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London Aikido News

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AUGUST GASSHUKU: MAKING THE MOST OF YOUR HOLIDAY

The August Bank Holiday Weekend is the time for our regular Gasshuku. It's appropriate for all levels of training. Here is why you can't afford to miss it...

The Japanese meaning of a Gasshuku is a training camp, the idea being to remove oneself from your daily environment and immerse yourself in aikido for a concentrated period. Our August Gasshuku is not a camp in the traditional sense, in that we go home in the evening to family and friends, but the intention is to give ourselves a dedicated space to sharpen our focus on training, and to sharpen our aikido.

O'Sensei considered aikido training to be about misogi – purification through the sweat of training. A Gasshuku is

like comparing the benefits of a long soak in a bath to a brisk shower. They are both cleansing, but the first is more thorough, more of an experience that penetrates the pores and works on different levels. For the experienced it can reinvigorate and give new insights into your training, for newer students it is a wonderful opportunity to train in depth and improve your skill level.

Aside from the spiritual side, it's fun! We often explore aikido in different ways to our regular classes. This year Andy will be concentrating on the foundations of our training – the core basics. Invaluable for beginners and kyu grades, and a great opportunity for experienced students to

explore in depth the underlying principles of their practise.

Another great benefit is the extra time for socialising. Sharing lunch between classes and drinks after training offers an excellent opportunity to meet and mix with other members of the club, to chat to seniors in an informal and friendly atmosphere, welcome newcomers, relax, share ideas and experiences and have a few laughs. Even better is that our aikido improves! Attending a Gasshuku is worth several weeks training. Book early as numbers are limited.

*Dates 25th, 26th, 27th Aug
Time: 11-1, 2-4 each day
Cost: £20 per day or £50 for the whole weekend*

November Koshukai with Senseis Ulf and Paolo

It will be an enormous pleasure to welcome back sensei Paolo Corallin and Sensei Ulf Evenas to London for an international Koshukai in November (3rd and 4th). All who attended last year's meeting greatly enjoyed training with these great

masters and it was a joy to welcome aikidoka from all over Europe.

The whole weekend's training costs a mere £70. So put the dates in your diary now and contact the dojo about registration as soon as you can.



FAQ-ed Off

Some of our more experienced instructors have commented on how frequently the same questions arise from new starters. Timeless classics such as "How long does it take to get a black belt? Or the even more frequent "How long do I have to train before I get a hakama?" might elicit a wearily precise but totally inaccurate answer such as "7.3 years", or something gnomic like "It

depends on how much you practice. If you practice every day you could get there in 5 years. If you practice twice a day you could get there in 10". All of which may be true but they are not meeting whatever need that prompted that question in the first place. As with everything in aikido, it cannot be explained, you just have to do it. Explaining to people that something cannot be

explained is not a particularly satisfactory experience for either party. Instead we have asked a few people to send us their FAQs and let anyone who was interested in answering have a go. Dojo rules do not permit anonymous contributions but here are a few of our responses so far. From the responses we have this could be a regular feature.

*"Sign up for the August Gasshuku."
Sayings of Hathaway Sensei Vol 1."*

How long, exactly do I have to train to get a hakama?

We kick off with some words from our Scottish Branch, Andy Murdoch.

The Questions:

1. Am I the worst person in the class.
2. Will I ever learn Ukemi? They make me really nervous.
3. Do I need to learn all those names in Japanese.
4. Why do people wear hakamas?

Andy writes:

1. Hard as it is, don't compare yourself, you don't know other people's backgrounds. Generally, however the answer is 'no' you're not. Also IMO, if you're thinking that way you are self-critical which, if applied in the correct dosage, is a very good thing. Better than thinking you're good

and are not. Just don't let it eat you up.

2. Yes, take them in your own time. It is perfectly OK to get your training partner to adapt to your level of confidence - which WILL grow. It's your body. They make most people nervous at some point.

3. No, you will soak them up as you go. It's not an academic test. You will get familiar. One good thing to remember is first part = the attack, second part = the technique and (if applicable) third part = the direction. When you get to the level of hakama grades and into dan grades you should know them in order to respond quickly. Great leveller with aikido as an international art now. I have attended seminars with Japanese,

French, Italian & Swedish sensei and you immediately have commonality.

