

A Guide to Etiquette in Aikido

Some General Remarks

Etiquette in Aikido is on one level an expression of the Japanese roots of the art, but on another level it is simply an expression of universal common sense and courtesy. The remarks on the following pages are not a comprehensive list of “rules” for practice: ultimately, it is better simply to digest them and obey the “spirit of the law”. While there are many “rules” and “conventions”, the best advice is simply to observe and copy the senior students in the dojo. If you have questions, ask the seniors and they will be happy to answer them.

Addressing Others

In an Aikido dojo, the teacher of the class is always referred to and addressed on the mat as *sensei* – literally, “teacher”. The Chief Instructor of the dojo should be referred to and addressed as *sensei* at all times, on or off the mat. More junior instructors may prefer to be addressed informally if not actually leading a class. If more than one instructor is present, then use the instructor's surname and title, as in “Smith-*sensei*”.

Students who are senior to you are known in Japanese as your *sempai*; in the opposite direction, your juniors are known as your *kohai*. It is considered respectful to address your seniors as *sempai*, especially on the mats. If you need/wish to include the person's name, then either name is appropriate: “Smith-*sempai*” or “John-*sempai*”. If one of your seniors requests that you simply address them by first name, then it is perfectly all right to do so.

Do not directly address your juniors as *kohai* as this may seem condescending. If you wish to be formal, then use the Japanese term *san*, as in “Smith-*san*” or “John-*san*”. In most cases, however, there is no need to be so formal, and a first-name relationship is not inappropriate.

On occasion, senior teachers may be referred to using equivalent Western titles, as in “Master Chiba” or “Professor Chiba”. This is typically confined to Western texts written before the meanings of certain Japanese terms such as *shihan* (“master”, or “teacher of teachers”) were more widely known. Instructors holding *shihan* title are referred to as such in writing, but *sensei* is usually used when speaking.

Behaviour on the Mat

At all times, one's behaviour on the mat should be governed by Aikido's basic principles of universal respect.

Never engage in contests of strength: the techniques of Aikido are capable of inflicting great damage and even death if used maliciously. If your partner is unable to perform any given movement through injury or any other reason, then do not force him/her to do so;

reciprocally, if you have an injury or any relevant medical condition, then make your partner – and, most importantly, the instructor – aware of it before practice begins so that he/she can take account of it.

The instructor is the single authority on the *tatami* (the mats). Follow his/her instructions precisely and practice the movements as demonstrated.

Actively seek out your seniors on the mats; do not expect them to find you. Similarly, a visitor to the dojo is an honoured guest and should never have to look for a partner. In both cases, allow the other person to practice the technique first.

Bowing

To Western sensibilities, the use of bowing in Japanese culture can seem odd at first. It is important to note that the bow itself carries no religious connotations whatsoever. The bow is simply a show of respect and openness and – like the handshake in Western culture – appears in many contexts: in greetings, partings, thanks, apologies and many others.

There are two main types of bow: the seated (kneeling) and the standing.

- The seated bow begins in *seiza* (the kneeling position), with both hands resting loosely on your lap. Move your left hand forward and place it palm down on the mat in front of you with the fingers together and pointing to a 1–2 o'clock position and the thumb at 3 o'clock; place the right hand beside the left, with the fingers at 10–11 o'clock and the thumb at 9 o'clock. As you do this, your body will naturally move forward: try to move from your belly rather than your chest, and keep your bottom on your heels if possible. Do not lean into your arms: there should be no weight in your hands. Lower your head so that it almost touches the triangle formed by your hands. Hold this position for about three seconds, then return to the upright position by reversing the previous motion.
- The standing bow begins with the body upright and the feet together. Men bow with their hands resting at the sides of the thighs; women bow with their hands resting on the fronts of the thighs. Keeping the legs and back straight, bend at the hips, inclining your body forward by 15–30 degrees. Again, the bow should last for about three seconds before returning to the upright position. Generally speaking, the standing bow is less formal than the bow from *seiza*.

