

Ask the Yudansha!

Question: "What is 'advanced' ukemi? Can you give an example? How is it different from regular ukemi?"

Patty: In Japanese, the word ukemi derives from a verb that means "to receive". As we advance in ukemi, we improve our ability to safely receive the force of a throw or pin and absorb the power of the technique. We become more able to investigate the very subtle energy shifts during a dynamic situation.

A very important component of ukemi is learning how to keep the connection with the changing movements of nage. By being sensitive to the connection, uke begins to FEEL the movement with his/her entire body and develops a receptive awareness that allows the full sharing of the technique. Uke and nage become one movement instead of separate entities.

As ukemi skills develop, not only is there a more flexible connection but uke develops a unified body and mind which allows for a safer and more effective response. I read recently that the ukemi skills in Aikido are more refined and subtle than in any other martial art, and I believe it is due to this factor.

We learn the techniques by practicing closely with each other and when really sensitive to our partners, we exchange very subtle energies. We learn by sensations and perceptions that are not ordinarily used in everyday life and in advanced ukemi, this can occur even during embu practice.

With advanced ukemi, strength and power is maintained throughout the attack but without resistance. To constantly resist nage is counter productive because one loses the ability to relax and blend. When uke resists he loses sensitivity and the ability to notice changes in angle and leverage that occur as the technique develops.

In summary, advanced ukemi means to become more sensitive to the dynamics of force and motion during technique while maintaining a strong, unified attack. It takes a lot of hard work and training but I think with Sensei's guidance, we are all headed in the right direction.

Joe: Advanced ukemi could be learning how to breakfall and prepare yourself to take high falls from koshi nages. Another example is learning how to follow the technique and take the ukemi safely without getting hurt or injuring yourself. Another example is learning to adjust your ukemi for the small and narrow spaces or learning to fall on a crowded mat without causing injury to yourself or others.

Aleta: Advanced ukemi is having the ability to respond to nage second by second, with fluidity and grace. This involves how to protect yourself without depending on nage to

position uke in the right place at the right time. Like a moving meditation uke becomes one with nage, moving with speed and accuracy. Lightness and flexibility are important. Responding without anticipating.

Kim: Right now, for me, advanced ukemi is about trusting my body and attacking without fear.

On a more technical level advanced ukemi is:

*a strong attack

*the ability to roll or breakfall from every technique

*the ability to react quickly (without anticipating) to what nage is doing

*the ability to protect yourself from injury

Advanced ukemi, like all of aikido, is something you have to work hard at and train for. It's not something that just happens all of a sudden when you reach a certain rank. It takes time and commitment and practice, practice, practice.

I've only had glimpses of advanced ukemi in my own practice. These were times when I threw myself into the attack without knowing what was going to happen and with my mind calm, I was thrown hard, and I hit the mat in a perfect position without ever knowing how I got there. My body completely took over. It was a wonderful feeling.

There is a communion, a blending of ki, that takes place between nage and uke and when this is fully developed then your ukemi is advanced. I look forward to when it happens to me!

Question: "Do you have any advice on how to prepare for a test?"

Joe: The best advice I have on how to prepare for a test is to practice as much as you can in class. If you need extra help it would be great to ask the yudansha or any of your sempai's for that extra help in preparing for any tests. They are always ready and able to help if asked .

Claire:

1. Attend open mat time on Saturday morning.
2. Come to class early and ask a sempi to practice with you.
3. Pick out a technique that you are having trouble with and work on it with as many fellow students as you can.
4. Ask Sensei for help and maybe ask if she could demonstrate the technique that you are having problems with.

The yudansha are there to help you prepare for testing but we are not mind readers, you need to let us know that you need help. As we have come up through the ranks most of us have had the same problems that you are having. It was by asking for help that got us through our tests.

Also, I know we are focusing on the dan tests right now, but all tests are important. The black belt tests just have more on them and are more involved.

Aleta: Trust that you know what you know. It's very important to have confidence in yourself. Visualize your being successful, relaxed and confident during testing. Practice, practice, practice. Relax and breath. It is good to remind yourself to take deep breaths. Enjoy yourself!

Kim: One thing I did that I found very helpful was I went over each test the night before...by myself. I was nage and I had a pretend uke. I did each technique of the test, from each attack, and on both sides. It might have looked a little strange to see me doing irimi nage with an invisible uke in my living room, but it was extremely helpful. I think it helped to ingrain the techniques into my muscle memory.

I also visualized my test the night before right before going to sleep. I went through each technique in my head. The key to visualizing is to visualize yourself doing it correctly. If you visualize yourself doing a technique correctly then you'll most likely do it correctly physically on the test. The reverse is also true. Be very careful to not visualize yourself doing something incorrectly because that can stick in your memory as well. You'll also want to visualize yourself being confident and relaxed.

More practical, physical advice: practice. Come to class early and ask a sempai to help you. Come to the Saturday morning open mat and practice. Ask one of the yudansha to come in some other time to practice or practice at a park.

Work on whatever gives you trouble, but also work on what feels good as that will give you confidence. If you only focus on what is wrong you'll forget about all that you are doing that is right.

QUESTION: "Can you explain what it means to be centered? Both how you do it within yourself and how you recognize it in others?"

JOE: One way to be centered is breathe and try to keep control of oneself. How I would see it in others is if they are not centered I can see it in how they breath and in their ki. If their ki is too high, they are not centered. One way to stay centered is to meditate and breathe and always try to empty your mind so that you will be centered and your ki will be better.

MATTHEW: Do not be too high, nor too low.

Do not be too right, nor too left.

Do not be too behind, nor too ahead.

Do not be too hard, nor too soft.

Do not be too strong, nor too weak.

Do not be too static, nor too active.

Do not be too confident, nor too timid

Do not be too wise, nor too ignorant.

To be really centered, forget everything above, but do not let it go.

If given two, make ten.

If given eight, make ten.

To begin to understand Aikido,

practice Aikido.

Centering comes from the form

and discipline of Aikido.

No amount of thought will bring the experience of centering,

only practice.

ALETA: To be centered is to be conscious of one's center within the body. I believe about our inches above the navel. If your energy is up in the head area, it will become easy to become unbalanced. In class, if the attention is on too many things like what others are doing, other than your partner or Sensei, the energy becomes scattered. To be focused and fully aware of your surroundings at the same time. An individual that is not in control of their emotions and thought processes would not be considered as centered. If you have ever watched someone in a rage, for instance would not be centered. Or any out of control behavior for that matter. Someone that fidgets is likely not to be centered.

KIM: A centered person to me is calm, balanced, relaxed, breathing deeply and steadily, and is in control. Being around a person who is truly centered is like being near a deep, calm pool of water.

When I'm centering myself in aikido I take a deep breath, bend my knees, relax my body, and let go.

QUESTION: "Why do we do techniques from static so much?"

JOE: One of the reasons why we practice techniques from static is because it is one way of learning how to do a technique correctly. If you were to do it fast your form may not be good or someone who doesn't know how the technique very well might get hurt. I think it is more traditional in the Iwama style of aikido to practice from static then learn how to do it from flowing or moving. When you practice techniques from static you learn how to break down the techniques into little pieces and really take the time to learn how it relates to do it in motion.

PATTY: The basic principles of Aikido relate to center, relaxation, alignment and connection. These principles are fundamental and must be fully integrated into the body/mind before a fully dynamic, moving practice can be successful. It is only through slow, meticulous practice that we learn to maintain a relaxed, aligned center and to maintain connection between uke and nage during movement. Once we have fine-tuned our attention, we become sensitive to any variation from our balance point. Stop-start practice gives us the opportunity to practice these aspects in detail, giving us a good foundation for the flowing movements of ki no nagare.

