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Aikido Training Methods: Past and Present

Less "Perfection", More Perspiration

• **By KENSHO FURUYA**

Aikido maintains a dynamic, profoundly spiritual, form of training preserving elements of traditional methods, but the current trend is to welcome new changes in practice and bring aikido more into a modern society of ever-changing attitudes and perspectives. I believe that not all changes are good and we must very carefully evaluate what we adopt and what we discard.

In some cases, we have sacrificed wisdom which has been cultivated and refined over countless generations for something vaguely "trendy" and "up-to-date". It should be obvious that training cannot be based on fad or fashion,

but on time-tested, well-worked, conscientiously perfected techniques. And even this is not enough. Add to that, the final ingredients of a touch of genius, the spark of enlightenment, a moving sense of beauty and something of the eternal. And this in turn must embrace an almost-divine sense of compassion and humanity.

Study very carefully before you throw away a technique or method

Changing your practice is not simply hitting the "delete" button on your personal computer or trying out the latest

Reverend Kensho Furuya is the resident chief instructor of the Aikido Center of Los Angeles in metropolitan Los Angeles and is a prolific writer on aikido martial arts, Zen, philosophy and the arts of the samurai sword. Furuya sensei brings over 35 years experience together to complete a monumental nine-volume, nine-hour, instructional video series on "The Art of Aikido" produced by Unique Publications/Video. Furuya sensei is also the director of the Los Angeles Sword and Swordsmanship Society and chief instructor of the Los Angeles Branch of the All Japan Iai-Battodo Federation headquartered in Tokyo, Japan.



Furuya sensei showing technique during class.

today merely a “fashion statement”? I heard one teacher of another discipline comment, “Most people like the ‘idea’ of practice, not the practice itself. Just say anything to them and get their money!”

Aikido founder trained day and night

The original Hombu Dojo was acquired cheaply because it is said that a band of loyalist samurai was massacred in that former samurai mansion during the late 19th century and their ghosts still haunted the grounds. After O-Sensei moved in, it acquired the notorious name of “Hell Dojo”, because of its reputation of very intense training going on day and night.

It is also said that the neighbors could hear all the sounds of practice going on but couldn’t see anyone working out inside through the windows. They

chrome-plated contraption in your local gym or spa. It is a matter for great and careful consideration. Generally, we change our practice, not for the sake of the discipline itself, but out of personal convenience. This self-serving sense of ego doesn’t belong here. Indeed, it can only lead to disaster. In most cases, we are only shuffling the pieces of the same jigsaw puzzle back and forth and haven’t really accomplished anything at all but a self-deluding sense of accomplishment which fades away soon enough.

Too much dialogue; too little movement nowadays

The trend in modern aikido training in this country has greatly changed. Today, I hear the words of “hands-on” teaching. This means that the teacher is obliged to give you personal or personalized attention. He may actually come over to you and say something about your practice. Or, he may just pat you on the head and say, “Great!” (Whether what you are doing is great or not is not the point here.) As long as he touches you or looks at you and says, “Ooh, ah” or “Gee your hair looks nice today,” we think, “How wonderful, I am being taught!” You may laugh or feel offended at this point, but, doesn’t this happen more often than not?

Some people call this “touchy feely” practice. In these particular types of classes, one notices an awful lot of dialogue and, more often than not, very little perspiration. I observe that nowadays we try to achieve the “look” of practice but hardly come close to practice itself. Is practice

didn’t realize that everyone was doing matwork practicing on their knees.

