

Sword and Spirit

The Members Journal of Itten Dojo

\$3.00



— October 2006 —

PLANNING NOTES

October 29

Daylight Saving Time Ends

November 23

Thanksgiving
(Itten Dojo Closed)

**November 29 through
December 2**

Special, In-house Seminar
with Ellis Amdur,
Focusing on Aikido and an
Introduction to Iaijutsu

From the dojocho...

Stupid, Stupid...

We devote considerable effort and time to development of physical skills applicable to self-defense, but all the technique in the world is useless if situational awareness and judgment are lacking at the moment of truth. This point was brought home to me several years ago, under circumstances in which tactical mistakes I made could well have resulted in tragedy for my family.

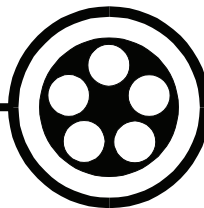
My wife, Rosanne, is an artist and designer. She had recently acquired an account she was very excited about: Two partners were starting a company to market a particular, Philadelphia-style soft pretzel, and Rosanne was hired to design the company logo, product packaging, and all the printed materials and various forms of advertising the new business would require. The account would be her biggest ever.

One late afternoon, I answered the doorbell to find a fellow standing on our front porch who introduced himself as the pretzel company junior partner. Rosanne wasn't home at the time, so I invited the fellow in (this was the first mistake), figuring I would need to write down a message or check for some type of information. Hearing that we had a visitor, my then very young daughter, Erika, trotted partway down the stairs from the second floor to see what was going on.

I'd never met either partner, but my first thought was to be as accommodating as possible. Besides, Rosanne hadn't mentioned any concerns with either partner — nor had she any concerns, prior to this incident.

Surprisingly, though, rather than asking a business related question, the fellow asked for cash, saying he was nearly out of gas, but realized he was close to our house. When I inquired why he didn't figure to use a credit

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card, or hit an ATM, the fellow said he'd left his wallet at home. At this point, things started to seem a little strange to me, and when I hesitated the guy began to get mildly belligerent. Second mistake: rather than reassess this person's intent at the first hint of implied threat, I remained focused on the idea this person was important to Rosanne and that I should try to accommodate him.

As the person's requests shifted toward demands, I suggested that I didn't have any cash. So Erika, innocent as she was, immediately piped up with, "I do!" (I was headed to the credit union myself the next day, and really didn't have anything much in my wallet.)

Figuring that in light of Erika's remark the easiest way to conclude the situation would be to provide some cash, I told the fellow to wait a minute and went upstairs to raid Erika's bank. As soon as I rounded the corner I realized my third — and worst — mistake: Erika was out of sight. I snagged the money and headed back downstairs, with the sick realization that those few moments would have been more than adequate for this fellow, this belatedly recognized intruder, to grab up my daughter and head out the door.

Between Erika's bank and my wallet, I was able to hand the intruder \$20, to which he replied, "Is this all you have?"

Making certain that Erika was well behind me, I told the intruder to get on his way, which, with some measure of grumbling, he did.

As soon as Rosanne returned home, I told her what had transpired and she immediately called the other

partner. He apologized profusely, saying that his friend suffered from some particular psychological condition and had a history of doing just this type of thing. The senior partner promised to return the money, which he subsequently did. Rosanne also informed the senior partner that under no circumstances would she again meet or deal in any way with the fellow who had "visited" us. As it turned out, the business venture went bust pretty quickly, although Rosanne was at least paid for the logo design and other work she'd accomplished to that point.

So, what were the lessons learned?

The first, and most important, though very disturbing to me, is the demonstration that despite my training I am fully capable of making utterly stupid, tactical mistakes. Self-defense demands a certain level of professional paranoia, the recognition that while everyone might not be out to get you, the few who are aren't going to announce themselves in advance. Take nothing for granted, at any time. Research and apply the situational awareness color codes developed by Colonel Jeff Cooper (see box on page 12).

Protect the most valuable; forget the rest. I should have been far more worried about Erika's safety than the potential for offending Rosanne's client.

Allow no one personally unknown to you to cross the threshold of your home. Remember that if you so much as crack the door to someone unknown, the door can be easily kicked open and entry forced.

