

Here is a summary of the our first lessons. Perhaps, you could try some of these exercises at home if you had missed any classes. Whenever possible, I have attached suitable Youtube videos that may help you visualize the exercises. Enjoy!

Aikido Concepts: Lesson #1

Ten-kan

One student of O-Sensei told him about Jesus's saying: 'turn the other cheek..'. 'Ah!', O-sensei said, 'What a good technique..!' But, 'I think..', he said, 'it would be better to turn completely.. to avoid the person committing the sin of hitting me in the first place!'

In this lesson, we will learn the idea of turning or tenkan. In life we learn to sit, stand and walk, but we do not turn very often. Aikido contains a lot of turns. Based on my own experience, I would even say, perhaps as much as 90% of aikido involves turning. So, it would be good for us to find out what ways there are of turning and which among these is the best.

- 1) Warm-up for **tenkan**: The principle of tenkan lies in the idea of 'store energy and release': Try lying prone on our backs with the knees up, feet on the floor.
 - a) Try bending the knees side to side, to gently twist the body.. then..
 - b) Lie on your side and try to roll onto the other side: for example, if you start on the left side of your body, you want to aim to roll onto your right side
- 2) There are three main ways you can initiate this movement. Which one do you think is the best? The strongest? The smoothest?
 - a) Try turning from your shoulders. This only moves the upper body partially to the ground, where your shoulders will be about between 5 to 10 centimeters short of the floor, depending on your flexibility. If you force the move further, then yes, you can make both your shoulders touch the floor but there will be a sudden crash. You will then have to push yourself up again to get to the other side.. which means, qualitatively, the movements are jerky, broken up, and haven't got much momentum.
 - b) This time, try turning by pushing off your feet. In this mode, the ribs will contract slightly, your breathing will contract, and you'll be making a large effort with your legs. The result is also a crash on the other side. It is better than the example from the shoulders, because there's more range of movement and more momentum and you do actually reach the other side, but, it isn't smooth and it takes more effort than what you will see in the next example. Here, your muscles are contracting rather than letting go..
 - c) Finally, try turning by concentrating your mind on your waist, on the part that is in contact with the floor. If you start by lying down on your left side, then focus on your left waist. Imagine the energy stored at the point of contact with the floor, where gravity is pressing you down. Then, simply release the pressure to roll it over. If you keep releasing, you can roll sideways more than once. See how far you can roll..by letting go. Keep rolling until the stored energy runs out. How many rolls did you do? Out of these three versions of turning, this is the best, because the movement produces a lot of momentum. It's easy, relaxing and smooth. With all this extra momentum to play with, you will be able to move

in many different directions, use it to stand up, for example. Much later, you'll find, I think, that this extra energy will be very useful when you start connecting several movements together in *free-style*.

- 3) Now, try standing up from a sitting position on the floor. You can start in *seiza* or from the cross-legged easy pose. Can you find an easy way to get up from the floor, using the idea of *tenkan*?
- 4) Try it from a position where you are lying down on the floor on your stomach. How many ways can you stand up from there..? Go slowly. Explore. Which way is the easiest for you now? Which way the smoothest? Which do you think will be the most efficient? Count how many micro-movements you need to make?
- 5) Eye movements: the latest neuro-science tells us that we move our eyes first when choosing where to go. When we coordinate our eyes movements with our bodies, we can get to where we need to go with less effort. Therefore, when you extend the spine, look up. If you want to contract (or 'flex'), then look down. Try some backward rolls this way, looking down towards your belly button when sitting down, raising your eyes as you come to sit or stand. Try some squats too. Ah! But if you want to move to the side which way should you look?

Try some easy neck rolls. Look up, sideways and down by focusing on a point on the ceiling, the walls and floor, respectively. For one second in each position, focus your eyes on a spot in your environment, so that some part of the wall, for example, is in good focus. Then try the same exercise at twice the speed, making sure that you re-focus your eyes on each new place.

In order to improve your coordination and balance, try balancing on one leg, with your body and head straight, arms out to the sides. Bend your free leg. Lean it against the stable leg at the knee or ankle joint, kind of like the tree pose in yoga. Now comes the tricky part: move your eyes to the left to focus on your left hand for two seconds, then move your eyes to the center, then focus on your right hand for two seconds.. Then try the same thing at twice the speed (one second at each spot). Then faster again: 0.5 seconds at each place. In the beginning, your eyes will trick you into thinking that you are moving. Don't lose your balance!

- 6) Centering exercises in the sitting pose. 6a) Sit in *seiza*, and have your partner push you gently from the front corner (next to your shoulder). To get maximum proprioceptive feedback, we need to activate the haptic sense in the hand. So, the 'push' here is not a normal push the way we normally think of pushing. Rather, the 'pusher' should push using her fingertips and her hand should be turned upside down (thumb-down, pinky-up). Push the shoulder just under the collar-bone.

