



Zan Shin

What It's Like to Start Aikido

By Ted Yeh

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- Ted Yeh
- John Ferrer
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I've always wanted to learn a martial art, but never started because I wanted to have enough time to commit and learn seriously. Growing up, most of my extracurricular activities were filled by piano and soccer, and there was only a short time (when I was maybe 12 years old) when my father and I tried to get into judo. We went to a few sessions a week, but that ended after a couple of months when we were either too busy or just lost interest. In high school, I remember going on a field trip to a local college where there was

an aikido demonstration. I remember liking it a lot because unlike judo, which to me was just fancy wrestling, aikido showed very simple, yet elegant movements where the attacker would end up flying across the mat. I liked the idea of using the attacker's energy to redirect it back against him. I didn't seriously consider getting into aikido until Northwestern, when I saw posters advertising it around campus. I waited until I was done with all my classes, and went with a friend in my office (Alex) to see what it was like.

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Receiving

By John Ferrer

The kanji for uke is written with two hands, one reaching down and the other extending up connected by the character for boat. This pictograph over time seems to convey a transfer of goods from one person to another. The kanji indicates an act of “receiving”. In karate, the one under attack is called *ukete*, the “receiving hand”. The defender in kendo is called the *ukedashi*, the “receiving sword”. In the grappling arts, the art of falling is called *ukemi*, the “receiving body” and comes from the root verb *ukeru*, “to receive”. In Aikido terminology, the person thrown is *uke*, the “receiver”. The importance of the term *uke* is significant. It is commonly

misunderstood as the “taker” of the technique and consequently the “loser” in this way of thinking. Instead of implying submission, *uke* meets the situation on his/her terms. *Ukemi* allows the attacker to safely receive the pin or throw, absorbing the power of the technique while maintaining the intensity and balance of the combative confrontation. It may seem that aggression and sensitivity are contradictory qualities, Aikido balances martial effectiveness with harmony and non-aggression. Therefore, *ukemi* becomes an investigation of conflict resolution.

It is about intent and engagement, both physical and spirited energy that begins

way before the physical interaction and continues afterward. *Uke* learns how to keep connection with *nage* (the demonstrator of the technique). This connection allows *uke* to absorb the force of the attack safely. attack A connected becomes the primary method of technical transference – *uke* feels the movement by *nage* and observes how



his/her balance is being taken away. It is important for *uke* to be physically flexible in order to gain this receptive awareness and maintain good connection. To be on the *uke* end of the training one’s mentality is not of resignation or, worse yet of stubborn resistance. Students must learn the proper use of power and resistance in their attack. One’s intention in the attack is very important. As well as the connection and receptivity is sustained throughout the technique. In this approach, one develops sensitivity for openings to capture after your balance has been taken. It is about sustaining the attack and keeping yourself safe.

~Continued on pg. 3

~*Receiving* continued

It is the presence of mind within the technique and observing openings. So, if *nage* makes a mistake you are still there and have not given up. The *uke* flows, absorbs the energy of the throw/pin, his/her *ukemi* does not signal defeat and is one he/she controls. It's about constant awareness of your surroundings.

Aikido is a unique martial art with *ukemi* skills very refined and subtle that it heightens our sensitivity. It teaches us of how vulnerable we are when we attack someone. *Uke's* understanding is that *nage* could kill you. The role of *uke* and *nage* is one of trust. Both are always attacking each other's center, both must keep themselves safe and find a way to take the other's balance - interconnected.



This is *budo* training. Aikido allows you to experience this level of vulnerability coupled with the same level of sensitivity. Aikido allows you to safely apply as much power to a throw versus other grappling styles.

By learning the vulnerability in conflict, we experience the true compassionate nature in *budo* – protecting yourself as

well as your *uke*. One can also extend this same compassion beyond the mat to an angry spouse or an angry stranger. All life is sacred, and *ukemi* becomes a method to gain wisdom, a window into our mutual vulnerability.

Be Like Water

By Duong Nguyen

Bruce Lee once said, “*Empty your mind, be formless, shapeless - like water. Now you put water into a cup, it becomes the cup, you put water into a bottle, it becomes the bottle, you put it in a teapot, it becomes the teapot. Now water can flow or it can crash. Be water, my friend.*”

That state of constant reaction resembles what I saw at the kyu testing. They started in seiza and ended in it. Everything that happened in between was merely a receptacle to measure the lessons within them. In class we simulate water, practicing reactions to imaginary attacks. These attacks are general, often unrealistic, which I believe can be a mental training. We are there to mold our minds and train our bodies.

We learn to become aware of body mechanics and delightful gravity. What I garnered from the class are we avoid confrontation, avoid the attack, and avoid injuring the attacker. This is quite interesting when considering the samurai roots of the art. I hope my study of aikido can reflect this.

