

Aikido: Q & A

How long will it take to master aikido?

It depends..

The short answer is.. 30 years.

Genetics has really little to do with it, according to Gladwell,
except perhaps in very rare cases.

Here's the long answer.

In his book *Outliers*, Malcolm Gladwell discusses the scientific secret behind mastery in most of the disciplines we've come to think of as having acknowledged world class levels of skill. In music, we expect to hear accomplished pianists, for instance, vocalists with highly refined singing voices, and concertos that take our breath away. In the fine arts, our interest is always piqued to hear of new artists on the rise with skills that appear to rival or even surpass the classical masters. In the Olympics, we praise the sportsmen and women who win the gold medal after years of hard, solitary, 4 am on the tarmac, rain-or-shine kind of work. Imagine the commitment it must take. Champion chess players and maverick tennis players, the same.

So, this magic number of 10,000 hours shouldn't really surprise us. It's the basic formula before a person can start to innovate in their field, breaking the rules, setting world records, or discovering a game-changer like Einstein did with his $E = mc^2$. It's the minimum length of time it takes for someone to go from scratch to Formula-1 success in whatever it may be, where the experts begin to take notice of something new afoot.

10,000 hours of practice works out to be about 10 years of play-time, at an average of 5 hours / day.

Few of us have as much leisure time as this.

But, full-time aikidoka regularly achieve it, which is why *uchi-deshi* training is recommended if you want to make a career out of aikido.

Part-timers, who train for fun rather than professionally, may achieve the same level of skill after 30 years or so, combined with attendance at Easter camps, summer camps, and a couple of weekend seminars per year.

This is why you see how the greater number of aikidoka on the seminar circuit tend to be in their 50's and 60's, some even in their 70's. They took the long road. You do see a few younger ones as well these days, and most of them were graduates of an uchi-deshi training program somewhere.

The supporting factors of the right space, a sufficiently large dojo with the right tatami mats, a critical mass of class-mates at a similar level who are positively encouraging, and teaching models of excellent aikido, are definitely needed to complete the picture behind an individual's story of success.

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The Budo approach has traditionally been to train part-time this way over the course of many years, with the help of one's fellow dojo members. Without them, we wouldn't have the opportunity to succeed, as learning in aikido is not a solo sport, where you can simply measure your performance against your previous best effort.

Aikido is more about harmonizing our movements with people of different shapes and sizes, different ages, speeds and coordination levels. It's also about seamlessly merging with their energy. This is training for empathy, for the human heart, rather than solely training for the body or mind.

Indeed, this heart connection is so much the basis of our art that the word 'success' doesn't always do it justice. What we do on the mat is not so much a performance, although it can be that, an aesthetic pursuit in its own right, but more like a heart-to-heart communication of the ethic behind the art.

Creativity, in this mutually interactive sense of give and take, is traditionally the light at the end of a very long tunnel.

But, even the smallest steps lead to where we want to go, if they're the right ones.

Remember, the tortoise always beats the hare in Aesop's fable! Continuity is the secret of spiritual success.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hz4hPbHIZ6Y>

Not to be outdone by Gladwell, Josh Kaufman, in his book *The First 20 Hours: How to Learn Anything Fast*, challenged the suitability of the 10,000-Hour Rule for most post-modern working people, who just can't spare the time.

Take the post-modern father. Looking after kids, cooking, washing, cleaning the house, bathing the kids between online talks to that all-important client over skype! When double income sourcing and multi-tasking house-hold chores have become the norm, whose got time to leave the house!

Whatever's worth doing to mastery level, though, must also be worth doing for its own sake. Some of us geeky types, like Kaufman himself confesses, just love learning for the pure fun of it, or for the discipline it takes to become competent at something new.

“I'll never recover”, we say to ourselves, and, “I'm never going to be able to do this..” because, in my emotionally overwrought state, I feel, in every fiber of my being that I'm dumber than Homer Simpson's 'duh'.

It's always exciting to learn new things, isn't it? Why stop after university? And, didn't someone say 'learning is for life'? Notwithstanding the joys of family life, anything to keep us from getting bored, right?

