Aikido and Life Skills

A.C.R.E. - Applying Aikido as a Conflict Resolution Method in Youth Education

Project Funded by
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Aikido
and Life SKills

A.C.R.E. Applying Aikido as a Conflict Resolution Method in Youth Education ERASMUS-SPORT-2023 SSCP Project number: 101133568 Project Coordinator Report

Antonio Albanese - Pierangelo Bordignon - Simone Chierchini - Robert Gembal - Luisa Zaffaina
Aikido and Life SKills

Cover photo: Tatiana Golovina
Editing: Pierangelo Bordignon
Cover and layout design : Simone Chierchini

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Antonio Albanese - Pierangelo Bordignon
Simone Chierchini - Robert Gembal- Luisa Zaffaina

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Preface

In 2014, a chance discovery regarding the Erasmus Plus Sport programme led to a deep reflection on how Aikido could become a means to promote life skills. This approach proved natural for those who had already devoted decades to teaching this martial art, building international relationships and creating spaces for shared learning.

The initiative took shape through collaborative work with international partners. Drafting the project and establishing an international network required long and significant effort, until, in 2023, an innovative project came to life: ACRE (Applying Aikido as a Conflict Resolution Method in Youth Education).

This programme focused on introducing and connecting Life Skills with the methodology of Aikido. Life Skills find fertile ground in Aikido: this discipline, in addition to promoting physical well-being, teaches how to manage conflicts, improve concentration and build relationships based on mutual respect. It was from these premises that the idea of using Aikido as an educational tool in a European project context emerged.

The initiative involved teachers and educators from various countries, combining pedagogical and martial arts expertise to create a replicable teaching

model. Challenges such as managing international communication and coordinating shared objectives were gradually overcome thanks to a shared vision and the determination of participants.

Among the project's most significant outcomes was the introduction of targeted educational pathways, where concepts such as empathy, stress management and creative thinking were taught through Aikido. The aim was not only to train better practitioners but also to cultivate more conscious and resilient citizens.

This project is a tribute to international collaboration and to Aikido's ability to go beyond mere physical practice, becoming a tool to enhance the quality of life. It is also a homage to those who, with dedication and passion, have helped ensure that Aikido and Life Skills continue to inspire future generations.

Introductory Note by the Project Coordinator

Applying Aikido as a Conflict Resolution Method in Youth Education (A.C.R.E. project nr. 101133568 financed by the European Union) aimed at promoting social inclusion among children and young adults through the development of key life skills, such as problem-solving, decision-making, creativity, critical thinking and personal and social responsibility.

Since these fundamental values align with Aikido, a martial discipline represented by numerous associations affiliated with the Italian Culture and Sport Association. the Vicenza Committee of AICS could not help but look with interest at the proposal from instructors Simone Chierchini, Antonio Albanese, and Robert Gembal Sr., who was later replaced by his son Robert Jr., to apply for European funding. This funding enabled the creation of a handbook of best practices for all practitioners of their meritorious discipline, in which, more than in others, respect for the person comes before technicalities and sports regulations.

Through the final work, coordinated by Professor Pierangelo Bordignon, to whom I extend my gratitude for his professionalism and availability, children and young adults will learn or strengthen their life skills through the practice of Aikido. Aikido teachers and trainers have been trained by Professor

Bordignon himself to recognise life skills within Aikido practice and to support children in their development.

The project has built a solid network between the three involved partners, and its outcome is, in fact, this manual of best Aikido practices—an original point of reference that will be disseminated to other Aikido dojos in Europe and made available to all those interested in Aikido.

My thanks, therefore, to Aikido Wago Dojo from Vicenza, Italy, represented by instructor Antonio Albanese.

Thanks to Uczniowski Klub Sportowi Akademia Ruchu I Zdrowia Sakura from Chmielno, Poland, to the late Robert Gembal Sr sensei, and his son Robert Jr., who excellently took over as the local coordinator of the project.

Thanks to Aikido Mayo from Westport, Ireland, and to instructor Simone Chierchini, who was responsible for summarising the project, as well as coordinating both the preparatory camp and the editorial work on this manual.

