

THE KIAI

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ON KATA PRACTICE

Most martial arts contain kata that are used in regular training. A kata is a set of predetermined forms that contain the basic templates that underlie the technical repertoire of the art. The kata are meant to be practiced repeatedly by the students in order to internalize these core moves.

In mainstream Aikido there are no kata. In the Aikido that we practice in the Dojo there are two katas: the 13 jo kata and the 31 jo kata. There are other styles of Aikido that include more kata in their curriculum.

What is a kata?

A kata is a sequence of forms that are meant to be repeated many times until mastery. A kata is often composed of core movements from which other techniques are derived. These movements are linked so that one flows smoothly into the next one.



A kata records the most fundamental elements of techniques in a format that is conducive to repetitive practice.

The purpose of kata practice.

The initial purpose of kata practice is to internalize the forms. The ultimate purpose is to transcend the forms. Initially the student's energy is used to learn and master the forms. As each form is being internalized, the student gradually requires less concentration and effort to perform it. The student can then decide



whether of not to maintain the same level of effort. The kata acts as a vessel to store energy. Under the right conditions, the energy that is not used in performing the kata can be stored and used to propel awareness to higher levels. Ultimately, a kata is a stepping stone to higher level of awareness.

How kata practice affects us.

Repetition is a necessary condition for mastery of any art. Repetition of anything (good or bad) helps to internalize it. That is, the item being repeated is drilled deeper into our core (our subconscious) with each repetition. The deeper it goes the more it molds our mental and physical traits. After a certain point it becomes such an integral part of the self that its manifestation is a self-expression. In other words, the person becomes the art.

How to practice kata.

We do not necessarily excel in every thing that we repeat during our daily life. How much better do you brush your teeth now compared to ten years ago? Do you consider yourself an expert in walking after having walked this earth for 30 years? In these cases the two additional ingredients that are necessary to elevate these mundane activities to the level of art practice, in addition to repetition, are clarity of goal and energetic contents.

Clarity of goal.

Normally, when we use our legs to walk, we are mainly interested in getting from one point to another point. This is a relatively easy goal for any average person. Instead, suppose each time you walk you want to get from point A to point B while treading on the least space, e.g. you want to walk on a half-inch thick line from A to B. If you keep at this for a year, that is maintaining your balance within a half-inch thick line every time you walk, you

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will become a master of balance. In that way you can transform a simple daily act into a practice toward a goal.

If you do not set a clear and specific goal each time you use your body, the body will naturally follow the path of least resistance and do just enough to get by. If you are interested only in ambulating, then your body will do just that. Therefore, for successful kata practice, the student must have a very clear mental image of the forms that are to be mastered. The more detail, the more precise the image and the more successful the replication.

Energetic contents.

If the student has a precise mental image of the form and repeats it often, she will master it over time. She will become more efficient at performing the form and will use diminishing amount of energy. At 5th kyuu it took you a lot of concentration to do morote dori kokyuu ho correctly. Now at nidan this same technique requires hardly the same effort. Many people will be content with this state and will call this mastery.

But if at nidan you devote the same amount of energy as you did at 5th kyuu to perform kokyuu ho, the excess energy not required by the form will carry your awareness to a higher level. For example, this energy will begin to make spontaneous energetic connections between kokyuu ho and other techniques that use a similar energetic path. These are not just mental connections but connections effected by your total energy body. At such times one may feel that something has suddenly clicked and previously disparate concepts or movements now become congruent.

The risk of kata practice.

The discussion above implies that if the martial artist is to transcend forms and get to the essence of the martial art he must constantly practice kata with a precise mental image of the kata and with a beginner's intensity. But this type of prac-

tice also carries an inherent risk that I have touched on above. The risk is that the kata becomes the ultimate training goal.

When a martial art is replete with kata the inevitable temptation is to make them the ultimate training goals. Our restless mind needs endless activity. It feeds on new and interesting things and thrives in diversity. After one has learned all the kata the training gets boring and one starts to look for new kata or new variations. The mind may even tell us that there is nothing else to be learned from our current teacher or current art. This is when students start to loose interest in regular training and look for new training partners, new teachers, new dojos or new arts.

It is my guess that one of the reasons for O Sensei not to leave us kata was that he wanted to keep the art dynamic and versatile. However, we should practice our techniques as if they are kata. We should have a precise picture of the techniques with all the detail in our mind; we should perform the techniques over and over without changing the detail; we should do each repetition with the same intensity as if it was our first time. Then, over time may be we can catch a glimpse of the dynamic core of Aikido.

HOA NEWENS



Do not overlook the truth that is right before you. Study how water flows in a valley stream, smoothly and freely between the rocks. Also learn from holy books and wise people. Everything—even mountains, rivers, plants and trees—should be your teacher.

