



The Aiki Dojo

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One Step at a Time



MOVIE MENALITY

by David Ito Aikido Chief Instructor

Furuya Sensei loved *jidaigeki* or “samurai period dramas” and he had a whole library of old VHS and DVD movies. Snooping around in them I found a copy of the original 1963 version of 13 Assassins or *Jusan-nin no Shisaku* directed by Eiichi Kudo. Comparing the Eiichi Kudo 1963 version to my Takeshi Miike 2011 version was interesting. The newer film followed the older version almost scene by scene quite closely even down to the dialogue. However, there are two main differences between the Kudo version and the one directed by Miike. Quite pointedly, there is a lot, and I mean a lot, less blood and gore in the original version. The other difference and probably the main difference is in how the samurai were portrayed. In the newer version, the samurai were more resolved and brash with a sense of bravado, planning an unthinkable breach of protocol to assassinate a lord who is terrorizing people, but who also happens to be the Shogun’s half brother. In the early version, the samurai seem more human, more like normal human beings, who are put into a difficult situation that neither can shy away from. There is a great scene in both versions where the main antagonist Hanbei Onigashira goes to confront the main protagonist Shimada Shinzaemon at his home unannounced as he is plotting the demise of the lord. Both men were students at one time at the same sword school so they know each other. In the newer version Hanbei is incensed and full of anger and goes to Shimada’s home to confront him and Shimada meets

him at the door and calmly listens while the rest of the 13 assassins hide. Hanbei angrily rebukes Shimada and throws around a bunch of threats. In the earlier version it is nothing like that. Hanbei actually surprises Shimada and walks into his house unannounced while they are planning the attack. Shimada plays it very calmly and dismisses the rest of the assassins and sits with his back turned partially away from Hanbei and asks him, “you came to kill me?” After a brief stare down, Hanbei calls it, “an ill twist of fate” and starts reminiscing about the days when they were students and how much he used to envy Shimada. As Hanbei sulks, Shimada comforts him for a brief moment as he says, “perhaps you and I had no other way to live. Being samurai is a helpless job.” Then in a moment of weakness he shares that he really wanted to kill himself in protest to his lord’s action, but that he couldn’t as a samurai because the retired Shogun asked him personally to guard his depraved lord. Shimada changes tone and says, “whatever will ensue between us from now on, I hope we’ll both act manly as samurai.” When Shimada says that, Hanbei sits up straighter, as if Shimada’s words brought him back to life, and then Shimada says as if it’s a matter of fact, “see you again” and Hanbei says sternly, “of course.” They resume their roles as adversaries and Hanbei leaves. Saying, “see you again” is Shimada telling Hanbei that he’s coming and Hanbei’s “of course” is him telling Shimada he’ll be a samurai and will be ready.



As warriors in battle, the easier path is to have an adversarial mentality about the person facing us which demonizes them and makes it easier for us to carry out our duty upon them. After all, aren't they trying to dispatch us, so then they must be our foe? This enemy mentality isn't wrong because it comes from a deep dark place of fear. A true warrior who has reached the highest echelons of Aikido sees things much more clearly and is illuminated past the surface of what the situation appears to be.

In Aikido training, in addition to the martial techniques we are learning, we are also physically learning a different and distinctive philosophy about confrontation and non-violence. Aikido is about peace and training is the path towards inner peace. We develop ourselves because to practice inner peace and give compassion requires precision. This is probably the most distinct difference between Aikido and other martial arts where the physical is emphasized and inner peace is learned last, if at all.

As we train and develop, we gain a clarity about the futility of the side of budo which is about death and destruction and at the same time we come to realize that the real opponent is not the person facing us but the person who is inside us.

Understanding this idea that the true opponent is ourselves and that the true nature of human beings is kindness and compassion, we come

to revere our opponent almost as much as we love and revere ourselves. This may seem like a ridiculous idea that the person confronting us is as human as us, but the more we train, the more we see that the person is not unlike us. We both have dedicated our lives to something and the person facing us is just as loyal, hard working, diligent and sincere as we are, but happens to find themselves on the other side of the same coin. This humanizes our adversary and they cease to be "them" or whatever label we give them to take away their humanity.

A true warrior is one who, like Shimada or Hanbei, finds themselves in an insurmountable situation but who have resigned themselves to their loyalty and their code to be honorable and see their situation to its end regardless of what that conclusion ends up being.