4. Achieved at a certain rank, part of traditional Japanese clothing. Also I'm a kilt-wearing Scot so need to cross-dress; it takes a real man to wear a frock.

The Aikido of Relationships – Jenny Lawther

Strong arms clasped me in a bear hug. I relaxed back, preparing to spring free. Aikido is an intimate art. Grasping, striking, holding, throwing, pinning – Aikido, like life, is undeniably about relationship. One cannot really practise aikido without it - O Sensei set it up that way.

Some months ago, I read an article about 'Temple Dogs'. It suggested that at the door of each dojo are mythical creatures who eventually lead each one of us away from the dojo forever – they come in the guise of all the excuses and reasons we give when we walk out of the dojo door never to return. One of the largest and most tenacious of those dogs is the call of the personal relationship. It doesn't discriminate between male and female and can rear its head at any time. Many are seduced or nagged away from training temporarily or permanently.

The nature of aikido training is that it requires consistent effort, a sense of dedication and persistence, to make any progress. Unlike some other more casual leisure activities it leads to more intense effort over time. We develop friendships and enjoy social time after training and, if we continue, we begin to subtly change. To our partners/families/friends all this can be perceived negatively. These days time is

valuable – long working hours, DIY projects, children, studies, shared social activities – the evening and weekend hours become precious. We are forced to make choices. So how do we avoid the temple dog of relationship leading us away from our training, sometimes for weeks or months that unexpectedly turn into years?

Some of us lie – to our partners, our sensei, ourselves. Either our sensei isn't happy or our loved ones are grumbling. It all gets dumped in the 'too hard' basket and we take the line of least resistance. We turn up occasionally, our training gradually tailing off to nothing; or we just never come back.

There is no easy solution. Any relationship is a blend of two individuals, each with their own interests and talents. We need to be who we truly are in order to be happy, and we need to give space to our loved ones to do the same.

The principle of tai-no-henko, one of the fundamentals of our aikido training, contains within it the notion of stepping beside the person and looking at the situation from the other's point of view without sacrificing our own. It teaches a harmonious response to clashing incoming energy. In the context of relationships this could be interpreted as the power of

negotiation. So, using the idea of tai-no-henko, we can:

- negotiate time;
- negotiate child-minding hours;
- ensure you give your partner quality time;
- establish routine training times when possible so everyone can plan around them easily, the routine can also help to carry you through difficult periods in your training. The dojo has varied class times seven days a week which can fit into anyone's timetable.
- Encourage your partner to have time and space for their own interests instead of resentfully waiting for you with a tally of hours you are absent.

Time lost is never regained. Just as a relationship needs balance so, too, we need balance within ourselves. If we enjoy training and find it beneficial we will be happier, more balanced within ourselves. All of the positive aspects that aikido nurtures in us can contribute to better, stronger relationships with others - especially our loved ones. Demonstrate to them that your enjoyment of aikido is not a threat, does not deprive them, but gives them a better you. Aikido is the path of harmony – not just on the mat, but in our lives. If we are balanced and secure in ourselves and our relationships then the temple dogs will keep their distance – they will recognise who is master as you stride past them into the dojo.

"Encourage your partner to have time and space for their own interests instead of resentfully waiting for you with a tally of hours you are absent"

Beginnings – Memories of Starting Training

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When I started Aikido I did everything wrong. I leaned on the wall. I took a bottle of water on to the mat (although realised before I got to the top of the stairs not to drink from it and never to bring one again). We all lined up and did this clapping thing...

Every Saturday morning I joined a group of strangers in pyjamas. Everything was new. Someone taught me how to break fall backwards. I had to acquire a kiai. Someone else showed me how to break fall forwards. There was Ikkyo, Nikkyo, Sankyo. I wasn't sure which was which. Katate dori... one hand? That two hand grabbing one...

It's all about moving from the hips. Settling. But it's much more than that... Aikido is Hanmi. But much more than that. I was still

doing things wrong. I turned my back on someone. And asked a question. I had to learn what they were all saying at the end. Domo...? Domo arigato gozaimashita. Thank you very much? I looked it up on the internet.

There was a satisfying symmetry to each class. And I really loved being thrown about. I also started to think about how aikido went beyond those two hours. Stability and confidence. Awareness. Paranoia? Who are all these people who insist on standing behind me on train platforms?

There was something new in every class. Something to not know, to make you forget which foot is which, which way is forwards. Eventually it started to become gradually, slightly familiar.