Kaufman suggests, correctly I think, that most people never reach the level where the new discipline they've chosen starts to become enjoyable. They give up too soon, either from a sense of frustration, overwhelmed by what they perceive to be the enormity of the task (10,000 hours..?!? Are you crazy!? No way..!), or from simply feeling embarrassed at having set unbelievably high expectations of themselves.. like some buffoon on roller-skates...

Success is an interesting word. It denotes steps taken in order, placing one foot in front of the other, perhaps enabling something to emerge from the principle of succession, the sequencing of things. A grammar of sorts. Once this principle of 20 hours is grasped, then, the mist clears a great deal. Everything else, including mastery, is just sweet sailing after that.

The greatest fear we must overcome, then, at the start of aikido training, is the fear of incompetence.

Or, the fear that we'll look silly.

Others who will laugh at us..

OMG! They'll see my tiniest mistakes, blow them out of proportion, and break out in heaving guffaws.

"I'll never recover", we say to ourselves, and, "I'm never going to be able to do this.." because, in my emotionally overwrought state, I feel, in every fiber of my being that I'm dumber than Homer Simpson's 'doh'.

My advice to you.

Don't worry.

Truly..

If you took a survey of secret thoughts in the dojo..

..hardly anyone really cares that much about how other people perform..

Early on, most people are too focused on themselves and their own performances anyway to think much about anyone else's.

Being concerned for others does become very important in aikido training eventually though, particularly for good instructors and good students past the intermediate level, who understand the philosophical intent behind the art and so have an intrinsic interest in seeing everyone do well.

It's part of the philosophy of aikido after all, that we get to a place in our skill, sooner than later, hopefully, where we can actualize our intent to do no harm, and actively protect one another. If we don't do this, we are at the mercy of being called hypocrites.

Kaufman figured out that the number of hours to get to this intermediate level of competence, through self-correction, was met somewhere much much lower than 10,000 hours.

It was extremely low..

Only 20 hours, in fact.

What most people don't notice, he says, is that, within 20 hours, you can basically get to the point where you realize what the correct form of anything is and compare

it against your own unsuccessful versions (assuming you start out with excellent models).

In other words, the feelings of hopelessness, the lack of progress, the delayed gratification, and the nauseating sense of having turned into a former version of ourselves, a physically uncoordinated and emotionally inept child, let's say, thankfully lasts, at most, only 20 hours.

And he proved it by learning to play several dozen songs on the ukelele, using only three chords. He plays them well, by the way. And, with emotion.. You can watch and hear him singing them here.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5MgBikgcWnY>

A basic level of competence, then, where you can start to correct yourself, shows that you know what the basic principles are and can make adjustments as you go along.

Our long-term goal is also to share our love of uchi-deshi training through a teacher's training course and mentoring program for those who want to become professionals.

A lot of the fun in learning comes from overcoming the basic fear of never succeeding, of never understanding the basic principles behind an art.

Success is an interesting word. It denotes steps taken in order, placing one foot in front of the other, perhaps enabling something to emerge from the principle of succession, the sequencing of things. A grammar of sorts. Once this principle of 20 hours is grasped, then, the mist clears a great deal. Everything else, including mastery, is just sweet sailing after that.

As we like to put it in the more spiritual arts. The guru is only ever a guide. True

learning takes place when personal effort matches a socially conducive environment. It doesn't and cannot come from, as is commonly supposed, simply aping the guru's mannerisms.

Yet, as Gladwell points out, the social factors involved in producing a resource-rich environment for the aspiring high performer is the most often underestimated point.

In our school, we encourage all three levels of participation. You can try it out for 20 hours, and see if you like it.

That will take a couple months or so, if you trained at a leisurely couple hours per week.

We also cater to the people who want to take the long, sweet road to success, the journey of a thousand miles that begins with a single step.

Our long-term goal is also to share our love of uchi-deshi training through a teacher's training course and mentoring program for those who want to become professionals.

We have the professional background, and our 10,000 hour mark passed by some time ago.

We have a good dojo space for the moment.

And, we have instructors with a strong interest in teaching well, using the best of the latest scientific principles of movement, and by creating the most supportive learning atmosphere possible.