ALETA: I believe that the practice of starting from static is practiced frequently because it is vital to practice toe point of focus. Like setting up the neuro pathways for that moment of connection. A preparedness to act with full attention. Setting up the body and mind for the moment of intervention. If one is not ready at the beginning, fully aware, we cannot take full responsibility for our actions.

KIM: Practicing techniques from a static position is the Iwama style of aikido. What it does is to help you learn angles, balance points, and precision. Once you have that in your muscle memory, it will all transfer to more flowing movements.

QUESTION: "What do you suggest I do to help my ukemi get better? I can roll and fall okay, but it still feels rough and I still get a little nervous when I think I'm going to have to do something fast."

JOE: The best thing to work on, even if your ukemi is good and you want to make it better, is to not worry about doing it fast. I have always learned that form is better than speed whether you are working on ukemi or technique. Start out slow then as your form gets better then add speed to your technique or ukemi.

CLAIRE: Just keep doing what you are doing. You could also come in early for class and ask somebody you feel safe taking ukemi from and ask them to work with you and you take all the ukemi. That way you can practice and be able to relax while being thrown. At least that is what is working for me.

PATTY: Being a little nervous is really a good thing. It is the edge of our practice and it

gives us a lot of good information. Learning smooth ukemi comes from practice, training and trusting ourselves and our bodies. We don't want to get hurt but we want to take some risk - it's a fine line that only we can determine for ourselves.

Breathing and relaxing seem to be the key. If we are attentive to the smooth expansion/contraction of each breath during the movements of the technique, body/mind/breath settles and things seem to flow.

MATTHEW: There are four stages of ukemi: intent, attack, reception, disengagement.

You develop the emotional, spiritual and mental desire to attack.

You execute this as an attack.

The attack is accepted into the space created by the technique and you respond to that space as uke.

The space redefines the attack and you must disengage - roll, high fall, end up on the mat.

Practice these steps and your ukemi will improve.

Practice with a more advanced student before class. Attack over and over at the speed you can handle, then start pushing your physical, emotional and spiritual envelope. Make sure you really understand and practice the mechanics of rolling, and high falls. In motorcycle school they teach that riding a motorcycle involves accepting a higher level of risk than you might be exposed to in a car. Ukemi is the same. To get good at it you have to decide to accept the risks. Ironically the better you get at ukemi, the less risk you actually expose yourself to, but you have to decide to accept the risk in the first place. It's mostly mental, and a 'can do' or 'will try' attitude is essential.

ALETA: My thoughts would be to: let go of the fear. Your body knows what to do. Make a conscious effort to relax the body. You can anticipate the direction your going. Trust. As we practice, ukemi gets smoother. It is bound to feel rough at times. Being a little tough is part of practice. It helps me to watch higher belts.

KIM: Breathe. Relax. Let go. Practice. Know yourself. Trust yourself. Practice. Attack with intensity. Work with advanced students. Practice.

Practice attacking.

Practice rolling.

Practice falling.

Practice breakfalling.

QUESTION: "Can you recommend any non-aikido exercises or activities that will help me with my aikido?"

BRYON: I think that anything that keeps you active is a good supplement to aikido training. In terms of exercises, some form of cardiovascular training is beneficial since our activity is anaerobic in nature. However if your goal is to really improve your performance in aikido then you should do anaerobic training such as sprints, interval training, etc. I also recommend strength training, not in order to be able to overpower your partners, but so that your muscles are strong enough to support your joints. I would definitely include rotator cuff strengthening exercises, knee, hip, and ankle strengthening/stabilizing exercises, and core exercises, in any routine you undertake. Other activities I would recommend would be meditation, chi gung, and anything that brings you close to nature and its rhythms. Lastly, I would say that the best way to get good at aikido is to do aikido as much as is possible.

CLAIRE: Any exercises is better than no exercises at all. Strength training is good but I have found out that for Aikido, core training is very important like Pilates, Yoga or ball work. If you have a strong core, you will be able to keep your back straight and that will make your techniques better. It will also make a difference in your movements and techniques.

MATTHEW: Aikido is a Do. This is the same word as Tao. As such, exercises and activities are informed by your Aikido, not the other way around. To be fair, there is, in fact no such thing as many Tao, there is only one Tao. By seeking to understand Aikido in every moment of your life, you are actually trying to understand the Tao. All other activities then become a part of the larger dojo of your life. Basketball, yoga, meditation, art, music, weightlifting are all Aikido in disguise. Practice your life outside the dojo with a constant eye towards recognizing Aikido.

I find that it is less a matter of applying Aikido to daily life, but recognizing the Aikido that is already there. Applying Aikido leads to following a set of rules, recognizing Aikido leads to a broadening of your intimate understanding of space and interconnection. On the mat you discover the response to an attack in the attack, rather than applying the technique to the attack.

But you want something to do for your Do, don't you?

The traditional warm up set in Aikido is the Qi gong of Aikido, and is said to be complete for the art of Aikido, but it doesn't hurt to strengthen your shoulders, stomach, back and legs to better support the technique. Aim for better overall strength and flexibility. Windsprints or other short burst activity is also good, as

Aikido happens in bursts. When I am training for Black belt tests I usually start distance running again and do my short bursts on stairs or in the middle of the run. Pilates, they tell me, is helpful for the core muscles.

Practice two modes of meditation. With my students I call the modes Serenity and Joy. Serenity mode is inward turning, seeking the stillness. Joy mode is outward-inward connecting or discovering. The first usually prepares for the second. The first is familiar in Zen meditation, the second in Shingon meditation. The first is in Hatha (bikram, Ayengar etc) yoga, the second is in Raja (or Bhakti) yoga. The first is in Sweating, the second in Dancing, Chanting or Journeying. The first is in silent Prayer, the second is in Psalmody. The first is in micro-cosmic orbit, the second is in macro-cosmic orbit. The first is in muraqaba, the second in zikhr. The first is in silent observation, the second in joyful connection or union.

Perhaps most importantly is to change your mind. You came to Aikido to change your body's reaction to attack, but your mind is the master of the body. Where your mind goes, your body follows. The Daoists say, "Imagination leads reality." Choose to view life not dimly, or negatively, but openly, joyfully. Do a mental check on the state of your mind frequently. Are you preparing and planning - 'what if-fing' - all the time? Are you avoiding or dreading? Are you worrying, doubting, fearing? Are you opening, embracing, approaching? Are you resilient or rigid. Are you exultant or diminished? You choose your response to the world - not what happens in the world. In Aikido, you choose the response to the attack, not the attack you receive. Choose responses that are connecting, blending, joyful, optimistic. This does not end the attack of the world, nor get rid of the unpleasant, but it changes your ability to deal with it in a way that is resilient, flexible, repeatable, survivable.

You may safely disregard all that I have said here, so long as you honestly, diligently, consistently train in Aikido and allow it to tell you what it is. Aikido will lead you to its truth, as long as you trust it and abandon your ideas of what it must be.

Do not correct the rose because it has thorns.

JOE: Well the best non aikido exercises that I can recommend to help out with aikido is weight training and cardio training such as running walking or wind sprints .

ALETA: My recommendation would be to expect the unexpected. That is be spontaneous in life, rather than falling into habitual grooves. Find the unique in what might seem commonplace. Be in the moment. Be ready to change an attitude or approach to any given situation.

KIM: I think just about any physical and spiritual practice can help your aikido practice. Here are some activities I do outside of aikido that enhance my aikido practice.

Yoga
Weightlifting
Tennis
Dancing
Meditation
Running sprints

Yoga—helps with balance, flexibility, breathing, and centering.

Weightlifting—helps me with basic strength and also explosiveness.

Tennis—helps me with footwork, focus, and breathing (I exhale every time I hit the ball).

Dancing—helps with centering, movement, and especially hip flexibility and openness.

Meditation—helps with relaxing, centering, breathing, and focus.

Running Sprints—helps with anaerobic conditioning.