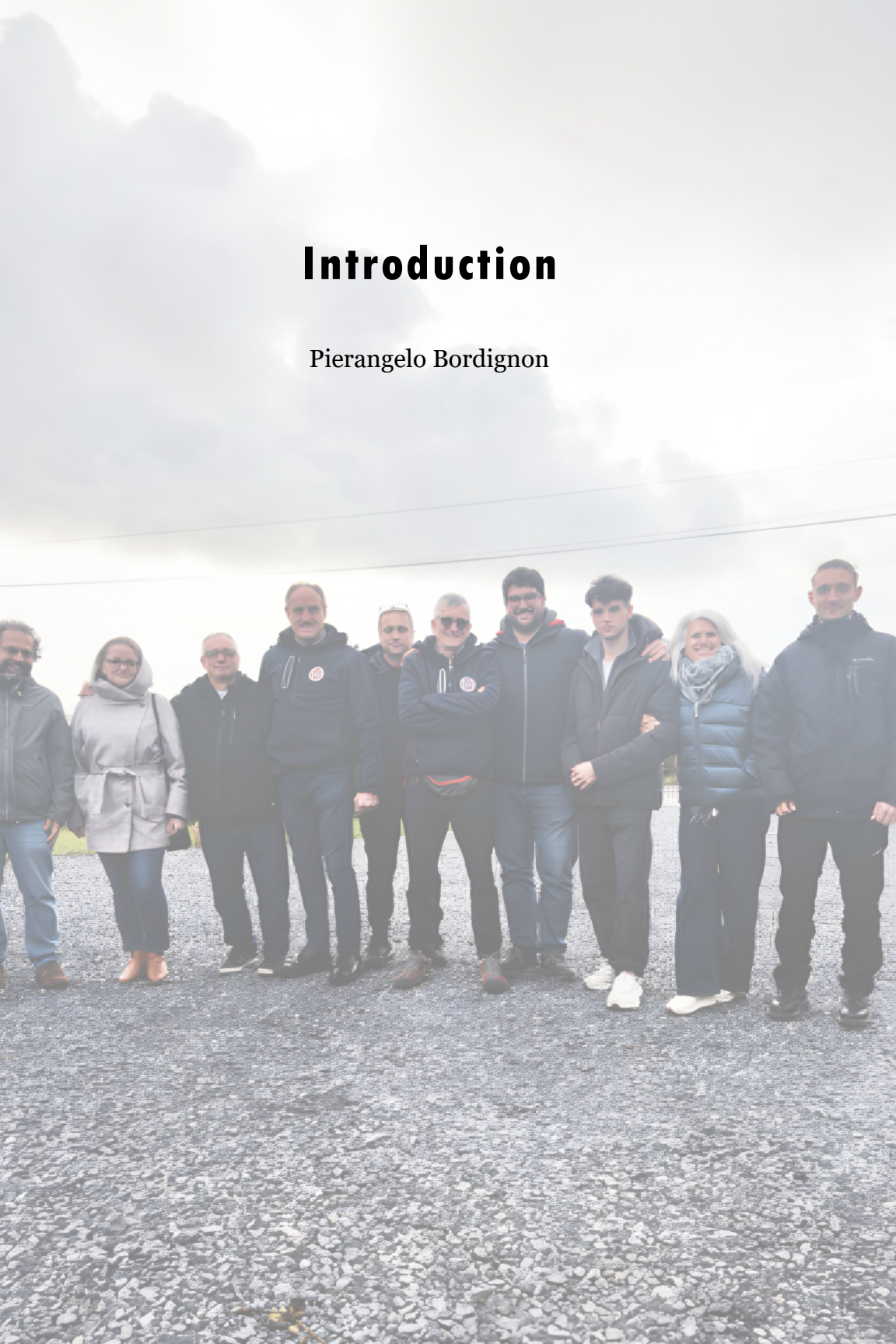
Thanks to Luisa Zaffaina, who, within the project, took care of the important aspect of environmental respect through lessons and practical initiatives implemented during the summer camps in Poland and Italy.

Finally, thanks to Dr. Vincenzina Vinci, European project manager, who helped us meet deadlines and achieve the ambitious final goal.

Elio Rigotto - Project Coordinator
Vicenza, Dec 16, 2024

Introduction

Pierangelo Bordignon



"To the subculture of the knowledge market or commercial cognition, we must oppose the generous and sovereign cultivation of useless knowledge, of gratuitous knowledge, of obsolete and exotic learning. This is knowledge whose only redemption lies in the pleasure of exploration, in the adventure of delving deeper and being surprised. [...] A radically aesthetic culture, aimed exclusively at the luxurious pleasure of knowing, at curiosity, at dépense. The enjoyment of wanderings and paths that lead nowhere, yet slow down and intensify, enriching with analogies and subtle affinities the ever-thinning web through which we perceive and claim to understand the real, the beyond-real, and the surreal. Culture is that way seen as a journey into the intermediate and liminal zones of knowledge, as movement across surfaces and boundaries, far beyond any pursuit of meaning, and especially of any meaning monetisable in any form."[1]

