

The Journey of Mastery

by Charlotte Hatch, Senior Mastery Teacher

In my life, I've had the opportunity to travel to foreign lands and explore the world. I've enjoyed different cultures, tasted new foods, met new people and seen exotic locales with fresh eyes. I feel excited and adventurous while traveling. Who knows what strange situation I might encounter? I need to be strong and courageous.

When O Sensei, the founder of Aikido, said that he was the universe, he believed that each of us is also the universe. All of us have a vast, rich universe within us, as well as the one outside. We can travel to foreign countries within; we can feel the nuances and yearnings of our inner world, our body, mind, heart and soul. Like actual travel, this inner exploration takes fortitude and courage, because we may also end up doing and feeling the unfamiliar.

The practice of ITP gives us a road map into our inner selves. It provides the stability of long-term practice, helping to gently, safely open doors to inner worlds that we've neglected to visit, sometimes for decades. Behind these doors lie extraordinary capacities that we inherit simply by being human.

I have a yearning toward wholeness and discovery but am uncertain as to how to get there. I decide to study ITP deeply by enrolling in Mastery. Walking in the door of the dojo on the first day of a new Mastery cycle, I feel a pleasant sense of anticipation tinged with a slight uneasiness. It feels like I'm standing on the end of the diving board above the water, getting ready to dive head first, not knowing how cold the water will be.

The topic of the first weekend is Visioning. The program leads me into myself. I write, dream and look at the stars twinkling in my inner sky. I feel where the natural flow of my life's energy wants to go and give myself permission to be as expansive as I want to be, and then more.

Our second weekend is Affirmations. I notice what themes are growing within me, where I want to transform in the coming months. And I learn how to bring these themes out, how to affirm them with words, how to create an alternate reality in which growth has already happened. This is the framework of my transformation.

The next session of Mastery is Theory and Philosophy. Michael Murphy comes to the dojo. He leads a



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sesshin, answering questions, offering support, regaling us with wonderful stories of his life's journey, within and without. We also study the life and teachings of Morihei Ueshiba, O Sensei. I discover I'm on a path toward transformation that Michael and O Sensei have traveled and that this path is always available to me, at every moment, should I choose to open myself to it.

The fourth session of Mastery is dedicated to practicing and leading the ITP Kata. The Kata is the vehicle I use to bring my transformation into reality. Performing it balances and centers me for whatever I experience in the course of a day. I'm encouraged to notice how different the Kata is every time I do it, and I'm amazed at how many nuances I experience as I perform the same movements over and over. The inner experience of the Kata yields incredible riches to me when I allow myself to feel what's happening in present time.

Leonard Energy Training (LET) is the topic of the fifth Mastery weekend. LET is based upon the idea that our bodies are our teachers. I practice tuning into what my body is telling me. I learn to listen to it, and in so doing, find out who I really am. My body doesn't lie; whenever my body is feeling a truth, I can count on it 100%. I tune into my body in three contexts: alone, in relationship to another body, and as part of a group. The energy of the group rises and falls as we do gentle activities together, followed by periods of reflection. And the group becomes more centered and grounded as the day progresses.

The next Mastery weekend is devoted to Staying Current: how to be centered in relationships, how to keep energy flowing. The first step for me is to drop into my inner world and notice what I'm feeling. I don't like some of my feelings. I'm unwilling to own them or welcome them. I'm encouraged to open my heart, to name, and to accept each of my feelings. And I practice peaceful ways of communicating them to others.

In our seventh Mastery weekend we explore the subject of Leadership from within. How am I leading and following in my life presently? How am I leading myself on my life's natural path? We do LET exercises expressing different aspects of leadership, asking our bodies to be centered and grounded in the roles of leader and follower. I realize that I can open myself to experience the energy of leading without losing my balance.

In our last Mastery weekend, we delve into Integral Fitness: fitness of the body, mind, heart and soul. This involves balancing and centering, bringing exquisite awareness to movements and commitment. Our first step is to take stock of how fit we feel in each aspect. Being a Mastery member has given my soul more fitness. I've become more tuned into my soul's messages, and I notice what experiences give my soul nourishment. I want to make decisions from an integrated, balanced state, allowing each of the four aspects of myself to have influence.

As the group concludes our Mastery cycle with a celebration of our growth and transformation, I feel the process of integration of body, mind, heart and soul stirring within me. There's an opening in my heart and an acceptance of more aspects of myself. I've learned the importance of centering. I have a new goal of being fully present in each moment of my life. And there's a big pay-off: I'm overjoyed to have become a member of an amazing community of people committed to staying on the path of transformation.