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MEDIA

Mar 2017
Vol. 29 No. 10

THE UK'S **NUMBER ONE** MARTIAL ARTS MAGAZINE

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Serving Your Apprenticeship Part 1

Juggling with Aikido Skills at Kyu Grade

Martial Arts especially Aikido can fall into two distinct categories. The traditional approach centred in Japanese philosophy and culture and the Modernist approach, based on western culture. Whichever journey taken towards the development of skill, knowledge and understanding Aikidoka must serve their apprenticeship and have a full and well developed understanding of the art as a whole. There are no short cuts to excellence. It takes many years of hard work and dedication to master the skills in Aikido. Many individuals gain belts as a matter of course through time served and not always as a reflection of their achievement or skill level. Reputations are not earned they are acquired. Moreover as a Coach, Competitor or practitioner invariably you are only as good as the last time you stepped on a mat! Aikido, like all martial arts cannot be learned from books, participants need to practise to gain both mental and physical appreciation of technique.

The Learning Journey – The Apprenticeship

There are five identifiable stages in the journey to fully understanding Aikido; to miss one of the steps will seriously inhibit true performance and understanding. Bearing in mind that Aikido is part physical and part psychological.

The stages are: -

Stage 1 Lower Kyu – generally at this stage the participants are learning basic skills taught within basic techniques. All associations have a range of basic throws, which are used to give the participant an understanding of which techniques work. This provides a sound building block to progress through the stages. It is very important that the foundation is of a high standard as poor technique, once embedded is difficult to change.

Stage Two- Upper Kyu – preparing for Dan Grade – minimising the number of errors in skill level to improve technical performance. At this stage the range of technique is widening and the core techniques are improving in quality. The coach is trying to enable the participants to have consistent quality practice.

Stage Three: 1st-3rd Dans. This level signifies that the participant is ready to be taught. They have grasped the basics and are at a point in the journey where they can begin to learn.

Stage Four: 4th and 5th Dan– At this level there should be great mastery of technique and performance. The participant is really beginning to understand the complexities of Aikido, with a sense of realisation that high-level skills are very difficult to master.

Stage Five: Dans 6 and above – For the few that reach this level the context changes to one of self development. Extending knowledge and in depth appreciation of Aikido in a wider context.

The first two stages are a type of Apprenticeship and should be approximately three to five years in length depending on the number of hours practised and quality of coaching. This stage should not be rushed and for some may take many years dedicated practice.

Initially learning Aikido is like teaching someone to juggle. **(Fig 1)** A pair of beginners at first try to juggle with one ball, they find this relatively easy. As the Kyu grade ladder is progressed the number of balls to juggle increases. Indeed to fully master the concepts and skills to effectively perform one technique may mean developing the ability to juggle with up to 20 different balls.

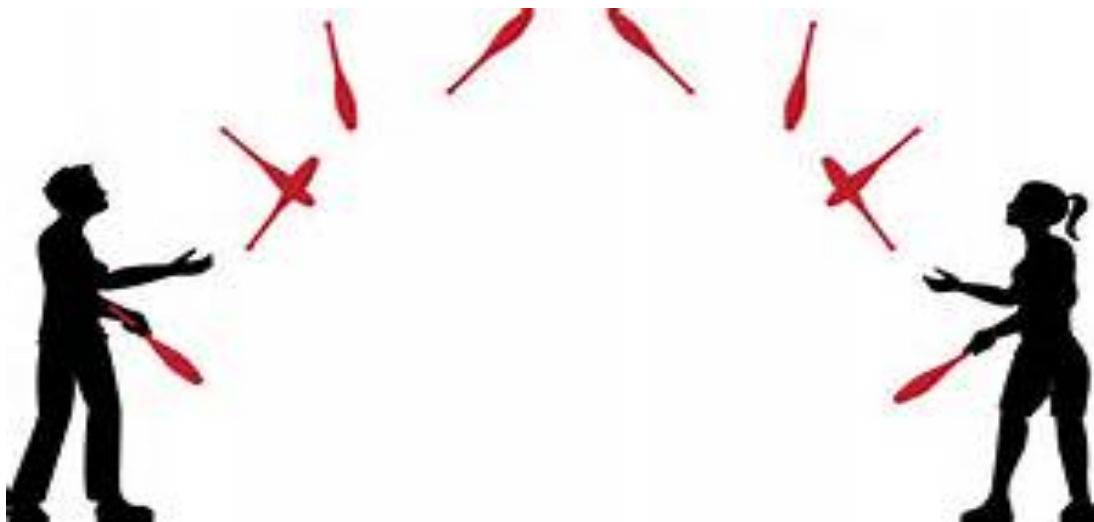


Fig 1 Learning Aikido is very similar to learning to Juggle

So what are the balls Kyu grades need to juggle, what are the elements of each technique?