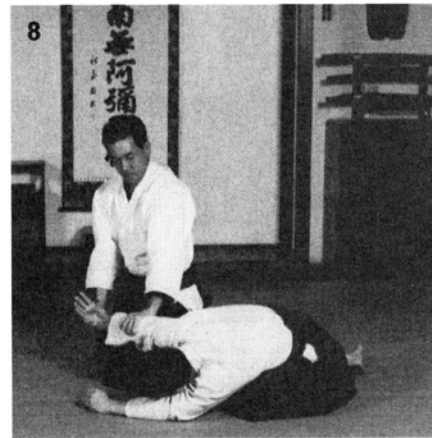
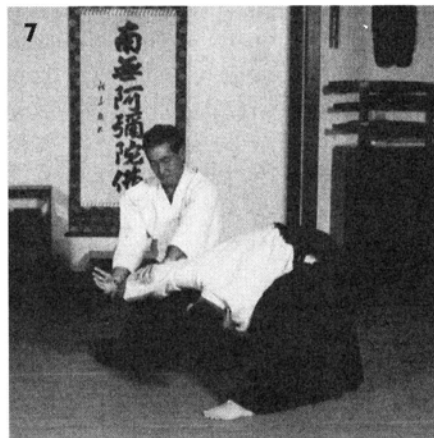
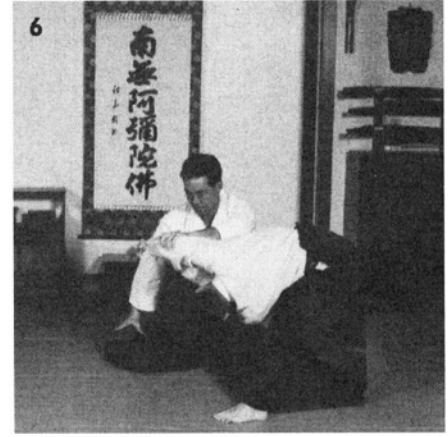
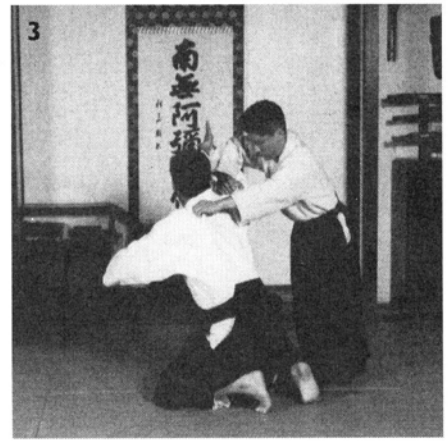
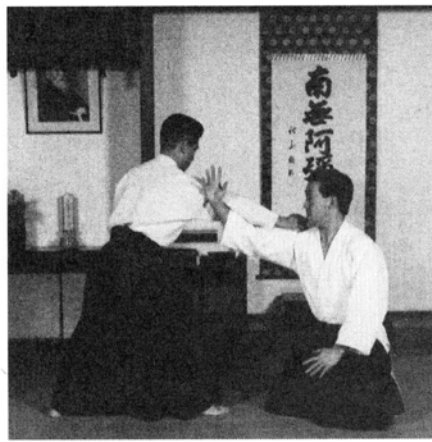
In my time, much, much later, we didn’t receive much verbal instruction; everything was taught by doing. It was always a matter of doing, not talking about it. In Japanese, there are many words for the term, “learning” or “practice”. One term means to “learn by observing,” another is to “imitate”. Still another is “practice as if you are practicing to become a monk or, in other words, religious discipline”. Another word for training literally means “to reflect upon the past”.

Training is silent training. If you are fully concentrated on what you are doing, you have no spare time to keep opening your mouth. Obviously, it does not mean to become totally mute during training. It means that we should not concentrate on the attraction and convenience dialogue alone.

True communication

I have heard when O-sensei called a student up during instruction, he never indicated how you should attack or what you should do. His old students recalled how it was very difficult at first but eventually one learned to communicate on a higher level and began to understand everything the founder of aikido required although no words were exchanged.

Nowadays, we talk too much and have forgotten how to communicate with each other mentally and spiritually.



With all the chit-chat going on, who can “hear” what another person is thinking? With all the dialogue we create during practice nowadays, we forget higher levels of silent communication. It is naive to think that just because one is not talking, one is not reaching out to you.

Even the Buddha teaches without words

The Buddha’s final transmission was to his brightest disciple, Mahakashyapa. It is said that at the final congregation, the Buddha finished his sermon and then, not saying anything, merely held up a single flower.

Mahakashyapa understood and smiled and the Buddha acknowledged that this student understood the ultimate “teaching without words”.

