Cleaning
By Maura Byrne

“Cleaning is an active prayer of thanksgiving. It is each student’s responsibility to assist in cleaning the dojo and to cleanse his or her own mind and heart.”


Veteran club members may notice that training time has been extended to include cleaning the dojo before class. This has always been part of training, but this is the first time the Club has formalized the link between cleaning and training.

Cleaning the dojo is an important activity for each student to participate in. Concentrating on the details of cleaning allows students to forget about their worries and annoyances of the day. And since the details of cleaning and preparing the dojo are addressed through a simple application of elbow grease, it becomes easier for the student to clear his or her mind prior to class and be ready to train.

Participating in cleaning also helps your fellow students. Many hands make light work. Conversely, leaving all of the cleaning to a handful of conscientious students to do all of the dojo preparation repeatedly will cause those students to become weary of coming to class at all. Leaving cleaning to others is also a sign of disrespect to your fellow students. If you expect to train effectively, it’s important that you are ready to train.

How we look after the dojo reflects our respect for our teachers. Like a clean gi or trimmed nails, a properly cleaned dojo demonstrates the class’ attentiveness and willingness to learn. This is especially important when there are visitors to the dojo, which is why extra preparation is taken before a seminar. But our everyday upkeep not only makes it easier for the extra cleaning but also expresses the sincerity of our desire to train hard and learn correct technique.

Cleaning and dojo preparation involve a small number of tasks that must be done. These include: mopping the mats; picking up litter or detritus on the floor; hanging the bell; hanging the pictures (O Sensei left, Aikido calligraphy center, and michi calligraphy right); and placing the training weapons in the rack under the pictures (jo on the bottom, boiken on top with blade turned up and handle to the right).

The new year is the best time to establish these good habits and cultivate a good attitude toward dojo upkeep. I look forward to seeing Club members on the mat - cleaning as well as training.

The University of Chicago Aikido Club: Early Years
By Don Levine

The University of Chicago Aikido Club was founded in 1973, when the Head Instructor of the then Illinois Aikido Club [now Chicago Aikikai], the late Akira Tohei Sensei, proposed the idea and came down for a demonstration. This was conducted in Bartlett Gym with the incomparable Robert Bryner, later a renowned sensei himself, taking ukemi on the hard wood floor. The Club’s first faculty adviser was Professor Tokumasa Nakamoto, Dept. of Biochemistry & Molecular Biology, then training at the Illinois Aikido Club. Collateral support for creating the Club was secured from Judo Club instructor, Dr. Paul Harper, surgeon, one of the founders of modern nuclear medicine, a grandson of University founder William Rainey Harper, and one of the first of the American postwar yudansha.

The Club became organized under Jonathan Eley, then a nidan. Now 6th Dan in Shin Shin Toitsu Aikido, and Chuden in Shin Shin Toitsu Do, Eley Sensei has long served as the Chief Instructor of Ki Societies Midwest. The Club’s first members to become yudansha were Karl Frogner, a graduate student in Biology, and David Fultz, the son of the late U of C Professor of Meteorology Dave Fultz. Frogner became the Club’s first president. After some years of functioning, the Club was truncated, following an incident when two University security officers evicted those training because there were more non-U-of-C-ers than students on the mat. The non-U of C members went on to practice in the Blue Gargoyle, and later followed Eley Sensei when he moved to 71st Street to form the Chicago Ki Society which, with the steady assistance of Fultz, he directed thereafter.

