

Aikido in the stones.

It was dark and cold at 6.34 when we pulled up to Cleeve House. The lights from the windows pierced the early morning darkness, reflecting off the few cars that had already arrived. We crept quietly into the hall, which was abuzz with whispery white-clad *Aikidoka*, while unaware of our early aiki activities, B&B guests of the house slept upstairs.

People were milling around in anticipation, filling up on tea and hot water bottles, and warming up by the fire.

'Morning! You alright?'

'Yeah, excited!'

'What time did you get up?'

'Just after 5.'

'Wow, you had a fair way to travel already then.'

'Yeah, we picked up Max and Andy on the way here.'

'Oh fantastic, you having tea?'



Carlo and Barbara had got the urn going and lit the fire, and were helping people to hot drinks, chatting enthusiastically – but quietly - about the adventure ahead.

'So you'll have fifteen minutes of meditation in the stones?'

'No, I don't think so, we only have one hour there, so I'm guessing we'll train most of that time.'

'Will other people be watching?'

'No it's just for us, we've exclusively hired it.'

'Really, can you do that?'

'I know isn't it amazing?'

'I like your hoodies!'

'Yeah, how fabulous, we got them made especially, look what it says...'

'Let me read... Seend Aikido Club Stonehenge January 2011...That's very special.'

'I know! Oh, do you have any herbal tea?'

While people made last minute use of the facilities, and Frodo and Sam wandered excitedly around, sniffing people and receiving welcome ear-scratches, Dave and I picked up my weapons bag and the *Shomen* box from the cupboard under the stairs. Checking inside, all the bottles and dishes were lovingly cleaned and wrapped up.

'It's a good job Danny sorted this out after the grading.'

'I know, it was such a nightmare last time. Look, he even ironed the towels!'

Matt said, 'Right guys, lets make a move,' and with a flurry of bags and weapons the house emptied of people as we piled into cars to head south. A pale grey dawn was beginning to creep across the cold January sky as our convoy wove through Wiltshire. Wintry trees sailed by silhouetted until we emerged onto the wide bleak expanse of Salisbury Plain.

Six thousand years ago this whole open landscape was deep in forest. Farmers began to clear the hills in around 3500 BC, just before the site was chosen for the great creation of Stonehenge. Our ancient ancestors traveled this journey, rolling the immense Sarsen boulders across its undulating slopes to the sacred site.



Now we drove there with ease, watching as we crested the hill and the stones emerged on the horizon, the great megaliths standing majestically over the flat plain in the growing grey light.

Arriving at the car park everyone excitedly got out of their cars to get straight into the Henge. We stood in the cold car park looking eagerly to Matt for instructions.

'Right,' he said, beaming at us, 'Let's all get back in our cars and stay warm for twenty minutes - we're a bit early!'

This was a good opportunity to prepare the flowers for the *Shomen*, and to realise a bit too late that a pint glass was not the best receptacle for two bunches of roses.

'Dave, can I use your water, I forgot to bring any for the flowers.'

'Sure, there's more in the back.'

'Mmm yeah but we need that for the glasses on the *Shomen*.'

'Oh, then what about tea afterwards - you have your thermos right?'

'No that's for hot water bottles'

'You're really gonna use them?'

'Yeah look, it's only little, just tucks into my *Gi* like this.'

'You can't train with that there!'

'No it's just for the meditation, you sure you don't want one?'

Just before 8, we emerged from cars with every layer under or over our *Gis* to combat the bitter cold. Some people went for hoodies under *Gis*, some over. I had a clever arrangement of five layers of jumpers as well as gloves and scarves all under my very bulky looking uniform. Expectant and excited we greeted more members of our group who had traveled straight to the Henge.

Elisa got out of her car to much a hug and handshake.

'Wow you came all the way from Poole?'

'Yeah, wouldn't have missed this for the world.'

'I know, and there's some Lancashire people here.'

'Really?'

'Yeah they left at 4 this morning.'

'Wow that's dedication!'

'Well this is a national event.'

'We're so lucky to be in this club.'

As we followed Matt to the entrance, I passed Becky my spare mini hot water bottle, newly filled.

'Ah, thanks lovey!' she beamed, white bobble hat bobbing as she stuffed it into her *Gi*.