By contrast, pushing normally, with the thumbs pointing up results in too crude a push. We want to realize the difference between the merely *instrumental* use of the arm to achieve some sort of martial goal, like winning or beating someone, for example, to using the arm as a *sensor*, an organ of intelligence. Ask yourself the question: "what happens to my body when I start comparing, judging and competing with others?" Most physical tensions we experience, I sense, come from feelings of frustration.

As soon as you set up a goal, a desire is set in motion, and with desire comes a set of comparisons and a general feeling of lack. 'I don't have what I want.' The distance between my desire and my goal creates tension. The greater the distance between my desire and my goal, the greater the number of obstacles or people in the way, the greater is the tension, the greater the frustration.

We compete with ourselves and others this way and lose our mental balance. It would work much better if distant goals were held as *simple wishes*, some things that would be nice to have or events that would be nice to experience but not absolutely necessary for us to be fulfilled as human beings. Without desire, we would have no comparison. Without comparison, we would have no judgement. Without judgment, no disappointment and no lack. The whole universe will be with us right now.

Some people think that having no desire would make life very boring. I agree. I am not saying we should have no desires. But, I am talking about the way we approach them. Is it possible to take our desires lightly? Can't we have goals and not obsess over them, not crave them? A wise person once said: "A beginner on the spiritual path is someone very anxious for progress. She is like someone who has just planted a flower seed in the soil. In a few days, a beautiful bud rises up out of the ground. But, instead of admiring the changes taking place, she is busy pulling out the plant to see if the roots have also grown, killing the plant in the process.."

Another story. This time from the Zen tradition. A beginner in meditation is often frustrated because he doesn't seem to be able to maintain his peaceful mind. A wise person said this: "When we start meditation, we don't realize our minds are dirty (with *sankaras*). It is like having a dirty handkerchief, so dirty that it's black all over. When it is so black, we don't realize that it was once completely white.

After some time in our meditation, our handkerchiefs start to get a little clean. White spots begin to appear against a black background. But, instead of realizing that our minds are getting cleaner, a beginner is someone who is shocked to see how dirty his handkerchief has become. Whereas, before, he noticed nothing, because there was nothing to compare, now he has a lot of black dirty patches...!! 'Oh, dear! How dirty am I..!'"

Aikidoka, please note that in the beginning you will start to experience new highs and new lows. "Oh God, how uncoordinated I am!", for example. This is natural. My advice to you is: ride the waves like the Asian dragon that can swim among clouds and mountains as easily as it rides the waves of the sea. Up, down, sideways, it doesn't matter. What matters is your capacity to remain equanimous inside, kind of like James Bond's preference for his drinks 'shaken, but not stirred..'. Of course, I'm not recommending you drink or become a secret service agent, unless they are already your goals..

Going back to the pushing exercise. It would be very difficult to sense the difference in your partner's balance with a normal push because your focus wouldn't be on sensory pick-up. Your attention will be overtaken with **trying too hard to compete**. So, you won't learn about the person you are faced with. Knowledge in the martial arts, like most other disciplines, is about learning differences and similarities in modes of attack within a safe environment. The quickest way to learn is to recognize the differences in the quality of energy your partners bring to class. Learn to let go inefficient habits as soon as possible.

If *tori* resists the push by tightening his shoulder or chest, his mind and balance will rise up to those areas and he will lose his strength and balance easily. The weight distribution of his posture would be like an upside down pyramid, and so, potentially very easy to unbalance. The ideal image of a man in the West, like the body builder's, is this top-heavy shape. In the East, by contrast, the ideal body shape is considered to be heavier underneath, more like a pyramid structure with a wide base. A sumo wrestler is a good image of oriental strength.

So, if you want better balance, let your mind settle in your center and any force going in to the upper body should melt down through your center into the ground. This process is called *centering* and *grounding*, respectively. Both are partly mental processes, they need relaxation and directed focus.

Prepare for a second or two, then ask your partner to try the same gentle push with the same force. Note: With concentration on the center you will have better stability. The pusher should also feel the difference in his fingers.

These exercises, however useful, will not give you absolute stability. If someone has a stronger center than you, then he or she may be able to move you. At that point, you must move with a calm mind.

6b) Try the same thing standing. This time, get your partner to push you from the side. Here are three different versions:

a) The natural reaction is to resist the push by contracting your shoulder, (your mind will also go to the shoulder) and your partner will be able to push you off your base easily. You will become weak.

b) But, if you relax your mind down to the center of your body, and drop your body down 3-5 centimeters, you will become heavier and more stable. But, the idea is not to be immovable. A heavier person or someone larger, with a strong center, will eventually be able to push you.. Get your partner, then, to push a little longer, or a little harder, till you do start to move. Notice that, this case, with your body relaxed, is better than the first because you are not taken off balance immediately when pushed. You must move, at some point, but you have time to think..

c) This time, stand normally but face your partner in *hanmi* stance (or "half sword stance"). Your partner pushes your shoulder from directly in front of you. Your partner's aim is to push you off balance to the back. This time it is a normal pushing position of the hand with fingers up.

Notice how the *hanmi* stance is much stronger than the normal posture in this case. When you get pushed on the shoulder, your partner's horizontal force on your shoulder will be redirected downwards through your back leg.. like a stake into the ground. And, for every force there is an equal and opposite force (Newton's Third Law of Motion), so, if you relax, you can feel your partner's force going down into the ground, making you more stable.

