

CLASS ETIQUETTE AND PROCEDURES

When someone is trying to hit you on the head your personal philosophy, or how you imagine yourself to be, doesn't matter much. What does matter is how you manage the attack without you or your attacker being hurt. On the training mat no one is interested in your ideas about how relaxed you think you are, but they are interested if you are relaxed in your movements. Are you moving with the flow of energy? Can you stay balanced while under pressure? Are you in tune with your partner? These are difficult tasks. They require sensitivity, inner strength, and a willingness to drop one's position of being right. The attitude for these challenges is clearly expressed in the words of the founder, Master Ueshiba, when he said, "The opponent is within ... it (aikido) is not for correcting others; it is for correcting your own mind." This ethic of responsibility teaches us that harmony (and everything else for that matter) first starts with one's self; the resolution of conflict begins by first resolving it within one's self.

In Search of the Warrior Spirit, Richard Strozzi Heckler

This section is much like *kokyunage*: it includes etiquette, class procedures, and some other items of interest that don't fit neatly elsewhere.

Proper etiquette is a very important part of the discipline of *Aikido*. Observing the proper etiquette helps focus the mind on training, and allows people of different backgrounds and skill levels to work together harmoniously. This includes students of other styles and disciplines: never criticize any martial art. Practice of the martial arts should begin with courtesy and end with courtesy, and this courtesy should not be confined to the *dojo*. *Aikido* is based on the laws of nature, and as such can be practiced everywhere, at any time. Be courteous and respectful both inside and outside the *dojo*.

Be sure to check in at the front desk when you enter the *dojo*. If you owe dues, please take care of them before class. Since the ranking belts have responsibilities for teaching and for greeting visitors, please assist them by taking care of any cleaning chores that may need to be done. Always remove your shoes before stepping on the mat, placing them somewhere out of the way. Since we often have visitors, please keep the bench area clear and as neat as possible.

In order to reduce the risk of injury during class, please keep your finger and toe nails short and neatly trimmed. Do not chew gum during class. For safety's sake, please remove all jewelry, and make sure that your glasses are secure.

Once class has started (i.e., the breathing exercise has begun), students should not join the class without permission from the instructor. Once you are dressed, have a seat (in *seiza*, preferably) along the *joseki* side of the mat and wait to be recognized. While you are not on the mat, please be quiet. If you are talking with visitors, try to do so in a quiet voice. Only students who are asked by *sensei* to talk with visitors should do so.

In an art like *Aikido* where we work closely together, good hygiene is very important. When washing your *gi*, bleach is not recommended; it will weaken the fabric. Be sure to fold your *gi* carefully to minimize wrinkling; part of the discipline of *Aikido* is keeping your *gi* clean and neat. Dojo members are expected to wear a white *gi* with no writing, emblems or patches. Visitors may wear their usual uniform. If you choose to wear a T-shirt under your *gi*, it should be a muted solid color, preferably white. For safety's sake, promptly repair any tears in the fabric of the *gi*.

Yudansha (black belts) are addressed as *sensei*. If there is more than one black belt on the mat, then you may address an individual using his or her last name followed by *sensei*. The term *sensei* is used only for those of *Dan* rank (black belts).

When coming on to the mats to practice, one bows to show respect to the art of *Aikido*, and to serve as a tangible indication of one's intention to train. About 5 minutes before the start of class, the ranking

student on the mat will set the line by kneeling in *seiza* on the *joseki* side of the mat; until that time, students are free to stretch and speak quietly. Once the line is set, all students should kneel facing the *shomen* (front), and silently await the beginning of class. This time gives you an opportunity to adjust your breathing: proper breathing is slow and deep, using the full capacity of your lungs. The proper practice of *Aikido* requires a calm and settled mind; take advantage of this time to set aside the events of the day.

When the instructor sits *seiza* in the center of the mat, everyone will bow to the *shomen*; this indicates your respect for the art, and your willingness to train. Then the instructor will turn around, bow to the class, and everyone will say *onegaishimasu, sensei* (please share); this bow indicates the mutual respect between the instructor and the students.

The practice [of Aikido] is a tool, not an end. I think that [it's] more important to become a better person through Aikido than to become an "Aikido champion". Concepts like honor, loyalty, sincerity, and care are the very core of the martial arts. These concepts breed friendship, and friendship is meaningless without them. True friends care for one another and help one another to create a disciplined but pleasant environment in which everyone can practice safely, have fun, and try to reach his or her potential, without sacrificing his or her uniqueness. I think that this is the true meaning of Aikido's lack of competition.

Massimo di Villadorata, interview in Aikido Today Magazine, vol. 9, number 5.

During the practice of *Aikido*, it is important to put aside all matters not connected with the class. Only by focusing on the principles of *Aikido*, and seriously practicing the art, will you be able to make progress in your training. Do not think of your practice as a competition between yourself and the other students. Earning rank is merely an indication that you are making good progress: rank itself is not the goal. Rather, the goal is to unify your mind and body so your training (and, indeed, your life) reflects the basic principles of *Aikido*:

**Extend Ki
Relax Completely
Maintain One Point
Keep Weight Underside**

The practice of *Aikido* is a partnership: together you learn the proper way to apply the techniques. Thus, a spirit of cooperation is essential in the practice of *Aikido*. You should not gain satisfaction from being able to stop your partner's technique; rather, you should endeavor to help your partner find the correct way to perform the technique successfully. Practice should always take place at an appropriate level so that injuries do not occur. You will be expected to work with partners of different size and different rank, and you will be expected to learn to throw and be thrown.

After *sensei* has demonstrated the technique to be practiced, quickly select a partner. It is important to try to work with all members of the *dojo*: you can learn from everyone. Those with more experience should try to partner with the newer students in order to help them get used to the proper way to attack and fall. While practicing, conversation should be kept at a minimum. When working with a higher ranking student, keep in mind that they have more experience than you; try to follow their instructions, and refrain from correcting their technique. If you are having difficulty with the technique, keep trying as long as you can do so without risk of injury. It is impolite to call to *sensei* across the mat, or attempt to wave him or her over. When the instructor comes over to help, pay close attention to the instruction, and then thank the instructor by bowing and saying *arigato, sensei*. When *sensei* claps twice, bow to your partner and sit on the *shimoza* side of the mat for further instruction.

If someone is injured, or becomes ill, be sure to notify *sensei*. Unless it is urgent, do not leave the mat without permission. Whenever it is necessary to move across the mat, try to move along the *shimoza* side; do not walk across the middle of the mat.

At the end of class, *sensei* will tell the students to set up for the close of class. If possible, the senior student should take the seat at the right end of the front line. When everyone is seated, the instructor will start to bow to the *shomen*, the senior student will say *shomen ni rei* and everyone will bow towards the *shomen*. The instructor will turn to face the class and bow, and, at the call *sensei ni rei*, students will bow to the instructor; the students will say *domo arigato gozaimashita, sensei*. Everyone remains seated until *sensei* has left the mat, at which time the senior student will *shikko* forward, turn towards the class, and say *rei*; the class then bows to the senior student. It is then appropriate to thank the partners that you worked with during class.