

Awase is the newsletter of the
Aikido Institute of Davis, a dojo where you
can learn the arts of Aikido and Tai Chi.

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The Mystery of Basics

by Hoa Newens, Sensei

Much has been said about the importance of basic drills in martial art training. It is a hallmark of the *Iwama* style of Aikido as taught by the late Saito Morihiro Sensei. Saito Sensei's emphasis on training in basic techniques is his main legacy. He devoted a great portion of his teaching time to basics, repeating ad infinitum the key points of the basic form of every technique. Every one of his students would remember the phrase "drop your elbow, your shoulder and your hips; let your *Kimochi* (feeling) sink; turn and look in the same direction as your *Uke*" that pertains to *Morotedori Kokyuho* in every class. It is the same form with the same pointers in every class, be it a regular class or a class in a seminar.

Some people would call him an expert technician who cares mostly about how Aikido techniques look and who dwells on the physical aspect of Aikido while ignoring its deeper spiritual underpinnings. It is a correct observation that Saito Sensei emphasized the correctness of the form. But he also has outlined a path that leads from the detailed form through the gradual disappearance of form and ultimately to *Takemusu Aiki*, the state in which the person acts in spontaneous harmony with the surroundings.

There are many who are attracted to Aikido because of its philosophical appeal and who focus heavily on the spiritual content at the detriment of the technical clarity of Aikido training. This approach may benefit students who have reached a certain level of spiritual maturity through some other disciplines prior to coming to Aikido. Aikido as created by O Sensei

is a martial art that begins with strict and rigorous physical training.

Understanding how a concrete form leads one to spiritual achievement is crucial to the propagation of Aikido as a martial art of peace.

For the sake of brevity many concepts are oversimplified in the following explanation.

In the process of learning a particular form our attention and energy are focused on solidifying the form. We do this by adding incremental detail to the form. More detail adds to the solidity of the form. When the form is built out it contains the maximum level of detail and reaches maximum clarity. At that time our attention and energy have no further outlet for manifestation at the physical level and therefore move to a different level of the technique, a more subtle level.

Not too many people achieve this level of clarity in a technique. Most would not have the discipline to get past 60-70% clarity; this is a point when the casual student feels that he has “learned” the technique and is ready to move on. He is not interested in further repetition of the same form and would rather seek different stimuli through a variation or a new technique. On the other hand, the serious student will forge on and research the finer detail of the same form to obtain a “higher resolution” technique. When these serious students get close to 100% clarity they find that they can add no more detail to the form. At this stage they hit a plateau and feel that they suddenly either have stopped learning or have nothing else to learn.

The few who persevere past this second threshold will break through and find that they are not interested in any variation of the existing form but find new meaning in experiencing the same old form. They touch on a different dimension of training and begin to sense a common thread between certain techniques. Their attention will now train their energy on finding the connectivity among techniques.

After several years of training at this deeper level these students gradually discover the principles underlying certain groups of techniques, such as *Suwariwaza* or *Bukidori*. Their attention and energy now soar to a finer level of subtlety.

As the training goes on the experienced student dwells mostly at the energetic level of techniques and certain energy patterns are revealed to her. She is able to recognize the energetic signature of each technique and learns to modify the technique through its energetic imprint. In everyday’s parlance we say that the student has got the feel for each technique.

The student continues to improve her skill and gradually acquires the ability to recall a particular feeling and manifest the associated technique at will. Thus she becomes free of form and her training now consists of training her attention – more specifically her intent – to create energy patterns appropriate to the existing physical circumstances. In terms of mat practice this means that the student uses her intent to allow the appropriate technique to manifest physically to resolve an oncoming attack. This is the beginning stage of *Takemusu Aiki*.

At this stage of learning the student works in the realm of intent rather than the realm of the manifest. This is where Aikido reveals its spiritual make-up.

In summary, the path from the basics to the spirit begins with a strong focus on form. It progresses through building out the form, consolidating it then transcending it. It requires persistent attention to basic forms. If this persistence is lacking and the student chooses to indulge in the variety of flavors of the forms, none of these varied forms would reach sufficient maturity to propel the student to the next level.

For example the *Ken Suburi No. 1* is a basic technique of Aikido *Bukiwaza*. It appears very simple and uninteresting to the untrained person but it contains a great amount of detail which clearly defines its correct form. The casual student gets quickly bored with this practice and

would regard thousand-strike sessions, which used to be staple practice of *Uchideshi* of the past, as meaningless torture. On the other hand the serious student who consistently sticks with his daily *Suburi* practice and unceasingly explores the finer detail of this form will realize one day that this *Suburi*, as does every basic technique, contains an energetic code which lies at the core of most Aikido techniques. Continuous and deliberate repetition of the correct form of this *Suburi* locks in the form with several layers of energy and at the same time unlocks the code within the technique. This code creates a bridge between the physical form and the layers of energy that allows the student's consciousness to penetrate the depth of the universal *Ki* and reach the source of all techniques.

