

Beginners Handbook

Relaxation

Western culture tends to generate the attitude that tension and strength are related to each other while relaxation is associated with sleep, laxness, spacing out, or some form of vulnerability. Actually, the more relaxed you are, the more effective you can be in just about any activity. All masters, no matter what the art or skill, perform best in a totally relaxed and alert state. Only beginners try hard. Masters try easy. It is the mark of mastery to be calm, relaxed, and in a deep state of peace while doing what one does best. By giving yourself permission to be relaxed and alert now, you will facilitate your advancement in aikido and enjoy your training much more.

When learning new moves, take your time. Go as slowly as you want to, and see how relaxed you can be. Especially play with how soft you can be in your breathing, face, neck, and shoulders. As these relax, your personal movement and sleep patterns will become more comfortable, while your actions on the mat will quickly gain ease, speed, and effectiveness. At the same time as this is happening, your attentiveness will increase.

Aikido is a martial art which requires your full attention, readiness to respond, and willingness to be flexible. In your training as an aikido student, it will be beneficial for you to cultivate a new level of sensory attentiveness. This is facilitated by your relaxation.

This does not mean that you should not train hard or push yourself. In order to learn any martial art, you must train very hard. There will be plenty of sweat, challenge, effort, pleasurable exhaustion, and much to overcome. Simply remember that you are doing something completely new and that its results will be evident in you as soon as you are ready to replace old patterns with new ones. This is accomplished as a release, as a relaxation of old, unnecessary tension and patterns of struggling with your life.

Gravity and Grounding

One of the first natural products of consistent training is experienced as a process called "grounding". Grounding takes place as your body relaxes and its chronic tension, which formerly was being used to fight gravity, now is released as energy for the body to use.

You know the feeling of being "uptight", and how quickly one becomes fatigued by uptightness. Grounding is the opposite of that feeling. In your training you can facilitate your grounding by being aware of how completely you can surrender yourself to the gravitational pull of the earth. Let your weight sink towards the mat at all times. Let your muscles relax and work as easily as possible with each movement. As you give up the fight against gravity a whole new world of body experience will open to you. It is especially easy to learn how to do this during your stretches and warmups, when you aren't involved with techniques and your partners. Use gravity as much as possible to assist you. Never strain into a stretch and never bounce. Simply let yourself be pulled into the stretch by the gravitational forces of the earth. Enjoy discovering your body all over again without any expectations about how you should be doing. Just explore how well you can learn and utilize the natural forces around you for your well-being.

Just as water in a vessel seeks its lowest level, allow your ki to settle naturally into your hara, your center. When your movements emanate from your center they will have depth (we commonly say "base") and will have surprising power and grace.

Speed

While on the mat, execute your movements only as quickly as you can while remaining in a relaxed state. There is rarely a need to rush. Speed will come naturally with proficiency. If you train at a faster speed than is appropriate for you, then you are like a skier who is racing down a hill too steep for his ability: an accident waiting to happen. Training too fast also reinforces mistakes which would be corrected at a slower pace. Speed will come with time and careful repetition of techniques. Take it easy and be precise. In this way you will learn well.

Timing

When making fine wine, timing is critical. The finest grapes and other ingredients will be wasted without the winemaker's knowledge, skill, and good sense to leave the wine in the cask (later the bottles) until just the right moment. Likewise, each aikido technique has its own proper "time", and must be permitted to mature. Carefully study the timing of each technique. You will discover that each has its own rhythm that cannot be rushed. The interaction between you and your partner has a universal rhythm, like the tide, and you must know when to flow in... and when to flow out. The essence of your practice is to study this rhythm, for it is the rhythm of life.

Breathing

Ki is the Japanese word for spirit, energy, life-force. When ki is usefully active in your body, it is known as kokyuryoku or "breath power". When you breathe freely, your energy can also flow freely so you can experience centeredness, relaxation, and extension. There is hardly a moment in which you will need to hold or restrict your breath in aikido. We do engage occasionally in special breathing exercises in which we hold our breath, but these have specific purposes related to your breathing capacity and the stretching of your mind/body. Always maintain a continuation of your breathing process when you practice your movements. All your movement techniques are easier when you breathe freely. This is especially true when rolling or taking falls: always exhale as you contact the mat during rolling and falling.

