

Aikidosphere

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Q&A with Akira Tohei, 8th dan

Part Two

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 (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 Two

What is the correct way to do kokyu dosa?

If someone is sitting in front of you trying to block your movement, the natural reaction may be to want to push outward from your seated position. But if this person is stronger than you, you will not be able to go against this force, so you must instead lead them downward to the ground. It is important not to clash with your opponent but to blend with their power.

The pin which is applied at the end is not a show of force to demonstrate how strong you are in being able to prevent uke from getting up. Don't try to hold down or press your partner into the mat -- the important thing is for you to be properly centered when sitting seiza. If you are in an immovable posture, your partner will not be able to get up.

Why is kokyu-nage named so?

Kokyu, meaning breath, is so natural that one does not have to think about it. The techniques should be very flowing and smooth, never forced, and always following the natural line and movement of the body.

When breathing, you should never inhale or exhale loudly. Breath, too, must be flowing and smooth, never forced. Some students exhale loudly, thinking this helps them to relax and do a technique, but this is merely empty noise. Natural breathing is quiet, silent.

What about kiai, especially during techniques such as kokyu-nage?

If the kiai is a natural response, not forced, then it is acceptable. Some students, however, want to yell because they think this gives them more power, but all they are doing is being a nuisance and distracting themselves and others. The kiai must be absolutely natural and spontaneous, an almost involuntary response. O-Sensei's kiai was something which welled up from his very being. Many would agree that it was like a supernatural phenomenon.

Why do we bow to O-Sensei's picture when we take weapons?

We bow out of respect and gratitude to O-Sensei and to show our humility in being able to practice his art.

How should a beginner practice with a bokken?

It is not necessary for beginners to practice with weapons. Wait until later in your training. After you have practiced various techniques for many years, then you can more easily progress on to weapon techniques.

Are there any special bokken exercises that will improve hand techniques?

Bokken techniques are done only from the right side. If you practice with a bokken, do your exercises from a variety of postures -- seiza, tachi waza, suwari waza -- in order to develop your overall technique.

When doing bokken techniques, is it better to start with gyaku-hanmi or ai-hanmi?

Both are acceptable depending on the technique, but the basic stance is gyaku-hanmi.

What is the purpose of jo waza?

This is another perspective, a different application of hand techniques.

If you have mastered hand techniques, you should be able to perform the very same movements with a bokken or jo and with the same proficiency.

What part does speed play in Aikido?

The more speed, the more power. But the first consideration should be correct technique. Speed comes in when necessary.

How do we know when to attack harder?

If nage requests it. But it is very important to remain calm and maintain a proper attitude.

Is Aikido always on the defensive side, and how do you use it to attack other people?

Aikido training is not to learn how to attack people, but for purposes of practice, we need to have nage and uke. Since nage does not need to defend if there is no attack, uke learns how to attack properly for practice purposes only.

When on the streets, do you attack uke or do you allow him to attack and then react to this attack?

I don't know. In the dojo we practice with the goal of improving our selves. With training, our technique improves also which may possibly help in case of a real attack. In the streets, however, is not a practice situation so I cannot speak to this.

Can you use kicks in Aikido? Which techniques could be used to defend against kicks?

Kicks are not necessary in Aikido. Animals use their feet, not humans.

As for defense, any technique applied against a punch or strike, for example shomen uchi, yokomen uchi, or tsuki, can work against kicks because the direction of a punch would be the same as a kick.

While doing free-style techniques with multiple attacks, how do you know if someone is behind you?

After completing a technique, turn and look around. By shifting your hanmi you can see in all directions.

As you practice throwing several partners, you must always be aware of what you are doing and understand the moves you are making -- it is not just a matter of go, go, go.

How does one keep the ki low?

If I understand the question correctly, you are asking how to become centered. You begin by relaxing your body completely, taking cleansing breaths, and sinking your thoughts as deeply as you can. If it helps you, think about your center of gravity shifting downward into your abdomen.

As you continue your development, you should find yourself being able to maintain a low center no matter how vigorously you train. But if the awareness and mindfulness are not there, you will not be centered.

Should we practice even if we are tired?

If you are only a little tired, you can still practice at a slower pace, at your own level with an appropriate partner. But you must be able to remain focused and aware. Like eating, you must be aware of the food in order to enjoy it.

If you are very tired, it is better to sit and watch class. As an instructor I must be on the mat all the time, but a student has an option.

What is the difference between iki

Iki is breath as in the medical sense, while kokyu means breathing in through the nose and out through the mouth as when training.

Why do we do the rowing exercise?

To teach us to move from the hips and to help not only our bodies, but also our feelings to become centered.

Where should one focus the eyes during a technique?

Do not look into your partner's eyes, but focus somewhere in the area of the nose. This should allow you to see the entire field of vision.

How many irimi techniques are there?

Irimi is a direct entry; irimi nage is a technique.

It is more important to understand the feeling of irimi, of making two lines than it is to worry about technique names.

Why do we use atemi? How often should we use atemi?

Atemi is to used as a last resort if uke is resisting. During practice you should not have to use atemi if your movements are correct to begin with.

What does koshi nage mean?

Koshi means hip and nage means throw.

What is the highest rank you can get in Aikido?

In some special cases 10th dan has been awarded.

What is the protocol for testing?

Testing is done by rank, progressing from fifth kyu up. The instructor (Tohei Shihan) is seated to the right side of the shrine. When you hear your name, move quickly to sit seiza facing the shrine with your partner, in the order in which your name is called. First bow to O-Sensei, then to the instructor, and then to your partner.

When a technique is called out, the student sitting on the far right (the first name called) is nage and performs first, continuing on until the instructor says to switch. Do not pause simply because you think you have completed the technique -- continue until you are told to stop.

Nage and uke then switch roles, and the second student performs the same technique until told to stop.

When the test is over, the same order of bowing is repeated, and the students move quickly off the mat.

During the test, there must not be any talking on or off the mat. All members, whether watching or waiting their turn to test, must be respectful and quiet at all times. A test is not a public event, and spectators are not invited. No photography is allowed, and only Aikido members should be in the dojo.

Are the hour requirements for testing unique to this Dojo?

The number of hours is a measuring point, meaning you are eligible to try testing. I do not know about other groups because what they do is none of my business. Years ago when the U.S.A.F. was first formed, test requirements were standardized, but now each region's Shihan has modified these for his area.

How can people supplement training for a test?

Come to class, come to class, come to class.

End of Part Two.