I don't do any of these activities to enhance my aikido, it just happens that they are all beneficial. Of course, activities like yoga and meditation make sense to do along with aikido, but I feel like dancing has helped me just as much as anything. We are always told to move from our hips in aikido, and what is most dancing but moving your hips! The yoga and dancing help to create an openness in my body and also great body awareness. The weightlifting helps with not only strength, but I feel like I'm less prone to injuries when I'm lifting regularly.

I think the key is to find something you enjoy and to be mindful of what you are doing.

Conversely, aikido also helps me with these other activities! I was recently in a dance class where the teacher was talking about "connecting to the universe," "letting go of the ego," and "relaxing into your body." Sounds like aikido! We also did a dance called the Warrior--the movements were very similar to tenshi nage. It was great to see it come together like that.

QUESTION: "What was the hardest technique for you to learn?" "Do you have trouble with anything now?"

JOE: The hardest technique for me to learn was shiho nage. As far as me having any

trouble with anything now, I am working on making my techniques better which means I am still learning from my mistakes.

BRYON: At first I thought that Koshi nage was the hardest technique for me to learn, but then I realized that Irimi nage was also hard to learn, as was Shiho nage, and Ikkyo, and Tenshi nage, and Kokyu nage... Ultimately I realized that the second half of this question was the only part I could truthfully answer. Yes, I do have trouble with every technique now.

CLAIRE: I had problems with most of the techniques. Irimi nage was a hard one especially with somebody big or tall or both big and tall. I kept trying to make them do it rather than having me do it correctly and then they would have to move with me.

Do I have trouble with anything now! Depends on the day, on what techniques I have a problem with.

I find that I am picking apart my techniques and then nothing seems to be right. I find that one of my problems is that I shortchange my blending, if you do that then the technique is either impossible to do, or very hard to do. So my suggesting is to watch Sensei as she always blends and to take your time, do not get too frustrated, you will get it.

MATTHEW: 1) Sankyo 2) Aikido

KIM: My first response was morote dori kokyu ho. I have always had a hard time with that technique. But then I thought of nikkyo which gave me fits when I was learning it. Sankyo gave me a hard time too. Then I thought of koshi nage which I hated, until one of my sempai made me practice it regularly. Then there's kokyu dosa! I wonder if I'll ever "get" that one. I often wonder if the technique you have the most trouble learning is the one you'll have the most affinity for when it finally clicks. I don't know...I haven't had it happen yet!

I've had many occasions where I've thought I had a technique finally figured out only to discover that I hadn't. Aikido is never dull—there is always something to learn. What am I working on now? I'm still learning everything.

QUESTION: "What is the proper etiquette for parents and/or visitors to the dojo? For example, do we need to bow upon entering, what is the proper way to address a teacher, etc."

CLAIRE: I feel that for a visitor to the dojo, they do not have to bow in as they do not know the etiquette of bowing in when you enter a dojo. For the parents it would be good form for them to bow in when they enter the dojo. It shows their children the respect

that they hold for the place where their children train. Everybody should call Robinson Sensei, Sensei when talking to her or referring to her as she is the Sensei of all who train in the dojo, adults or children. The AikidoKids! teachers are not Sensei's. They can be called by their names.

JOE: The proper way to address an AikidoKids! teacher is sempai and as for bowing if the visitor is a parent or just someone that is watching I don't think that they have to bow upon entering unless they feel that they should do so.

KIM: Visitors should do what they feel comfortable with. They should, however, respect the dojo as they would any place they visit. Following the basic rules, such as removing shoes before walking on the floor, is showing basic respect for the place, just as you do when you go to the library and speak in a quiet voice.

If you are a parent who is also training with your child, then you need to follow the same dojo rules as the kids and other adult who are training. If you have any questions on what those etiquette rules are, then ask a teacher.

Robinson Sensei told me that parents and visitors should act as though there was an invisible wall between you and your kids. You should not get involved in what is happening on the mat. This means not telling your children what they should or should not be doing while they are training. Allow your children to practice and allow the teachers to teach without interference.

This invisible wall also applies to students who are not dressed out and training. If you are there to watch a class, then you need to just watch and not make comments or help the other students.

QUESTION: I'm a little nervous about training alongside so many high ranking sensei's during the November seminar. Can you explain the proper etiquette involved in training with them and also just being around them?

CLAIRE: I have found that all the Sensei's are just like everybody else, great to work with and willing to take the time for new students. Treat them as you would treat a welcome guest in your home. We will have the Sensei's that are teaching and you will know who they are. Always greet them as Sensei or if you know who put their name in the greeting like Robinson Sensei--Goto Sensei--Witt Sensei. When you see someone with a black belt treat them like a Sensei and call them a Sensei, if they are not a Sensei they will say so. If they are a Sensei they will appreciate the respect that you give them. If you have a chance to be next to a Sensei during class please bow into them, it is a wonderful chance to feel the Sensei's technique. The one thing I would strongly recommend is that you don't try to correct anybody that you train with even

though they are a lower rank than you and you feel that they are doing the technique wrong. Just do the technique as close as you can to the technique as it is being shown. Smile a lot and have a wonderful time.

JOE: Well the proper etiquette for training with them is to always bow to them and address them as Sensei. Also if you are around them it is always acceptable to make sure you open the doors for them and allow them to go in first. If you see them carrying their bags or weapons always try your best to ask them if you can help carry their bags or weapons. Never eat before they do--always let them get their food and eat first before you do. Training with a sensei is always an honor and privilege so make sure you always treat them with respect and thank them for coming and training and sharing their aikido with you .

ALETA: I would replace nervousness with profound gratitude and love. They don't bite. Always bow when meeting them, each day or before speaking to them. Keep your heart open and the rest will take care of itself. I find that by opening my heart with gratitude the nervousness gets replaced with joy. Always bow when approaching a sensei. Introduce yourself and offer any assistance at any time, either in the dojo or at a social gathering. Thank them for any advice they have to offer. There will be those that will be assigned to help Sensei's, however, it is best to be aware and ready to give assistance whenever possible.

KIM: I like to remember that even though they've been training many years and have much experience and wisdom, that these sensei's were once in my position. They will be kind and help no matter what level you are at—1st dan or 7th kyu. You should always treat all your fellow aikidoka with respect, but make sure to treat the visiting sensei's with respect. Bow to them whenever you address them, do not interrupt them, listen respectfully when they give advice, open the door for them, and if you see they need assistance (whether to carry their bags or get them a bottle of water) go ahead and ask them if you can help. Even if they do not need assistance, I'm sure they will appreciate the thoughtfulness. Thank them when you are done training with them. It's also a good idea to err on the side of safety. If you do not know whether a black belt you are working with is a sensei or not, treat them as if they are. Also, during a seminar you will work with many people who you do not know and will not know what rank they are. If you and your partner are both white belts and you do not know what rank they are it's best to offer to attack first. It shows respect and the person will appreciate that thought. Above all else, have a great time! Training with aikidoka from other dojo's is a great

opportunity and experience. You'll learn so much!

QUESTION: I hear about blending in Aikido. What does this mean? Is it very important?

ANSWERS:

CLAIRE: When I started in Aikido I never thought much about blending, it was doing the technique that was being shown. Now I know that when you watch Sensei shows how to do a technique it is all about blending. If you don't blend the technique isn't there. When you shortchange your blending, is when you find that you have a hard time doing anything right.

PATTY: There are two parts to any attack: (1) the energy and momentum towards an object and (2) the actual form of the attack, such as a grab, punch or kick. In aikido, we never meet the momentum of an attack straight on - we never oppose an attack directly; instead we move off the line to redirect or neutralize the oncoming energy. The very first moment an attack is identified, nage seeks to control the oncoming motion by smoothly and continuously directing it to a natural conclusion and by blending with the energy. This leading and blending can only be done with a stable balance, clear awareness and most importantly - the unification of breath, body and mind.

