

# AIKIDO INSIGHTS

Essays on the Intangible Aspect  
of Aikido Training

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# Contents

Dedication	i
Acknowledgments	iii
Forewords	v
1 Set a Training Plan	1
2 Growing Through Aikido Training	3
3 Aikido as the Ultimate Martial Art	7
4 I Wanted Them to See Where They Are Going	13
5 What Aikido Does to You	19
6 How Aikido Training Reduces Violence	23
7 A Perspective on Self-defense	29
8 What Makes Aikido Aikido	35
9 Writing About Aikido Is Part of Aikido Training	41
10 Hard Training and Soft Training	45
11 Prepaid Luck	51
12 The Power and Techniques of Focusing	55
13 On Kata Practice	63
14 Service as Part of Aikido Training	69

15	Life is Conflict	73
16	From Conflict to Harmony	77
17	Saito Sensei's Legacy	83
18	The Art of Peace	89
19	Things Get Worse Before They Get Better	97
20	Dojo Expansion and Dojo Spirit	101
21	Fitness, Aikido and Tai Chi	105
22	Square Pegs, Round Holes	109
23	When Am I Ready to Teach?	115
24	Kihon Waza	123
25	Yawarakai Waza	127
26	Forty-year Lessons	131
27	Women in Aikido	137
28	Ranks in Aikido	143
29	The Mystery of Basics	149
30	How Correct Aikido Ukemi Promotes Health	155
31	First Rei, Then Waza	159
	Epilogue	167
	Glossary of Japanese Terms	169
	About the Author	173

## The Mystery of Basics

*We held kyū tests recently and I noticed that some students lacked grounding; the “basics” just weren’t there. I knew that it was time to refresh interest in that dull practice called “basic”. This time, though, instead of lecturing on the benefit of drilling the basics with added urgency as I used to do in the past, I thought it more important to provide a clear explanation of how this benefit is realized. I hope that this understanding will help the students to motivate themselves instead of relying on the teacher’s urging.*

**M**uch has been said about the importance of basic drills in martial art training. It is a trademark of the Iwama style of Aikido as taught by the late Saito Morihiro Sensei. Saito Sensei’s emphasis on training in basic techniques is legendary. 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 kokyūbo* 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 in the Aikido community regarded him as 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 accurate to say 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. It was Saito Sensei's view that you train the spirit by first training the body.

There are many who are attracted to Aikido because of its philosophical appeal and who focus heavily on the mystical 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 the energy that was used to build the detail of the technique is no longer needed at the physical level. Therefore, it is rechanneled to a different aspect of the training, at 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. The serious student though, 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 that bind certain techniques. 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 to 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 *bukinwaza*. It appears very simple and uninteresting to the untrained person although 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 who 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 heart of most Aikido techniques. Continuous and deliberate repetition of the correct form of this *suburi* locks in the form with several layers of energy, from gross to subtle, 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 to 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.

November 2, 2009

# Epilogue

I hope that some of the concepts and ideas presented in the foregoing essays have stimulated the readers' thinking about Aikido and about their own practice. I assert no claim of originality on these thoughts and concepts. They are mere discoveries along my training journey and reflect my own limited understanding of the nature of Aikido and related arts.

I invite readers to build on these thoughts and use them as stepping stones on the training path. In addition to exploring the practical applications of these ideas, I encourage readers to engage in a serious quest to discover new insights on Aikido and record their findings along the way. This mental activity will enrich their mat training.

Train hard, explore and enjoy.

*Gambatte kudasa!*