



# The Aiki Dojo

道の為、世の為、人の為、合気道

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## Little Bird

by Mimi Lam

I used to think that peace existed  
Within a perfectly framed portrait of  
bright blue skies  
Clouds so fluffy they would envelop me in their embrace  
A lake so still it reflected its scenery  
Leaves so rich they gushed green  
Mountains so goliath-like they commanded the sky  
But where is this portrait?  
Rain keeps pouring  
The leaves are poison ivy  
Pecking my skin until it bleeds  
The mountains spiking from the ground  
Give me splinters all over  
Skies so overcast, sunlight is a distant memory  
A lake so thick and muddy  
Everything is bereft of beauty  
When will I realize  
The perfect landscape will never come?  
Walking in the rainstorm, I'll feel calm  
Peace will not be a picture,  
But inside of me.  
A little bird will feed my heart.  
It'll tell me everything will be okay  
And suddenly  
A hurricane will come and I won't be afraid



Watercolor design by Maria Murakawa



## Self Care

About 30 years ago, we were doing an Aikido and Iaido demonstration at Japanese Village Plaza in Little Tokyo, Los Angeles. I was new to Aikido, so I wasn't demonstrating and was assigned to hand out flyers. As I made my rounds through the crowd, an old Japanese man stopped me and showed me his gnarled fingers and said, "I did Judo all of my life. If you keep doing Aikido, this is going to be you when you get old." I reluctantly thanked him and walked away, but in my mind, I was thinking, "Yeah, right." Like all young people, I just dismissed him as being a grumpy old man.

I may have dismissed him, but I never forgot that old man and his weird forewarning. Every time I got injured, I somehow always remembered him. Now that I have been doing Aikido for over 30 years, I can totally see what he was trying to tell me. What this old man was trying to tell me was that there are three opponents that we cannot defeat: time, old age and old injuries.

Father Time is the greatest opponent that each of us will ever face and he is undefeated. In Japanese they say, "Kohin yanogotoshi" or that "Time flies like an arrow." Interestingly, to pull back the bow string and release an arrow is referred to as to "loose" it. Therefore, time flies like an arrow because like when we loose an arrow, time can never be brought back. Knowing that there was so much to learn and so little time to teach us, Furuya Sensei would often admonish us by saying, "There is no time left!" I too dismissed him, but now as I get older, I understand his warning so much better. Like the releasing of an arrow, what

little time we have on this planet we loose chasing frivolous things. Time is the most precious commodity that we all tend to waste. No matter when we die, in the end, we will all lose to Father Time.



by David Ito  
Aikido Chief Instructor

Old age is probably the most surprising to us because when we are young, we don't think that we will ever grow old, let alone die. We have to have this kind of immortal mindset when we are young or else we wouldn't have the audacity to take chances, but with such boldness comes experience and wisdom. Most of us spend so much time in the pursuit that we don't realize that time is passing us by and before we know it, we look in the mirror to find that we have squandered our youth. At each age, we experience different physical changes. Kendo

master, Moriji Mochida discussed this when he said, "It took my body 50 years to learn the basics of Kendo. After I reached the age of 50, that's where the real training began. This is because I finally began to practice Kendo with my mind and heart. When you reach 60, your legs and hips begin to weaken. You learn to conquer these weaknesses with your mind and heart. At age 70, your entire body begins to refuse to move. This is when you learn how to not use your mind or heart. If you do not use your heart, your opponent's heart becomes a mirror of your own." We can master Aikido at any age, but as we get older, it gets a little more difficult because we have less time, strength and energy. That's why playwright George Bernard Shaw said, "Youth is wasted on the young."