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of Itten Dojo

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Role of the “Leading” Uke

By John Butz

New aikido students are bombarded with information. They have to relearn fundamental things like how to stand and breathe. They need to grasp more complicated things like connecting to uke, performing techniques, pronouncing Japanese terminology, and executing proper ukemi. How seniors present information to new students can make the learning process more efficient and understandable, or turn it into an exercise in sheer frustration for both parties.

Similarly, more advanced students are struggling to acquire the skills they need to continue advancing. As they improve, intermediate students begin to reach the (temporary) limits

of their abilities. They encounter hard spots they can't get around, or lines that they can't find, while over-eager training partners counter every attempted technique while delivering pithy advice about relaxing.

Both of these challenges can be overcome by developing an understanding of how the role of uke impacts nage's learning, and by understanding when uke should attempt to explain technique, or — more to the point — when uke should remain silent and train.

We are used to exchanging information via the spoken word. Throughout our lives we rely on language to convey concepts, receive information, and interact with others.

However, it can be very difficult, if not at times impossible, to convey physical actions and concepts using only words. It is particularly difficult to express these concepts if you and your audience don't share a common vocabulary — just think back to the last time you tried to explain some highly specialized aspect of your job to a layman, and you'll begin to understand the challenges facing both instructors and students in the dojo.

The first time a new white belt steps on the mat, he or she's just managed to tie the belt into a semblance of a proper knot and his or her biggest concerns are keeping the

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uniform together and not looking foolish. Beginners don't know the names of the techniques, which foot comes first, or any of the things that intermediate and senior students take for granted. The first time that someone grabs their wrist and waits for them to execute the technique that Sensei just showed the class, beginners will most likely just stand there or begin to do something that has no real relation to any technique. This is the point at which the more senior student, perhaps eager to pass on their acquired wisdom or frustrated that vigorous training has been interrupted by this beginner, will begin to direct the junior student through the technique.

“Step left. No, your other left. Now raise your arm. From the shoulder, not the elbow. Don't step that way, lead with the center. Not like that. Here, grab my wrist and feel this.”

This scenario is all too common during a training session, and it serves as nothing but a waste of time. Neither participant is truly able to learn anything. The beginner is not able to build the foundational layer of skill required in order to progress, and the experienced student misses an opportunity to pass on to the junior the beginnings of the physical vocabulary of aikido that is required to make measurable progress. To change this equation requires a different approach to training with juniors.

At an aikijutsu seminar I recently attended, the instructor made a comment that is very appropriate to this discussion: “Initial success results in further investigation.” As instructors



and seniors, it is our job to create the conditions allowing new students to find the initial success that will continue to drive them along the path to a deeper understanding of aikido.

The tool that we use to accomplish this feat is the role of the “leading” uke.

Defining the Role

But what is the commonly understood role of uke? Some people see uke as the one who loses. Others see uke as the one who makes their technique look good. Still others view uke as a personal punching bag upon which to demonstrate their expertise. None of these views, in my opinion, are correct.

Without uke, there can be no technique. In training, uke is responsible for not only executing clean, proper, and committed attacks, but also for keeping his or her attention on nage during the course of the technique and continuously trying to set up the ideal conditions for the technique to be practiced. Establishing these conditions requires uke to develop relaxation, focus, and the

ability to maintain postural integrity under adverse conditions. Interestingly, these same traits not only allow uke to counter techniques, but are also important in executing techniques as nage.

Because we will spend half of our training time as uke, it makes sense to view the role as an active one that contributes to our practice, as opposed to a passive role that benefits only nage. The process of ukemi is an active one, something that you do, not something that is done to you. The goal of ukemi is not merely to survive the technique, but to maneuver in such a way as to negate the opponent's technique and open up opportunities for counterattack or escape. In order to achieve that goal, uke has to stay actively ahead of the technique and relax limbs and joints to protect the body, escape locks and controls, maintain postural integrity, and be able to execute powerful, meaningful attacks.

Like everything else we do, ukemi requires a considerable amount of practice. Interestingly, the elements of good ukemi are very closely related to the skills required to perform good technique in general. Because of this, students should be constantly looking for opportunities to improve their ukemi. I believe that the limiting factor in how quickly a student will progress is not their ability to memorize the curriculum or execute waza, but rather their ability to perform proper ukemi.

Given how important ukemi is, when we look back at the scenario described earlier, where uke attempts to talk nage through a technique, it should become obvious that an

opportunity for the improvement of both partners is being missed. It falls to the senior student to re-think the approach to training as uke.