This quotation is taken from a text reflecting on the meaning of education as it is understood today in schools and in places where young people are trained: an education geared toward profit and gain, where acquiring skills and competencies is equated with securing a place in the world, leaving little room for knowledge deemed ancient and obsolete by the market. In this context, the author Paolo Mottana calls for a counter-education, understood as a "celebration of existence, a motion to base the act of educating on the indispensable value of desire, of vital expansion, and of sensitive imagination: for an inverted education, not a means to exploit the flesh

[1] Mottana, P., *Piccolo Manuale di Controeducazione*, Milano, Mimesis, 2011, p.55

of the world, but a field of multifaceted, emancipatory experience, open to the possible as well as the (im)possible, and animated by affirmative and exuberant incarnations."[2]

I firmly believe that this is the most fitting citation to introduce the book you are holding. I believe it because, although the person who wrote these words was not directly involved in the development of this manual, the effort to avoid constraining Aikido by associating it with a utility—often implied in the Theory of Life Skills (particularly when engaging with parents and institutions such as schools)—is central to the reflection you are about to read and has been so since the very first discussions with the project partners.

It is crucial to clarify a fundamental point from the outset: in addressing the relationship between Aikido and Life Skills, we must take care not to distort the essence of this martial art by turning it into a tool aimed solely at acquiring utilitarian skills. Aikido, with its intrinsic value, deserves to be appreciated for what it is, not for the utility it might offer through the skills we seek to develop with and through it.

The term *dépense*, referenced in Mottana's quotation, originates from the philosophy of Georges Bataille, who uses it to describe the concept of "expenditure" or "waste" not aimed at a productive or utilitarian purpose but tied to excess, generosity, pleasure, or consumption without return. What we wish to suggest right from the start is the idea of intellectual and cultural experience lived in a gratuitous and luxurious manner, not driven by

[2] Ivi, p.10.

utility or profit, but by the pure pursuit of aesthetic pleasure, knowledge, and curiosity. It is a form of investment of personal and cultural energy that does not aim for material gain but rather for enjoyment as an end in itself.

As the work to close this book draws to an end, I realise that, in some way, I am also reflecting on my personal experience. I practised Aikido more than 20 years ago within a therapeutic community for individuals struggling with addiction, which used Aikido as a psycho-physical discipline to support care. From this experience, I retained treasures that have shaped much of who I am as an educator: numerous philosophical approaches (such as the idea of service embodied by the *uke*), various exercises (such as warm-ups) and, above all, a profound example.

That profound example was Giampiero Savegnago sensei, who lead us young people involved with a wisdom I can only describe as "deeply human at the highest level". The techniques of Aikido were never lost. The connection between us was never lost. Stories, mistakes and vulnerabilities were never lost. Abilities grew, I believe - in ways we didn't fully understand, but they grew. Everything, in that hour and a half of work together, flowed. We knew it had value, but perhaps it was, above all, beautiful. Thank you, Sensei.

What made the relationship between Aikido and its therapeutic function effective? Aikido training took place within a therapeutic context and a communal living environment that, in a sense, "welcomed Aikido into its home". However, when the teacher arrived, he would lay out the tatami mats and, in doing so, create his personal *dojo* within that

home—a unique and meaningful space, both for the practice of Aikido and for its role in healing. But how did these two dimensions, the one "inside the tatami" and the one "outside the tatami" interact?

This handbook seeks to explore this reflection. It does not claim to be exhaustive but aims instead to serve as a starting point: an attempt to initiate a deeper dialogue to better understand the connection between Aikido and the development of Life Skills. Certainly, this relationship raises fundamental questions:

- To what extent can Aikido be considered an art, and to what extent a sport?
- What are the pedagogical implications of viewing Aikido as an aesthetic experience and a path of personal growth?
- How can the playful and creative aspect of Aikido be reconciled with the need to acquire technical skills?

We will not provide answers to all of these questions. The scope and objectives of this work do not allow for an exhaustive exploration. However, keeping these questions as a backdrop, we will focus on one central inquiry: is it possible to integrate Life Skills training into Aikido practice, as is done in many sports projects?

Implementing Life Skills training involves addressing a fundamental question: are the children involved living their life well? Are they leading a quality life in terms of psychological, social and collective well-being?

