

My interpersonal relations contact by Ben Turnbull Sensei

Born the son of a dedicated martial artist, I was destined to become involved in the martial arts myself. I was raised with an almost religious respect for Aikido and those who had mastered it. My father's teacher had learned from a man known throughout the martial arts world as one of, if not the greatest martial artist to have ever lived. Morehei Ueshiba was never defeated, and he lived with only one goal in mind, to develop a better way. He trained relentlessly throughout his life seeking the perfect way, the Way of Harmony, and developed an Art which has the potential to solve the world's problems and create love and harmony amongst all its people. One of my earliest memories is of when my father's teacher came to stay with us in Canberra. I remember shaking his huge Japanese hand and saying "Hullo San-say".

Seiichi Sugano, whom I have always known as "Sensei" (which means "Teacher"), learned Aikido from Aikido's Founder, O'Sensei Ueshiba. He trained daily and became a "uchi-deshi" (live-in student) of the Founder. He earned his third degree black belt (the teaching grade) within a few years, and when the Founder decided it was time to share Aikido with the world, he sent Sugano Sensei to Australia to teach. My father had trained in boxing and wrestling, kickboxing, pancratiun, judo and jujitsu, but when he started training under Sugano Sensei he soon dropped out of the other arts. For Sugano Sensei did things that at times just didn't seem possible. He could move faster than seemed humanly possible and threw people around the Dojo as if he was just dancing amongst children. This was in 1965 when top-ranking martial art teachers simply weren't available in Australia. It wasn't all that long after the war, and there was still a great distrust of the Japanese. My father soon became a senior student because he knew how to fall. I was brought up with this great respect for the Japanese culture and particularly my father's teacher whom I have no doubt my father would die for. And so I was born into an Aikido family.

As my awareness of all around me grew, I began to learn more and more about how people interact and why. My father was not only devoted to martial arts, but had one time been a magician and hypnotist, and had studied psychology and human behaviour, and more and more I now see how his studies have been built into me. Many of my childhood memories are of Aikido and my father's dedication to Aikido. So many things which I didn't understand as a youngster later became clear to me, so many things I wish I could explain to other people but can't find the words for, and even if I could, would they really want to hear? Many things which my father taught his students for years, things which I have heard him say time and time again are only now become apparent and really make sense to me.

Being the son of the instructor meant that my introduction into the Dojo environment was somewhat different to someone who has never had anything to do with martial art. My father sculptured me into the Aikido way from a very young age. I remember trips away to National Aikido events when I was quite small.

Seeing my father training on the mats with all the other people dressed in white suits, I remember wrestling with him in the living room as my father taught judo ground locks, and sword training in the front yard and being taught where to hit or claw if I was ever attacked. When I was 10 years old my father started a children's class and I started training as his assistant. When I was young I would have quit training if I had been allowed to. Much of the time I would have preferred to have been playing with my friends down the street. No I look back and thank him for insisting that I train. I am sure I would be a very different person without Aikido.

One day my father told me that he was sick and that I was to teach the children's class, and before long I was taking the classes. I trained for some years in the children's class and later began training in the adults classes as well. Eventually I stopped training with the children and only trained with adults. Over the years I moved up through the grades, and as I learned more and more about the world I also learned to look through the eyes of a student of Aikido - the Way of Harmony.

The Learning Contract which I have taken is by no means new to me. It is a subject which I have been involved in for many years and will continue to study until the day I die. So for this Learning Contract assignment, I have decided to discuss the way a beginner who is new to Aikido learns how to fit into the Dojo.



The Aikido Dojo

The Aikido dojo is an environment which is very foreign to the Western beginner who is entering it for the first time. Some people fit right in, some take a little while to get used to it, and for one reason or another others don't stay long. For genuine martial artists, the Dojo is a place held very close to the heart. It is not like a sports hall where you run around and play little games, or a classroom where you have to sit and listen to some silly old git making some potentially interesting things sound very boring. The dojo to the Martial Artist is like the church to the faithful Christian in that it is a place held with reverence and respect. It is a place where people go to improve life for themselves and the people around them. A place where we learn to focus our minds and where we seek a better way.

