

Aikidosphere

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Q&A with Akira Tohei, 8th dan

Part One

Editor's Note: The following are excerpts from weekly question and answer sessions that were held in the 1990s with the late Akira Tohei, 8th Dan Shihan. The sessions took place after the first of two classes on Tuesday and Thursday evenings at the Midwest Aikido Center in Chicago. The first class was always scheduled to be of a more fundamental focus, thus the questions were dominantly asked by newer students of the Center, although members of all levels participated. The setting was one of Sensei having just finished teaching, the mat swept, the chores quickly done -- he would then make himself available for questions.

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Part One

What are the principles of Aikido?

Masakatsu - Righteous victory, proper attitude

Agatsu - Victory over self

Katsuhayahi - Victory over speed of light, doing things so perfectly that time is no longer a factor

Who did the Aikido calligraphy that is hanging on the shrine?

This was written by Doshu Kisshomaru Ueshiba, the son of O-Sensei and presently the leader of the Aikido world. He presented the scroll to me when I was sent to Chicago by Hombu Dojo.

What is written on O-Sensei's picture?

Takemusu Aiki which is another name O-Sensei used to refer to Aikido.

Take = Budo, martial spirit

Musu = Creation, birth of

Aiki = Aikido, harmony, love

What is the meaning of bowing during practice?

Bowing is a show of respect and courtesy. In the martial sense, it is a baring of the neck to the opponent, indicating trust that one will not be harmed. In the social sense, it is a humbling or "making lower" of oneself -- putting the other person on a higher level of esteem than yourself.

When bowing, which hand should be placed down first?

We cannot say which hand, right or left, should go first, since styles are different according to the situation and school of thought. In some martial arts, especially when one is using a sword, the left hand is placed down first since this is the side where the sword is worn. But in Aikido since we do not carry weapons, it is acceptable to simply place both palms down at the same time. What is important is that our hands form a triangle and that we perform the bow with sincerity and respect. In some arts, for example in tea ceremony, it is proper to place the right hand down first as the sign of utmost courtesy.

At the end of class, after bowing to O-Sensei and then to the instructor (Sensei), is it necessary to bow one more time when Sensei leaves the mat?

No. Only two bows are needed.

After the bow at the end of class, what does it mean when you motion with your hands?

This gesture means that class is over and you can bow to your partner and leave. But proper etiquette would also dictate that you do not move as soon as the gesture is made -- you pause for a respectful moment and then disperse. Since this is my "home" dojo, it is not necessary for you to wait until I am off the mat. If we had a guest instructor or if I were visiting another dojo, students should wait until the instructor has bowed off the mat.

Do we need to bow when exiting the mat?

Yes, bow from the seiza position.

Should we bow when we enter the mat level of the dojo after removing our shoes?

Yes, from a standing position.

Do we need to bow to a Shihan when we pass him?

No, only if you interrupt him. Do not call attention to yourself.

What does "onegai shimasu" mean?

Literally, I respectfully ask this favor of you. (Please teach me. Please come to my aid.)

Please explain the circle-square-triangle logo of our dojo.

These shapes represent Aikido.

The triangle is like the beginner -- strong, rough around the edges. Movement is in a direct line, like irimi.

After some practice, the movements of the beginner become somewhat longer and more solid. This square is like nage and uke moving together. This is also the shape of the pin at the end of a technique.

The circle is what we are aiming for -- flowing, fluid, smooth movement.

How old were you when you began the practice of Aikido, and how did you find it?

I was 17, right after World War II ended. I wanted to help my country after its defeat by the U.S. I had returned from training to be a kamikaze pilot, and Japan had surrendered before I could fly my suicide mission. This sense of loss overwhelmed me, and I was searching for a purpose in life.

We have heard reference to "old-style" Aikido practice. Does this mean that it has changed over time?

I do not think there is an old or new style. Of course, when O-Sensei was young, his physical movements tended to be more rigorous than when he was older, but this is true for anyone. If you practice diligently, there is no distinction between styles. I teach what I learned during the time I was with O-Sensei.

What are some of your observations of Aikido practice and O-Sensei's teaching?

O-Sensei had a certain aura about him. We deshi thought he was almost divine. His gifts shone through during practice sessions, and each day was a different perspective.

What is the difference between budoka and bugeisha?

Budoka is a professional martial arts instructor, whereas bugeisha is an instructor from an outside group. Aikidoka is a professional Aikido instructor, not students.

What does mushin mean?

Mushin means no mind, nothingness. It is very important to have this natural feeling during practice. This term is similar to heijoshin, but heijoshin should apply to your entire life, not just your practice.

After many years of training, technique becomes mushin (no mind) How does this apply to life?

When you first take a driver's test, you concentrate very hard to maneuver the car correctly. But after many years of driving, your level of proficiency is increased and the same conscious focus is not required. Or take the example of a secretary who must hunt and peck when she first learns how to type, but after several years can perform very quickly and without looking. Extra effort is no longer required to find the letters on the typewriter.

How can we relax better while waiting for class to start?

Empty your mind of outside distractions by breathing slowly, deeply, quietly. As you are emptying your self, become aware of the atmosphere of the dojo and be open and receptive to the teachings of O-Sensei.

Is a balanced mind and a forgiving spirit required to practice Aikido?

Agatsu is all important.

If someone is upset or angry, they do not have neutral feelings, and it is as if a gate is closed. With this sort of attitude, one is not receptive to any teachings. A student needs to be ready and open in order to learn.

Are there exercises we can work on when we are away from the dojo that would help us become centered?

All the exercises we do in class can be done at home. To get the most out of them, you must make sure that you have the proper frame of mind and are doing the exercises with care and attention.

How should we address senior students?

Since everyone is a dojo member, call them by name regardless of rank. You can address senior members as "sempai" if you wish, especially if they are teaching class. (You would not call them "sensei" even in a teaching situation.)

What are proper questions for sempai? How do we talk to them?

You should feel free to ask sempai whatever you don't understand. If they do not know the answer, they should be willing to find out.

The role of sempai is to help new members by showing, not teaching.

What if sempai is asked a technical question?

Answer in your best judgment. If your answer is challenged, your response should be that there are many ways to perform a technique.

A dojo is not a school, however. It is a place where people come to pursue the same path. If a member challenges what is being learned, they are no longer members.

I would like the yudansha to think beyond the technique -- to get to the essence of the technique. Anyone can go through the motions, like a robot. But in order to understand why a technique works or where the movements fit in, this takes a lot of hard work and training. And this learning is done by working with a partner on the mat, not from watching videos or reading books.

At what level should you begin helping and teaching others?

Helping is not teaching -- be very clear about this. Students' roles are not to teach, but to help their fellow students.

Is it easier to learn by watching or being told how to do something?

Experience is the best teacher.

Then should sempai say nothing when practicing, only demonstrate?

Yes, a verbal explanation is not the best. There are times when it is necessary, but it should not be the first impulse. If you talk too much, you are not

a teacher, not a sempai. Students mistakenly try to understand something with their heads rather than allowing their bodies to experience and learn it.