First Rei, then Waza

礼 Rei (Traditional, 礼)

by Hoa Newens, Sensei

The first lesson for any student entering a traditional martial arts school is most likely how to perform a proper bow. This bow is the simplest expression and an essential element of Rei, particularly in the context of a school of Japanese martial art. Rei is an integral component of traditional arts, including martial arts.

Rei is both practical and spiritual, taking roots from Confucianism. It is one of the five cardinal virtues that form the foundation of the philosophy expounded by Confucius (551 BCE – 479 BCE): Compassion, Righteousness, Propriety, Wisdom and Trustworthiness.

Rei can be loosely translated as courtesy or propriety, the ability to do the right thing at the right time. Rei is the expression of the other four Confucian cardinal virtues in human relations. Rei presumes that there is a certain order in the universe that links its various elements in the most harmonious way. In the Confucian cosmology human beings (or men, for brevity) and other creatures of this universe do not exist as separate entities but are interdependent and thrive by relying on each other. Each being in this universe has a duty toward the others. Rei acknowledges these relationships and the associated protocols that are inherent in this cosmic order and seeks to preserve this order. According to the second law of thermodynamics, energy in the universe tends to move from an orderly state to a state of disorder. It takes a conscious effort to establish and maintain a state of order. Rei is that conscious
effort. In this discussion we examine Rei in the context of Budo.

Any art that involves significant exchanges of energy between men and other elements of the universe (including other men) must necessarily be built on a stable system of relationships among these elements in order to continue to evolve. Without the stability of the relationships the artists would need to divert substantial energy toward the maintenance of relations that could have been used to enrich the art instead.

For example, in the case of Japanese martial arts, thanks to the Rei that exists in the Sempai-Kohai system, the teaching can be transmitted efficiently from Sempai to Kohai without being subjected to the distracting interferences of the intellect and personal judgment. The Kohai is to follow the Sempai instructions to the letter without questioning. Of course, there are potential flaws that we will address later on.

Rei is at the heart of Budo and is an integral part of the Bushido code. Rei is also what allowed the gradual transformation of Bugei (fighting arts) into Budo (martial path) in 17th century Japan. In Bugei, the Bushi (warrior) devotes his energy to polish his fighting skill so that he can deal with other men appropriately (kill if necessary).

When not fighting, the warriors of old kept their edge sharp by practicing Rei. As a warrior’s practice, Rei is imbued with the same discipline that is the hallmark of Bushido. To the Samurai, the practice of Rei culminates with the rituals of Seppuku (cutting his belly) in order to regain the honor that has been lost due to a loss in the battlefield or other failure to uphold the Bushido code. When the killing and fighting are no longer necessary, the Bushi diverts more of his energy to polishing other skills to deal appropriately with other men. It is this shift that placed higher emphasis on Rei and caused the birth of Budo.

In Budo a simple bow is an acknowledgement by the subject of his relative position and duty in the cosmic order. I bow toward the Shomen as I enter the Dojo to acknowledge that the Dojo is a special place in this universe where I train and grow. I bow to O Sensei’s picture before a class to signify my readiness to open up and receive his teaching. At the end of class I bow to show gratitude for the spiritual nourishment provided by the art that O Sensei created. I bow to my training partner to acknowledge her special role to help me grow and to request that we begin training together. Each of these bows represents an acknowledgement of a special relationship and its associated duties. The meaning of the bow represents the content of the Rei (also referred to as its Ura, or back).

The form of the Rei (also referred to as the Omote, or front) has to do with how the bow should be done. The subject should face the object of the bow with an upright posture then deliberately lower the bare head by bending from the waist while keeping the back and head aligned. The positions of the hands and legs depend on whether it is a standing or sitting bow. The deeper the bow, the deeper the acknowledgement and the more special the relationship.

Content reinforces form. Rei should be performed with total presence and complete attention to detail, as if this is one’s last act on earth. While performing Rei one’s heart must be filled with gratitude and respect toward the person or object of Rei.

Ideally, the expression of Rei should be correct as to both form and content. Regrettably, this is not the case. We often see students executing the incorrect form of a bow, such as bending at the upper back rather than the waist, or not facing the object of the bow, or without taking off headwear. At other times we see students executing the right form for the bow but obviously without the requisite contents, such as when in a hurry to get to the next action.

Rei, of course, is not just expressed through the bow. Rei includes holding proper postures, handling weapons in the proper manner, using
the proper words to address people at various levels, using the proper vocabulary, speaking at the right time only, wearing the proper attire to a function, and taking the correct action at the proper time. Here are some examples in an Aikido Dojo environment.

With regard to the Dojo, *Rei* may include the following acts: bowing upon entering and exiting the Dojo and the mat area; keeping the facilities clean by keeping shoes on designated racks; keeping the mat clean by keeping hands and feet clean; caring for all things so as to minimize any waste; occasionally bringing flowers or other offerings to the *Shomen*; making a contribution (mat fee or flowers) when visiting a Dojo; keeping quiet while watching class in session; refraining from any act that would bring dishonor to the school; etc.

With respect to weapon handling, *Rei* may include: treating wooden weapons as live weapons; taking proper care of weapons to prolong their life; giving the weapon the same respect as you would to its owner; etc.

*Rei* toward one’s own body includes taking good care of our health by exercising moderation and refraining from excesses; keeping proper personal hygiene; wearing the proper attire according to the occasion; maintaining an upright posture; etc.

With regard to fellow students, *Rei* may include the following acts: training with any one who requests of us without personal prejudices; keeping an open mind and learning from all; staying focused and connected with our training partner while executing or receiving techniques; offering generously to help someone in need of guidance; etc.