Becoming the “leading” uke

One of the principles that permeate our practice of aikido is the idea that we do not attempt to do something to uke, but that rather we do something to ourselves that has a predictable effect on uke, allowing us to manipulate the opponent. It is challenging to learn how to do this, and to get the proper feel of it. But when we take up the role of a “leading uke” we have an opportunity not only to practice this sort of manipulation, but also to begin to lay the foundation for the junior student to acquire this same skill set.

When training with a new student or working on a technique that is causing nage challenges, the leading uke should advise nage to remain relaxed, and allow the action of uke to draw nage into the proper shape of the technique. By doing this, nage will begin to grasp the line and sequence of movement that makes the technique “happen.” Simultaneously, uke can work on the proper ukemi, in essence facilitating the most efficient practice for both partners. Both uke and nage will keep moving and will be more involved than would be possible if words were being relied upon to convey the technique.

One of the most interesting side effects of this method of practice is the difference in the number of repetitions that a pair can perform during the course of a class. In the time it takes for the new student to be talked once through an unfamiliar tech-



nique, the leading uke and his partner can perform multiple repetitions. Quantity is not the only advantageous factor here. The quality of each repetition will be higher if uke draws nage into the technique, because uke will be practicing the correct form and helping nage acquire the all important body-feel of the technique. Quite simply, it is more efficient to be quiet and shape the technique. As nage grows more familiar with the movements, uke can gradually shift away from being the motivator and allow nage to build the skill set. This is accomplished by uke providing steadily increasing resistance until nage becomes unable to perform the technique, at which point uke goes back to shaping the line for nage.

When training with the more advanced student, the leading uke should concentrate on providing a level of resistance commensurate to the skill of his opponent. It should become readily obvious that the uke that has spent time actively shaping the technique while working with juniors will, at the very least, be more physically fit than the uke that has

been talking others through techniques. The more active student will be better equipped to perform high-level ukemi because he or she will not have wasted valuable mat time on pointless activities. As the skills of nage increase, uke should increase the speed and power of attacks and continue to maintain the relaxation inherent in proper ukemi.

Most advanced students do this routinely, and tend not to think about it because they have internalized some of the skills required to be a good uke and are working on increasing the power and speed at which they can execute techniques, counters, and recoveries. But even advanced students will run into things that they can't understand or feel. When this happens, it may be necessary to return to a more cooperative mode of practice in order to work on specific technical details or to learn a new technique, but the leading uke should be able to provide the feedback necessary to assist nage in acquiring these new skills without having to resort to wordy explanations. As a good rule of thumb, if you can't say it in five words or less, it is probably best to keep quiet.

It is imperative that uke, even while shaping the technique for the inexperienced nage to find, keep in mind that the goal of ukemi is neither compliance nor stiffness, but is instead development of the ability to retain postural integrity, maneuver for a counter attack, and protect oneself. Although the leading uke is essentially performing the technique on himself, he must not lose sight of those fundamental precepts.

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This type of training requires a great deal of responsibility on the part of uke. Uke must know what the techniques feel like when done properly and must be sensitive to the abilities of the training partner. Leading uke must be able to protect themselves, because they will be intentionally putting themselves in compromised positions to help their fellow students advance and therefore need to be confident in their ability to take the required falls. It is a very different paradigm than the more passive approach that some take, but it will have far more powerful results.

Limitations

Obviously, things like pins, proper hand positions, footwork, and other specifics might need to be corrected. What then should the leading uke do? The answer is simple: Wait until the instructor comes around and

fixes it. There are some things that you simply can't shape in nage. It is far better to continue practicing the techniques up to the point of difficulty, and get reps in, while waiting for the instructor to get around to you; then request detailed instruction in the problem area. Because our time on the mat is limited, it is foolish to stand around doing nothing because you can't walk nage through something without a lot of talking. It is better to keep moving and practicing while nage is making mistakes than to try to talk nage through it. Explaining is the job of the instructor. During an open mat period or outside structured class, however, it is appropriate to be more detailed in working with your partner, assuming you are competent with the skill set you are working on. During a formal class, it is best to keep your mouth shut and do another rep.