Long, short, or middle length, then? What will it be?

Take your pick.

What kind of injuries do you get in aikido?

Severe injuries are actually relatively rare in aikido. The image that Steven Segal's films give of aikido is a hard one, callous, destructive, *realist*, the anti-thesis of aikido as conceived by the founder Morihei Ueshiba.

Actually, I know of only one well-known school that trains for the eventuality of causing serious injury. But, there are also a handful of famous sensei in other mainstream schools whose reputation for causing injuries on the mat has given them the title: 'known for his powerful technique'.

Perhaps we all need to carry hidden swords and guns now, just to make sure we have a shooting or slicing chance of survival in the *real* world. Honestly, sounds like real *Kill Bill* to me..

I recommend that you stay away from such teachers, or such approaches, if your goal is the more long-term ones of the health and integrity of your body. Cruelty only breeds cruelty. And, as they say, 'he who fights by the sword, dies by the sword'.

There's no enlightenment in that.

If Nishio Shoji Sensei is right, then it's also a pathetic way of life, leaving untold suffering and misery in its wake. Nishio is one aikido teacher who was not one to mince his words. With a long background in iaido and karate, his aikido was very realistic, without being cruel.

Indeed, he's gone on record saying that Miyamoto Musashi, the man most martial artists admire in Japan for being the greatest swordsman of all-time, was really only a coward, who died an early death, shivering in a cave.

Nishio justifies his belief from the number of people Musashi must have killed

before he wrote his famous *Gorin-No-Sho* (The Book of Five Rings) which posterity has elevated to the status of martial gospel.

Technically, Nishio points out, the book may have some merits. No doubt. But, we mustn't be taken in by that, he says. After all, each piece of advice in that book had only one goal: to learn how to kill summarily, and without compunction. Thus, publishing that book for mass consumption may well have contributed far more to the diminishment of the human spirit in our time than to its enlightenment.

We cannot, of course, follow Musashi's advice to the letter in our more peaceful era. Even when his advice is refashioned as metaphorical advice for managers, it sounds odd. Do we really need to face down death, for example, in order to prevail against challenges in the market place? Or, plan to take strategic advantage over our business partners, by striking at their first sign of weakness, and so on? I mean, the whole thing, from a larger humanistic growth perspective, sounds rather juvenile, doesn't it?

In his book *Épée 2.0*, Johan Harmenberg's recounts how he won the gold medal in épée at the Moscow Olympics in 1980 using Musashi's strategies against the Russians. Musashi's teachings eventually overhauled the whole field by influencing the way the top nations of the world played the sport at the elite level. But, that's a reasonably clear example of the application of Musashi's teachings that worked in a competitive sporting context, among individuals and nations fighting for points.

I am unsure exactly how striking at a business partner, though, really leads to rewarding outcomes, either in the short or long-term. But, perhaps, I am just naive here and not sufficiently versed in the complex nuances of the *kill or be killed* philosophy of the so called realist school of martial thought. Of course, I would be happy to be educated if anyone could instruct me in what I may be missing out on.

At a minimum, it's reasonable to assume the exact reverse. Because, if the metaphor of *corporate warfare* was strictly true (when it isn't, of course), then we'd expect to see more competition and much less cooperation than we actually find.

If anything, international cooperation between corporations appears to be on the rise, at least in the wake of the banking crisis, the invention of the European Union, and post-9-11, and in spite of the stories we periodically get of espionage behind the scenes.

Globalism has also brought people closer together. Whether via the internet, through tourism, cultural exchanges of all kinds, or cross-pollinations in art and music, and regarding the ecological concern over climate change, more and more the world is coming together in dialogue. In the main, the planet seems a gentler place to me, geared to responding to cooperation rather than cut-throat reactions at the first signs of weakness. But, I may be wrong.

Perhaps we all need to carry hidden swords and guns now, just to make sure we have a shooting or slicing chance of survival in the *real* world. Honestly, sounds like real *Kill Bill* to me..

According to Nishio, Musashi was a coward because he'd killed a great many young men, some say as many as fifty, simply to test his skills at swordsmanship.