In developing our reflections, we have chosen to adopt an accessible tone rather than a strictly

scientific or technical one, presenting certain issues broadly and generally to make them accessible to a wider audience. For example, when we introduce specialised theories, we do not delve deeply into their origins or intricate details but instead refer readers to specialised literature for further exploration. This choice is based on two primary reasons:

1. A heterogeneous audience: The book is aimed at a broad and diverse audience, including Aikido practitioners and instructors (who might use it as a tool to reflect on their training experiences), institutions such as schools and sports centres, and organisational bodies such as municipal administrations and social entities (who might draw inspiration from it for alternative projects to integrate into their educational and training offerings). The writing, therefore, develops in a constructive tension between the educational subject and the art of Aikido, without necessarily drawing a clear distinction between the two domains. We thus ask for the indulgence of readers specialised in either field.
2. The existing variety in Aikido: While Aikido is a unified martial art, it encompasses various schools that sometimes use different terminologies or adopt slightly distinct philosophical approaches. For instance, some schools emphasise the spiritual aspect, while others focus more on technical efficiency and the practical elements of movement. These differences lead us to favour a language and approach that can be inclusive and flexible, accommodating the diverse traditions and sensibilities within the Aikido community.

Integrating Life Skills into Aikido training requires an educational perspective aimed at promoting the well-being and health of young people—not just within the dojo but also in their daily lives outside of it. To achieve this goal, it is essential to begin by reflecting on how training is conducted in our dojos. For this reason, it seemed natural to initiate a dialogue between practices, experiences and the expertise developed by different instructors and their schools, to arrive at a shared synthesis.

This approach takes into account both the diversity in training methods and the dynamic nature of Life Skills, which can vary depending on the socio-cultural context in which they are considered and applied.

The content presented in this manual emerges from reflections, practices and discussions conducted in light of some of the latest scientific research in the field of sports psychology, with particular attention to the development of Life Skills. The final outcome was shaped along a shared trajectory during the various phases of the Erasmus ACRE project (*Applying Aikido as a Conflict Resolution Method in Youth Education*), coordinated by AICS Vicenza and driven by the commitment of the following Aikido instructors: Antonio Albanese and Luisa Grace Zaffaina (Wago Dojo – Italy), Simone Chierchini (Aikido Mayo – Ireland), Robert Gembal Sr. and Robert Gembal Jr. (Akademia Ruchu i Zdrowia Sakura – Poland).

Years of practice in the discipline fostered the awareness and shared conviction that Aikido, when practised in daily life, organically nurtures the well-being of young people through the exercise and

development of what are commonly referred to as Life Skills. One of the project's objectives was precisely to explore the relationship between Aikido and Life Skills and to attempt to identify the best operational conditions to support the growth and translation of these Life Skills through training activities in the dojo.

The project required intensive coordination and remote collaboration, culminating in three key milestones where theoretical reflections were put into practice:

- **Westport, Ireland, April 8–14, 2024**: A week-long meeting and training session focused on Life Skills, attended by 14 instructors from Ireland, Italy and Poland. This event was crucial for discussing and developing Life Skills-related practices, which were later tested during the summer camps. Much of the technical reflections and historical insights contained in this text stem from this intense exchange among those attending, during which instructors integrated Aikido practice with the analysis of Life Skills theories.
- **Chmielno, Poland, July 13–20, 2024**: The first summer camp involving young participants, where field experimentation began to strengthen Life Skills through Aikido. This meeting also marked the initial attempts at activity evaluation.
- **Cereda di Cornedo Vicentino, Italy, August 24–31, 2024**: The second summer camp with young participants. Based on the results obtained during the Polish camp, necessary adjustments were made, continuing the experimentation to both enhance Life Skills and improve evaluation activities.

The key to this project, we believe, has been the open dialogue maintained despite differences among partners. In this regard, it is important to honour the memory of a Sensei and a Friend, Robert Gembal Sr. (Akademia Ruchu i Zdrowia Sakura – Poland), who supported the project with great enthusiasm from the very beginning. Sadly, his voice was lost to us in March 2024, leaving a void in our discussions. Thanks to his vision, we were able to share this work with his son, Robert Iwo Gembal, and his wife, Agnieska Szulecka, who have taken up his legacy and contributed to advancing this effort.

We did not aim to write a typical Aikido handbook; rather, we sought to present a series of reflections and suggestions for viewing Aikido through an educational lens and with an educational focus. This is not an Aikido handbook in the strict sense, as we wanted to respect the essence of the art, which is transmitted through silence, physical practice, imitation and its own unique formative methods. At the same time, we endeavoured to honour the nature of Life Skills transmission, which requires moments of sharing, specific training and efforts to foster autonomy and awareness through practice.

In the first chapter, we introduce the discipline of Aikido, focusing particularly on the history of its origins. We highlight two pivotal encounters that profoundly shaped the life of Morihei Ueshiba and, consequently, the development of the discipline: the first with Takeda Sokaku, master of *Daito-Ryu Aikijujutsu*, and the second with Deguchi Onisaburo, founder of the neo-Shinto religion *Omoto-kyo*. The first encounter contributed to forming the technical foundation of Aikido, while the second shaped its

spiritual dimension and provided Ueshiba with the key to access opportunities and spaces that were previously beyond his reach.

