A black and white photograph showing two Aikido practitioners in a dynamic pose. One person, wearing a white gi, is performing a throw or technique on another person in a dark gi. The person in white is leaning forward, applying pressure to the other's arm. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

合  
氣  
道

# Aikido

From the Inside Out

A Beginner's Guide

Howard Bornstein

**Aikido from the Inside Out**

**A Beginner's Guide**



**Howard Bornstein**



**SINGULARITY PUBLISHING**

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# AIKIDO FROM THE INSIDE OUT

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Dedicated, *in memoriam*, to Suzanne Segal, my friend and teacher, who helped me to understand that the best approach to self-defense is to have no self to defend.

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Edited by Kathleen Vian

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# Introduction

## **What this book is good for**

Aikido is an unusual art, with principles steeped in martial arts and philosophy. Unlike many martial arts, the essence of aikido is independent from the physical form of the movements. It's independent from individual techniques. Yet, the forms and techniques spring from the essence. This ineffable essence is what makes aikido so alluring and, at the same time, so difficult for a beginner to understand.

I have found that trying to learn aikido from books is just about impossible. It's not because the authors of aikido books are not knowledgeable or don't know how to write. It's not that their photographs are unclear. It is because with aikido, *what you see is not what you get*.

The dynamics in aikido are not usually obvious or visible unless you already know what to look for. The principles of aikido are a set of feelings, sensations, and understandings about elements of nature, physics, energy, and behavior. To learn these principles, you must experience them through the body, the feelings, and the mind—generally in that order. You have to learn them through direct transmission. Descriptions are inadequate.

If this is so, then why write about aikido? The purpose of this book is not to describe aikido techniques, but to try to direct your attention, as a beginner, to the inner elements of sensation that are the essence of the aikido experience.

By knowing what to look for, you can put your attention on the elements that will get you “inside” the art. Often the martial arts are taught from the outside in. This means that an external form is taught and students practice these forms in endless repetitions, typically for years. Eventually, if they endure the repetition of these outer forms, they may come to understand some inner aspect of the art.

Since aikido relies so much on the inner experience in order to perform it properly, it seems more advantageous to learn it from the inside out. In other words, if you can practice by specifically looking for the inner “taste” of the aikido principles—and learn to recognize and then recreate this taste on demand—you can “own” the principles of aikido. It is out of these principles that the forms will then naturally, and with effortless grace, emerge.

The purpose of this book is to point to the principles of aikido, to give a sense of what they “taste” like, and to provide signposts so that you can recognize and identify

these principles during practice. This book will be most useful to those who are already engaged in an active study of aikido—currently practicing and have at least a basic familiarity with the concepts, principles, and techniques of aikido.

Note on gender reference: Obviously, aikido can be practiced by both sexes with equal effectiveness. For simplicity, gender references in this book are generally masculine, but apply equally to both sexes.

## The Principles

Connection  
Harmony/blending/confluence  
Balance and center  
Flexibility  
Proper distance (*ma ai*)  
*Ki*  
*Atemi*



### The Principles: What are they?

If the purpose of this book is to provide a series of inner signposts for the principles of aikido, is it possible to describe these principles in meaningful ways? I think it is, but only when you add your own experience to the descriptions.

The principles presented here are drawn from my own study of the process of learning aikido, from my peers who have shared their experiences with me, and from my students who have, often unknowingly, participated in my sometimes unusual experiments.

For the purposes of learning the inner taste of the aikido principles, I've separated them into the following categories:

Connection

Harmony, blending, and confluence

Balance and center

Flexibility

Proper distance (*ma ai*)

*Ki*

*Atemi*

In my view, these principles form the core of the aikido experience. The topics covered in the rest of this book are also important, but the principles are clearly the

foundation upon which all the rest is built. I hope that, by starting here, you may discover a visceral sense of these principles to guide you through the maze of interpretation and contradictory teachings that you'll encounter on your path.

The Principles

**Connection**



## CONNECTION

Connection may be the single most important principle of aikido practice. It's what makes aikido "work" without effort. It's the aspect of practice that eliminates the opposition.

Here's the idea in theory: If you and your partner are struggling, you experience resistance and opposition. However, if there is only one of you (the other one leaves, for example), the struggle and opposition cease. *Connection is the way to change two into one without making someone leave.*

Connection, in the realm of aikido, requires that you affect your partner's center. The "center" is considered to be an area below the navel in the body and is the seat of balance. We'll just talk about center in the physical realm, but as you practice, you'll see that center pertains to other arenas as well.

## A SIMPLE PRACTICE

Here's a simple way to practice finding the center of the body and observing how it's affected:

Imagine that you have a very agreeable partner who will do whatever you suggest. Better yet, find a real partner

to try this with. Your partner stands in the typical relaxed aikido triangular hanmi, or stance. He offers his right hand to you, as in a handshake—thumb up. However, his arm is relaxed and bent a fair amount at the elbow.

You are going to grab his hand and arm and try to affect his body. First just grab his wrist and move your arm left and right in front of you. The result will, of course, vary with each person, but generally, you'll be able to move your partner's arm easily. However, the movement will stop at his elbow, or possibly at his shoulder. In other words, by moving your partner's arm left and right, you affect him as far as his elbow or shoulder. The basic stance or balance of your partner won't change.

Now grab your partner's right wrist with your right hand and start turning it clockwise (to your right). This means that you are twisting around the long axis of your partner's arm. His hand will start with the palm facing to your right. As you rotate, his palm will face down, and then face to your left.

You might be able to rotate his palm toward the ceiling, but by now you've taken up most of the slack in his arm, so you're starting to encounter some resistance.

### FIND THE POINT OF FIRST RESISTANCE

This point when you encounter resistance after taking the slack out of your partner's arm (or any part of their body) is of special importance and we'll come back to it.

Right now, continue to slowly turn your ever-patient partner's arm clockwise. Your partner is not actively resisting this practice, by the way. Next, with your left hand, grab his right arm above the wrist (and above your right hand). Even though the arm has tightened up somewhat, you can continue slowly and steadily to turn the arm. As you do, you'll notice you're affecting the right shoulder. It will start to move out and down toward the front of the body. The upper torso itself will start to bend forward slightly. You're getting close. Continue turning the arm just a little more, so that the torso bends forward clearly.

At this point you probably haven't touched your partner's center yet, but you've affected enough of him to make it considerably easier to move him. Without changing your grab or the position of your partner's arm, take a small step backwards, away from your partner. Only step back far enough to take the slack out of your *own* arms as you continue to grasp your partner. You want to end up with one foot behind the other, your weight evenly centered

between them, with your legs a comfortable distance apart, and your knees slightly bent. It's okay to take a moment to settle into this position.

### MOVE BY SIMPLY SHIFTING YOUR WEIGHT

Slowly and steadily, shift your weight to your back leg. This will result in a *pull* through your partner's arm and out in the direction of his fingers. *Remember to make this a smooth pull, not a tug.* Most likely, your partner will lose his balance and fall forward as you pull. As soon as your partner loses his balance, let go. Your partner takes a step to recover his balance.

Through simply taking up the slack in your partner's arm and in your arm, you established a kind of connection. This connection became manifest when you shifted your weight backwards. Because you were connected (and because you had already affected your partner's position by twisting up his arm), your partner's center shifted forward a few inches when you shifted your own center back a few inches. These few inches were just enough to make him completely lose his balance and fall.

