

Thoughts on Relaxation and the Practice of Aikido.

By Ben Tyler

Relax. It's a word that we hear so often throughout aikido. And really why not? It's a lovely word, beginning with that rolling R and ending with a 'kss' sound that overall evokes a wave breaking on a calm beach. Which of course all gets thrown out the window as you observe four feet of oak gracefully arc toward your head at speed. During that particular moment every part of your being is screaming that relaxation won't be any help at all and any suggestion to relax will be met with "I AM RELAXED" grunted through gritted teeth. Despite the (many) hardships that come with relaxing there are significant benefits that come with being able to relax. I have found that relaxation starts with the mind and then flows to the body. A relaxed mind can make a relaxed body.

While relaxing as a term connotes the physical side of things there is also something to be said for mentally relaxing. I believe that relaxation while easiest to understand as a physical concept really starts in the mind. Mentally relaxing could be called releasing stress. On the mat there a multitude of things to stress over. Did you get the footwork right? How did that technique go? And of course, are you relaxed enough? When you stop worrying about the great many things that may and or may not be valid to worry about, then you can actually start getting your body to follow suit. Even better getting your mind relaxed and out of the way allows several things to happen. First you're now able to focus on your opponent instead of the inside of your own head. Secondly your body can begin to relax and flow.

Physically relaxing is a critical part of practicing aikido. As one would assume from the number of times instructors tell you relax. A relaxed body can move quicker and with more power than a tense body. This is counter intuitive to many of us. How can a relaxed person be powerful and strong? Culturally we often equate power with tension, after all tense muscles move pianos. How can you be powerful when you're not tense? The trick (and it is a trick) is that you're exploiting your opponent's energy, not necessarily adding your own. It's like a puzzle where all the curves are paired and matching. If all the curves match, then wonderful aikido happens. If you attempt to power through and strong arm your way through technique you're often losing aspects of your opponent's energy that would add to the power. To put it another way, trying to solve a puzzle box with a hammer isn't going to leave you with anything that resembles a puzzle box, or for that matter, make a very popular patron of the puzzle store.

So at this point we all agree that being relaxed is fantastic. How do you make that happen though? One of my great frustrations is when an instructor tells you to relax right after you thought you WERE being relaxed. You're thinking "It's easy to say, but how does one actually do that?" and the response is inevitably along the lines of "Well you just relax." What I've found is that relaxation starts not on the mat or in the dojo, but in the quiet times you find through your life. I like driving and meetings. In these moments I'll try to observe what in my body is tense, what's relaxed and what my posture is like. Then I'll change posture if I need to and try to relax what was unconsciously tense. This acclimated me to actually being relaxed. Then on the mat I will focus on a single opening movement regardless of what might be thrown my way. That disengages me from the worry of "What if, it's a punch? What if, what if, what if?" Through that I learned that a single calm movement offline can be effective against any attack and that acclimated to relaxation during technique. It was definitely a learning and acclimation process with a seemingly glacial pace, but together I've started finally relaxing myself.

I've found being able to relax while practicing aikido is one of the best ways to improve. You'll see great gains in the ability to move and easily find techniques. Also you'll see gains in endurance as less energy is spent trying to force an uke into movement. Mentally relaxing is the mountain spring from which total relaxation flows. Destressing brings benefits not just to one's aikido but cascades down through their entire life. So the takeaway of all of this is to just... relax. ...Thanks.