*Rei* with regard to a *Sempai* may include: receiving instructions and corrections with full attention; expressing thanks when receiving any sort of guidance, whether requested or unwanted; accepting criticism without questions or attempt of rebuttal; giving the right of way to *Sempai* (access to the mat, execution of techniques, access to food during a banquet, etc.); always addressing *Sempai* with respect; handing over objects with two hands; etc.

*Rei* with regard to *Kohai* may include: accepting total responsibility for mistakes or failures committed by *Kohai* while following instructions; putting *Kohai*’s needs for training before own needs; setting examples by acting first before *Kohai*; watching for the welfare of *Kohai*; never abusing a *Kohai*’s trust; etc.

*Rei* with regard to a *Sempai* supplemented with the following: bowing to greet *Sensei* upon sight; helping with tasks in the Dojo; refraining from requesting promotion; properly requesting leave of absence from the mat or from the Dojo; requesting prior permission to train when visiting a Dojo; keeping *Sensei* informed of important life changes (family, job, sickness); keeping *Sensei* informed of students’ needs; etc.

*Rei* with regard to one’s *Deshi* (students) may include a *Rei* accorded to *Sempai* supplemented with the following: accepting total responsibility for *Deshi*’s growth; accepting responsibility for *Deshi*’s behavior at other Dojos; staying aloof of personal relationship with any *Deshi*; etc.

*Rei* toward the Aiki path may include: protecting the integrity of the teaching; disseminating the teaching; refraining from behavior and acts that would sow discord among followers of the path; etc.

The practice of *Rei* requires intense discipline and constant vigilance. Each act of *Rei* must be carried out with full intent and awareness. Many of these actions are repeated and often become rituals. The student must remain extremely vigilant so that they do not become rote and lose their meaning. For example, at the beginning and end of class, the students line up facing the *Shomen* and collect themselves before performing the ceremonial bow. Even though brief this quiet period should be used to allow one’s energy and spirit to settle into the center (*Hara*), so that one becomes fully aware and present, while waiting for the instructor’s cue to perform the bow.
Rei should emanate from the heart and not be dictated by entrenched forms and customs. We learn Rei first by practicing the form until it becomes second nature but we should also understand the underlying meaning and absorb it into one’s heart. It takes only a few days for a beginning student to learn how to perform a proper bow and say Onegai Shimasu to her training partner, but it may take her several months or years to understand the meaning of that act of Rei and allow it to reach her core. Assuming that she performs Rei with full awareness each time, after a few years of conscious practice, as soon as she locks eyes with her Uke, a sense of gratitude will arise naturally and an unspoken and respectful request to train will emanate simultaneously with her bow and the vocalization of the words Onegai Shimasu.

Rei is not absolute and manifests differently under different circumstances; it should be adapted to the cultural, environmental, political and historical contexts. Rei is expressed differently in feudal Japan and in modern Japan; in Japan and in America; in a warm climate and in a cold climate; in a repressive society and in a liberal society. Rei needs to adapt so that it remains alive and guides men toward harmonious co-existence with all creatures.

In the government there are books of protocols; in the military there are books of regulations; in society there are books of etiquette; in Bushido there is Hagakure (a.k.a. the Book of the Samurai) that can be helpful for modern Budo. All these publications make recommendations for the correct comportment for specific times, places and occasions but will not cover all situations in life. There are many times when one must decide on the right behavior by oneself by drawing from the depth of one’s heart. If Rei has been absorbed into the heart then the correct action will be clear; if Rei has not reached the heart, then confusion, faux-pas, misunderstanding and conflict ensue.

Viewed in this light, Rei is an essential aspect of our Aikido training. It takes on more importance as one promotes through the ranks. At the beginning of our martial art training we are introduced to Rei but we normally spend most effort learning Waza (Techniques). During our training journey, Rei will nurture Waza through maturity in a few years or decades, but Rei training endures past this level and will continue to forge our spirit and guide us to ultimate harmony with the universe. Rei deserves our constant and increasing attention.

Seminar with Nadeau Shihan
by Martin Dubcovsky

Back in April, my old dojo, Aikido of San Diego, turned ten years old. To commemorate the event, dojocho Dave Goldberg held a three-day seminar taught by Robert Nadeau shihan. Nadeau was amongst the first western students of aikido, and a direct student of O’sensei. Throughout the seminar, Nadeau was keen to present O’sensei’s words, methods, and mission for aikido.

The weekend opened with a two-hour question and answer session on Friday evening. Topics ranged from technical difficulties, to training etiquette, to the metaphysical. This was a great chance for Nadeau to present some of the language he likes to use, and lay out the foundations for the work of the next couple days. Particularly, Nadeau explained that O’sensei liked to assign dimensions to the manifest universe, each dimension having particular qualities (or tonalities), and presented aikido as the process of exploration of dimensionality. O’sensei, he said, was a master of this process, able to exhibit the quality of the higher dimensions at the physical dimension. Nadeau presented four methods O’sensei favored for the quick travel between dimension: centering, grounding, chanting (sound), and
earth-fire-water. For the remainder of the weekend we worked solely through grounding.

Throughout Saturday and Sunday, Nadeau presented a sampling of mainstay techniques including tai no henko, kokyuho, ikkyo, nikkyo, and iriminage. The intent was not to teach techniques, rather to use the qualities of techniques to explore dimensionality. In teaching Nadeau followed a steady pattern. He first presented a technique, and allowed us to practice briefly to make sure there were no technical difficulties. Quickly he would invite us to move on. To settle, explore the quality of our grounding, and allow the quality of the next dimension to present itself. Continuing to work with the same technique, grounding once again, mixing in the quality of this new dimension (or space), and then trying the technique again at this new dimension. After some practice with this, Nadeau would choose a different technique from which to practice the transition between dimensions through grounding. We worked primarily on the transition between the first (physical) dimension, and the second dimension, and touching briefly on the next transition.