This is the mystery of basics that ensures that only the dedicated students of martial arts reach the source of all techniques.

From the discussion above one can infer that a person just needs to learn and master one technique in order to reach the source. It is a logical assertion, but who in his right mind would practice just one technique for ten years? Only a person with no-mind (*Mushin*) would.

Are You Having Fun?

by Donny Shiu

My journey in Aikido began a little over a year ago. I was one of the first newbies that started at the dojo's new home, a fresh beginning indeed.

Although everything was new to me, the energy and the spirit of the dojo were apparent. With Bruce Sempai's clear and gentle instructions, interesting techniques, and great classmates, it was easy for me to feel right at home. I had

some ideas about Aikido, but certainly did not know what I did not know. Reading and watching are not the same as doing. One cannot learn to swim without getting wet.

Under the teaching and guidance of Sensei and the wonderful support from everyone in the dojo, I am having a great time in the study and practice of Aikido. I am getting wet and the water is warm.

I have found that Aikido lessons may seem apparent, but it is often subtle or hidden waiting to be discovered. Aside from the obvious physical aspect of the art, learning about the nonphysical aspects is no less important. My brief time in Aikido has allowed me to learn a little more about myself and more importantly my deficiencies: weaknesses that I was unaware of; I didn't know what I didn't know. To self diagnose was and is not easy. Thankfully through the knowledge, wisdom, patience and kindness of everyone in Aikido, I am being shown the **WAY**.

(I think I have undiagnosed ADHD and OCD . . . just kidding!)

In the process of my training, I have experienced numerous **circles** of emotions such as confusion, frustration at myself, the sense of discovery, and joy. That's why I find the mental aspect interesting. I hope to understand and minimize the negative emotions and harness the positive ones to grow as an Aikido student and as a person.

I think the growth mentally enhances the growth physically and vice versa, like a **circle**. The body does not work without the mind. Being humble and open-minded along with physical training are crucial in this journey. Furthermore,

to diagnose is not enough, one must treat; awareness is not enough one must act. To be aware of my weaknesses is a good start, but I must tackle them however challenging it may be. It may take time, effort, and persistence. I guess that's why it is called a journey. So I will see you on the mat.

Much more can be written, analyzed, discussed about Aikido, but for now I'd like to conclude by sharing a learning moment I had. It came unexpectedly from my sister. I was having a passionate discussion with her about Aikido during one of my confused, frustrated moments. I was going on and on. Out of nowhere she stopped me cold in my tracks with a very simple and profound question, "Are you having fun?" I certainly didn't expect that. I had to pause, realign my brain. Apparently, I was so caught up that I didn't realize that I am having fun. Discussion ended and nothing more needed to be said. With this, I would like to conclude this article by asking. So, are you having fun?

A Review of *The Spiritual Foundations of Aikido*, a book by William Gleason

by Johann Baptista

The Spiritual Foundations of Aikido is a great book for anyone who is seeking to further their understanding of Aikido and learn more about its spiritual roots in ancient Shinto. It is also a very good resource for learning about Osensei and includes an excellent background on his life and teachings. It begins with an introduction of what Aikido is, then goes on to teach about Osensei's life and spiritual path. Afterwards, it begins to introduce the fundamental beliefs of Shinto, mainly the Kototama, or sacred syllables of Japan. It is unique in its explanation of the

beliefs of the Omoto'kyo sect, from which Osensei was a disciple. This sect claimed to have revived many ancient and pure traditions of ancient Shinto. It goes deeper still and reveals the Eight Powers, which the author believes to be synonymous with the Eight Noble Truths in Buddhism. This book, in essence, is a great resource for those who are curious about Shinto, its beliefs, and its relation to Aikido. *The Spiritual Foundations of Aikido* also has several common Aikido techniques demonstrated with pictures, and captions that help understand the philosophy behind each move, and how to apply them. Overall, I have found this book to be a wonderful journey into Aikido, and I would highly recommend it to anyone who has taken an interest in the deeper philosophies behind every technique. As a bonus, it also includes beautiful calligraphy all throughout the book.

My Personal experience:

Personally, I loved *The Spiritual Foundations of Aikido*. It has taught me so much about the wonderful art that we practice. This is my first book on the spirituality of Aikido, or more broadly, the spirituality of the Orient, which I have been very interested in since I started seeking more ancient philosophies that originated close to the earth. For a long time, I have been learning from a Native American background, although I am not myself Native American. Much like Omoto'Kyo, my teachers and the founder, Stalking Wolf, also believe in a purer understanding of the spirit, free from the complications of modern institutionalized religion. Anyway, that's a background on me, sorry for getting slightly off topic. *The Spiritual Foundations of Aikido* has taught me exactly what I sought, and showed me that these two philosophies have **nothing** in contention. It has only deepened my belief that all philosophies that originate from nature are simply one of the many manifestations of the human spirit, and all share a message of love and respect, for all beings.