'Have you got the pictures for the *Shomen*?'

'They're in Danny's car, he's got them.'

'And the tablecloth's in the box right?'

We gathered near the entrance where a warden explained the Henge rules.

'There's a long list of things that you're not allowed to do in Stonehenge,' he said, 'but instead of listing them all, I'll just summarise it into one: you're not allowed to do anything.'

We giggled a bit at this but he continued quite seriously.



'It's very important that you don't touch the stones in any way at all, but if you feel the need to touch one, there is a Sarsen and a blue stone here that you can touch if you feel



unable to restrain yourselves. You can hug it, stand on it, kiss it if you like, but remember that lots of people have.'



Thanking him for his advice, we headed off through the tunnel underpass and up the little path to the stone circle, weapons bags on shoulders and roll mats under arms as we excitedly approached. I wanted to run straight into the stones as a child runs into the sea, but was a little encumbered with *Shomen* accoutrements.

800,000 people visit the world heritage site every year, and they pay £7.50 for a ticket that allows them to walk along the path that goes quite close to the outside of the circle, provides a nice place to take pictures from, and then curves back to the car park. What few people know is that before opening up to tourists, the Henge is available for exclusive hire for an hour, with no restrictions on

where you can walk.



We followed Matt on the path, getting excited as we drew closer, and as the sheer majesty and size of the great megaliths rose up in front of us. When the path scooped away from the stones we broke off, stepped over the little barrier rope, passed the 'no entry' sign and walked right through the stones into the centre of the circular temple.

Stonehenge! It is a word that evokes feelings of magic, mystery and a little shiver from the depths of our beings. It describes an ancient stone temple that has presented an enigma to humanity for thousands

of years. What is it? What was it built for, used for? Why had so much effort, over so many years, been expended on its creation? Why does it have such a profound, magical effect on people? One of the most important qualities about Stonehenge is its aura of mystery. If these questions are ever answered, the awesome power of the place will dwindle and fade away.¹

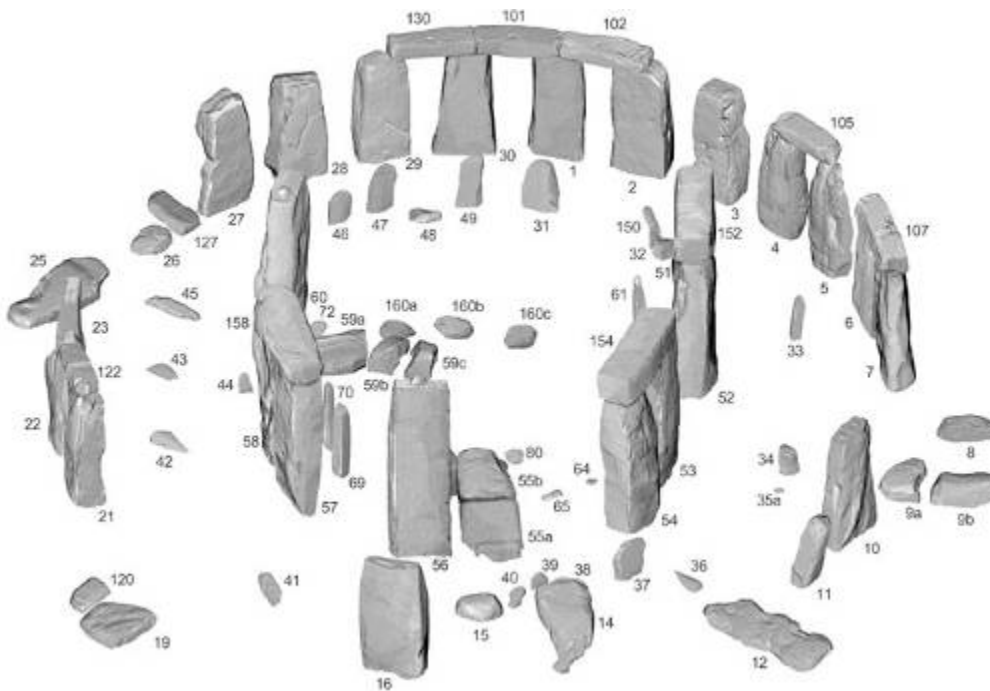
As we stood among the stones it was clear why Stonehenge is the most important prehistoric monument in Britain. With complex and mysterious origins, and with still unexplained theories about its creation, purpose and history, all that was obvious was that it is a mighty landmark of extreme significance.

