

# Aikidosphere

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**Q&A with Akira Tohei, 8th dan**  
**Part Three**

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 Three**

**When the M.A.C. hosts a seminar, what is our role as students?**

You should create a welcoming atmosphere which means a clean environment. Try to make visitors feel comfortable, but if you are a beginner, remember that there are some roles which only senior students should take.

Be willing to learn and to perform necessary tasks. During class, practice with members from other dojo.

During a seminar it is hard to tell the rank of our partner and who should go first in doing the technique.

If our dojo is hosting a seminar and you are not sure about your partner's rank, always defer to the guest. This is common courtesy. Also defer to age.

**What do you do when you know your partner is a visitor who has not been announced to Sensei?**

Suggest immediately that they announce themselves and take care of the necessary paperwork. Visitors must sign a waiver before they can practice. Those who are on desk duty need to identify visitors and have them properly introduced before practice.

**Is it possible to have a time scheduled for free practice?**

There is time as soon as the Dojo is opened, before the first scheduled classes. In between the two evening classes, there may be some free time provided that all cleaning duties are finished first.

**What does the word Kangeiko mean?**

Kan means cold and geiko is from keiko which means practice.

Kangeiko is a special training session held during the coldest part of the winter. At the M.A.C. this is a ten-day program at the end of January or the beginning of February.

**What is the meaning of the New Year's decorations on the shrine?**

These are typical Japanese symbols for the New Year.

The round rice cakes are called kagami mochi, or "mirror rice cakes".

The shape is round like a mirror which is one of the three sacred symbols of the supreme Shinto deity, the Sun Goddess. A mirror also plays an important role in reflecting back to us our selves and our actions.

A sheet of white paper, a symbol of purity, is laid under the rice cakes. Green leaves or evergreens represent longevity and growth, and the tangerine placed on top signifies the passing from generation to generation, turning from green to color.

If we were able to do so in our dojo, I would like to serve the traditional sweet bean soup and rice cakes at our Kagami Biraki celebration every year. This is when the kagami mochi is broken up into small pieces and passed to every member of the dojo, to be eaten in a sweet bean soup. As we share this offering together, we can all be rejuvenated and rededicate ourselves to Aikido.

### **What is Kagami Biraki?**

This is a New Year's celebration in the martial arts, usually around the 15th of January. The traditional ritual is for the kagami mochi (rice cake) which had been offered on the shrine to be broken up and passed to every member. Kagami means mirror in Japanese, and this sacred symbol of the Sun Goddess deity reflects our true selves.

### **What is the true meaning of Dojo?**

A Dojo is not only a place for training the body and disciplining the mind, but it is also a unit like a family. We are all members of this Dojo, and just as in a family, we need to all take responsibility for the well-being of the group.

During practice we look after each other so we can benefit mutually from our training. After practice, we work together to clean the Dojo because we have dirtied it as we trained. We dirtied it -- therefore we need to clean it. This is the least we can do to prepare the Dojo for those members practicing after us.

It is important to perform menial tasks with a willing attitude. This is part of our training. And it is also very important to be able to anticipate what needs to be done. Students should not have to always be asked to do chores -- they should notice that things need to be done and then do them before having to be told. Mindfulness is good training. This is how we can all pitch in to care for our Dojo, our family.

### **What is the role of uke in terms of harmony? How do you know when this happens?**

The resulting feeling between nage and uke is that there is a certain good flow coming from the way they are practicing together. As students advance in their training, they will be able to adjust their movements, speed, and intensity to maintain this harmony and learn to give themselves over to their partners as uke. There is no resistance, but enough tension to make the throw natural and correct.

### **What role does atemi play in Aikido?**

Atemi should be used only as a last resort. But as we train, we need to be aware that atemi can come in at any point during a technique. We can always use atemi, but we choose not to. I feel that atemi stops the motion of uke and takes away from the flow of the technique. When movement stops abruptly because of atemi, there is a disruption of harmony between nage and uke.

How should we breathe when doing techniques? Should we exhale at the end of a technique? Should we be holding our breath while throwing?

Above all, breathing must be natural. And holding one's breath while doing a technique is not natural. The more you practice, the easier it will become to be able to control your breathing and to remain in this natural state while doing a technique.

There is a tendency for beginners to hold their breath when throwing, first of all because they are tense and apprehensive about doing the move correctly. But there is also the false notion that holding the breath gives one more power. This might be the case when doing an activity like weightlifting, but in Aikido the breath must be continuous.

Contrary to what many students are in a habit of doing, it is not correct to suck in a big breath and then forcefully exhale, thinking that we are helping our body to relax and be strong. We are not using physical force to do techniques -- we are relying on ki. And as ki and breath unite, this is an absolutely natural flow.

One way to train yourself to breathe properly is to remember that Aikido is learned by the body, not the mind. Your head sometimes gets in the way of your body learning a technique. Don't think too much -- just let your body feel how the moves need to be done. Then your body will also take care of the breathing rather than your mind trying to control, and thereby stopping, the flow. This is why you must come to the Dojo and practice on the mat -- you cannot learn Aikido by reading books and watching videos.

I'd also like to talk more about coming regularly to the Dojo for training. We all lead busy lives, and sometimes it is hard to make a commitment to come to class. But if your intention is to pursue Aikido, then you should have a sense of pride that urges you to practice regularly. This feeling of

pride is not one that boasts of the effectiveness of Aikido or that compares and criticizes other martial arts, but one that encourages you to grow and develop, Masakatsu. And the only way you can make progress in using this tool to polish yourself, Agatsu, is to practice on the mat regularly. Staying at home and watching videos or reading books is not training.

This Dojo is not a school. There is a big difference between going to school and practicing at the Dojo. Don't confuse these two. As long as you keep paying tuition at school and do a bare minimum of work, you can probably stay year after year even if you don't attend class, and perhaps even graduate. A Dojo is different. Unless you come to train often, you will not advance. You must put in time. This investment of time and energy will not only aid your progress in Aikido, but the cumulative effect of all members training together will help build our Dojo to be a strong community living out the principles of Masakatsu and Agatsu.

### **How does budo blend with Aikido?**

Aikido is budo.

### **Can you practice Aikido and not practice budo?**

When you practice Aikido, you are practicing budo.

### **What difference, if any, is there between being physically centered and mentally centered?**

When we talk about the body being centered, we often use the term "keep one point". This means that the body's weight is dropped down into the abdominal region to a point just below the navel and that this center must be immovable. In order to maintain this physical posture, however, the mind must be trained to remain centered also. Otherwise, no matter how stable your center of gravity may be, someone physically stronger will be able to move you.

When practicing how to "keep one point", it is essential that the body be relaxed. If one is not successful in staying relaxed, perhaps this indicates a lack of being centered mentally, a lack of concentration and discipline. Just as the physical body needs to practice movements and techniques, so also must the mind be trained. When the two unite and flow together quite naturally, there is a sense of complete mindfulness and awareness which gives rise to correct Aikido.

### **How can we help uke who have trouble doing forward rolls?**

Try to explain the movement first, as talking may calm the beginners' fears. When the explanation seems to be understood, then do the physical motion slowly, over and over.

### **What should a beginning student's goals be?**

There are many. Some students want to learn how to be strong. I began Aikido training in Japan after the end of World War II when everyone in our defeated country wanted to become stronger, but that is not as important as learning how to concentrate and center oneself.

### **What should an advanced student's goals be?**

Again there are many. People have different styles and, therefore, different goals. Some people have a need for more power, but like all worthy goals, this is not something that can be achieved immediately.

End of Part Three.