

AIKIDO AND THE 7 HABITS OF HIGHLY EFFECTIVE PEOPLE

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Many of us who train in aikido consider aikido a metaphor for life: what we learn in aikido can be applied to life off the mat, and what we learn in life can be applied to aikido on the mat. So it is not too surprising that when I started trying to apply The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People in my daily life, I also considered how these principles applied to aikido. What did surprise me, however, was how well The 7 Habits described aikido and how well aikido demonstrated The 7 Habits.

At first it may seem odd to think of aikido practice in terms of ‘habits.’ Stephen Covey, the author of the 7 Habits of Highly Effective People¹ (p. 47) defines “a habit as the intersection of knowledge, skill and desire. Knowledge is the ... what to do and the why. Skill is the how to do. And desire is the motivation, the want to do.”

We certainly use knowledge, skill and motivation in aikido. And, yes, we develop habits from repeated practice. Indeed, that was O-Sensei’s intention: regular practice of good habits, good ways of interacting with people, and constructive responses to aggressive situations should make us better people. We become what we practice because these responses become habit. So it is worthwhile to consider whether the habits we develop are the ones we want.

Perhaps, just like effective executives, effective aikido practitioners have attitudes and behaviors that allow them to be so effective. Successful aikido might not inevitably result from extensive practice of techniques. Perhaps some attitudes and behaviors make aikido practice more effective, just as some attitudes and behaviors make some people more effective in their lives off the mat. This article looks at how knowledge, skill and motivation intersect and whether certain habits may be more effective for success both on and off the mat.

First, I provide a brief overview of The 7 Habits, then we look more closely at how each is manifested in both the philosophy and the daily practice of aikido. According to Covey, the first three of The 7 Habits help people achieve independence or achieve what he calls the Private Victory. Before a person becomes independent, he is dependent on others. A dependent person needs someone to take care of him and blames other people if his life is not good. The Private Victory is how we achieve independence from others, through taking responsibility for our own lives. An independent person is self reliant and self-guided. The first three Habits are intended to develop independence.

The next three Habits, according to Covey, help develop interdependence or the ability to interact well with others. Interdependence includes cooperation and collaboration. One must first be independent to successfully be interdependent. Interdependent does not mean being dependent on other people but, instead, refers to voluntarily cooperating to achieve more than either could individually.

The last Habit involves personal renewal and growth. It encompasses and nurtures the other Habits.

Some notes about the following discussion. First, the aikido examples describe uke as being one gender and nage as being the other, making it easier to distinguish uke from nage. Second, the Habits have been interpreted within the context of aikido; while I have attempted to remain true to Covey’s original text, some emphases may be different. So, how do The 7 Habits appear in aikido?

¹ Covey, Stephen. 7 Habits of Highly Effective People. Simon & Schuster, New York. 1990.

Habit 1: Be Proactive.

Being proactive means taking responsibility for making decisions. A proactive person makes choices based on his values. In contrast, a reactive person is affected by the environment, situation, or people around her. Whenever possible, a proactive person makes choices that affect his life. He does not agonize over those things that are outside his control, but makes choices regarding things he can affect.

Habit 1 is at the very core of the philosophy of aikido: we can choose a peaceful solution even if someone is attacking us. Through training, we strive to develop the knowledge and skill to respond to conflict without resorting to more conflict. 'Budo,' the way of the warrior, actually is the way of 'stopping sword' or stopping war. Contrary to popular thought, therefore, Budo is the way of peace. Because nage (the person who throws) chooses to protect himself without harming the attacker, he unilaterally chooses peace. The belief that we are free to make this choice is at the very core of aikido. We practice responding to attacks so that we have the knowledge and skill allowing us to choose a non-violent, non-aggressive response to violent or conflict-laden situations.