Conclusions

During the course of a student's practice, a lot of focus is directed towards being nage. Particularly when preparing for tests, the focus is on the role of nage and the proper execution of techniques. It is imperative that we do not lose focus on the reciprocal side of our practice. The role of uke is vital in providing us with a skill-set that will allow us to continue to improve and add life and vitality to our practice. More important, however, is the attitude of the leading uke. We must remain focused on training together, and pushing those with whom we train to strive for constant improvement. By fostering a methodology that encourages students to train harder and delve deeper into the workings of aikido, we strengthen not only ourselves, but also our training partners, and ultimately, our dojo. ☯



The Legs Conditioning Set

By Bob Wolfe • Photographs by Erika Wolfe

One of the distinguishing characteristics of our aikido is recognition that combat is three-dimensional, not constrained to linear and lateral patterns of movement. We frequently incorporate vertical components of movement to our Honden waza — for example, in sankyo, koshinage, and aikiotoshi — and make extensive use of the legs in newaza. For that reason, we need strong legs.

The leg conditioning set is short but relatively demanding, designed to build strength, flexibility, depth of stance, and balance.

Squats

The first exercise in the set is squats. From musubi-dachi, raise the heels slightly from the mat (figure 1), facilitating keeping the heels in contact throughout the range of the squat (a requirement of the exercise).

With heels touching and the torso aligned vertically, sink slowly (figure 2) toward sonkyo (figure 3), allowing the hands to slide naturally down the thighs, to the knees. Pause in this position for a moment, rather than “bouncing” immediately into the upward component of the squat.

Slowly start to rise to standing (figure 4).

Resume musubi-dachi (figure 5).

On the command, “Ue!,” press to standing on the balls of the feet, with distinct sense of driving up through the legs in a spiral pattern, from the base joint of each big toe (figure 6). Note that heels will not be in contact at this point.

We typically perform 10 repetitions of this exercise, each class. Pay special attention to a slow, deliberate descent, in other words emphasizing the “negative” portion of the exercise.



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Leg Presses

Without a doubt, leg presses are the most difficult exercise in the leg conditioning set, both from the standpoint of proper form and in terms of the physical exertion required.

With feet placed a little more than shoulder width (in *shikko-dachi*) and arms extended in a gentle circle at shoulder height (figure 7), sink toward the right (figure 8).

Maintaining a slight bend in the left leg and keeping the left foot flat on the floor, shift to the right as you sink to load as much body weight as possible on the right leg (figure 9). Hips should be “tucked under,” and the back kept straight. Pause in this position.

Press back toward standing (figure 10), staying toward the right to keep the work on that leg. Do not rise to the point the knees are locked; the trick is to maintain maximum load on the legs throughout the exercise.

Drift toward the left (figure 11), and then slowly drop as low as possible, weighting the left leg (figure 12).

Slowly and deliberately, press back toward standing (figure 13), drift to the right (figure 14), and repeat the squat (figure 15). If you vary slightly the alignment of feet, and/or the angle of hips and torso, you can shift the load to different muscles in the legs.

We normally perform 10 reps of leg presses, to each side.

Following the final repetition, allow the extended foot to turn upward and lower yourself until you are sitting on the back of the base leg, stretching the extended leg (figure 16). Hold the stretch for 10–15 seconds.

Without rising, shift to the opposite side (figure 17), and repeat the stretch (figure 18).

Typical mistakes made in this exercise include failing to push oneself by staying too high throughout, “bouncing off” the low position rather than pausing, and sticking the rear end out behind rather than keeping the hips tucked under.



Toe Stretches

In some ways, toe stretches aren't so much for strength or flexibility as they are conditioning for discomfort. Which is why we always say, "If this doesn't hurt, you aren't doing it right."

From iaigoshi, press the lead leg upward, so as to make a straight line from the ball of the foot to the knee (figure 19). The instep must be driven forward to create this line, rolling the toes to a stretched position. In addition, sit on the base heel, such that the toes of the base foot are being stretched as well. Hold the stretch for at least 30 seconds (more is better).

Shift to the opposite side lead, and repeat (figure 20).

Conclusion

The leg conditioning set is demanding on multiple levels, affording not only some serious exercise but the opportunity to practice mental focus and composure and coherent patterns of movement.

