



History of Aikido

A Japanese martial art that does not honour its traditions can hardly be called Japanese. Tradition in Japan is not merely a matter of reverence, but the very basis of Japanese culture and understanding. This is true even in modern Japanese society. Training in Aikido is no different.

While Aikido may be relatively new to North America and generally unknown by most of the population, its roots and traditions are very old; much older than many martial arts forms. Yoshinkan style Aikido, in particular, is considered one of the more traditional forms practiced. As such, it is part of the student's training to learn the customs and understandings of Aikido's samurai heritage. This heritage reveals both the growth and the development of Aikido and the root understanding behind many of our habits and actions.

The Rise and Fall of the Imperial System (4th - 12th Century A.D.)

Japanese history is the embodiment of imperial history. Its story begins with the *Yamato* race which established itself in a small province in central Japan during the 4th century. In the course of about the next three hundred years, the Yamato family gradually gained control over the numerous warring tribes and clans in the surrounding provinces.

It was by the way of trade connections with Korea and China (under the Han Dynasty) that Japan gained the political and cultural foundation upon which Japanese culture was built. However, as cultural contact with China was interrupted toward the end of the 9th century, Japanese civilization began to take on its own characteristics and form. Life in the capital was marked by great elegance and refinement. While the court gave itself up to the pursuit of the arts and social pleasures, its authority over the martial clans in the provinces became increasingly uncertain. Effective control passed into the hands of two rival military families, the *Minamoto* and the *Taira*, who both traced their descent from previous emperors. The Minamoto family prevailed, annihilating the Taira clan in 1185. This Minamoto victory marked the end of the Imperial throne as the effective political power in Japan, and the beginning of seven centuries of feudal rule.

The Feudal Age and the Samurai

At the onset of the feudal age, the *samurai* were peasant-farmers who fought for their lords as well as they could when the occasion arose. As conflict between landlords became more frequent, it became necessary to train armed groups to protect the respective boundaries. At this time, these armed groups were called *samurai* or *bushi*, but their status in society was not established until a military government



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was formed by the Minamoto family in 1192. This military government (the Shogunate) encouraged austerity and the pursuit of martial arts and related disciplines for the Samurai. These studies were eventually codified and called *Bushido* - the Way of the Samurai.

Early Development of the Martial Arts (Bugei)

As the feudal era advanced, the Samurai came to occupy the uppermost strata of Japanese society. Their principal duty was to learn and practice many martial arts, the skills necessary to fulfill their allegiance to the feudal lord for whom they were expected to fight and die. There were numerous martial arts which the *bushi* were required to learn: *kenjutsu* (sword techniques), *bajutsu* (horsemanship), *kyujutsu* (archery), and *sojutsu* (spear techniques) constituted the principal combat arts. A favorite saying among the *bushi* at that time was "Master eighteen martial arts." Additionally, it was necessary that the *bushi* learn a secondary system of combat techniques to support their armed fighting methods. These unarmed techniques were referred to as *Kumiuchi* and involved forms of grappling techniques which evolved from *Sumo* (combat wrestling). Throughout the feudal era the distinction between armed and unarmed techniques became greater.

Development of Unarmed Techniques and Aikijujutsu

By degrees, unarmed combat techniques developed into different systems and styles. Varying battlefield situations and the technical requirements of feudal warfare led to establishment of the various *ryu* (schools) which were controlled by, and passed down through the large powerful families. One of these systems was *Aikijujutsu*. It is not completely clear where Aiki techniques originated, but the Aiki system is said to have originated with Prince Teijun, the sixth son of the Emperor Seiwa (850-880), and was passed on to succeeding generations of the Minamoto family. By the time the art reached Yoshimitsu Shinra Saburo, the younger brother of Minamoto Yoshike, it seems that the foundations of modern Aikido had already been laid.

Yoshimitsu was a man of exceptional learning and skill, and it is said that he devised many of his techniques by watching a spider skillfully trap a large insect in its fragile web. His house, Daito Mansion, has given its name to his system of Aikijujutsu which came to be called *Daito Ryu Aikijujutsu*.

Yoshimitsu's second son lived in Takeda, in the province of Kai, and his family became known by the name *Takeda*. Subsequently, the techniques of Daito Ryu were passed on to successive generations as secret techniques of the Takeda house, and were made known only to family members and retainers. When Takeda Kunitsugu moved to Aizu in 1574, the techniques came to be known as *Aizu-todome* (secret techniques).



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During the 16th century, Japan was embroiled in civil wars. Each feudal lord (*Daimyo*) struggled to maintain a powerful independent position within the country. In order to do so, each Daimyo had to create a stable, unified force of his own, which required a very strong bond between the lord and his bushi. *Bushido*, the code of the Samurai, encouraged the development of combat techniques, cultivated the qualities of justice, benevolence, politeness and honour; above all inculcated the idea of supreme loyalty to lord and cause. It was during this period of independence and feudal isolation that combat forms developed into numerous *ryu*.

Aikijujutsu and Its Social Background

The next two and a half centuries (Tokugawa period) were relatively peaceful for Japan. The Samurai, as a class, saw little combat, though they continued to practice and refine the various martial arts of *kenjutsu*, *iajutsu*, *bajutsu*, and forms of *jujutsu*. *Ju* is a Chinese word meaning pliable, harmonious, adaptable, or yielding; *jutsu* means technique. As a collective term applied to all fighting forms, *jujutsu* came into existence long after the forms it describes originated. Jujutsu's golden age extended from the late 17th century to the mid-19th century.

As the martial arts (and all Japanese culture) became strongly influenced by Buddhist concepts, the fighting arts were transformed from combat techniques (*Bugei*) into "ways" (*Budo*), stressing self-discipline, self-perfection, and a certain philosophy of life. The dimensions of the martial arts expanded beyond the simple objective of killing an enemy to include many aspects of everyday living. Particularly after the decline of the samurai class, the martial "techniques" became martial "ways", and a great emphasis was placed upon the study of Budo as a means of generating the moral strength necessary to build a strong and vital society.

At that time, Aikido was known by many names, and remained an exclusively samurai practice handed down within the Takeda family until Japan emerged from isolation in the Meiji period. The Meiji restoration (1868) brought not only the return of Imperial supremacy, but also a westernized culture, political, and economic way of life to Japan. The samurai, as a class, virtually disappeared under a new constitution that proclaimed all classes equal, but the essence of Bushido, cultivated for many centuries, continued to play an important part in the daily lives of the Japanese. Budo, being less combative and more concerned with the spiritual discipline by which one elevates oneself mentally and physically, were more attractive to the common people and were readily taken up by all classes, and people of every social strata. Accordingly, *kenjutsu* became *kendo*, *iajutsu* became *iaido*, *jojutsu* became *jodo*, and *jujutsu* became *judo*.