*Continued on page 3...*



A few months ago, I stumbled upon a private branding page on Michael's website. It was filled with marketing and branding ideas to help the dojo. Sadly, most of those ideas, I never saw. Most likely, Michael took his own life because he didn't realize how much he meant to the people around him. But, I think that is all of us. We all take for granted the life that we have and our impact on others. Likewise, we take for granted that the people in our lives will always be there and we forget to care for them and acknowledge them. Now that Michael is gone, I realize just how much he meant to me as a student and as a friend. Mental health is a very real problem and should be taken seriously. If you are struggling, thinking about suicide, are worried about a friend or loved one, or would like emotional support, please don't hesitate to contact someone. If you need help call 800-273-8255



**Michael Stinson**  
**1970-2019**

### Self-Care *continued from page 2...*

Old injuries are probably the most insidious because they have a way of sneaking up on us. When we are young, we tend to not take care of ourselves. With time and age, the bumps and bruises have a way of adding up. Some of us were "too tough to care," and powered through our injuries and put it out of our minds and powering through them. Injuries, even minor ones, that aren't properly dealt with seem to return with vigor when we get older. I can attest to this because when I turned 50, all of my old injuries seemed to hit me all at once. The punishment for being too tough to care is pain, stiffness and a loss of functioning. What we do not properly take care of in the past that will echo into our futures.

Try as we might, we cannot defeat these three undefeated warriors (actually there are four if we count Mother Nature, but she doesn't necessarily appear on the mat). In Aikido, our goal is not to "defeat" our opponents but to "harmonize" with their advances and attacks. We lose to our opponents because we *genjohitei* (現状否定) or "Refuse to accept reality." To harmonize is to accept things as they are, but that doesn't mean we should become apathetic.

The fight-flight-freeze response to danger is supposed to be our mind's natural reaction. However, in Aikido there is one more choice – harmony. We don't resist, but we also aren't passive either. We learn to move with the attack in a calm, balanced and cognizant manner. To act with harmony means being active instead of being reactive and to take appropriate measures. We cannot fight time, aging or injuries nor can we ignore them or run from them. Thus, the only way to engage them is to harmonize

with them and the best way to do that is with self-care.

Essentially, self-care means being mindful. We are mindful of how we spend our time. We do our best to balance productivity with rest and also make sure to focus on the things that have importance in our lives. Self-care also means being mindful about what is appropriate for our age. We can break-fall or do *koshinage*, but after a certain age, should we? Aikido is designed to be done to inflict the least amount of injury. Self-care also means being mindful of our bodies. In training, we are supposed to push ourselves to the limit, but this must be balanced with proper rest and care or else those things will eventually catch up to us. Thus, we should schedule regular doctor visits, downtime, rest and mainly just listen to our bodies. We won't get anywhere in an old car that has no gas or is falling apart, but an old car that we take care of can last a long time and safely get us to where we want to go.

Aikido is not about winning or losing, but how we play the game. We are supposed to train hard, train through injury and push ourselves, but that doesn't mean that it should be done mindlessly. To follow the way of Aikido means to be mindful of ourselves and the situation and do our best to create peace and harmony, not death and destruction. Come to think about it, that "old man" wasn't really all that old, but perhaps he was just someone who didn't live in harmony with himself and didn't take good care of himself. Self-care is the ultimate Aikido technique and one that most don't practice. The only way to truly defeat time, old age and old injuries is with grace and that means being in harmony with ourselves by taking care of ourselves and the people in our lives. •



## Knife Training

As Aikido practitioners and teachers, we have to be very careful when we work with weapons, especially when we work with a *tanto* or “wooden knife.”

Sometimes when I see people training with a *tanto*, I get the feeling that they are not aware of the danger and difficulty that careless practice creates. What worries me the most is that this type of practice can lead to a false sense of control or security when one is faced with the possibility of being attacked with a knife. Furuya Sensei was quite strict in many ways but more so with *buki-waza* or “weapons training.” Practicing with a wooden weapon was supposed to simulate a real weapon and Sensei felt that students needed to understand its use. They also needed to be extra diligent and pretend as if the weapon was real.

Nowadays there is a lot of information about *buki-waza* on the internet, but like everything that circulates on the internet, not all that information is good, reliable or verified. Once in a while, something good pops up. I recently read a 1992 study of knife attacks conducted by Darren Laur, an instructor in defensive tactics for law enforcement agencies in the US. Laur did a simple experiment where he selected a sample of 85 active officers and posed a situation in the which the aggressor attacked the participant with a rubber knife, without them knowing it. Here



by **Santiago Garcia Almaraz**  
Chief Instructor, Aikido Kodokai

were his results: 3% of the people managed to see the knife before the attack, 12% realized during the attack that they were being attacked by a knife, but only after being stabbed several times, and 85% of people realized that they were attacked with a knife only at the end of the experiment. The knife was impregnated with paint and so many were able to see that they would have been injured when they were asked to examine themselves for wounds afterwards.

