

What factors are needed in order for a dojo to survive?

This article was submitted by J.C. Guion for his 3rd Dan exam conducted in Alameda in September 2008, and posted with his permission.

I tend to see the survival factors of a dojo closely related to our Aikido practice, where we train our body, our mind, cultivate and strengthen our spirit. I would compare body training to dojo practical matters that we need to take care of. Mind to proper attitude and dedication to the dojo, and spirit to the Sensei leadership. All are important factors in the survival of a dojo.

Body training could be compared to the practical aspect of running a dojo. As we train, our body gets stronger, more flexible, we improve our endurance, we get in better shape. From a practical standpoint, where we shape and take care of our body with proper training, we also have to take good care of the dojo: having it clean, in good order with all daily chores taking care of. Dues need to be collected, members informed of events and decisions, financial book kept in order. Practical matters are a reality and a necessity.

To make sure that practical matters are taken care of, everyone needs to help out, showing consistency and dedication. This is where mind training matters. Without the proper attitude and mindset, daily chores cannot be properly addressed. As practical matters are dealt with, our confidence and actions toward the dojo everyday life are reinforced. Body and mind are working together, we cannot properly train one without the other one. As one improves, the other one improves too.

Practical matters are of paramount importance. The most important of all, certainly, is having enough members. Without enough members, rent and bills cannot be paid and the dojo has to close. This is unfortunate, the harsh reality, but there is no way around it. To help attract members, the dojo needs to advertise itself. For example, it can run advertisement, create special offers or participate into community events. The idea is to get known. If people want to do Aikido, they know where to go. Another complementary approach, is to get people interested into Aikido. This is quite difficult, mostly because Aikido is not well known to the overall public and the people think about martial art through the distorting prism of hollywood action movies.

As we need to attract new members, we also hope - once they have joined - that they will stay. However, we can never really know if a new member will still be around after few months. Unfortunately, there are a lot of things that are out of our control, such as family and work constraints, personal aspiration and expectations, but what can we do, what is in our control, is create the right conditions for members to stay.

I believe that the spirit we find in a dojo is provided by the Sensei through his sincere and sound leadership. Like a seed growing slowly into a something stronger, spirit has to be nourished with care as it is felt and carried by every member. As a dojo gets older and its members more experienced, this spirit is shared and can be felt by any visitor and any new member. This is ultimately what will make new members appreciate the dojo, its members, discover Aikido, enjoy their practice and stay.

Keeping the right spirit is also the most difficult of all. It requires a strong and steady will, keeping the right direction, going through all the difficult times. If a dojo were to loose the spirit that he wants to imprint its students with, even though it would have many members and would seem to be successful, it would have fail to survive.