MORIHEI UESHIBA

YON DAN ESSAY

“The will of the gods permeating body and soul is aiki-polish that sword and make its brilliance known throughout this world.”

Morihei Ueshiba
(Budo)

“Prayer is a demand of the soul. Even if you do no more than pray sincerely. . . great joy will eventually come upon you.”

Paramahansa Yogananda
(In the Sanctuary of the Soul)

“Then it comes, a swelling, arching wall of water. . . paddling, we find the part of the wave where we are no longer moving under our own power, but being propelled forward by the force of the ocean. . .”

James Meacham
(The Tao of Surfing)

References to divine will are found throughout the spiritual poetry of Aikido's founder, Morihei Ueshiba. The Japanese word “kannagara” translated as such refers to a state of perfect attunement with the movement of the universe. O'Sensei clearly believed that such a state was attainable through rigorous, life-long training. Like O'Sensei, Paramahansa Yogananda, one of the great spiritual teachers of this century, also believed that rigorous training could bring about such a state of oneness, or attunement. The training that he counseled, however, was the practice of sincere, daily prayer. James Meacham, in his sermon on the Tao of Surfing, also discusses the phenomena of oneness. He relates his experiences with wave riding to spiritual experiences and advises the would-be surfer to view the waves as awe-inspiring sources of power. Each of the above quotes illustrates an attitude of humility toward a source of power and movement in the universe. Although each of these sources of power can be viewed as being different and distinct, it is my intent in this essay to illuminate their similarities.

In O'Sensei's philosophy, permeation with the will of the gods is an alignment with the movement of the universe, an act of blending, which at its essence, is a form of surrender. Prayer, as Yogananda saw it, is a surrender as well, one of the will, and a seeking of guidance from a higher source, perhaps God. Surfing, in Meacham's view, is likewise an act of surrender, an activity where one allows oneself to be moved by a greater outside force.

Viewed from this perspective, Ki flow, the idea of God (whatever we conceive of that to be), and the swelling power of the ocean wave appear as one and the same. Faced with an opponent in training, we may meet with conflict, only to eventually blend in a harmonious direction, guided by the flow of Ki. So too do we struggle at times with decisions in our lives, only to have the answer revealed when we have ceased to seek it and instead, opened our hearts in prayer. In attempting to ride a wave, we might struggle against wind and water, but in the moment of aligning ourselves correctly in the spiral, the struggle falls away and we fly. In each situation it is the act of surrender, be it physical or spiritual, that eases the struggle, brings peace to the soul, joy to the heart.

As I approach my 20th year in Aikido, and the date of my Yon Dan exam, I am becoming more aware of the need for surrender in my own life. Having attained some skill in physical practice, I am focussing more on spiritual practice, and seeking to blend in that regard. Years of experience with conflict have left me with an ever-deepening desire for peace. The wish for inner peace being no small order, a great soul-searching is taking place as I move in the direction of this goal. The views expressed in this essay reflect that search.

Describing all of my efforts towards this end would be beyond the scope of this paper. I will say, however, that over time, as I have worked with partners on the mat, swan in the ocean, and absorbed wisdom from spiritual teachers, an awakening has begun to take place. This awakening has led me to extend myself in

prayer as I extend myself towards the path of Ki when blending and as I align my body with the spiral of a wave when moving in the ocean. Guidance, to me, is itself like the ocean, and my act of prayer, the proper alignment of body with wave. My experience of peace is like the ride when one is joined to this magnificent spiral energy, a soul-soaring oneness.

I know that the path is long, and challenges to this new-found peace will be many. I sit humbled before the great ironies governing wave riding, the power of prayer, and the power of Aikido training; oneness is only achieved when we cease to struggle, in the act of giving our faith, we receive the gift of guidance, and in the act of surrendering our strength, we become one with the limitless energy of the universe.

MARY ELIZABETH HALL



UCHIDESHI ESSAY

It's easy to see that those who have been living and practicing in the dojo have become rapidly a lot better at doing the techniques that we practice here. This is what was going through my mind when I first started thinking about the uchideshi program. I wanted to gain some understanding of Aikido and as usual I was in a big hurry, the lack of understanding which seems to be getting ever deeper depending on whatever level I have reached continues to intrigue me. However at the time I just wanted to get better, to know where to put my body, how to stand, or what should I be doing with my feet anyway? Oh and my hands.

Also the rent and tuition seemed to fit right in to my financial picture. My whole life just sort of fell together in a way that would let me do this program with the possibility that the chance may not come along again, or ever for that matter. The decision was obvious and, although I had some fears about committing to this program (like maybe I'm too old or not

skilled enough) I still managed to talk myself into it.