One of the greatest baseball players of all time was Sadaharu Oh of Japan, whose batting coach was a student of O' Sensei. This coach, Arakawa-san, used the principles of aikido and developed training exercises to target a recurrent problem with Oh's swing. With the help of his coach, Sadaharu worked on exercises and drills to coordinate mind, body and batting technique. He practiced hitting 90 mile-per-hour fast balls using a one-legged stance. He practiced balance and concentration with thousands of repetitions of his swing. With this constant training and encouragement from his coach, Oh learned to blend with the direct oncoming energy of a fast-pitched ball to become the world record holder for homeruns at the professional level.

In his book, *The Zen of Baseball*, Oh states "If your body is not at one with your mind, you are lost. And no amount of strength you put into your swing will help. You can tell yourself anything, but it is something else to join what it is that you know to the snap of your wrist and swing of your hips." He relates how O' Sensei told Arakawa-san that in any situation that you struggle with, all you have to do is eliminate the ma (space and time) between you and the object. This means to make the opponent yours - absorb and incorporate his thinking into your own and become one with him so you know him perfectly.

This is blending at the highest level, yet we can all achieve it with our aspiration and serious training. We can achieve this unification of body, mind and breath with the

practice and legacy of O'Sensei and Saito Sensei and learn to blend with the occurrences and challenges that face us in our everyday life.

MATTHEW:

Keep
heaven,
earth,
divinity,
humankind
in perfect harmony,
blended, bound together
for all eternity
- O Sensei

-
Musubi (rendered 'blended/bound above) is the mystical power of becoming or of creation; the process of matching one's partner's movement/intention at its inception, and maintaining a connection to one's partner throughout the application of technique.

It is Aikido philosophy manifest. Union with the other in perfect harmony 'til neither self nor other remains.

Is it important? It might be the only thing that really is. It is the root of takemusu*.

*Takemusu aiki = A "slogan" of the founder's meaning "infinitely generative martial art of aiki." Thus, a synonym for aikido. The scope of aikido is not limited only to the standard, named techniques one studies regularly in practice. Rather, these standard techniques serve as repositories of more fundamental principles (kihon). Once one has internalized the kihon, it is possible to generate a virtually infinite variety of new aikido techniques in accordance with novel conditions.

Joe: Blending means to be able to take someones attack and be able to do a technique correctly. It is important to blend with the attack if you don't blend then you are not able to do the proper technique

ALETA: Blending with your partner would be aligning yourself mentally and physically, even spiritually, so that you can see the world through their eyes or their perspective. Becoming one with your attacker.

I believe this is crucial in gaining control of a possibly dangerous situation.

KIM: Is blending important in aikido? Blending *is* aikido. It is fundamental. It doesn't matter if the blend is ten kan or irimi, behind uke or in front, it is the most basic principle of what we do. Think of tai no henko. This is the first technique we do in every class and it exemplifies blending. The uke grabs, nage does a tenkan and is then next to uke. Done. Of course, it is not so simple!

Blending is also what makes aikido look fake to those who see it from the outside. A good blend makes the technique look easy and light...and unreal. That is because there is none of the bumping and blocking that happens in many other martial arts. Watch videos of O'Sensei and you can see how miraculous good blending can be. When he does aikido is doesn't look like he's doing much of anything, it is so effortless. He's there one minute, and then the next, he is gone. It's all about the blend.

Take note of your own techniques. If you feel like uke is heavy, or you are using too much strength or the technique just doesn't feel right, then you are probably not blending thoroughly. Short changing a blend is common, especially when we are learning. When you get it right, though, and the blend is smooth, aikido is effortless.

QUESTION: This month the yudansha were asked to share their thoughts on ukemi.

CLAIRE: In my practice of Aikido I thought for a long time that learning the techniques was the most important thing. I now know that ukemi is as important or almost more important than the techniques. If you can relax (really hard to do) when you are the uke you will be able to feel the technique and then be able to do it. How you train to be a good uke is again to relax and not be afraid. If you have confidence in your partner that they will take care of you and will not go faster or harder than you can take, that will go a long way to being a good uke. I know that I have a long way to go but am enjoying the trip.

PATTY: A great challenge for me during ukemi is to stay awake and maintain strong zanshin as the technique develops. When I first started taking ukemi, I thought of it as a passive action, not recognizing the importance of staying actively involved. I find that I can stay active by focusing on balance, timing and breath. My definition of a good uke is one who is alert, active and fully committed to the encounter.

JOE: Well what it means to be a good uke is to give good honest attacks and be able to roll or breakfall from any technique as safe as you can without injuring or hurting yourself. How I would train to be a good uke is to start with the basics such as rolling low and doing back rolls correctly and then working towards breakfalls. To be a good uke means you have to do the basics first then work up to the advanced level.

ALETA: Good ukemi can teach good Aikido. I am protected with good ukemi. By

practicing good ukemi, I learn to stay connected with my partner. I am really in the moment.

KIM: First learn to roll well, both forwards and backwards. What I mean by well is to have rolls that are smooth (no bumping), efficient (you can get up and down quickly and take up minimal space), and extended (you have unbendable arms). From there work up to breakfalls. These also should be smooth, efficient and extended. Once you feel comfortable with rolls and breakfalls then you can have more fun with your ukemi. It's great fun when you no longer have to worry about how you will fall.

Listen to your body and to nage's body. It may sound strange to "listen" to a body, but that is what is happening when a nage and an uke blend well together. This listening is an important part of being a good uke. You keep your mind quiet and your body relaxed and you can then feel what nage is going to do. If you are not listening for some reason--maybe you are thinking about how you don't understand the technique, or how you'd like to work with someone else, or you are hot or cold--then your ukemi will be stiff and uncomfortable. Part of the listening process is to relax and follow nage.

Sensei sometimes talks about the yin/yang aspects of ukemi. When you attack you should be yang--hard and direct. That is one aspect of ukemi. The first attack should be very direct and hard, and also honest. You want to give nage a good attack because if not then nage has nothing with which to work. If you give a weak grab or a half hearted strike then nage doesn't receive your energy. Without good energy then aikido doesn't work. The whole point of aikido is to work with your partner's energy. If uke doesn't give energy then nage can't do aikido.

There is a point where your attack should turn yin--soft, relaxed, and malleable. This is where the listening comes into play. Listen and pay attention to what nage is doing and follow that lead. But don't just follow without any energy or intent. Soft, relaxed, and malleable does not mean you give up. Your intention is still to attack nage, but now it is in a different way. Now the intent is either to find an opening so you can reverse, or get back into a position where you can attack again. Sometimes the intent is to just get out of the pin or throw without getting hurt. Either way you have to be relaxed. A tense, stiff body can't feel what nage is up to. A tense, stiff body is also more likely to get hurt.

Finally, my favorite part of ukemi is that I can easily turn my mind off. It's a good idea in aikido to always turn off that thinking mind, but it is especially easy when taking ukemi. I just go along for the ride!

QUESTION: Concerning jui-waza. I know we are supposed to go towards the attacker in order to get control of the situation. Sometimes I feel like I'm too close;

the attacker has no energy and I have to create it. If the attacker is coming with a full head of steam, then the energy seems clearer and easier to deal with. Is there a 'space' in which it is ideal to perform jui-waza?

ANSWERS:

PATTY:

We need to determine that space based on our perceptions and according to the situation at hand. This is where ma-i and zanshin come into play as well as the natural rhythms of the techniques.

One idea of space would be to allow uke to rise and in a sense, greet him with a relaxed attitude and stance, seeing what the intention might be, then dealing with the situation as necessary. Maybe uke would like to stand up and apologize or just walk away. We don't want to get into uke's face in such a way that s/he is forced to attack us - we don't want to turn into the aggressor. If we are in a neutral yet ready position, we can respond appropriately to the situation at hand, whether it is with a handshake or with yonkyo.

