

Aikidosphere

Yoshimitsu Yamada
8th Dan, Shihan
USAF Chairman

On Being a Good Instructor

By Yoshimitsu Yamada, 8th dan

Editor's Note: This article by Yamada Sensei has been reprinted with the permission of Budo International, a major martial arts magazine publisher in Europe, for which Sensei is a regular contributor. Photos courtesy Bill Breshnihan.



In this issue, I would like to discuss what it takes to be a good instructor, as well as the proper mindset for being effective as a teacher. Needless to say, my point of view is purely based on my experience as an Aikido instructor. I have also watched some of my own students become teachers and it is through them and my own years as a Sensei that I made certain observations.

One of the most pertinent facts is that there are more important aspects than just technical skill to be successful in the art of teaching. I have noticed that it is not necessarily always the most talented Aikidoist who can actually impart what he or she knows about the art. For example, an excellent ball-player is not automatically an effective coach. This concept shows us that it often takes something more than physical ability.

A teacher needs to be respected and beloved by one's students. Speaking of respect, I often hear teachers complaining that their students do not offer them the proper respect. In my opinion, respect is not something that is owed to you, nor can you force it upon anyone. It is to be earned, mostly through experience, self-confidence, and respect for others.

To be a good instructor, your student needs to sense your years of committed experience and confidence in what you are doing. Unfortunately, in my case, I always regretted that I became an Aikido teacher so young, immature and relatively inexperienced in the ways of the world. Aikido headquarters had no other options, as Aikido was a new art and there were not many practitioners dedicated to spreading Aikido at that time. I was sincere, but without the requisite people skills to be as effective as I could have been. While being young, one's technique might be strong because of their physical prowess. However, one might lack other factors, which help to become a leader. For example, social experience, how to deal with people or how to act like a human being are traits that one learns through time.

One thing I always have in my mind when I teach is that among my student body, there are many different kinds of people from different fields, and that they are already established and mature in their own professions. They are not unlike myself. Interestingly enough, I truly started feeling comfortable as a teacher as I approached my fifties. As I have said before, in addition to time and

experience, it is also crucial to have confidence, in order to be a good instructor.

Quite often, I come upon instructors who do not allow their students any freedom and stop them from going to other seminars given by other instructors. They might even go so far as to say that staying with them is enough and the students need not expose themselves to other influences. To me, it shows a lack of confidence on the part of the instructor. Letting your students see other worlds keeps them free to use their own judgment. That kind of self-assurance is an important way to improve oneself as a leader.

I remember distinctly one time when at an large seminar of different Aikido Shihan, there was a group from a particular dojo, who instead of training with rest of the attendees --which is the essence of the "seminar experience"-- only trained amongst themselves. Their teacher, who was not one of the Shihan, who also attended the seminar, forbade them from branching out, so as to not "corrupt" their Aikido.

In addition, instead of attempting to do what was being demonstrated, they continued training as they always did. How sad that is, for the students who could have benefited from feeling different styles, as well as for the teacher who did not have enough confidence in his students to trust that his students could develop their own style through other influences and still be devoted to him. In the end, they didn't take full advantage of the possibilities for growth.

Needless to say, good instructors need not feel as though he or she needs to prove themselves to their students. Nor do they have to show them how strong they are. Presumably, the students already know that. It does not serve teachers well to see a student's physical skill on the same level as theirs. In other words, to avoid comparing themselves to their students, the teachers need to realize that ten different people have ten different abilities and physical conditions. A valuable mentor exhibits caring, generosity and patience while dealing with each student accordingly and individually.

One last piece of advice is to not make your students your "Yes Men." If you surround yourself with people who are going to put you on a pedestal, you are setting yourself up for the illusion that you are superior to other people. One has to understand that off the mat you are same human being as they are. However, once you get on the mat, you can show them "who's the boss". When I lead class, I feel like I am the conductor of a symphony orchestra, in that each one of my students is playing a different instrument, whereas my responsibility is to create nice harmony among them. Sometimes, I feel like I am a chef of a big restaurant who through my daily recipes brings variety and tastefulness to my students, so that they don't get tired or bored, always seeking to bring them inspiration.

As an Aikido Sensei, I am always looking for ways to be a better teacher. It is an evolving process that helps me express my humanity and to learn to be a better human being. After all, it is the success of your students who makes you a good teacher, while a good teacher creates strong future practitioners. Teaching is a relationship of mutual respect and understanding. In that way, your student always has someone to look up to and visa versa. To me that is respect earned.