Aikidoists are not barbarians, they are sophisticated highly developed warriors of budo. They know that when thrust into an untenable situation human beings will fall to the lowest level of their self-development and that is why constant training, reflection and development is necessary. One just hopes that that lowest point of their development isn't in a dark place where they will resort to the cruelty and indifference of an animal and not of a human being.

That one moment when both Hanbei and Shimada discuss their situations is for me one of the most poignant. It showed that two high level warriors were still human inside but simultaneously resigned to their fates. It teaches us that humanity is necessary for mastery.

Training develops us for that one moment when it all counts. We fall to the level of our lowest development and wherever that station is, we hope we can still be steadfastly human beings and deliver kindness, compassion and forgiveness even in the face of our own certain death. •



KEEPING THE KATA

by **Ken Watanabe** laido Chief Instructor

We've all heard of *kata* in martial arts. *Kata* means form. Martial arts *kata* to most people are different techniques, performed solo or with a partner, strung together into a series which are to be memorized by the students. However, another meaning for *kata* is shape.

When my teacher, Furuya Sensei, first moved to Little Tokyo, he hired a Japanese carpenter to build the dojo's Japanese interior. As Sensei built the dojo, he noticed the carpenter didn't use the walls of the existing space to base his measurements. When he asked why the carpenter didn't base the interior on the inside walls, the carpenter replied, "the walls are not straight so if I base my measurements on them then all my work will become crooked. Even if the space is not square, your own measurements still have to be correct."

That day, Sensei discovered that Japanese carpentry shared more with *budo* than simply the country of origin; both arts strive to keep their convictions despite outside influences. If the carpenter let the imperfections in the dojo's space influence his measurements then nothing would fit or it would look awkward. Likewise, in Aikido, when our opponent attacks us we cannot allow their power to break our movement and influence our technique.

When our opponent attacks, do we maintain our "shape?" Do we keep our posture, our stance, and our mental stability, or does our opponent's energy break our balance? Does our movement draw in and neutralize the opponent's attack or does their attack overcome us?

It's easy to give in, abandoning the technique and ending up in a game of tug-of-war. This kind of "fighting" is easier to understand; when our opponent attacks, we meet their force with more force to defeat it. When they push or pull us, we resist.

It's important to realize that the goal of martial arts isn't to get into shape or to be strong; the goal of martial arts isn't to kill or destroy our enemies either. It's also not for dominating others or feeding our own egos. Ultimately, the true goal of a martial arts technique is to bring a sense of order in the midst of chaos.

When the opponent attacks, no matter how they attack, it's important to keep our own movement correct. When we can control our own movement, we will be able to see how to blend with, and control our opponent's movement without using excessive force.

In practice, the student should emphasize movement over trying to throw or pin their partner with too much muscle. Of course, prac-



ting Aikido can make one very, very strong, but its power doesn't come from pure physical strength; its power comes from movement, specifically the physical, mental, and spiritual energy in that movement. Its movement is energy, and its energy is movement. This is why maintaining the integrity and balance in our "shape" is so important. This is why no matter how our opponent attacks we do the technique as correctly as we can.

This kind of thinking, of course, can become stiff, old-fashioned, and dogmatic. Meaninglessly doing what is deemed correct is just as bad as running away to something else because we give up too easily. Aikido, at its heart, must maintain the integrity of its basics to keep it an effective martial art. As teachers and practitioners, where do we find the balance? How do we keep its integrity without the art stagnating?

How do we keep our own integrity intact when the opponent attacks and how do we maintain the integrity of aikido as a whole? The balance is in *onkochishin* or "respecting the past as we adjust to the present and look towards the future."

The carpenter builds a Japanese tea house with care, skill, and the right materials in order to keep the shape of a tea house so that with a bit of wind it doesn't collapse into a pile of lumber. Likewise, as students, we practice Aikido with our body, mind, and spirit to keep the shape of Aikido instead of changing it to something common and generic. Now, more than ever, it's important to practice good Aikido and work together to keep its shape intact. •

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by Reverend Kensho Furuya

One Step at a Time

If one wants to approach Aikido as a martial art, it doesn't necessarily mean that we must train to throw the other person hard or try to beat up others. Aikido doesn't necessarily mean that we have to be physically superior to the opponent. I think all of us know this intellectually but forget it in our actual practice. I think the first point is that students should become more aware of their spacing. This is one of the fundamental elements of good, effective technique. Usually, we begin the technique once the attack is initiated or after our partner makes contact. One should be moving before the initiation of the attack and well before contact, maintaining proper spacing, so that one is out of the line-of-fire as the attack is completed. Usually, in practice, and maybe it is because there is not enough room on the mats, most students fail to establish the proper *ma-ai* or spacing before the attack is initiated as the opponent approaches. Watch the spacing first because spacing is not only to negotiate the opponent's attack by establishing the proper distance, but this spacing also greatly influences the proper timing of the technique as well.

