

Experimenting with Uncertainty

**A Roban for Nidan Grading
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Introduction

This roban discusses the learning process for practitioners of aikido and notes that we can expect to reach certain plateaux in our training. As we progress to more senior levels of experience and expertise it requires increasingly more effort to move onward from a plateau in our practice. It is proposed that this is because as we become more skilled in our Aikido we therefore make fewer mistakes. Mistakes are essential to learning and actively experimenting with areas we are unfamiliar with can serve as catalysts for new periods of growth. It is suggested that encouraging a more experimental approach to training can be the stimulus to further development both on and off the mat. Therefore it is proposed that we must actively let go of our expert status and consciously adopt the attitude of that of an experimenter and beginner.

Mapping the System

When a beginner comes into contact with the art they require some structure (i.e. the technique) to be able to identify and map the system they are observing. They need to categorise where things fit and don't fit, the dojo culture, technical names and other aspects such as shapes and patterns of movement. Over time, Aikido practice confers growth for the practitioner and this can be described in a typical learning curve. It rises steeply upward at the beginning and gradually begins to tail off as we come to know more about the art. The curve also includes a number of plateaux at regular stages, which punctuate our learning process.

After some years of practice a practitioner is likely to have mapped most of the basic technical reference points of the Aikido system and they may reach a plateau in their training from which it can be difficult to ascertain whether further progress is being made. They come to realise that in order to keep the art alive for themselves, they must start to look for other territory in which to explore further which may be within Aikido or in another area completely. It is asserted that it is at these stages or plateaux in learning, that active experimentation with many different aspects of Aikido training should be actively pursued in order to stimulate learning.

Plateaux in Training

Because everything is new to a beginner they can make rapid advances in learning. Whereas for senior level practitioners, achieving incremental gains require that we must work much harder than when we were beginners. Also as we become more skilled in our practice, we may be less likely to experiment with it. We become so skilled that it becomes harder to "get it wrong" and therefore to learn through our mistakes.

A practitioner who is competent in certain areas will want to practice those skills and perhaps teach in that area. We therefore tend to limit ourselves to doing things that are within the realms of our personal knowledge, competency and skill. Perhaps we should sometimes put ourselves on the line and do something we are most uncertain of and inexperienced about, in order to stretch ourselves. Alternatively, we can accept the gaps that we have in our knowledge and allow others the opportunity to share their expertise with us. It may be that a particular practitioner has exceptional rolls or is

very adept at nikkyo. If one is always the expert, then we cannot open ourselves up to the range of different experiences and possibilities of different results. To move onwards from a plateau in training requires us to seek other dimensions of practice in order to uncover new layers of complexity and/or subtlety.

O Sensei Experimented

It is rare for a completely new martial art system to be created and when a new martial arts system is presented to the world it is usually the result of a thorough analysis of other older arts, and then a re-combination of their best principles and techniques into another system. This has been the way that martial arts have developed and been refined over the centuries.

O Sensei also followed this path by studying ju jutsu, swordsmanship, yari (spear), bayonet and aiki-jutsu with different teachers before he experimented with and developed his own martial arts system. In effect he analysed and redeveloped the systems of others and added his own ideas and inspiration. From O Sensei's example we see that there is a precedent for experimenting with and deviating from the established system of a martial art in order to create new knowledge.

Mistakes are essential

In discussing experimentation it is also necessary to include discussion of the synonymous concept of mistakes. Mistakes are an essential part of the learning experience, and yet as stated before, it becomes increasingly difficult as we progress in our skill and knowledge to make as many mistakes as when we were beginners.

In practice there are three basic results:

- A) You do a "known" technique and get the expected outcome.
- B) You do a "known" technique and get a different outcome (and that's interesting)
- C) You do some "unknown" technique (often unconsciously) and get an unexpected outcome (this is the most interesting).

At this time there may be some internal discussion such as "What the hell was that?" and then we try to repeat what happened. More often than not this is almost impossible, as usually prior habit and learning gets in the way and the spontaneous creation that occurred just seconds before, is lost.

Practitioners at all levels can become fixed on performing techniques as the correct responses to particular forms of attack. But what happens if the attack changes or a mistake is made? By having less investment in trying to get it right every time, and being prepared to let go of our ideas about what should happen in a given interaction, we can become more accepting of different outcomes.

Experimenting with Uncertainty

There is a balance between retaining the integrity of the Aikido that O Sensei taught, while also accepting that Aikido is a dynamic and developing martial art. No technique is ever performed the same way twice. This creates infinite opportunities for something new to develop. Often the result or outcome of an interaction as uke or nage is not always what we expect or perhaps even want. I describe this as a feeling of uncertainty about the outcome or result. This is not to say I enter the interaction with uncertainty. Rather, I am certain that what I do will change to reach an outcome but I do not know 100% what that outcome will be. Therefore the goal of practice as we progress further in our Aikido, is to experiment more with uncertainty rather than with certainty of outcome. By experimenting more with the uncertain and unknown we open ourselves up to the potential of getting different results. In this place of uncertainty the next phase of growth in knowledge and skill can occur and while some of these experimental responses will work and some wont, our practice will be richer for allowing more possibilities to enter the game.

Applying Experimentation and Uncertainty

Often the first thing that members of our children's class say when you ask them to do something new is "I cant do it" or "I am not very good at that". These comments tell me that they are programmed with a fear of failure or of making mistakes. They will try things only if they can be certain of a good result. Our society seems to emphasise getting the right answers to questions and problems, or on doing things right first time and there is often little tolerance for errors. This is actually counter productive in the long run as it creates a limiting framework for us and reduces how willing we are prepared to experiment with different behaviours. We can become risk averse and are therefore constrained by the limited number of outcomes that we can idealise or visualise. This inhibits our growth and learning of skills both on and off the mat. However, if we train with an attitude of experimentation and an acceptance of uncertainty, we have an opportunity to practice making more mistakes in the safety of the dojo which will benefit our daily life.

Conclusion

This roban briefly discussed the learning process for practitioners of Aikido and noted that there are likely to be longer plateaux in our training as we become more skilled. It was suggested that encouraging a more experimental approach to training can be the catalyst for further development. If we consciously adopt the attitude of that of an experimenter with uncertainty we can use our Aikido practice and allow new knowledge to unfold for ourselves. And as this Aikido experimenter perhaps the underlying question we should ask ourselves as we train is:
"What would happen if....?"

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