In this light, we attempt to present a historical perspective rather than focusing on legend or myth. We see a young man full of talent and potential, grappling with challenges, seizing opportunities and continuously testing himself in pursuit of an existential structure made up of qualities and skills (which we recognise as Life Skills). These qualities ultimately enabled him to achieve fulfilment and develop the discipline of Aikido as it is handed down today.

The two main roots— *Daito-Ryu Aikijujutsu* and *Omoto-kyo*—form the technical and philosophical foundation of Aikido. They characterise the art's non-competitive approach, emphasising personal growth and self-mastery over dominance or aggression. In this context, practitioners cultivate the ability to face life's challenges without resorting to violence, demonstrating strength when necessary and compassion when appropriate.

The chapter also focuses on the figure of the teacher and on the relationship with them, which is fundamental to embarking on the path of the art. The teacher is not merely an expert in martial techniques but someone who aspires, through example and wisdom, to be a mentor who guides practitioners on their personal and spiritual journey. Aikido instructors teach the values of respect, humility and the pursuit of harmony. In this journey, the teacher's role and the bond formed with them are indispensable elements.

In the second chapter, we delve into a reflection on Life Skills, analysing research and studies that

have sought to identify the conditions necessary for these competencies, particularly in sports contexts, to not only be learned but also applied to daily life. This reflection is guided by an attempt, inspired by Romano Guardini's concept of *Polar Tension*, to avoid reducing the relationship between Aikido and the Theory of Life Skills to a mere "mixing of meanings, a compromise, or a higher synthesis" (Guardini R., 1997). Instead, the goal is to explore ways to manifest both elements of the relationship in a dynamic coexistence.

As is readily apparent, martial arts—with their emphasis on ethics, discipline and self-work—are undoubtedly suitable environments for learning personal and social skills. However, the primary goal of Aikido (as with martial arts in general) is not specifically to promote Life Skills but to achieve mastery in practice and the corresponding growth within the art itself. On the other hand, research shows that the acquisition and transmission of Life Skills require specific implementation within training sessions. In this process, the role of the instructor, along with their philosophy and training methodology, is crucial in determining the success or failure of projects related to Life Skills.

It was therefore necessary to identify the parameters that would allow the transmission and assimilation of Life Skills to align with the needs of Aikido, ensuring that neither was subordinated to the other and maintaining an acceptable level of purity of the art.

According to the World Health Organisation's definition, Life Skills are "a set of psychosocial and interpersonal skills that help people make informed decisions, solve problems, think critically and

creatively, communicate effectively, build healthy relationships, empathise with others, and cope with and manage their lives in a healthy and productive manner. Life Skills may be directed towards personal actions, actions towards others, or actions to change the surrounding environment to make it conducive to health".

Life Skills are numerous, and their nature can vary depending on the socio-cultural context in which they are considered. However, in this text, we have adopted the classification provided by the World Health Organisation, which identifies ten fundamental competencies considered the core of any prevention program aimed at promoting the well-being of children and adolescents, regardless of the context. These competencies are:

1. Decision-making skills
2. 2. Problem-solving skills
3. 3. Creative thinking
4. 4. Critical thinking
5. 5. Effective communication
6. 6. Interpersonal relationship skills
7. 7. Self-awareness
8. 8. Empathy
9. 9. Emotional management
10. 10. Stress management
11.

To develop Life Skills in young people, it is not enough to simply provide information; it is essential to focus on personal experience and concrete behaviours. Learning, in fact, should be understood as an active process that takes place through the transformation and structuring of experience, as Bandura (1977) asserts. Numerous

studies agree that young people primarily develop their Life Skills through extracurricular activities such as music, speech and drama, and sports—experiential contexts that offer real-life situations in which to experience emotions, manage stress, solve problems and work as a team.

In this perspective, the development of Life Skills becomes a key element within the broader theoretical framework adopted by this book, Positive Youth Development (PYD). This approach promotes the positive growth of young people, with values such as health, well-being and the acquisition of Life Skills serving as indicators of positive development.

This approach does not view young people as "problems to be solved", but rather focuses on the skills they can develop, the positive qualities they possess and the internal and external resources available to them to promote well-being and prevent risky behaviours. In this sense, we speak of an *educational perspective*. This involves reflecting on how our work impacts the daily lives of young people and, in particular, recognising that possessing Life Skills does not automatically translate into the ability to apply them across various areas of life.

