

## Low Impact Aikido & The Use and Exploration of *ki*

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I began my journey with Low Impact Aikido and a deeper discovery of *ki* quite by accident. And in doing this I discovered that I was not alone, but one of many who were both beginning to explore this type of Aikido, and exploring understanding how to teach Aikido this way. It was as if there were many who were there waiting to be welcomed on the mat by this and others ready to teach it.

The discovery part began first with an injury that occurred while training. I was thrown forward and my heel got caught in my training partner's *hakima*. As a result, I had a seriously extended hamstring muscle. I was off the mat for many months and when I returned I had to take baby steps at first. By this, I mean I could not roll or fall initially but could only break balance. I simply could not do what I had done on the mat before my injury.

I began to see things inside the techniques I hadn't seen before. Somehow slowing down and only going to the point where my balance was broken was almost like the discovery of a new Aikido for me. Things that before had been questions came together and began making sense to me: breath in particular revealed itself in a new way. I also had to also use something else other than my strength when working with my partner. I couldn't push off on my left leg. So I began trying to find how *ki* could become more a part of my Aikido, of what I was going on the mat.

After I was back on the mat and able to begin rolling and falling again, I started exploring breath and *ki* earnestly. I worked on both of these, not always successfully I should add. I understood that they were related. In the Old Testament, one of the Hebrew words for God is "Ruach Elohm." (רוח) (אלוהים) This refers to God as wind, breath, and spirit – the Spirit or Breath of God. I remembered this from my theological studies. So I thought, okay, breath is divine and so is *ki*. That I understand from reading about O Sensei and his writings. This is how I began my exploration, taking a small step here and another there.

Then my ankle broke during a Saturday morning class. There was no complicated technique involved. I was simply there as the *uke* for the sensei that morning. I was circling around her as she was demonstrating an *irimi nage* when my ankle snapped. In the months that followed after my surgery to repair my ankle, I first wore a cast and then a boot. When I returned to the mat after about nine months I was weak and again had limited mobility from the ankle that

broke. My sensei approached me as I walked on the mat the first time and told me, “Regulate yourself. Do what you can. Don’t push yourself.”

Shortly after I took my *shodan* but before my ankle broke (it broke as I was preparing for my *nidan*), I was asked to substitute for a teacher who could not make it to an evening class. As I was greeting those arriving for the class, each told me they had this problem or that problem and could not do rolls or even sit falls. I realized I would need to improvise how I had planned to teach the class. So the question was, what could I teach?

I bowed in and after slow warm-ups began to spontaneously teach starting with the basic blend drawing upon my experiences when I could not do rolls or falls. I told the students there that night to take their time and explore both the connection and the blend. “There’s no time clock that says you have to do the technique in so many seconds. Do what you can at the speed that works best for you.” I could feel everyone relax, as if the whole class collectively breathed a sigh of relief.

The next technique I demonstrated was a *shomen uchi ikkyo irimi* where I became both *nage* and then *uke*. By showing those in the class that they could have the full experience of the technique without the throw or fall they were able to look inside the techniques in a new way. What we saw was the flow of *ki* and it originates and develops at the technique’s beginning, middle and end.

As the class progressed, I had the realization that this was perhaps new territory that we were exploring. After the class ended, my insight was confirmed when student after student came up to me and expressed their appreciation for the way the class was taught. We were able to explore not only *shomen uchi ikkyo* but also *shomen uchi irimi nage*, *kata-dori nikkyo irimi* and at the end of class a standing *kokyo dosa*.

I had read in many places that O Sensei constantly changed and refined his techniques and moves as he explored and developed Aikido. This was the first insight I had into what this could possibly mean. There was a special energy in that class, one that I had experienced before. This feeling was the feeling that we were all connected, all breathing together and moving as one, yet retaining our individuality. But we weren’t doing full impact Aikido. The techniques that were done, even with just breaking balance, were powerful. There was an energy there that was unmistakable. I realized that the techniques were being completed energetically. In other words, the throws were being completed with *ki*. There was no doubt that that something special had happened during this class. In “A Life in Aikido – The Biography of the Founder Morihei Ueshiba” by Kisshomaru Ueshiba, he writes [p. 26]:

“The art which O Sensei created incorporated powerful martial techniques, but it finally depended upon *ki* – that *ki* which is the energy animating all life. He liked

to refer to it as ‘Takemusu Aiki,’ the harmonious energy which is born or comes forth out of martial practice.”

Reflecting upon the class during the days that followed, I began to wonder if I could actually begin teaching what had happened during the class? The term I came up with “Low Impact Aikido” as a way of expressing what this expression of the Art could be. The more I sat with this, the more comfortable I became with the name.

