

Levels of practice, ability and understanding in Takemusu Aikido.

Sensei always emphasized that Aikido was based on the use of sword and that the basics of Aikido (kihon) were where the focus of the training should be, for both beginners and seniors alike. He developed a reputation through his many international seminars, of putting a strong emphasis on basic technical training and although he would often show more advanced levels, many aikidoka, both within Takemusu Aikido as well as without, have come to equate this school of Aikido almost exclusively with the first level of strong solid basics (katai kihon).

However this impression is incomplete in many ways. Takemusu Aikido includes all levels. In line with other Japanese traditional Budo and Bujutsu, the key elements for all the more complex and advanced levels are 'encoded' in the most basic practices and hence this is where most of the training takes place. What are these key principles that we need to access and develop in basic training? How do these principles relate to the more advanced levels? What are these levels and how do we make the qualitative shifts in ability to access them?

In learning basic technique at the solid static levels we are not just learning techniques but are also learning good 'body use', balancing out our sense of physical presence by developing greater 'grounding' and 'sense of back', making distinctions between power based on contracting isolated muscular groups with power based on whole body coordination. And most importantly we need to be aware of, and work with, what we are doing with our minds from the very beginning. The physical sense of 'grounded openness' we are endeavoring to develop should go hand in hand with a similar settled yet expanded and relaxed state of alertness – and these body-mind states should be developed and tested under gradually increased pressure in the training process. These essential principles (and many others) should be emphasized from the beginning as their development form the foundation for all subsequent growth in Aikido.

In Iwama when Sensei would teach the more flowing forms (nagare and ki no nagare) and other advanced levels, he would employ a particular didactical method where he would isolate and emphasize the key points. We called this method 'semi-flexible' training in that the flowing form would be interrupted at various points in sequence to check it (position, angle, balance, atemi options etc).

So this transitional didactic from basic static to flowing was in effect a mixture of two levels (For more examples of this check Volume 5 of the Traditional Aikido series by Morihiro Saito Sensei).

The fundamental levels are two, with the 'semi-flexible' level a didactical transition used between and within them.

A: static (kihon)

B flowing (ki no nagare)

Each level can be further divided into two sub-levels which in practice tend to overlap:

A1. Basic static solid (Kihon katai).

At this level each step in the technique is associated with a pause which allows us to check and feel our position relative to the ground (footwork, balance, compression patterns and pathways), our physical structural alignment and our relationship to our partner (angles, distance, structural disturbance and balance break issues). Most of this training takes place at the 'holds' level of attacks (katate, morote, ryote, kata, ryo kata, mune dori). The practice takes place slowly and should develop whole body coordination, strength, flexibility and sensitivity as well as deepen into the Principles briefly touched upon above.

An important point here is that the 'pauses' are not 'empty'. The training is one of movement balanced with stillness, where the moments of 'stillness' are as important (if not more) than the 'movements' themselves.

Whether we move or are still, our energy or 'ki' should remain dynamic and expansive while our awareness should remain uninterrupted and open (zanshin).

A2 Basic static soft/flexible (Kihon yawarakai).

This is a second level in the basic static forms, but while the emphasis on the first solid level is a sharp clear strong form with pauses, the second level aims to 'take the hard edges off' the techniques by softening and dropping the center of the power to the lower body and center. Techniques also tend to be done as one movement from a static start. The 'whole-body' coordination becomes more 'rounded out' and a shift begins to take place from emphasizing strength based on uncoordinated muscular contraction to kokyu ('whole-body-power rooted in the ground, directed from the center and expressed through the periphery').

'Semi-flexible' This is the didactical teaching method that links the static with the flowing forms as described briefly above.

B1 Basic flowing (nagare). It is important to begin this level slowly and focus on good movement and body use (tai sabaki), connection and blending (awase), balance control and balance breaking (kuzushi). Speed and power come later and are not to be emphasized at first. Too often this level is done without these key points in mind and the practice becomes an aerobic weak and meaningless 'choreographed running around and falling over' kind of aikido: much movement but weak or absent connection with uke who is often thrown from positions where his balance has not been compromised and his center not controlled. When our practice would degenerate in this way in Iwama, Sensei would bring us right back to the basic static level.

The flowing level is not simply the basic level in movement without breaks from a flowing contact start, but involves technical details as far as changes in footwork, handwork, angles and distances, etc. Atemi that were emphasized in the basic may disappear or take other forms. Another prerequisite for useful practice at this level is the development of the yawarakai, 'softer' quality at the second static kihon level both as uke as well as nage. This quality easily translates to flowing forms. While one is at the 'hard' static first level (katai) transitioning directly to flowing forms is usually very difficult with the practice usually breaking down in terms of connection and fluidity of movement.

