

On the Importance of Posture in Aikido

EACH DAY OF HUMAN life contains joy and anger, pain and pleasure, darkness and light, growth and decay. Each moment is etched with nature's grand design-do not try to deny or oppose the cosmic order of things.

I am not a physiotherapist and can't claim any expertise, nevertheless I decided to write about good posture and aikido for two reasons that seem very important to me.

Firstly, Aikido is a fantastic martial art that is available to all body types. The non-competitive aspect of it allows us to focus on self-development and helping others. The way we practice, with a set starting point for each technique and an appropriate response (ukemi), allows us to explore potentially risky joint locks and pins in a safe way.

As a result, it is possible to practice aikido with all body types (which is great!) and without a perfect posture. That last point is fine when you are a beginner, but it will at one point pay its toll on our joints, back and neck, if we don't make it part of our training to correct bad posture.

Secondly, bad posture will also limit the extent to which we can develop our practice and those of our partners. Learning each technique is where learning aikido starts. But there's a lot that gets in the way when trying to move beyond being able to perform techniques to using them as a way to develop fundamental principles and become a better version of you.

So, good posture is important for both minimizing unnecessary pressure on joints, neck, back as well as to use the alignment of the body systems (arms, trunk, shoulders, wrists) to let the power/energy flow from the core to the extremities and through the technique.

As an example, when the elbows are bent, they will prevent energy coming from the body to flow through the arm and the arms' muscles and the joint will have to apply force and receive tension to compensate to send energy out from the arms into the technique.

Picture of bent elbow

That's when we start to "push" rather than extend into kokyo. So both for our own longevity on the mat and for allowing our aikido to remove these barriers, I think we need to talk about how important posture (and conditioning to a certain extent) is.

Here's a non-exhaustive list of posture elements that I think are relevant to the practice of aikido:

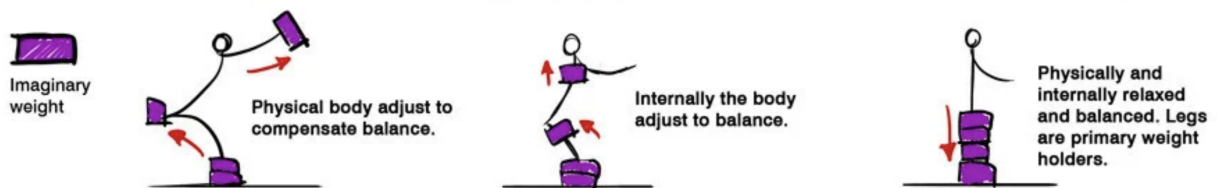
- Body Alignment - feet under the hips under the upper body (head) - no trunk bending

- Moving from the hips/core and allowing the energy to flow through the allow body through kokkyo
- Unlocking the knees so the legs are never fully extended and to preserve the knee joint from taking too much pressure
- Not bending the knees beyond the tip of the feet (if someone looks like a frog at one point during the technique then they are probably beyond this point)
- Not letting the feet point towards a direction that's different from where the knee points to (That one is so important! Believe me. I had no-ACL and knee problems since I was 21.)

Thanks to Florian Tan who is a trained physiotherapist and long time aikido student and teacher I discovered the [Joint-by-Joint approach](#). In this approach, Gray Cooke lists joints that are meant for flexibility and those meant for stability - and how our sedentary lives very often leds to sloppiness or some joints and stiffness of others.

Alignment of the body

Where there is gravity, bodies will develop so that they can perform efficiently while fighting against gravity. Feet under hips under upper body. That simplified version is to encourage practitioners to at least keep their hips under their body, supporting their weight. Otherwise who will bear the weight of the body? The lower back and knees. And what are the two most common physical conditions? Lower back, neck and knee pain.



[Tai Chi seems to have a strong emphasize of posture alignment.](#) See original post with more drawings [here](#).



While researching this topic I found an article by a PT aikidoist that explains pretty well that it doesn't take much bending to apply 92% additional pressure on your spine.



Morote dori kokyo is a great example where your body position is aligned but uke is very unbalanced.

Activating the core muscles - Compact body

Of course, while moving you can't always be standing straight like a redwood tree. In that case, engaging your inner muscles and core will compensate and will relieve the constraint on the joint and back. I like how this article explains a position they call [“close packed”](#).

To use a kung fu point of view on this: “Physical structure from a kung fu point of view involves a little bit more than just good posture. It takes that good posture and adds to it internal connections so that your whole body learns to move as one fluid and powerful unit.[..] [Put simply good structure is the way you connect the different parts of yourself together internally so that they are aligned with the forces acting on your body.](#)”



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[Watch Pat Heidricks](#) shihani's position - see how she steps big but keeps her body tight and engaged, and how she brings her rear foot with her to keep it under her body. Whether in tachi dori or suwari waza she will never let her foot drag behind her.

Exercise: when taking ukemi or performing the technique - practice as slowly as possible so that you have time to check what your weight is leaning on. Stop during the practice and check for these cues: is my forehead lining forward and my knee is bearing the weight? Is my butt leaning back and my lower back activated to bear the weight of my upper body? Is the center of my feet under my body? How much weight is each of my knee bearing? Look at yourself in a mirror if possible.

A helpful advice I got from Joe Shelley was also to do squats while paying a lot of attention to activate the glutes. Activating glutes should help keep the hips under the body.

