

Sword and Spirit

The Members' Journal of Itten Dojo

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— November 2005 —

PLANNING NOTES

December 11

Road trip to Madison,
New Jersey, for
Shinto Muso-ryu Jo practice
at Shutokukan Dojo

January 21 and 22

Aikido seminar with
Ellis Amdur,
at Itten Dojo

January 28 and 29

Aikido seminar with
Ellis Amdur,
at Toman dojo in
Gaithersburg, Maryland

From the dojocho...

Taikyoku Kuzushi

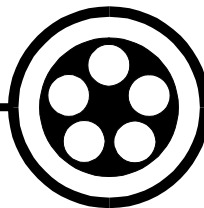
Several aspects of Amdur Sensei's approach to aikido are unique, in particular his style of *ukemi* (rolls and breakfalls) and his concepts of *Taikyoku kuzushi* (ultimate principles of achieving unbalance in the opponent). While Amdur Sensei openly teaches his method of *ukemi* at seminars, the *Taikyoku kuzushi* are ours alone, and are the foundation of Itten Aikido. Each set of exercises within the *Taikyoku kuzushi* is referred to as a theme and numbered from one through five. In this special issue of *Sword and Spirit*, we'll take a detailed look at each of the exercises in the five themes.

Every technique in our repertoire commences with an entry and reception of the attack, based on one of five themes, and most techniques can be seen as combinations of several components either identical to or closely related to the exercises described in the following pages. If techniques are viewed as "words," the *Taikyoku kuzushi* are the "letters" comprising the techniques, with *randori* being the "sentences" written in the form of engagements.

Ikkyoku, or the first theme, encompasses receptions operating in a vertical plane. With this set, the student learns to initiate movement from his or her center, drawing power from the ground and extending energy through the arms. *Ikkyoku waza* all involve sequential patterns of coordinated movements that must be accomplished in the proper order for the desired effects to be achieved.

In *Nikyoku*, the second theme, movement originates in the hips or in the center of the back, translating to receptions operating in a horizontal plane. *Nikyoku waza* can be applied as *tehodoki* (releases), *atemi* (strikes), or deflections. In practicing the *Nikyoku* exercises, the student should pay particular attention to the "feel" of the exercise internally, focusing on aligning and sequencing the torso and limbs.

Continued next page



Sankyoku (third theme) waza spiral upward, and can be applied as releases or strikes or as a means to extend the opponent beyond a centered and composed stance. It is in the Nikyoku and Sankyoku themes that we see most clearly the influence of Kuroiwa Sensei's boxing career, these sets incorporating the hook and upper-hand components on which Kuroiwa Sensei "hung" most aikido techniques.

Fourth theme, or Yonkyoku, techniques spiral downward and are primarily used to extend the opponent. A clear understanding of the use of hip rotation to push the elbow to rear, rather than pulling the elbow with the arm, is absolutely critical to effective application of Yonkyoku.

The fifth and final theme, Gokyoku, is in many respects the most demanding in application, because receptions to a point in space require the student to enter directly into an onrushing attack usually culminating in a strike, while essentially ignoring the attack to take control of a specific point into which the opponent collides. In Gokyoku, the opponent "blends" with the defender's fist. In addition to exact coordination of the sequence of movement and construction of an immovable stance, application of Gokyoku demands courage and the willingness to accept some degree of punishment in order to dish-out considerably more.

In our normal practices, we review the Taikyoku kuzushi in a manner that functions as a warm-up. Occasionally, we'll examine one or

more of the exercises in detail, but it is important to recognize that the time we spend on Taikyoku kuzushi in formal practices is woefully inadequate. Students *must* make regular, extended practice of the Taikyoku kuzushi a primary focus of training time outside of class. An excellent way to do this is to start with ten repetitions to each side of each of the exercises, and then look for exercises that can be "chained" to make a more challenging practice.