Habit 1 is also manifested in the physical aspects of aikido training. When uke (the person who attacks) chooses to protect himself without harming the attacker, he unilaterally chooses peace. The belief that we are free to make this choice is at the very core of aikido. We practice responding to attacks so that we have the knowledge and skill allowing us to choose a non-violent, non-aggressive response to violent or conflict-laden situations.

When uke attacks, the goal of nage is to proactively redirect the attack rather than reacting to it, to choose a response rather than having a response dictated to her. An effective nage takes responsibility for her actions and does not blame uke for her response. This does not mean that nage always succeeds in her goal. If nage does not have the knowledge or skill to respond appropriately, she might not be effective; however, she would take responsibility for her response and try to learn how she could respond differently to be more effective in the future.

Nage also might not succeed for reasons that are outside of her control. A reactive person blames the factors outside his control while a proactive person tries to think of ways he could respond differently. For example, if the attack is meant to have forward momentum but uke does not give that momentum, nage does not have direct control over the attack. A reactive person blames uke for a bad attack: "I can't do the technique because you aren't giving me the right attack." A proactive person makes the choice to work with the attack given or tries to modify the attack by action or words; he changes what he can without abdicating responsibility. Sometimes nage may not be able to modify the attack - either because uke does not have the skill to attack as the technique was demonstrated or because uke perceived the technique differently. In these cases, the proactive person finds something else to learn from the practice. Nage always makes choices - the question is whether he chooses proactively based on his values or chooses to react based on the environment or other people.

Uke also makes choices. The most obvious choice is whether to be injured by a joint lock or atemi or to take a fall or roll. Usually uke chooses to take the fall because she wants to protect herself from injury. Uke learns to roll so that she can make this choice safely. For example, my joints are fragile, so I choose to take ukemi before my ligaments are torn. It is important for people with fragile joints or other injuries to be proactive in this way because being reactive puts them at risk of injury. Another person may be able to withstand more force on his wrist and may choose to resist more if he knows how to do so safely. Early training should emphasize ukemi skills as much as nage technique because it is essential that students understand how to protect themselves while receiving the energy or force of the technique.

In each technique, uke has a choice: the atemi or joint lock usually does not force uke to fall down. If uke has a choice, we must recognize that one uke may choose a different response than another. I, for example, will always choose to take a fall rather than be struck by an atemi. One of my students, however, is a police officer who is trained to not be intimidated by a threat of force.

His instinctive choice is to stand his ground rather than roll. Rather than force him to value an atemi the way that I do (i.e., something to avoid) I have had more success in giving him different options to choose from. If I give him a playful slap on the cheek, for example, he makes different instinctive choice: he would rather take the fall than experience that (gentle) embarrassment.

When a senior student trains with a beginner, the senior student also makes choices regarding the way she will attack. Often the beginner does not know the technique well enough to execute it correctly in response to a fast and powerful attack. The senior student will often take the ukemi without trying to prove the beginner's lack of skill, or may even lead the beginner through the movement using her ukemi to help the beginner learn. With a more advanced student, the senior student may choose to attack harder and counter if her partner is not executing the technique well. She chooses to adjust her attack to challenge her partner at an appropriate level. This also demonstrates how important knowledge and skill are in implementing a choice: two beginners working together may not have the knowledge or skill to attack in a way that facilitates proper execution of the technique, even if they are motivated to do so.

Being proactive does not necessarily change what happens to us, but changes our response to what happens to us. For those of us who have grown up in traditional western culture, Aikido teaches us to perceive our choices differently: ukemi is not losing but is the choice to make a strategic retreat to protect ourselves. Protecting our 'opponent' is not a sign of weakness but a sign of strength. Aikido practice gives us the knowledge and skills so that we can make choices we are proud of rather than react impulsively to stressful situations.

Suggestions for practicing Habit 1 (Be Proactive): be aware that you have choices about how or when to move, or about how to think and feel about an interaction. Take responsibility for your actions and decisions. If a technique or practice is not working (whether that means that the interaction is not harmonious, that the participants did not learn anything of value, or that the movement was ineffective), do not think about how the other person could change. Instead, think about how you could take the first step to changing the interaction.

