THE FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLES OF AIKI STRATEGY

"His skills were such that, as soon as he was touched by his opponent, his opponent seemed to lose all control over his balance and strength, and would be thrown with ease. How he accomplished this was hard to explain, even if one saw it with one's own eyes." ~ Sumitomo Arima

Mr. Arima commenting on Shiro Saigo's oshikiuchi techniques upon his arrival at Jigoro Kano's dojo. Sumitomo Arima wrote the Arima Judo Kyohon in 1904, which is believed to be the first book on Kodokan Judo.

All techniques of Oshikiuchi/Daito ryu, regardless of their level, have fundamental principles in common that should not be neglected, or taken for granted. For a technique to have proper progression and be performed within Daito ryu concepts, these fundamentals must remain a constant.

These principles apply to and have equal importance in ippon dori, gyaku udedori, and kuruma daoshi of ikkajo, just as they do in okugi's aiki tsubushi gasane or aiki futari dori hiji gatame. These fundamental principles are:

- **Aiki** - Spirit or energy unification.
- **Kokyu** - Proper Breathing.
- **Kuzushi** - Breaking the opponent's balance.
- **Ma-ai** - Distance between opponents.
- **Metsuke** - Meeting or focus of the eyes.
- **Zanshin** - Staying attentive at the end of a technique.

Aiki - Spirit or energy unification.

Aiki, for Daito ryu, is divided into three levels: Shoden, Chuden, and Okuden/Hiogi levels. Aiki at the shoden level is finding the opening to apply the technique, by kuzushi, by entering at exactly the precise moment by using a deceptive maneuver to weaken his defense. Hence, Aiki at shoden level can be defined almost as a mechanical skill that requires endless practice.

Aiki at the chuden level comes more from a "sixth sense" than a technical skill, although the techniques and this "sense" interrelate, creating what teachers refer to as "secret power". The name uses the Kanji in the word himitsu[secret], a point emphasized by most teachers, for the chuden level of Aiki is achieved only after much training in a selfless way, and as a secret, it is revealed only to those deserving of it. It is a consequence of technical skill and quality of spirit, that conveys proficiency and inner strength.

Aiki at okuden level is not only, one of true spirit and strong techniques, but also of returning to the initial state of training, to the basics, the fundamentals. At okuden, the mastery of techniques is superior, but once again insight must be a priority and metsuke fulfills its role, which is that of defusing the attack whenever possible, with the highest skill being that of benevolence and compassion. Thus the circle becomes complete.

- **Kokyu** - Proper Breathing.

This term means "breathing method" or "breathing power". When explaining kokyu, teachers often refer to the Kanji characters of the word, which mean "exhaling" and "inhaling". The breathing pattern of ah and un is the same one depicted in the Nio guardians of the old temples, specially the
two statues at Kaminari Mon (the Gate of Senso-Ji). *Ah un* breathing is composed of three stages: *ah*, *un* and *cin*.

- **A** (first stage): One inhales through the mouth as if pronouncing the letter "a". With the diaphragm lowered, one breathes with their "stomach" (actually the lower part of the lungs). If one accidentally breathes with the upper part of the lungs only, the shoulders would rise and if one inhales too deeply, the shoulders would tense and one's movements would be slowed.
- **Un** (second stage): One holds their breath as if pronouncing *un*, concentrating one's energy into the tandem. This stage is called *Shisei Mosoku* ["whole-heartedness stops one's breath"].
- **Cin** (third stage): As the tandem strains, one should exhale as if pronouncing "cin". When surprised or shocked, people draw in their breath. One is comparatively calm when breathing out. When holding your breath (*un*) one can release energy while concentrating on the tandem, creating a brief period of readiness.

An attack will be more effective when the opponent is about to exhale. Taken aback, he will draw in breath, and his mental state might be broken by his inability to exhale. This causes his rhythm to break making him vulnerable. It is wise to take sharp, quick breaths and exhale with soft, long breaths while training.

For training purposes, inhaling is *Yin (in)* and exhaling is *Yang (yo)*. Although kokyu strategy is not the same in every martial art, we should remind ourselves that kokyu ho is also part of *Sado* [the Way of Tea], *Shodo* [the Way of Calligraphy], and *Kyudo* [the Way of the Bow], among others. Proper breathing methods are conducive to overall good health and a proper mental and spiritual state.

- **Kuzushi** - Breaking the opponent's balance.

Kuzushi is defined as breaking or disturbing the balance of an opponent (often related to the concepts of *rakka, sankakuke*, etc.) creating an opening in which the technique and our full strength should be applied. The critical point of kuzushi is a minute fragment of time. It can not be rationalized, but only felt or sensed. Regardless of how timely and effective our entry was, if the taking advantage of kuzushi was not adequate, our technique would be a failure.

- **Ma-ai** - Distance between opponents.

This can be defined as the distance between an attacker and defender. For Daito ryu techniques, the concept of distance is similar to the ma-ai used in swordsmanship. Although the exact distance is a variable when it comes to the individual biotype and other factors, a common denominator exists, and that is that the initial ma-ai was conceived with the sword in mind. The techniques were designed for situations where the attacker is armed with a sword. The swordsman's confidence rises because he feels comfortable with the distance held by the unarm Daito ryu student, and he assumes that he is in an advantageous position (swordsmanship's ma-ai). The assumption is incorrect because Daito ryu ma-ai is similar and no such advantage exists.

Following this same concept, Daito ryu techniques often use ma-ai as a deceptive tactic against an armed attacker. The studying of ma-ai and timing is of vital importance.

- **Metsuke** - Meeting or focus of the eyes.

This can be described in many ways. One way to explain metsuke would be the point of focusing the eyes and the mind so not to be drawn in by the opponent's attack. It may be explained as perception that eventually should develop into pre-perception which enables us to sense an attack, or
aggressiveness in the form of impending danger, before it actually occurs. Metsuke also means insight into the human soul, which can inhibit an attack by the expression in the eyes, or defuse it with benevolence or compassion. Masters of insight were Tanomo Saigo, Sokaku Takeda, and Morihei Ueshiba, whose eyes were capable of conveying love or creating great fear.

**Zanshin** - Staying attentive at the end of a technique.

The direct translation for the Kanji characters of the word zanshin would be "the body remains" or "the mind remains". After executing a technique, a state of alertness or awareness, should remain in us. It might look like a brief cause, a moment of stillness to others, but to the student it is a condition of calm readiness. It is not contemplation, nor is it a feeling of "basking" in the perfection or effectiveness of the last technique. Zanshin is a functional state, based on the need for self-protection. A period of carelessness after a successfully executed technique may create the opening (**suki**) needed by an opponent to strike. Zanshin should act as a sensorial shield.