It might seem to those of us who are more familiar with iwama-ryu, that this was all rather esoteric ki babble. But the focus of our work was on physical expression, and training the basics, which is the mantra of iwama style. A lot was presented over the course of the weekend, and I was unable to capture most of it. To give you a flavor of the weekend, I will leave off with a few quotes from Nadeau. He is a treasure for those of us who never had the chance to train with O’sensei, and I highly encourage everyone to make the time to train with him.

Quotes:

“O’Sensei was very fast at accessing higher dimensions, and bringing them back into the body; back to functioning here.”

“Don’t work on transcendence; work on the here and now. Stay active!”

“How can I practice backhand if you keep hitting it in front of me? We’re practicing backhand today. Together”

“O’sensei used the word ‘aikido’ in several different ways. He called the process of exploration of dimensionality aikido as well.”

“Work on the transition from first dimension to second; second to first; first to second; second to first. This forms a template.”

“Transition to the next dimension. Then rebirth your self at that level, settle and ground at that level. Only then travel to the next. Balance before you jump, or else you get mindful; you get weird”

“More people working on a better level has an effect. More people being balanced carries weight.”

The Paradox of Ukemi:

“Never Turn Your Back to the Ocean”

by Bruce Donehower

Perhaps one of the first things you notice in aikido, especially when you come to it from another martial art, is how uke and nage try to cooperate in the practice. This can be surprising, and for some people off-putting. We live in a highly competitive society -- no big secret about that. And even though we make a point to say there is “No I in Team, etc.” most of us are competitive when push comes to shove. To practice a martial art that’s not competitive and that’s not based on ambitions of one-upmanship is downright paradoxical, if not quixotic, I dare say, when we begin.
And nowhere do we experience this paradox more keenly than when we take ukemi.

When I present ukemi in the Beginner Class, I sometimes like to compare ukemi to surfing or sailing. I like this metaphor because it gives us a picture of dynamic cooperation.

Anyone who’s been out on the ocean when the waves are really high or when the wind is really ripping knows that you can’t beat the ocean. You can’t even challenge it. You have to cooperate with the forces that meet you, merge with those forces, and ride them intelligently. If you get very skillful at your art, you can tease those forces and start to have playful conversations with them -- always knowing, respectfully, that they might smack you at any time.

Sometimes when we watch aikido we get caught up in paying attention to the nage and to the throws. This is understandable and entirely appropriate, but from another standpoint it is a bit like watching a surfer out on the ocean and admiring the waves but failing to see how the surfer is playing with the wave -- or watching the America’s Cup sailboat race and drawing the conclusion: Wow, that wind is really awesome!

Aikido starts to happen when uke/nage find themselves engaged in an elemental dance, much like surfer/wave.

Osensei stressed time and again that aikido should be cooperative. If he had wanted to make it competitive, he could have done so. He might have instituted tournaments or a ranking system based on competitive exams with points awarded for besting a bigger or more skillful opponent and bonus points awarded for besting multiple opponents, like the Brave Little Tailor swatting flies. But he didn’t. Gosh, you don’t even get consolation points for knocking someone down -- the “throw” has to be beautiful and cooperative; mere trickery, brute force, or surprise moves that simply overpower the weak and unwary just don’t cut it. As the saying goes: “you just can’t win for trying.” This is the paradox of aikido and why the training in ukemi is more than learning to forward roll and backward roll. You are training to be the nage’s loving partner -- completely one with nage/wave (you and nage ARE the wave) -- the two of you doing something that one person alone cannot accomplish: namely, aikido.

It’s not just a martial art.

The Mechanics of Practicing Exercises  
by Shannon Newbold

Exercises are tools to improve particular skills. They enable you to focus directly on a technique, so that you can develop it faster. By Practicing certain exercises correctly you can accomplish in a matter of weeks or months what otherwise may take years. The following are some good points to follow when practicing.

Slow down.

Work through exercises without mistakes. Your body will move just as you train it to move. If you practice something fast and sloppy a hundred times, why should you expect that the hundred-and-first time will suddenly become clean and precise? However, if you practice something a hundred times perfectly, you can be sure that the next time will be perfect as well.

You can do any technique perfectly if you do it slow enough. If you train slowly (and therefore, more accurately), you will be much steadier and more confident. Techniques that are trained fast are less controlled and are likely to “freeze up” if you get a little nervous. Think quality, not quantity.

Avoid mental blocks.

If you concentrate so hard that you begin to strain, then tension and anxiety build up to “do it right this time.” This pressure actually causes
you to make more mistakes, and just adds to the frustration. Don't rush yourself. Keep an even and flowing rhythm as you practice. The natural movement associated with rhythm directly opposes the rigidity and stiffness that cause mental block.

Concentrate on the purpose of the exercise.
Since exercises are designed to focus on developing a certain skill, you should be aware of what that exercise is designed to accomplish and concentrate on that as you practice.

Don't spend too long on one exercise.
When a person begins weightlifting, the initial efforts are very tiring. By resting, then working out, then resting again, over and over, the person gets stronger. It's the same with Aikido. If you practice a technique over and over for too long, you will reach a point where you actually begin to get worse. The best thing to do is rest the particular muscles that you have been working. Try another technique, then come back to it later, and you'll be surprised how much easier it becomes.

Learning to Walk
By Kori Farrell

I have been walking every day for the last two decades. Over 7,300 days I have practiced. However, my intention was never to practice walking.

After figuring out enough to get by on two limbs instead of four, I turned to other things. I learned how to run and jump, how to climb trees, skip stones, plant seeds, and play soccer.