Following the eviction incident, the Club restarted as a student organization under Eley Sensei. Subsequently, Karl Frogner became the Club’s regular instructor under the jurisdiction of Fumio Toyoda Sensei, who in 1980 established the Aikido Association of America. Frogner left the University after completing his doctorate in 1981, and again the Club was in the lurch. The few students left asked faculty advisor Don Levine to assume management of the Club, and the Club started up again. It became connected with the Aikido Schools of Ueshiba, with which its original sponsor, the Illinois Aikido Club, had meanwhile affiliated. ASU yudansha Chuck Webber, Arthur Benjamin, Wendy Whited, Tasaki Kazawa, and Herbie Diaz provided instructional support until the late 1980s, when Levine Sensei became head instructor. As a result of these changes, the U of C Club may be the only Club in the United States to have come maintained connections with four major national associations: United States Aikido Federation, Ki Society, Aikido Schools of Ueshiba. At present it is unique in supporting instructors from three different major organizations and inviting guest instructors from several other aikido associations.

Over the years, the club has trained more than two dozen aikidoka who have become yudansha. Eley Sensei kicked off the Club’s 30th Anniversary Year festivities with a special class at the Club’s dojo in Henry Crown Field House on Thursday, October 16, at 7:00pm.
Etiquette  
By Maura Byrne

It’s never easy to write an essay on etiquette, largely because essays like this ought to emphasize the positive aspects of behavior rather than on avoiding the negative ones. Etiquette isn’t the sort of thing that is noticed or rewarded when it’s observed, but it is always noticed when it is breached. During training, etiquette is extremely important. Instructors and other students can very easily interpret an unobserved point of etiquette as a sign of disrespect, whether or not it’s intended as such; the breach is so conspicuous that they are unable to ignore it. Not observing etiquette also can reflect poorly on the club when students from other dojos visit.

Observing etiquette reduces distraction and reinforces a respectful attitude toward the teacher and fellow students. Here are some of the basic points that will help you avoid the common pitfalls:

1. Come properly dressed and groomed. Wear a clean gi, make certain it’s properly fastened, and tie your belt. If you are not sure how to dress for class, a senior student will be able to show you. If your obi becomes untied or you have a similar problem with your gi, turn away from the other students and take care of the problem. Keep your fingernails and toenails trimmed.

2. Sit seiza. It’s not easy at first, so sit seiza as long as possible and then sit cross-legged. If you can’t sit seiza or cross-legged, speak to the teacher. In either position you should sit with your back straight and your chin up.

3. Speak as little as possible during practice. If you are not the sensei, you shouldn’t be discussing technique. If you think your partner is doing something wrong, simply demonstrate the technique more clearly. Sooner or later, your training partner will pick up on it.

4. Pay attention to sensei during practice. Sensei will frequently stop two training partners to correct or demonstrate the technique. If you are not the person being used to help demonstrate the technique, you should sit seiza, out of the way of those training. A student who has received a correction or comment on their technique from the sensei should practice it at least once immediately following the instruction, regardless of whose turn it is to be uke or nage. If you and your training partner are both uncertain about a technique, you should both sit seiza and watch sensei as he or she discusses and demonstrates the technique with others.

5. Never behave like the “odd one out.” If everyone else has paired up and you find yourself without a training partner, sit seiza close to a pair of training partners and pay close attention to their technique until they invite you to cycle in. If it takes a while for them to notice you, take the time to observe their technique and visualize how you can improve your own. If you do something else on your own, it implies that you aren’t interested in learning the technique.

6. Don’t leave the mat unless you are excused. Sensei rarely pushes students beyond reasonable limits, and usually notices if you need to leave the mat. If you’ve been injured during training, the common thing to do is for both you and your training partner to sit near the edge of the mat away from the other students to avoid collisions. Sensei will certainly notice you and do what he or she can to help. If you have a medical condition that may make you vulnerable to problems or injuries, make sure that sensei (or at least a senior student) knows about it before class and what steps should be taken in case these problems occur.

7. Latecomers wait to be invited on the mat. If you arrive to class after everyone has clapped and your fi ngernails and toenails trimmed. If you can’t sit seiza or cross-legged, speak to the teacher. In either position you should sit with your back straight and your chin up.

8. Don’t distract students from what sensei has to say. If you find yourself being a demonstration uke, and you are not currently receiving the technique, the best thing to do is to sit seiza while sensei is speaking and be ready to repeat the attack when sensei wants you to.