The important part is not that your partner fell, but that, for a moment, you were connected. When you moved

from your center, your partner moved in a corresponding way. While there may have been some effort on your part, the kind of movement you did was one that really requires very little effort. It was nothing more than shifting your weight between your feet. If you took up all the slack between you and your partner and also affected your partner's stance by your spiraling movement up his arm, *the shifting of your own weight should have felt very much as if you were standing by yourself doing the same thing.*

### A SECRET

Herein lies a real secret of aikido practice. If you connect with your partner's center, the essential part of any "throw" is this simple shifting of your own weight. It's important to understand that this shifting is not a big deal in most cases. The movement is only a couple of inches. It doesn't need to be a big, exaggerated movement.

When you connect like this, you become one with your partner in a very real, experiential way. When you move, your partner moves, at the same time and in the same direction. You are really one, in terms of movement. Your experience of movement is basically the same as if you were moving entirely by yourself. In other words, once you connect to your partner's center, it doesn't take any

more effort to move yourself *and* your partner than it does to move yourself alone. The implications of this are powerful. It takes no more effort to throw your partner than it does to simply move yourself through space or shift your weight. Any more effort than that means that you are not connected or are using far more force than is necessary.

### CAN ONE ACTUALLY LEARN THIS?

In this practice, you used a very simple exercise with a very cooperative partner. Now how do you learn to find connection in a normal training class? This experience must obviously be learned by practice, not by reading about it. But you can make it your own by repeatedly finding your way back to the sensation of connection. Here are some tips that will help.

### FIND AS MANY POINTS OF CONTACT AS POSSIBLE

It's easier to establish a connection with your partner's center, at least in the beginning, when there are more points of physical connection. The more places you are actually touching your partner, the better. For example, just before a "throw," you may be simultaneously touching your partner's neck, arm, shoulder, and hip.

### NOTICE THE POINT OF FIRST RESISTANCE

There's a signpost you can look for that will help you to find your way back to this experience of connection each time you engage with your partner. Look for the moment when you run into resistance. Resistance can be caused by several factors. It may signify basic conflict—that is, forces moving in direct opposition. However, if you've followed the principles of aikido by blending, this resistance means something else. It means that you have touched your partner's outer "shell." This shell is the first physical point of contact with your partner.

The practice of finding your partner's center is the practice of moving your awareness through his shell and into his body and, at the same time, actually affecting the areas touched by your awareness.

In the practice of twisting your partner's arm, you start the movement at the wrist. By sensing the resistance as you twist the arm, you feel the movement go up to the elbow and then the shoulder. By continuing to twist and to pull slightly, you direct the movement through the shoulder and into the upper torso. You can further follow this awareness and control it through the body until it comes exactly to your partner's center. The closer you come to that center, the less effort you'll need to move him.

### PAY ATTENTION TO THE QUALITY OF THE TOUCH

It's really a quality of touch that you're trying to learn. In general, your hands want to be soft and yielding. Keep your hands very relaxed and heavy. In *irimi nage*, for example, the hand that reaches behind the neck should be soft and flexible. Contact your partner's body with the broad surface of your hand, not with the tips of your fingers.

You should feel like it sort of "gloms" onto your partner, like putty. However, you want to have the lightest possible touch. Let gravity exert most of the force. Any more force than the force of gravity is probably too much.

You never want to grab or clutch. This cuts off your ki and makes it impossible to feel where your partner is going. You will also wear yourself out by clutching at your partner. A light, soft, relaxed touch is all that is necessary. Don't confuse a light touch with no connection. Even though the touch is light, you want to feel like you are touching "through" your partner, into his depths. Ah, another one of the seeming contradictions in the study of aikido!

You will have to practice over and over to find this quality of touch. In most cases, learning to come back to this touch will require unlearning other habits, rather than actually learning something new.

## AIKIDO FROM THE INSIDE OUT

Even though the touch is light, you want to feel like you are touching “through” your partner, into his depths.

This light, connected touch allows you to feel what your partner is doing without having to rely on your eyes. You’ll want to learn to feel your partner’s movements and intent by touch alone. The touch that allows your connection to your partner’s center is the same touch that lets you feel your partner’s intent.

### The Principles

#### Harmony/Blending/Confluence



## Harmony

The most basic principle of aikido is the principle of harmony. Harmony, represented by the Japanese character *ai*, can also be thought of as a blending or confluence of energies or forces. The principle of harmony is to avoid or resolve conflict, clashing, or opposition.

### BLEND INSTEAD OF COLLIDING

Generally, the first action in an aikido technique is one of harmony or blending. As an attack comes in, you blend with the attack in one of several ways. One method of blending is to simply get out of the way of the attack so you aren't harmed. But it is important to get out of the way in an intelligent manner. Aikido movements are designed to get you off the line of attack and leave you in a safe position. By blending, you avoid the clash of an attack, giving your partner the illusion of "getting what he wants." If your partner's attack is unopposed, your partner will extend all his energy into the attack—energy which you can use and direct.

When working with a partner, one of the best measures of how much "aiki" is in effect is to notice how much clash, struggle, or opposition there is in the practice. The principle of harmony is that, instead of moving directly into your partner's power,

you move around it or redirect it around you. The techniques of aikido are designed to allow you to do this. But the key is to learn to feel the sense of conflict and opposition in the first place.

The principle of aiki resolves opposites.

You and your partner are trying to keep your own centers, extend your energy, and gain a tactical advantage over each other. Thus, as your partners grab or strike, you try to blend with and redirect their energy. However, at any moment, your partner may alter the attack. You constantly need to notice where there is struggle and opposition and immediately modify your response in an appropriate manner. A general rule about following harmony is that the instant you feel opposition, change your approach and find a different way that has no opposition.

### GET OFF THE LINE OF ATTACK

Getting off the line of attack is a central theme in aikido and is somewhat different from other traditional martial arts. In many styles of karate, for example, one person attacks and the other responds by "standing his ground," blocking the attack (knocking it out of the way) and counter attacking from the same place. Aikido is quite different in this regard.

Aikido stresses the idea of the centerline. The centerline runs from the top-center of your head, straight-down your body, equally bisecting it. The centerline is significant in aikido because most of your vital targets—face, throat, solar plexus, and genitals—fall along the centerline. The centerline is the core of you, the vulnerable, solid center that, if injured, affects your very existence. If your arm is struck, while you might incur pain, you will still be able to function, even if it's only to run away. If you're struck in a vulnerable spot on the centerline, you may well be down or dead.

So in aikido, rather than “holding the line” and defending ourselves, rooted on one spot, we move off the line of attack to a more advantageous position. Moving away from an attack can be done intelligently or not so intelligently. For example, if our partner kicks or strikes and we simply move straight back, even though we may avoid this first strike, we have remained on the line of attack and allow our partner another opportunity to strike again.

Likewise, if we jump wildly to the side, we again avoid the initial attack, but we've now created space between ourselves and our partner—space that our attacker will probably fill with a new attack. Again, we've just put off the inevitable.

Intelligent moving in response to an attack in aikido usually means blending by entering or turning. (We use the terms *irimi* and *tenkan* for entering and turning. Some schools use the terms *omote* and *ura* to describe similar concepts).