I learned how to ride a bicycle, drive a car, and later, a tractor… I practiced yoga, hiked mountains, and painted pictures. I cannot remember ever looking back. Learning to walk no longer interested me—it seemed as though I had it figured out, and that was all there was to it.

Aikido surprised me. It shook me from my seemingly certain relationship with my body and left me stumbling and uncoordinated in an environment so supportive that it made no sense to be anything but myself—to be anywhere but exactly where I was.

It suddenly occurred to me that I might not have it all figured out after all…

I kept coming to class.

In a conversation a few months ago, Kent sempai recalled to me that upon beginning his Aikido practice, he realized that he would have to re-teach himself how to walk.

I saw that I was thinking something similar… I had started to consider walking in its everyday form as an essential basic technique.

As one of my first building blocks, this skill was put in place at a time when the builder had no concept of the structure it would support. Whether I pay attention or not, I will continue to rely daily on this foundation. Given that I will be practicing anyway, it seems only sensible to practice well.

With these thoughts in mind, I decided that I too would learn how to walk.

I feel as though I am a snake shedding an old skin… letting go of things I have unknowingly carried for years. Gradually I have begun uncovering where I am on my path and learning to be compassionate towards myself unconditionally.

Through Aikido, I am discovering that in spite of my enthusiasm and desire for understanding, there is a part of me that is afraid. I am afraid to believe that I can pass beyond the awkward first steps of a child and begin moving with the
universe. This would mean taking on all responsibility for my actions in the world, trusting myself to have placed the stones of my foundation with care, and having the faith and the patience to return to the beginning and rebuild each time I discover I have overlooked something along the way. The prospect is both exciting and frightening, though it need not be either.

Did I experience nervousness when I was two years old? If I felt the same uncertainty back then, I do not remember now. And if I have picked it up in the years since, I cannot say when or how.

Whatever the case, when I sit with these feelings I can see that they profoundly influence my movements. Oftentimes I hesitate. I pull back and tense up. I am indecisive and my intent divided. I reach for hands instead of center, move with arms instead of hips… wrestle instead of blend, while my energy rattles around in my head and my chest instead of sinking into the mat… it is exhausting.

But perhaps it is a necessary part of this path. In many ways it makes sense to me that we learn fear and self-consciousness so that we may one day unlearn them, and in doing so make lasting peace with ourselves and the world.

I see that there are many things for me to unlearn, and relearn. I am also beginning to understand that I must not try to divide my attention between all of them at once, nor should I skip in impatience from one lesson to the next.

Right now, I am learning to walk. I am watching. I am trying to stay with myself in each moment with patience and good faith. I am aiming my intention towards attaining the peace of mind that will dissolve my self-doubts. Aikido offers me a Way of beginning, and more importantly at this point, of persisting.

---

I step…
Such a small act, and yet
I rejoice in the totality
of miracles,
of the infinite focus and intent
that can be carried,

Simply by aligning one foot,
and then the other.

…

どうもありがとうございました。
(Domo arigatou gozaimasu).

---

The Space Inbetween
by Marion Donehower

Over the years of practicing aikido I went through different levels of seeing and experiencing aikido. First I was impressed with everybody who was about two kyus higher and knew so many more techniques. However, in time the seeing became more differentiated and refined. By going to more seminars and watching more advanced students and senseis I learned a lot about the quality of aikido. I learned that aikido has a lot to do with your inner attitude. The more the aikidoka are enjoying themselves, the more they smile and laugh, the better their aikido becomes. They move with more grace – effortless, selfless, and with skillful relaxation. They obviously live in the moment and leave behind the realm of insecurity, vanity, and pride. As I was watching I relaxed a little more, breathed a little easier, and felt a little happier.

As I was moving through the years with my aikido experience I was more closely watching the most advanced aikidoka. I started to see more of what is not visible to the eye. I started to
see the invisible, the space inbetween — the little moment of pause between inbreath and outbreath, between the yin and the yang in the movement. This invisible inbetween, we know from other arts. In painting there is the inbetween of colors. Colors are meeting and a third color arises or a line appears. Change and excitement is happening by pausing the flow of colors. Music has the space inbetween individual notes. The aftereffect of the notes lives in us and creates with the notes the whole. In Asian painting we observe the use of negative space — that’s usually where things are happening and where dynamic is created. As a psychotherapist I know that I should not pay too much attention to what the patient tells me. I should pay closer attention to what is not said — his mood, attitude, silences. It is always the non-doing, the pausing, the sequencing. This creates the rhythm, flow, and tension in all arts, as well as aikido. In aikido there is probably a combination of breathing, relaxation, moving from the hara, and skillfully applied techniques. We internalized the learned and then we can concentrate on the more subtle inner work.

In our Iwama style dojo we have especially a wonderful weapons curriculum where we can learn this wonderful pause and sequencing in a very systematic way. Inbetween the different moves of the jo or the boken, we take the moves apart and pause for two seconds. I think this is really challenging. I had never learned in this way before, and at first I forgot my two second right away. Recently I feel I get much more the flavor of it. I was able to experience it as a meaningful pause and started to breathe with it. In kokyu nage breath throws, we also have a wonderful breathing pattern. We breathe the uke in, pause, and breathe the uke out. By focusing on these shorter movements, which are usually not too complicated, we can breathe more easily and we learn to draw the uke into our sphere of energy. As an observer of aikido I feel that through the rhythmical movement of uke and nage on an advanced level that not only aikidoka are satisfied but also the observer. It doesn’t seem to be very different from watching or listening to a high quality of good art. Just as the aikidoka moves ki, he also moves ki in the spectator. For the viewer of art, this has a purifying and healing effect.