With weapons it was like starting again. How can swinging a piece of wood be so complicated. It's like pulling a rope. Try in one handed. Don't lean on the back foot. And remember the kiai. It was fun to try and focus entirely on the moment. Ich, ni, san (I'll get the hang of that one day). But should I enjoy cutting people's heads off... quite that much?

I couldn't avoid the word. Grading. Someone helped me a lot with this and when it came to it I got some things right, others wrong. Right and wrong? But I was over the first very small hurdle. And I knew what some techniques were called now. As well as how to do them a bit. Two years later I still feel like a beginner. Just slightly less of one. And I bruise a little less easily too.
Jo Wheeler

Back in the late 90's in 1997 actually my friend wanted to start training in aikido but didn't want to start on his own so he asked me to come along so I did. I asked him after the 1st class of the beginner's course why you wanted to start training in aikido. He said that he saw Steven Seagal movie *Under Siege*. He saw Steven Seagal doing all these things to the bad guys killing them with what he said was a clothesline technique and

knife fighting as well. He wanted to be able to do that too. The funny thing is we started the same time and at the time a 10 week beginners class was £50 for 10 weeks he got his mother to pay for 5 lots which obviously 5x£50=£250. I thought she was nuts for doing that because he has never stuck at anything in his life but it was brilliant for club financially as well as the other 25 people as well who started the same time out of that he did 4 classes then he stopped

coming. I contacted him asking him why he had not been coming to class he said that it is too rough. I said don't be silly but what he said later was that I who was too rough. He went down a bit hard with ikkyo ura and he winded himself which I didn't know about. After that I haven't seen him since. One last thing when I started at the club the club received in one day £1500 probably the best ever.

Matthew Huggins

Zen, Aikido and Irritation - Lyn Gameson

With the caveat that I know very little about Zen, know a bit about Aikido, and know lots about Irritation, here are some thoughts that you might agree with. It has long been accepted that martial arts such as Aikido and Judo are useful vehicles for understanding Zen ideas – maybe one could argue that any religious practice could usefully be expressed through martial arts training – but some books tend to dwell on rather arcane topics (e.g. Aikido and circles) that are difficult to understand on a cerebral level, let alone to incorporate into our Aikido practice. It would be a shame if this type of material put us off from trying to use Aikido for spiritual training, as every moment of Aikido practice offers opportunities to develop these ideas.

There are many things that all of us could write about the relationship between Zen and Aikido; even if we don't know much about Zen, if we were told that Concentration, Mindfulness and Awareness were treasures to cultivate through training, we could come up with our examples. In fact, it would be an interesting exercise to ask aikidoka (from beginners to yudansha) for 3 examples of concentration and mindfulness in Aikido. Some might come up with actual examples during techniques, such as the Uke not clocking off during Tai no Henko, or the Tori's gaze not 'sticking' to Uke's hand during katate dori ikkyo; others might come up with examples during the more 'passive' moments, such as kneeling correctly whilst watching techniques being demonstrated, or watching with 100% attention rather than seeing just enough to recognise a technique and to crowbar it into some mental pigeonhole labelled 'Shiho nage'. Others might broaden the practice of Mindfulness through Aikido to include cleaning the mats after training, or folding hakamas correctly, or changing the flowers.

Suppose Andy demonstrated a technique just once, then said "onegaishimasu" - what would our reactions be? Mild panic (Was that morote dori or kosai dori?) or self-remorse (I'm so flakey, I must concentrate more), or very likely – irritation (Hey - I was still thinking about the last technique, That's Not Fair), even anger. Irritation or anger are just different degrees of energy which flares up, sometimes with good reason, but frequently for the most minor of reasons, and particularly when we at some level know that much of the problem's cause lies with ourselves. Either way, we tend to view this energy negatively – it makes us physically uncomfortable, and can lead to speech or actions that seem to arise almost outside of ourselves. Instead of viewing them negatively, we could try and view them as the most useful tools we've been handed for a job. Some Buddhist texts depict these energies as a Bull – as in a powerful and unpredictable animal. To quote from 'Gentling the Bull' by the Venerable Myokyo-ni:

For the traces of the bull do not signify an enemy to be got rid of, but rather precious energy of sufficient power to grind, burn or singe away 'I'. This powerful energy, being much stronger than I, needs to be approached religiously, respectfully, with folded hands, 'The fires still burn, I am still here, please burn me away'.