Development of Stage 1 and Stage 2 – learning to Juggle

Ball 1: Posture and Balance: It is essential that Kyu grades develop the ability to maintain balance and this means developing good posture. Posture is expressed as how you stand to ensure you can maintain control and not be thrown. **(Fig 2)** Posture is not one stance but is flexible, moving with the energy flow of your opponent. Posture should never be rigid or fixed, whilst your centre of gravity should be maintained and offering the opponent your strongest stance.



Fig 2 Vanda Fairchild 5th Dan exhibiting perfect posture during the application of Kote Mawashi – an indicator of good posture is having the spine and back leg in a straight line with both feet flat on the floor.

Ball 2: Avoidance: This is employed to try ensure the opponent's attack does not hit home. Remembering that ultimately Aikido techniques can be tested again the Katana (Sword) where blocking is not an option. All Aikido techniques are based on avoiding action in order to make it safe.

Ball 3: Movement: All techniques are provided with power through body movement. It is essential that the participant learns to use body movement effectively to enable them to position themselves and generate energy to throw efficiently. **(Fig 4)**



Fig 3 David Fielding 6th Dan Using avoidance combined with turning movement to effectively break balance.

Ball 4: Distance: This is know as Mai-ai and will be unique to each individual. It is the skill of maintaining effective distance with your opponent. **(Fig 4)**



Fig 4 Shaun Hoddy 6th Dan maintaining distance by using an Atemi (strike to the head) to stop the opponent closing.

Ball 5: Breaking Balance: Known as Kuzushi and is the ability to exploit weaknesses in the opponent's posture and shift them off balance. **(Fig 5)** Again there are many ways to off balance an opponent. These are commonly exploited through primary and secondary lines of weakness.



Fig 5 Dan Ransden 4th Dan using Shiho Nage to effectively break his opponents balance.

Ball 6: Direction: This is the understanding of weak lines combined with an appreciation of body movement so that your strong throwing lines are matched to the opponent's weak line.

Ball 7: Blending: Is the ability to move with your opponent's energy and not against it. It is maximising the effect of any throw by using your opponents force against them. **(Fig 6)**



Fig 6 Bob Jones 7th Dan using the forward motion of the opponents attack to good effect, blending with forward moving force.

Ball 8: Rotation: All Aikido techniques focus on circularity or rotation either whole or part body. Usually hands create circles and rotate to enhance efficiency of techniques.

Ball 9: Catch: There are a number of complex catches that allow different techniques to be performed. These different hand shapes need to become a natural and automatic response before they can become effective. **(Fig 7)**



Fig 7 Vanda Fairchild demonstrating the initial catch for Kote Gaeshi

Ball 10: Atemi: Aikido utilizes an open handed strike or Atemi. Due to the nature of Aikido the use of the hands is essential, so they are protected by not using a punch as part of the techniques. Also historically punching against armour was highly ineffective. **(Fig 8)**



Fig 8 Mick Pratt 4th Dan using effective Atemi Waza to throw with Ai Gamae At

Ball 11: Centre: The development of the understanding of centre is extremely important. All throws are generated from the centre and hips and not the arms. To be able to transfer power from the lower part of the body (hips and thighs) to execute a technique is essential. **(Fig 9)**



Fig9 Paul Carr 3rd Dan notice the right arm in line with the knot in the belt demonstrating a excellent centre line.

Ball 12: Control: the development of the ability to control an opponent without injury is a high level skill. Appreciation must start at Kyu grade level. The participant gains control, through technique of the opponent's body and be able to adapt and change to ensure dominance.

Ball 13: Falling (Ukemi): The ability to fall safely is an essential skill. It means that opponents can be repeatedly thrown without the fear of injury providing multiple opportunities for repeated practice.

Ball 14: Etiquette: Participants must become familiar with the etiquette involved in the practice of Aikido. This provides the rules of engagement and develops a safe environment for practice.

Ball 15: Variations: As a Kyu grade most techniques are learned standing but the range of Aikido has to be mastered Suwara Waza (Kneeling techniques) Hanmi Handachi Waza (one kneeling one standing techniques) Tachi Waza (Both standing), Bokken, (Wooden Sword) Jo, (Wooden Staff), Tanto (Knife) Yari (Spear) all in Irimi (entering) and tenkan (turning) forms. **(Fig 10, 11 and 12)**



Fig 10 Bob Jones demonstrating Hanmi Handachi Shiho Nage.



Fig 11 Shaun Hoddy using Tanto



Fig 12 Shaun Hoddy in action again this time using Jo

These fifteen example balls to juggle provides an insight into the complexity of Aikido training. It is virtually impossible to perform at 100% by the time you reach 1st Dan. It is important of new practitioners to take their time and ensure that as many of these skills are embedded into everyday practice. The development of all these elements cannot be rushed; there are no short cuts to excellence.

Photos Julia Ford and Martin Cheevers

Written by Bob Jones