Extension

Extension, expansion, and relaxation are closely linked to each other. Extended movements are relaxed, with the weight naturally below, and centrifugally directed (from the center outward). This means that the ultimate direction of your movement will be out your fingertips and toes, as well as out the top of your head and the base of your spine. It means that you continually expand in your training, that your presence enlarges, and eventually fills infinite space. Such was the experience of O'Sensei, aikido's founder, of "being one with the universe".

The unbendable arm exercise is possibly the best way to start learning extension through the arm. If you haven't experienced it, get someone in the dojo to teach you. Extension can also be practiced through your elbow, knee, shoulder, or any other part of your body.

The idea of any extension exercise is to make your body bigger, to gain more presence in space. extension is expansion of ki, mind, and body. This does not mean that you will get fat, but rather that you will fill all the space to which you are entitled. As your ideas about yourself become more positive, you will be able to enjoy new extensions of your being every day.

Congruity and Training

Behavior is learned, trained. From infancy we learn by copying those around us and by responding to our environment. Endless repetitions of our patterns of behavior have reinforced these patterns in us. Your training in aikido is meant to give you new patterns and new choices. All of us resist newness until we become comfortable with the safety, usefulness, and fulfillment which can be found in new choices. Even if the old patterns are uncomfortable or destructive, we may cling to them until the new patterns have been tested and proven at least as desirable and safe as the old ones. This takes place most easily and effectively in the mind, but must be tested and reinforced in the body. The body learns slowly compared to the mind, so many repetitions of each movement are necessary. When your mind has a clear picture of what you want and your body has had many opportunities for solid testing procedures, there will be dependability in the new patterns. When all the parts of the mind and their body counterparts agree on your actions, these actions are congruent. This means that all of you is going in the same direction at the same time.

The Chinese have a saying: "A single drop of water has no power. But millions of drops of water moving in the same direction at the same time have the awesome power of a tidal wave."

Think of your body-mind as a community of parts which must agree on a given action for it to have efficiency and power. This is congruity. It begins in the mind by you making clear, sharp, detailed pictures of each technique as you see it demonstrated. Then, when you begin to practice with your partner, your picture can tell your body what to do. Once you join with a partner to train, start moving right away. Even if the movement isn't perfect, this approach will train you into the fastest, most effective learning strategy in the martial arts. But move slowly! Let your system find its best learning pace. Just keep the picture in your mind and move from your center. The rest will follow.

Uke-Nage Relationship

Uke (literally "one who receives", the one who takes the fall) and nage (the thrower) have a very special relationship. Unlike many martial artists who train against an opponent, the aikidoka trains with a partner. There is no competition in aikido, no pitting of one person against another. Instead, each partner is half of a whole, each having equal responsibility for the learning experience.

Contrary to what one might think, uke –not nage – has the most difficult role. Uke has the task of giving his partner an "honest" attack to work with. On the face of it, this seems quite simple. Actually, it is not. An honest attack is more than holding as tightly as you can, or striking as forcefully as you can. An honest attack is an aware attack. Aware of your partner's situation. Is there a major difference between partners in size and strength? In experience? Obviously, if a 200 pound black belt holder with advanced skills were to strike full power at a tiny beginner with little or no experience, he or she would be more than just intimidating, and in fact would be totally insensitive and irresponsible.

Many students of aikido have a difficult time in reconciling the difference between total resistance/full power attack and "falling down" for their partner in a condescending response to a weakly-applied technique. It is helpful to remember that as uke, your primary responsibility is to serve your partner. Try to bring out his or her best. This is best accomplished through sincerity and sensitivity: by bringing them to the edge of their capabilities and extracting their maximum performance, but without undue strain.

The relationship between uke and nage is like a cart with wheels. Tighten the hubs of the wheels too much and the cart will not roll. Too loosely and the wheels will wobble and provide no stability. Think of the movement of your techniques as the movement of the cart: tighten the hubs of the wheels just to the point where they begin to bind, then back off slightly and the wheel (technique) will run smoothly. Over a period of time, consistent repetition of correct movement firmly executed will lead to naturally stronger technique. Remember: train, don't strain!!!

Dojo Maintenance

The responsibility to keep the dojo clean is a communal one. In our Western culture we often tend to think of cleaning as a "chore", as demeaning work performed by others. It is important to our training that we transcend such ideas. To see work that needs to be done and to do it is, in and of itself, a special kind of training. The development of character and humility is equally as important as refining technique.

Please help clean the mat before and after each class. It only takes a few minutes for several people to sweep and/or damp-mop the mat each day. In this way we have the sense of a fresh start for all our training, and leave the dojo in a state that reflects our respect for what we are learning.