Some examples might be Tai-nohenko into Ikkyo undo (from Ikkyoku), Ingathering into Expanding or Expanding into Kagi or Kagi into Kumote (from Nikyoku), or S-cuts into Uwate (from Sankyoku). You can also link exercises from different themes: Uwate (Sankyoku) into Kagi (Nikyoku), Opening the hips (Yonkyoku) into Expanding (Nikyoku), or Ko-no-ha (Gokyoku) into Kagi (Nikyoku). After experimenting in this fashion, always finish with another, more defined run through the standard forms for each theme, ten repetitions to each side.

Aikido techniques are especially complex compared to techniques of most other martial arts. The sooner a student is able to perform the Taikyoku kuzushi with proper form and intent and attention to his or her internal alignments, and then recognize the analogous movements in applied techniques, the sooner his or her aikido will become effective in a practical sense, and the easier it will be to learn more advanced or unfamiliar techniques.

— Bob Wolfe

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of Itten Dojo

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Yonkyoku — Receptions Spiraling Downward



“Opening hips”

From hanmi, extend your lead arm and turn your hand palm-up (as your rear hand rises to guard your throat). Turn lead hand palm-down and pivot in place — on the heel of your lead foot and the ball of your rear foot — as you retract your lead hand with Yonkyo. Lower hips as you pivot, such that your rear knee presses into the back of the calf of your lead leg. Your rear hand should continue to guard your throat through the application of the Yonkyo, then both your hands should be lowered between repetitions of the exercise. Switch lead sides and repeat.

Training Tip of the Month

Given the focus of this issue, it's appropriate to expand the discussion to include stretching and conditioning, since those aspects of training share some considerations in common with the Taikyoku kuzushi. Most importantly, both stretching and conditioning demand turning your attention inward, constantly monitoring the feel of the exercise you're performing to insure optimal effect and minimal danger of injury.

Stretching is essentially universal in sports, regardless of the level of competition or the age of the participants, but I've always been amazed by the number of fairly senior martial arts practitioners who still disparage the concept of stretching, especially as a warm-up. I can't count the number of times I've been told, as I stretch prior to a practice, "That flexibility is all well and good, but you're not going to have the chance to stretch first if you suddenly have to defend yourself." The obvious point these critics miss — aside from the fact most of them can't lift a foot higher than the opposite knee — is that by proper and continued stretching, I am more flexible all the time, far more capable of generating power and much less likely to be injured by a sudden, explosive movement.

Here are some basic points to remember:

Stretching prior to practice is preparatory, not developmental. In other words, be conservative in stretching before the workout. The best procedure is to warm up gently with a few of the Taikyoku kuzushi or other exercises, and then, once a light sweat is broken, commence your stretching routine.

Everyone is probably aware that bouncing movements are to be avoided; instead, stretch to the point of the onset of discomfort, and hold that degree of extension for at least a minute.

Stretching should be slightly uncomfortable, but never painful. Pushing to the point of pain is more likely to result in loss of flexibility than the gains we're looking for.

Continued next page

Gokyoku — Receptions to a Point in Space

Ko-no-ha undo (“Turning over a leaf”)

Stand naturally. Lower your hips and step deeply forward, turning slightly to the side and extending your lead arm at throat-level. Imagine you are being extruded through a funnel, with power rising from your feet, through your legs and torso, ultimately exploding in a single point in space.

Although this technique can be performed with an open, lead hand, for optimal effect in application against an opponent the lead hand should be closed in a fist, palm-up. Your rear hand gently braces your lead arm at the elbow. At the “moment of impact,” your skeleton should be aligned from lead fist knuckles to rear foot heel and you should be absolutely immovable.

Be certain to tuck your chin as you enter, such that you are looking out from under your eyebrows, so that in application should you be struck by the opponent, the hit will occur high on the crown of your head where it is much less likely to stun you or knock you out (unlike getting hit in the face because your head is up).

Return to neutral and repeat the exercise to the opposite side.



After practice, when you are thoroughly warmed, is the time for development stretching, the time to push for greater flexibility. You can use the same exercises that you used in your warm-up, but hold the stretches longer and try for greater range.

In most forms of leg stretches, one good way to increase your flexibility is to get into position and take a deep breath, feeling the stretch pull inside. Exhale slowly, and sink more deeply into the stretched position. Take a deep breath again, being careful to stay in position — do not rise up and release the tension. As you exhale, you will again sink further into the stretch.