¹ <http://www.stonehenge.co.uk/ceremony.php>

The historical studies into the site have shown that it was created in three stages, the first of which was around 5,000 years ago. The original site was a circle with a ditch, a bank, and round metre wide holes dug into the chalk. A thousand years later the second and most dramatic stage took place with the arrival of around 80 massive bluestones from the Presili mountains in Wales. Weighing up to 4 tonnes each, they were rolled and rafted the astonishing journey of 240 miles and set up in the inside to form two incomplete circles of pillars. Finally, in around 2,000 BC the larger more local Sarsen stones were transported with sledges and ropes from the Marlborough Downs, around 25 miles north. These made up the outer circle with a continuous run of lintels across the tops, of which several remain standing perfectly.

Entering the circle through these great arches, the stones seemed scattered in the circle to form a less clearly defined shape. But they were the remains of what once formed five huge trilithon arches in a tighter Sarsen horseshoe in the centre. The largest of these weigh 50 tonnes, and the fallen ones formed a great cluster of Sarsen remnants in the centre, while around them the immense Sarsen monoliths towered above us into the pale grey sky.

The grass on the inside of the circle was surprisingly short. Little tufts of deeper taller grass grew around the bases of the stones where they had been sunk heavily into the ground, the immense gnarled surfaces of which were dappled with mottled clouds of green lichen and moss.



Shown by courtesy of Tony Johnson (Books.php)

An awed and reverent hush fell upon the group as people gathered shyly at one end of the circle, dwarfed by the boulders around them.

When standing within the circle I was, at first, struck by the seeming permanence of 'place' and the continuity of human experience and vision. I then started

to reflect on the importance of the living but passing moment for us as humans. I concluded that it is simply the quality of our thought, attitude and action, in this moment ... now ... that matters.²

Matt moved forward confidently into the circle, heading for the cluster of fallen Sarsen trilithons around the Alter Stone. He indicated a central space for the alter and those of us on *Shomen* duties rushed into action, laying out the ingredients as we had done many times. It was still and sheltered among the fallen stones, and I thought of all the thousands of sacred ceremonial paraphernalia that had



been arranged at that spot.

² Andy Wishart

Becky arranged the white tablecloth on the grass, resourcefully using the box lid under it to provide a secure base for the water glasses, Danny carefully un-bubble-wrapped the glasses, bowls and bell for the altar, and I managed to keep the picture frames standing without touching the stones.



Just like us, in many different ways, people have held rituals in this spot for

millennia. Many theories surround the mysterious purpose of the stones but ceremonies of life, death, healing, worship of the sun, the moon, the seasons and all forms of power beyond our realm have all happened here, with all manner of ceremonial crystals, bells, flowers and pictures.

'Ok, are we ready guys?'

'Yes Sensei,' Danny said firmly, gathering up the last of the packaging as we ran to take our places with the others.

Matt made some subtle alterations to the altar and turned to face us. The honour and gratitude was visible in his face as he welcomed us to our special seminar.

'This is a huge privilege,' Matt began, 'This is a moment where ancient Japanese history meets ancient English history, and we are the link. These two ancient histories combine and we are central to it. We're going to mediate for a few minutes and then we have the rest of the hour to train.'



With his black *Hakema* swishing in the cold wind, with his dedicated class gratefully receiving his words of guidance, Matt resembled one of the great druid elders who have led groups through ceremonies on that spot for centuries.

He turned to kneel before the Alter stone and with a little concurring with each other we arranged ourselves quietly and quickly to do the same. Sharing rollmats and pulling hoodies snug around faces; we formed a circular ellipse around the centre, kneeling in *seiza* for a few very still minutes.

***To practice Aikido properly, you must:
Calm the spirit and return to the source.
Cleanse the body and spirit by removing all malice,
selfishness, and desire.***

- O'Sensei³



A dull wind was whipping around the

stones, but we were sheltered between them. The ground was firm and powerful beneath us, as we breathed deeply every bit of energy we could glean from the circle.