The Warrior Spirit

by Marion Donehower

When I was a young child, I enjoyed stories of knights and heroes having adventures and overcoming hardships. Knights slew dragons and found treasures and rescued ladies in distress.

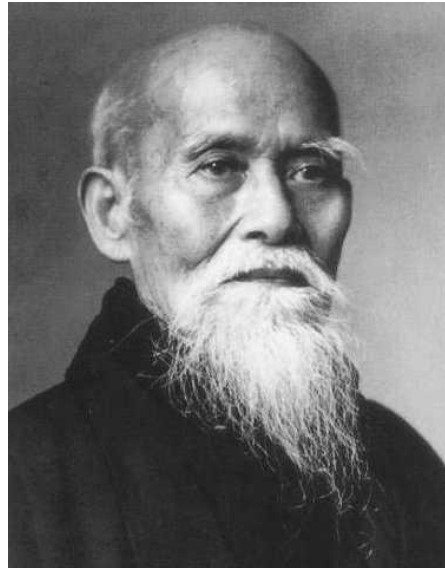
My favorite story was about King Arthur, especially since my father's name was Arthur. I lived in these stories so much that I became a daring horseback rider. Much later when I discovered aikido and tai chi and the wonderful tai chi weapons, I remembered the stories of my childhood. I realized then that these tales were not only adventure stories – not only children but also adults are inspired by these stories to be courageous and fearless in order to be a more truthful and authentic human being.

As I went through life I realized that the warrior or knight doesn't have to fight the good fight in the world – instead the real adventure is the difficult task of his inner work. The true warrior frees himself not from the outside or from dragons but of the unwanted, inner impulses of his greed, narrowness, and unkindness. These inner dragons and demons are difficult to overcome, and the true warrior has to pay attention to himself and others without pride, self-deception, or vanity.

I believe that aikido fulfills these warrior ideals. As we practice over the years we struggle less with different techniques and focus more on the inner aspects of the art. We are more observant of subtle adjustments and changes. One has to trust that with diligent practice transformation of body and mind can occur.

During a movie night at the dojo we saw the three sequences about the life of the samurai

Musashi (born 1584), an old movie but still fun to watch. In the second part of the Musashi movie I enjoyed the scene where Musashi meets the priest right after Musashi killed four people with his wooden sword. Being the innocent village fool, Musashi has to boast of his victory. Musashi believes that now he will finally be a samurai – his biggest dream. Not so, says the priest. He laughs and responds: “you are nothing like a samurai! You think killing people makes you a samurai? You are too strong, too willful, without any thought.” Musashi is stunned. And from that moment he never stops contemplating these statements. He turns his life around, becomes a poet and artist, and leads a meditative life. The movie showed that the true warrior is not dependent on strength, youth, gender, or a multitude of techniques. The true warrior works at any moment in life in order to become a more polished human being. As a T-shirt from an aikido retreat says: Masakatsu Agatsu. “True Victory is Victory Over Oneself.”



**The Founder of Aikido
Morihei Ueshiba, Osensei
with Calligraphy
Masakatsu Agatsu:**

“True Victory is Victory Over Oneself”

Fear of Mat

by Paul Guttenberg

It lay there, day after day. Waiting quietly in its lair, it bided its time in an effort to lull me into somnolence. "Stretch, breath, and be at peace" it would murmur wistfully as I bowed and entered the dojo. "This is a place of harmony, of natural movement, you are safe, please enter and be welcomed" it stated plainly. Little did I realize at the time the conniving nature of that conglomeration of plastic and foam. The evils that petrochemicals could produce were far beyond what my paltry imagination was capable of forming. Innocently, I fell victim to its siren call.

A beginning class in Aikido beckoned. After over five decades and numerous visits to various medical hobby shops, many OEM parts had been replaced. I was filled with aftermarket items, and every year it was getting more difficult to pass smog. Somehow I managed, however, and felt there were still a few good miles left under the hood as long as I remained on a regular and somewhat unique maintenance schedule. Adding stretching, breathing and new postures might even extend the time between overhauls. It was worth a try at the very least.

The instructors were wonderful. Encouragement was bountiful, care was taken to do nothing hurtful, and we proceeded in a spirit of cooperation. We grew friendly with the mat, learned to move across it, to enjoy and feel comfortable with it. Then we were instructed to get down upon it and strike it.

Just as Admiral Yamamoto had done over sixty years before, I had awakened a sleeping giant. That blow would be repaid ten fold. I would roll and the mat would harden underneath my spine. I would fall, and that soft yielding surface would suddenly transform into hardened concrete. What our instructor called "drop and flop" would cause an instantaneous molecular transformation of the mat from plastic and foam to high tensile steel. It was a fundamental

reaction that could power a small planet, but instead chose to punish me for having dared to strike it. Shortly it became a contest between my will to learn and its ability to transubstantiate. This was no mere mat; this was a living, breathing opponent of uncanny ability. Walking across it was gentle, pleasant and inviting. Its softness yielded underfoot and gave support where needed. Its clean and kind surface welcomed the tread of bare feet and cushioned them in luxury. The minute maneuvering and falling began, the substratum instantly petrified and the surface turned to 400-grit sandpaper. It struck back at my body, and ground flesh off my toes and feet. It took on a life of its own, and became an opponent to both my uge and my nage attempts.