### Smelling the Flowers

**Justin Azevedo**

There is a certain milestone that everyone reaches when they are Aikido beginners, where all of the basics of ukemi, stance, attacks, and blends begin to become second nature, and a wider sense of what is possible in the art first presents itself. For me, this happened about six months or so after I first started training. I don’t remember what exact technique I was working on, but I remember having a sudden flash of insight: if I moved that way instead of this way, I could have done a different technique. And if uke punched instead of grabbed, I miraculously had yet another technique waiting in the wings.

This is a fantastic place to reach in Aikido, especially for the first time. However, for me, it was also fraught with anxiety; instead of the rote 1-2-3 sequences I had entered into an uneasy alliance with, I was now aware (on a very basic level) of a more complicated algebra. With this new knowledge came my usual self-defeating tendency to over-analyze, and suddenly my Aikido became a lot more difficult. Pleasantly difficult, but still difficult. In order to proceed from there, I added a new tool to my toolbox.

Before every class, I use my time in seiza before bowing in to meditate and clear my mind of the various irritations and tensions that have accumulated throughout the day. Though I’m not particularly a Zen adherent, I find that stepping onto the mat with a mind as serene as I can make it allows me to train harder and better. One of the things I started doing in order to get myself into a calm state of mind was to stare at
the flowers arranged on the shomen, and attempt to smell them. I would concentrate on the color and texture of each flower until I felt like their aroma wafted into my nose; if I didn’t know what a particular flower smelled like, my brain would fill in the gap with a floral scent I did know. This exercise not only calmed me, but made me feel as if I were stretching my awareness across the dojo, preparing me to do the same as I trained.

As I progressed from an absolute beginner to a slightly more experienced beginner, I used this trick to help codify the blossoming variety of techniques that were imprinting themselves into my muscle memory. To avoid waiting for uke to attack and trying to think of a way to respond, I began considering how I “smelled” the flowers each night. Of course, I couldn’t really smell the flowers from where I was, but I could approximate it by that combination of reaching my awareness out as far as it could go and letting my instinct take over. Similarly, I could not predict exactly how uke would attack, but by reaching my awareness out and operating from what my body already knew, I could effectively predict how I should react, as I was both initiating and controlling the interaction.

As it turned out, though, translating my flower-sniffing to the mat is a little more complicated than I initially thought. The problem lies in expectation; I have preconceived notions of what certain flowers smell like, and my own interpretations of what the aroma of an unknown flower could be. Thus, this exercise became fantastic for honing my awareness, but perhaps a little detrimental to honing my instinct. Bruce Sempai often warns against “working from a script,” or engaging with uke with the expectation of a certain, fixed outcome. By increasingly attempting to predict what would come next when training, this is the exact trap I began to fall into. As my toolkit grew, I naturally gravitated towards certain movements and techniques that felt more natural to me. As a result, I too often found myself hoping for specific resolutions to each engagement: this movement should ideally resolve as that attack, and that attack should ideally be answered with this technique, etc. The key word in that last sentence is “ideally.” Most situations are not ideal, which is why we place such a high importance on blending. Asking for specific attacks and forcing a specific technique are very important tools for learning the basics of that technique, but they increasingly got me in trouble during jiyu waza and randori. After all, just because I want the flower to smell like jasmine doesn’t mean it actually does.

Therefore, I’ve lately added a little twist to my meditation. I still breathe deeply to calm myself before class, but as I regard the flowers on the shomen, I attempt to perceive their aroma as something it should never be. Fresh paint, for instance, or a hot pizza. That way, I can mentally prepare myself for accepting and blending with the unexpected. My natural reaction of “there’s no way that flower could smell like a pizza, and if it did, that would be strange and disgusting!” gives way to “sure, a pizzaflower. Why not?” By immersing my mind with this sort of openness and aversion to prejudice, I find myself much more capable of dealing with unanticipated situations during training, be it a surprise attack, a technique that must change midway through, or even avoiding injury from wayward ukemi.

Every now and again, though, I go back to simply trying to smell the flowers. Thinking too hard, after all, is still my greatest Aikido weakness, and sometimes I have to remind myself that it is simply enough to relax, take a few deep breaths, and be as aware as I can.
The Eleven Signs of Aikido Addiction

by Johann Baptista

1. You start grunting more often (Hai! Hei! Hap!); using your new vocabulary to respond to questions and give answers.

2. You ukemi in places where no one is looking.

3. You attempt to use your understanding of the principles of Aikido do deal with everyday objects like doors.

4. When near or interacting with other people (i.e. Shaking hands) techniques spring to mind.

5. Bowing unconsciously replaces needless words like “thanks” and “you're welcome.”

6. You spend an inhuman amount of time thinking about and/or researching Aikido philosophy or history.

7. Your room gradually starts to turn more Japanese.

8. You actually like being slammed on the floor.

9. When bored or doing uninteresting things like standing in line you practice Aikido movements.

10. Your room becomes like your dojo's tatami; where you roll, practice, and experiment with techniques and concepts, sometimes to the detriment of the more fragile objects found within.

11. You are right now thinking of things to add to this list.

Gakusei

By Kori Farrell

And so it is that I find myself watching and the longer I look, the more I see and the more I see, the less I feel that I know

and the less I feel I know, the more room I have within me to take these things and with them fill my being.

This cycle is an infinite expansion of self, roots reaching, relaxing deep into cool, dark soil branches extending, welcoming in the universe, grateful to find that the simplest thing there is to do is love.

Do Not Fall Asleep When Training

by Donny Shiu

I want to share a lesson that I have learned recently because I fell asleep in class. It was obviously not quality training because I didn’t remember much. Don’t let it happen to you. Be present in body and mind. Stay awake and be alert.