### ***IRIMI MEANS ENTERING***

*Irimi* is a great, hidden secret in aikido, strangely missing in many other martial arts. *Irimi* means entering. Entering, like many concepts in aikido, initially seems to be counter-intuitive. For example, your attacker is about to smack the top of your head with a large pipe. It seems like the last thing you'd want to do is enter into his sphere.

*Irimi* means entering to a safe place. In the above example, you enter behind your attacker, where it's safe. But you get there as if you are going to pierce directly through your attacker's own center. With an *irimi* movement, you head straight for your attacker's center and then veer off to the side at the last moment.

*Irimi* provides a number of advantages. Because you don't block or run away from an attack, you give the attacker the illusion that he is going to hit you. He thinks that his attack will proceed as planned and so he doesn't hold back or change directions. This works to your advantage.

If you perform your *irimi* movement with extended *ki* (*ki* is discussed later), your attacker will feel “pierced” to the center as you enter. This may have the effect of stopping the *ki* of his attack in mid-stride, which weakens his balance. It may end the attack all together if done with enough *ki*.

*Irimi* is the force of the spear, the force of a tidal wave.

You can “disappear” right before your partner’s eyes with a good *irimi*. Once I was practicing *irimi nage* with a *kohai* (junior student) when he performed a marvelous *irimi* movement. I came in to strike, my target was right in front of me and he appeared as though he was going to just stand there and let me hit him. He was relaxed and smiling. I struck hard and fast and my experience was that he simply vanished before my eyes. His entry was so clean and pure that I didn’t see him slide by me. He just “winked out of existence.” Of course, he “winked” back into existence moments later behind me and threw me to the mat.

*Irimi* is the force of the spear, the force of a tidal wave. Your *irimi* movement should both pierce your partner’s center and also wash over your partner like a giant wave. A good *irimi* movement is a force to be reckoned with!

### TENKAN MEANS TURNING

The other typical movement we do in aikido is the *tenkan*, or turning movement. *Tenkan* turns when pushed. If our partner comes to push us in the chest, we roll around the extended arm, keeping close contact with the attacker’s arm and body. By rolling, we get out of the way of the attack and we position ourselves at our attacker’s side, which is a much safer place than in front of him.

*Tenkan* is the force of the tornado or cyclone.

Like *irimi*, the *tenkan* movement saves us from being hit by the initial strike and puts us in a relatively safe position, where we can follow up with additional movements or techniques. Usually, the *tenkan* movement will continue with the turning motion by leading our partner’s energy around in a circle or spiral of which we are the center.

*Tenkan* is the force of the tornado or cyclone. You are in the center and your partner is flung around the edges of this cyclonic force.

The Principles

**Balance and Center**



## Balance and Center

Aikido deals intimately with the center, with balance, and with gravity.

From the perspective of aikido, you move from a point known as the center, or *hara*—a spot approximately two inches below the navel. By bringing your awareness to the center and moving from this point, you can experience a sense of unity and integration of movement. Great power is available from this unity.

In a similar manner, if you want to affect your partner, the most effective way to do that is to “touch” your partner’s center. If you affect the center of an opponent, his body moves easily.

By moving your partner’s center, you affect his balance. Two valuable assets you can use in affecting your partner’s center and balance are your connection with your partner and the force of gravity.

## CONNECTION AND GRAVITY

It is through your connection with your partner that you can push his center off balance to let gravity take him to the ground. In many ways, all you’re really doing in aikido is pushing someone over. The elegance of aikido is that you can do this with sensitivity and control.

An excellent practice for getting a sense of this quality is to have a partner stand near you in a relaxed, comfortable stance. Place your own hand on his upper arm or shoulder. Make a connection from your center through your arm to your partner’s center so that when you move your center, your partner’s center moves also. It’s important to transfer the movement *through* your arm, so your arm mustn’t collapse.

Try this from several different angles and positions and find out in which direction and at what angle he is the easiest to move. Experiment to find the minimum effort necessary to take the balance.

Whether this practice seems simple or incomprehensible, you can learn a lot from attempting it. One thing to notice is how little effort is really required to take someone’s balance. In a throw, most of what you are doing is simply taking the balance and possibly extending your partner’s existing momentum. Gravity does all the work from there.

## MAKE YOUR PARTNER WEIGHTLESS

Another way to think about this connection with your partner’s center is to think in terms of making your partner “weightless.” When your partner is solid in his center, with feet firmly planted on the ground, in a strong

stance, you will have the most difficult time affecting him. Imagine instead, your partner up on his toes, leaning awkwardly to one side, just barely managing to keep from falling over. In such a situation, he would be (from your perspective) nearly weightless. Simply pushing lightly with one finger might be enough to knock him over, since gravity would be doing all the work. By affecting your partner's center, you can lead him into this weightless state.

### IT'S OVER RIGHT AT THE BEGINNING

In working with the principles of balance, the goal is to take your partner's center and upset his balance so that he is in this unstable, weightless state.

This aspect of the practice happens right at the *beginning* of a technique, during the blend. At the "end" of the blend, you want to have established a relationship with your partner so that he is already weightless. In other words, your partner attacks and you blend to get out of the way of the attack without opposing it. However, at the same time, you connect to your partner's center in such a way that at the end of his strike or grab, he has lost his center and balance and is already weightless.

With proper blending, leading your partner's ki, and touching his center, the technique is "over" before the throw occurs.

If you learn how to make your partner weightless, there is no concern over doing a throw. The "throw" is effortless, since your partner is ready to fall anyway. The throw can usually be adjusted to any direction and you do not need to rely upon technique to make it work.

The Principles

**Flexibility**



## Flexibility

Flexibility in relation to aikido means more than being able to bend over and place your palms on the floor. Flexibility relates to your ability to quickly perceive and respond to each moment, particularly when things are changing.

This skill is hard to learn in aikido class because the class itself conditions you to expect the same thing over and over. It is common in classes to practice repeatedly with the same attack and response. While this method allows you to learn the movements that go into a particular response, you always know ahead of time what's coming.

What happens if your partner does something you don't expect? This is precisely the case if you have to use your skills in aikido for self-defense. If you always condition yourself to practice aikido in a fixed way, then when you confront a situation that's new, you won't be able to respond appropriately.

That's where flexibility comes in. Besides learning principles, you want to be flexible in your *application* of these principles.

## PRACTICE WITH DIFFERENT PEOPLE

In normal classes you may switch partners while practicing the same technique. This is a very useful way to practice because the next person you work with will probably be completely unlike your last partner. They will differ in size, strength, temperament, and approach. If you try to apply a technique to your new partner in the exact same manner as you tried with the last, you'll likely fail.

A technique doesn't exist by itself, apart from a specific attack. A "technique" is an application of aikido principles applied to a *specific situation*. So, there is no one correct way of performing *irimi nage* or *kote gaeshi*. There is a general form that has a recognizable shape of *irimi nage* or *kote gaeshi*, and you will have to adapt that general form to a specific instance if someone attacks you.

A "technique" is the application of aikido principles to a *specific situation*.

If you study with different aikido teachers, you will see many variations of any given technique. Each teacher teaches the technique the way it is appropriate for himself. Each teacher's variation of a technique is based on his understanding of many principles of aikido adapted to his

own physical type and temperament. This is how it should be. Your challenge is to take what you see and adapt it to *your* own body type and temperament.