Another idea might be the technique of inhaling uke as s/he rises from the ground - we inhale them into our space. This helps our timing, so that our exhalation will carry the power of our technique should we need it against another attack.

MATTHEW:

We are not supposed to go closer to the attacker to 'control the situation. We are to maintain ma-ai. There is a huge difference. Ma-ai is proper spacing - physical, mental, emotional and spiritual space. This space is between uke and nage before the attack, during the attack and in the techniques as well as after the throw.

Now for the unpopular part:

When the attacker is giving no energy, they are cheating the game of jiu-waza. It's really very disrespectful. When I attack Sensei I intend to knock her flat if I can - I cannot feel Aikido if I do not give an honest attack, others cannot observe Aikido if it is not a real attack, Sensei cannot find holes in her technique if it is not a genuine attack. If Sensei does not have the chance to improve, you are assuring that your own Aikido will suffer. You are assuring that everyone will suffer. Ukemi cannot mature if you do not 'ride the edge,' to borrow from high performance motorcycling.

I'll rephrase: an attack that lacks integrity (slow or fast, fluid motion or stop motion) is insulting to everyone in the dojo, especially to your Sensei. It is an insult to everyone trying to learn the art. It is a failure to take ownership and responsibility.

Finally, it is uke's job to attack. If they attack and the technique does not work, nage has something to work with, something to work on. It is nage's responsibility to examine his/her technique and unlock the secrets. It is not uke's fault. If uke

pretends to attack, then, success or failure, it is uke's fault completely - and that's when uke gets hurt.

JOE:

The best way I know how to deal with the space in jui waza is to continue moving so that you can use the space that will be idea for you. It is always good to practice good zanshin when doing jui waza.

BRYON:

I personally think that the correct distance for jui waza is going to be different depending on both the attacker and the nage, and also depending upon the goals of the jui waza.

If the nage does not have a clear idea of how they can and will control the attacker, it will be dangerous to get too close as the uke may hit or grab you before you are in control. I also do not think it is a good idea to get too close if the uke you are working with is not very agile, as it will be hard to get them moving and changing direction before they have had a chance to get some momentum. On the other hand if the uke is very quick and likes to attack only once they have gotten very close (not what we would really consider good attacks) then you will be at a disadvantage if you let them come to you, and especially if you are retreating. If the attacker is heavy in their bodies (not necessarily physically heavy though it could be) it is often better to let them get up and build some momentum before trying to throw them.

If the goal of the jui waza is to shut your attacker down, or to show complete control over your attacker then it is better to stay right on top of them as long as you are capable of holding your own. However if the goal of jui waza is to demonstrate a variety of clean well executed techniques then I think it is better to give the uke some room to get up and develop a strong attack.

I think that jui waza will always look a little different depending on the dynamics between the two people, and these dynamics can change even within the jui waza. A good nage and uke should be able to deal with these changes the differences between partners.

ALETA:

If the attacker has no energy then there is no jui-waza. It becomes something else. Either the attacker is afraid to give you his or her energy, or they are being passive aggressive and controlling the encounter to take your energy, and that could be because they are afraid, in which case you have already won. In which case Nage must be spontaneous in dealing with this lack of energy.

QUESTION: What advice do you have for beginners?

ERIN: Basic etiquette is so important in Aikido. Know who sits to your right when you line up. When it is time for class to begin or end, quickly find that person and line up. Make sure that there is two fists' distance between you. Whenever Sensei asks for something to happen, like standing up to warm up or to fetch weapons, you should be running to your spot on the mat or to your weapons bag or rack. You should then be running back to your place. Move quickly and with purpose. Sensei should never be waiting on students to do what she asks.

When practicing in pairs, the junior student should always attack the senior student first. When there is an odd number of people, the odd person should find a pair and bow in to them. The odd person should then sit to the side (or stand, if space is lacking) and wait for the pair to each finish two techniques. When finished, the pair should bow to each other and then one of them should sit (or stand) and the odd person can train. Rotate in this fashion until each person in the trio has trained with both of the others. Watch the others while they train, and be ready to jump in right away when it is your turn. Always make sure that your uke has a clear place to land. You are not just training with your own partner, you are also training with the pairs on either side of you.

Etiquette is not just one more thing that we throw at you to think about while you are training. Martial arts training has the potential to be very dangerous, and etiquette helps to keep everybody safe. Also getting the etiquette right trains you be aware of your whole surroundings, not just what is happening right in front of you. Sensei calls this thinking martially, and is very useful for other things, like driving, as well.

CLAIRE: When you are new to Aikido there are so many things that are different than anything you've done before. Where to place your feet, what hand to use, how to move; as you practice it will all fall into place. Don't be afraid to ask questions of Sensei or the senior students. We all have been where you are now, with the same questions and concerns.

Come in a little early and grab one of the senior students and ask them to work with you and ask your questions then. If you have questions during class ask your questions after class ends. When its time to practice don't be afraid to bow in to anybody and everybody. When you get your standard book, read the first part of the book that will answer a lot of your questions. A lot of thought and work went into the book, take advantage of it.

JOE: The advice I have to give to a new person/ beginners would be that if you have any questions on basic etiquette to ask an advanced student to make sure that you are doing the bowing or anything that has to do with the basic etiquette correctly.

KIM: Ukemi is a very important part of your aikido training. When you are a beginner

the ukemi may feel awkward or fake. You may wonder why you have to move a certain way or turn your body in order to fall better. It often seems counter-intuitive. However, the point of learning ukemi, and learning it well, is to protect yourself. If you learn to fall or roll or break fall safely out of a throw, then you can get up to train more.

Furthermore, your role as an uke is to assist the nage with learning the technique. You are not there to give nage a hard time or to lock nage down. Many of us go through a period when we become more comfortable with our aikido and with our fellow students. It becomes tempting to give our nage's a hard time. Try to resist that temptation. If you are working with someone who is just beginning then you will only succeed in frustrating him/her. When you are just beginning it is hard enough to figure out where your feet go and which way you are supposed to turn; a stubborn uke only makes it feel worse. We are here to help each other learn aikido. If you are working with a more advanced student you should not try to be a difficult uke for one reason--self protection. If you try to lock down an advanced student then he/she is most likely going to do the following; 1) throw in an atemi. If you are not prepared you'll end up getting a punch in the nose; 2) change the technique. This is called henka waza. If you are a beginner and your partner changes the technique in the middle and you are not prepared and your ukemi is not fully developed then you can get hurt. What often occurs is that the second technique happens more quickly and abruptly (for the uke) than the original one. If your body is not trained to detect when your nage is changing the technique then the ukemi is harder to handle.

One more thing to know about ukemi. It is not good to get into the habit of walking out of a throw (even if you can). Often when you are working with another beginner they cannot throw you in such a way that it makes you really have to fall. Take the fall anyway. Sometimes advanced students work more slowly and gently with beginner's than they do with each other. We go slower so that you don't hurt yourself while you are learning the ukemi. We also may not make you feel like you are being thrown off balance. Go down anyway. Sometimes the mat is crowded. Learn small space ukemi. Take small rolls and cover your head! Even in small spaces you should do the ukemi. It's very important to get your body into the habit of falling and rolling. One day you may run up against someone who throws you hard and fast and you have to know how to get out of it without getting hurt.

When you feel you are ready to go faster, ask your partner. It is okay to tell your partner that you'd like to try attacking faster, especially with a senior student. But remember that if you go faster on the attack then the ukemi will be faster as well. If you want to go tearing into your nage full speed, be prepared to get thrown and have to fall at full speed. It is also okay to tell your partner that you don't feel comfortable rolling or break falling or even going fast. However, sometimes the senior students know when it is time to push you a little. There may be a time when a senior student throws

you around in, say, in irimi nage and you are pleasantly surprised that your feet can move so fast! Practice your ukemi as much as possible. You'll find that it's a lot of fun being thrown around!

