

Aikidosphere

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Choosing Partners

by T.K. Chiba, 8th dan



It is always enjoyable to work with a partner you know and who understands you. He or she can be co-operative or even helpful to your particular problem at a given stage of training. It is, therefore, natural to seek partners at your own level.

However, if progress is to be made in training, particularly in the development of a solid physical base and dynamic, flexible movement, an ideal practice should include many different elements. In this regard, some of the basic concepts commonly understood in the Japanese martial arts need to be carefully considered.

First, you should practice with partners who are training at a more advanced level. In this training, keep an open mind to the individual characteristics of your partner, which vary from person to person. Train your eyes to the diverse expressions of the art and the reasons behind them, such as sex, age, height, weight, mentality, personality, nationality, history of training, and physical condition. Cultivate your powers of observation. Practice and apply your technique with maximum effort, so that you can come to know your limitations and can learn to extend them. (If you don't know what your limitations are, you cannot work with them). Learn ukemi that is applicable to different styles of execution.

Second, practice with partners who are training on or about your own level. Apply what you have learnt and reconfirm the learning process. Try to see your own problems and weaknesses at any stage as they might be reflected in your partners. Observe closely when others of about your stage overcome a particular problem, and work to discover how it has been overcome. This process of overcoming problem refers not only to a problem with technique, but especially to breakthroughs to a higher dimension of physical awareness.

Third, practice with partners who are training at a lower level than you. Confirm your understanding of basic techniques and apply them with minimum effort. Learn to control yourself and yet make the technique effective. Practice especially with beginners who have no pre-conception of movement, so that you may study the workability and precision of movement. In all three of the basic training guidelines above, maintain an attitude of flexibility. Train with members who are larger than you in size, height, weight, etc., with those who are about the same size as you, and with those who are smaller than you.

Above all, take the opportunity to bring yourself back to beginner's mind.

To properly apply the concepts stated above, I generally conduct classes so that students change partners frequently, at least twice in the same technique. I consider it desirable to have students practice as much as possible with every person present on the mat in any one class. I have heard of a dojo where one's partner for the practice period is fixed beforehand. This custom reflects the ignorance of the teacher.

Generally, there are two forms of training in which the above guidelines will be applicable. The first form is when you are receiving instruction from a teacher, i.e. during scheduled class. The second form of training is free practice. Within free practice there are two elements: to work with someone, and to practice alone, without a partner. Practicing alone, without a partner, while valuable, especially in studying weapons, is outside the scope of this particular essay. Usually, free practice occurs towards the end of a class, during the last ten minutes or so. Its purpose is to immediately re-confirm what was taught in class.

However, free practice is not limited to the relatively short time given to it in class, but should include that part of training conducted outside the class schedule. Without doubt, an outstanding Aikidoist is one who has used free practice as much as possible as a way to train, both with others and alone. This initiative is one that I find lacking in American students. When I was uchideshi at Hombu Dojo, there were always a few students who stayed behind after the class of the day for free practice. (This caused considerable problems for the uchideshi who had been working all day and were exhausted but could not rest until all members had finished training. Uchideshi had to be well skilled to snatch a nap for ten or fifteen minutes, still wearing gi, taking the opportunity whenever possible in order to survive!)

It is not my intention to assert the importance of vigorous training, however, while the mentality of the general student body is limited to training by instruction only. I hope that the above information will give some light to your future training.