

What I Have Gained Through the Practice of Aikido

Thesis for 4th Dan Examination

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In order to talk about what I have gained through the practice of aikido, it is perhaps best to make some simple comparisons between how I view myself before starting aikido and how I view myself now. It is important to remember, however, that my views and values have also changed over the 20-plus years of my aikido experience. How I viewed myself when I was twenty years old may be very different from how my now forty-five-year-old self views that twenty-year-old. It also must be remembered that I already had some basic knowledge of budo through several years of karate and about a year of kendo experience prior to starting aikido.

I see my own aikido practice as having four major stages: my first encounter with aikido at Otemaegakuin Dojo in Nagoya for about a year; about seven years with Aikikai Australia, following the teachings of the late Seiichi Sugano Shihan; several years with the Kobayashi Dojos group, primarily under Hatayama Shihan, and; Kenshinkai Dojos, following Hatayama Shihan's particular vision for his aikido. Again, moving through these stages has also changed my perspectives.

I have always suffered from poor eye-hand coordination and have never enjoyed ball sports. Aikido has helped me address this weakness. My coordination has improved considerably over the course of my aikido practice – clumsy bumps and knocks are no longer a daily reality for me. Furthermore, I have been able to find ways of dealing with this lack of coordination. For example, aikido teaches us that we do not have to “catch” the wrist – we merely need to make contact with the arm and slide the hand down to the wrist, or that it is possible to change to any of the other wrist-lock positions from ikkyo. I am more capable of achieving tasks through sense of touch than I was before starting aikido. My balance, which also has never been particularly good, has also improved with practice.

I have found the principles of aikido to be helpful in daily life: passing through crowds without knocking into people, standing on a crowded train without losing balance, anticipating which direction a cyclist coming the other way will swerve, and being able to sense other people in close proximity even when I can't see them. Ukemi has aided me on several occasions, including once when I was hit by a moving vehicle. In this specific example, I was able to minimise the damage inflicted from being knocked down by a car onto an asphalt road. Without the ability to instantly and subconsciously perform a breakfall, I almost certainly would have struck my head against the road surface.

Awareness is another element important to aikido. In practice, we should be constantly monitoring and assessing our movement, position and distance to our partners. This helps me in my work, in which I need to look for subtle clues to gain insight to how my students respond to activities and also to manage behaviour in the classroom. Where I position myself in the classroom can have a significant effect on the class atmosphere. Sometimes when I am in a situation that could degenerate into conflict I chide myself with Tohei Sensei's adage, "Take the centre!"

Furthermore, aikido has given me the confidence that I could, if I had to, respond appropriately to acts of physical violence. I have, for example, been grabbed by the lapel by a student and threatened with violence. I merely invited the individual to carry out his threat, at which point he released his grip. I believe that this confidence is important when dealing with bullies, as they tend to only respect power. I am also aware of the legal implications of physical violence, and believe aikido to be an effective way of controlling attackers without physically injuring them.

A threat even more likely than physical violence is boredom, a lack of an outlet for my frustrations. Aikido not only gives me a means of channelling my negative feelings out, but creates an atmosphere in which those negative feelings are diminished or forgotten. During the two years I was unable to train, I found my stress levels had risen significantly.

Aikido has provided me with the opportunities to practice with both males and females of ages ranging from 12 to practitioners in their 70's. Aikido requires that I change my practice methodology to match that of my partner, and this is an important life lesson. In recent years I have found myself to be placed in the position of the senior partner, and sometimes I have needed to think how to teach my partner how to perform a technique. Aikido has helped me consider teaching methods that address what each individual student needs.

In short, aikido has enriched my life. It has given me health. It gives me ways to constantly challenge myself and to monitor my development. I can hardly imagine myself without aikido.