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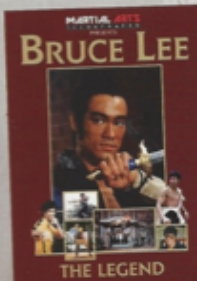
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Serving Your Apprenticeship Part 2

Juggling with Aikido Skills at Dan Grade

This article will focus on the follow up to part one of Serving Your Apprenticeship that appeared in last month's issue of MAI. It will continue the theme of "Juggling Skills" (**Fig 1**) as part of the Apprenticeship that all Aikidoka must journey through in order to gain a full insight into the practice and ultimate mastery of Aikido. Part one looked at Stages One and Two (kyu grades) whilst this issue will reflect on stages three, four and five, including some associated learning and training theories, that support the Apprenticeship journey.



Fig 1 Developing Aikido skills is akin to juggling with many balls

Stage Three: 1st to 3rd Dan. 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. (**Fig 2**)



Fig 2 Paul Carr 4th Dan coaching Oshi Taoshi at the USA National Course

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

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

Having focussed on the physical aspects of technical development and laid the foundation of future success the main aim of any Kyu grade achieving Dan grade level is to minimise the number of errors they make. A Dan Grading is not the ultimate; it is by no means a demonstration of perfection. At best it illustrates the individual's ability to demonstrate a basic understanding of Aikido and perform with a minimum of errors. Once they have achieved their 1st Dan they are entering **Stage Three**. At this level there are some important aspects to be considered if the Aikidoka is to continue their development including: -

The ability to deliver **Consistency**, to maintain a high level of practise and minimise the number of errors made within each technique. To be able to produce and repeat quality techniques. Within sport Aikido there is a demand on Aikidoka to maintain performance all year round with the ability to reproduce “perfection” on a regular basis during “Shiai” competitions. **(Fig 3 and 4)**



Fig 3 Gareth Bottomley 3rd Dan producing a perfect Kote Gaeshi



Fig 4 Scott Pearce with a perfect Tenshi Nage

At this stage another key skill is the ability to **apply technique in different circumstances**, this maybe with different opponents and variety of attack, multiple attackers, competition and self defence (Aiki Jitsu). The application of technique in a variety of formats and circumstances is essential for a complete understanding of Aikido.

This stage demands the continued **embedding** of the skills learned at Kyu grade level until they become an automatic reaction, building on muscle memory and the ability to eliminate the conscious thought process.

Finally, to able to be self-critical, the self-identification of technical errors and be able to start the process of **self-correction**.

During this period being an Uchi Deshi or inside student is very important. To be the coaches Uke (demonstration partner) will teach you much about the application of technique. **(Fig 5)**



Fig 5 Dan White 1st Dan, an excellent Uchi Deshi – here getting to grips with being thrown by Jujigarami

Stages 3, 4 and 5 can be linked to Piaget's "Stages of Learning". Initially develop to further the understanding of young people's learning; it can be applied to the development of Aikidoka. Remembering that anyone starting Aikido has a "Training Age" of zero, reflecting the fact that most people have very little experience of Aikido or Martial Arts. Other ages, related to learning include Chronological, Legal, Development and Psychological Ages, all have a bearing on the individual's ability to learn and perform.

Piaget and others developed the following three-stage model of learning and development.

Piaget 1 Cognitive

The beginner is getting to grips with how
Their limbs coordinate and perform an action.
(Links to Apprenticeship Stage 1 and 2)

This parallels the abilities that Kyu grades often exhibit, getting to grips with the "Juggling Balls" and trying to cope with some very unnatural movements. The Kyu grade is reliant on external cues from the Coach and often focus is on the development of isolated individual movements, improvements of part of the technique not the whole.

Piaget 2 Associative

The Aikidoka thinks less about the
movement and can shift attention to adapting
the movement to the conditions.
(Links to Apprenticeship Stage 3)

Coaches should provide effective feedback through questioning to help adjustment of movements, the learning emphasis shifting from Coach to student. The Aikidoka is beginning to apply learning to different circumstances and reflect on their own development.

Piaget 3 Autonomous

The Aikidoka has mastered the full pattern
of movement producing consistent, dynamic
and fluid movements.
(Links to Apprenticeship Stage 4 and 5)

Coaches should allow participants to identify and correct their own errors, reflecting that the student is now capable and self-critical.

At Aikido Stage 4 (4th and 5th Dans) A 4th Dan should be at the peak of physical and technical delivery after which the Aikido journey becomes increasingly more esoteric. There is a move away from physical skills with a greater focus on physiological, philosophical and the relationship between mind and body. This is a period of self-realization with the inner control of emotions such as anger and aggression, to achieve total control of self.

It is also a period of increasing individualization of approach. **(Fig 7 and 8)** Through knowledge and understanding, are should develop a unique approach to Aikido, and begin to specialise, there is increasing appreciation that total mastery of every element of Aikido is almost impossible. **(Fig 6)**



Fig 6 Bob Jones 7th Dan, Shaun Hoddy 6th Dan and Vanda Fairchild 5th Dan all still on the Aikido Journey and pointing a way forward for others.