I tried to learn. I tried to make peace. When no one was looking, I would quietly apologize to the mat for having offended. It only laughed cruelly in return. Months of practice passed, and still the mat held its ground. I enjoyed the instruction, I enjoyed the camaraderie of my fellow students, and I enjoyed the philosophical underpinnings of Aikido. The mat remained my implacable foe. Still I continue. Surrender has come to roost just yet.

Modern pharmacology has its own wily ways. The latest medical hobbyists I have encountered assure me that if I keep taking these pills, I will eventually stop twitching in fear every time I see plastic and foam together.

The Eternal Seasons

By Toby Hargreaves

In the winter and fall months the sun is low in the sky so that morning and afternoon light comes into the dojo and spreads out on the mat. I like to join it and let it warm my body with its benevolence.

The seasons are just long enough so that by the time you get to the end of one, you are tired of it and hungry for the next one. I experience this on the farm especially. At the end of summer I can't stand the sight of tomatoes, eggplants and peppers. But the thought of leafy greens, turnips, beets, carrots, and broccoli makes my mouth water.

Sometimes when the seasons change I am a little jolted, surprised—as if I were dozing and somebody nudged me and I sputtered awake. The summer was so long and hot and endless, I forgot that eventually fall would come. When fall did come, something deep inside me remembered something. If our consciousness truly does outlive the body and continue on to witness lifetime after lifetime, then how many countless seasons has it also witnessed? Our feeling of recognition of the seasons must be based on a very long, deep memory.

I particularly love autumn. "Autumn" sounds prettier than "fall", but I like the connotation of the latter. I don't know if it's called fall because the leaves fall, but I like to think that it is because the whole world is falling—falling toward the darkness of winter.

I love autumn because it is a time of peacefulness and calm with the activity of summer winding down and soon will come the much needed rest of winter. Most of all, I love autumn because it is now.

When I think of "being in tune with the universal spirit" (part of our dojo mission statement), this is what I think of. That the seasons aren't just a backdrop or setting against which we live our lives, but they happen within us too, and we change with them. Changing seasons, changing mind.

The seasons are part of our existence. They repeat themselves in the sense that there is a regular pattern to them that we are all familiar with. But if you pay attention and "tune in" to the seasons, you'll find that they are endlessly fascinating. The seasons have been the subject of writers and poets since the beginning, but

appreciating and reflecting on them never gets tiresome or stale. The simple act of noticing your surroundings expands your awareness and connects you to a bigger self.

Have you noticed how ubiquitous the weather and seasons are in our songs? When skies are cloudy and gray, when the rain comes falling down, things are not going so well. And when the sun comes out and skies are blue, then everything is good again. Of course our feelings are not entirely dictated by the seasons, but the two seem inextricably tied up together. Have you noticed how when you think back to a memorable time of your life, you can remember exactly what the weather felt like?

And one more thing: seasons brings us together because we experience them together. We all have the feelings of the seasons inside us, so we know what it feels like to walk on a warm spring day, stay cool on a hot summer day, appreciate the clouds and colored leaves of fall, and bundle up against the cold of winter. When it's fall, it's fall for you and everything around you.

Fall contains a great spiritual lesson: surrender. Let go, stop trying so hard to control everything. Let your leaves fall, let age come, and let things take their course.

Wind howls, Rain sheets

Emotions swell and ebb

Memory beyond words,

Change comes--

and carries me along.

[Editor's note: Toby, the dojo's Uchi Deshi, began his year-long service as dojo Uchi Deshi in January, 2009. An Uchi Deshi is a fulltime live-in student apprenticed to the dojo's Sensei.]

News from the Dojo Garden:

Aiki Tomato!

AIKI トマト

Words cannot describe the intensity of redness exhibited by the dojo garden’s first tomato, grown in a little pot out in the alley in the back. The brave tomato showed its pluck before being plucked, sliced, and devoured by aikidoka.

“Look on my works, ye Mighty!”



Tomato in Seiza



Here the intrepid vegetable flanked by Kent and Bruce demonstrates correct posture and provides a wordless example of fortitude inspiring to all traveler’s of the Way.

Summer Sunrise

Red Tomato

Slice through Illusion

Katz!

[Please note: the Sempai has ripped out the dead tomato plant and replaced it with cabbage and Russian kale. Sic transit Gloria mundi. Pabst!]

Striking the Moon

Justin Azevedo

In June of this year, I struck out west to attend a seminar at Aikido of San Leandro held by Hitohiro Saito Soke, of Iwama Shin Shin Aiki Shurenkai. While I was only able to attend one day of the seminar, it was nevertheless an enjoyable and eye-opening experience, with training that was similar enough to what I have done before to make me feel comfortable, with just enough variation and differences to give me room to grow by reexamining things I typically take for granted or don’t think too much about.