QUESTION: I'd like to practice aikido at home, but I'm not sure how to do that. I don't have a partner. Do you have any advice on what I can do on my own?

ANSWERS:

MATTHEW:

Ha! Another double edged question!

First, the practical:

- 1) Practice weapons. Pay attention to correctness in all aspects of your weapons form. Explore and discover how energy comes from the hips.
- 2) Maintain Zanshin at all times.
- 3) Connect with all things: don't just reach for the coffee cup, connect with it before you even touch it.
- 4) Do the warm up exercises - they are Aikido's Qigong, and are based in its body-theory.
- 5) Shadow box the forms: move through the forms like they were Taiqi postures; do the same with the ukemi for the technique.
- 6) Make sure to always stand in hanmi.
- 7) Make sure you are placing your feet on the ground with the correct movement as you walk.
- 8) In a crowd, see the holes in the crowd and move gently with purpose through them.
- 9) Meet conversations and demands with space and blending. It is your mind and spirit that must be trained, not just your body.
- 10) Love more constantly, more deeply, more inclusively.

Aikido is a path. That is the meaning of 'Do' in the word. If you only walk it only during class, it will take forever to reach Fuji.

However...

A new student came to study with a master. 'How long until I become a master?' 'Twenty years.' The master said. The new student was shocked. 'I will work twice as hard as anyone else, I will do nothing but the art. How long then?' 'Forty years.' The Master said.

Aikido reveals itself to you. You must train hard, with as much concentration and attention as you can, but you cannot speed up the learning, you can only slow it down. Aikido will explain itself to you, as you are ready to hear it. Constantly prepare the ground, nurture the soil, water and tend to the sprouting seeds. They will mature of

their own, in their own time.

JOE:

Well you could train on your own at home but I think its better to train in a dojo with other people and the only thing you could do at home is work on your weapons.

BRYON:

There are a number of ways to train on one's own at home or a park. The first and most obvious is to practice weapon suburi and kata. Although I think most people would like to train their taijutsu, practicing weapons alone can help to develop focus, patience, strength, endurance, and proper body mechanics; all of which will transfer to taijutsu as well. Another easy way to practice alone is to work on ukemi. Most people can find a carpet, rug, or some grass to practice their rolls on, and anyone can practice fast and powerful attacks anywhere. It is also possible to practice footwork and body movement alone by practicing happo giri (8 direction cut), irimi, koho tento (rowing exercise) and tenkan (with the 2-step). Finally, it is possible, once you become familiar with a technique, to practice both the uke's and the nage's roll as separate kata. I consider this to be a more advanced practice personally, as again, it is only possible once you know the proper foot work, arm, and body movements. As a side note I would also like to encourage people to do some strength, flexibility, and cardiovascular training on their own. Increasing one's general fitness will not only make aikido practice easier, but it can decrease the chance of injury as well.

QUESTION: What is the best way to instruct or correct a kohai—verbally, physically, or both? When someone is just beginning, how much instruction should I give? Finally, if you see someone struggling can you help even if he/she is working with someone else?

ANSWERS:

MATTHEW: I pondered about this a bit. The question is a trap. My answer, then the trap, then the answer again:

Answer:

If a student is sincere about Aikido, one of the meanest things you can do is to teach.

The student is trying to see Aikido's beauty.

The student is trying to hear its melody.

Struggle purifies.

The trap:

If you teach, they will not learn.

If you do not teach, they will not learn.

Nanchuan's monks were arguing over whether a cat they had caught existed or not. Nanchuan heard the argument and came out into the courtyard, seized the cat and put his knife to its throat.

"Say something beyond whether the cat exists or not, or I will kill the cat."

A moment of silence.

The answer:

Nanchuan killed the cat.

JOE: The best way I know how to correct or instruct a kohai is to show them, then I explain to them what I am doing. As for instructing the new people, I usually just watch and observe them to see if I need to help them. If I see someone struggling and they are training with a sempai or a cohai I ask first before I offer my help or assistance. If they say no I just continue my training, and if they say yes then I am able to offer my assistance or help to them

BRYON: I think that with most people the best way to make corrections is both physically and with words. However I think that often people spend too much time trying to correct beginners. Often so much time is spent trying to explain a technique that little or no training actually occurs. As sensei has said numerous times it is better to limit yourself to only one or two corrections. It should instead be made clear to beginners that they need to become responsible for their learning and seek to understand aikido through their bodies and experience. In regard to helping someone you are not working with, this is generally reserved only for sensei, or the high ranking yudansha if they are assisting sensei. If you are training with someone and notice that someone in another group or pair is having trouble, it is not your place to help them. At most you could get sensei's or the instructor's attention and let them know that there is a problem, or if you and your partner are more highly ranked than the people having trouble, you could split up and work with them. Finally, it is most important to realize that it is the job of the sensei or instructor to teach, everyone else should be focused on training.

QUESTION: What keeps you coming back?

ERIN: I started Aikido as a way to stay active and to get out of the house. I also wanted to learn those crazy rolls and flips that I saw some of the students doing. I learned to do those, but I also learned other things too. I learned how to control my body. I was very unaware of how my body occupied and moved through space when I was a kid. I was always bouncing off of things and tripping people up, and my mum was worried that I would hurt myself badly sometime. I also learned patience, in that I would not look as good as Rudy and Dave and Sarah and Rachel by my next class. I learned perseverance by turning up at that next class anyway. I keep coming back because every time I do, I learn something. I learn something about a technique, something about movement, something about me, something about somebody else. It doesn't have to be the secret of Aikido, or how to solve the energy crisis to be worthwhile. Something as simple as learning to not let your elbows collapse in the middle of shiho nage can make my whole night. I come for that awesome moment where I know something that I didn't know before.

CLAIRE: I've never thought about what keeps me coming back. I think one thing is the challenge of learning new things. I don't mean just learning new techniques, but learning new things about the art of Aikido and learning new things about myself.

Everything you read about people my age say that in order to stay younger and in shape you need to challenge yourself. I am challenged each time I am on the mat. Just when I think that I know just how to do a certain technique, I look at it different and or all of a sudden I learn to breathe different, learn to relax and it changes everything. Each new partner challenges you in a different way. I also know one of the things that keeps me coming back is all the wonderful people we have in our dojo and have had over the 9 years I have been training.

PATTY: This is what keeps me coming back:

1. The beauty of the techniques and learning the details as we attempt to gain mastery.
2. Sensei, who gives us all so much support and shares with us her deep knowledge of Aikido and Budo.
3. A sense of connection with a larger tradition.
4. The people and practitioners that share their efforts.
5. Over and over again, I see how much it helps me in my life and in my relationships.

JOE: Well what keeps me coming back is I really enjoy training in Aikido. It brings balance and harmony into my life. I really enjoy training with everyone.

KIM: I like the immediate physical feedback that I get from training with my partners. I can then carry over the lessons from that feedback into my regular life. When I have a problem or conflict in my life I can often see it in purely aikido terms. A

conflict is just energy coming at me and if it's emotional energy it's no different than physical energy. I've learned in aikido how to receive and redirect someone's energy physically. But I've also learned how to deal with it emotionally and that is something I can take out into the world with me.

I come back because aikido gives me strength. I'm not talking just about physical strength, because I can get that in many other places, but emotional and spiritual strength.

I also come back because of all the wonderful people with whom I get to train and learn.

QUESTION: I am a beginner but I want to work with the black belts more. It seems I am always on the opposite side of the mat from them. Is it okay to get up and go to who I want to work with? Or do I have to work with whoever is next to me? What is the proper etiquette for bowing in to the higher ranked students?