We bow when we enter the door and when we step onto the mats before class, and we never wear shoes on them. We wear shoes to the change rooms and then wear thongs to the mats where we remove them not only for respect, but for hygiene. A picture of the Founder of Aikido hangs at the front of the Dojo and this is where the Teacher of the class kneels as each class begins. The students kneel in rows facing their teacher.

Before the class begins, the teacher and the students bow to the picture of O'Sensei and thank him for the Art he has handed down to us. Then the teacher turns, still kneeling, to face the students, who then bow to the teacher, thanking him for his teachings and for all the time he has spent studying the art. The teacher returns the bow, thanking his students for coming to learn.

When class begins there should be little or no talking except by the teacher. After warm-up exercises and KI exercises the teacher demonstrates techniques and then the students pick partners and train together. The more junior person attacks first and the senior does the technique. After practising both sides, the senior attacks and the junior practises the technique. In having the senior do the technique first the junior has more time to see and understand the technique. Thus we have the "Sempai-Kohai" system which

translates as senior-junior. When beginners first come into the Dojo, everyone who has trained longer than them are their sempai. After a beginner has trained for a while and some new beginners come in they are the beginner's kohai. The seniors or sempai will in no egotistic way exert their superiority over the kohai. The sempai are there to help the kohai. So a beginner in Aikido not only learns from the teacher but from everyone.

A Different Kind of Strength

The beginner in Aikido will have to struggle with many cultural differences which are an integral part of Aikido. Not only does his or her body have to learn a new way of doing things, but also the mind must learn a new way of thinking. If we break the word Aikido into the three separate kanji (Japanese writing symbols) and look at the meaning of each of these symbols we can begin to grasp the nature of the art itself.

Ai - means Harmony

Ki - is the life-energy which animates all living things

Do - literally means The Way - the Path we follow as we strive to improve our lives and the lives of those around us.

So Aikido more or less translates as: "The Way of Harmony with Life" or "Life Energy". In Aikido we wish to get away from the western belief that big muscles and a tough attitude equals strength. On the contrary they are often only a cover-up for inner weaknesses. We train to develop the use of the universal energy called Ki, and when beginners come into the Dojo they are confronted with ideas such as this and don't know whether or not to believe what they are being taught.

Some make up their minds there and then that this is a load of rubbish. Those who are open-minded enough to stay and learn, soon find this ki energy flowing from within themselves and then they know the truth.

At this point I think it is important to look at just what the term martial art means. Martial means inclined or disposed to war; warlike, basically meaning military. Art means the production or expression of what is beautiful: a skill or knack or method of doing something, especially if it is difficult.

So martial art is basically the perfecting of the techniques of combat or self-defence, and the developing of a strong spirit so we can survive any situation. The martial arts are those disciplines which were originally descended from years of warfare, and later from years of use as disciplines for self-development.

An old martial art saying: "No-one has more love and respect for life than those who have been forced to take it."

Putting Aside the Ego

There is no competition in Aikido. Competition is born from the animal drive to achieve superiority over others by beating them. When you think about it, doesn't it feel good when you beat someone else? Until you realise that such a feeling is merely one of petty conceit! But in Aikido we train to put the ego aside and rise above our animal mentality. We wish to be better today than we were yesterday, to improve ourselves. We don't train to try and appear better than others by putting other people down, because that is beside the point: what we aim for is to escape our built-in animal instincts and become truly human - to stop acting like unintelligent animals and be real human beings with all that conveys. Competition is merely reverting to animal behaviour, much the way animals behave when fighting to deprive each other of food, but fighting for attention instead. In contrast, the truly human way is to cooperate with each other and help each other for mutual benefit and advantage. As you can imagine, a person coming from the western cultural background of continual one-upmanship in competitive sports such as football (where opponents try to smash each other into the ground and call it a "game") may find it very awkward fitting into the environment of an Aikido Dojo, where we cooperate and work towards the same goal. This can be a major hurdle for people who are egotistic and self-centred. For this sort of person can feel very intimidated by a class of people who are obviously senior to them because they have been training longer.