The morning keiko was dedicated to weapons work, and took place in a serene wooded area up in the Berkeley Hills. While we were working on kumitachi, Hitohiro Saito Soke stopped us for a moment to demonstrate what some would think of as the simplest of bokken techniques: the first ken suburi, an overhead strike. In order to stress the importance of a clean, well-defined technique, he relayed a story he was once told by his father about training under O-Sensei.

In those days, training in any environment at all hours could be expected, so it apparently wouldn't be out of the ordinary to find oneself practicing sword techniques at a lake or river during a moonlit night. Saito Sensei said that in such a situation, a common practice for refining that simple overhead strike would be to stand in the water and aim for the reflection of the moon. The goal, he said, is to strike the moon so that it disappears from the face of the water. Naturally, such a superhuman feat would require perfection on the part of the trainee; the slightest angular variation, the merest flaw in stance, or the briefest moment of hesitancy in the strike would all result in complacent, mocking ripples of moonlight floating on the water. In order to successfully strike the moon, the sword needs travel in the sharpest, cleanest line from the middle of the back down to the hara, and the strike must extend and resolve itself in the most efficient, powerful manner. Nothing less would fully erase the moon from the water's surface.

However, he told us, the point of this training is not necessarily to learn the mechanics of the strike. This is, of course, because it's impossible to strike the moon, completely eliminating its reflection. Even after the cleanest strike and most unerring aim, the moon will calmly reappear on the water. However, by training to erase the moon with each strike, one cultivates the habits of intention and commitment, Aikido concepts that can be easily overlooked but are fundamentally important. The moon will keep reappearing, yes... so strike it again. Each strike should be delivered as if it is the final one that will cut the moon from the water. The small target and yielding surface provide the building blocks for constructing a clean, accurate strike; the persistence to make each attempt at an impossible task a genuine one provides the intention and commitment to ensure that those clean, accurate strikes become the body's natural habit.

This story stuck with me long after the seminar. I turned it around in my head multiple times

while using it as a model for refining my own bokken work, and I found another, broader meaning to it. Avoiding sloppiness and shortcuts by training with intention is important in working on individual techniques or in a single class, but it's also important throughout the entire time one spends training in Aikido. Every technique, every class, every rank test, every seminar... all things in Aikido should be approached with the utmost focus and determination, as if an opportunity for learning and improving can be squeezed out of the smallest detail (which, of course, it can). And just as it's a test of intention to strike the moon from the surface of the water with every single repetition instead of letting the strikes go awry due to fatigue, inattention, or boredom, so too is it a test of intention to continually train with a beginner's mind at times we don't think we need to.

In this regard, the ephemeral success of slicing through the moon's reflection on the water serves as an interesting example. The goals I set in Aikido are signposts along the way, but the way itself is the important thing. Learning how to execute a pitch-perfect shihonage will not necessarily make me ready to challenge all comers on the street, any more than being awarded that next rank will make me any wiser or more perceptive than I was the day before. The moon will always reappear. All I can do is strike again.

A Perspective on Standards and Aikido: Their Application

by Brian Campbell

Evolution is a natural process; change is a natural process. Under the processes of evolution and change, no "thing" is constant for very long. The application of a standard to a "thing" renders it less vulnerable to these processes. This process is called

standardization. This is the major and most obvious importance of a standard. In general, standards provide points of reference, are vital to measurements and safety, necessary for defining limits, and helpful in resolving disputes.

Sensei Hoa Newen's excellent and comprehensive article, Ranks in Aikido, stresses the need for standards as part of Kyu training, noting their absence in the Aikikia headquarters curriculum, for many years (Awase Newsletter Winter/Spring 2009). It was this article that inspired my thoughts about standards and their importance to us who are beginning Aikido or are somewhere else in their process of studying Aikido.

I like to describe standards as having two parts or components. Standards have an objective component and a subjective component. Some standards may be better described as objective standards, and others may be better described as subjective.

An example of an objective component of a standard by analogy: let us assume that I am a renowned chef. For the objective component, let's take one of my creations: the California Personal Pizza with a soft cooked egg on top. Here is the standard:



In addition, to the picture, which provides a reference of appearance, there is the list of ingredients and cooking conditions that make it just *so* (available for a small fee). These make up the objective component of the standard.

The subjective component, using the same analogy, of the standard is gained from the

experience of the preparation, of the aroma, the texture and flavor and how you feel or felt during the experience of preparing the dish and devouring it afterwards. The subjective component is vital to a comprehensive understanding of the standard, but cannot be captured and communicated like the objective part. However, it is really the subjective part the standard that will inspire you and entice you to share it with others.

In fact, subjective standards are the most important standards. These are values, forms of art, the pristine beauty of the natural world, leading an honorable life, amongst other things. These standards, while they might be described as transcending time, are also conditioned by circumstances. So they appear different, from time to time and place to place, in contrast to the objective standards or objective components of standards.