Injuries

Generally speaking, injuries in aikido are of the bump, bruise, strain, sprain variety: the nuisance injuries that plague dancers, joggers, tennis players, etcetera. If some part of your body is getting consistently sore or bruised, let us know. Perhaps we can see what you are doing that is causing the trouble. If you injure yourself in any way, please notify the instructor immediately. A first aid kit is available in the dojo.

The Keikogi

Your training uniform is called a keikogi or gi, and your belt is called an obi. Traditionally, the belt you wear is an award, given by your instructor, and denotes your level of competence in your art. The condition of your gi and obi, and the manner in which you wear them, demonstrate your attitude as much as your actual skills on the mat. A gi should be washed after two training sessions if you sweat heavily, and if it has been able to dry out between workouts. However, according to tradition your obi should never be washed. The intimacy and close contact required during aikido training make it not only congenial but pleasurable if your gi and body are clean and free of sweaty odors. Put your name on your gi in indelible ink as soon as you get your gi. Normally, the name you wish to be called is written on the left shoulder/sleeve.

While on the mat, your gi may become ruffled or disarranged. When rearranging your gi, turn towards the wall, away from your partner and others. Never bow with your gi in disarray. Keep the belt tightly knotted and in front of your center. It is acceptable to train in some other clothing during your first month only, but please do not wear street clothes. Wear loose-fitting clothing such as sweat clothes, and not anything with buckles or other sharp objects that could tear the mat or injure your partners.

Personal Cleanliness

We train in close contact with each other. A shower before class has made many training partners easier to work with. Please keep your fingernails and toenails short and clean. This may not seem important to you, but experience has shown that we suffer more annoying injuries from long nails than from any other cause. Nail clippers are provided in the dojo. Just ask.

Jewelry

Wearing jewelry during training may cause injury to yourself and others. Remove jewelry if at all possible, especially that which is not covered by your keikogi. Some jewelry may not be easily replaced once removed. You may wish to secure such jewelry with additional protection such as first-aid tape. Above all, it is your responsibility to ensure that you do not injure others while training.

Observation

Observation is an active, not passive, skill. It is a skill that can be developed through training. To a martial artist, the ability to clearly see (not to be confused with look) and instantly evaluate a movement or situation is critical. You will find that much of the teaching of aikido is done non verbally. That is to say that the instructor demonstrates a movement and the student has the responsibility to perceive the movement and to try to repeat it. Part of the teaching is to break your dependency on others to explain everything to you. Martial arts movements are not learned by intellectualizing, by conceptualizing, by philosophizing, but rather by doing. Unlike the Western concept of teaching, the burden is not on the instructor to teach you, but on you to seek out the truth of the teaching yourself. An old martial arts maxim states, "Do not listen to my words, for they may lie. Watch my body, as the body tells the truth." The greatest gift your instructor has to offer is simply the demonstration of his or her art. It is up to you to "steal" that art and make it your own.

Cycles

Like all of nature, we all operate on natural rhythms. Most probably, your progress in aikido (and in the rest of your life) will go in cycles. It's easy to train on the upswings, but it can be difficult to persevere when things aren't going so well. If you only train during the upswings you reinforce a pattern in which you function well when it's easy and poorly when it's hard. In the whole of your life, this can be rather destructive. On your own behalf, consider what would happen if you trained well when things were going well and continued as well as possible through the low times, so as to raise the quality of your peaks and valleys equally. Then your highs will be higher and your lows will be higher, and you will learn how to count on your skills when the going gets difficult. The natural result of this consistent training is that tomorrow's low is higher than yesterday's high! This can be a rather pleasant surprise.

Stay with it. Train on a steady schedule and allow yourself to discover your greater capabilities. Put in some time every day for your aikido, even if you can't make it to the dojo. Aikido will give you its greatest gifts in the later years of your life, when you need them most. Remember that this is an art which continues to improve with age. Stay with your training, and you will improve with age too. And don't fool yourself into thinking that it's easier for anyone else: it's not. We all have the same degree of self-realization before us.

Commitment

It will take at least a year for you to get a taste of what aikido is like. This may be a difficult statement to understand, but it is true for all the martial arts, and the fine arts as well. A beginning musician would not expect to play in Carnegie Hall after taking "ten easy lessons", so why should one expect to have a high level of skill in the martial arts with a similar amount of training?

A musician usually learns the technical basics of his or her instrument, along with the basics of music theory, before becoming competent at improvisation. Improvisation has no firm rules, but the music is enhanced when the musician knows what the rules are, even while breaking them.