Soon after, I had an opportunity to teach another class and had the same experiences occur. And again students came up after class and expressed their appreciation. One student mentioned, “I saw an attention to detail with the techniques I had never seen before.” Another told me, “I saw something different tonight. I have a whole new way of looking at what I’m doing on the mat.”

Reflecting upon both these injuries, I am sure that my ability to connect with students when teaching or discussing Low Impact Aikido came from my own experiences being injured. I remembered clearly what I could and could not do. All this was there imprinted in my mind and in my body. And I think students could sense that what I was teaching and showing was authentic just because of those life events. In other words, what I was demonstrating and talking about didn’t come from a workshop or seminar (although don’t get me wrong workshops and seminars are great, but this is something different). It was something that was in me and not from a knowing from outside me.

Soon after I began writing about “Low Impact Aikido” and to my surprise found three other teachers were exploring the same idea at the very same time. Some were calling it “Non-falling Aikido” but it was identical in many respects to what I had been exploring and teaching. Paul Linden Sensei and Aviv Goldsmith Sensei were also seeing the need for a form of Aikido that would allow people who could not roll or fall an opportunity to learn a true martial art. Each of us I found out where approaching it from a different angle, but we were focused on the same goal. That is, allowing people to come on the mat and train who otherwise would be turned away because they could not roll or fall.

As a result of my starting to write about Low Impact Aikido, I began receiving emails and messages on social media sites. The content of the emails and messages were pretty much the same. The person writing would write that they were wanting to learn and train in aikido but they had a physical limitation and could not take a full impact class where they would be required to take rolls and falls. The saddest part of these messages was that they had been turned away from Aikido dojos time and time again. They were told if they couldn’t roll or fall they could not learn Aikido.

I answered each email and message explaining that I would try to find a nearby dojo that would accept a student who could not do rolls and falls, but with little success. Time and time again the *dojo cho* would inform the person making the

inquiry that they could not train if they could not roll or fall. These messages came from all parts of the world. My attempts to find dojos almost always ended up with no results. While this was happening, I was time and time again discovering that a Low Impact approach to Aikido could work. That is, one could experience the full spectrum of Aikido, both the martial and spiritual.

After all, O Sensei “insisted that ‘Aikido is the study of spirit.’” [From “The Essence of Aikido – The Spiritual Teachings of Aikido” compiled by John Stevens, p. 13] I always emphasized this when teaching any my classes, but especially with my Low Impact students. “It is about energy, spirit, *ki*. You don’t need a perfect body to learn Aikido. You just need to let your spirit soar and connect with what’s already there.” I’m sure some of my students became tired of hearing me say this. But it was coming from my own experiences, and from my heart.

A powerful example of the use of *ki* happened when I was teaching a class in Grass Valley, California. One student arrived at class with her teenage son. He had been involved in a car accident where the car rolled over. As a result, he had damage to his brain. This in turn limited many of his faculties including his speech and especially the movement of his left arm that was semi-atrophied with his hand in a claw like position. He watched the class seated in a chair off the mat with the hood of his sweatshirt pulled over his head. He was listening to something as he was wearing a set of earphones. However, I noticed that as I taught the class he became excited. This was evident from a smile that appeared now and then as he looked up from under his hoodie. He also gestured for his mother to come over a number of times and listen to what he was trying to say.

After class, his mother asked to speak with me. “My son would like to come on the mat.” I replied that it was fine with me but she would need to be responsible for him and monitor him. She agreed to this and the next week he stepped on the mat and bowed in with us while standing. Before the class began, I told his mother to let him know that he was welcome and that he should just try to do what he can and not overextend himself. I also walked over and expressed the same to him. I put my hand on his shoulder and told him, “You’ll do fine. I want you to relax and enjoy yourself.”

Over the next weeks, he began blending in with the class, becoming more adventuresome with trying the techniques I was teaching. I would go over to him and tell him, “You can use *ki* to move people even if your left hand and arm aren’t able to move. You need to begin seeing this in your mind’s eye that you can use this energy. It is there for you to use. So go for it.” In the beginning, I would stand behind him and extend my energy through him so he can have a feeling, a sense, of how this felt in his body and spirit. After a while, I left him on his own to explore this. It worked. In the weeks that followed, he was beginning to affect his training partner’s balance with his energy.