Being physically present by showing up is not enough. One must also be at the present with one’s mind by focusing on the task at hand. Be aware, attentive, and alert; otherwise, the mind can be all over the place while the body is simply going through the motion. As Sensei had once said, “sloppy technique comes from a sloppy mind.” Poor awareness of the moment in relation to your physical body may translate into
How Correct Aikido Ukemi Promotes Health
by Hoa Newens

Ukemi is the art of safely receiving the impact of a technique to allow it to run its full course as intended by Nage (the person executing the technique).

From the viewpoint of physical health there are three types of movement that the Uke (the person receiving the technique) does that promote health, beside the well-known benefits of aerobic activities such as improved circulation and muscle toning. These types of movement are balancing, twisting and tumbling. In the following example we have a female Nage throwing a male Uke.

First, what is balancing and how does it promote health? When Nage executes the technique correctly, Uke’s physical balance should be challenged throughout the entire duration of the technique (Kuzushi), with the outcome that he is pinned to the ground or thrown away from her. If he takes proper Ukemi, Uke would constantly adjust his body so that he remains balanced until the point where he can blend with the ground and either lay flat to absorb a pin or take a roll. In this way, Ukemi involves a series of constant postural adjustments to remain aligned with gravity that allow the body to quickly recover from continuing balance upsets caused by the technique. Our Aikido curriculum contains a vast array of techniques that upset Uke’s balance from a multitude of angles, positions and directions, causing him to undergo a multitude of body adjustments to maintain his balance. Over time, with continuing practice, Uke increases the coordination among body parts and expands the boundaries of his balance. The resulting improvement in physical coordination and balance make for a safer and healthier interaction with the surrounding world.

Note that the preceding discussion presumes that Nage executes the technique correctly, that is her purpose from the outset should be to upset Uke’s balance with the intent to throw or pin him. If her intent is to create pain or damage his joints then the context is totally different and so should be the Ukemi. Both Nage and Uke need to do proper Aikido in order to derive mutual benefit; this is a fundamental tenet of Aikido that should never be forgotten.

Now let’s look at twisting. Twisting is often associated with pain in our culture, such as in the phrase “I had him do it after some arm twisting”. The pain is there only if you resist the twist. Most Aikido techniques seek to upset the vertical alignment of Uke’s body and / or displace its center. To produce this effect, often
a twisting is applied at a peripheral joint (e.g. the wrist in the case of Kotegaeshi or Nikyo) or directly at a central joint (e.g. the neck in the case of Kokyuho or Iriminage). A skilled Uke would absorb the spiraling energy from his extremities all the way to his center, that is, allow his muscles and tissues to stretch and let the impact to spread to his entire body from the point of contact through the Hara (the center of Ki in the body) in the hips. For example, in receiving Kotegaeshi he would relax and let the twisting motion at the wrist cause his forearm to twist until the shoulder joint kicks in and let the entire arm twist. Then the next joint in the sequence, the hip joint, gets to work and prompts the torso to twist to absorb the impact further. The joints at the knee and ankle then begin to feel the twist but they should not be used to absorb the torque; instead Uke should reposition the entire impacted leg. Through this sequence, the muscles and the related connective tissues (fasciae, ligaments and tendons) are relaxed and get a good dose of stretching as they absorb the energy of the twist. As long as it is not overdone, this stretching strengthens these tissues, improves lymphatic circulation and blood circulation, and increases flexibility.

How can tumbling or rolling bring about any health benefits? One obvious benefit is that the ability to execute a roll on the ground helps one to recover safely following a fall. The lesser known benefit has to do with inversion. During most of our wakeful state we keep an upright posture which is rarely disturbed until we lie down to rest. In this vertical posture the internal organs, especially those in the abdomen, are stacked on top of each other and their surfaces stick with each other. Stickiness reduces plasticity and induces hardening. In addition, sediments including toxic matters are deposited at the bottom of these organs. When we lie down and shift positions there is some relief in the stickiness and some stirring of the sediments. A sedentary lifestyle exacerbates this stickiness and allows sediments to accumulate, causing sagging organs and increasing the toxicity level. Physical exercises tend to alleviate these conditions, especially those that require twisting motion such as Yoga, Chi Kung, Tai Chi or Aikido. The twisting increases organ muscle tone, strengthen the surrounding tissues and wring out the toxic materials. More helpful are the movements that shake up the organs and turn them upside down during brief moments, such as during a roll. These moments of inversion cause additional work-out to the muscles and tissues, cause the toxic matters to be in suspension and facilitate their excretion.

To sum up, Aikido Ukemi involves three types of movement that contribute to making us healthier: balancing, twisting and tumbling. If not done correctly these movements increase our risk of injury; but when Ukemi is done properly we become healthier. It pays to be mindful of our Ukemi.

**Kangeiko**

*by Martin Dubcovsky*

(Kangeiko: an intensive winter training session.)

Instructing: Hoa Newens sensei
Attending: Brian Campbell, Martin Dubcovsky, Paul Guttenberg, Toby Hargreaves, Edim Kurtovic

**Monday, Jan 25 2010:**

It's 6:50am and I am not yet fully awake. My motions are sluggish as I park my bike, weapons slung over my shoulder. I walk towards the entrance of the dojo I do my best to pull my self together. I exchange yawning greetings with the few other brave souls in the dressing room. We are all excited, though a bit hesitant about what we have committed ourselves to.
We complete our warm-up stretches, and sensei calls for us to gather in a circle with our boken. We will go around, each one of us counting off ten strikes. Once we have finished going around, we will switch our stance and go around again. Today, as the first day of training, we are to start of easy, only 6 rounds --360 strikes. As we begin sensei reminds us to keep our shoulders relaxed, and to initiate all motion from our our hips. Quickly we discover the rhythm, boken rising and cutting unison, the count picked up by the next person along the circle. I do my best to heed sensei's advice and focus on my hips; after a few rounds, his advice becomes self evident: there is no way to continue this exercise using muscle strength. Sensei hands out quick corrections, making sure we don't let our attention slip: "finish each strike", "sink with your hips", "level strike", "don't let your sword bounce".