The circle symbolizes serenity and perfection, the source of unlimited techniques.

– O'Sensei⁴

Although a time to still the mind, my few minutes were drenched with the awe and majesty of the moment, of the millennia of history written in the stones, of the thousands and thousands of people that have journeyed here and found their own meaning and significance on this average looking cold hard patch of grass. Feeling a huge sense of history and humanity, my tiny human concerns seemed insignificant, dwarfed by the vast passing of this planet's huge and heavy history.

Matt stood up and turned back to us as our moment of stillness turned to action.

'Ok, grab a *jo!*' he instructed, and we scurried to packs and bags behind stones, discarding rollmats and hoodies, returning with wooden staffs clutched eagerly.



'Now, spread out and fill up the whole space!'

Still a little tentative in the sacred circle, we edged ourselves around, careful not to touch the stones.

'*Jo Hoppo Ski!*' Matt shouted, assuming *Jo kamai*.

'What is it?' someone whispered.

'8 directional ski!'

'Oh, thanks.'

'Ichi!' Matt called, and everyone thrust forward in unison.

'Ni!' he said, and the group spun around to thrust behind.

It was faster than usual and it took a while for me to synchronise. Matt stood at the front and we copied him, skiing in directions, south, north, east, west, south-west, north-east, piercing the cold air with our staffs.

'Kia!' he shouted, and we raised our voices in unison, loud and powerful, echoing around the stones.



A rush of extra adrenaline filled each movement, and the energy of being among the stones seemed to add an unusual grounded power to the technique.

'And again!' he called, 'in *awase*.'

'*Ich, ni san,*' we flowed faster and faster, flowing in our own circles among the stone circle.

Just as I was getting the hang of it, Matt shouted, 'weapons to the side.'*Onegaishimas!*



'Danny please.'

Danny ran up to the front.

'*Tai no henko*,' Matt said, offering his arm.

Danny grabbed his wrist and Matt swished a seamless *tenkan*, the power pouring out of his fingers.



'*Onegaishimas!*'

We paired up to do our *Tai no henko*, fast and powerful, with very few words.

Scarves and gloves soon disappeared as the swift movements warmed us up, and the sound of *kiais* surrounded the circle.

A couple of wardens somberly circled the site, gracefully allowing us our space, seemingly uninterested in our unusual behaviour as they must have seen far stranger.



Leading us through the techniques one by one, Matt spun his class through a series of circular movements.

Aikido technique is structured on circular movement, for

harmony is brought about and all conflict resolved through the spirit of the circle. The response of the body, mind and spirit to the principle of the circle is vital to the creation of technique. A circle encloses space, and it is from the perfect freedom of this emptiness that ki is born. From the center of this birthplace, the creative processes of life are joined with the infinite, immeasurable universe by the spirit. The spirit is the Creator, the eternal parent giving birth to all things. – O'Sensei⁵

⁵ <http://www.aikidosantacruz.org/osenseis.html>

In *shiho nage*, the four directional throw, we pivoted and turned to bring our partners down, in *kotegaishi* we circled our partners to roll them backwards, in *koshi nage* we rotated partners on our hips, in *kokyu nage* we simply wheeled 180 degrees, allowing the momentum of our partner to throw themselves.

The Budo of Aikido springs from the mastery of the spirit of the circle. The essence of this Budo is to embrace the complementary action of cause and effect and to draw into yourself all things as if they were held within the palm of your hand. You have a spirit, therefore you must realize that each person has a spirit. When the life processes are connected with the spirit and the fundamental principle of the circle is given birth in Aiki, all things are led to completion through the circle. All things are freely created by the circle. The secret of the circle is to create technique by piercing the very center of space. – O'Sensei⁶

It was a challenge to find someone new to train with each time, and to not to throw each other to the stones. The usual seminar strategy of finding the highest grades to train with seemed less significant, as perfecting technique was not the highest priority. My aim was to share this precious moment with as many of my fellow Aikidoka as possible, to throw and be thrown by my Aiki Brethren as we have done so many times, but in this deeply memorable and timeless place.

'Try to train in a new patch each time!' Matt called. 'Make full use of the space and squeeze every last drop out of this experience!'

Running through the stones to find my next partner, Elisa grabbed me for *iriminage*.