See if you can understand the principles of a technique that you see demonstrated, and then try to apply those principles to your own situation. Depending on your circumstances, the “form” you end up with may be very different from what you saw, and yet, you may very well have done the same technique.

As you relax into flexibility, you’ll even see that doing the same technique with the *same* partner requires that you start anew each time.

## VARIATIONS

Flexibility is something you’ll need to develop for yourself. It requires constant experimentation. Some schools teach, for example, that all aikido techniques must have a vertical element to them, and that horizontal motions are incorrect. Find out for yourself. Almost every aikido technique has an angle of movement that is the most effective. Experiment with this angle. Try all the variations that are possible.

Does the technique *require* a 45 degree angle or is a 45 degree angle just one of an infinite number of variations that are possible with this technique? In order to gain a thorough understanding of a technique, you’ll need to try many variations of it. You need to map the envelope of a technique to know where the principles of aikido exist and where they start to dissolve. So the first practical aspect of flexibility is to try as many variations of a technique as you can.

## WHEN A TECHNIQUE DOESN'T WORK

When a technique doesn’t work, it’s almost always because you have abandoned one or more of the principles of aikido. That’s why it’s useful to have a clear understanding of these basic principles. When a technique doesn’t work, you can run through the litany for yourself to see what is missing.

- Did I maintain the proper distance?
- Did I blend with the attack?
- Did I keep my balance?
- Did I establish a connection with my partner’s center?
- Did I lead my partner’s energy in a direction that is to my advantage?
- Did I keep my ki extended?

- Did I stay relaxed?
- Did I remember to breathe?

In most cases, when a technique fails, it's because one or more of these principles has been lost. Try to identify the missing elements and reintegrate them back into your practice.

One thing to be clear about is that sometimes a technique won't work because it isn't appropriate for the attack. This type of confusion sometimes arises in the artificial setting of a class. A teacher tries to communicate something about a specific principle and asks you to practice a technique against a specific attack. While this technique may be appropriate for your teacher and his partner, it may not be appropriate for you and your partner.

For example, *irimi nage* may not be the most appropriate technique for you if you're very short and your partner is very tall. This isn't to say that *irime nage* is impossible in this situation. It's just that, if you were on your own to choose the response that's the most effective for you, you might not pick *irime nage*.

However, your teacher just told you to do *irimi nage*. So you try it because you're filling in the details of your

personal *irimi nage* envelope. But if your training has been centered on acquiring flexibility, this experience may be a frustrating one because your instincts are telling you to respond in a different way.

The reason to call attention to this is because these are the very instincts that you are trying to encourage while practicing aikido from the inside out. So it's important to be able to distinguish between difficulty of this nature and problems due to missing some of the principles of aikido.

#### **JIYUWAZA DEVELOPS FLEXIBILITY**

Certainly the principle of flexibility dictates that if one approach doesn't work, you should switch to a different technique. Such changes are absolutely required in the practice of *jiywaza*, or freestyle practice.

I want to mention *jiywaza* here because, amazingly, quite a few aikido schools don't offer it as part of their practice, or if they do, they don't offer it until a student is fairly advanced, usually after the black belt level.

I find this is quite puzzling, because everything you practice in aikido class is designed to lead you to *jiywaza*. Think about a jazz school that teaches scales, runs, and even songs, but never lets a student improvise. *Jiywaza* is the practice of joyful improvisation within

## AIKIDO FROM THE INSIDE OUT

aikido. In full *jiyuwaza* practice, you have no idea ahead of time how the attacker will attack. You need to respond to the attack in the moment, using all the principles of aikido. Each attack requires a different, spontaneous response. If you only practice fixed responses, it's going to be hard to achieve this spontaneity.

*Jiyuwaza* is the practice of joyful improvisation.

If your school doesn't practice *jiyuwaza*, I highly recommend that you practice it on your own. Get a group of interested students and practice after class. Because *jiyuwaza* demands more than basic practice, it's important that you start out slow. There's no great advantage to practicing *jiyuwaza* fast, especially in the beginning.

You can also restrict the practice to certain attacks. For example, a useful place to start is with grabs to the wrist. Let the attack itself suggest the response. One extremely useful variation of this practice is for *nage* to be blindfolded. Then the response has to come almost entirely from the energy of the attack and not from a preconceived notion of how to respond. Of course, blindfolded *jiyuwaza* requires additional safeguards so that no one gets hurt.

## The Principles

### Proper Distance (*Ma ai*)



## Proper Distance

*Ma ai* literally means “harmony of space” and the meaning is fitting for the spirit of aikido. *Ma ai* in aikido generally refers to proper distance from an attacker, but the notion of maintaining a sense of harmony with space is a good way to find proper *ma ai*.

In its simplest sense, *ma ai* is the space that allows you to be safe. But *ma ai* changes as an attack occurs. While you don’t want to be standing within your partner’s sphere of influence before an attack (since he can easily strike and hit you), once the attack occurs, your relationship (your *ma ai*) changes dramatically. Because aikido responses almost always use blending, entering, or turning, you will find yourself very close to your partner. Don’t panic! In aikido, as in love, close is good.

## DISTANCE IS THE ENEMY

The natural tendency is to put distance between us and something out to get us. In aikido, the opposite is true. Distance is the enemy in the aikido scheme of things. This is true for a number of reasons.

Distance leaves you open and draws your partner’s *ki* into you. If you are the object of an attack, your distance requires your attacker to come to you. It draws your

attacker’s *ki* to your center. In more advanced practice you can use this to your advantage, but as you are learning about *ma ai*, think of distance as the bad guy.

## DISTANCE GIVES YOUR PARTNER ROOM TO ATTACK

If your partner has sufficient distance between himself and you, he has room to wind up with a strong strike or kick. When you’re in close, there is not nearly the same amount of room to wind up. For most striking and kicking attacks, this significantly reduces the effectiveness of the attack. Realize, however, that there are certain styles of martial arts that excel in close-in fighting techniques, so this isn’t a sure defense in itself.

## DISTANCE BREAKS THE CONNECTION

Since the essence of aikido is to join with your attacker’s spirit, when there is distance, it is harder to maintain a connection. Being close to your partner allows you to make contact and keep a good connection. This connection transmits your partner’s intent and actions to you.

## HARMONY IS INTIMATE

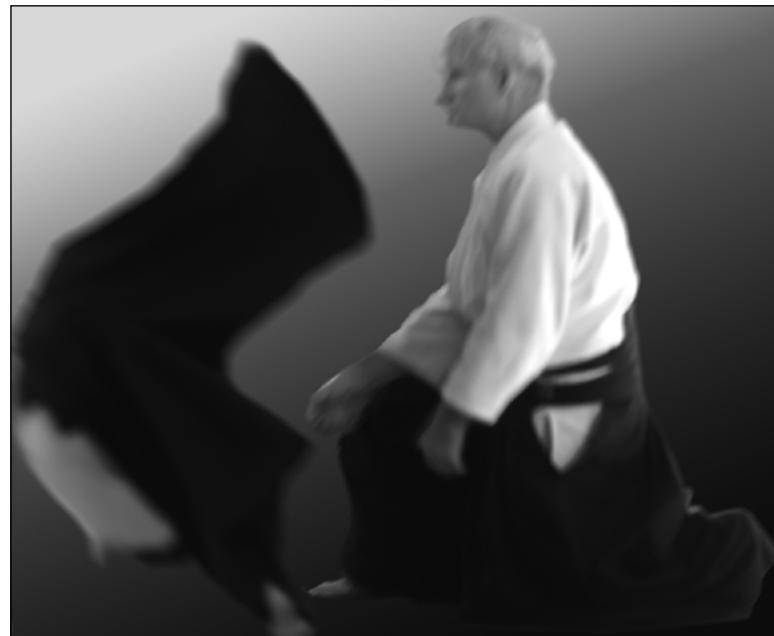
Strangely, to blend with an attack, the proper *ma ai* often puts you into an intimate relationship with your attacker. To enter in close and make the necessary connection often means allowing another person into a very close proximity to you. This close proximity can feel, and in fact is, very intimate.

