



Roundtable Forum on Aikido and Older

June 23, 2014

Students

We had 3 speakers to start the forum; Jim Barnes, Hilary Dawson and David Humphreys. There was discussion about how to bring older people into the dojo, how to make them feel comfortable versus those who grew up in the dojo. Many audience members participated with suggestions and comments such as the following:

Approach every class with a partner as new, don't take them for granted. Build up intensity gradually. Trust yourself and your partner. Develop sensitivity to your partner, don't assume. Might have to divide the class. One dojo had the oldest beginner at 75, who stayed for 2 years.

Concentrate on basic movement and flexibility. Bokken and jo are good. Biggest thing is why do you practice? What are your expectation and goals? Older people see grace of movement. Engage with who is in the room and do basics. Personal awareness of self is key – head, body and spirit. More mature students appreciate that. Some people use the metaphor of tenkan for conflict resolution and verbal attack. How to teach ukemi to older students? One speaker discovered some older students progress to rolls easier if they learn break falls first. Show basic movements at a pace they can handle.

Speaker said they enjoy seeing students at any age. Some places use Aikido as therapy for PTSD. One dojo has high percentage of 30 – 50 year olds who started younger, stopped and returned later in life. They want to pick it up 20 years later. In their application form, they have a comment about medical condition. If there is any condition and they are determined to join, it is best to ask for a note from their doctor. You have to monitor older students more closely to ensure they don't overdo it. Most take direction well. Biggest problem is self-confidence; they think they are wasting their partner's time. They have great maturity and skills. Use tact and patience and it will pay off for them and for the dojo.

Encouragement is very important. Another speaker observed when older students train with younger students and get hurt, they never say anything. If they stay, they are more stable; they are a good core group and can give more time to the dojo activities.

Rolling is the hardest part, even for young people. One dojo has very soft tatami and an piece of extra foam for older people and new students to fall on at the start (like a crash mat). The falling part is for uke's benefit, not nage's. So there should be techniques where you don't do the falling part. We should have the option of doing classes with less falling. People get so focused on the throwing part they miss key points at the start. Or could opt with your partner not to fall.

One instructor said students are all aging in his dojo and they are fairly top-heavy with older students. Older people are really inspirational. They have amazing resilience that you don't expect; it breaks common assumptions.

As an older student, another said, he finds rolling easier than suwari-waza.

Besides age, we all have different body structures, attitude, baggage, strong and hesitant sides, etc. Throw to outside of mat for safety. Have imaginary wall exercises like in Yumi's class.

Others comments we are missing young people in the room to give feedback and we should ask for their comments after the forum. Some people manage their levels by going hard and fast, then switch to another

partner. It's ok to tell other students about one's limitations. We should help every beginner to feel comfortable to tell partner, "I can't do this or take it easy on that". Essence of Aikido to adapt to partner.

Older person throws 8 times and younger person throws 4 times.

To bridge the generation gap, have parties.

Use red tape for body party to single out "caution" to your partner.

Safe environment is key.

One dojo charges half rate for seminars for participants over 60.

Bad back class was held for a while. Or you can form groups for those coming back from an injury. Focus on strengthening what is needed.

Instructor should be a mediator, a good listener and aim to find the solution. Involve all the senior students to let them know the problem and reinforce how to solve. Hopefully, no one has to leave the dojo.

Even young students have to be responsible for themselves. They have to be able to speak up, if they are hurting or being hurt.

Another instructor explained his approach. Teach young guys first. Aikido is not fast lane. I grab some new pounders and say "You practice with x (an older person)", because I want them to slow down. That eliminates most of the problem. Make sure senior person knows how to fall. Don't imitate young students. Like sumi-otoshi – hold onto hand longer. You have to tell older students from other martial arts who think they know everything they really don't. Attitude is key. Constant attention and talk.

One instructor who is a doctor said, "I emphasize the health benefits of Aikido as a doctor. Mental and physical – flexibility, strength and aerobic capacity. One and a quarter hour of Aikido is equal to 45 minutes of vigorous walking. Meditation is very calming. Acceptance and cooperation is wonderful in Aikido. At advanced stage, you can get past physical and basic moves to a spiritual aspect. Older students give a lot to the dojo. Consequences of fall depend on bone density, 30 years of Aikido is great and will give huge gains in bone density. We have one person in a wheelchair doing Aikido."

I got arthritis in my knees on return to Aikido. But I got great support. My instructor says, "Do what you can do and if you can't don't."

Need to ask why they want to do Aikido. They used to practice and stopped. Ask why. Older students have varying needs and interests. Keep them wanting to come to class. Use your flexibility or lose it. Fear of falling gets them tense; if you relax, it will help overcome fear. Hardest part of Aikido career is first step on the mat. Introduce Tai Chi for mature students. Separate the class. Start low and work up.

As an older student, I like the philosophy of Aikido; counter your own ego, focus on peace and harmony.

Try, try, try and fly. Literally, Aikido is about falling and getting up. Practice will all ages, sizes; you can't find that in yoga or at the Y. Great to see older instructors. Mary Heiny is a great example and role model. For a Dan test, some older students did not have to do suwari-waza. That is a good accommodation for older students.

Having basics classes are very good; it creates a good entry point for older or frail or new young students. Less threatening and very encouraging. Know people you can flip around and who not to flip. Sensitivity of all students to each other. You need to be responsive to needs of others. Other senior students make a point of encouraging others and encourage themselves to be patient with themselves. Know they can learn at their own pace and others will help them.

My own aging is affecting my practice; a lot is mental. Come to terms with what you can't do anymore. Younger people have the same fears about falling that older people do, we just don't think that since they seem so resilient. Head instructors at CAF should structure teaching to take account of fears people have. From a business view, we have to keep/attract older people since they are a big demographic. The difference

in expectations between older and younger has to be bridged so you can start to understand each other. It would be helpful to have training session for teachers to ensure they have similar understanding.

As an older students, I feel stoked about how Aikido gives me a fabulous body. However, I am a bit afraid for my safety working with young students.

Maybe consider offering a seniors' rate for Aikido. That may encourage seniors to know they are welcome in the dojo.

Discussion Moderated and Minutes Taken by
Liz McKinlay, 5th dan
SC2014 Camp Coordinator
Deputy Dojo-Cho
Vancouver West Aikikai