Similarly, with aikido you must learn the basics well before you attain the ability for full expression through improvised movement. As a new aikidoka, you are like a person who is learning a new language. The basic movements are the letters of the alphabet. Learn your basics well. As time goes by, you will learn how to put the letters into words, the words into sentences, and later how to combine the sentences into personal statements that reflect your own individuality.

If there is one important point that should be stressed to beginners it is this: the secret of aikido is daily training. Consistent, unwavering devotion to one's practice. If you consistently come to practice, you will progress! The secret to aikido is so simple, so obvious, that it is easily overlooked.

Our Relationship

When you join the dojo you fill out an application and legal waiver. This defines a small part of your relationship with the dojo. Most of that relationship (like most of the art) is learned in silence, without explicit verbalization. Please learn to utilize the dojo well. Let it be a garden in which you can grow. Simple considerations will enhance your relationship with the dojo beautifully.

Mark your attendance each time you enter the dojo, before changing into your practice clothes and getting onto the mat. You become eligible to be tested for advancement in grade after a fixed number of training days: examination requirements are posted at the dojo. Higher grades make more diverse training available to you, in this and in other dojos throughout the world.

A dojo is more than a physical space. It is a family of people. You are now a member of this family, and a very large family of aikido people all over the world. There are approximately 8000 aikidoka in Northern California alone.

The dojo exists so we may train ourselves well, and its quality depends on all of us. Please make yourself available for help in the dojo when needed, pay your dues on time, and support the atmosphere in which you are growing. Dues need to be paid in full regardless of the number of times you train during the month. Unlike a spa, gym, or most other public places, the dojo is an extension of our creativity and willingness to generate peace in our lives. Your support of the dojo is your support of an idea.

Other Instructors

We suggest that you train with as many instructors as possible. From time to time we will host other instructors at our dojo, and will advise you of seminars and workshops conducted by other instructors at other locations. Each instructor has a unique approach, and can offer valuable insights into their understanding of this fascinating art. By taking an eclectic approach to your aikido education, you get to enjoy the best of all instruction. By respecting all instructors of all schools, you get to live aikido in your personal life.

Other Students

You will find your fellow students of all ranks to be a marvelous source of information. The central theme of harmony that permeates aikido nurtures a strong sense of community. We are all here to help one another: each of us, in time, both teacher and student.

Other Martial Arts

Be respectful of the other martial arts at all times. Do not get into useless arguments as to which is "best". Each has its good points and, practiced with sincerity and dedication, provide similar results. Although our techniques may differ, the mental-physical forging that leads to refinement of the character is the same. "The mountain does not laugh at the river because it is lowly, and the river does not laugh at the mountain because it cannot move about." Ridicule others and it will surely come back to you.

Deciding to Leave

If you decide to drop out of aikido for any reason, please tell us. We are sincerely interested in making your aikido experience a positive one. It may be that your personal needs can best be fulfilled elsewhere at this time. We will honor your leaving just as we honored your arrival. We have been training in aikido for a long time, and have dealt with a multitude of processes within ourselves and others. We would like to understand your experience and to learn from it. By communicating with us, you provide us with valuable feedback and give us the opportunity to improve ourselves.

What to Expect, or...

"If you only knew what you were getting yourself into!..."

Training in the martial arts is always demanding. Excellence demands an extraordinary amount of dedication no matter what the art. In aikido we are training in personal excellence at being ourselves. This means that our excellence unfolds throughout our entire lives. How (and if) it unfolds will depend on the nature and consistency of your personal training both in and out of the dojo. We are the products of our lifestyles, and each aikido class provides us with a magnified concentrated vignette of ourselves at a particular moment in time. For this reason, it is often difficult to deal with the intensity and the content of our discoveries about ourselves. Only continual and integrated training discipline can facilitate these lessons and provide us with the internal mechanism and strength to assimilate them efficiently. Perhaps by thinking about this you can understand three obvious, but often-ignored facts:

- (1) All of the martial arts have a very high attrition (dropout) rate.
- (2) All masters are highly disciplined in their training. It is the disciplined, consistent training over a long period of time which produces mastery. The start-stop-start pattern of "training" is more akin to "trying" than training.
- (3) For as long as you do aikido, no matter what your age, you will improve.

To go the whole road will take (and give) more than we would ever have expected when we started. Whenever in doubt, go back to the basics. They will keep you on the path.