## AIKIDO FROM THE INSIDE OUT

It's important to understand that while aikido is intimate, this does not mean sexual. Even given that, many students still find this intimacy threatening or disturbing. Yet it almost can't be otherwise if you are "becoming one" with your attacker. Learning to allow a person, who may be trying to end your life, in close is, needless to say, one of the great challenges of aikido.

### The Principles

#### *Ki*



***Ki***

*Ki* literally means “energy” but it has the connotation of a fundamental creative principle. Clearly, *ki* is meaningful in aikido, as it is the second character making up the very word “aikido.” But how can we understand its connection to aikido in a practical, non-theoretical way?

When we start practicing aikido, inevitably we perform the techniques using our muscles and “strength.” This is how we normally think of performing physical tasks. But muscles and strength don’t really work in aikido. Another kind of approach is necessary—using *ki*.

I remember training with experienced aikidoists when I was starting aikido and being completely baffled at how amazingly strong they appeared. Without seeming to exert any effort, they would exude phenomenal strength—a mere shrug and I would go flying. There was a sense, when I grabbed a wrist, of some terrific force coursing through their arms.

In fact, I was so overwhelmed by the strength of some of my partners that I almost became discouraged, because I seemed so far from this kind of strength and it seemed impossible that I could ever obtain such “power.” Fortunately, this phenomenon was fascinating enough to keep me interested and studying.

I would say now that this kind of strength is the extension of *ki*. In the study of aikido, one of the most important transitions is that of shifting from the use of strength and muscles to the use of *ki*. An interesting aspect to this shift is that there isn’t really a technique to acquire *ki*. Some teachers say that you can build *ki* or strengthen *ki* through various practices. My experience is that, while possible, it isn’t really necessary. *Ki* already exists in all things. It is more likely that we block the *ki* we already have rather than find that we lack enough *ki*. As with many other aspects of aikido, the biggest challenge with *ki* is to unlearn old habits rather than learn new ones.

**STRENGTH VERSUS KI**

Beginners, especially beginners who are very strong physically, often come up against the paradox of strength versus *ki* early on. When you use physical strength against an experienced aikidoist, it almost never works. This unexpected failure is due to two reasons. First, you are positioning physical strength against *ki* strength, and developed *ki* strength is far more powerful than the physical. Secondly, physical strength creates struggle and struggle gives your partner a hook to fight against.

For example, if you are performing an *ikkyo* technique against an overhead strike and use your muscles to push

through the technique, you immediately give your partner “something” to struggle back against. There is something about the quality of muscle strength that lets your opponent push back. In the realm of muscular strength, a kind of Newtonian physics applies: for every action there is an opposite reaction.

*Ki* strength has a very different quality. It is clear, powerful and compelling. At the same time, it has the quality of a strong wind or a powerful wave. While its effects are palpable, it seems to be impossible to resist or stand up against. Who can stand up in front of a giant wave or stop the wind? It has force, but nothing to allow one to grab on to.

## WHAT IS *KI*?

So what exactly is *ki*? *Ki* is the strength that is available without using muscles, will, struggle, or effort.

So, if we don’t use muscles, will, struggle, or effort, how do we then practice? Well, this is the mystery that you have to explore during your own practice. You can find the answer to this in your own body, but the best way to start is to try, intentionally, not to use muscles, will, struggle, or effort. See what’s left.

Paradox:  
If it isn’t working, try less.

This classic aikido paradox flies in the face of conventional wisdom. Conventional wisdom says “To do your best, try your hardest!” With aikido, it’s more like, “To do your best, try the least!”

This is because we perform “trying our hardest” with efforting. But this very approach sets up the resistance that will defeat us. By “trying” less, we can allow something else to move in and do the work for us. This something else is *ki*.

*Ki* becomes available with relaxed awareness. Relaxation is imperative for extension of *ki*. Aikidoists say that tight muscles, clenching of fists, etc. cuts off *ki*. This is one of the reasons why we (in the role of *nage*) wait until the very last moment to actually grab our partner during a technique. Grabbing cuts off *ki*. Most of the techniques where we think we have to “grab” can be done without grabbing at all.

You just need to understand that as you practice, as you become more relaxed, as you relinquish efforts, strength, and struggle, something else becomes available. If you know about this ahead of time, you can be on the look out

for it. At first, you may only notice it after the fact. Later you'll notice it during practice. Each time you notice its presence, it can help reinforce the value of letting go of muscle, will, struggle, and effort.

### LEADING *KI* OR MIND

When you work with your *ki* and with your partner's *ki*, you move out of the realm of the body and start working with energy. You begin working with your own energy as well as your partner's energy. This is a very different (and liberating) kind of experience. We all have a storehouse of experience and conditioned ways of dealing with the physical. However, most of us don't have as much experience dealing in the realm of energy. This newness allows us to move away from our conditioned responses and come up with something different.

For example, I know that if I am working with a big, strong man, and think about moving his body, I will have to use a lot of effort and may very likely be unsuccessful. This isn't an intellectual conclusion that I make. It is a visceral one, based on a lifetime of experience which says that a bigger, stronger person will prevail. If I approach this big, strong man with this attitude, I am already defeated. However, if I don't see him as 220 pounds of

muscle and sinew, but instead see him as energy, suddenly my options are much broader.

It is much easier to move your partner's energy than your partner's body.

If you engage your partner in the energetic realm, you will have a much easier time of it. In a physical struggle, all other things being equal, the stronger person will prevail. However, in the world of *ki*, physical strength means little. You are moving your partner's energy body, not the physical one. The energy body is often equated with mind, intent or *ki*. That is, to affect your partner's energy body, you affect his mind, his intent or his *ki*.

The physical follows the energetic.

There is a relationship between the physical and energetic. The physical follows the energetic. In other words, if you affect your partner's energy field, the body will move easily. If you lead the mind or *ki* of your partner, the body tags along like an obedient puppy.

Leading *ki* is an advanced form of connection—connecting to your partner's essential energy without necessarily making physical contact.

### HOW TO LEAD KI

We can only touch on the surface of this question. The real answers will come from your own practice and experience.

A good beginning practice of leading *ki* is to start your response before your partner actually touches you. For example, if your partner reaches for your wrist and you wait until he grabs you before you start to turn and throw, you will end up with someone's body hanging on to your arm as you try to throw. If, instead, you start the turn and throw before he actually grabs you, you will be able to lead his energy. In order to grab you, if you are already moving, your partner will have to track your movements and follow you. If he is intent on grabbing you, you will be able to lead his *ki* by just staying slightly ahead of his grab. Then you simply lead the movement into any convenient aikido form.