So I began sniffing around asking Megan what to do and talking to other students and past uchideshi. Having heard the whole gamut of advice it all pointed to one person Sensei. So nervously I asked Hoa Sensei if I could talk to him. He gave me a print-out of the guidelines for the program and said that he was glad that I was showing interest in this because it meant that I wanted to improve myself. I thought he meant improve my technique, but that's what I get with a preconceived idea of something I haven't experienced yet. So he gave me a few days to think it over and come back with a decision.

Having given it as much thought as I could, I returned the uchideshi program contract signed, ready to move in January first. I must admit that I have no regrets even though I hadn't realized what I had gotten myself into (and I only say this because it's true). My vision was obscured by the material idea of having better technique. Not the possibility of improving myself as a person.

Hoa Sensei said that I would be able to work during the day as Megan had. Ted and Vanessa seemed to have been able to hold down their jobs while they were uchideshi. Lucky for me I'm self-employed and after some of those sleepless nights I could come home and take a nap before keiko. I had tons of work to do just to get ready to move into the dojo. I was fixing my apartment to rent and cramming all of my belongings into my garage. I was kind of stressed and about a week to go before I moved in I hurt my back. Some of my fears about being inadequate had started appearing to me. This was one I couldn't overlook. I've been training with an old back injury all along and this felt as bad as when I first hurt myself 8 years ago. So I told Sensei, and asked him what to do. He said, "Move in

*Your heart is full of fertile seeds,
waiting to sprout.*

MORIHEI UESHIBA

as planned and, if you can't train soon, we will postpone your stay." So I went to the chiropractor and after a couple of visits I felt a lot better. Looking back on that I think it was just a manifestation of fear of what was about to become a real challenge.

Megan bowed out and I bowed in on New Years Eve. I felt jittery and I think I had my eye on the door when Sensei called us up for a little rondori. "The old and the new" he said and so it began. We had a little party for Megan on New Years Eve, and it was show time. Megan had this connection with Sensei that was magnetic. She was telling me how I was going to have to behave, what I should look for, the do's and don'ts without missing a thing that Sensei was doing. I just stood there and tried to look like I was paying attention.



Megan gave me the uchideshi daily planner with all the times and chores on it and it saved my life (and probably gave her some privacy, too, although she was always available when I had a question). Megan's coaching was a huge help and I'm sure that if I had to figure this out for myself I would have fallen right on my face. I only hope that I can be as useful to the next uchideshi.

After a short while it became apparent that this program was about awareness not about techniques, although awareness covers techniques. Nonetheless, my awareness was low. I thought my focus was good. Looking back now, it was kind of tunnel vision. Now I'm aware that my awareness needs work, and I need to look around to see what's going on around me.

We started off January with kangeiko (translated winter practice). It consists of twelve 6-7 am classes over a month. Last year we trained with jo and bokken doing the ken tai jo exercises. This year there was some bokken work combined with some kaeishiwaza at a pretty fast and vigorous pace. By itself it wasn't too hard.

But with one more 6am class and the rest of the schedule, by Friday night I was having a hard time staying awake let alone paying attention.

We had a huge influx of new people over the next few weeks, New Year's resolutions no doubt, so I found myself enrolling and orienting new students. At first I was worried that I wouldn't get the quality of training I thought I should get, and then I remembered the uchideshi that came before me and they all improved while helping new people. Of course I like to train with my sempai and try to feel the technique while it's happening, it also feels really good to go slow and speak the technique, it's a great reminder. Not only that, after regular class I'm left responsible for my training. It is good for me to have to ask for help.

I have been really lucky as far as work is concerned during the time I have been here

I've been working on a project for myself so I was able to cut down on my work hours to devote time to the dojo. If I had to have kept a 40 hour a week schedule while training who knows what would have given out. As it was I worked on the average 6 hours a day, and trained about 4 hours a day.

I took 2 kyuu tests. The first one was 3rd kyuu. I did the majority of training before I moved in. I felt ready and confident. and at the time of the test I thought I did well until I received the critique after. I passed, however there were a couple of really good points made: 1. about my breathing, and 2. about being able to move from a seated position, suwari-waza. I tried to keep these in the forefront of my mind while training and still do. I asked Peter Slote to help me with my 2nd kyuu test and, although we didn't train a lot together, the coaching and advice was right on time. Peter was also a great help with information about what being an uchideshi is and what's important. Like pay attention to Sensei, and don't be afraid to make mistakes, make big moves,

don't be a butler, etc. I was some of those things and I tried to move big but that's a tough one for me. Anyway my 2nd kyuu test came early and I didn't feel entirely ready, but I felt good while testing and the critique from Sensei and sempai were encouraging.

There wasn't a lot of events for me to prepare for. The biggest one was the Memorial Day gashukku in San Diego. What was great about that was it was the most time I had to focus on Sensei and during that time there were a couple of moments that I knew I was in the exact right place just because it felt good to be there. Although there were a couple of things I'd like to go back in time to change. All in all it was a great week-end.

