

Aiki Peace Week – Ideas to Start Your Lesson

Personally, I have rarely step onto the mat with more than one idea of where my lesson may go and very often not even that. A fixed lesson plan, doesn't seem to suit aikido classes. They seem to require a more organic approach, a good deal of intuition and the sensitivity to work with what is going on in the class. With this in mind, the following are ideas and exercises that you may want to use as a starting point, in which to demonstrate that aikido is all about harmony not only with yourself, but with your partner. (*You can not have one without the other*).

1. Ask your students to sit in seiza or cross legged if this is uncomfortable. Ensure that their posture is good and their hands rest at the tops of their thighs rather than on their knees. Tell them to visualise something that makes them feel very happy or a place where they felt at peace. Stand directly by their sides looking in the same direction as them and slowly bend down and place your fingers gently under the knee that is nearest you and try to lift. (*Do so slowly so as not to disturb the student*). You should find that it feels like lifting a concrete statue.

Now ask them to think of something that makes them sad or angry and test in exactly the same way. You and they will be amazed, (*or maybe you wont be*), at how easy they are to lift and knock over.

This simple exercise shows how important it is to be at peace with oneself. If we are unsettled we have little chance of succeeding at almost anything, not even the simple business of maintaining our stability.

2. Ask uke to use their right hand to hold nage's left wrist, (first form, or katate kosadori). Nage should ensure that there is a gap between his/ her fingers and uke's wrist. Ask uke to extend his/her power and nage need do nothing, other than stay centred. Nage will find that as uke increases their power that they are fairly easily driven backwards. (*Ensure that the person receiving the technique does not turn this into a pushing fight. As a variable the uke could physically push back and experience the effort required resisting or even overcoming uke's attack*)

Repeat the experiment, but this time, nage should ensure that as uke takes hold that nage also makes the best contact by lightly clasping uke's wrist. There should be no gap between nage's fingers and uke's wrist. This time when uke extends his power, the nage should find that they can hold their ground without any effort and that uke's power is entirely neutralised.

To me this exercise shows that by accepting an attack positively, rather working against it or disengaging from it, that it can be entirely neutralised.

3. Ask uke to stand upright with hands by side. They should be relaxed, (centred) and looking forward. Nage stands behind uke, places his/ her hands on uke's shoulders and then attempts to push/ pull directly down to the ground, (*not backwards*) through the shoulders. They should find this to be a nigh on impossible task.

Repeat the experiment, but this time, after placing hands on uke's shoulders, nage should relax completely and ensure that their arms are relaxed, (*let gravity work for them*), which should mean that virtually the whole forearm down to the elbow is in contact with uke's back. Ask nage to imagine that rather than trying to knock an opponent/ problem down, that the uke has become an extension of themselves. Ask them to start imagining a flow of energy downwards, (*giving them a picture to think of like water tumbling over a waterfall might help*). When they feel comfortable with the connection with their partner and just as

importantly feel that uke is comfortable with them, tell them to ask uke in their mind to go to the ground and gently extend their own power/ ki downwards. They will be astounded at how easily the uke goes to ground.

I love this exercise because it seems to me to be the very essence of aikido. It shows that when we truly empathise with our partner and stop trying to impose ourselves on them, that almost any journey is possible.

4. Ask uke to attack nage by attempting to grab both shoulders with both hands, (ryokata dori). Uke should raise arms/ hands through the centre and attempt to physically push uke's arms and hands off of them. This should at best prove to a struggle and is an unpleasant experience for both uke and nage.

Ask uke to do the same, but this time, nage enters as if they were greeting a long lost and very good friend. As they enter and make contact with nage's arms, which should be more of a sliding along sensation than a banging down sensation, they should then gently but positively lower their arms. They should find that uke's grip on their shoulders is easily dismissed and that they head to the ground easily.

I believe this exercise shows how aggression when greeted positively and dare I say it with warmth and love can be totally disarmed.

5. Ask uke to relax and centre and take partner by the wrist, left to right, or right to left, (2nd form or katatetori). Ask nage to try to stay in place and try to move the uke. This should prove to be difficult. Then instruct nage to enter using tai sabaki, turning movement. Tell them that the movement is not complete until their shoulders are touching uke's shoulders and are perfectly aligned. Their hands should be stretched out in front of them, but with elbows just in front of their body. Ask them to direct their minds forward and without worrying about their partner walk forwards. They should find that their uke moves with them and no effort is required. As a variation ask them to leave a little gap between their shoulder and their partners or to misalign the shoulders a little and to observe how that changes the quality of the movement. Revert to doing the exercise correctly, in terms of positioning, but ask uke to think backwards. See what happens when nage tries to move forwards. Then see what happens when they move backwards. Then ask uke to think forwards or backwards. Can nage pick up on the difference? If they take their time and relax, they almost certainly will.

This simple exercise shows that it is only when you place yourself exactly in your partner's place both physically and mentally are you able to fully appreciate where they are at and only then can you provide an appropriate response/ solution. In most conflicts, there is no resolution until both sides have a true understanding of where the other side is coming from. Whilst they continue to see each other as opponents, then a positive outcome is unlikely. It is only when they are able to see the other party as someone like themselves that peace can be truly found.

6. Ask your students to practice any technique you like. After a few minutes, ask them to practice the same technique but with a smile on their faces. Ask them to evaluate the difference in the quality of their technique. The likelihood is that it will have improved significantly.

Acceptance of aggression and dealing with it positively leads to far more positive outcomes than meeting force with force.

I hope these simple suggestions, provide some inspiration and ideas for how you can make a real link between the practice of a martial art and how it can be used to create peace within oneself and ultimately the world in which we live.

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