Ushiro Ryukata-Tori Ikkyo—Attack from behind. Training from seated position.
 Establish spacing (1).
 Initiating attack (2).
 Breaking attacker's grip (3).
 Begin moving behind attacker (4).
 Getting completely behind attacker (5).
 Controlling elbow (6).
 Establishing pin (7).
 Bringing opponent down to mat (8).
 Pinning (9).
 Applying pressure to wrist (10).



Koshi naga—Hip throw. Initiating technique (1). Breaking his grip and balance (2). Moving in deeply to establish position (3). Bringing attacker over the hip (4). Completing throw (5). Establishing spacing (6).

Effective teaching is incomplete

Training as a novice priest in the temple was fascinating and (at first) extremely disheartening. I can discuss many similarities between this training and training in martial arts but few can go through what a novice priest must endure. Priests are required to participate in many different types of ceremonies and services each day. No one tells you exactly what you have to do, but fear of making a complete fool out of yourself in front of everyone compels you to keep asking everyone with the hope that someone will have enough compassion to tell you what is going on. No luck.

You participate without knowing anything, but because you don't know what's happening you are on your toes to know and see everything that is going on. It is a tough but extremely effective learning experience. Nowadays, we teach too much and all the student does is fall asleep.

When one wants firewood, one eventually has to learn how to pick up the ax and swing it. No matter how much to use those busy little muscles below your nose for making all kinds of noises, it will never get you warm by a nice fire.

“Training is silent training. If you are fully concentrated on what you are doing, you have no spare time to keep opening your mouth.”

I think it was the late Bruce Lee who once said that you can lie on the carpet in your living room and go through the motions of swimming and learn the concepts of staying afloat but you never really learn how to swim until you throw yourself into the

swimming pool and get wet. Many of us are in danger of becoming “living room” swimmers.

A positive sense of fear

Although I always thought the most of my teachers, I was always a little afraid of them. This is not mortal fear; I think it is a Eastern attitude of exhibiting a tiny bit of fear out of respect. This is not an artificial emotion; the fear is real as well as the respect.

When my Zen master, who is now 84 years old, speaks of his student days (a long time ago, indeed!), he always used to say how frightened he was of his teacher. And, in the same breath as relating what a strict teacher he was, he readily admits how much he thought of him and respected him as a truly great sensei.



Juji naga—Cross-throw. Attack (1). Moving behind attacker (2). Breaking grip (3). Locking his hands with a “cross” throw (4). Stretching his arms and breaking his balance (5). Executing throw (6). Throw (7).

Afraid to even say “hello”

One day while I was in Japan, I was walking down a narrow street near the dojo with one of the aikido instructors when we saw Doshu, the grandmaster of the Aikido World Headquarters, where we practice, coming up the path from the other side. Immediately, I tried to think of the appropriate words to say to my teacher in this situation when all of a sudden I felt a strong tug on my arm by my friend and off we were, running down another alley, away from the person we respected so much.

“What are you doing,” I yelled. “We should have said something to Doshu, now we are going to get into trouble.” Later that day during practice Doshu kindly said nothing to us about the incident. I am certain he saw us. He probably thought we were just dumb little kids which, now that I reflect back to those days, we probably were.

My friend was not afraid of Doshu nor was he in any kind of trouble with Hombu Dojo. As I have thought about this funny incident over the years, I realized that it was nothing more than the fact that he couldn't face such an unusual situation as meeting his teacher on the street and instead of calmly making the proper greetings to Doshu and going on his way, he could only think of getting out of there. As rude as “running away” was, at the time, after all these years, I realized that it was a very clumsy form of the highest respect to pay to one's teacher. Even Confucius

said, “In the presence of your teachers, quicken your steps!” It is a way of showing deference to them.