Habit 2: Begin With The End In Mind

Beginning With The End in Mind is about knowing what is important to you so that you are able to pursue things that you value. A person who does not know what he is trying to achieve can be very busy doing the wrong things. Dr. Covey describes Habit 2 as having your ladder leaning against the right building: you can work very hard at climbing the ladder of success but not achieve what you wanted because your ladder was leaning on the wrong building.

From a philosophical point of view, aikido teaches that the goal of martial skill is not to destroy the attacker but to protect yourself and others. This goal is very different from the goal of many other martial arts and is exactly what draws many of us to aikido in the first place. O-Sensei has written that the goal is not to conquer the opponent but to conquer our own egos, our fears, our desire to dominate or get revenge. If our goal is to refine our spirit, we need to train differently than if our goal is to learn how to defend ourselves on the street.

In aikido, an effective person understands his goal of training. If he just wants exercise, he may train in one way. If he wants to learn as many techniques as possible or want to learn self-defense, he may train another way. If he believes that he can refine his spirit and his interactions with others, he may train in yet another way. If you do not keep your goal in mind, you may be motivated to refine your spirit but actually be climbing the ladder of technique and self-defense. Without keeping the end in sight, you may practice for years yet find you have not made progress towards your actual goal. The most effective aikido practitioners Begin With The End In Mind. I have often heard Saotome Sensei say that we are trying to learn aikido, not ikkyo or any other specific technique. Technique is a tool for learning aikido, a signpost showing the way to aikido understanding; technique is not the aikido. A student whose goal is to learn techniques is likely to feel that if she trains more days per week and more hours per day, she will advance faster. Indeed, she may learn more techniques but may not learn the underlying philosophy or principles.

Without learning the principles, she ultimately may be unable to implement certain techniques effectively. In contrast, a student who sees techniques as tools for learning aikido may choose to train on the mat fewer days per week, but may think about how aikido applies to daily life on the other days. Hard aikido training is good, but only if you are training in the right things.

Habit 2 is about consciously identifying goals. As corny as it sounds, it is about having a ‘mission statement.’ If the student described above had an articulated ‘mission’ to learn principles of aikido, she might put less emphasis on the mechanics of koshinage and more on the interaction with her partner. Having a mission certainly applies to the dojo as well as to individuals. There are probably few dojos with articulated missions; all follow some kind of mission by default. If you do not know what the dojo mission is, how can you tell if the ‘ladder’ is leaning against the correct building?

I found myself consciously articulating my dojo mission when I began writing this article and I suspect our mission will evolve as we live with it for a while. Our dojo mission is “to provide a safe and supportive environment in which students have positive experiences learning clean technique as tools to understanding the principles of aikido.” If I break this down into its components it goes something like this. The environment should be physically and psychologically safe: students should not be fearful and should not get injured. The environment should support learning through instruction at the appropriate level and speed to challenge but not overwhelm students. Senior students should be encouraged to develop supportive behaviors that nurture the development of their juniors both for their own training as well as for the benefit of the junior students. Experiences should be positive because learning aikido should be a fun and rewarding endeavor; if students are miserable, humiliated or demoralized, they do not learn the positive lessons aikido can teach. O Sensei is often quoted as saying that “True Budo is an act of love,” suggesting that students should approach their training with a joyous spirit. Students should learn clean technique because good kihon-waza is the foundation upon which students can build. Learning how to do fancy and complicated techniques in a sloppy manner does not facilitate learning the principles of aikido. The goal is to learn the principles of aikido, which will help each participant become a better person in some way - whether that is greater confidence, more kindness to others, enhanced grace, patience, less ego, or any of the multitude of ways in which most of us can improve. Although this is a somewhat lengthy example of how a dojo can know the ‘end’ it strives for, it is more efficient than struggling for years to climb the wrong ladder.