Nagare level practice is the most common form of regular aikido practice among different contemporary styles and schools.

B2 Advanced flowing (Ki no nagare). At this level all the principles of connection and center control have been minimally understood and internalized. Perhaps not to the extent that one can perform techniques in this ideal way consistently, but in the sense that when these basic principles are not being adhered to, one immediately feels their absence and is thus able to make corrections. The focus on this level is much more the 'felt sense' of the interaction. Hence the 'energetic' aspects become prominent. This is the level one often admires in senior practitioners and teachers when they seem to hardly exert any effort yet control opponents convincingly and gracefully.

Ki no nagare techniques typically are 'simpler, faster and more direct. Nagare techniques are 'denser' and 'longer' as far as contact and duration. In ki no nagare the physical contact between nage and uke is minimal and in some cases even absent. The 'energetic' felt sense of connection

however required for these advanced techniques should be deep and unbroken.

In practice a distinction is not always made between these sub-levels within static and flowing technique, however the distinction becomes clear with experience and sensitivity.

Once the basic technical repertoire has been developed through the above fundamental levels then other areas of technique and practice become accessible and although for teaching purposes they can also be broken down using the semi-flowing teaching method, these advanced levels are normally practiced at the second flowing level (nagare and ki no nagare).

Jiyu waza (free style practice).

Jiyu waza is free style practice either against a pre determined single attack or different multiple attacks. This practice develops towards freely generated attacks from one or from multiple opponents. Technical responses are not set but can be generated freely. It can be done in slow motion or at speed. The variations for practice at this level are many. It leads on naturally from the previous fundamental levels and allows for a more 'playful' practice of the basics in flowing form.

Henka waza (variation techniques).

Henka waza are basic techniques which are changed to suit a changing attack. The technical change in the responsive technique can be either a variation of the same technique which was being applied to uke (eg nikkyo to a variation of nikkyo) or a change to a different technique altogether (eg nikkyo to irimi nage).

Learning henka waza deepens our understanding of the basic techniques as we study them from new angles and situations where uke resists, changes his attack or tries to escape. It deepens our understanding of the techniques through apprehending their limits and potential range of applications.

Oyo waza (practical techniques)

Oyo waza are more martially oriented, combat applications of the basic techniques. They usually involve the use of atemi (strikes) to create openings in the balance breaking set-up steps along with shorter more

direct technical pathways in the resolutions. This practice needs to be done carefully and with control and within the limits of the ability to blend and receive of uke as techniques at this level are potentially physically dangerous.

Oyo waza are not taught until the movements and techniques at the previous fundamental levels are firmly grasped. The atemi should not break up the movements but fit into them and the directness of the techniques at this level should not be technical shortcuts but rather minimalistic and functionally efficient expressions of them.

This level is important to know as it puts to rest many questions aikidoka have regarding the 'combat effectiveness' of Aikido. Especially those who have no experience of having trained in other martial arts and therefore have difficulty placing aikido in a martial context. It also serves to put the basic techniques into perspective as far as connection, control and atemi are concerned (both being able to deliver atemi and being aware of when one is open to atemi from an attacker).

Modern day aikidoka do not train with the development of this level as a priority, but without it we can easily go astray in our basic training as far as the effectiveness of the basic techniques are concerned. Knowing the oyo waza and having this knowledge 'in the background' of our training serves as a check on these important principles.

Kaeshi waza (counter techniques)

Kaeshi waza are aikido counter techniques to aikido techniques and were traditionally only taught to instructors. Kaeshi waza practice is advanced practice in the sense that both ukemi and the knowledge of the techniques with their internal structure needs to be well developed. Counter techniques rely on understanding and being able to feel the weaknesses in a technique which is being applied to oneself as uke and it is through these weaknesses or 'windows' that the counter blends are initiated to recapture control of ones center and of nage's center. Simply practicing set counter techniques without this inner feel for the openings is to miss the point and value of this practice.

Takemusu aikido

Freely inspired responses to the unique demands of the moment based on the principles of Aiki. This can be either technical or 'non-technical'. This is not a level that can be 'practiced' but is more the fruit of years of

committed physical training where the principles of the art have been internalized and where a psychological 'shift' has taken place whereby blind reactivity and defensiveness based on fear and aggression have been replaced by an intelligent responsiveness to the demands of the situation.

Clearly the development of this level is what aikido is really about when we consider aikido as a 'do' or 'path': an art that transcends the regular practice we do in the dojo and comes to inform ethically and spiritually all areas of our life.

Lewis Bernaldo de Quiros
29th April 2013