Laur’s experiment corroborated something widely known on the street, most of the time the victim will not notice the presence of a knife in the hands of the aggressor until it is too late. I wondered why 97% of the people in the experiment and most people who reported being attacked were unable to see the knife. As I reflected on the way we deal with *tanto-tori* or “knife techniques” in our practice, I noticed that knife training in Aikido practice is centered around a lot of protocol. This is done to create a safe environment so that the student can develop the necessary series of skills and abilities. In this way, they can improve their knowledge of knife techniques, which will also deepen their knowledge of Aikido techniques in general.

*Continued on page 5...*

## Knife Training *continued from page 4...*

On this basis, I would like to clarify some issues that we must not forget when we are practicing *tanto-tori* and facing a possible knife attack so as not to lose the perspective of what we can find before an attack on the street. In the first place, it would be quite naive to think that whoever plans to use the knife is kind enough to warn us before attacking. If it is not just for the purpose of intimidation, but for robbery or fighting, the aggressor tries to keep the weapon hidden until they are within reach of the victim to surprise them.

Secondly, when the attack is launched, there is a spike in adrenaline (survival response to stress), which causes us to have tunnel vision, which reduces our perception of the details.

Also, the distance in street attacks is less than one meter (3 feet), so it is difficult to see something as small as a knife or razor blade coming towards us. Maintaining the *mai-ai* (間合い) or “spacing” is essential to be able to defend ourselves or at least survive.

Next, when a person who is not used to this type of situation is attacked in a surprised way, the natural reaction is to recoil and turn their face away which makes it difficult to see something if we do not look in the right direction.

Finally, most of the time when we are being attacked with a knife, it can feel like being just being hit and slapped with something and so we tend not to take it seriously.

Understanding these points should make us become more aware and pay more attention to our training. The key to *tanto-tori* is to pay attention to one’s spacing, timing and, of course, the precision in the execution of the technique.

*Mai-ai* or “spacing” is fundamental in Aikido training. *Mai-ai* is the safe space between us and our opponent that we need to maintain in order to defend ourselves properly. The amount of spacing depends on the style of martial art. The shorter the distance, the more likely we are to be attacked. To give us an idea, the human hand moves faster than the time it takes to see the movement and react. An arm moves approximately at a speed of 6.25 m/sec, that is, it takes around 0.16 seconds to reach a target that is less than a meter away. It is quite difficult for a person to be able to recognize they are being attacked, see a weapon, get out of the line of attack, and apply a counterattack. If we don’t have adequate spacing then our reaction can be late, we can get stuck, or we will be too late.



Supposedly, when we control the spacing, we also control the timing. Attacks can be very chaotic, but they also have a rhythm. Victims aren’t usually stabbed just once, but on average stabbed up to 30 times. Being able to control the spacing enables us to

change the timing of the attack and use that to unbalance our opponent. The correct timing and spacing are essential to be able to move and create the situation to be able to control, cancel or divert the attack and if possible, save our lives.

The facts clearly show that facing a sharp object carries more than an 80% chance of being injured. This necessitates that the execution of the technique be as precise as we can make it. Sensei always said, “In reality, we will only be able to execute the technique to about 50% of what we perfect in the dojo.” Modern defensive tactics programs believe that we will probably get cut, but the problem is not in getting cut, but in making sure that the cut is not so severe that it prevents us from fighting for our lives. Therefore, knowing that there will be technical decline in a real situation and that we will probably get cut, then we have to make sure that our techniques are practiced and perfected to the best of our abilities.

Most of all, we must train our minds and spirits because the difference between life and death in a

knife fight won’t be the person with the best technique, but rather the person who will be able to remain calm. Calmness enables us to read the situation correctly, maintain the spacing and timing and execute the techniques effectively.