Goals made explicit in this way may seem obvious and simplistic. However, many people who put hundreds of hours into aikido practice without having clear goals do not progress in the way that they want. While some people are guided by effective subconscious goals, the most effective aikido practitioners probably know what they want to learn from aikido.

Suggestions for practicing Habit 2 (Begin With The End In Mind): identify your goals in aikido, overall, and in each component of practice. What attracted you to aikido in the first place? Why do you keep training? Is that what you want from your training, or are you looking for something more? If you have trouble articulating your values, talk with people whom you respect – ask them about their values and what they hope to achieve through training or teaching.

Habit 3: Put First Things First

Once we have identified our goals, we need to set priorities and Put First Things First so that we actually progress towards that which is most important to us. Habit 3 is the physical creation, or implementation of Habits 1 and 2. Although it sounds obvious, we often tend to follow the path of least resistance or of responding to peer pressure or expectations. In aikido training, just as in life, we need to prioritize our time and energy to be effective. Philosophically, aikido teaches that to choose the path of peace we must act in a manner that is consistent with that choice. We should not think or talk about peace and harmony but act in ways that are violent and conflict-driven. We need to act in a manner that is consistent with our goals.

An example of Putting First Things First can be seen in how we relate to our partners. Without a doubt, training in aikido is fun and many of us like to train hard. But sometimes a student may get caught up in enjoying the hard training and forget what her real goal in training is. Her unconscious goal may be to make the other person fall down, preferably hard and with a lot of noise. She may learn a lot about the mechanics of koshinage, but might not learn about the principles of aikido: harmonizing, letting go of ego and protecting her partner. She may want to learn these principles, but spend most of her time just learning mechanics. Sensei Mary Heiny has said: "Be careful what you practice, because sometimes you learn what you practice." In other words, once you have picked the training 'ladder' that is leaning against the correct building, make sure you climb that ladder. Your first step must be in the direction you want to go.

Within each technique, uke and nage should also work toward their respective goals. If nage's goal is to find a peaceful resolution to uke's attack, he might ultimately not succeed in throwing uke. If nage's goal is to make sure uke falls down, he might not find a peaceful resolution. We have all heard aikido described as "power, grace and harmony." I have participated in many debates about the priority of those three elements, since most of us are not skilled enough to achieve all three simultaneously all the time. Should nage strive for harmony, even if it means sacrificing power? Or should nage strive for power, even if it means sacrificing harmony or grace? Until nage is skilled enough to achieve all three simultaneously, he should know what is most important to him.

Uke should also have a goal. Often, her first goal is to provide a sincere attack that allows nage to practice. This is the 'gift' she gives her partner. Once involved in the movement, she may have an additional goal to receive the energy of the technique without becoming injured. She may want to help her partner learn through her ukemi. She may want to focus on good posture and suppleness so that she could reverse the movement if an opening presented. She may want to be very centered to challenge her partner's ability to take her balance. Each of these goals would be manifested in different movement. Ukemi is not set in stone, but varies depending on uke's goals. Uke's goals, in turn, may depend on what the instructor is teaching that day, who she is practicing with, or what principles she is focusing on that month. Uke's physical movement should reflect her goal.

When we have taken responsibility for our actions, identified our goals, and acted in accordance with those goals, we have gained independence - achieved the 'Private Victory' that Covey discusses. Once we are independent we can work to collaborate with others, thus to become interdependent.

Suggestions for practicing Habit 3 (Put First Things First): consider whether your actions reflect what you want to achieve through your practice. Think about your values and about the choices you make. Every moment you make small choices about how hard to push, how to align your body during the technique, or who to train with. You also make choices when you interact with and mentor other students, family, friends, co-workers, and even strangers. Every day, stop to think about whether your choices bring you towards the End you identified in Habit 2.