'Hai! Onegaishimas!'

Despite her diminutive size, she was solid with power as she spun around me and turned to take me off balance.

'Hai!' we trained with powerful *kias* all the way through.



⁶ <http://www.aikidosantacruz.org/osenseis.html>



Changing partners as we changed techniques, following Matt's lead and making the movements our own, we spun swiftly through the hour. Turning and swinging, sliding and ski-ing our way through the lesson, we took our techniques seriously, fully absorbed in our efforts, expending all our energy, until breathless and pink in the face, matt called one final *onegaishimas!* And we ran back to the centre.

He knelt down with his arms in *kokyu*.

'Mireya please!'

'*Onegaishimas!*' I ran to kneel opposite him and gripped both his wrists for *suwari waza*.

He raised his arms and turned, throwing me sideways to the ground. The stones spun in my vision and filled the grey sky as I landed heavily on the grass.



Looking up for a partner for this last technique in the stones, Becky was heading towards me.

'*Onegaishimas?*'

'*Onegaishimas,*' I nodded firmly, as we knelt to face each other.

'You alright lovey?' She grinned, pink cheeked and glowing

'Brilliant,' I smiled, grabbing her wrists as she offered

'*Haï!*'

'*Owarimas!*' Matt called to conclude the lesson.

Becks and I bowed to each other in thanks and breathlessly lined back up to bow out.



With both pictures of O'sensei and Saito Sensei we did two sets of bows and four claps. The force of the unison claps resounded through the stones as we knelt our heads to the ground, cold grass pressing against warm foreheads.

Cast off limiting thoughts and return to true emptiness. Stand in the midst of the Great Void. This is the secret of the Way of a Warrior. – O'Sensei⁷

We rose from our bows of gratitude to breathe in and grasp the last few moments together in the circle. There was a hurried call for a group photo and we assembled in front of the *Shomen*, disheveled and flustered, to smile out of our crumpled and grass stained *gi*'s at Alex.

'Great guys,' Matt said, 'now just before we go, take a few moments just for yourself to really have a personal experience here in Stonehenge. Do whatever you like but make it memorable to you.'

Without thinking Dave and me turned and wrapped our arms around each other as tightly as possible.

I laughed into his *Gi* as I cemented the memory of the moment into my mind. Vast great dappled grey stones around us, creamy grey sky above us, cold wind on my neck, warm heartbeat of Dave on my cheek.



Other people were taking pictures, walking thoughtfully off on their own, kneeling in meditation.

The wardens were approaching and Matt nodded acknowledgement.

'Alright, let's pack up now.'

The *shomen* ingredients were quickly returned to their box, salt and rice poured back into bags, sake and water back into bottles.

'Where's the lid?'

'Can you carry the pictures?'

'Do you want to take the flowers?'

'Whose gloves are these?'

⁷ <http://www.fightingmaster.com/masters/ueshiba/quotes.htm>

We headed back to the cars, elated, exalted, glowing.



Looking back at the stones as we walked away, I thought of the many thousands of people who have gathered at the site, and the many thousand more who will. I felt like we were as many little creatures scurrying in and out and around the solid stony permanence of the stones, like excited little grandchildren scampering about among serene wise old grey grandparents. All the while the stones stand solid, watching, from their still silence as the chaos of humanity flits and flurries through.

At the car park, exchanging Aikido bags for cooking bags, we headed off through the fields to set up our breakfast camp in the shelter of the

trees. Bacon and eggs were fried, tea and coffee brewed and much warm and happy reflecting on the morning was shared.

Aikido at Stonehenge, what a surreal experience! During the training I felt both very grounded and high as a kite (and no I hadn't smoked anything beforehand!). My most vivid memories are: bowing to the pictures of O'Sensei & Saito Sensei against a background of megaliths; lying on my back during Suwariwaza Kokyuhō and seeing the tops of the great stones against the sky. Pure bliss.⁸

⁸ Isabelle



Sometimes we have the opportunity to be part of something special, and the aikido Stonehenge seminar was one



of them, it made me realize how small we are as individuals but when we open our selves up to a greater energy and all become part of the circle we become stronger and more powerful in both mind and body. A truly wonderful experience, thank you!⁹



⁹ Becky