This sort of person often only feels good when they can put other people down as in competitive circumstances, because that's the only way they've been taught to achieve satisfaction.

So when they come to train in Aikido it can be very off-putting. If a person of this nature cannot put their ego aside and begin to train genuinely they will usually drop out of class. Because of the flowing nature of Aikido, students will rarely resist the flow of the technique's movement. A beginner in Aikido will be able to advance much quicker if they learn how to safely receive the techniques as soon as possible. This involves going with the movement and learning how to protect themselves and fall safely. The egocentric, competitively natured person often wishes to achieve their little ego-victories by being able to prevent their partner from throwing them down.

When the Teacher or senior student sees this happening they will attempt to explain why the technique must not be resisted. For in a real combat or self-defence situation, if someone resists we release the blockage and the movement flows into another technique. Or if the movement has been completely halted we must relax the blockage by "relaxing" the attacker. This may mean knocking the front of their face out through the back of their head or tearing out their throat in a genuinely dangerous self-defence situation when one's life is on the line. So we make every effort to explain the dangers of resistance to them.

But I have witnessed beginners who always must compete - people whose conceit is so great that they cannot help trying to prove their imagined superiority with whomever they are training. That sort of person often enjoys hurting other people. One beginner I recall (let's call him Ryan) had this very problem. Time and time again he would resist the technique and make it very hard for the person training with him. It got to the point where many people would avoid training with him.

Whenever I trained with him he would resist and then I would have to go into another technique, which is fine except that we were supposed to be practising a specific technique, not playing around. Myself, my father and several of the other sempai had tried to explain to him why we don't practice resisting, but still he resisted. Then one day he was training with a woman and applying the technique as hard and painfully as he could, and then resisting as much as possible when the other person tried to practice.

My father, being a very spirited man, decided he had seen enough of this. He stormed over and said "This is the reason we do not resist" and with that he applied the technique fully on Ryan. I remember it clearly because I was training on the other side of the room and I heard this yelp like a dog that has been kicked. I looked around and Ryan was cowering before my father, and for the rest of the class Ryan didn't resist or play his little ego games. My father had broken that animal urge.

But within a few lessons he was back to his usual ways, and before long he dropped out of the class. He wasn't even aware of the foolish little games he was playing - it was just instinctive, and when pressure was put on him to change and develop it was too much for him and he dropped out. Luckily, most people who come through the Dojo aren't as bad as that.

Creating New Habits

It is unfortunate he wasn't able to learn a new and more effective way of thinking and behaving: it seems he didn't even recognise his own bad habits and if he had been able to solve these things he surely would have been a much happier person. I recall my father saying the most intelligent people are those who can self-analyse and change their own bad habits and adopt better ways of doing things. This is one of the major things that separate animals from human beings. We are able to look at what we are doing and say "Hey, this is right!", or we can stop and look at what we are doing and realise that something is just a bad habit and we have the potential to break that habit.

When we first come to learn Aikido we have to learn a whole new way of doing things. One metaphor for the state in which we must be when we come to training is: we must be empty-minded with no pre-constraints or expectations. We must be like the empty bowl ready to be filled with fresh, clean water.

We aim to put verbal thought aside so that techniques flow naturally from within ourselves. We have to teach our bodies new ways of moving and learn to extend Ki instead of relying solely on muscular

strength. We also learn new ways of learning. Watching, listening with such intent that not only do we see the techniques being demonstrated, but we feel how to do them within ourselves are some of the things which slowly, over time, become built into the student of Aikido. Conclusions

Aikido is as infinite as the vastness of space and as in-depth as the studies of human behaviour and interpersonal relationships. It embodies ways for us to become better people and the potential for making the world a better place. It is a long road of learning which I have undertaken and which I will walk throughout my life. I welcome others onto the path but shall not force those who don't want to know. I will learn all that I can and do my best to pass on those things I have learned to those who follow. Thus is the nature of my learning contract. Thus is my Obligation.