Habit 4: Think Win/Win

Looking for the win/win solution is at the core of aikido, both the philosophy and the daily practice. The whole idea of aikido is that we do not want to be destroyed (lose/win), yet we also do not want to destroy our opponents (win/lose). We are searching for a way to respond to conflict, protect ourselves while protecting our practice partners. Traditional aikido has no competitions for trophies or rank. Day to day practice should also not be a competition. Neither uke nor nage should lose dignity or be endangered by the practice. One of the themes of aikido is that uke is not the 'loser' of the interaction: uke succeeds in protecting himself, succeeds in noticing nage's openings, and may succeed in escaping if the technique results in a roll or reversing the technique if nage has left an opening.

When an effective uke attacks, she tries to give an attack with energy and connection so that

nage can do the technique being attempted. An uke guided by her ego, on the other hand, may desire to show that she is better than her partner and instead strive for win/lose. For example, uke could give a different kind of attack than what makes sense for the technique being practiced - e.g., static instead of dynamic - just to 'prove' that nage is not good enough to do the technique. But this win/lose result is not in the spirit of aikido. Aikido is about conquering our ego, not conquering the other person. If uke does not give an appropriate attack and nage cannot practice the technique then uke also cannot practice receiving the energy of the technique. Uke's ego may be bolstered, but her skill will not improve and she will not progress towards understanding the principles manifested in that technique.

Nage could similarly try to crush his uke, but this would not be in the spirit of aikido. Nage's goal is to execute the technique cleanly and safely without leaving himself vulnerable; it is not to destroy his partner. In aikido, it is fairly obvious what happens if one person crushes the other person: he might no longer have a practice partner because he has injured or intimidated them all. Without practice partners, he would lose an important part of our training. Hence, what starts out as a win/lose situation eventually ends up as a lose/lose result.

This applies on a psychological level as well as a physical level: a strong personality can intimidate another person through words as well as through actions. But if uke intimidates nage into a weak response, uke does not get to practice receiving the best quality aikido her partner can offer. If nage intimidates uke, then nage will not learn where he is open or vulnerable because an intimidated uke will not have the courage to show nage those openings. In contrast, someone who is strong and confident does not need to intimidate his partner. A confident person enables his partner to grow and succeed because a more skilled partner helps him grow as well.

Just as the win/lose situation is not tenable, lose/win is no better. An uke who is very insecure could enter with an 'I give up' attitude that makes his attack weak and insincere, resulting in lose/win. But this type of entry does not help nage learn how to respond to a strong attack. Nage may also have a lose/win attitude, mistaking blending for weakness. A weak response to an attack does not challenge uke to improve; if uke is not challenged to improve, then this is again a lose/lose situation. Indeed, it can be difficult to know how much to challenge your partner - enough to help her grow but not so much as to crush her.

In an effective interaction, both uke and nage are challenged so that each improves but neither is overwhelmed to the point of failure. Both uke and nage should be able to complete the technique (or a sincere attempt) with dignity and without injury.

Suggestions for practicing Habit 4 (Think Win/Win): think about whether both people benefit from the experience. How can you redirect the energy of the attack or technique to achieve your goals while enabling your partner to achieve his goals. Sometimes that means challenging your partner to achieve more; at other times it may mean finding the harmony or guiding your partner so that she can succeed. Think about what other people want; often we trample their goals because we are insensitive to them. If it is difficult to read your partners' goals, you may even want to ask how you can best help them.

Habit 5: Seek First to Understand, Then to Be Understood

Seek First to Understand, Then to Be Understood is a key concept in both the philosophy and practice of aikido. In both tenkan and irimi, nage pivots his body to look in the direction that uke is looking, to 'see the world as uke sees it.' First, nage blends with the attack, then he changes the direction. Without blending first, nage only escalates the conflict. An example would be the omote version of tenshinage: nage receives uke's energy before redirecting it. More skilled practitioners are able to blend more efficiently so that sometimes it is difficult to see the blending and it looks like the movement only enters forward. Beginners sometimes try to recreate what looks like a purely entering movement and instead end up clashing with their partners. This is a danger in trying to recreate the movement of someone much more skilled than yourself without first learning basic technique.

