

# THE USE OF TOUCH IN AIKIDO PRACTICE<sup>1</sup>

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One of the very significant elements of Aikido practice is the amount of time we stay in direct physical contact with uke. We usually are in direct contact with uke during the whole time it takes to blend with the attack, redirect it, and throw or pin uke. This lengthy period of contact offers us the opportunity to feel and study uke's movement and learn how to exert more effective control upon uke.

Direct contact with uke means *touch*. In this article, I'd like to examine *effective touch* as an element in effective Aikido. The subject of effective touch is not a common topic in Aikido teaching. Perhaps it is obvious, and perhaps it is dealt with implicitly, but I think there may be great value in examining touch explicitly. It is, after all, the medium of communication between uke and nage.

## EXPERIMENT #1: AWARE TOUCH

Rather than simply talking about touch, I'd like to suggest some practical experiments through which you can explore touch. For the first experiment, sit next to a partner. Now, reach out, grasp your partner's wrist, pick up their arm, and then put their arm down. That's pretty simple, right?

It may be simple, but there is a lot to study in it. To begin with, what did you pick up? That is, what did you think you were picking up? Your partner's arm, or your partner on his arm? I'm trying to suggest there is an important difference between picking up an arm-thing (an object) and picking up a person (a conscious being).

Do the movement again in two different ways. First, think that you are picking up an object; then, second, sense that it is an aware, thinking, feeling person whom you are contacting and moving. Does your thinking make a difference? Is the action of touching or moving the arm different when you pay attention to the person-ness of your partner? If so, in what ways?

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Many people will experience that the action becomes softer, more perceptive, somehow fuller when it is suffused with greater, more humane awareness of the partner.

Ask your partner what s/he felt in the two different ways of moving. Many people notice that they felt alienated by being treated as an object and that that alienation led to dislike of and perhaps resistance to the movement. Conversely, people often feel that they are being taken care of when they are truly felt, and they soften and go along with the movement. How would that affect the performance of an Aikido defense technique?

## **EXPERIMENT #2: THE PHYSICALITY OF AN EMOTIONAL STATE**

Let's go deeper into the process of touch. Pick up your partner's arm, again in two different ways. First, think/feel that your partner is vile and disgusting, someone toward whom you feel a lot of anger. Then second, sense that your partner is someone who has shown a lot of kindness and generosity to you, and you feel gratitude and respect for them.

Notice the form of the language I used to describe the two attitudes of arm lifting. I used feeling language: "disgusting" "anger" "kindness" "gratitude." That's how we normally communicate about our feelings. However, below that language level is a more sensory, body-based process.

When you feel disgusted by your partner, what do you feel \*in your body\*? How is disgust manifested in breathing, muscle tone, posture, and movement flow? Most people will feel some kind of constriction and twisting in their bodies. How is gratitude manifested in your body? Most people will feel some opening, freeing, softening, and balancing in their bodies. Notice what in particular you feel/do in your body.

When you pick up your partner's arm, how does the negative emotional state physically affect your touch? How does it affect the way you support and move your partner's arm? How does the positive emotional/physical state affect the way you contact and move your partner's arm?

Most people find that the negative state creates a hardness in the touch and leads to a feeling of being separate from, even alienated from their partner. And they feel that the positive emotional state leads to a feeling of awareness of and togetherness with the partner, a feeling of mutuality and cooperation.

In the first experiment, we used feeling-based language. Here we are using body-based language. Does that make a difference in how aware you are of the physical basis for such interactional states as alienation or harmony? Most people find that when they attend to the physical basis of their feelings, they gain both new information and a new perspective. Seeing feelings as physical actions allows greater awareness and provides an opportunity for change and improvement.

### **EXPERIMENT #3: TOUCHING FULLY**

In this experiment, sit on the floor, and have your partner lie down on their back in front of you. Put your hand on their shoulder, and start a rocking motion. Try to find the natural rocking rhythm of your partner's body. If you go faster or slower than their natural rhythm, the motion will seem sticky or awkward, but when you find the right rhythm, their body will fall into an easy movement.

In all this, notice the rhythms and qualities of your touch. How much pressure do you exert on your partner's shoulder? Do you push hard or soft? Do you touch with a flat, hard, edge of touch, or do you melt into and mold to your partner's body? Do you push only onto the spot that you are touching, or do you feel into and through your partner's body?

Now, leave your partner for a while. We will do some work with the hand you had been using to touch your partner. For the sake of simplicity, all the instructions will refer to the right hand as the touching hand, but if you are left handed, simply reverse the directions.

Sit comfortably, in seiza if that is easy for you, or perhaps in a chair, and put your right hand in your lap. Take hold of your right thumb with your left thumb and fingers, and use them to move your right thumb around. Your right thumb should be as passive and relaxed as you can let it be. Gently rotate your thumb a bit; move it back and forth; bend and straighten it. Do these movements slowly and gently, for a minute or so for each variation. Then do the same to each finger on your right hand. When you've moved around each finger a bit, then use your left hand to roll your right hand back and forth on your thigh. Let your right hand, wrist and forearm get soft and malleable.