Clearly, timing is critical in leading your partner. If you lead too early, you will have turned before he has committed to an attack and he can simply abandon the attack and start again. If you wait too long, you lose the advantage of leading.

### YOU CHOOSE HOW YOUR PARTNER ATTACKS

Leading *ki* allows you to influence how your partner will attack. We often talk about giving our partners a clear opening for their attack. If you offer your hand, it becomes a much more desirable object of attack than if you offer nothing. By making it easy for your partner to attack you in a certain way, you are actually "making" them attack you the way *you* want. In other words, you'll know ahead of time how you will be attacked, because you are giving him an opening too good to pass up. This is a great advantage to you. It takes away your partner's element of surprise in the attack. If you can lead the attack, you know ahead of time what he will do and where he will end up. Again, the secret of leading *ki* is timing.

Leading *ki* allows you to determine how your partner will attack

The Principles

*Atemi*



### **Atemi**

*Atemi* literally means strike, but in aikido it has a more specific meaning and usage. *Atemi* is used to strike at your partner's openings, not to inflict injury, but to take your partner's mind and affect or lead your partner's *ki*.

#### **TAKE THE MIND**

If, for example, your partner moves in with a strong, hard lunge punch and you move to the side and place your fist in the position that his head will be at the moment of his strike, you're likely to dramatically change your partner's attack. Unless your partner is completely oblivious to your fist, you'll likely see the attack falter. Typically, the forward momentum of the attack will stop. In fact, your partner may try to reverse his movement to avoid running into your fist. Notice that you're not specifically or actively striking at his face. You are just placing your fist in a position where he's likely to run into it if he follows through with his attack.

This is the kind of reaction your body would automatically have if you were surprised by a low tree branch during a walk. You might jerk backwards, even fall down to avoid hitting the branch. By the judicious placement of a "strike," you can dramatically affect your partner's energy, position, and relationship to you.

This is not to say that you should always use an *atemi*. In aikido, you want to use your partner's energy, so changing a forward motion to a backwards one may not necessarily be what you want. It's just an option that is available to alter your partner's *ki*.

#### **FILL YOUR OPENINGS**

Another important role of *atemi* is to fill openings in your own sphere so that your partner can't attack you.

Take the case where your partner grabs your right hand with his left hand. In response, you raise your arm diagonally to the upper right so that you can go underneath his armpit for a throw. As you enter under his armpit, you're potentially vulnerable to a strike by your partner's right hand. So as you enter in, your left hand strikes at your partner's face. This strike is not actually meant to hit him. It simply forces him to raise his right hand to protect himself. This block effectively insures that he won't be using that hand to strike you. You've filled in the momentary opening your movement creates.

In general, *atemi* has three practical aspects:

- To stop or change your partner's *ki* or movement
- To fill your own potential opening so your partner can't enter
- As a last resort, to actually strike your partner

## AIKIDO FROM THE INSIDE OUT

If all else fails, atemi can be used as an actual strike.  
When your life is in danger, you use whatever you have available. If all you have left is a strike, use it.

## The Techniques

**What are they?**  
**The value of techniques**  
**Problems with techniques**



## The Techniques—What are they?

In many aikido schools, great emphasis is placed on learning techniques. The techniques make up your repertoire of aikido moves, and, the thinking goes, the better you learn these techniques, the better you learn aikido. But what are you trying to learn when you practice techniques over and over for years?

Most aikidoists who have been practicing for a long time notice that, after a while, something changes in the way they do aikido. They no longer worry so much about the details of the technique. Instead, they simply deal with an attack using, well, aikido. Through endless repetition, they have finally made the techniques their own, and when they perform the techniques, they become personal expressions of their own aikido.

Real aikido is the embodiment of the principles of aikido along with the tactics of aikido

That's the real reason for practicing techniques: to make aikido your own. The techniques can be thought of as outer forms or shells of the real aikido. The real aikido is the embodiment of the principles of aikido along with the tactics of aikido.

By practicing continuously, you begin to get glimpses of the real aikido underneath. After enough of these glimpses, you begin to move from the shell to the real thing in your normal practice.

## ANATOMY OF A TECHNIQUE

Techniques have a few things in common, regardless of the attack and response. These are the elements of a technique, which follow a specific order. They are: blending, leading, control, and neutralization. Surrounding all of these elements is the circle of connection.

### Blending

Blending is the *ai* in aikido. It's the method of joining the attack without opposing the attack. Blending positions you so that you're directing your partner's energy without clashing with the force of the attack.

### Leading

Leading takes your partner's energy and extends it just a bit past the level of comfort that your partner would ordinarily have. This extension generally results in your partner leaving his center. It destabilizes his balance. At this point, you can fairly easily direct the movements of your partner wherever you like.

**Control**

Control in this context mean to connect with your partner's *ki* and center and move them where you need to. It also means control over your own *ki* and center.

Control gives you a deft hand at moving your partner. You want to refine your control so that your techniques have no openings. If your control wavers, your partner may escape, may reverse the technique on you, or may otherwise harm you. Control is like the enamel coating on your technique. It is nonporous, without holes, smooth and contiguous, so that nothing can sneak through.

Please remember that aiki control is benevolent. It's done with loving kindness, not with cruelty or vengeance.

**Neutralization**

This is the conclusion of a technique. It is usually either a throw or an immobilization. In either case, the attack is neutralized, at least for the moment. Remember that an aikido throw—the kind we do hundreds of times in a class—can be devastating to someone who doesn't know how to take a fall. So a throw may "neutralize" an attacker by injuring him. That is why you want to have as much control over your throws as possible. It is also why you should immobilize your partner, if possible. If the

attacker knows how to fall, the throw may not stop him for long. If he doesn't, the throw may do more damage than you intend.

If you're skilled, simply taking your partner's balance and holding him in a position of instability may be enough to convince him to stop the attack. This is also an effective type of neutralization.

**Connection**

Connection is the glue that combines these elements into one. It provides the timing for an effective blend, it's the conduit through which you extend your partner's *ki*, it establishes the feedback necessary for control, and it solidifies the final neutralization of the technique.

Experienced aikidoists will recognize that there are no hard and fast boundaries among the elements of a technique. They blend one into another. Your very first movement may contain all the elements of blending, leading, control, neutralization, and connection.

Since I'm not describing specific techniques in this book, use these distinctions to evaluate your own practice. Try to identify these elements in each of your techniques. If some are missing or less developed, their absence is probably causing you some problems.

The Techniques

**The value of techniques**



## The value of techniques

The best way to use new techniques is to try to understand the principles within them. If you develop a habit of learning to feel the inner content of a technique, you will soon be able to discard its form and simply practice with the content.

## THROW AWAY THE TECHNIQUES

Consider one of the key axioms about techniques: learn to throw away your technique as soon as possible. The sooner you can move away from the rigid form of a technique to the aikido “feel” of the movement, the sooner you will make aikido a part of yourself. Even if it takes you years to make a technique your own, if you train with the understanding that the “map is not the place”—in other words, that the technique is not the truth—you will have the most effective approach.

Learn to throw away your technique as soon as possible.

If you train endlessly repeating the same form, your technique will only work in the limited range of conditions for which that form is suitable. As soon as you run into a situation where the form no longer works,

you’ll either have to leave the principles of aikido and resort to force or tricks, or you won’t be able to perform the technique at all.