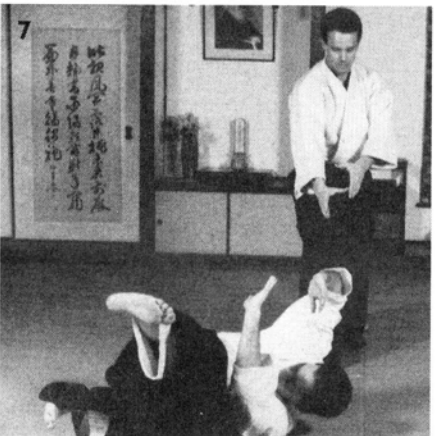
Teachers must be teachers.

Everyone is a friend, but only students can be taught

Today, students seem to demand that their teachers be not just teachers, but a father, a priest, a judge, a police officer and a therapist. Today, successful teachers are “friends” and “companions” or ideally, “good buddies”. I think it is great to become close to one's teacher. Yet, even in the most casual, informal moments, if we don't maintain a certain degree of distance and propriety, we lose an important part of the spirit of training.

In my own experience, I have often found that, although I enjoy the company of all my friends, ultimately “friends” are much harder to teach than “students”. And, in the dojo, I prefer, to teach “students” than “friends”. I feel lonelier inside, but I can never forget that I am a teacher first. Some teachers I know have found the perfect balance between being a friend and teacher to their stu-





Double strike shiho-nage throw. Spacing (1). Moving away from attack (2). Breaking his balance (3). Deflecting second attack (4). Locking both arms (5). Stepping to shiho-nage throw (6). Throw (7).

dents; I admire them greatly.

Ukemi breakfall training: It is harder to receive than to give

Ukemi or breakfall training

is one of the least understood aspects of aikido training. When the general public watches the usual aikido practice in class, one sees one partner attack, the other partner executes a technique and one falls down or gets pinned. Sometimes, it seems like hardly anything was done to throw the partner. People look at this and, more often than not, say, "I think it's fake."

Obviously, it's not fake. If aikido was fake, it would have disappeared a long time ago. There is much more than meets the eye when the aikidoist encounters his training partner. This is one of the most dynamic methods, physical, mentally and spiritually, of aikido training.

"Uke" means "to receive", or be the "receiving end of the technique". The counterpart is "nage" or the one who executes the technique. During regular aikido training, partners take turns being "uke" and "nage" and keep up

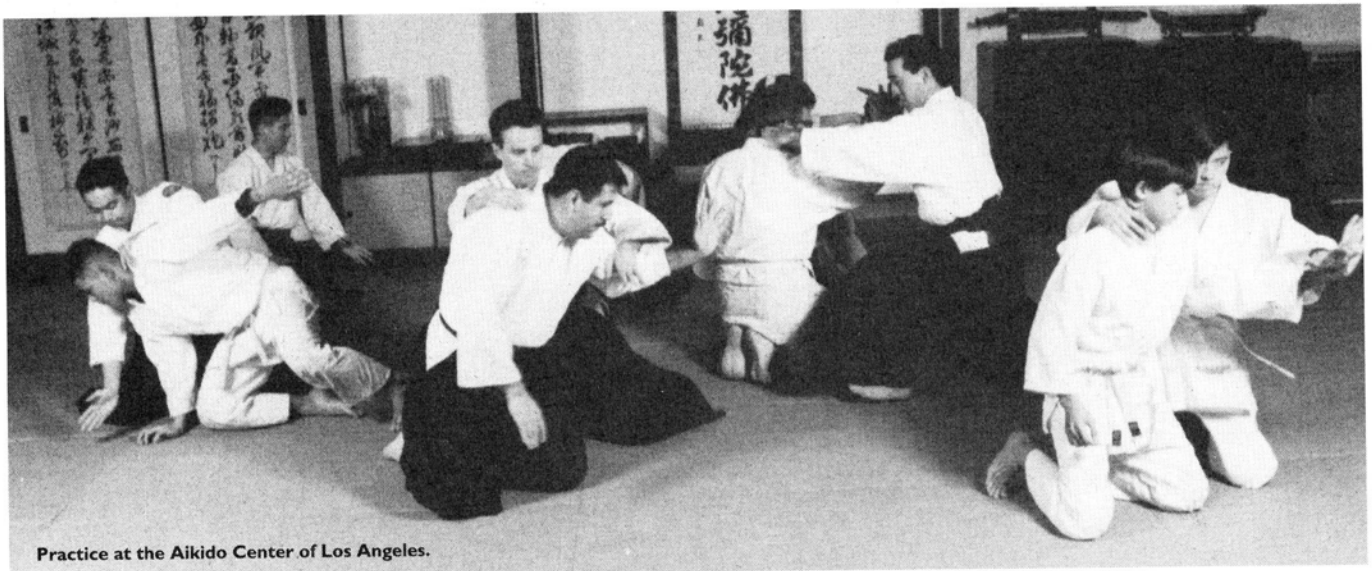
the pace continually throughout the training period.