This transition is not an immediate process, especially when individuals find themselves in challenging contexts that limit the expression of their potential. Consider, for example, cultural difficulties related to the role of women, conditions of social disadvantage, challenges connected to immigration and racism, or barriers to affirming the rights of people with disabilities.

In this light, it becomes crucial to organise one's dojo with an "expanded awareness" of the young people who attend it and the relational network it weaves within the community. This means creating a space where both personal growth and the surrounding social context are acknowledged and supported.

For this reason, these themes have been explored within the framework of the Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000), which posits that a person's well-being depends on three key elements: support for their autonomy, the satisfaction of three fundamental psychological needs (autonomy, competence and relatedness), and self-determined motivation.

Specifically, the three needs identified by the Self-Determination Theory provide valuable insights for structuring environments where individuals can engage in activities that promote their well-being. These needs are:

- Autonomy: the sense of being free to make choices and to be the source of one's own actions.
- Competence: the need to feel effective and capable of tackling and overcoming challenging tasks.

Relatedness or Belonging: the need to establish meaningful connections and to feel accepted and valued in relationships with others.

If we aim to promote the development of Life Skills through Aikido training, adopting these theoretical frameworks requires a continuous evaluation of conditions within the dojo management:

- Focus on strengths rather than problems, adopting an attitude that values and enhances the resources of young practitioners;
- Provide a training environment that encourages the expression and appreciation of these resources;
- Incorporate intentional and mindful efforts to promote Life Skills;
- Support the ability to transfer Life Skills learned in the sports context to other areas of life.

Two key factors enhance the value and applicability of this vision:

1. Focusing on resources allows instructors to move away from a therapeutic (curing) dimension and instead emphasise fostering individual potential (caring), an objective that is fully achievable within an Aikido dojo.
2. This approach fosters the development of a positive relational context, which is not only well know by the instructors but also benefits the dojo itself by strengthening its educational quality and deepening its connection with practitioners.

Life Skills represent a dynamic set of knowledge, skills, and attitudes that develop over time through practice and critical reflection. To translate these competencies into meaningful actions, it is essential that the environment in which they are exercised is structured to provide opportunities for active participation and personal agency.

In this context, it becomes crucial to identify effective organisational methodologies and enhance the competencies of instructors, so that training

sessions and participation in the life of the dojo become spaces where the fundamental psychological needs of human beings, as outlined by Ryan and Deci—autonomy, competence, and relatedness—are concretely addressed. This involves considering the work of instructors both "*inside the tatami"* and "*outside the tatami"*, distinguishing between aspects specifically related to the art of Aikido and those that can be implemented according to Life Skills theory.

With these terms, we aim to practically organise the tension we mentioned at the start of our reflection: the desire not to blend the two dimensions but to maintain them in a reciprocal relationship that allows each to fully express its qualities, fostering the well-being and health of young people. *Tension* implies *relationship*: it does not mean *mixing* or *separating*.

It is critical to recognise that our approach to teaching "*inside the tatami"* must inevitably consider the methods required for transmitting Life Skills. Conversely, the structuring of moments dedicated to Life Skills training cannot disregard the specific needs of teaching the art, such as the hierarchical master-student relationship, the emphasis on physical practice over verbal instruction and the preference for embodied over cognitive learning.

For this reason, the chapter suggests a series of considerations that, in many cases, can be transformed into practical advice or possible suggestions to help each instructor structure their practice in line with the transmission of Life Skills. Drawing from theoretical research on Life Skills education, the following are recommended:

- responsibility of the coach, attention to their

training philosophy
- development of meaningful social relationships with students
- strategic training planning
- pairing specific Life Skills with particular techniques and practical exercises
- inclusion of moments for both discussion and practice.

The chapter concludes with a critical reflection on a fundamental caution within the dynamic tension between Aikido training and Life Skills education. Specifically, it warns against an attitude often implicit in Life Skills training projects: the assumption of a purely positive learning framework. This perspective presumes that sports can always and universally create positive, beneficial experiences that enhance physical, psychological and social capital. Such a view risks bypassing or dismissing, intentionally or not, the value of negative experiences in shaping existential learning. In essence, this reflects the utilitarian mindset that pervades modern thought.

This does not mean intentionally creating negative experiences but rather avoiding the illusion of crafting an aseptic environment that shields against them. Negative experiences, after all, are among life's greatest teachers. It is also about leaving adequate space not for the utility of Aikido but for its beauty, as we suggested at the beginning of these pages.

Seeking an additional utility in Aikido to be spent in the social context we inhabit may make sense, but it is a sense that must be carefully evaluated, reflected upon, critiqued and approached with

caution. This should always be done with an attentive educational perspective to ensure it serves existential learning—learning that is not made up of simple lists of skills to acquire but of key moments that lead to a meaningful existence.