And as a result of this, his range of motion with his atrophied left arm and hand changed. He gained some range of motion with both his arm and his hand opened some. His mother came up to me after class a number of times and told me his doctors were asking her what he was doing to bring about this change? But most importantly, the change was in him. I could see that he was happy on the mat. He arrived at class with a smile on his face and left the same way. His mother said he would look forward to the class all week.

This was a big lesson for me. It was the first time I had worked with someone with a major physical impairment on the mat. It showed me that the lessons of The Founder and the power of Aikido could work with individuals who had less than perfect bodies. It also confirmed the stories about O Sensei teaching and training even with his advanced age and when sick were true and not just hagiography.

I then began to write more about my experiences. Articles were published in various on-line and print magazines in the United States and abroad. The response was one of interest but what I wrote did not set the world on fire. However, what did happen was I began hearing from more people both in America and from other countries who had had an experience trying to join a dojo (mostly Aikido dojos) and were told they could not train due to some physical limitation or another. One man wrote that he had back problems and could not do any rolling. He inquired about beginning classes at a dojo in his country (the UK) and was told he could not train because rolling and falling were a required part of Aikido.

As a result of my articles, emails also began arriving from people who had trained in the past and wanted to get back on the mat but because of age or other reasons could not do a full impact type of class. They were asking if I knew of dojos where they could train? Other inquiries came from women who were very interested in learning Aikido but also knew they could not take falls or roll, again due one physical factor or another. I responded to each email stating I would search for a dojo near where they lived that could or would accommodate them. Unfortunately, I was not always successful.

I began a correspondence with Aviv Goldsmith who was welcoming students at his dojo (Aikido of Fredericksburg, VA) who wanted to learn Aikido but could not roll or fall due to one reason or another. Aviv Sensei had a unique approach in that he would give the students the experience of throwing he and other senior students. I thought this was an excellent approach. I wanted to learn what was working for him and how he taught his classes so I could incorporate this in my own classes.

At the same time, I began to combine some of what I had observed working best in the Low Impact classes in my regular classes. This included breaking down techniques so that students could experience all the parts of the technique as a whole without rushing to make the throw. This had always been a problem; that

is, students rushing to complete the technique with the throw at the end. I always told those in my classes, “Enjoy the ride.” By this I mean they should enjoy all the parts of the technique and not only the throw, which although dramatic was only one part of what was occurring.

I believe there is a common misconception that Aikido is about throwing, and being thrown. I’ve heard this referred to as, “The art of flying.” Although this is indeed a spectacular part of Aikido, I think other important parts of flying happen before taking off and then landing. If you are only focusing on one part you will miss what can be learned from the whole. Of course, seeing O Sensei and senior teachers throw students on YouTube or in person is exciting and sometimes almost beyond understanding. However, I realized the critical “thing” that makes any of this possible is *ki*. With that energy there at work, there would be something perhaps more akin to grappling. *ki* allows connection and much, much more.

Therefore, understanding *ki* is not only critical but perhaps the very thing that is at the very core of O Sensei’s insights into the Art. And when working with students who cannot roll or fall, although this element may not be able to be practiced as noted in the above illustration with the young man in my classes in Grass Valley, California, *ki* does not depend on a perfect body. It can be there and available to everyone.

I also searched outside of Aikido literature for information about human performance. One of the books that provided a wealth of information was (and is) “The Rise of Superman – Decoding The Science of Ultimate Human Performance” by Steven Kotler (New Harvest, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, Boston, New York, 2014). The book explores the chemistry and science of the brain and body in moments of peak performance. Reading the book I began to understand that there was a science behind how Aikido and especially Low Impact works.

Kotler states that “flow” involves “dozens of neurochemical systems.” It became clear to me that although there are many aspects to *ki* that are yet to be explored, and may remain forever unknown there probably are some parallels between “flow” and *ki*. The easiest way to understand this is that “flow” and *ki* could work hand in hand. The body is a biochemical and bioelectrical system that works from and with the brain. Using the brain to create neuropathways to accept and work with *ki*, my inquiry has been can this be something that can be used in Low Impact Aikido to allow a handicapped individual, for example, to begin to experience and use *ki*?

Another interesting aspect of Kotler’s book is that “commitment” triggers the flow that occurs. Two of these triggers are “rich environment” and “deep embodiment.” The first happens when we encounter an unfamiliar environment. Surely on during an Aikido class, although we repeat techniques many times, they are and can be presented by the instructor with many slight variations. The

choice is either to get lost in what might be new or different or be willing to explore something what is being taught.

One can observe this at workshops and seminars when a guest instructor shows her or his insights into something very familiar like *yokomen uchi irimi-nage*. Most will try this once or twice and then go back to the way they've done it for years. Kotler writes, "Novelty means both danger and opportunity." He notes that our brains like familiarity because it requires less work.

