part of American society, I have to acknowledge that it's not helpful. When people perceive assaults on their faith, all it does is reinforce their faith. I try to ponder the literal meaning of karate – *empty hand*. My own experience, my baggage, impedes my progress, and I know that; why can't I leave it behind? All I can do is to keep on trying. I do think I have made progress, and I think people I have hurt in the past would acknowledge it too. My progress is undeniable if I think about the arguments I have started on the subject of religion in the past. Nowadays, I try hard to sit most of them out – the arguments are almost always unproductive, and I firmly believe that living my own life as best I can and in accordance with my understanding of the universe is the best way to effect change in the world. But yes, “I fail time and time again.” Just yesterday I pointed out to a bunch of people that the single largest institutional financial backer of all legal initiatives in this country that seek to limit my life as a gay person is the Catholic Church. It seems many people don't know that. Well, is it helpful to point that fact out to a group that may or may not include Catholics who donate a good chunk of their income to the Church, which the Church hierarchy then redirects toward anti-gay electoral and legislative battles in North Carolina, New York, and California, or isn't it?

### ***And Finally***

I began this essay with an anecdote about balance in the most literal sense, but I hope the metaphorical sense was not lost - I was able to change my goal in that tournament on the fly to suit the situation, an example of my ideal of

maintaining the pragmatic worldview that I've partially laid out above, a worldview free of false dichotomy and dogma, which can interfere with doing/thinking the right thing at the right time, a worldview that resists the appeal of easy answers as superficial and almost surely incorrect.

But now it occurs to me that on that day at that tournament I played it way too safe. What kind of a goal is not falling down? On our shinzens at Thousand Waves sit Daruma dolls, icons representing Bodhidharma, their big eyes staring at us as we train. The figures are rounded and weighted at the bottom, and when knocked over they immediately right themselves. The lesson they impart is often interpreted as similar to the old Japanese saying, “Fall down seven times, get up eight.” Looking backward shouldn't ever consume too much of our time, but perhaps I should have made the Daruma doll's lesson my goal at that Seido anniversary tournament instead. I don't remember the fights well at all, but I do know that I didn't fall down. Mission accomplished? I may have launched off with a brilliant backfist that scored, or maybe my opponent artfully moved inside my backfist attack and nailed me with a reverse punch. I have no idea – all I know is that I didn't fall down, and I didn't win. How useful is that?