Although it is true that the way knife techniques are practiced in classes may seem “very formal,” this formality is a fundamental part of Aikido and it is present in all techniques, whether with weapons or without them. The objective of this “formality” is to establish a physical and mental foundation that trains our bodies so that we can be technically and mentally prepared to face these situations despite the fact that being attacked on the street is less formal and more unpredictable. These rules, formalities and etiquette is what gives us the mental focus.

Training with a *tanto* helps to bring a sense of realism and immediacy that no other attack brings. This practice with a *tanto* forces the students to be serious and focused and it helps to evolve and train their bodies and their minds. Teachers have to do their best to maintain the formality of the training while also teaching effective techniques and students must also do their best to be focused and train hard. Training with a *tanto* is very strict and that is because of the risks associated with being attacked with a knife. •

When we think of the *katana* or Japanese sword, we think of its fantastic cutting ability and its effectiveness. When used in battle, we want a sword that will cut well, be sturdy and be dependable, but it also has to be easy to use.

However, the blade's sharpness is not the first thing we work on. Before sharpness, there are other important things to consider when making a sword – the blade's shape, the materials from which it will be made, the blade's construction, the process that goes into making the blade, and the techniques with which it will be used, to name a few. Although a sword's cutting ability isn't the first thing we work on, we always keep it in mind.

This is similar to studying a martial art. When we begin, some want to be strong, some want the techniques to be effective, or some want to win. Regardless of the reasoning, some have their own ideas of what is best for them and what is important to their development.

Similarly, when we practice Aikido, we worry that Aikido might not be effective. Obviously, Aikido is an effective martial art and so of course Aikido will work. When we ask ourselves if Aikido is effective, what we are actually asking ourselves is "Will I be effective?" It's like a steak, we ask, "Will it be delicious?" Of course, it will be delicious when cooked with the right hands. A fine cut of steak can be deliciously tender, flavorful and juicy, but it could also be a gray, tough, or mass of scorched flesh with its flavor burnt away. It all depends on who cooks it. There are many things that go into making a steak delicious and it is the same when developing an effective technique.

When we practice, we wonder, why do we have to consider certain things like etiquette, basics, posture, our behavior? It is because these things all affect the final outcome. They become the elements to the mastery of our art. Why keep a kitchen clean, the knives sharpened, and the soap properly stocked? Because these are all important parts of cooking a steak.

Worrying only about effectiveness is like cooking and eating while only considering our calorie count. When we cook, we worry about the food's taste, its healthiness, how it looks, and more. There are many factors going into cooking a meal, not simply filling a stomach. If that was the case, we could just eat fast food for the calories.

If effectiveness was the only consideration, why practice to develop ourselves when we could just use a baseball bat or a folding chair? We do that because a baseball bat or a folding chair isn't good enough for us. We want something more. We go to a restaurant not just to satisfy hunger, but to experience something – skill, expertise, culture, care. Likewise, we begin

training because we want something more than just a bat, a chair, or a gun.

We sometimes think of the sharpness of the sword too early just like we worry about effectiveness over correctness and technique. Eventually we realize that the correctness and technique are what make Aikido effective. Most times, a student isn't just given a random devastating technique to practice – that would be irresponsible. A student must also be given a technique which contains the tools with which to master Aikido. Many parts of training can seem meaningless to a new student, but once their value is realized, then a part of Aikido becomes truly understood.

A good teacher considers what to teach in class by thinking, "How does this help the student?" Teachers have to carefully consider whether or not the technique fosters the skills needed to master Aikido or if these techniques are just something to appease the student's idea of what Aikido is "supposed" to be, what martial arts are supposed to be, or what is currently trending on YouTube. If a teacher thinks in this shallow way, then the art may die away. Likewise, if the student cannot, or will not, understand the teacher's rationale, then the art may die away too.



## Mastering Every Step



by Ken Watanabe  
Technical Director

The difficulty between the student and teacher was once illustrated as "Two arrows meeting in midair." Both students and teachers need to understand one another for Aikido to continue. Like the sword smith refining the iron ore in their forge, a student must have the perseverance and faith with which to practice until they are able to truly understand, and a teacher must also teach properly and with care, while pointing the student down the correct path.