The second trigger, "deep embodiment," is described as "full body awareness." He continues, "Action and adventure sports demand deep embodiment." He includes martial arts as something that require deep embodiment as do the more extreme sports. One cannot take any test in Aikido from the first *kyu* tests to the upper level *dan* ones without having deep embodiment present. As the ranks increase, the attacks become faster and stronger. There is no time to think. The brain has to change from analyzing to another mode of action, what Kotler notes is called "transient [hypofrontal] fast track."

The dojo does provide a "rich environment" [see George Leonard's chapter, "Welcome to Our Dojo" in "The Way of Aikido" to get a sense of the special environment a dojo offers. Also, Richard Strozzi-Heckler's "The Leadership Dojo" for another insight into what the dojo means and can provide.]. And, the intensity of the class and stepping onto the mat (especially during a test) gives one a true snap shot of one's level of embodiment, or not.

We are not isolated organisms but intimately connected with each other and the universe. Again from "A Life in Aikido," The Doshu writes, "To him [O Sensei], ultimate mastery would be the integration of each individual being with the universe." The science of the brain (and the body) cannot be unconnected to the reality of the connection with the whole. Our bodies are already connected and the path of Aikido is a way we can discover what is already there. And one does not, I discovered, need a perfect body to make this discovery.

Here is another example. This one again is from my own life and my own experiences. In 2008 I was shocked to discover that I had a lump on the side of my neck. I thought this was another "owie" from something that happened during a class. My family doctor whom I have absolute trust in and had been my family physician for twenty years said I should get this checked out. I was truthfully skeptical but went ahead and saw a specialist at the local Kaiser medical facility. After a number of tests, I was told I had a very aggressive type of cancer on the back of my tongue. It was in Stage 2. I was given a 70-90% chance of a full recovery if I began treatment immediately.

Being adopted, I had no access to my family medical history so it was a mystery where this came from. Never the less, the truth was I had cancer and needed to begin chemotherapy and radiation treatments immediately. What my cancer team of doctors prescribed was a grueling regimen of 35 radiation sessions and

4 chemotherapies. I was told they were going to really go after this. “After all, you’re in great shape and we need to get this now.”

It was an arduous journey that lasted from April on through the month of September that same year. When everything was completed, I had lost a fifth of my weight and body mass. When I approached the mat again, I realized there was no way I could roll or fall. I could barely manage a slow two-step. But what I could do was use what I had learned from my Low Impact teaching, and use this on myself. Techniques only went as far as breaking balance and these were done slowly. And I had to use *ki*. My strength was gone. I had lost most all my muscle tone. Even walking was difficult at times. When I was on the mat, any movement was a challenge.

It was frustrating not being able to do on the mat what I remembered I could do before my cancer. Then I re-read “The Secret Teachings of Aikido” {Morihei Ueshiba translated by John Stevens} and right away at the beginning of the book these words jumped out at me:

“It is our responsibility to present the true spirit of Aikido, not just its physical aspects, in order to further, and correctly advance, the cause of Aikido in contemporary society,” [p.7]

These words brought me back to my center to the spirit of *ki* that I had been using and teaching. This became in essence my mantra during the next months as I gradually regained my strength and with that my balance and center not only on the mat, but also during my time off the mat. And since that time, I have continued this exploration, the relationship between breath and *ki* and how it can be taken out into the world to harmonize what is tragically often missing in our daily lives.

It is now seven years and two months since my last cancer treatment ended. I have yearly check ups that have all been positive. But I have not forgotten that experience, or the two earlier ones. When I train and teach, I strive to do this with compassion that comes from my own experiences, and from my heart. And every day I’m excited in this journey I am on exploring the relationships between *ki* and breath. I continually ask myself, “What can I learn? What have I learned? What can I share and write about?” And most of all, within this exploration, I ask what works on the mat, and when I leave the dojo? And by works I mean not just in optimum situations, but when life isn’t the best and isn’t working as planned or as wanted.

I see this exploration as being on-going. And I hope I have been able to communicate this to my students, friends and family. That is, that Aikido is about more than rolling or falling or learning a set of techniques. It is about life and learning how to live as much as possible as an embodied human being.

For this I am grateful to O Sensei, the Doshu, my teachers, especially John Stevens Shihan, Bob Noha Sensei, Richard Strozzi-Heckler Sensei, and my many training partners over the years. And without question to my family, and to my wife who has been and is my best teacher and partner.

A deep bow of gratitude to all. Thank you from the bottom of my heart.