Nage also tries to be sensitive to the attack and to respond appropriately, to allow uke's energy to flow in a direction that is natural. If the attack is fast, nage responds with fast movement; if the attack is slow, nage responds at an appropriately slower pace. When uke attacks faster, nage may switch to another version of the technique - such as the *tenkan* version of *tenshinage*, which allows uke to dissipate energy before it finally redirected. When doing freestyle, nage's goal is to select techniques that are appropriate for that moment - for that uke and that attack; to do this, nage must first understand the nature of the attack.

Another aspect of Habit 5 is being non-judgmental. Nage can become annoyed at uke because the attack is weak, but if nage tries to understand why the attack is that way she can be more constructive. For example, the attack may be weak or stiff because uke is afraid of being injured, or because he has not been instructed in how to attack properly, or because he is going slowly to learn a subtle component of the technique. Once nage understands why uke attacks in this way, she can choose an appropriate response: to be very protective of the uke who is fearful, to instruct the uke who does not know, and to join in the search with the uke who is exploring a particular aspect of the technique.

From a more psychological point of view, each person comes to aikido with different 'baggage' and a different mountain up which to carry that baggage. One person may naturally be rigid, another may be disorganized, another may be timid and another may be insensitive. Aikido is a beautiful way for each person to evolve. Since another person's baggage is likely to be different from your own, you must first understand what your partner (or student) is trying to overcome. Once you understand his baggage and see his mountain, you can appreciate and value what is striving for. Then you can be more patient and supportive in your practice or your teaching.

Suggestions for practicing Habit 5 (Seek First to Understand, Then to Be Understood): watch, feel and listen to your partner at the beginning of every interaction. Resist the temptation to focus your attention on the final objective of the technique; instead, begin each technique by savoring the flavor of that interaction at that moment with that partner. Redirect or receive your partner's energy after you have harmonized with it. This also applies to our interpersonal interactions, within and outside the dojo: if you are clashing with someone, visualize how he sees the situation or simply him to explain his perspective. People are often more open to understanding your point of view after they feel they have been heard and understood.

Habit 6: Synergize

The 6th Habit, to Synergize, is about the whole being more than the sum of its parts through collaboration. This, too, is key to effective aikido. Through cooperation, both nage and uke learn from their practice together. In a concrete sense, if uke refuses to attack or nage refuses to respond, there is no practice.

Synergy is the optimal win/win result. When trust and cooperation are absent, the interaction is defensive and one person wins and the other loses. When there is a moderate amount of trust and cooperation, compromise and respect are present - better than defensiveness, but not yet the ideal learning environment. When both trust and cooperation are strong, synergy is present and each person accomplishes more than he or she thought possible. Each of us has trained with someone with whom we really 'clicked' and had an amazing practice. In this kind of training, we feel both challenged and capable of meeting that challenge; ideally our partner feels the same.

In addition to synergy at the level of an uke/nage pair, an effective dojo also practices synergy. For example, the whole dojo benefits when each person in the dojo is valued for what he or she brings. One person may bring clean technique, another may bring energy and enthusiasm, yet another person may be able to relate practice to daily life. Very few people (if any) have all of these attributes; everyone has something to work on. When the dojo can appreciate the strengths that each person brings and recognize what each person is struggling to improve, they can share knowledge, skills, and expertise.

Synergy is about valuing the differences between people. If everyone else in the dojo were good at what you were good at and bad at what you were bad at then you could not learn from one another. I may teach you about the extension that makes koshinage effective; you may teach me about the centering that makes ikkyo strong. Synergy also crosses the boundaries between those with different levels of experience. For example, instructors and senior students bring a great deal of knowledge and skill to class. Beginners bring questions and confusion that make the senior students think about why certain movements work more effectively than other movements. The effective aikidoist learns from each interaction, no matter the skill level of her partner.