Personally, I would not undertake any practice or exercise without stretching, preferably both before and after physical exertion. Again, if you're in this for the long run, it behooves you to use every opportunity to increase your fundamental level of fitness, of which stretching is a prime component.

Strength is also a critical component of fitness, and of overall ability in martial arts. Although with aikido and Shinto Muso-ryu Jo we have arts that are less dependent on strength than, say, karate or wrestling, to pretend that greater strength is not useful in either art is foolish. Clearly, the best way to increase strength is through proper weight training, but we can accomplish quite a lot with the resistance-based exercises we perform in the conditioning portion of our regular aikido practices.

If you think back to your first practice at Itten Dojo, you may remember my emphasizing that during the conditioning workout it was far more important that you imitate the proper form of the exercises than attempt to match the number of repetitions performed by the other members of the class. Once an acceptable base level of fitness is attained, I definitely want all students to push themselves during conditioning, but never at the expense of proper form. In the first place, it's just dumb to injure yourself due to incorrect execution of an exercise. Too, we only have so much time to devote to conditioning, and it's going to hurt in any case, so why not get the most benefit for every moment of discomfort?

Now, to be sure, there's good pain and bad pain. Good pain is the burning created by build up of lactic acid, when skeletal alignment is correct and muscles are pushed past the point of exertion to which they are accustomed. Bad pain is the sudden, sharp indication that something inside has torn or otherwise broken. Seek the first and avoid the second — the key is to watch and imitate me.

Continued next page



Aiki-dome (“Stopping with spirit”)
Stand naturally.

Raise your lead hand to cross your opposite arm at the wrist.

Form a fist with your lead hand and cut across the opposite arm at the wrist (note — the opposite arm substitutes for the attacking limb of the opponent). The motion of the lead fist is an extension and a cut, not a punch.

As the lead fist is extended to a point in space, flex your knees and lower your hips for power, allowing your lead foot to slip forward several inches. Your lead heel drops into contact with the ground at what would be the moment of impact on the opponent. It is critical to recognize that “Aiki-dome” *does not* entail an entry forward, as is the case with “Ko-no-ha undo” — your center point will drop, but not move forward at all.

Return to neutral and repeat to the opposite side.

When we are doing our conditioning, just as when we are practicing the Taikyoku kuzushi, I’m not just trying to get some exercise. I’m very consciously attempting to model for you the best possible form I can manage. (Of course, that pays off for me in a lot of ways, too, but the point is you can be assured the form I am using is the form you ought to be integrating.)

Posture tends to be a critical consideration in conditioning exercises, as it is in techniques. I would apply the concept of posture even when an exercise is performed seated or prone. Protect your back.

Almost as importantly as attending to form, don’t cheat. You’ve almost certainly heard my mantra, “The difference between black-belts and white-belts is this: Black-belts are always looking for ways to make training harder, while white-belts are always looking for ways to make it easier.” In a nutshell, that’s why most white-belts never become black-belts. Only do as many repetitions as you can execute with proper form, but complete every rep that you possibly can, every workout. In the old karate dojo we had another saying: “Train hard; fight easy.” That might be a little simplistic, but it’s certainly true that slacking off in practice isn’t going to enhance your fighting ability. You never know when the pushups you skipped might have given you the endurance to throw that last punch to end the fight with you still standing.

Breathe! Proper breathing always enhances performance of conditioning exercises. The opposite is worse. Improper breathing can actually hurt you. A good example is a student holding his or her breath during abdominal crunches. Doing so results in what doctors refer to as a valsava maneuver, which raises blood pressure dangerously and puts undue strain on the heart.

There are also some breathing tricks that can be useful. If you make scoop-pushups a breathing exercise by focusing on the cycles of breath rather than on how difficult the exercise is physically, you will achieve more repetitions without strain and realize a higher level of conditioning. You can even use the quick, panting breaths taught to women in birthing classes to squeeze out an extra rep or two of knuckle-pushups (and in pushups, as with any other resistance exercise, it’s only the last few reps that accomplish anything).