Now that my commitment is almost complete I look back and see that what I wanted was just the tip of the iceberg of what I received. I've hiked from Tahoe to Yosemite twice. It takes 3 weeks and I always feel the same way: I don't want to leave the mountains but I need to get back to the world. That's how I feel now.

Thank you all. Onegai Shimasu



GAVIN BRODER
UCHIDESHI

IF IT IS TO BE, IT'S UP TO ME.

The old adage "be careful what you wish for" is ever so true after you begin your Aikido practice. The discipline over your mind and thoughts, which guide your physical and metaphysical body, is honed to a remarkable edge. An edge that cuts through inertia and mental obstacles much quicker than you can imagine.

Your thoughts, whether on the mat, in the Dojo, in the street, at home, at work or play, importune actions.

In total, or in part, these actions can become second nature and quickly manifest as habits. Therefore, responsibility for your thoughts are laid at the threshold of

your character – built upon habits which are repetitive actions spurred by your conscience and unconscious thoughts.

As character evolves, one's destiny is framed, not predetermined, but circumscribed by the spiral lineage of thoughts begetting actions, actions repeated as habits, habits defining character and finally character manifesting as one's own destiny.

RICHARD S. GARCIA



AIKIDO

I have rowed since 1987 – that is twelve years – and have endured double practices six days a week, etc... not trivial stuff. Rowing practices are typically two hours on the water, not much more than an Aikido class. However, one's attention level fluctuates a lot more on the water than in Aikido, and there is always time for true relaxation or recovery (turning the boat, right after a hard piece while you search for your breath, waiting for the other boats to catch up, whatever). Part of this is obviously necessitated from the physically demanding, interval-style training required to be a successful rower. Regardless, in Aikido there is never really any time to rest and it is never acceptable to let your attention wander. Even plucking the broom from a higher level student or making the circle at the close of class is part of training.

My training model, cultivated for so many years, is not geared for this sustained focus level. I have had good success learning to concentrate my energy on a definable goal, moving the boat. Ok, I have only been studying Aikido for four months, but as soon as I think I know one technique... no time to finish that sentence! Listening to the instructors, the focus of Aikido is actually not to be able

to ward off this punch or roll away from that kick. Hoa Sensei states that the Aikido student who can defend himself from a human assailant but succumbs to the lethal toxins in his environment was not a good student. Then there is one definable goal after all: I simply need to focus on blending with the universe.

Quite esoteric, and I am happy for you if you get it. In crew you do one thing, in a specific place, for a definable amount of time, against quantifiable competition. Sure there are some different styles in the stroke itself – faster or slower hands away, pulling yourself up with the toes or heels, slide speed (consistent or not) – but the bottom line is the oars go in, the boat is moved, and then the set up to do it again. As I continue with Aikido I do get the sense that I over complicate things; the footwork is either the Aiki walk or two step (right?). Simple enough to say, but rowing looks easy too.

I certainly appreciate that the more experienced students choose to train with newbies like me. In fact, it is apparently a win/win situation and part of Aikido training. This intermingling is not so natural in rowing. I remember that my freshman squad was permitted to have only one mixed practice with the varsity team the whole year. Perhaps it is because one's partner plays a key roll in the feel of the boat, in wins and losses. Rowing may be deceptively simple to watch, but getting into a single or even holding onto the oars correctly – forget about trying to row – is

Each and every master, regardless of the era or place, heard the call and attained harmony with heaven and earth. There are many paths leading to the top of Mount Fuji, but there is only one summit—love.

MORIHEI UESHIBA

difficult. Some people go their whole life without taking a single good stroke, not something to mull over when pushing off the dock with an untried teammate. The delicate balance of a one and a half-foot wide double (two scullers) is easily upset by the smallest of movements (my single is about one foot wide). After graduating college I moved to Philadelphia to pursue rowing more seriously. There I raced and trained with athletes who were of a higher caliber and the message was the same: Rowing with a better person is not to help you improve, but rather because it is the best current match.

Reflections like this make me question the speeches I heard in college, purporting rowing to be a metaphor for life. We were learning to work with others, follow a schedule, and focus on a goal – or so we were told. I love rowing and don't plan on ever diminishing the attention I give the sport. But as I move my single, only wanting to leave others bouncing in my wake, to show them who is better, I know the skill of learning to work with other people is learned more successfully in Aikido.

I appreciate the opportunity to practice this. I have read and heard and discussed and sometimes believe that the true competition or challenge is within. That we are to interact with each other with humility, and appreciate help however it comes. This is difficult to incorporate into life, at least for me. I can see the effects of class trickling out and showing up in unusual places. I like that.

PAUL WINANS



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THE DOJO CODE

*I always look, listen and learn.
I bow with humility to receive from O'Sensei,
the Sensei and fellow students.
I do my best, share and persevere in my practice.*