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Learning Aikido through Kata Part 1

Introduction

One of the distinguishing features of Sport aikido is the presence of a range of kata, which provide a unique learning system for the understanding and development of Aikido.

These higher grade Koryu-no-Kata are fundamental to the Tomiki Aikido or Sports Aikido system. In total there are seven recognised learning sequences that comprise a total of 227 techniques.

Each of the Koryu-no-kata has a distinct emphasis or theme that develops a comprehensive understanding of technique in variety of contexts and applications. They are a relatively recent introduction to Aikido, developed primarily by Hideo Ohba during the 1950s and 1960s and form a comprehensive catalogue of technical information. Fumiaki Shishida and Tetsuro Nariyama added a further sequence during the 1980s.

They include the Koryu-dai-Ichi, Koryu-dai-Ni, Koryu-dai San (also known as Goshin-no-kata) Koryu-dai-Yon (also known as Nage-no-kata), Koryu-dai-Go, Koryu-dai-Roku (**See Fig 1**) and the Koryu-dai- Sichi (also known as the Goshin Ho)



(Fig 1) Shaun Hoddy 6th Dan, one of the top UK instructors, explaining Kote Mawashi (Nikkyo) kneeling finish, a technique from the Koryu-dai-Rokkyu

There is great synergy between the worlds of Aikido and Judo. Tomiki and Ohba both having extensive Judo practice replicated the kata system developed by Jigoro Kano substituting Judo for Aikido technique to establish a similar learning system. Full details of the Judo kata are available in Kodokan Judo by Jigoro Kano (1986) published by Kodansha International. This focus on kata or learning sequences starts with Judo and the Nage-no-Kata, (**See Fig 2**) which comprises 15 techniques and Sports Aikido Randori-no-Kata (originally with 15 techniques) but now practised with 17 throws. Judo also developed a basic groundwork kata, Katame-no-Kata (**See Fig 3and 4**)



(Fig 2) Illustrating the similarity – is this Uke Otoshi from Judo (Nage-no-Kata – technique number one) or Hiki Otoshi from Aikido (Randori-no-Kata – technique number seventeen). Performed by Garrett Baxter 4th Dan

Within Judo there are five higher-grade kata, **Kime-no-Kata**, **Goshin Jitsu** (developed by Kenji Tomiki), **Ju-no-Kata**, **Itsutsu-no-kata** and **Koshiki-no-Kata**.



(Fig 3) Bob Jones 7th Dan explaining Ude-Hishigi-Juji-Gatame from Judo Katame-no-Kata

The relationship between the Aikido and Judo kata is quite revealing not only highlighting some differences but also the similarity in technique. Of course they are going back to a time, pre Olympics, when the distinction between the techniques within the martial arts was not as well defined.



(Fig 4) Two Aikido students learning Nami-Juji-Jime (cross lock choke) from Katame-no-Kata

To truly master the Koryu-no-kata there needs to be a full appreciation of two distinct elements. An understanding of the mechanism of each individual technique combined with an appreciation of the overall context, or style of delivery. Practitioners are required to perform each kata in its own unique style, with differences in pace and purpose. These kata celebrate the approach of Tomiki Aikido in producing techniques that are fit for purpose.

This article does not intend provide a complete description of all the techniques in the Koryu-Dai-Ichi but will explore specific examples in order to provide a representative flavour of the kata and highlight specific additional elements of these selected techniques.

Koryu-dai-Ichi

The Koryu-dai-Ichi or Kata number one, comprises twenty-four techniques and commences with Suwari-waza (kneeling techniques) and proceeds to Tachi Waza (standing techniques).

The kata is divided into four sections A (5 techniques) B (7 techniques) C (6 techniques) and D (6 techniques). The overall focus of the kata is the maintenance an understanding of more traditional Aikido, with an emphasis on flowing circular technique. Another important distinction is to maintain and extend the distance from the opponent, ensuring that they have to lean or extend themselves in order to make an attack. This gives the kata its unique style and approach and differentiates it from all other sequences. Each technique is performed either left or right handed, each Koryu-no-Kata being comprised of right (Migi) or left (Hidari) attacks in several forms, from strikes to grasps, encompassing the 35 basic attacks that all Aikido techniques have been adapted for.

I have selected four techniques, one from each section to highlight the type of move performed in combination with the unique approach employed within the Koryu-Dai-Ichi.



Fig 5 Starting distance and kneeling posture

Section A: Technique number one

Suwara Waza Oshi Taoshi (Ikkyo)

Both partners kneel at distance and rai (bow) before shikko (knee walk) toward each other stopping at hand blade distance. **(See Fig 5)** Tori initiates the move by attacking Uke with a clockwise circular strike to the head. Uke response with the mirror action and blocks Tori's strike. **(See Fig 6)** Tori continues to drive forward catching the opponents elbow with their left hand and driving it towards the face. **(See Fig 7)** As the opponent turns Tori drives the elbow downward and pins to the floor. **(See Fig 8)** The opponent's arm is raised to a 45-degree angle and secured. The pinning action is right hand holding wrist and left hand pinning the elbow joint. **(See Fig 9)**



Fig 6 Meeting Toris initial strike in centre.