..another aikido teacher Shimizu Kenji used to say, “It takes almost nothing to destroy an immensely beautiful classical Chinese vase. We just need to drop it from a height, or throw it against a hard surface, at an odd angle”.

Even technically, this would be a confession to mass murder, and skills of the lowest order. Of course, a discussion of morality doesn't even enter in here. It's always a sin to kill. But, more sinful, surely, if the killing was done for selfish reasons and not out of self-defense. Anyone with a conscience, if unavoidably called on to kill, such as in a war, does so with only the heaviest and most circumspect heart.

Aikido, by contrast, is an art that offers the attacker many moments within the encounter to mend his ways. Its whole essence lies in the skill of not-killing, indeed

not-harming.

And, that, we hardly need reminding, is the acme of skill. It's also what characterizes the saintly behaviour of prophets, the kind and compassionate counsel of the mystics, sages, holy men and women throughout recorded history, on every continent on earth.

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“It's much more difficult to carry such an *object d'art* to safety from one place to another, without spilling its contents, particularly if there were many distractions on the way, preventing us from doing so with ease.” Moving companies, even with their multiple layers of wrapping paper, bubble-wrap and card-board boxes, regularly enough, fail to transport these vases safely, to their owners' great dismay.

In other words, how you care for your partner, how you make your techniques 'work' depends entirely on your intent. If Musashi killed 50 teens, who could barely match him with their basic skills in swordsmanship, it means that he left many families grieving for the rest of their lives for their lost sons, husbands, and fathers too.

As Buddhist psychology teaches us, such a person, who had spread so much misery, cannot but suffer the consequences of such actions on his psyche. That is the law of the mind, which leaves behind deep emotional complexes, residues of our immoral acts known as *sankara*.

As the Buddha claimed many centuries ago, immoral action follows us like a constant shadow, unless we make amends or purify our minds. Musashi appears never to have made amends, and that is why, Nishio says, he died ingloriously, shivering away with guilt in a cold cave.

Whatever the outcome of that debate, we must, I think, choose our heroes wisely, because if we're not careful, we will most likely end up like those we admired the most.

In any case, it seems to me that it's a mark of great moral immaturity to cause injury, even unintentionally, or by avoidable accident, since we're not in actual combat.. just in case you were wondering. Nor do I think aikidoka in general have plans to enlist in a war any time soon. And, so, for the ethical purposes of aikido, the interactions on the mat are cooperative by design. Yet, as we know, a severe injury may well cripple someone, and leave us emotional shattered for life.

For this reason, in our dojo, we try to go out of our way to insure the greatest possible safety levels on the mat, even if that would interrupt the flow of our classes sometimes. Mindfulness is encouraged for that reason also, and not only because it grants us inner peace. Contributing to the generation of a shared peaceful practice space must be also our personal and collective goal.

Of course, I hope you can begin to see how inner peace, once generated, can translate into outer peace, in better working and family environments, social and community settings.

Having said that though, and even with all the measures we put in place, aikido **is** a contact sport, so you will get the same basic sorts of minor injuries, if you can call them that, that most other such sports also encounter.

Some bruising on the wrists or shoulders.

Some toe, wrist, or ankle sprains are common, especially in the beginning, until our bodies get stronger and adjust to the ranges of motion we typically study, and until we learn how to fall safely.

In the early days of training, because we don't always know what we're doing. It's true, we can overtrain, overstraining others into the bargain. Hopefully, these are

just early coordination problems, such as we had when we first learned to drive.

We know we should take our foot off the break pedal but not too slowly or else we'll lurch back and forth, but, as novice drivers, we often do just that. We also know that we must push our foot down on the accelerator at some point, in order to move forwards, neither too suddenly nor too forcefully. Yet, without learning how to control these moves, releasing and applying the pressures gradually, we'll go careering out ahead or shunt into the next parked car..

All these considerations flash through my mind in a millisecond before I decide to throw my partner in one direction or the other, next to or away from others practicing, so as to minimize possible harm.

With time and more experience on the mat, the aikido equivalents of these coordination problems usually iron themselves out over time.