Slowly, try to sense the returning force from the ground (from your back leg) and then circle your shoulder slowly towards your partner, returning his force to him. Your partner should come off balance, and buckle under you. The principle at work here is that of the *yamabiko* (or "mountain echo"). We start moving from the point of contact (where we feel separate),

accept his force into your structure, and then change his line of force into a wave-form, by changing your structure. We return the energy back to its origin, where we are one..

Finally, try unbalancing each other in three dimensions. In this exercise, our *uke* will be standing, holding herself strong and straight with one arm bent at the elbow, the hand making a fist pointing up. She wants to be as stable as possible, maintaining this posture. Tori will, then, place his hand on top of this fist (open palm) and will try moving the person off-balance in different directions.

One secret is to always move from your center, like we did in the first 'turning' exercises on the ground. If you only try to move your partner using your arm, by pushing or pulling you won't succeed. Instead, you'll only get more tension in your body. The other secret is to use the ***Yamabiko Principle***.

The Yamabiko Principle: Add the weight of your arm onto your partner's fist and then extend down through his fist into his center. The returning force from your partner will come up through your hand. The idea is to take this returning force and redirect it when it comes back into your hand.

Another secret. After I send my energy into his center, I take the pressure off my partner's hand a little. When I do this, my partner will lean into me even more.. (By the way, my partner's job is to keep pushing up, even when he or she is off-balance..)

Please see attached videos of Endo Sensei for illustrations of a couple of the exercises we did (about 1 minute 30 seconds each).

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CFIaxVfGmNM>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aJIxFgKo0lg>

Aikido Concepts: Lesson #2

Ma-ai

'Ma' or 'space', and 'ai' or 'harmony'. Literally, the space of harmony or harmonious space. This is often interpreted to mean the minimum distance I need to be away from my partner to prevent an easy attack.

In our school, we also interpret this to mean *good timing* and *safe pressure, safe positioning* in relation to our partner, etc. Indeed, it refers to creating a bubble of safety for everyone you encounter, individually or in groups.

In the multiple attackers scenario, it also means two things: 1) moving at an angle away from the center of the circle, fitting yourself between the gaps in the group's defense, and 2) walking, or running, on the outside of the circle.

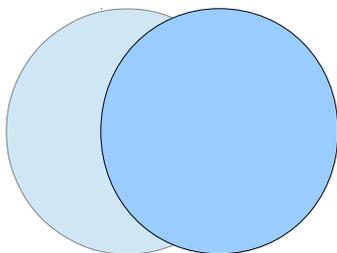
In the first case, as you disappear from the center, the attackers will collapse into the center of the circle. In the latter, the movement of the group will form a spiral (if looked at from above), where individuals will line up to attack you, running at you one at a time, within the expanding curved arm of the galaxial form, making your defense easier than dealing with multiple vectors of attack.

Other cognate words: *ai-kido, ki-ai, tokono-ma*

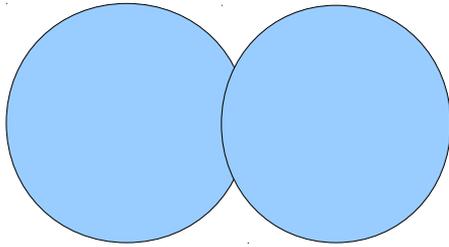
Ai or 'harmony' is important in the idea of *ma-ai*. Anything you do without friction or effort, and without disturbing the peace of another, is harmonious. Safe space can best be visualized by the geometric form of the Vesica Pisces.

Ma-ai, then, can also translate as respectful or loving distance, one that respects each person's need for their personal space. At the same time, in order to work together or even to love another human being, there must be a shared space that does not violate the dignity of the other. In quantum scientific terms, we might call this space the *quantum vacuum* where consciousness is potentially both individual particle and collective wave. Let us see how we might express this with the vesica pisces.

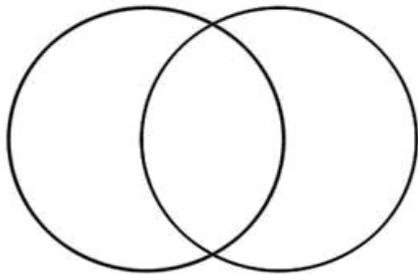
Example 1: Too much overlap. This can be perceived as oppressive, domineering, disrespectful.



Example 2: Too little overlap. By contrast to the first example, this can be perceived as disengaged, negligent or indifferent.



Example 3: The Vesica Pisces. Ideal engagement is a meeting half-way, where the two centers of equal circles overlap, becoming aspects of each other.



We might also use quantum terms to describe the way we need to switch our attention from a single point of focus on the body to a broader wave-like awareness of motion, alternating between them as we learn to string the movements together. The Vesica Pisces represents harmony or love, where we differences are respected, the first circle does not fully become the second circle, yet there is sufficient overlap or empathy that movement in one results in movement in the other and vice versa.