Don't waste any benefit of the leg conditioning set by rushing, taking it easy, or failing to observe proper form. Done correctly and for an extended period of time, these exercises will ensure you have the strength to train effectively. ☸



News and Notes

Harrisburg Paper Covers Dojo

Pat Carroll's article describing aikido training at Itten Dojo finally appeared in the "Life" section of *The Patriot-News* on Tuesday, August 1st. As mentioned last issue, we'd hoped the reporter's original intent to compare aikido to Krav Maga had given way to an exclusive focus on our dojo, but we learned when the paper sent a photographer that we would indeed be compared to "that more violent school" the photographer had visited the night before.

My heart sank when I saw the headline, "Fight Clubs," thinking immediately that nobody we'd want to have in the dojo would be likely to actually read the article. And I was less than thrilled to see the article start with a number of Zen-related allusions I'd specifically told the reporter don't apply to either martial arts in general or aikido in particular.

At least the front-page photo of Eric Klinger and Jeff Jones practicing ikkyo looked wonderfully better than the Krav Maga photo just below the headline, which was of a guy flinching away from a punch with his eyes screwed shut — I'm guessing the Krav Maga instructor was probably rather more upset than me.

Thank heavens Carroll in the article quoted from Lisa Granite's essay "On Budo and Pushups," which I'd provided. With Lisa's input there was balance to the description of what we do. In what I said to the writer during my interview, I spoke to his assumption that aikido is ineffective, and failed to emphasize that the real benefits of training have little or nothing to do with fighting.



On the day it was published, the article yielded just one phone call to the dojo — and that from a fellow who wanted to know if I were to "fight a kung-fu guy, who would win?" I was sorely tempted to say that I would bet on me and my .45 caliber Model 1911, but I was instead polite and tried to explain that, despite his assurances to me that "kung-fu is the most deadly style in the world," the question allows no simple response.

Realistically, the answer I choked back gets closer to the truth of the matter: Anybody training in martial arts *primarily* for self-defense is wasting his or her time. With the possible exception of persons in lines of work that require physical restraint of other persons within strictly defined limits of force, for most people there are far more efficient and effective means of self-protection than budo.

I wish I'd emphasized to Carroll that, ultimately, the most important reason to train is the simple fact martial arts are one heck of a lot of fun. Drawing together a diverse

group of exceptional individuals who share a passion for pushing their own limits, practices have a very strong social in addition to physical component. Often, people's closest friendships are formed in the dojo. I met my wife there.

Aikido practice in particular has an added attraction. Proper execution of the techniques is physically pleasurable. This is something very different from the pump one gets from karate or judo. A hard workout in those arts feels good, but in my experience the sensation of executing techniques in aikido produces a much more pervasive exhilaration. What's more, the exhilaration is the same whether on the "giving" or "receiving" side of techniques, a characteristic unique to aikido.

Maintaining a high level of fitness, increasing physical strength/grace/balance/flexibility/coordination, achieving greater mental focus, having a fascinating circle of friends, all while engaging in an activity that is endlessly challenging and feels delightfully good — more so the longer one's involvement — what could be better than that? (Oh, yeah, and you also learn how to fight...)

As I say, I wish we could have explored more of the "other than fighting" aspects of budo in the article, although I recognize the writer's specific intent was to address a range of approaches to self-defense. Nonetheless, I am very grateful that Pat Carroll took an interest in what we do and produced the article to begin with. There's no way to know who might eventually read the article, or what future opportunities the article might engender.

Training Tip of the Month

When I'm working on aikido class plans, I look for ways to add some extra interest to the workouts by including occasional exposure to old forms of modern techniques, or by covering unusual variations or applications of our standard repertoire. During practices, it probably appears to the members of the class that I'm just pulling this supplemental material out of thin air when, in fact, I pulled it out of my notes.

I have notebooks dating to the early 1980's, when I started the habit of recording at least one significant item learned at each practice. In my files there are now spiral-bound notebooks, three-ring binders, and electronic documents recording techniques, principles, and "life-lessons" gleaned from karate, kickboxing, kenjutsu, aikijutsu/aikido, and jodo.

My personal "aikido instructor's manual" consists of everything of any utility to our training, arranged by relationship to the Honden Waza or other curriculum topic. There are chapters for taikyoku kuzushi, conditioning, ukemi, each of the techniques in the Honden, weapons, and major principles. When crafting class plans, I can make a quick check of the manual for pertinent material that might enhance the coming training session.