It is appropriate to bow on the following occasions:

- When entering and leaving the dojo. When entering the dojo for the first time in the day, or leaving at the end, a seated bow directed towards the *shomen* (the front of the dojo) is appropriate; at other times, for a brief absence from the mats, a standing bow is enough.
- At the beginning and end of class. At the beginning and end of each class, the student line up in *seiza* to face the instructor: all bow to the *shomen* in an expression of thanks for O-Sensei's gift of Aikido, and bow to each other to request (at the beginning) and thank each other for (at the end) practice. Seated bows are appropriate. After the instructor leaves the mat, there is another bow to the

- shomen*, after which you should thank each person with whom you have practised.
- With a partner. When you select a partner for practice, you should bow to one another; do the same when you finish practising with your partner. Use whichever bow is appropriate for the circumstances: if you are both seated, then use the seated bow; if you are both already standing, then use the standing bow. It is not necessary to interrupt the flow of practice by bowing each time you exchange the roles of *tori* and *uke*.
 - With the instructor. If the instructor of the class offers you or your partner personal instruction, then thank him/her afterwards with a seated bow. If you are nearby when the instructor demonstrates to another pair and space is limited in the dojo, then it is polite give the instructor room to demonstrate, be seated and observe the demonstration, and bow afterwards.
 - In case of collision. It often happens that people collide on the mat. If this occurs and you are involved in any way, then check that the other person is unhurt and apologise with a bow before resuming practice. In case of injury, alert the instructor and/or the nearest first aider.
 - At gradings. When you approach the Chief Instructor to receive a grading certificate, bow before he/she hands you the certificate, accept it with both hands and lay it to one side before bowing again.

Cleanliness and Hygiene

Attend class in a clean and hygienic state. Remove all jewellery, as it can get caught on clothes or other people and cause serious injury. Similarly, keep finger- and toe-nails neatly trimmed. Keep your *keiko-gi* (practice suit) in good condition: wash it at least once a week and repair any rips.

If you have any open wounds or other potentially infectious sites such as verrucae, then make sure that they are securely covered before beginning practice. If you develop a cut or any other injury during practice, then stop practice immediately, inform the instructor, tend to the wound, and clean up any blood that has fallen on the mats.

Before class, help the other students to ready the dojo for practice. After practice, help the other students to clean the mats.

Please wear *zori* (sandals) between the changing areas and the edge of the mats. Ideally, you should step out of your *zori* and directly onto the mats: this helps to prevent dirt being tracked onto the mats.

Timekeeping

Punctuality and good timekeeping are considered to reflect a calm and orderly state of mind.

Arrive at the dojo in good time so that you can help the other students to ready to dojo for practice and be on the mats, in *keiko-gi* and ready to practice, five minutes before the

scheduled start of class. If you arrive late, then wait at the edge of the mat until the instructor indicates that you may join the class, and perform the usual bows. Warm up if you need to do so, but do not disrupt the class.

If you have good reason to be late (e.g. family/work commitments, caught in a road accident), then lateness is not considered rude provided that you explain the cause to the instructor at an appropriate moment. Otherwise, however, persistent lateness is considered disrespectful to the instructor and the rest of the class.

Similarly, all other things being equal, it is not considered good form to leave a class early. However, in the case of unavoidable commitments, it is entirely acceptable to leave early having informed the instructor in advance.

Weapons

When picking up a weapon (*bokken*, *jo*, *tanto*, *shinai*, ...), hold it horizontally in front of you with both hands, palms upwards. If the weapon is a “bladed” one (e.g. a *bokken*), then the edge should face towards you as an indication of non-aggression. Except in the case of the *jo*, which has no hilt, the hilt of the weapon should be on your left. Bow to the weapon, raising it slightly above your eye level.

When exchanging weapons during practice (e.g. when changing rôles in a knife-taking exercise), do so with the same respect to the weapon as above. This is not necessary when returning the weapon to *uke* upon completion of technique: instead, simply place the weapon on the floor in such a way as you will be safe from an immediate attack by *uke* when they pick the weapon up.

When sitting in *seiza* with a weapon (either watching a demonstration or at the beginning and end of class), keep the weapon on the mats at your right-hand side. “Bladed” weapons should be laid down with the edge facing towards you and the tip pointing to your rear as an indication of non-aggression.

Weapons should always be transported to and from the dojo in a closed weapons case or another bag suitable for the purpose (e.g. hockey stick/fishing rod bag). Under no circumstances should weapons be carried openly outside the dojo, except in case of outdoor practice in fine weather.