Whether it's forging a sword, grilling a steak, or mastering Aikido, every step, regardless of how mundane it might seem, is an important part of creating that end result: a sharp sword, a delicious steak, a good martial artist. A sword may be sharp, but it does no one any good if it's easily broken or if the person doesn't know how to properly wield it. •

I was reading a very rare book the other day. It was written by a sword expert who was enlisted by the Japanese army during the war to repair swords damaged on the battlefield. What is extremely interesting and valuable is that he kept detailed records of each sword he repaired and studied the percentages and frequency of various types of damages inflicted on swords in actual combat. His conclusions are quite interesting for study.

The author's main complaint was that most swords issued during the war conformed more to standards determined by fashion and conformity to the uniform and army regulations than creating the ideal battle sword. As a result of this, many swords were too heavy, or ill proportioned between the *nakago* hole on the tang of the blade and blade length, weight, curvature, etc.

Most swords were not able to withstand the rigors of actual combat and broke. In addition to blades breaking upon impact, he was also critical of the length of the *tsuka* or "handle." If the *tsuka* was too long, it easily broke upon impact. In addition, a longer handle would cause the blade to break very often at the *nakago-ana* or "retaining peg hole" on the tang. Broken *tsuka* were the second most frequently occurring damages to the swords.

Of course, he also admits that much of the damage to many blades occurred with improper usage of the blade. Many soldiers were not properly trained in swordsmanship. I find this very interesting because of what I learned from one of my very early teachers in Iaido. He had come to America to work as a cook although at the time he was already in his late sixties. During the war, he fought in several life-and-death duels with other martial artists while working as an inspector for the Japanese army. Years later, the memories of taking lives with a sword haunted him and he was very reluctant to teach a few of us Iaido. Fortunately, the two sponsors who brought him to America were able to learn from him. Later, the restaurant wanted him to learn more English for his job here and very luckily, I was asked to tutor him in English. Rather than taking money for English lessons, I asked if I could join his exclusive Iaido class in trade. What a great opportunity it was.

I was surprised in practice that he used a very light, short sword – almost like a longish *wakizashi*, rather than a katana – which was about 23 inches in length. It was not the heavy, wide, cutting blade that we think of today. He said that in practice it is permissible to use a long blade in order to develop one's technique. But, in actual combat against another swordsman, a shorter, lighter blade is easier and faster to manipulate. A lighter blade cuts just as well and does not break as easily as a longer blade. It is true that longer blades have a tendency to break more easily and more frequently get *hagire* or "cracks" on the *mono-uchi* or "cutting edge" than on a shorter blade.

It is interesting that all of my teacher's instructions were confirmed over and over again by this author's own findings in repairing swords. Nakayama Hakudo also recommended shorter blades for actual combat and he recommended long blades in practice. Today, we have misinterpreted this for the most part and most Muso Shinden-ryu students use very long blades. Ha-

kudo himself used a blade that was about 33 inches in cutting length although he was barely 5 feet and a few inches in height. One of my later teachers, a direct student of Hakudo Sensei, attests to this fact. Some years ago, I happened to obtain one of Hakudo's personal blades, made by Minamoto Yoshichika, and personally inscribed by Hakudo after several cutting tests. This is not the usual *kokuin* or "stamped tested" inscription by *kiritsuke* or "hand engraved" inscription. In an old video of Hakudo Sensei, he can be seen using this very same blade and he uses it as if it is very light like a feather, as they say. I cannot imagine how fast he could use a much lighter, shorter sword.

Today, we too like long swords, and even I use a longer sword in the tradition of Hakudo Sensei. With a shorter sword it is hard to perfect *noto* or the drawing and returning the blade to the scabbard or with *chiburi*. A longer sword definitely helps one to use their hips and center



## Proper Use of Swords



by Rev. Kensho Furuya

in all cuts and techniques.

It is also fashionable to use very long handles. I think this comes from watching too many *chambara* or "samurai movies." In the old samurai action films, actors carried swords with very long handles for dramatic effect. Much like in the Kabuki theater, the sword handles are extra-long to give dramatic effect to the actor and his moves and dances.

In ancient days, the rule was always that the handle is one-third the length of the blade. If a blade is 27 inches in length, then the handle is approximately 9 inches.