At the end of the chapter, we propose a reflection on evaluation, which, in relation to Life Skills and their attainment, remains a rather debated topic. Given the limited scope of this work and its lack of intent to contribute extensively to the ongoing theoretical debate, we suggest some methods of evaluation, particularly those implemented during our summer camps in Italy and Poland. These are presented more as a testimony than a recommendation, with the intention of exploring them further in the future, including through cross-dojo collaboration.

The following three chapters constitute the most practical part of the manual and share the same structure. We have divided the ten Life Skills listed by the WHO into three groups: the emotional area in Chapter 3 (self-awareness, emotion management, stress management); the relational area in Chapter 4 (empathy, effective communication, effective relationships); and the cognitive area in Chapter 5 (problem-solving, decision-making, critical thinking, creative thinking).

Within each chapter, for each Life Skill, the following elements are provided: a description and a reflection linked to the historical context; some aspects that resonate with the practice of Aikido, as well as certain techniques that help activate the specific skill; the description or design of good practices that the research group shared during the workshop in Ireland and the Summer Camps held in

Poland and Italy in the summer of 2024, aimed at organising the dojo or defining its relationships with the surrounding context; specific advice for those managing training sessions or the organisation of the dojo, which we felt was important to share.

In Chapter Six, the project's key points are outlined, along with some practical outcomes implemented by the masters during the summer camps. This concludes one section of the book—the most technical one. However, we had a wealth of material to work with, and it seemed interesting to offer another perspective on the project.

The final chapter, *titled Photo Memories: Experiences from the Summer Camps* (formatted with a different graphic layout), presents this alternative view through a narrative composed of stories and short vignettes, capturing significant moments that deserved to be preserved, as well as testimonies that recount the Acre project in a completely different light.

We are fully aware that this book is not exhaustive—nor do we hope it to be. Instead, we hope it can serve as a foundation for future dialogue that brings together more people and more dojos. We believe that dialogue, when exercised properly well and with care, has perhaps been the most beautiful experience we have shared - a dialogue not only made of words but also of bodies in action on the mats, or working together during the various tasks of the day. A dialogue between schools, embracing thoughts, people, ideas, biases and idiosyncrasies. The ability to remain in dialogue with one another, even in our differences, is what allowed this text to take shape, despite the distances and challenges.

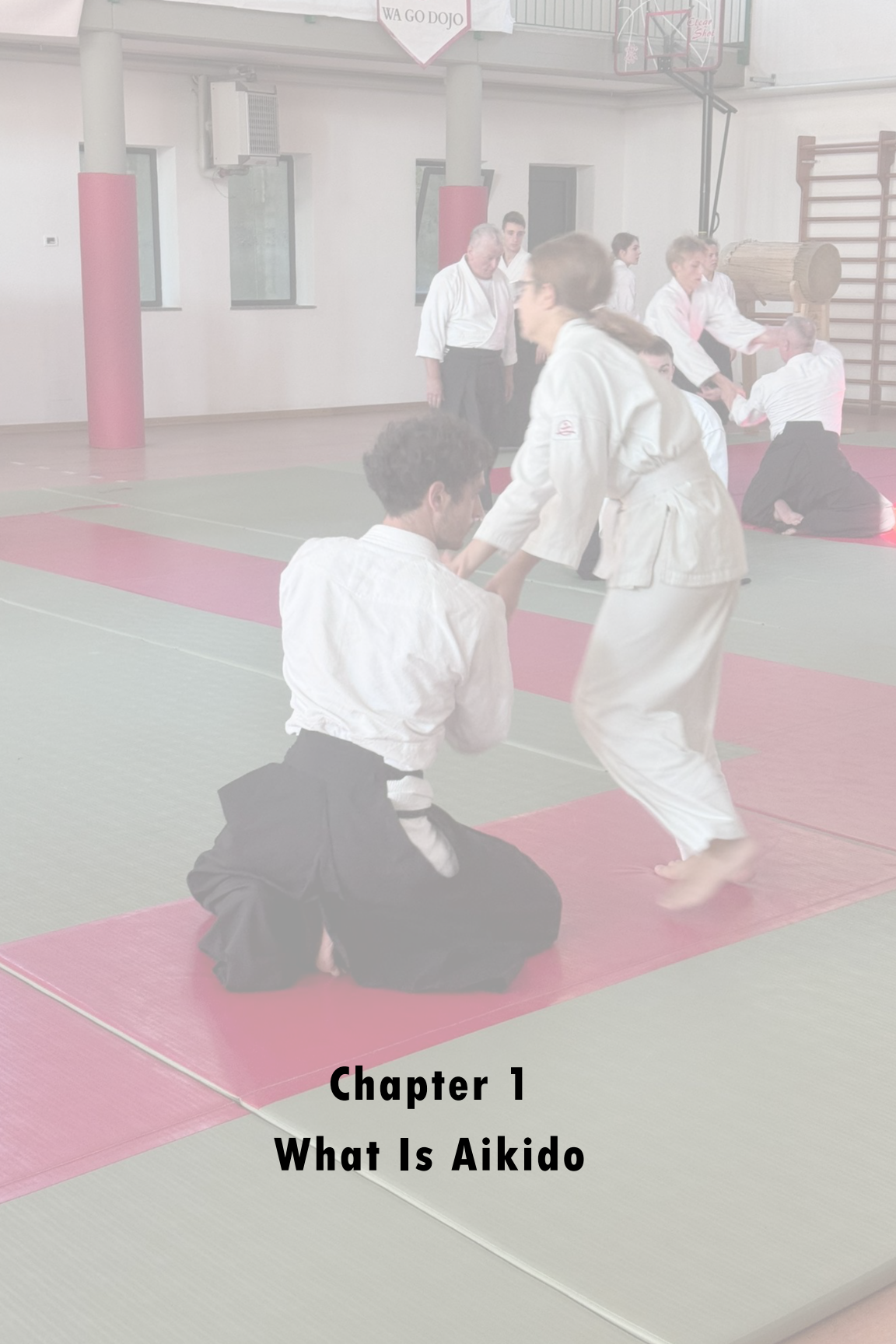
And despite the fact that many times, the dialogue was difficult, impossible, or painful.