In our dojo, we are very fortunate to consistently practice the standard forms of Aikido. We also have standards preserved on DVDs (Aikido Curriculum volumes). The use of media allows us to review and assimilate the visual or objective parts of the standards in the absence of a formal teaching program. We also have the benefit of having them for future Aikido students and teachers.

Subjective components of Aikido, or subject Aikido standards might be explored in such techniques and concepts as “[from form to non-form]” (Hoa Newens Sensei, Seminar 2009, 20th, Iwama Style Aikido Gasshuku) and Takemusu Aiki. While these seem remote for a novice or possibly even more advanced students, there is always the benefit of brief glances or experiences.

It is clear that systematic documentation and preservations of Aikido standards and a healthy dose of standardized Aikido techniques in practice not only benefits us in the present, but also benefits potential future students and sensei(s) as well.

Ki-Ai!

by Bruce Donehower

One of the first things we learn at the dojo is to Ki-Ai!¹

At the beginning of every eight-week beginner class, students are shown how to do the partner-blending exercise and they are told to Ki-Ai at the conclusion of the technique. The instructor demonstrates; the students try.

Inevitably, silence descends. The silence may be interrupted by a few “yeeks!”, hooooos!”, “tschaas!”, or general exhalations of varied timbre, finally interspersed with the words of someone talking or beginning to instruct.

Let’s be honest: the Ki-Ai can be difficult. In some respects, it goes against the grain.

What do I mean? Well, if we observe ourselves learning to Ki-Ai, one of the first things we may notice is embarrassment. Perhaps due to the proliferation of stereotyped images of martial arts in our society, the Ki-Ai has taken on some comical overtones. We probably feel a little silly making noise, like maybe we are back-bench extras in an underfinanced action movie. But let’s get back to basics for a moment and think about Ki-Ai as breath and breathing.

I once heard Sogyal Rinpoche, the Tibetan teacher and author of *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying* say something very profound in his inimitable light-hearted, humorous way: “Dying is very simple. You breathe out, and you don’t breathe in again. And you’re dead!” He laughed when he said this. But he was trying to get his audience to pay attention to a Big Point. We come into the world with a breath and we leave on an exhalation. In between a lot may be happening that apparently fills the time, but essentially we are breathing.

One way to think about aikido is to see it as a practice of breath. We learn to breathe with our

uke, our situation, and we learn to blend. Try this exercise: see if you can watch your breathing through an entire class. Pay attention to the moments when you hold your breath. Pay attention to the moments when you remember: ah! I thought I was watching my breath, but I was thinking about [whatever – some technique]. Then, try to breathe through the techniques: breathe the uke in; breathe the uke out. Try to harmonize with your partner through breathing. See the movements as breath. If you find yourself running a script (for example, “because I have been studying aikido longer than my partner it is my job and obligation to teach those of lower rank so therefore I shall instruct my partner in the following way thus and thus . . .”) and you start to talk, note that you are talking and focus again on breathing and feel the breath. Experimentally, see if this changes your practice in any way or if it changes your partner’s practice in any way. Observe the breath.

Then, think about Ki-Ai.

One benefit to the practice of Ki-Ai is this: it helps us breathe. It’s like a laugh. When we give full attention to Ki-Ai and breathe through each technique, we don’t have time or attention for idle chit chat or personal scripts. Or at least, we minimize those occasions for distraction.

Learning to focus is a big part of learning a martial art. In some respects, it is the main thing – cut through distraction; be present in the moment; respond authentically. Due to age and disposition and body type, we might not be able to practice all the aikido techniques (for example: we probably won’t do a lot of hard falls in the AARP stage), but we all can practice learning to focus. We all can Ki-Ai.

Paradoxically, the more we practice Ki-Ai, the less sound we may make – although, we shouldn’t fool ourselves on this point, especially not in the beginning.

The Ki-Ai should come from your core. In the physical sense, this means that the breath is expelled by two opposing contractions:

¹ I’m not sure one can make a verb out of the word ki-ai. Anyone? “Ki” is ki. “Ai” means harmony, as in *Ai-ki-do*.

downward contraction of the diaphragm and inward contraction of the abdomen muscles. These two opposing motions create a dynamic (spiritual) tension in the hara, or tanden. If this sounds confusing, just think of the breathing exercise we do four-times at the beginning of class in the warm ups. We breathe deeply into the abdomen through the nose; hold the breath momentarily; press down with the diaphragm while contracting the abdomen to breathe out through the mouth as we shadow the internal action with a kokyo-motion of the hands and wrists and expel the breath as though pressing forward. The same happens when we Ki-Ai, except more explosively. If done sincerely, you will notice that this momentary explosion of breath and sound stops mental chatter and centers you in the moment. Theoretically in that brief instance you are free to act spontaneously and creatively and decisively. We might not have time or skill to marshal a technique in a moment of crisis, but perhaps we can Ki-Ai.

