

## **A Stitch In Time... AIKIDO Training Can Kill You!**

An article highlighting a paper entitled **Aikido and Injuries: Special Report** written by Prof. Shishida Sensei (Rokudan) of Waseda University, Japan, and first presented in 1989 was recently featured on the Aikido Journal Online website ([www.aikidojournal.com](http://www.aikidojournal.com)) and which prompted me to write the following...

**Question: Can Aikido Training Really Kill You or is that just a catchy headline?**

**Answer: Unfortunately, besides being an attention-grabbing headline, it is true!**

### **The Main Points of Prof. Shishida Sensei's 'Aikido and Injuries: Special Report'**

From August 1972 to May 1989, a total of 7 deaths and 4 serious injuries were recorded as a result of young male / female college undergraduates attending regular aikido training sessions or a seasonal aikido training camp at / or organized by their respective University Clubs. It was stated that a number of the undergraduates (involved) were somewhat physically weak and that this may have been a contributory factor. (QED)\*

The culture of the university aikido clubs where these tragic events took place is, by all accounts, an inherent (and ongoing) failure of 'the university club system' in Japan to adequately monitor the training sessions / camps by experienced and qualified senior level dan grade aikidoka and to prevent 'hazing' (an initiation rite) of new members. Also, it is a system of control (by the University hierarchy) that brooks no outside interference with the 'goings on' within their respective fiefdoms. Sounds odd, doesn't it?

Please Note: For more information, please visit the Aikido Journal Online website (see above) to review the postings made by some very experienced aikidoka who have either direct or indirect experience of witnessing such events or of the university club system itself.

### **Shihonage and Iriminage are the Leading Killers**

Of the accidents / deaths that were recorded, shihonage accounted for 6 cases, i.e., deaths – 5, serious injuries – 1; and iriminage accounted for 2 cases, i.e., deaths – 1, serious injuries – 1; kotogaeshi accounted for 1 death; and an uke attempting an ushiro attack accounted for the last (recorded) serious injury.

To quote from Prof. Shishida Sensei's paper: "shihonage and iriminage stand out as techniques causing the accidents. In both techniques, it is easy to hit the back of one's head with the inherent danger of a cranial hemorrhage *occurring*\*."

## **Prof. Shishida Sensei's Conclusion**

The following is an abridged extract taken from Prof. Shishida Sensei's paper...

“I believe that there is a common cause to the accidents in all 11 cases, i.e., the inherent danger of the kata method of practice as a result of an examination of the cases.

The point is that the safety of the uke is one-sidedly placed in the hands of the tori. In the kata, the uke and tori are generally decided beforehand, and the tori can decide the intensity and sometimes the type of technique according to his purpose. On the other hand, not only is the first action of the uke limited, but it is also tacitly assumed that he will not offer any resistance to the technique. In this way, both can perform their roles. In this sense, it can be said that the kata method is safer than randori training where one can be thrown with an unexpected technique.

However, even in kata practice it must be recognized that serious accidents may occur, a) if the uke is inexperienced; and b) if the uke is very tired, and even more importantly; c) as a result of the intensity and application of the tori's technique. In the 11 cases cited, the victims are all uke.

Fatigue under unusual circumstances can also result in accidents, as can improper behaviour of the tori and lack of attention to safety, and the proper method of practicing techniques.

One must assume a heavy moral responsibility if one places the uke in a situation where he / she is not permitted to resist in a kata practice *especially if it* \* results in an accident. The tori must practice keeping in mind the inherent dangers of kata practice and proceed carefully. Furthermore, I think aikido leaders should re-examine the present practice and teaching methods in order to make this approach a custom.”

## **Prof. Shishida Sensei's Suggested Countermeasure**

The following is an abridged extract taken from Prof. Shishida Sensei's paper...

“I would like to introduce an exercise for neck training which I have used in our aikido class at Waseda University since 1985 as part of our warming up exercises.

***It is an isometric exercise in which one partner pushes the head of the other using the base of one or both palms against the forehead in eight directions: left, right, forward, back and to the four corner angles. Each time one pushes for about six seconds using full strength with sets being repeated several times.***

If this exercise is done only once a week, it is not particularly effective. However, if it is practiced daily it is very effective ... and an effective way to avoid accidents ... as is to incorporate a physical strength development regime as part of the lesson.”