ANSWERS:

ERIN: Good for you wanting to work with us. It is perfectly okay and even expected that you go to get who you want to work with. Also, after the first time that the class lines up (when we bow in) you no longer have to line up by rank. You can sit where ever you want to on the mat. Sitting next to the person with whom you want to train next is a pretty good way to make sure that you get to train with that person.

PATTY: This is a very good question. Take advantage of your training time and make the most of your opportunities to learn. It is very important to take the initiative to train with your sempai and to make efforts to go directly to whom you want to work with.

I am not sure if this is correct in all instances, but I would say that as a beginner, don't be overly concerned with etiquette. Of course, bow in to your partner with respect and note that it is customary to bow directly in front of your partner, not off to the side. Other than that, just go for it!

There is a type of practice that may be useful in this situation. As the teacher is talking and demonstrating technique, determine which of the sempai you would like to work with. As you watch and listen carefully to the teacher, at the same time hold a strong and focused intention that you will immediately and without thinking, run to the sempai that you have selected. The split second that the teacher indicates to practice, rush like the wind to your person and see what happens. Don't think. Don't hesitate. No gaps. Just pure response. I can guarantee that 99% of the time, you will be able to work with the person that you have selected.

By the way, there is a very good book that I would recommend to any beginning student and which is available at the dojo library called "Mastery". It discusses the path that we take as we attempt to master a discipline. The author, an Aikido Sensei and former educator, describes the ups and downs, plateaus and other issues that emerge as we learn and apply ourselves to a field of study.

Continuous learning and perseverance are key matters. Learn at every opportunity and always remember - only you are in charge of your training efforts.

MATTHEW: As a beginner I was *afraid* of the black belts, not because they were going to hurt me, I just thought they would be annoyed. Sensei said we had to train with everyone, so I started to do a zigzag. If I was practicing on the left side, when Sensei clapped I went over to the right, next time to the middle and so on.

Everyone else was moving around too, so a well thought out strategy like that didn't work.

Remember, you can train with anyone, but be happy with each partner. The black belt may have a better grasp of the technique, but a brown belt may be better to learn from because their path is closer to yours. It's similar to Teaching Assistants and Professors. The TA may be better at helping you get the basics because they've just mastered them.

Proper etiquette: approach, bow, keep good Ma'ai. If they are standing, you stand. If they are kneeling, you kneel. If they are practicing the tango when they are nage, you do the tango. Trust that they have a reason why they are doing the tango.

You cannot learn if you do not trust. Trust in Aikido even if it looks like the tango.

Remember, you only have to have good etiquette if you want to learn Aikido.

JOE: When I want to train with a black belt I usually go sit next to them before Sensei shows another technique so that way I can train with them.

BRYON: Although it is traditional to bow into someone close by after sensei has demonstrated a technique, you do not need to limit yourself to this practice. It is acceptable to go over to a yudansha and bow into them and it is also okay to call their name to get their attention, just don't shout. This works best if you want to work with the student just used as uke by sensei to demonstrate. The biggest issue I have with these ways of bowing into an uke is that often people do not properly show respect to sensei before trying to find a partner. You must wait until sensei has said "go ahead, thank you, onegaishimasu, dozo, domo, arigato, etc.." and bowed to her uke after demonstrating, before you bow to her and THEN get the attention of another student and bow to them. I would recommend that once sensei claps to stop work on a certain technique, you take a quick look to see where someone you might like to work with is sitting and find a place close to them. If you keep using this strategy you will eventually

get the opportunity to work with yudansha. Finally you could talk to yudansha before class and let them know that you would like to work with them. Just remember not to monopolize the time of any one yudansha or any other uke. They need to be able to train with a number of different people, and you do too.

ALETA: It is always encouraged to work with higher belts. Take the initiative! The proper bow is the same.

QUESTION: What do I do if I'm working with someone who is ranked higher than me and he/she is doing something wrong? Also, what do I do if I have a problem with someone who is of higher rank than me?

ANSWERS:

ERIN: If you're working with a sempai during class, then you can go to Sensei and ask her about it as if you are the one who is doing it wrong. That way you won't be correcting a sempai (which is very, very bad manners, and should not be done), but the fault can still be fixed. It also allows the sempai to save face. Kohai should not correct sempai, but at least in my personal case, if I ask for feedback from my partner, I'm giving permission to comment. If you're having a more general problem with a sempai, it is always appropriate to speak to Sensei privately about what is going on.

CLAIRE: If I am in class, I would get the instructors attention and say that I am having problems with the technique and if she or he could help me. That way she or he would be watching and it would be up to the instructor to correct the other student. Also, when I am nage I would do the technique as the instructor is showing. If it was at a seminar I would do the best of my abilities in receiving the attack and when it was my turn to be the nage I would again do it like I saw the instructor do it. (I have done this at seminars)

If I was having a problem with a higher rank student. I would find a time to talk to Sensei about my problem, again I would not blame the higher rank student, I would just say that "I" seem to be having a problem working with the other person and would she please watch and see if she could help me in finding out how I can correct the problem.

PATTY: I would recommend saying something if you are uncertain about a technique. In this way, you can discover what the issue might be. This can be done tactfully and with a respectful manner. Maybe the Yudansha will be happy to hear your thoughts... or maybe they might end up correcting you in the end. Or maybe they will become angry and that's their problem. Remember nothing is absolute. And there are no mistakes...only opportunities to learn. In the end, it is best to check with Sensei regarding a technique,

but having a discussion (brief if you are on the mat) may be a good way to discover something new about your practice.

As far as having a problem with someone - be grateful! That is the edge of your practice. Aikido is unique in that we always work with a partner and there are many teachings within that model. Just as pebbles in a riverbed become smooth over time from tumbling among themselves, our rough edges are smoothed out as well from the friction of our practice.

MATTHEW: I am assuming we are talking about technique and not selling hot stereos out of a pickup truck.

Our dojo used to be far more traditional about this in the past. In prior times, as kohai, you had no right to do anything about a sempai who was doing a technique differently than you expected. It was assumed that they were working on aspects of a technique that you were unaware of. If you didn't like practicing with a sempai you were to practice with them more often. If a sempai told you to do something, you were to do it. You didn't have the right to talk back - not to your Sempai and not to your Sensei.

The most important words I learned were "Yes, Sensei." The next most important were "Yes, Sempai."

The Yudansha followed that same rule, but then, as now, the majority of the Sempai had trained with each other for years - the hierarchy was not as obvious because they could read each other. Remember, of our current Yudansha who started with this dojo, I am among the "youngest" with only seven and a half years here.

I trained with Sempai that were very smooth, very gentle. That must be true Aikido, I would think. Then I would train with others that scared me or were rough. That is not Aikido, I would think. Because I had an image of how the art should be, I blocked my own opportunities to learn.

There is a buddhist phrase: If you meet the Buddha on the road, kill him. I met the buddha in Yudansha that fit my ideal of the art, but not in those that did not. I created an attitude of deep respect for only part of the picture. From that partial image I created my categories of right technique and wrong technique, right practice and wrong practice.

The old answer to the questions directly, if I may be so bold as to summarize what both sensei and my sempai told me: You do your technique, the Sempai will do theirs and if you can, steal whatever it is they are doing for later in your training.

If your problem with the sempai is not one of risk of serious injury, but one of frustration, fear or a conflict with your idea of Aikido: deal with it. It is a mirror held up to your soul.

Treasure conflict, it is the seed bed of growth.

JOE: I know it is not the best thing to correct someone who is of a higher rank than you. I think the best way to handle that problem would be to speak with the sensei so that the problem can be corrected without anyone getting upset. Also if you have a problem with someone who is of a higher rank than you is it not a good idea to tell them because it will only make things worse between you and the person who is of higher rank than you; again i would speak with the sensei so that whatever problem you have it can be handled properly without having any further problems between you and the person who is of higher rank than you.