A Ki-Ai is not a shout, scream, yell, cry of anger, or overblown dramatic flourish. One reason we feel a little silly, perhaps, when we Ki-Ai is due to the habit of watching and judging ourselves constantly (not necessarily a bad habit). We watch ourselves performing on the mat and we watch ourselves performing a Ki-Ai and we feel, perhaps, a gap between what we are trying to do and who we think we are. It may feel uncomfortable; it may feel silly; it may feel . . . I don't know; you fill in the blank. We're all very good at doing this, but the Ki-Ai is a chance to stop doing this for a brief moment. For one brief moment of Ki-Ai, simply breathe. Throw yourself into the moment as though the Ki-Ai were the most basic and most important technique in aikido that you need – *desperately!* – *now!* – *as though your life depended on it!* – to get right. Fill yourself with exuberance and give a Ki-Ai in celebration that you have found the favorable circumstances to be on the mat. Imagine: you just have received an enormous good fortune.

Ki-Ai!

A Discussion With Me – On Paper

by Amanda Campbell

The following is sort of my discussion with myself in which I stray from my subject entirely. It is very interesting (at least to me) and I think it represents Aikido because of the way, if this went on, everything is mentioned and thought of. It is hard to follow but nice enough.

- a) Squirrels are odd because of their appearance, consisting of
 - i) Fur
 - (1) Generally a shade of
 - (a) Red
 - (b) Brown
 - (c) Gold
 - (d) Yellow
 - (e) Orange
 - (f) And some others
 - ii) That weird little face that looks a little bit like a bird – distant relationship (bird-squirrel)?
 - (1) Personally, I think not because
 - (a) Birds aren't mammals – squirrels are
 - (b) Some birds *eat* squirrels
 - (c) Squirrel burrow, birds make nests

(i) On birds nests – It is a little odd the way they are made, consisting of

1. sticks, twigs, that sort of thing
 - a. Short
Definition:
basically like
branch-type-things
2. Mud
3. Feathers, String, anything else the birds can find

(ii) On burrows – they seem more hospitable than a nest to us humans beings because they are warm and dry.

There – that was a small part of a show of thoughts and what they can lead to. As quoted, thoughts are the most powerful things in the world.

The Language of Aikido

by Kathleen Holder

Parlez vous aikido? Hablo un pocito. Sukoshi dekimasu. I am learning a little.

The longer I train in aikido, the more similar the practice seems to learning a second language—not so much in the Japanese words and phrases we learn pick up along the way (although they are an important part), but more in the learning of the movements themselves.

The similarity first occurred to me not long after I finished an introductory aikido session for beginners and joined the regular class. I soon realized that I had entered an immersion program. Sensei would demonstrate the techniques and students of all ranks—brand-new beginners and black belts alike—would practice them together. “Let’s try that,” Sensei encourages, so much like the instructions of a French teacher leading a pronunciation drill: “Répétez s’il vous plaît.” The methods of learning are similar: observe, repeat, memorize, practice some more.

At the start of one class I looked to my right down the line at a long row of black hakamas—I was the only white belt. I suddenly had a new appreciation for what my two daughters must have experienced when they each started kindergarten in a Spanish-immersion school. And especially in my early experiences, I felt very much like the nonnative “speaker” in trying to observe and duplicate the vocabulary or phrase that the instructor was demonstrating. It was a lot like being tongue-tied, but in a bigger way. Watching the hands, I would miss what the feet were doing—and vice versa. Others around me were practicing conversation while I was trying to get my body in the right position—like an English speaker trying to shape the mouth to pronounce a French “u” sound, roll the tongue to trill the Spanish “r” or train the ear to discern rising from falling tones in Chinese. I felt completely inarticulate.

Yet at the same time, thinking about aikido as if it were a language helped me be more patient with myself. I had started with the idea that being a beginner offered certain freedoms—there would be few expectations of me! But I gradually realized that I had too-high expectations of myself. I didn’t really like being a fumbling beginner. I didn’t want to look stupid or make mistakes. But that fear of making mistakes is an obstacle to learning anything. And I started to think: Just because somebody studied French in the past, I wouldn’t expect them to

instantly understand German or Russian. So, why would I expect that I would understand this Japanese art just because several years before I had learned a few phrases and, memorized a few “poems” in a Korean dialect? While different martial arts, like languages, may share some roots, each has its own distinct vocabulary, syntax and grammar.

About the same time, one of my sempai, Alexey, seeing my frustration after class, gave me a very helpful useful piece of advice: “Just keep coming, and you will get it.” He was right. Just like in learning a language, or anything else for that matter, it is practice that makes the most difference. I have known people with very little natural aptitude for learning languages who have become fluent in Mandarin Chinese because they keep trying. And in martial arts, I have seen the persistent students outlast natural athletes many times.

I have kept coming. I’m not fluent yet. Sometimes on the mat, I feel a bit like Eliza Doolittle at the racetrack in *My Fair Lady*. Midway through her speech lessons, she could can say “How do you do” without a Cockney accent, but didn’t yet know enough phrases, enough entrées to hold a full conversation. Iriminage? Sure, that’s in my vocabulary. But what was that blend?!