It’s better to go after the inner aspect (the principles) of the technique. Once you’ve gained a sense of the principles, you’ll be able to apply them, regardless of the situation. And a funny thing happens when you start incorporating the principles of aikido in all your practice. Suddenly the specifics of the hands and feet become much less important. You can still perform the practice even though your hand and feet are very different from a previously-learned “form.” And finally, you’ll notice that your “form” is *created* as a result of the expression of these principles. In other words, each time you practice, you create anew your form of *ikkyo* or *kote gaeshi*. The principles give expression to the form. This is aikido from the inside out.

## TECHNIQUES ARE TACTICAL

The techniques embody knowledge as well as feeling. Because aikido is a martial art, it uses tactics to achieve its martial end. When you learn a technique, it is important to understand the tactics involved. The application of the principles of aikido according to these tactics enables the success of the technique.

Each aikido technique embodies a number of tactical issues. Some may be general and are found in all the techniques and some tactics may be specific to the technique. Try to identify and master each tactical aspect.

For example, the technique of *tenshi nage* embodies a number of tactics. One tactic is to draw the attacker's *ki* out of his lower attacking arm and moving it to the "weak" spot at the floor behind him. Another tactic spirals the *ki* of his upper attacking arm around itself and then extends the arm though the elbow up and over the attacker's shoulder. Another tactical element of the technique is to split apart the movement of energy of the attack. Yet another tactic is to pierce the attacker's centerline with *ki* from both hands as your arms form a triangle just before the attacker grabs your wrists.

These are just examples. Suppose there are ten tactics that are important in properly performing a technique. You want to include them all if you can. Fortunately, the tactics of aikido are intelligent enough that, even if you don't use all of them, the technique will still work. If you only used seven out of the ten tactics for a technique, it will probably still work without too much trouble. If you only use five of the tactics, you might also have to resort to using strength along with your aikido. If you

only incorporate two or three tactics, the technique will probably fail. When you practice all ten tactics regularly, if you are ever put on the spot, the chances are that you'll include seven or eight of them in your technique and everything will turn out ok.

You won't find the specific tactics for techniques detailed here. They really need to be taught initially through direct transmission. That is, directly from a teacher with whom you work. But they're not particularly esoteric or hidden. Once you recognize the patterns you can discover the tactics for a given technique yourself. You just have to analyze it as a martial form to discover what is important. What do you have to do to keep from getting harmed by the attack? In other words, how do you move to minimize your openings and maximize your partner's weaknesses? What do you have to do to lead the attack to neutralization? What do you have to do to control the situation? These things determine the tactics of a technique.

In the course of your practice, learn to combine the tactical elements of the techniques with the principles of aikido. This lets you place the martial aspect of aikido in the service of the benevolent application of aikido.

The Techniques

**Problems with techniques**



### Problems with techniques

Techniques are a two-edged sword. On one hand, they can lead you to an understanding of the principles of aikido. The tragedy is that techniques often become an end to themselves. Techniques can be like the sword that takes life or the sword that gives life. They take life when they become rigid, unyielding, and authoritarian. They give life when they open up the inner meaning of aikido.

If you come across a school where the aikido teacher insists that his demonstration is the proper or only way to perform a technique, you'd do well to look for another school. The specific details of the way a technique is taught are peculiar to a teacher's style, temperament, body structure, and history. It's also specific to the attack he's receiving and the person who is attacking.

A teacher will often correct the placement of your hand or foot if you have something out of alignment, for example. However, when a teacher insists that your foot must go precisely this way or your hand must always be such and such *every time*, he is confusing his personal expression of the art with the principles and tactics that make aikido work. Teachers like this think that, since their aikido expression works for them, their way must be effective

and must be transmitted to their students. They've forgotten that aikido embodies universal principles that express themselves uniquely each time.

You can easily discover this richness of aikido for yourself. If you have the opportunity to train in many different aikido schools, even if the schools are within your own "lineage," you will find different ways of doing the same techniques. And even though the techniques may be different from yours, they'll still work if the practitioner is skilled.

I can't stress this point enough: aikido *techniques* are personal expressions of the practitioner. Aikido *principles* are what make the techniques work. The principles remain constant, no matter who practices or what the situation is.

*Ukemi*

The art of falling



## *Ukemi*

### **The art of falling**

A common misconception among beginners is that *ukemi*, or the art of falling, is thought of as the passive, difficult, or the less desirable aspect of aikido practice. The “fun” part is throwing people. The boring part is getting thrown. But there is a different way to approach *ukemi* that will make it more interesting, considerably easier to learn and perform, and more effective.

### **UKEMI IS AN ACTIVE ENDEAVOR**

Even though, as *uke*, you are being thrown, *ukemi* is still an active endeavor. *Uke* really has two roles. The first is as the attacker. *Uke* needs to give a good, clean attack in order for *nage* to benefit from the practice. Learning to commit to your attacks is a study all its own. Once *nage* blends with your attack and starts to redirect it, your experience changes. Now you’re not leading, but following. *Nage* has taken the lead and is directing your energy.

The mistake many beginners make at this point is that they become passive. They just let *nage* drag them around and toss them to the ground as though they were sacks of rice. As *uke*, you want to always be active. Instead of being

pulled around and thrown to the ground, you’ll realize a tremendous advantage if you actively follow *nage*’s lead, moving under your own power and direction.

At some point, *nage* may do something to take your balance beyond recovery. Once you notice that your balance is going, you actively disengage your interaction with *nage* and lower yourself to the ground! Notice who’s doing what in this description. *Uke* should always feel like he is in control, even when being thrown!

You always wants to feel in control, even when being thrown.

### **LOWER YOURSELF TO THE GROUND INTENTIONALLY**

Let’s use *shomen uchi ikkyo* as an example. You give a good, clear attack to the top of your partner’s head. As he performs the *ikkyo*, your body is bent over and your energy is directed to the ground. You can simply be slammed to the ground like a wet towel, or you can be active. To be active is to lower yourself to the ground intentionally. At each point you want to be in balance. Your partner is continually taking your balance and, by performing active *ukemi*, you are continually

reestablishing your balance. This dance goes on all the way to the ground or to an immobilizing technique performed on you.

The tactical reason for this method of practice is that if your partner provides an opening, you are in position (that is, in control) to move through that opening. You may be able to reverse a technique on your partner if you are in balance and control of your own falling.

The method of active *ukemi* is very simple. Once you feel your balance going, don't resist. Take a step or two to recover your balance and then lower yourself, under your own control, to the mat. Of course, your speed will have to match your partner's.

To get a feel for what this is like, imagine you are *uke*. You strike at *nage* and imagine that he is performing a technique on you. Go through the movements of "his" takedown on you in slow motion. If you are performing the movements under your own control, you'll be able to stop and reverse the movement at any time. You want to have this feeling (control, reversibility) when someone is really throwing you.

If you can take *ukemi* this way, you provide a valuable aid to beginning students because you effectively "teach" them the throw or technique by the way you take the fall.

A more advanced version of *ukemi* is when you move in an unexpected direction (that is, not the place where *nage* expects you to fall) after losing your balance. This may upset *nage*'s balance and suddenly *nage* is taking *ukemi*!