Fig 7 Bob demonstrating the Judo approach to Sumi Otoshi (Corner drop) and in Fig 8 the Aikido version.



During Stage 5 (6th Dan and above) social and moral elements of development dominate, the application of Aikido to daily life and the appreciation that the goal is a way of life rather than a series of techniques. Your Aikido becomes yours and yours alone and although you never stop learning or striving to understand the complexities of Aikido you realise that you never will. You realise the importance of basics and you learn the humility to practise them. **(Fig 9)** The belt system is significant, you start with red and white and end with red and white, you have travelled a full circle. Your journey is over; the Apprentice has become the Master. **(Fig 10)**



Fig 9 Even at 7th Dan basics are still important, here Bob Jones is performing a movement and posture exercises - Tandoku Undo.



Fig 10 A proud moment Arthur Austin and Adrian Tyndale both being awarded their 6th Dans.

Maslow and others offer another model of learning that relates to the development of Aikidoka.

Part 1 Unconscious incompetence The individual does not understand or know how to do something and does not necessarily recognize the way forward. They may deny the usefulness of the skill. The individual must recognize their own incompetence, and the value of the new skill, before moving on to the next stage. The length of time an individual spends in this stage depends on the strength of the stimulus to learn. **(Relates to Aikido Stages 1, Kyu Grade)**

Part 2 Conscious incompetence Though the individual does not understand or know how to do something, they do recognize what they need to do, although may not have all the skills to move forward. They have learned the value of a new skill in addressing the way forward. The making of mistakes can be integral to the learning process at this stage. **(Relates to Aikido Stages 2, Kyu Grade)**

Part 3 Conscious competence The individual understands or knows how to do something. However, demonstrating the skill requires concentration. It may be broken down into steps, and there is heavy conscious involvement in executing the new skill. **(Relates to Aikido Stages 3, Dan Grade)**

Part 4 Unconscious competence The individual has had so much practice with a skill that it has become "second nature" and can be performed easily. As a result, the skill can be performed while executing another task. The individual may be able to teach it to others, depending upon how and when it was learned. **(Relates to Aikido Stages 4 and 5, Dan Grade)**

This theory help contextualise learning and gives some useful descriptors of Aikidoka in order to pinpoint their progression through the Apprenticeship journey.

It is important that during the Apprenticeship journey the Aikidoka is exposed to a variety of “approaches to learning”. One style of learning does not fit all, and coaching delivery should be varied based on relevance and need. One of the main theories explaining learning styles was developed by Kolb, who investigated approaches to teaching and learning that can be readily applied to the Aikidoka five stages of development.

Kolb's learning styles model

Kolb's learning theory sets out four distinct learning styles or preferences, which are based on a four-stage learning or 'training cycle'.

Kolb's model is particularly relevant, as it offers both a way to understand individual's different learning styles, and also an explanation of a cycle of learning that applies to all.

Kolb promotes this 'cycle of learning' as a central principle in experiential learning theory and is expressed as four-stage cycle of learning, in which 'immediate or concrete experiences' provide a basis for 'observations and reflections'. These 'observations and reflections' are distilled into 'abstract concepts' producing a plan for action that can be 'actively tested' in turn creating new experiences.

So this is a cycle of experiencing, reflecting, thinking, and acting. Immediate or concrete experiences lead to observations and reflections. These reflections are then translated into concepts with implications for action, which the Aikidoka can actively test and experiment with, which in turn enable the creation of new experiences.

Initially the concrete experience would require the coach to interpret and provide solutions for Kyu Grades, as they do not have the full range of experience to create remedial actions. As the Kyu progresses to Dan grade they begin to develop strategies for self-reflection and the ability to produce and improve their own technique. By the time the Aikidoka reaches the later stages of development, 4th Dan and above, there is a diminished reliance on the concrete experience and a greater ability to start with more abstract concepts. Kolb does provide a framework for learning through which the Apprenticeship journey can be progressed.

More traditional approaches to the learning of Aikido, indeed most martial arts from Japan is one of watching and copying demonstrated movement. By applying such as Piaget, Maslow and Kolb with other educational and learning theories we can modernize the approach to coaching Aikido and ensure the Apprenticeship journey is efficient, effective and achieved.

The length of the journey can be quite varied, from stepping on a mat to achieving 6th Dan would usually take a minimum of at least twenty-five years continuous and regular practice.

Each stage of Aikido development requires a unique approach, with a specific range of skills, knowledge and understanding to be mastered. Each stage must be completed before progress to the next level. Unfortunately there are no short

cuts, progress may be quick or extremely slow and will depend on the attitude, physicality and dedication of the individual. The correct foundations provide a sound basis for the progression through the five stages but whatever the approach it is a lengthy and complex journey that only a few individuals ever complete.

The key, when starting Aikido, is to look at Aikido as hobby a but a hobby for life, to look beyond the learning of physical technique and to look to enjoy the journey and have fun. **(Fig 11)** What is crucial is having an experienced coach who will be able to help, using their knowledge and skill to motivate, encourage and facilitate you through each stage of development.



Fig 11 Black belts having fun during a weekend training session in Dublin, enjoying what you do will help the learning journey

Photography Julia Ford, Chris White and Martin Cheevers

Written by Bob Jones