ALETA: Honesty is the best policy. I would talk with Sensei about it. She is a genius with diplomacy. Understand that we are all here to learn at every level. There will be many opportunities to perfect our techniques. Sometimes working with someone that you have difficulty with,gives a greater lesson.

QUESTION: I've been hearing about the upcoming seminar with Goto Sensei. I'm a beginner. I know I can go but was wondering what one gets out of attending seminars? What can a seminar do for my aikido?

ANSWERS:

ERIN: Mostly, seminars are fun. You get the opportunity to do techniques that we don't practice very often and you get to do them with partners that you don't get to train with that often. In daily class, we often spend a lot of time on basics, and rightly so. Aikido requires a good foundation. At a seminar, you can start to learn how to build on that foundation. Sensei once described daily class as like cake. Not from the standpoint that it is easy practice, but from the standpoint that it forms a base for other ingredients to rest on. Seminars are the icing that goes on top of the cake and makes it better. Also, did I mention that seminars are fun?

JOE: Your Aikido grows and gets better when you attend seminars. Seminars are a great way for your Aikido to expand and for you to be able to learn more techniques.

ALETA: Aikido is expansive. One can spend their life studying this art and still have room to learn more. It is a great opportunity to study with another Sensei. It is a way of learning through a new perspective.

QUESTION: Why do we practice weapons?

ANSWERS:

ERIN: Weapons provide a visible indicator of ki flow. If the tip of the sword drops,

then that means that the students hand's are relaxed instead of fully extended. The extra couple feet of wood makes this easy to see. Weapons also provide a context for the empty hand attacks. If a student can imagine his or her hand as a weapon that student will be able to energize the attack properly and give nage lots of energy to work with. Plus, it's really fun.

PATTY: I find the weapons work to help me visualize center-line more precisely and subsequently to control the center-line - more so than with open hand practice. It gives us the opportunity to be really exact with our angles. That accuracy then translates to our open hand techniques.

Weapons work also helps with distancing and timing and helps us internalize complex patterns of maai. Our observation and visual accuracy is trained at a different level as well, and this enhances our ability to respond quickly and precisely.

Weapons also helps our concentration practice. As we hold a weapon in our hands, there is a sharper focus point and this helps to bring us to a unified state of mind. Therefore, constant training with weapons can help us with our attentiveness in everyday life.

I've been reading Dave Lowery's book, "In The Dojo" and he devotes a chapter to weapons in the Martial Arts. In Japan, weapons are considered dogu, or instruments of the Way and have been considered capable of elevating the spirit of their users. He states that to recognize this aspect of the Japanese dogu is to understand their essence. He further explains that the dogu represent a bridge between art and implement, between the aesthetic and the utilitarian. In our particular lineage, our weapons are an integral part of our practice and this translates into all aspects of our lives.

As we work with weapons we are reminded of the seriousness of our practice. Living lives of general affluence and ease, it is easy to forget how vulnerable we really are; it is easy to take much in life for granted. Our weapons work remind us to be constantly vigilant, constantly attentive to the great matter of life before us.

JOE: We study weapons because it helps to improve our techniques in Aikido and it also teaches you to be aware of your zanshin and maai when training.

QUESTION: As a new student to aikido, and someone who has studied other self defense techniques, I wonder why defense against kicks and/or ground skills are not reviewed?

MATTHEW: When I was in second grade another student determined that the chair I had been sitting on all day belonged to her. She attempted to take it from me whilst I was sitting on it. I, naturally, objected, and being much smaller than she, bit her soundly

on the arm.

I responded with the best tool at hand, my teeth.

Generally, Aikido does not demonstrate ground fighting, kicking, nor for that matter, strikes against the face or the groin, nor techniques against Iron Palm, Mantis Hands or elbow strikes.

Assuming that O' Sensei knew what he was doing, and I think that is a fair assumption, he structured our practice with great intelligence and vision. He included a complete body of practice that would cover all situations; a set of tools that, like teeth, are broadly applicable.

He has given us, through Aikido, the option to respond with the best tools at hand.

JOE: One of the reasons why we don't do much defenses against kicks is because those who haven't learned how to kick or fall correctly may hurt or injure themselves

KIM: The main reason we don't practice kicks is that the ukemi is difficult. The leg is put in an awkward position and uke's knees and ankles are at risk.

That being said, you can treat a kick in the same way as you would treat any attack. The principles behind your aikido are the same no matter what the attack.

As an example: my husband and my son were wrestling around one day. My husband got our son pinned in such a way that he was on his knees and his arms were pinned up behind him; his head was on the ground. My son asked me how to get out of that using aikido so I got myself pinned down. It was a very uncomfortable and vulnerable position—one that could very well happen in "real" life. I decided that to "do aikido" I'd take my husband's energy forward since that was the way he was leaning (he was pushing my head into the ground). My arms were pinned but I still had use of my legs and hips. I planted my feet on the ground and pushed as hard as I could while keeping my head down. He went flying over my head. I was able to get up and on my feet before he regained his balance.

I did not use any aikido techniques like we practice in class but I used the principles of aikido. An attack is just energy coming at you. Deal with it on the level of energy and forget the form in which the attack takes.

QUESTION: How do you keep your practice interesting?

CLAIRE: I am able to keep my practicing interesting because it's never the same. I go through periods of being focused on a certain aspect of my training. Right now it's my breathing and it's changing how I do the technique and receive the technique. I asked Choat Sensei almost that same question. He said that he picks out one thing he wants to

work on and works on it before he teaches a class and after class.

JOE: One way I would keep practice interesting is to do different techniques and to add weapons into my daily practice.

ALETA: I don't need to "keep" my practice interesting. It already is. I am consistently making new discoveries in my practice as to how I can improve technique. There are many techniques I have yet to discover.

KIM: I've never found aikido to be uninteresting. There is always something to work on, something to learn. One could spend months just working on tai no henko! I would pick one thing that you'd like to work on, improve, or delve into deeper and then do it for however long you need. Since Aikido aims to enhance your physical, mental, and spiritual life, there is no end to the learning opportunities. It is all interesting.

QUESTION: Give an example of how aikido has manifested in your life outside of the dojo. Or give an example of how you've used what you've learned in aikido outside of the dojo.

ANSWERS:

JOE: One example of how I used aikido outside of the dojo--someone was having a bad day and decided to yell at me. Rather than just staying there and yelling back I just calmly walked away and didn't say a thing. I felt that was the way I used aikido off the mat. Instead of attacking them I blended with them.

ALETA: I've learned that life is often not what it seems and to be prepared or watchful. Not to be paranoid, but more aware of my surroundings. My life is sometimes a randori experience. Forces coming from all directions. I am learning to keep my cool. Respond when necessary and in an intelligent manner. One example: I went dancing. A large man repeatedly bumped into me while I was dancing. It seemed that he really wanted to take my balance. I decided to take his. He went flying across the dance floor and falling. He no longer bothered me.

KIM: Aikido has permeated every aspect of my life. Aikido came when I was sitting at a park and felt threatened by a group of young men. I thought about O' Sensei saying that he was a part of the universe and to attack him was to attack the universe. I connected with all that was around me and those men walked around me as if I were surrounded by a protective bubble. Aikido came to me when a friend was in a difficult relationship with a man. He kept emotionally pushing her and she was pushing back and resisting him. I told her to just let him push but to step aside and let him go past. In my mind I could see a jui waza with her attacker coming at her with the double kata

grab. All she had to do, I thought, was turn away. She did step aside and this man is no longer in her life. Aikido came to me when someone was yelling at me. At least I thought he was yelling at me, but when I was about to engage him, I stopped and thought, 'is this an attack?' It wasn't. He was just yelling to yell and be a pain. I ignored him and he stopped. Every day my actions and reactions are influenced by my life on the aikido mat.