Fig 7 Tori drives elbow toward opponent's face



Fig 8 restrain on the floor



Fig 9 Pin at wrist and elbow

This particular technique provides an insight into two elements specifically taught in Aikido. The first is the use and mastery of kneeling techniques, developed as

defence during meal or other ceremonial events where the defender and attacker start from a traditional kneeling position. These techniques will be a focus for a further article later in the series. The Koryu-dai-Ichi however provides an initial exploration of these techniques, and secondly develops the concept of Tori attacking first. Aikido is often portrayed as a defensive martial art. The Koryu-dai-Ichi does explore techniques being initiated by Tori and does not wait for the opponent (Uke) to attack.

Section B: Technique number two

Ai Hanmi Oshi Taoshi (ikkyo)

Both partners are Tachi waza (standing) Uke attacks Tori's left hand, attempting to grab. Tori performs sugi ashi (backward sliding) movement to draw the attacker into leaning forward to grab the wrist. **(See Fig 10)**



Fig 10 Opponent grasps Tori's hand

Tori then drives forward pushing the opponent's arm and elbow back toward their head, simultaneously stepping forward with their right leg. **(See Fig 11)** Tori then continues to circle, driving the opponents elbow to the ground. **(See Fig 12)** Once on the ground Tori adjusts posture, by moving their right leg forwards and applies a lock to the opponent's arm. **(See Fig 13)**



Fig 11 Drive elbow to the face



Fig 12 Restrain on the floor by locking elbow



Fig 13 Apply finishing lock

The change in lock, from the basic (Fig12) help denotes the change in technique from an Irimi to a Tenkan style.

This particular technique is categorized as a Tenkan or turning throw. All Aikido techniques are performed in two main directions, Irimi or entering and Tenkan or turning. Again this differentiation will form part of a subsequent article, but the Koryu-dai-Ichi introduces practitioners to the concept of Irimi and Tenkan providing and broadening delivery options of each technique within Aikido.

Section C; Technique number three

Kata Tori Senkai Nage (Kokkyu Nage)



Fig 14 Opponent tries to grasp Tori's left sleeve

Tori stands with their left shoulder forward, the opponent stretches forward to grasp Tori's upper sleeve (Kata) between elbow and shoulder. **(See Fig 14)** Tori absorbs the attack by stepping backward and catches the opponent's attacking arm. **(See Fig 15)** Keeping the arm straight **(See Fig 16)** Tori again steps and then kneels away from the opponent dropping their body weight to the floor. Thus using their body weight in the execution of the throw. **(See Fig 17)** As the opponent is drawn toward the floor Tori uses their spare arm to catch inside the opponent's leg and aid the projection of the technique.



Figure 15 Tori step back and catch opponent's arm at the wrist



Fig 16 Absorb the momentum and encourage opponent forward movement



Fig 17 Drop body weight and cut at opponent's trailing leg

This particular throw incorporates another two key elements within Aikido, first the use of whole body weight by kneeling during the execution of a throw and the second the development of Kokkyu techniques. Kokkyu is traditionally interpreted as “breathing” techniques focussing on the use of “Ki” or “Chi”, the second definition is “trick” technique” leading the opponent and giving disguise to the movement. Again Kokkyu techniques will be a focus in subsequent issues.

Section D: Technique number six

Ushiro Ryote Tori Kokkyu.

The opponent grasps Tori's lead hand and tries to grasp the other hand by stepping behind Tori. **(See Fig 18)** Tori drives the lead (in this case) right hand upward whilst turning anti clockwise to the left. **(See Fig 19)** Tori begins to blend, go with the opponent's movement. **(See Fig 20)** Once the opponent has firmly grasped Tori they drive their hands to the floor projecting the opponent forward and downward. **(See Fig 21)**



Fig 18 Opponent grasps Tori's right hand.



Fig 19 Opponent attacking with Ushiro Ryote Tori (two handed grasp from behind)



Fig 20 Tori turns to bring both arms to the front



Fig 21 Project opponent whist lowering posture

Here the concept of blending, working with an aggressor's energy and direction becomes central to the execution of the throw. Plus we begin the exploration of techniques performed when the opponent attacks from the rear.

The Koryu-Dai-Ichi begins the journey of learning a wider range of technical principles within a more traditional approach. The kata must demonstrate flow with a focus on maintaining and extending distance as part of the Kuzushi or balance breaking process. The balance breaking comes in the form of tricking the opponent to over extend, and then use whole body movement to execute. In its full context the Koryu-Dai-Ichi is a graceful yet effective sequence of throws highlighting the more traditional principles of Aikido.

Photographs by Martin Cheevers and Chris White

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