## **My Suggestions To Enhance Greater Safety During Our Own Training Sessions**

1. That the isometric 'neck strengthening' exercises as recommended by Prof. Shishida Sensei be incorporated into the warm-up routine at the beginning / ending of every class. It would only take a few minutes and the potential benefits are obvious.
2. Whether a sensei or a student - to reinforce every aikidoka's understanding of the inherent dangers of training and to highlight each aikidoka's responsibility to train safely with a brief reminder given at the start of every training session on how improper and / or dangerous aikido practice is unacceptable as it can be extremely dangerous for the unwary or the uncooperative participant - whether uke or nage.
3. Allowing someone to train 'within their limits' is a good yardstick ... pushing someone beyond those limits is getting into the red zone. But again, this is up to each particular sensei to monitor and safeguard all ... as has happened on previous occasions (in our own training sessions), pushing people beyond their physical capabilities to merely inject some 'budo attitude' can have dire consequences. Boot camp is not for everyone and everyone is not for boot camp. A greater focus on 'the gentle art' might save a life or prevent a horrendous injury from occurring in the future.
4. Repetitive Training (*kakari-geiko* (?)) is perhaps more appropriate for an uchi deshi programme or even for the more senior level yudansha to enjoy when they feel the need. But, for the majority, after a long day's work, it is just way too much. In my experience, when this type of training has been occasionally introduced, the participants quickly became exhausted, which lead to 'sloppy' technique, frustration, and bad feeling... which seemed (to me) to be totally counterproductive to what the point of instruction was all about, i.e., a) improvement of technique and b) how to effect greater precision / control. (This is purely a personal opinion).
5. The other great danger that I perceive in training is that SPEED KILLS - precision. I have often observed that when a visiting Shihan instructs (at one of our training sessions), and especially when--on the rare occasion that--the mat area is insufficient to 'safely' cater to the number of practitioners, quite often (but not always), many, if not all practitioners become incredibly overenthusiastic and speed-up considerably. For example, the other night, I was an observer at just such a training session – and barring the Shihan himself, without exception, every other single person on the mat was operating at 78 RPM instead of the normal 45 RPM; and because the mat area was very tight, I observed more than one clash of 'coconuts', several collisions, and goodness knows how many near misses: thankfully, no injuries were recorded. And it wasn't that people were being deliberate, in fact, it was just the opposite – everybody's zanshin was operating at maximum, and even when the class was split into two waves, the problem of speed did not diminish ... however, the fact remains that everyone was still doing things at *warp speed*. Furthermore, this caused many to completely miss the point of the shihan's instruction and in their excitement, the faster they got, the sloppier they became. I wonder if this phenomenon is universal, and if so, perhaps it is / might be identified as the 'Shihan Factor' – just a thought?

## **Aikido Practise in Hong Kong (HKSAR)**

It must be stated that within our own training sessions in Hong Kong (HKSAR), we are fortunate to have an excellent number of highly experienced yudansha who carefully monitor every facet of training and safety. Also, the greater majority of practitioners here are all (mostly) splendid people who take the greatest of pains to ensure the safety and well-being of each respective training partner – whether uke or nage, novice or experienced, male or female, local or foreigner, young or old.

On the rare occasion that it happens, if an apple turns ‘sour’, it is quickly ‘sweetened’ or failing that, it is ultimately ‘removed’ from the barrel. And if a ranking or up-and-coming sensei turns ‘wicked’ or for reasons best known to him- or herself has several moments of ‘wickedness’ – well, word soon filters up to the highest echelon and the matter is ‘put right’ PDQ. Finally, IMHO, Hong Kong is a great place to learn and practise aikido, which we do in great spirit and in as safe a manner as is virtually possible.

### **On A Personal Level**

I can recall Cottier Sensei's frequent warnings about how dangerous shihonage really is ... but I suppose, like many, I did not give the technique the respect it obviously deserves. And maybe, being among the first techniques learned, one tends to get a bit complacent with its execution. Reading Prof. Shishida Sensei's article has had a profound effect on my thoughts towards training, and dare I say it, enlightened me considerably. It was a timely 'wake up' call.

I trust, after reading this article, it is one for you too!

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\* my insertion

**Please Note:** Kind permission to reproduce elements of Prof. Shishida Sensei's paper which appears on the Aikido Journal Online website was graciously granted by Mr. Stanley Pranin Sensei, Editor.

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