Kokkyo

Kokkyo is our way as aikidoists to transmit power and pressure to the body without unnecessary pressure on the joints. In my opinion it is the continuation of the body core activation mentioned above, through the arms and the hands, into your technique or your action.



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Kokkyo goes hand in hand with engaging your whole body. I catch myself having a sloppy body and forgetting about kokkyo ALL THE TIME. Sensei would be holding my hand in a sankyo grab, talking, until they apply sankyo. And my elbow bends!! If they keep going - it will hurt. What SHOULD have happened is, my arms are in kokkyo all the time and when they apply sankyo, the extension in your arm transmits their pressure to your whole body that moves appropriately to find a better position and avoid letting the tension apply to the wrist and elbow.

Exercise: I heard Hendricks Shihan once saying to a kid that Saito Sensei would be practising kokkyo all the time, even while driving his car. Test yourself on a sankyo ukemi. Extend energy arching your arm from the shoulder to the elbow to the wrist until the fingertips. Does sankyo hurt your wrist or your elbow or is your whole body moving with each of their movement?

I would say though that the best exercise for kokyo is the forward and backward rolls. Arching your arm, are you rolling all along them? Are they doing their job of absorbing energy until your back smoothly makes contact with the ground? Are you able to roll extremely slowly and softly?

Move from the hips/core

Don't push with the back or the arms. They are not where your strength resides. The ground is the most solid thing you have at your disposal. But it takes good feet resting position, activating core muscles and good alignment to use this available static energy.

I remember Nadeau Shihan explaining that he would walk think feet first, saying at every right or left step - feet - feet - feet. They think hip first - hip - hip - hip. Now back - back - back - back. Like the wind is blowing from behind you almost have to fight it to not go too fast. How does these affect your walk? How does it feel?



Nadeau Shihan - walking exercise with uke helping you feel your posture, where you move from and how much power this gives you.

Alignment of the the knees and toes

That's another one that we hear over and over again. Knees should not go beyond the vertical line above your toes, they should not collapse inwards but should align with the direction of your feet. Basically, if your foot is looking towards a direction so should be your knee.

Florian Tan, who's been an aikido student and teacher for a very long time and who's a trained physiotherapist, introduced me to [Craig's Cook Joint-by-Joint approach](#). Based on observations of a very number of patients, Cook noticed that pattern in people's issues which showed that joints that are near each other tend to play either a stabilizing role or provide flexibility for motion. As such, starting from bottom to top, feet need to provide stability (and get sloppy due to our sedentarization), ankle provides flexibility (but tend to be stiff),



Knee alignment - Nadeau Shihan

Feet - Ground and Mobility

Having trained in very fluid, fast moving styles and slower styles emphasizing rigorous form and posture, I've alternated between being too flowy and too heavily stuck to the ground.

What tennis taught me is that there is moment for feet to provide mobility and one moment for them to provide ground, and you need to learn to switch between these two modes. One thing Patricia hendricks Shihan explains well is how to get mobility by weighting on the ball of the foot when needing to pivot and move backwards when blending with an attack - especially with weapons as the distance you need in order to stay at a safe distance from your partner is bigger.

This is a particularly challenging move, and one where people will often use their knee in an uncomfortable position to get to the expected results. Basically, to come back to the joint-by-joint approach. They find mobility via the knees instead of the feet.

Conclusion

I want again to emphasize that I am nothing close to a physiotherapist. I broke my ACL at age 21 while trying to play rugby in the worst conditions. I did not have surgery and as a result I had important knee issues for years. When I got back to aikido after a 10 years gap, my knee would collapse / almost dislocate everytime I would take ukemi on a speed irimi nage. It could just not hold motion at an angle. Everytime it happened I got scared. For most of these

incidents, I had to stop training for a few weeks for my knee to heal. I spent so many years of my life at the PT (would be there 2 hours every day for 6 months after my initial injury...). All the doctors except one recommended to quit aikido.

Then I started fixing my posture and finding tricks to prevent my knee from having to bear any weight in rotation. Instead of quitting, I started training more and more. I started doing PT exercises on my own when I wasn't training enough. I started paying attention to my physical condition. And not only how well I could do a kote gaishi. I have other body issues related to training often but my missing ACL has not bothered me once for the past 3 years and I feel fine taking any ukemi in any condition.

That's why I get passionate about saying that Aikido isn't only about techniques and ki/flow. But that posture, conditioning, paying attention to the joint position, are so important to last in the practice. And they help with the technique as well and to keep growing in your aikido.

Once you know all the techniques and weapons, why do you train for? For me, it's recently been to go from the macro to the microscopic. From the visual form (step right, lift arm) - to the tensions within the body that keep all body parts together, centered and focused on the uke. I am still far from having incorporated this in my body and practice. But I am very grateful that each of my teachers, and a lot of their students, have all given me hints that there was more to explore.

Acknowledgements

I want to deeply thank Patricia Hendricks Shihan who's been so kind and committed to giving me guidance to explore and improve my aikido, as well as who I am as a person.

Since the beginning of 2020, I have learned a lot more about the history of aikido. I have found inspiration every day at the dojo. I have found many reasons to try to be a better person. It is a very special place and I love every one of the people who've helped me be part of this community. Un énorme merci également à Guillou qui m'a laissé suffisamment d'espace pour vraiment explorer cette passion pour l'aikido et me laisser être moi-même.