Unfortunately, you would have to be a pretty exceptional person to truly incorporate this into your daily life. Even if you can accommodate the petty irritations of rush-hour commuting, turf wars over the arm-rest, queue-barging, even punch-ups (I've seen a few fights on the Northern line), the working environment at its very worst can feel like a literal battle for survival, in which the 'fires' have flared up to a degree that they can barely be controlled let alone welcomed as a source of spiritual training.

In Aikido, we are blessed with all sorts of minor irritations, particularly when our techniques don't work, because: the uke is not holding properly / changing their hold mid-technique / hanging on too long / not hanging on long enough / ate garlic last night.

And when we're on the receiving end: getting shoved around by tori, having fingers and wrists 'over-fiddled-with' during kote gaeshe or sankyo, etc

Pain is a great source of irritation. Obviously there is true 'bad pain', which indicates that something is getting damaged and where the appropriate response is to ask your partner to tone down, but there is also a kind of VAT-pain where we start to take pain personally ("Not sankyos again - these techniques must be chosen just to hack me off") and where we add our own irritation into the melee of stretched tendons and end up with a seething mass of pain and energy, of which the 'true' pain might form a relatively small part. This is not to say that anger is always inappropriate in the dojo – of course there are times when anger is the appropriate response to someone breaching etiquette or putting other people in danger. By irritation, we are talking more about the "It's not fair" scenarios.

So Aikido gives us many opportunities to recognise irritation, and to 'catch' the rising energy in time to deal with it through humour, or even trying to use it to 'burn me away'. Of course this runs completely counter to modern trends where irritation is actively encouraged. The list of permissible irritants increase: Smokers, 4-by-4 drivers, MPs who use a plane to get to a meeting abroad. And of course we really believe the producers of Big Brother choose housemates along the lines of "Let's choose those 10 – they have similar views and will get on really well together." Sadly, the modern definition of Self seems to be "I'm irritated, therefore I am".

Back in the dojo, whilst it is a joy to practise with the perfect partner, who executes techniques without shoving and who falls down when supposed to, it is the less perfect scenarios that can really give us an opportunity to practise more than physical Aikido.

Dojo Refurbishment

From mid-September we will be giving up the upstairs portion of the dojo at Windus Rd and refitting downstairs to create an entirely new matted area. This will give us a 30 mat space which is only 2 mats less than the original dojo prior to the last refurbishment.

Why the change?

This has been necessitated by the recent steep rent increase and by the fact that the premises are underused for considerable periods of time. Attempts to introduce other activities such as yoga and tai chi, to the downstairs area to help share in the cost proved fruitless.

What about changing rooms?

Changing will now take place behind a curtained off area with the option of the shower area for latercomers.

So is the Dojo shrinking then?

This may be viewed as a contraction of LAC but in fact it is not. We already run 2 of our largest classes away from Windus Rd at Rushmore School and our West London Branch at Acton is doing well in hired premises. The only session

which required the full upstairs space is the Saturday morning class. In the future we will take another space to accommodate that class and any others that outgrow the available space. This means in fact, that we have the flexibility of our own full time space with the option of taking significantly larger spaces as the need arises. We will also then be operating on a more sound financial footing which will allow us to devote funds to other activities.

What happens in a crowded class?

Any class chooses its techniques according to the numbers of participants and the space available. Should we at any stage fill the available space, appropriate techniques will be practised that will be safe and fruitful for all. Saito Sensei used to say that it is better to have a dojo that is slightly too small than one that is too large

Membership Fees

Please note that everybody should now be paying the membership fee of £5 per month by standing order. If you have not done so yet, please collect a form from the dojo.

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Grading News

At the last grading the following Grades were awarded:

6th Kyu Piotr Wojick

5th Kyu Paul Dossett
Batu Onver
Keith Forward

4th Kyu John Classy

3rd Kyu Naim Rahman
Steven Mooten

Well done to all concerned.

And Finally

Thanks to all who have contributed and sorry to all to those who sent material that we did not have space to fit in. We will try to get you in the next time. Meanwhile if you have any thoughts that you would like to share with the rest of the aikido club and broader aikido community please send them in. We are a little low on visuals for this issue so any who has photos, calligraphy, or other images that you would care to share please do send them to our usual email.

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