Everyone is now awake, and sensei turns our attention to first kumitachi. We practice the form first in kihon, and then awase. Throughout the practice we switch partners until everyone has had a chance to train with everyone else, including sensei. This is simultaneously a delightful and terrifying! To end the class sensei presents a couple kokyunage which relate to the motions of the kumitachi we have just learned.

Wednesday, Jan 27 2010:
Once again we gather in a circle for our warm up strikes. We have been adding a round each day, today we count off eight rounds of strikes --480 strikes. I find the transition from striking on one side, to striking on the other distracting my rhythm. And it takes a few strikes each time for me to relax my shoulders, settle into my stance, and engage my hips. Fortunately our circular arrangement means we have a target, as well as an opposing strike to blend with, which helps sharpen my focus.

Yesterday we went over the second kumitachi, and today we cover the third and fourth. The pace of this week's training is fast, especially considering most of us have never learned the kumitachi before. It is a crash course in sword work, and everyone is working hard to absorb as much detail as possible. Once again we connect the motions of the sword work with taijutsu through kokyunage.

Friday, Jan 29 2010:
For our last day of training we warm up by counting off 10 rounds of strikes --600 strikes. I've never done so many consecutive strikes, and that on its own feels like a great accomplishment. We also managed to wrap up the kumitachi, going over the fifth yesterday, and ki no musubi no tachi today. To finish of the class, finish off the week, and cement the motions into our bodies, we finish off with kokyunage.

And since no training is complete without a party, we celebrate with pastries and tea while wearing out new shirts, and our strengthened spirits!

Kangeiko / 2010 / Survivors

From Left to Right (seated): Toby, Sensei, Brian, Paul; (Standing): Martin, Edo
February, 2010

For the past year—since February 2009—I have been living in the Aikido Institute Davis, serving as uchideshi. As a part of my apprenticeship I am supposed to write an essay sharing some insights I’ve gained in the past year. The truth is essays that try to sum up a year of experiences are hard, the reason being that I’m still in the midst of it, and I don’t know the ultimate impact or value this experience will have on my life. This could probably be said of any major experience one has in life—you never quite know exactly what happened or why. Regardless of all that, it has been a wonderful year, full of joy, but it has also been one of the most challenging I’ve had. I’ve worked hard and trained a lot. I know my technique has improved and I’ve made a lot of discoveries about the techniques. But the most prominent feeling I have is one of embarking. That my training has only just begun (as Master Yoda said to Luke). As I step out into the daunting world of choices, a million ideas, dreams, paths call my name.

These choices lay for the most part dormant the past year, but now that I am again confronting the future, confusion arises in my mind. How to best live my life? How to best serve my purpose in this world and realize my true nature? What is my path? Is it a wandering one, or one of steady, lifelong commitment? I have a feeling it will be the latter, but how it will shape up, I don’t know. So as I wrap up my yearlong apprenticeship, my mind moves ahead and is busy engineering and organizing the future.

My intent was to write an essay describing my experience the past year as uchideshi. One thing that has characterized this experience is living in the dojo. What is it like to live in the dojo? You all know what it is like to come to class, to train after class, to train intensely for the weeks leading up to a test. But you may be curious to know what it is like to live in the dojo. Indeed, many of you have asked me numerous questions from, “Which mat do you sleep on?” to, “Where do you take your showers?” and so on. But in the end, all of those are just logistical details, little things that you work out along the way. What I started out with in the fall of 2008 was simply an idea, to live in the dojo and be uchideshi. With only that intent I started out in February last year. I had no ulterior motive or even goals to speak of. I didn’t care about getting my black belt, or becoming a sensei, or even teaching at all for that matter. It was one of those decisions in life that you feel guided to make, for no good reason other than you feel really, really strongly that it is something you should do. It is a wonderful feeling when this happens. It is like being taken on a great rollercoaster ride. You know it is going to be a lot of fun and you know it is perfectly safe in the end, but it is still scary because you have absolutely no idea what sorts of sheer drops, mid-air flips or loss of bodily functions may occur between the beginning and the end. It was with this mix of excitement, apprehension, and blind faith that I started out my apprenticeship.
The journey turned out to be more than I could have imagined. Words don’t do it justice, but this year has been the most wonderful of my life. It has also been the most challenging. The year has been pivotal not just because of the rigorous training and compromised living situation, but also in finding a career path, exploring myself spiritually, and falling in love.

I hesitate to make a big deal out of my experience because it is not really about me, but more about us—restarting the dojo in a new location, building up the membership, starting up new classes. It was kind of like a big project that we all helped work on. But what happened really was a once in a lifetime thing for me because it was an intense focus of energy on my part and all of yours. I put myself in this situation—I bought my ticket for the rollercoaster ride and strapped myself in,—but all of you, the dojo, and Sensei all focused your energy, attention and love and helped create this experience with me. It was a mutual gift and a creation; I gave you my energy and you all gave me yours, and we all helped each other grow and learn. For my part I feel tremendously blessed to have received such a gift.

If there is anything I have learned about Aikido in my time here is that this spirit of mutual giving and creation is Aikido. The great teachers say “Budo is love”, “Aikido is love,” and it is hard to talk about that in our society without sounding sentimental and emotional, but it really is true. The phrase, *Takemusu Aiki* can be translated as “Harmonious Energy (*Aiki*) giving birth (*Musu*) to martial techniques (*Take*).” This is the ideal that we all strive for, but it is also a process that we are actually doing here at the dojo. I have seen it at work this past year.