~**What It's Like to Start** *continued*

I didn't really know what to expect on the first class; my impression of martial arts school was from karate/taekwondo where it was basically run like a drill. I was pleasantly surprised to find a more I-show/you-do feel where a technique was shown from a few different angles, and then we were expected to perform them on our own. It was confusing at first because I couldn't remember all the movements of which foot moved where, which way to grab, how to shift my weight, etc. It took several classes for me to be able to just begin to understand what to do, and what helped a lot was the private instruction during practice where the sensei would point out how I was grabbing wrong, how my posture was incorrect, and other small things that I didn't pick up from the demonstration alone. Still, one of my biggest issues is being able to do the techniques from both the left and right.

Reflecting the motions in my head still takes a while, and I have to pause and plan out the movements a lot of times to make sure I know which way to go. Even as the attacker, I have to remember how to fall and how to shift my body so that my arm doesn't get twisted off.

After about a month of aikido, I thoroughly enjoy it; to me, it's really cool how incredibly effective some of these techniques are, especially some of the pins and arm locks. Just by putting the arm in a extremely unnatural and awkward position, you can basically render the rest of the person's body useless. As a side note, I think the weapons practice is really fun also, because it reminds me of samurai-like sword-work. This summer, I plan to go to the dojo in Chicago to see what it is like.

Accomplishments of Note

Since our last newsletter we have had several club members participate in kyu rank tests at Shinjinkai. In October of 2007 Tom Teterycz tested and was promoted to the rank of yonkyu. That December Rafael Bras, Duong Nguyen, and Alex Adler all tested. Rafael was promoted to yonkyu. Alex and Duong were promoted to gokyu. In April of 2008 Jared Lewis tested and was promoted to yonkyu. Congratulations to all of the members that have tested.



Learning to Train

By Jared Lewis

Before I began aikido I had some notions of how martial arts practices would be conducted: with severe discipline and absolute respect. Once I began training these notions were confirmed: there was discipline and respect. These took form both in the tone of practice and in procedures of etiquette. I originally took these formalities to be no more than traces of the Japanese culture still intact after aikido's relatively recent migration to the United States.

I now think differently. Even if there were to develop a completely American style of aikido that eliminated these Japanese pieces of etiquette, these formalities would have to be replaced with others for training to maintain the same level of integrity. The formal procedures of aikido, such as bowing to front when practice begins, bowing to your partners, and sitting silently when Sensei is speaking, and the respect students must have for practice are not merely cultural. They are martial.

The etiquette of aikido is among the first steps a student must take to control his or her mind and train more fully. Each formality reinforces the student's focus on training. Bowing the front as a group is a physical recognition that class has begun and that it is now your complete focus. Bowing to your partner of course shows respect but also can be used to physically reinforce that you are



now changing roles from defender to attacker or vice versa. Sitting when Sensei lectures physically forces you to stop practicing and start taking instruction. I find it very difficult to control my mind. However the use of strict procedure allows my more easily tamed body to reign in my mind.

Respect for others and the dojo environment is not only important as a matter of politeness. Respect directs your focus away from yourself and towards the other. The ability to focus on the other and your environment and not being caught up in your own thoughts would be of the utmost importance in a self-defense situation.

Of course we all come to class to learn aikido, not pieces of etiquette. But it would be a mistake to dismiss etiquette as trivial. How we conduct class displays how we approach our training. In class we are not only learning techniques, we are training our awareness and focus. Before you can train, you must learn *how* to train. Casual training leads to casual technique, sharp and focused training leads to sharp and focused technique. Respect and etiquette are tools the martial artist uses to sharpen his or her self.

On the Efficacy of Aikido as a Martial Art

By Alex Adler

But, let's examine another scenario. You've just been assigned two problem sets due within a day of a hefty midterm. To make matters worse, you are in an ongoing argument with your friend or significant other, and a scholarship deadline is fast approaching. This is, for most people, a stressful situation. So, what are some of the solutions that come to mind? Office hours could help get the homework assignments done. And, talking to a friend might help resolve the conflict you're in. Your adviser may even have some key advice for that scholarship application. But, for one moment, would you ever consider Aikido, a martial art practiced right here in a club at Northwestern, to help in this situation? Probably not.

Indeed, on its surface, Aikido instructs the student in many ways to redirect the attacks of an opponent in order to neutralize a threat. One self-defense technique we learn is how to protect ourselves if taken by surprise by being grabbed from behind. Another is how to dodge, subdue and disarm an opponent with a knife. However, what has become apparent to me as a practitioner of this martial art is that Aikido is instructing the student not only to carry out a list of 'moves' in a certain order for a certain attack; but, rather to always maintain the composure and presence of mind to do *something*.

On a new student's first day, he or she will most likely hear the instructor use the term *tanden*, a Japanese term referring to the body's center of mass. This is often taken to be the center of one's universe; and, in learning our self defense techniques, the essence of each technique is in the control of one's attacker's *tanden* (also balance) while maintaining one's own *tanden*. This point is, perhaps, the crux of the self-defense techniques learned in Aikido.

So, as a result of the self defense techniques and training in Aikido, one can learn how to maintain one's balance and composure in a 'battle' with an enemy. But, the true aim of Aikido as a *martial art* is to show the student that this concept applies to more than just a fictitious battle field, but rather to the 'battles' one experiences in everyday life. One who understands this concept can face any number of challenges while maintaining a strong presence of mind and a level-headed approach.

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