

## AIKIDO – Just What Does it Mean?

by kevin saunders

Here are a few thoughts of mine on some of the other hidden meanings as to what I think Aikido also stands for...

**A**ttendance – this is the crux of the whole matter, in my humble opinion. And the reason I suggest this is because if one is to begin to have any chance to grasp what Aikido is all about, one needs to turn up to the dojo on a regular basis and practice, practice, practice. It sounds too simple when it stares back at you in black and white, but it's absolutely true. For example, how many times have we seen people turn up on the occasional basis or for infrequent yet intensive bursts of training, and then disappear for quite some time, then much later, the next time they come back, they marvel at their peer(s) who have since advanced in their own training, which the lapsed aikidoka might experience first-hand through practice or as is displayed by the colour of their belt(s). Aikido is such a complex martial art, it demands one's constant attendance and attention, without such, the newcomer is left feeling confused, bored, frustrated and more; yet the path to enlightenment is within every aikidoka's own personal attitude to practice. As O-Sensei was oft quoted as saying (something like), "a used spade never rusts". *The moral of this message is:* practice, practice and more practice – it's a solid foundation upon which to build one's whole aikido experience.

**I**ndividuality – never lose sight of it, and never take anyone else's for granted either. Everyone who walks onto the mat in the dojo brings with them a lifetime of invaluable experiences. Some may have spent years studying another discipline, e.g., karate, judo, wing chun, TKD, etc., and many aikidoka hold down very responsible jobs and positions of authority in their working life, and they also have a wide variation of other outside interests. All of the aforementioned come to bear one way or another in each individual's approach to training, and to the actual practice of training itself. This is one of the great joys of doing aikido in a place like Hong Kong. We are so graced to have such a wide diversity of talented individuals who share their inherent knowledge with us every time they partner us in a training session. If you've ever practiced with a professional dancer, you will get an incredible insight into what 'moving one's centre' is all about; with an academic, you might well experience a totally different approach – something more akin to a thought-provoking 'mind over matter' analysis, perhaps; and if you ever get the chance to train with a writer, be prepared to see a story unfurl at every step ... it may not be *chapter and verse*, but it will be a good yarn none the less. But whichever person you train with, delight in what they bring to the mat, because it's often much more than the eye alone can perceive. *The moral of this message is:* every aikidoka is (or should be) a delight to know and a joy to behold ... yourself included.

**K**i – “The hidden ki to AiKiDo’s mysterious gait”, was something I penned in a poem entitled *The Divine Breath* which appeared in a previous issue. What is ki and how is it so important? As I interpret it, ki is that difficult-to-understand ‘life force’ which is imbued in all living things. A practical expression of ki can be experienced when you are effortlessly whizzed through the air with seemingly no effort at all by your training partner, or when you yourself effortlessly send a willing training partner airborne with seemingly no effort, thought or premeditated action. We all have marveled when this has happened to us, and perhaps, on the odd occasion, when we ourselves have felt this mysterious power when performing a technique on a training partner. It is a rare glimpse into the awesome potential of aikido, but when it happens, whether you’re on the receiving end or the giving end, it sure feels good. One of the more irritating aspects of ki and sometimes one of the hardest to come to terms with is how to coax it out from within ourselves. To do this, one needs not to use power, but simply relax. How many times have we all heard the oft repeated chant – especially by those senior to oneself – of ‘R-E-L-A-X’, to which the immediate thought, if not the actual reply, is “I AM RELAXED, buddy!” And no matter how many times we are told this by our seniors, we too then turn to our juniors and say precisely the same thing to them. And so it goes on. A seemingly never-ending circle. *The moral of this message is:* (my understanding of) ki is best explained in *The Divine Breath*: ‘A conundrum to be unraveled, A riddle twixt a mystery, That force of nature so Enigmatically, AiKiDo.’