Something that has occurred to me throughout my training and I’ve always been amazed at is that I have never regretted coming to an Aikido class. I have not so good classes and tough classes like anyone else, I have been bored with basic techniques, mentally exhausted, frustrated with other people, angry at myself, in doubt about every other aspect of my life, but that statement has always held. Aikido has been a constant and unrelenting uplift in my life. So much so that I wonder how low I would be if I hadn’t found it.

To be honest, figuring out what to write for this essay was quite a struggle, up until the point when I made up my mind to do it this way (I had some encouragement too). The reason was: I have learned so much about Aikido and want to share it with you all. But much of it I can’t explain in an essay, so it will have to wait until next time we are on the mat. In fact, much of it is waiting to be unfolded over the years.

As I think back on the year, I realize that it was a time in which I made a serious commitment to Aikido, Tai chi, Sensei, and the Dojo. It was the first time I lived alone for a long period of time, and I learned to appreciate my own solitude, especially during the quiet hours of the evening. I didn’t do it alone, though. We are all connected and in a way I am just a manifestation of the Dojo spirit. If not for everyone’s dedication to Aikido, I would not have become uchideshi. And it is not just me who has grown; everyone has grown together. We are not perfect, but we do a pretty darn good job of actually helping each other. Everyone comes to the dojo of their own free will, and that makes for a very valuable spirit of cooperation. When people cooperate, powerful things can happen.

It is with great joy in my heart, and maybe a few tears in my eyes, that I bow to you all.
Relaxed Extension and Metaphors
by Toby Hargreaves

The state of mind and body that we are striving toward in Aikido can be called “relaxed extension.” We use these words a lot in our training. “Relax your shoulders,” “Extend through your fingers,” for example. What does it mean to do these things and how do you do it? Well, relaxation and extension are words used to describe particular feelings. Feelings, unlike concepts and ideas, relate to our personal experience of the world and can’t be precisely transmitted through words. However, we try to do so anyway, using metaphors (the words “relax” and “extend” are, in a way, metaphors themselves) to approximate those feeling we are trying to develop. For example, our teachers often say things like, “Inflate your arms like a beach ball”, “Sink down into the ground”, “Reach out and connect to your partner’s center”, and so on.

In the Iwama style, we actually use relatively few of these metaphors. Most of our training is done silently, and directions we get from our teachers are concrete and physical, like postural adjustments, weight distribution, timing, and so on. However, we can’t escape the use of metaphors entirely. How do you ever learn something that you don’t know? Perhaps we do it by relating to previous experience through metaphor. The occasional metaphor is certainly useful in teaching and can help students grasp the essence of a technique, but we must keep in mind that we want to eventually get beyond metaphor into pure feeling. There is nothing more wondrous than a wordless teaching.

When I first started Aikido, I was amazed by the feeling of extension. It was a new discovery for me, something I had never consciously done before. During that time I would often walk home from the dojo after class each night, and as I walked I would spread my fingers and send my energy outward and exploring and delighting in this new sensation called extension. How wonderful it was! I felt I could take on anybody who might spring out of the bushes and attack me—fortunately I didn’t get to try it out, but that’s how confident this “extension” made me feel.

Extension and Connection

In order to connect with something, we must extend out to it. To reach the other side of a river we extend a bridge across the water. To complete a task we extend our energy out to get the work done. To relate to other people we extend our voices to talk to them or our hands to touch them. We maintain our physical bodies by extending out and looking for food to eat.

We are always extending and connecting; it’s how life conducts its business. If we were to stop these activities, we would die. Therefore, the practice of Aikido is, essentially, the practice of life: as we perfect our ability to extend and connect we incrementally strengthen the life inside us.
Tahoe Gasshuku Pictures
Many Thanks to Guy Michelier!
DAN Promotions  
**June 2010**

- Justin Azevedo 1st DAN
- Kathleen Holder 1st DAN
- Shannon Newbold 1st DAN

KYU Promotions  
**February 2010**

**Juniors**
- Kelsey Imamoto 8K

**Adults**
- Johann Baptista 5K
- Kori Farrell 5K
- Paul Gutenberg 5K
- Brian Campbell 3K
- Guy Michelier 3K
- Martin Dubcovsky 1K

KYU Promotions  
**May and June 2010**

**Juniors**
- Alicia Lepler 6K
- Amanda Campbell 6K
- Torrey Frederickson 6K
- Kelsey Imamoto 7K
- Brody Blacet 8K

**Adults**
- Mark Henrickson (5/27) 6K
- John Passamonte (5/27) 6K
- Dale Koenig 6K
- Elias Marvinney 5K
- Donny Shiu 3K
- Eugene Lepler 3K
GATEWAY TO AIKIDO

A new introductory “Beginner Class” starts in September 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.

The dojo sponsors a quarterly eight-week beginner class entitled “Gateway to Aikido” intended to provide a focused and intensive overview/introduction to the practice and philosophy of aikido. Participants in this eight-week course receive a one-on-one close attention from instructors and more experienced students. The classes are chatty and informative; additionally, at the end of six of those eight weeks the students may join other dojo classes at their discretion to sample what those classes are like. Altogether, it is a very economical and enjoyable way to become acquainted with the dojo and aikido.

This June two of the “beginners” from a 2006 Beginner Class, Shannon and Kathleen, have persevered to the rank of shodan.

The next “Gateway to Aikido” eight-week beginner class begins in late September. Watch the website for dates.

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

Pay Your Dues!

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!