Bear in mind that in intense training, roughly 30% of key information will be forgotten by the next day. If not reviewed, more than 50% is gone in two days. Under these conditions, you'll need several complete repetitions of a topic to insure retention. Maybe you enjoy hearing the same correction more than once but, believe me, that process gets kind of old from my perspective.

Get yourself a notebook, and use it. Make it a point to record at least one item each class: a new vocabulary word, a principle, a kuden (oral teaching), or description of a technique. When recording techniques, attempt to write the description in sufficient detail that even a person with no knowledge of aikido could walk through the technique just on the basis of the notes.

Otherwise, years later, you may well not be able to figure out what the heck you're supposed to do — and it might have been the only time in your life you had a chance to see that particular technique. ☸

Humorous Aside

I was whining to Dave Lowry about how the *Patriot-News* article turned out and he responded with some interesting comments:

The piece they did on you guys was not at all bad. The difficulty in doing stories of this sort is that there is so much crapola out there, so many preconceptions, that you are forced to spend your energies disabusing the writer of these, rather than explaining what the stuff really is. So you're spending 75% of the interview explaining what you don't do and only the remainder trying to get across the idea of what it is you actually do.

Really, the aikido stuff was better than I would have anticipated. I recall

an interview I did after a book came out, one that appeared in the local paper here. During the interview, I had made the comment that "Yes, I could kill you with a sword, but what, in the end, is the value of that skill?"

Of course, the headline was, "I Could Kill You With A Sword."

Starner Leads the Band

Alan Starner has been asked by Daybreak Church to take a part-time position as Daybreak Band Leader (Christian contemporary music is an important and lively aspect of worship at this church). Alan's duties will include scheduling musicians to play on weekends and at special events, arranging music and preparing charts for the performers, and

assisting Daybreak's leadership team in selecting music for regular services and special events. In addition, Alan notes that he will "work within the music ministry to encourage team members to grow spiritually, relationally, and musically."

Of course, Alan needs to keep his day job, too, serving as a vice-president for the central Pennsylvania division of Advantage/Pezrow Sales and Marketing.

Welcome to New Members

The aikidokai recently added two members: Chris Fisher, a manager in training with Giant supermarkets, and Mike Dutton, a production manager with Pfizer corporation in Lititz. ☸

Strangers are owed courtesy, as well as assistance when warranted, but not at the expense of making oneself vulnerable to attack.

Samurai kept a naginata hung over the front door, and were never unarmed even when sleeping. If you face a home invasion type incident, inaccessible weapons are worse than useless. (The father of a college friend of mine had firearms loaded and hidden throughout their home. At the time, I thought he was psycho. Now, though, I think he's a shining example of the theory, "Better to have it and not need it, than to need it, and not have it...") Obviously, live weapons in the home must be stored safely, but a variety of means now exist to permit rapid access to weapons while denying any access to unauthorized persons.

Make a plan. Think about possible situations and how threats might be handled. We can't anticipate every contingency, but we can consider at least a few environments in which assaults are most likely and devise general responses. I will never again separate myself from a family member in any situation the least bit disturbing.

Nowadays, Erika thinks I'm overprotective, but that's just the way it's going to be. I'm determined that whatever mistakes I make in the future will be matters of erring on the side of caution. And I thank God that I learned this lesson at the cost of nothing more than personal chagrin.

— *Bob Wolfe*

— States of Readiness — According to Col. Jeff Cooper

Condition White: You are essentially unaware of anything going on around you. Maybe you're fatigued, distracted by some worry, or had a bit too much wine with dinner. Regardless of the excuse, you are not ready — for anything.

Condition Yellow: You are alert but calm and relaxed, scanning your surroundings for potential threats. You know who's in front of you, to your sides, and behind you. You don't think anyone will make a hostile move, but you are mentally ready in case something untoward develops. Yellow should be the "default" condition for every martial artist.

Condition Orange: You recognize that something is out of the ordinary, and that the chances for violence are increasing. At this stage you note the positions of all potentially hostile individuals around you, as well as any weapons they may be able to use, in their hands or within their reach. You develop a plan for dealing with the potential hostiles, including identification of escape routes. In addition to being mentally ready, you are physically ready as well.

Condition Red: You are engaged in combat. Someone is assaulting you and you are reacting to the attack and defending yourself. You are taking immediate and decisive action to stop your opponent, or evade and get help.