Suggestions for practicing Habit 6 (Synergize): think about how the first 5 Habits can benefit your interactions so that everybody can achieve more. During training, select things to work on that are compatible with the skill level and objectives of your partner. Move in ways that challenge your partner, yet allow him to succeed enough to make the interaction a positive experience. Identify the strengths each member of the dojo (or family or job) brings; recognize, value and nurture those strengths.

Habit 7: Sharpen the Saw

The last Habit is about continually improving yourself. The ‘Sharpen the Saw’ image comes from a story that Covey cites in his book: “Suppose you were to come upon someone in the woods working feverishly to saw down a tree.

‘What are you doing?’ you ask.

‘Can’t you see?’ comes the impatient reply. ‘I’m sawing down this tree.’

‘You look exhausted!’ you exclaim. ‘How long have you been at it?’

‘Over five hours,’ he returns, ‘and I’m beat! This is hard work.’

‘Well, why don’t you take a break for a few minutes and sharpen that saw?’ you inquire. ‘I’m sure it would go a lot faster.’

‘I don’t have time to sharpen the saw,’ the man says emphatically. ‘I’m too busy sawing!’”
(p. 287)

In reality, each of us is the saw. If we do not take time to improve ourselves, we will not have the resources to effectively complete the tasks we face. The concept of self-improvement is also at the foundation of aikido: we never finish learning aikido, we only progress along the path. The effective people are those who keep their ‘saw’ sharp and continue to learn new things.

Covey discusses the different dimensions in which we can improve: physical, social/emotional, mental and spiritual. In the physical dimension, aikido provides aerobic exercise, stress management, and training in graceful movement. In the social/emotional dimension, aikido teaches us to work with one another, to collaborate, to empathize and help others. In the mental dimension, aikido challenges us to visualize, analyze and synthesize both concepts and the translation into application. In the spiritual dimension, aikido is meditative and it encourages us to clarify our values and behave according to those values, even when under stress. One of the beauties of aikido is that it provides an opportunity to improve ourselves simultaneously in all four dimensions.

To ‘Sharpen the Saw’ we must operate outside our comfort zones. If we only practice what we already know or do well, then we never improve. We must acknowledge our weaknesses so that we can work to overcome them. Once nage is skilled in performing a certain technique in one way, he can try different ways of doing a technique and savor the different ‘flavor’ of each. Once he is able to perform a technique with one person, he can practice with someone who is larger or smaller, faster or stronger. We may be more comfortable doing a technique in the same way, with the same person, but such stagnation does not help us progress along the path. We need to remember that the techniques we learn are not aikido, itself, but guides to understanding aikido.

An effective aikido dojo provides an ideal environment for stepping outside our comfort zones because the dojo can be a place of safety and trust. If I did not do a technique well the first time, I get three more tries, then another four and another. Few environments allow us to ‘fail’

with so few consequences. Few environments surround us with people who share common goals and cooperate to achieve those goals. In a happy, caring, and fun-loving dojo we laugh at our mistakes and take joy in doing just a little better next time.

Suggestions for implementing Habit 7 (Sharpen The Saw): create balance in your life and challenge yourself to constantly learn new things. Once you have 'learned' a technique, do not always practice it the same way: try to understand the intent and principles of different variations. Attend to all four components of self-improvement: physical, social/emotional, mental and spiritual. You may be able to practice each component within aikido, or you may use other activities to fulfill your need in certain areas.

Aikido has always been a wonderful metaphor for life. And life is a wonderful way to both learn and practice aikido. Stephen Covey's 7 Habits of Highly Effective People provide an interesting metaphor for aikido. Reflecting on both the 7 Habits and on our own aikido training could help us develop habits of effective training. Hopefully we will become better and more effective people off the mat as well. And that is what aikido is all about.