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Injuries and Training

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Undoubtedly, Aikido is many things for many people. Nevertheless, some characteristics mark all interpretations. For example, “Aikido is a physical activity.” While we must allow for huge variation in the samples of our art, we would be pressed to seriously question the presentation of an Aikido that was not, at least to some degree, a physical activity. Therefore, we can almost universally accept this fact about Aikido training: Like all physical activities, Aikido will make you stronger, more coordinated, more aerobically fit, etc., as well as put you at risk to experiencing both soreness and/or injury.

In the end, it is misguided to equate being sore or injured with a reason for not training. This kind of thinking violates the fact that Aikido is a physical activity. For those of us with martial interpretations of Aikido, such a position becomes even more dubious. We cannot say that we can train both hard and safe. From a martial point of view, to train safely is not to train hard. Ultimately, risk is vital to true Budo. We should not seek to remove it completely from our training.

We must figure out how to balance the truth of soreness/injury and risk with the truth that we cannot progress under a will to self-destruct. To be sure, there is a wide area for exploration between these two apparent poles. We simply need to look to some guidelines that can aid us along the Way in order to temper our explorations with wisdom. As we begin and/or continue our training, it is important to learn the differences between (1) an actual injury, (2) a potential injury, (3) soreness, and (4) tenderizing. Obviously, all of these categories are dealing with tissues that have been stressed. They are divided by the degree of stress relevant to a given tissue. According to that stress level and the nature of the tissue involved, said differences will account for both healing and preventative methodologies. The presence of any of these tissue stresses require that we alert our instructor to exactly what it is our body is telling us. We should also understand these types of tissue stress according to two other categories. These are, (a) those stresses that prevent us from training – keeping us off the mat, and (b) those stresses that do not. How we come to identify the type of physical stresses that we are forced to deal with will determine if and when class can be geared toward one’s continued healing and/or if class would only further aggravate one’s condition.

Tenderizing is the most commonly felt stress of the four types. In the beginning, particularly due to ukemi, but also due to seiza and shikko, tenderizing is what the new student’s body goes through the most. We will also have to go through a tenderizing process, again, every time we alter (i.e. improve) our ukemi – which will take place every time we learn more about ukemi. Tenderizing is vital to Aikido training. Tenderizing is not the product of incorrect form. Tenderizing is mostly due to improper lifestyles

being lived before commencing Aikido training. In particular, tenderizing is related to a lack of physical suppleness and/or overall flexibility. Tenderizing is also very common in those individuals that lack ample muscle mass. Because tenderizing is a result of these things, the worst thing we can actually do for ourselves is take time off from training. Rest will not increase our muscle mass, nor will it increase our flexibility. By seeking rest when we should be seeking movement, we are only prolonging the tenderizing period. When seeking rest, we are also most likely to continue the lifestyle that was the catalyst for our long and hard tenderizing period. By returning to the mat, or better yet, by never leaving, we not only pass through the tenderizing process more efficiently, we also work to make it more productive in its purification of our body. As for tenderizing, the Golden Rule is this: Movement produces more movement; Stillness produces more stillness.

For most, soreness may be hard to distinguish. Athletes that come to Aikido may be more ready to identify soreness than non-athletes that come to Aikido. The latter often mistake soreness for injury. The difficulty in identifying soreness is often due to its location – not just the subtlety of its sensation. Because Aikido utilizes the entire body, soreness is often felt in places one may not be accustomed to feeling soreness at. Often because one has never been sore in “that spot,” a practitioner is sure he/she has injured something even when no such thing is the case. Without going into lactic acid buildups and tissue reconstruction, etc., we can say that soreness is a result of training slightly above our performance envelope. By extension then, progress must include healthy amounts of soreness. While soreness can and should be reduced with such things as warm ups, warm downs, regular yoga training (with and without props), massage, hydrotherapy, etc., like tenderization, soreness should not and cannot be avoided at all costs. Moreover, like with tenderization, our body is better served by continuing our Aikido training when we are sore than by taking ourselves off the mat.

Potential injury is often characterized by a strain and/or a weakness at a particular focal point. One should give special attention to these areas when they are located at points of articulation, such as at one’s neck, on one’s spine, at one’s shoulder, elbow, wrist, or knee, etc. Potential injuries mark a weak spot, a spot where an injury is likely to occur if we do not address what our body is telling us more mindfully. To do that, we should not necessarily halt our training but rather seek to temper our training with more concern. We do this by striving to practice more mindfully in terms of correct form as it relates to our current condition. This is important because such weak spots often come to us via the repetition of incorrect form. Thus, automatically seeking to rest a potential injury by taking ourselves off the mat may be nothing more than wasting a prime opportunity to learn more about correct form.

On a different but related note, areas of potential injury should always be marked with the placement of red tape over said location when training. They should also be accompanied by an Injury Log entry – which informs your peers and your instructor of your condition. Potential injuries may even warrant a visit to the dojo’s medical expert. Potential injuries should always be treated with RICE until all inflammation is gone. After there is no inflammation, one should proactively include some or all of the following (depending on the nature of one’s potential injury): deep tissue massage, stretching (with props), hydrotherapy, stim machine use, ultrasound massage, acupuncture/acupressure, light resistance training, proper diet, and proper sleep cycles and durations. All of these things are practiced in order to enhance both healing, prevention, and mindfulness.

A fully realized injury should have us off the mat if our instructor finds that there is no way for us to train around it. Obviously, we should also make an entry in the Injury Log. After seeking the guidance of the dojo’s medical expert, we should seek to treat such stresses with the same methods laid out above for potential injuries. It is not wise to let time alone heal us. Relying solely on time for healing is not cultivating mindfulness, and often this only works to hide the injury, making us ignorant to its continued

but now subtle presence. In addition, injured students should seek, to the best of their abilities, to attend classes for viewing. Often times, watching a class delivers great insight into one's own training and thus the likely cause of one's injury. Students can suit out and sit on the mat during class in seiza or on a zafu. Alternatively, students can bypass suiting out and sit on the side of the mat on a zafu or chair if necessary.

One should not automatically train through an injury – “gutting their way through it.” One should also not automatically remove themselves from training due to stressed tissues. Aikido is always about a multiplicity of choices, so certainly Aikido is about more than just these two choices. We must find the wise middle ground – the ground from which we can continue to learn from our injuries rather than merely be plagued by them.