During the Muromachi Period, the beginning age of Iaido, most Iaido blades were, as a rule, only 24 inches in length. Again this conforms to the teachings I mentioned just now. For a 24 inch blade, the handle is only about 8 inches in length – very short by modern standards – but if we examine early *koshirae* "sword dressings" of this period, we do notice that the *tsuka* is about this length in general. It is not because early Japanese had smaller hands, it's because the length of the *tsuka* is determined by its most effective proportion to the length of the blade.

This is just a bit of research trivia. I think it is always more popular to use long handled blades in these modern times. If we do follow the older ways of using swords in actual combat – which we don't today, we can argue that the blade and handle have to be much shorter.

Despite this, I too still recommend my students to use a longer blade in training simply because this helps them to develop their center (hip) movements in the techniques. A shorter sword does not have this benefit for training and its only benefit is in actual combat. The handle, of course, must always be in proper proportion to the blade length. However, I think it is good to keep in mind that in actual combat, a shorter sword is advisable and recommended by the old masters. To practice Iaido, we must learn all aspects of the sword, however old or minute – this is practice. •

**Editor's note:** *Furuya Sensei published this in a slightly different form to his Daily Message blog on July 19, 2004.*

# UPCOMING EVENTS

行事 .....

**Dojo Coronavirus update:**  
**We have started doing Aikido techniques with partners using the jo or short staff to maintain the connection. The classes will still be outside and, we will only offer a limited schedule as well. Please maintain six feet social distancing and wear a mask at all times.**

For more information on Maria Murakawa's watercolor art, please contact her at: marimostories.co@gmail.com

For more information about Mimi Lam's poetry or writings, please contact her at: lammm.mimi79@gmail.com

The Furuya Foundation and the Aikido Center of Los Angeles (ACLA) admit students of any race, color, and national or ethnic origin to all the rights, privileges, programs, and activities generally accorded or made available to students at the school. The Furuya Foundation and the Aikido Center of Los Angeles do not discriminate on the basis of race, color, gender identification, national or ethnic origin or sexual orientation in administration of their educational policies, admissions policies, scholarship and loan programs, and athletic and other school-administered programs.

## Aikido Training Schedule

合気道 時間割 .....

<b>Saturdays</b>		<b>Wednesdays</b>	
10:15-11:15 AM	Regular Class	6:30-7:30 PM	Regular Class
11:30 AM-12:30 PM	Regular Class		
<b>Sundays</b>		<b>Thursdays</b>	No Class
9:00-10:00 AM	Children's Class		
10:15-11:15 AM	Regular Class		
11:30 AM-12:30 PM	Regular Class		
<b>Mondays</b>		<b>Fridays</b>	
6:30-7:30 PM	Regular Class	6:30-7:30 PM	Regular Class
<b>Tuesdays</b>	No Class		

NOTE: Visitors are welcome to observe our Morning, Fundamentals, or Regular Classes.

\*Last Saturday of the month is Intensive Seminar by Invitation only.

## Iaido Training Schedule

居合道 時間割 .....

<b>Saturdays</b>		<b>Mondays and Wednesdays</b>	
8:00-9:00 AM	Regular Class	8:00-9:00 PM	Regular Class



# The Aiki Dojo

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### The Aikido Center of Los Angeles

has been awarded Official *Konin* recognition by the Aikikai Foundation, Aikido World Headquarters.

Our dojos are committed to the study and practice of the teachings of the Founder of Aikido, Morihei Ueshiba and his legitimate successors, Nidai Doshu, Kisshomaru Ueshiba, the present Doshu, Moriteru Ueshiba and Hombu Dojo-Cho, Mitsuteru Ueshiba.

### Affiliated Dojos of the Aikido Center of Los Angeles



Aikido La Gomera Aikikai Kodokai Dojo

Aikido Salamanca Aikikai Kodokai Dojo

Aikido Valladolid Aikikai Kodokai Dojo



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We are a not-for-profit, traditional Aikido dojo dedicated to preserving the honored values and traditions of the arts of Aikido and Iaido. With your continued understanding and support, we hope that you will also dedicate yourself to your training and enjoy all the benefits that Aikido and Iaido have to offer.

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