On the good side, while taking time off to recover from minor injuries, and upon reflection, they do have something to teach us, I think. Namely, that we don't need to struggle, or use as much force, as we formerly believed we needed to when we first tried aikido.

It's also a good opportunity, if you realize that you may have been, unwittingly, the cause of someone else's bruises, to learn to take responsibility for your actions early, apologize, and think of how you might make your next grip less intense for that person or for the next. That is the beginning of training in compassion for others.

But, it's also just common sense, like when you hit another car while driving with too tight a grip on the steering wheel. To stay on this analogy, gripping the steering wheel too tight can mean not being able to swerve out of the way of harm in time.

Loosening up on the attacks, paradoxically, can also make us much more precise in applying our techniques. Like the peripheral vision we are encouraged to have

when driving, a relaxed flexible body gives us more mental space, better perception and coordination skills on the mat.

Unintended accidents do happen, of course, but losing concentration for a second doesn't mean that an accident is entirely your fault, particularly if there was a big enough distraction on the road, let's say a pile up.

But, perfectly preventable accidents also do happen.

Aikido attacks.. should be carried out with 'loving intent' for the benefit of our partner. Of course, it's never a benefit to *consciously* hurt someone.

In any case, damage may have been done. So, at the very least, please do apologize, and make a promise to your partner and to yourself that you'll try to avoid such collisions in the future.

This promise itself, even if it's just an internal check, can teach us a new way of being aware that we mightn't have thought of before. It can enlarge our sense of ourselves to think of doing things to reduce the possibility of unintentional harm.

Of course, some people will say that there's no point in taking responsibility for harms that weren't intended. The word *unintentional* suggests that the harmful consequence had a cause but no actor. And, there's even the subtle suggestion that, because the person wasn't aware at the time, he couldn't have avoided what he did.

But, of course, we *do* blame drunken drivers for killing people on the road, and drug abusers for messing up the lives of their family members. Not being conscious is no excuse to harm someone.

If non-harming is essential to the philosophy of love, then preventing injuries must be the cornerstone of everyone's aikido practice.

As an aikido teacher, for example, I am very conscious now of the surface my partner must fall on, how wide it is, how soft, how safe, etc. How many others are doing aikido in the near vicinity, the possibility of collision, the need for more space for a more secure landing, etc.

All these considerations flash through my mind in a millisecond before I decide to throw my partner in one direction or the other, next to, or away from, others, so as to minimize possible harm.

Although, to think this way has become second nature for me, as I am sure it is for many other aikido teachers, it does take a lot of energy to maintain during a multiple-attacker scenario, for example. The more ukes involved, and the higher the speeds, consideration for the welfare of the group as a whole must correspondingly go up.

The danger of head-on collisions in such scenarios is very real. And, we have a need to avoid pile-ups, trip-ups, and to be careful not to throw people too fast on top of one another. These are all very necessary quick calculations.

Probably, these precautions have been built up in me over time, intuitively, through slow and careful non-verbal practice with many partners, over many years. So, that I know from trial and error what hurts. Even so, I think it pays to realize consciously what the possible risks are and figure out ways to diminish them.

If non-harming is essential to the philosophy of love, then preventing injuries must be the cornerstone of everyone's aikido practice.

So, my advice to you, dear reader, is this: when in doubt, apologize. Reflect and learn from the experience. Find a gentler, kinder way. And, move on.

Don't stay stuck in blame or shame games. We all make mistakes. The point is to correct them. If unintentional accidents happen more often than they should, perhaps it would be good to take a collective look at the possible sources of the problem. It may be just that some physical habits get in the way of prevention.

The main reason we grip tighter than we sometimes need to, for example, is because of our ignorance of the inefficiency of hardness. We overextend ourselves, thinking that we'd be safer that way. A tight grip, usually also means a tight and fixed posture, with inflexible footwork. It's a way of bracing ourselves against a possible hard fall.

Ironically, it's the soft and malleable body that is safest, since it can move and contour to the floor smoothly in the fall.

Strategically, too, a stiff and relatively static attack is not wise, as it can be counter-attacked too easily.