Both stretching and conditioning merit entire issues independently — and the topics are on the to-do list — but I hope the things I’ve mentioned in this tip for the month will be especially useful for you and will help you draw maximum benefit from these two crucial components of training. ☸

News and Notes

Plans for *Sword and Spirit*

As this second issue goes to press, I'm taking a hard look at whether I should maintain a monthly publication schedule or switch to bi-monthly instead. It is my intention to finish this volume with a third issue for December regardless of what I decide to do for 2006. One thing that disappoints me is the fact only about half of the members of the dojo have to date purchased a copy of the debut issue, leaving me short of break-even on the cost of printing. This matters, because — as usual — the dojo continues to skirt along at barely break-even overall. (I was planning next to say something like, "Hey, if you guys aren't interested in the journal, I can find other uses for my 'spare' time," but it occurs to me that if you're reading this, you aren't one of guilty parties who didn't pick up a copy of their own.)

Nonetheless, putting one of these magazines together is a pretty substantial effort, one that I can accomplish without much difficulty in any two-month period, but evidently not without occasional strain on a monthly basis. I'll let you know next issue what I've decided to do.

By Contrast, Considerable Interest on the Internet

In each of the past several months, as many as 400 individuals have downloaded from our web site the PDF versions of the previous, electronic newsletter, *Itten Dojo Update*, and the abridged, posted version of the first issue of *Sword and Spirit*. A typical month also sees 200-some visitors to the site download the dojo brochure.

What I want to know is, where are all these people? You'd think at least a few would be local, and show up to enroll.

Noteworthy

Congratulations to Budd Yuhasz on his recent promotion to Senior Health Care Analyst for Coventry Health Care, and to Stephen and Evan Bates of the aikidokai on passing their Cokyu examinations.

Itten Aikidokai

As we move into winter we'll be looking ahead to the next visit with Ellis Amdur, the technical advisor to our aikidokai. Amdur Sensei will be teaching a seminar at our dojo on the 21st and 22nd of January, 2006, with planned topics including randori and completion of the bojutsu set (six-foot staff vs. sword). If we follow the usual format, there will be training sessions from 9:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. and from 2:00 to 5:00 p.m. both days, with a break for lunch from 12:30 to 2:00 p.m. A registration flier will be distributed to members (and perhaps a few invited guests) later this month.

There will also be the opportunity to participate in an open seminar with Amdur Sensei the following weekend, January 28th and 29th, in Gaithersburg, Maryland. This seminar will be sponsored by Jim Sorrentino of Aikido of Northern Virginia and hosted at the Toman dojo of our very good friend, Josh Freeman. It would be well worth the trip just to see Josh's dojo, which is without question one of the finest dojo to be found anywhere, but the seminar topics should also be a real draw, especially for the Sunday

session. While training Saturday will focus on incorporating atemi to aikido techniques, something we work on every time we're with Amdur Sensei, the Sunday sessions will feature a highly unusual examination of one or two classical, kenjutsu kata, dissected in detail. Single-day registrations will be permitted, but participation will be limited to 40 people on the mat at a time, and preference will be given those registering for both days. Registration information will be posted soon on the Aikido of Northern Virginia web site (www.aikido-nova.org).

It is exactly a two-hour drive from Itten Dojo to the Toman, so it wouldn't be absolutely necessary to obtain accommodations in Gaithersburg. The training schedule will follow the same, general format used when Amdur Sensei visits here.

Shinto Muso-ryu Jodokai

Alan Starner and I have been discussing the possibility of making a trip to Seattle in 2006, to attend one of the weekend seminars at Relnick Sensei's Shintokan Dojo. At the time this was written, the 2006 training schedule had not been posted to the SMR Jo web site, but as soon as options are available we will survey our jodokai to see which weekend might work for the greatest number of members.

It's very important that everyone training in our line of jo is seen by Relnick Sensei as often as can be managed, and since there won't likely be as many regional seminars as were scheduled in past years, it's incumbent on us to get ourselves to Sensei, in Woodinville. ☺