It is important for the uke to attack well yet understand the technique expertly enough to protect himself against the technique without stopping it. This means that he must create a strong effective attack, protect himself against injury from the technique yet give the opportunity for his partner to execute the technique strongly and effectively. This is quite a job.

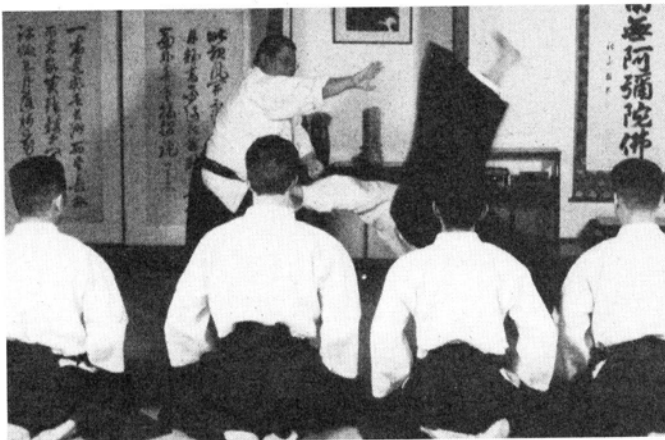
In many cases, one partner is not skillful enough in "ukemi" so one must show a great deal of reserve in executing the technique to avoid injuring him. In regular practice, it is important to adjust the technique according to the skill and level of his partner to create a safe and injury free-training environment. With beginning students, it is necessary to practice slowly and carefully; with advanced students, one should have enough confidence to execute the technique with appropriate power and speed.

It is important to develop enough skill and flexibility in ukemi so that however he may be thrown or whatever technique may be executed against him, he can "receive" it without any problem or concern for personal safety. When I first began training, ukemi was emphasized over throwing technique and it was often said, "The better the uke, the better his skill in the techniques."

Veteran teachers have related that, in the early days of aikido training, one had to be at least third-to-fourth-



Practice at the Aikido Center of Los Angeles.



Instruction during practice.



Bowing and showing respect is important in training.

degree black-belt level in aikido to take ukemi safely from Founder. His technique was simply too powerful and devastating.

One of the problems in practice today is that some aikidoists have no confidence in their ukemi and try to block the technique. Against an advanced student, this is very dangerous. What is important to remember in aikido practice is that movement is more important than being too stiff and trying to block the technique at every turn out of fear for your own safety. One must be mentally, as well as physically, flexible to adjust to every situation during practice. It is necessary to move softly or strongly, it is necessary sometimes to move quickly or slowly. This is known as blending.

Unfortunately, this type of practice is easily distorted and often people practice "slowly and softly" while claiming this is the "mental" or "spiritual" aspect of aikido. This



The dojo must be immaculate and in perfect order for practice.

is a major pitfall in training and often leads to much misinterpretation and misunderstanding about aikido.

There was one great aikidoist who died recently, the late master Kisaburo Ohsawa of the Aikido World Headquarters. What a great teacher he was! His technique often looked soft and movement was rather

slow. Yet no one could deny the great power and energy that continually sprang forth from him. When he touched you, all the power in your entire body seemed to leave you so it was all you could do just to stand up. I miss these great masters of the old guard. As far as we have come in martial arts and aikido today, still, we have a great deal more to learn from them. There is hardly anything to be discarded or thrown away. Indeed, one can say that we are in danger of throwing out the treasure along with the wooden treasure chest. ✨