Ueshiba: 'There is something much more frightening, much more dangerous than even the lion, the king of all violent beasts. What is it?' 'What is it, Sensei?' asked the student. 'Look in the mirror at your own reflection, your animal self, when it is out of control'.

Aikido attacks, as Ueshiba cautioned us, should be carried out with 'loving intent' for the benefit of our partner. Of course, it's never a benefit to *consciously* hurt someone.

Among those who are less-than-ethical, the hypocritical aikido sensei tries to justify his cruelty by saying that his students need toughening up, in preparation for the so-called *real* world out there, on the *mean* streets of downtown x, y, or z.

But, this, I feel, is a cop-out. Whatever the *reality* on the streets may be, the purpose of aikido is to change ourselves first, so that we become the kinds of people we want to see in the world.

If anything, we should train daily so as to be mentally strong enough to show those who are cruel how to lead a very different life.

We must start with self-compassion.

We are training future leaders of the expansive human spirit, ambassadors of peace, and not small minded obedient men, who are ready to kill in an instant, incapable of the smallest gesture of kindness.

So, no. I don't believe in tough training. Real toughness is something internal. It doesn't need encouragement from the outside. The toughness we seek is really the same as the gentleness that Jesus taught, melting the animosity of our enemies, with our good-will and non-aggressivity.

We must start with self-compassion.

To realize that we have our own fears, frustrations, and angry outbursts that we can't control is to realize that we have a lot of work to do on ourselves.

As Ueshiba put it:

'There is something much more frightening, much more dangerous, than even the lion, the king of all violent beasts. What is it?' 'What is it, sensei?' asked the student. 'Look in the mirror at your own reflection, your animal self, when it is out of control'.

The aikido dojo is exactly where we can learn not to react to past hurt feelings, or to feelings of inadequacy, fear, anger, anxiety, but learn to purify these past complexes as they come up within ourselves.

There will be thorns in aikido, but they are the thorns of love.

In the safe environment of the dojo, by blending with these *sankaras* as they show up in our awareness, we dissolve them one by one. To that extent, we are purifying our consciousness of past ill-will, whether generated from within or from the outer

environment.

Do-jo, literally means, 'the place of the Way'. It's the same term used for Zen temples. A place of meditation on the self, on life and death, and everything in between.

Bu-do, or 'martial way' is made of the characters meaning 'stop the weapon' (bu) and 'the mountain path' (do). In other words, the moment you step on the mat, you are engaged in your own hero's journey for the philosopher's grail. For the peace that passes all understanding.

There will be thorns in aikido, but they are the thorns of love.

Overextension, over-gripping, heavy and stiff attacks, often come from a simple fear of not using sufficient strength.

This sensitivity to our partner is what we strive to cultivate through the mental practice of *heijo-shin*, or equanimity, keeping a calm non-reactive mind.

Because we believe we're practicing a martial art, we think we need to use, if not brute strength, some kind of *special* force. But, this belief, we soon discover, is also unfounded.

It probably comes from the common habit of perceiving a heavy person as a heavy *object* we need to lug around rather than consider him or her a living breathing spirit we must lead with good technique. And, the movies probably also predispose us, I think, subtly conditioning us to think that all the martial arts, including aikido, must be *hard* if they are to succeed.

But, the discovery of the right balance of strength with relaxed extension seems to

come soon enough from a little practice, when we realize that letting go our attachment to the use of force is the middle way of non-contention.

We neither give up nor ratchet up the pressures given to us by our partners. We just let them slide past, or join them, leading them along their natural way, in the direction our partner's ki wants to go.

This sensitivity to our partner is what we strive to cultivate through the mental practice of *heijo-shin*, or equanimity, keeping a calm non-reactive mind.

The Buddha taught that consequences of ethical action also follow us, like the sun. Wherever it goes, it casts no shadow.

There is no struggle there. No grip. No push, and no pull.

This is also sometimes called action in the state of *muga-mushin*, or 'empty self - empty mind'. Egoless consciousness.

Just a vast open mind, under a vast open sky.

Ueshiba called it 'the great spirit of aiki' which is why we still affectionately refer to him, many years after his passing, as *O-sensei*, or 'great teacher'.

And, we still give him thanks for showing us the way.