**I**nitiative – another one of life’s great mysteries. Often is the case when a little initiative is called upon during our aikido training. I view it as an important aspect of each aikidoka’s own selfless willingness to offer oneself up to serve for the greater good. For example, by simply making that little bit of extra effort to get to the dojo a little bit earlier, so one can help lay the mats, or not delay the onset of a training session, or keep the Sensei waiting (perish the thought). Truth be told, we’ve all at one time or another chanced the thought to conveniently delay our arrival -- whether we actually do it or not is another matter entirely -- or to spend a little bit too much time talking in the changing room knowing full well that others are hurrying in to the dojo to lay the mats. Laying mats is not a nice job, nor is cleaning them or as is occasionally done, repairing them. But not having a permanent dojo means that we can’t fully get involved in the normal day-to-day chores associated with a permanent dojo. This is the way it is for us in Hong Kong, at the moment. However, it is important that when an individual aikidoka notices that something he / she can do for the benefit of others without any reward or praise with just a smidgen of initiative, then it is a good indication of that aikidoka’s sense of responsibility and initiative. For example, during any class, there is always something which can be done, e.g., helping a junior tie his / her belt properly, tidying-up the mat area, greeting a visitor who may be a potential new student or a very senior aikidoka (- this does occasionally happen), picking-up a discarded grading syllabus, restoring the jo(s) or bokken(s) to their rightful place / owner(s), giving someone an encouraging word or a smile when you can see they are not at their best, etc. So, the next time a bit of initiative is called for or you’re standing idly around watching others doing what you could in fact assist with, show some aikido spirit and contribute. *The moral of this message is:* a little initiative goes a long way.

**D**etermination – to do well in your training and over time, your own gradual advancement, but not to get overly concerned with or worry about the colour of your belt or anyone else’s for that matter either, because in the grand scheme of things, it really is not that important. As you become more experienced at aikido, you begin to realize that the colour of one’s belt is not a great indicator of an aikidoka’s actual skill level at all. Personally, I tend to use it more as a barometer of (my own and) that aikidoka’s potential. But one thing is for sure, within a very short space of time during any training session with a partner, you will instinctively get to know that person’s skill level. Some of the more experienced aikidoka will tell you that they can tell an awful lot about a person the moment they ‘connect’ or take hold of their wrist, which is truer than not in most cases. But whatever the colour belt or actual skill level, I would suggest you pay more attention to trying to understand the technique and execute it properly and graciously, rather than see who is the toughest / strongest / quickest at putting your training partner on the mat. And when it comes to taking the grading exam – nearly every aikidoka’s least favourite time, some people are just naturally more adept at taking (grading) exams than others. But whatever wonderful or befuddling experience(s) you encounter on your aikido journey, first and foremost, just *relax* -- there’s that word again -- and secondly, never ever lose heart. If you’ve been true to yourself and done your best, no more can be asked of you. So don’t worry whether you make it or not, even if it be at your first, second or even third attempt; every time you are called on to demonstrate your knowledge of aikido, just try to enjoy it and derive the truly positive aspects out of it. It’s all good experience and much can be learned; just think of it as another step along the road to enlightenment. As Cottier Sensei always says, “You have the rest of your lives to practice aikido, so don’t worry!” Wise words indeed. As for belts and their respective colours, I think Bruce Lee summed it up best when he said (something like), ‘a belt is only useful for holding your pants up!’ *The moral of this message is:* train assiduously, with patience, respect, and most of all, with honour.

**O**bedience – this is a tough one, especially when it clashes with an individual’s own (perhaps strong) personality, culture or beliefs. By obedience, I refer to having respect for the Sensei who is instructing that particular class, by observing, and simply doing what is requested of you – without argument or any disrespectful backchat. This would also apply to your training partner, particularly if they are of a higher grade than you. It is quite possible that during the course of any training session, you might have an encounter with someone with whom you do not personally like or agree with, particularly if it involves the execution of a particular technique. This is where you must bite the bullet and keep your thoughts firmly to yourself. You should NEVER argue on the mat with anybody, least of all with the Sensei. If you do have a disagreement, and it’s about a technique, simply raise your hand and request clarification from the sensei ... that’s what he / she is there for. If it’s about anything else, discuss it after training, but be sure to do so in a civilized and adult manner, and try to retain that element of the true aikido spirit of harmony. *The moral of this message is:* talk less, do more. (One of O-Sensei’s favourite sayings, if I’m not mistaken).

If you agree with any of what I've written, then try to make use of it in your own approach to training. I am certain it will help you achieve a greater understanding of this complex martial art and will help it become all the more enjoyable to you over time. If on the other hand you totally disagree with any / all of what I've written, then simply disregard it. As I stated in my opening, these are merely my own thoughts and experiences, and as such, I offer them in the hope that they may be of some help to new students, and possibly, to a few older ones too.

*Author's note: The quotes I've attributed to O-Sensei and Mr. Bruce Lee may not be totally accurate, and if I am in error, then I apologize unreservedly in advance and proffer my humble apologies to the correct source(s). But, having said that, their meaning is beyond reproach and totally in accord with the teachings of O-Sensei and Mr. Bruce Lee.*

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