9. Be conscious of the shomen. The shomen is the front of the dojo, where in our dojo we have hung pictures and placed weapons. It is considered rude to turn your back to the shomen. Although most of the time half of the training partners in our dojo have their backs to the shomen, it’s something to be careful of in other dojos. Also, when we make a circle after class, the shomen forms part of the circle. Don’t exclude it by sitting in front of it.

10. If sensei indicates a different preference regarding etiquette, observe sensei’s preference.

These are common pitfalls, especially with new students. If you can avoid them, you will help provide an excellent foundation for learning technique.

Jellyfish  
By Dwight E. Sora

“Hard without soft is useless.”

Or perhaps the quote is, “Soft without hard is useless”. Either way, it means the same thing, and it remains my favorite line from my favorite kung-fu film, Jet Li’s Fist of Legend. The line sums up an important concept for aikido training, that of always having variety. Specifically, varying how one practices—the level of resistance, the speed of uke and nage’s attacks and responses, sometimes making movements big and exaggerated, while other times small and precise. Variety, as they say, is the spice of life, and it goes a long way towards avoiding boredom with training. More importantly, however, it is critical to constantly test yourself, identifying your strengths and improvements, and then determining what you must do to improve.

A peril of aikido is falling into a training rut without realizing it. Sometimes, regular practice with a single group of people breeds over-familiarity with the way each person moves and feels. What can happen is that even if the entire group gets to the point that their technique looks clean and smooth and students are flying high in the air with their break falls, a kind of complacency about technique sets in.

I once saw a nature special that highlighted a species of jellyfish that inhabits a totally isolated body of water in the southern Philippine islands. They are pretty creatures, yet utterly defenseless. In addition to their environment being a closed system, there are no natural predators living there to threaten them. Hence, after millions of years of evolution, the jellyfish have lost the characteristics ability to sting possessed by their open ocean brethren.

Similarly, a single group of students with habituated training patterns may gradually lose their edge. Without real awareness of what is occurring, they stop probing their techniques any deeper, and their aikido becomes pure movement, like a dance.

Therefore, it is important to approach each technique from every possible dimension. As mentioned before, varying speed and resistance are key. They both test one’s knowledge of the technique’s basic mechanics, and allow one to gauge how well they navigate their own stress and self-consciousness in performance.

Also, it is good to try your technique on as many different types of training partners as possible, whether different is size, age, rank or ability. Of course, one is lucky if their dojo or club is receiving a constant stream of new students to keep things shaken up. The alternative is to attend seminars and training camps. Besides being exposed to good teachers, one’s learning is kept sharp by dealing with the wide spectrum of styles and attitudes. Even students who seem difficult or even unpleasant to work with on the surface have their benefits. It’s tempting, after a bad training moment with a particular person, to be dismissive and avoid them for the remainder of the class. “He’s too stiff”, “He keeps resisting me” or “He/she is too old/young” might be the comments running through the frustrated student’s head. However, I challenge my juniors (and myself) to not avoid such “problem” training partners, because you might learn more from someone with whom you don’t want to work on the surface have their benefits. It’s tempting, after a bad training moment with a particular person, to be dismissive and avoid them for the remainder of the class. “He’s too stiff”, “He keeps resisting me” or “He/she is too old/young” might be the comments running through the frustrated student’s head. However, I challenge my juniors (and myself) to not avoid such “problem” training partners, because you might learn more from someone with whom you can’t make something work than someone who folds over gently and nicely every time.

Aikido, and martial arts in general, is problem solving, and the only way to get better at it is, when confronted with a problem, to face it and do what you can with it. And always, bad training partners are like any obstacle life throws your way. You can’t control them or determine where or when they’ll appear, so you might as well get use to the idea that they’ll always be around.

Otherwise, you might never want to leave your pond.