Have you ever tried to do something impossible? One student wrote to me the other day that he thought he could never do well in Aikido because it is too difficult. Of course, no one in their right mind will admit that Aikido is easy—it is definitely not. Yet, because Aikido is such a great challenge does not mean that it is hopeless to pursue it. In Chinese calligraphy we must master writing literally thousands of characters. If we think that each character can be written in many different styles and methods, the numbers are almost infinite. Yet, despite the incredibly horrendous task ahead of trying to learn calligraphy, we still pursue our study by practicing one character at a time.

Maybe we can think of Aikido like mastering Chinese calligraphy. There is so much to learn but if we focus on the infinitely broad scope of Aikido as an art, we will probably give up from the beginning. Don't think about it broadly and worry about it. Just begin practice and learn one thing at a time. What is the old adage, "how do you eat an elephant?"

As long as we pursue Aikido with awareness and enjoy our practice, we will eventually master everything there is to know.

There is an old worn-out saying about how a journey of a thousand miles begins with one step. Such a cliché but how true it is!

Long ago, Tokugawa Ieyasu eventually took control of feudal Japan and established his regime which lasted nearly 300 years. Although he was, at first, one of the least likely candidates to achieve this, he did succeed eventually above all others. It is interesting to note that in his instructions to his samurai retainers, he said, "go slowly and take one step at a time. If you try to go too fast, you may stumble and wind up at zero again."

I think this is the best way to pursue Aikido. Go one step at a time and always make sure of yourself. In this manner, I think nothing is impossible for you.

Ultimately, something is impossible because we make it impossible for ourselves. If we think about it, we will find this to be true. When I first joined Aikido, I think I was the worst student around, I couldn't do anything, not even the simplest moves. Yet, I kept trying and trying and although I am not very good, I still have come a long way since my very first day. If you pursue Aikido conscientiously, you can do the very same, probably much, much better than me. Nothing is impossible in this world for you unless you yourself decide to make it impossible for yourself. However, in whatever you do, there is always the price to pay—time, effort, sacrifice, patience, commitment and loyalty.

I heard that in one area of Africa there are ants that build their nests several feet high, often six feet to ten feet high. It would seem to me to be impossible for a tiny ant to build something so tall, yet they do it every day. If a tiny ant can build such a monument, I am quite sure that anyone can master Aikido. •

Editor's note: *Furuya Sensei posted this article in a slightly different form to his Daily Message on January 24, 2002.*

UPCOMING EVENTS

行事

October 13-14th

Aikido Kodokai Dojo's 20th Anniversary Salamanca, Spain
Details to be announced.

October 27 Intensive Seminar

October 28 Children's class
Halloween Party

November 22

Dojo Closed for Thanksgiving

November 23

Special Black Friday class

Aikido Training Schedule

合気道 時間割

Saturdays*

8:00-9:00 AM Iaido
9:30-10:30 AM Advanced class
10:45-11:45 AM Weapons class

Sundays

7:45-8:45 AM Iaido
9:00-10:00 AM Children's class
10:15-11:15 AM Regular class
11:30 AM-12:30 PM Fundamentals
12:45-1:45 PM Open practice

Mondays

6:30-7:30 AM Morning class
6:30-7:30 PM Regular class

Tuesdays

6:30-7:30 PM Advanced class
7:45-8:45 PM Weapons class

Wednesdays

6:30-7:30 AM Morning class
5:15-6:15 PM Fundamentals class
6:30-7:30 PM Regular class

Thursdays

6:30-7:30 PM Regular class
7:45-8:45 PM Open practice

Fridays

6:30-7:30 AM Morning class
6:30-7:30 PM Fundamentals 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

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Saturdays

8:00-9:00 AM

Sundays

7:45-8:45 AM



The Aiki Dojo

is the Official publication of
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We are committed to the study and practice of the teachings of the Founder of Aikido, Morihei Ueshiba and his legitimate successors, Kisshomaru Ueshiba and the present Doshu Moriteru Ueshiba.

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