#### BREATHE DURING UKEMI

Breathing is very important in *ukemi*. If you hold your breath, your body won't be soft and limber and you'll wear yourself out. If your *ukemi* seems difficult, use your breath to help take the fall.

If you control your own *ukemi*, breathe, and stay relaxed with the feeling of *ki* flowing through you, *ukemi* will be a completely different experience. You may end up finding *ukemi* to be more rewarding than throwing!

**The Martial Aspects of Aikido**  
**Intent and practicality**



## Intent and practicality

Two martial aspects of aikido are important to include in your study. These are intent and practicality.

Intent determines the seriousness of the outcome, and practicality determines the efficacy of the outcome.

### INTENT

When you apply the martial aspect of aikido, you have a range of choices from being very protective to devastating your opponent.

After you achieve a degree of proficiency, the difference in a response that is protective from a response that is devastating is only the difference in your intent.

Let's state this again: The difference between protection and devastation is not one of technique or method. It's only a difference in your intent. The very same technique can protectively disable an opponent or physically devastate an opponent, depending on what you intend.

This truth engenders both a sense of security and a sense of responsibility. There is security in knowing that you may deal with any situation with an appropriate degree of force. There is also responsibility in knowing that excessive force may result from losing control or losing

your temper. The best maxim in working with intent is to strive to produce the greatest effect with the least force. This practice tends to temper intent so that it doesn't devastate.

### PRACTICALITY

The martial aspect of aikido is a good reference point to use when judging the practicality of the technique. From the martial point of view, you have to ask "Does it work?" and "Does it create any openings?"

When you ask "does it work?" you're checking to see if you're able to redirect your partner's force and energy in a simple, harmonious way, without excess force on your own part. It's not enough to just knock your partner down. Much of the importance is in the "quality" with which you knock him down!

Openings are times and places in your sphere where you're vulnerable to attack. Openings also allow your partner to regain control as you try to neutralize him. If you consider that you have a sphere around you about the diameter of your outstretched arms, you can think of an opening as a weak point in this sphere. It is through these openings that your partner will attack effectively or escape. When you perform a technique, it's always important to observe whether you create any openings. In learning to observe your own openings, you'll learn to see the openings in your partner's techniques as well.

## Aikido Training

### Guidelines, attitudes, and aphorisms



### Guidelines, attitudes, and aphorisms

The bottom line in learning aikido is in training. Nothing substitutes for time on the mat. However there are some general guidelines that make this time on the mat more effective and more enjoyable.

#### USEFUL GUIDELINES

Like everything else in this book, I recommend that you find out for yourself whether these guidelines make sense. I've found them effective in the training process. You'll have to see if they work for you.

#### Training is a personal study, not a competition

In our culture, it's pretty hard not to feel competitive in aikido training. But you'll learn aikido quicker and "deeper" if you can resist this temptation and turn it into a personal study.

#### Going slow is better. You can find the "feel" of aikido

The wish to accomplish tends to make us want to speed up when it's better to go slow. Going slow actually helps in a practical way because it gives the nervous system the time to experience the movements from the inside out—to feel the movement—which is how it is actually learned.

#### Learn to do more with less

This approach helps to overcome the almost irresistible urge to "do" aikido, particularly with muscle or force. To learn to do more with less, you'll have to find the aiki way of doing things.

#### Experiment as much as possible

Discover the full "envelope" of a form. Knowing where things *don't* work is as useful as knowing where things do work.

#### Never do anything that feels dangerous or beyond your capabilities at the time

Aikido is an intelligent art. The old maxim, "no pain, no gain" should be replaced with "no brain, no gain." Don't put yourself on the sidelines because you've ignored your body's warnings. And learning self-defense may mean defending yourself from bullies in your own dojo.

Always take care of yourself. Be sure to ask your partner to slow down or go easier if you feel you're not ready for a particular level of training. If for some reason they don't respond appropriately, stop training with them.

### Let your training be filled with joy!

If you're not having a good time, you may be missing the point of aikido training. Lighten up!

### USEFUL ATTITUDES

Here are some attitudes I've found helpful to cultivate while trying to unravel the mysteries of aikido.

#### Relaxation

Keep your body relaxed throughout your training. Being relaxed during aikido practice is a bit of a paradox. It's hard to learn to be relaxed because learning implies doing something, and if you try to relax, the trying will most likely produce the opposite effect. Relaxing is more like not trying. This doesn't mean that you don't have an intent. It means you let the intent do it, not your muscles and "will."

#### Large Awareness

Take in the big picture. Be aware of all that is around you. Keep your awareness "soft" and on your partner's center, not on his fist or weapon. "If you focus on the sword, the sword will slay you!"

### Calmness

Cultivate an attitude of calm, centered relaxation. This attitude will allow you to respond to an attack with clarity, speed, and precision.

### Attitude of reconciliation

An attitude of reconciliation will eliminate most conflicts before they start, keep a conflict from escalating, and allow you to resolve a conflict with minimum harm.

### AIKIDO APHORISMS

These aphorisms, some of which have been mentioned elsewhere in this book, come from years of my own training and study. I provide them to suggest directions for your study, as you see fit.

There are differences between the left and right sides of the body. One side is usually "better" at aikido. Instead of favoring the better side, train diligently on the "other" side. Let one side teach the other.

Learning aikido is really "unlearning" bad habits more than learning something new.

The principle of aiki resolves opposites.

Aikido is a "feeling." Ultimately it is the feeling of loving kindness. Training with this feeling changes the "quality" of our movements.

Aikido is intimate (but not sexual).

With proper blending, by leading your partner's ki and touching his center, you'll find the technique is over before the throw occurs.

Do all the movements with the whole of oneself, not with just the parts.

If it isn't working, try less!

A technique is the application of aikido principles to a specific situation.

It's easier to move your partner's mind than his body.

The physical follows the energetic.

Even though your touch is light, you want to touch "through" your partner, into his depths.

Learn to throw away your techniques as soon as possible.

Be in control, even when being thrown.

Real aikido is the embodiment of the principles of aikido along with the tactics of aikido.

### About the Author



Howard Bornstein has studied the martial arts for over twenty-eight years, the last twenty-one being devoted to aikido. He also spent eighteen years with the sacred dances of Gurdjieff and became a guild-certified Feldenkrais teacher in 1992.

*“Since aikido relies so much on the inner experience in order to perform it properly, it seems more advantageous to learn it from the inside out. In other words, if you can practice by specifically looking for the inner “taste” of the aikido principles—and learn to recognize and then recreate this taste on demand—you can “own” the principles of aikido. It is out of these principles that the forms will then naturally, and with effortless grace, emerge.”*

### **Reviews of *Aikido from the Inside Out*:**

*“I recommend this book to everyone. Howard has a deep understanding of Aikido principle and describes it in terms which are easy to understand.”*

*-Chuck Clark, 7th dan, Chief Instructor,  
**Jiyushinkan**, Tempe, AZ*

*“I enjoyed it thoroughly: no pontificating, no ‘O-sensei said,’ no rehashing of the same damned things that every aikido book since 1960 has contained. In other words, you have actually written something that is useful.”*

*-David Martin, 4th dan, Instructor,  
**Shobu Aiki Dojo**, Oklahoma City, OK*

*“An excellent, most excellent book. You have accurately revealed the hidden, inner aspects of Aikido.”*

*-Shari Dyer, 4th dan, Instructor*