But sometimes, technique does occur without much conscious thought, much the same way that words come to us as we speak—vehicles for expressing meaning rather than the focus of study themselves. And *that* is a blast.

Shall we practice conversing in aikido? Onegai shimasu.

Agriculture as Ecological Aikido

by Elias Marvinney

The fundamental principle of aikido as laid forth by Osensei, Morihei Ueshiba, is defense against attack without harming ones enemy. The term aikido itself translates as the “the way of harmony with ki”. Specifically, this can be described as the act of blending with energy or ki directed towards oneself, maintaining harmony with it, and redirecting it into a more useful form. As we all know from practice, when this is done well it requires very little energy expenditure on the part of the nage. One applies aiki by understanding the rhythm and intent of the attacker to find the optimal position and timing to apply a counter-technique. Such techniques, while derived from the linear motions common to most other martial arts, are circular in nature and convert the linear motion of the attacker into a circular form that renders him helpless.

Of course anyone who is likely to be reading this already knows most if not all of this. What may be of more interest to practitioners of aikido is the striking similarity between the principles of aikido and those of sustainable agriculture. To illustrate these similarities, first let me draw some parallels between conventional agriculture and martial techniques contrary to to the principles of aikido. Too often, agricultural practices treat the natural world as an enemy and seek to force natural energies to conform to human needs through raw and un-nuanced application of energy. Tremendous environmental harm is done through the industrial, high-productivity oriented agriculture systems of the Western world. These systems take a linear approach to agricultural production such that energy is drawn from fossil fuel reserves to power vehicles and synthesize chemical fertilizers, pesticides, and herbicides, applied to the system and transformed into plant material (along with solar energy), then exported to consumers and eventually landfills. A large

fraction of applied energy is lost in an uncontrolled fashion as soil is eroded and fertilizers and pesticides run off into waterways, causing damage to ecosystems in the process.

This is comparable to the energy expended and energy wasted or lost in the application of linear martial techniques which seek to overwhelm the opponent with sheer force. Of course such techniques may be successful in winning a fight, but only at the cost of lost energy and likely harm to the opponent. In contrast, aikido treats each encounter with an opponent as a partnership, and the extension of hostile energy as a gift. This same idea forms the basis of sustainable agricultural practices. The natural world is treated as a partner, and its harsh energies harmonized with and redirected into a useful and beneficial form. Wind can be funneled by hedgerows and windbreaks away from vulnerable crops and toward windmills; rain and flood can be channeled away from the home and fields and into catchments and trout ponds. Harmful pest outbreaks can be countered with diversified cropping systems which harbor natural predators. Most importantly, instead of linear throughput of energy and nutrients as in industrial agricultural systems, sustainable systems are characterized by cyclical energy and nutrient flows where the waste products of one process are used as inputs by another (as in composting). The flow of energy through a truly sustainable farming operation can be compared to the flow of energy through a well-executed waza in aikido. Finally, much like Osensei's conception of aikido, sustainable agriculture can be approached as a synthesis of practice, philosophy, and even religious beliefs, provided that one's religious beliefs encourage and support living in harmony with nature rather than simply bending it to one's will.

KYU Promotions

June 27, 2009

Eugene Lepler	5K
Janice Palmer	5K
Farnoush Saiidnia	5K
Donny Shiu	5K
Brian Campbell	4K
Guy Michelier	4K
Dan Forootan	3K
Martin Dubcovsky	2K
Justin Azvedo	1K
Kathleen Holder	1K
Shannon Newbold	1K

October 24, 2009

Kale Johnson	8K
Webb Johnson	8K
Torrey Frederickson	7K
Paul Guttenberg	6K
Elias Marvinney	6K
Eugene Lepler	4K
Donny Shiu	4K
Edim Kurtovic	3K

DAN Promotions

August 27, 2009

Toby Hargreaves 1st DAN



Dojo Garden: Aiki Bean

Upcoming Events

Check On-line Dojo Calendar for Up-to-the-Minute Listings

December 12 Seminar with Bill Witt Shihan at Dojo

GATEWAY TO AIKIDO

A new introductory “Beginners’ Class” starts in January 2010.

This eight-week special introductory class is designed for new students who want to sample what Aikido has to offer. Check dojo website for details.



Aiki Friends
Sensei Goto and Sensei Newens
November 7, 2009 Seminar
Bay Marin Aikido

A note about the newsletter: The AWASE newsletter is currently published twice a year in spring and fall. All submissions are welcome! Very little editing is done. Authors should take care to edit, copy-edit, proofread, and make their own stylistic corrections. However, formatting mistakes are generally the unfortunate goofs of your editor, who may be confused from time to time. Sumimasen!!

Reminder: Please let Sensei know if and when you will miss classes for an extended period of time.

Dues are due at the beginning of the month and help keep the dojo running. Please pay on time or use automatic payments from your bank. Thanks!