Once you have softened your right hand, you can go back to active movement, but make the active movement as non-effortful as possible. Start moving your hand around softly and gently. Move your fingers. Turn your hand palm up and then palm down. Bend then straighten your wrist. Do all these movements in a smooth, silky, slow and continuous manner. Take a minute or so for each movement. Notice your breathing, and let your breathing get soft and gentle too.

Now, go back to your partner on the floor. Put your hand back on his shoulder, and make sure to keep all the softness you have just developed in your hand. Touch his shoulder the way a loving parent holds a baby. Mold your hand to his shoulder. And start the rocking movement again. Let the pushing movement come from your core, not just from your arm. Make sure that you don't get hard as you deliver pressure to his shoulder. Stay soft. How does this feel to you? How does it feel to your partner?

Most people will feel that their touch becomes fuller, more contactful, more harmonious when they soften their bodies and allow themselves to merge with the person

they are touching. They realize by comparison that their touch is brittle and un-contactful when they are in their normal state of muscular tension.

#### **EXPERIMENT #4: EXTENDING THROUGH**

Go back to the initial position for experiment #3. Put your hand on your partner's shoulder, and again start pushing and rocking them. What are you doing when you push? If you examine your internal sense of purpose or shape for the movement, do you feel you are just pushing *at* and pushing *on* the shoulder? Or do you feel you are pushing *into* the shoulder, and *through* the shoulder *toward* some part of the body?

Perhaps it isn't clear what pushing into and through might mean. Sit with your hand touching your partner's right shoulder. Feel the spot you are touching, and also direct your awareness toward your partner's left Anterior Superior Iliac Spine (the bony projection by the waist that we customarily call the "hip.") Push on a diagonal line through the torso toward the ASIS, and begin moving it. Can you rock the ASIS by rocking the shoulder? Now shift your awareness and your aim to the right knee. Can you rock it back and forth? This process of aiming through the body involves sending directed awareness into the body.

Try rocking your partner's shoulder by simply pushing on the shoulder and then by pushing through the shoulder, and notice the difference in how much of the body moves as you push. Notice the differences in the rhythms and qualities of the body's movement. Ask your partner if the push and the resulting movement feel different to him.

Most often, people will notice that more of the body moves, and it moves more naturally and fluidly, when the pusher has a sense of joining the body and sending intention into/through the body toward some point.

Most often, the partner feels that the movement created by the push is clearer and more distinct, as well as gentler and more comfortable, when the pusher has a sense of participating in the partner's body and sending intention into/through the body toward some point. The push becomes more "literate" and takes better account of the unique structure and function of the unique person being touched and moved.

#### **EXPERIMENT #5: APPLICATION**

The point of these experiments is to suggest a way of touching uke in doing defense techniques, so let's try applying this way of touching. A simple technique to work with would be *katatori ikkyo*. Stand in left hanmi, and have your uke grab your left shoulder with their right hand. Let's do the version in which you begin by stepping diagonally back to the left with your left foot. At that point, you grasp uke's right hand with your right hand. Stay there a moment.

How do you feel? How do you feel uke? Do you grip the outside of the wrist, gripping uke as you might hold an iron pipe? Or do you hold into the wrist, softly and strongly, feeling uke's person-ness? Do you hold the way you would hold a struggling puppy, caringly and carefully so you don't hurt him, yet firmly so he can't escape?

Are you breathing, letting your belly relax, supporting the weight vertically down through your legs, letting your spinal column and head float freely?<sup>2</sup>

Now, the next part of the technique starts by placing your left hand under uke's right elbow. That is the start of the ikkyo proper. As you push forward/upward on the elbow to crank uke's arm, how are you touching? Softly and gently, or with a hard, aggressive edge? When you start to move uke's arm, are you pushing only on the arm, or are you feeling through the body?

If you blanket uke with gentle awareness and penetrate their body with focused intent, uke will more likely soften and yield to your guidance. You will assume clearer, less confrontational control of uke's movement.

In every technique, it is important to aim through uke's body to control and destabilize the pelvis, spinal column and legs. If you hold into and through uke to their core, you will have a much clearer sense of how they are moving. You will have a better sense of how to destabilize their posture and throw them. And you will have a better sense of their thoughts about changing their movements to counter your defense technique.

## CONCLUSION

A gentle and penetrating touch leads to more effective as well as more harmonious defense techniques. In addition, the greater sensitivity to uke will help reduce injuries in practice. The philosophy of Aiki should extend not only to the large elements of defense techniques but to the foundational elements of breathing, posture and touch. And practicing Aiki touch is something we can learn on the mat and use all day long as we contact people, whether that is literally touching them or just being in touch with them. We have the opportunity to study and refine our touch every time we touch uke, and that can add a new depth to Aikido practice.

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<sup>2</sup> For more information on body and movement use in Aikido, see my article *Tools for Harmony*. For detailed instructions on how to do the basic breathing, body awareness, and centering exercises I teach, see the file *A Downloadable Script for the Eight Core BIM Exercises* on my website, [www.being-in-movement.com](http://www.being-in-movement.com).

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