What remains is the fact that this book seeks to bear witness, in a European spirit, to the idea that being together is possible when one believes in what they are doing—for the joy it brings, not only for the utility it provides. This does not mean idealising relationships. We believe, however, that living them with the (harmonious) spirit of Aikido often means seeking connection when others offer you confrontation.

Morihei Ueshiba said: "Aikido is the art of harmonising with the universe and relating to others in a peaceful and cooperative way". Ueshiba regarded martial arts not merely as a form of physical defence but as a practice for cultivating mutual understanding and inner peace, building relationships grounded in harmony and respect.

Above all, this text seeks to convey this testimony and to encourage others to join this dialogue, to live this art together and grow together—not just because we know it has value, but because practising it is profoundly beautiful.

For this reason, I am going to conclude with my heartfelt thanks to all the participants in the project, and especially to the instructors Antonio Albanese and Luisa Grace Zaffaina for conceiving it: without their vision, building a connection among us would not have been possible.



Chapter 1
What Is Aikido

Aikido is a martial art from Japan, synthesised in the first half of 20th century by Morihei Ueshiba.[3] It draws from older combat techniques, rooted in *koryu*—the old, classical Japanese martial schools developed for battlefield combat.[4] Aikido is practised both unarmed and with traditional Japanese *Budo* weapons, primarily the *ken* (sword), *jo* (staff) and *tanto* (dagger).

However, what sets Aikido apart from other purely physical martial arts is its promotion of the principles of 'peace' and 'acceptance.' These ideals are embodied in its techniques executed through prearranged forms, known as *kata* (型 or 形), aiming not to defeat an opponent but to dissuade them from combat and neutralise their aggressive intent.[5] Aikido's purpose is to avoid conflict, seeking instead to resolve differences without violence. With this aim, Aikido techniques are not designed to harm the attacker; rather, they guide them—both explicitly and implicitly—toward non-violence without inflicting injury. In this approach, the attacker is not viewed as an enemy, and conflict is resolved not as a 'clash' but as a 'meeting'.

Aikido's training method to achieve this control over both the opponent's actions and one's own responses involves rigorous self-discipline. Like the old Japanese combat arts, Aikido encompasses

[3] Morihei Ueshiba (1883-1969) is regarded as one of the greatest martial arts masters of modern times and is referred to as O-sensei (Great Master) by aikidoka.

[4] Cfr. Ellis Amdur, *Old School, Essays on Japanese Martial Traditions*, 2002, Edgework Books

[5] Cfr. Nobuyoshi Tamura, *Aikido. Méthode nationale*, 1977, Univerpress, Paris

not only the refinement of physical skills but also spiritual and mental training, emphasising respect for the tradition and the authority of the instructor. Underlying this inner journey is the awareness that the practitioner's first task in relating to the world is to change their own perspective: "the greatest enemy hides within each of us".

The form of Aikido as it exists today evolved from Ueshiba's efforts to embody the meanings embedded in the kanji characters that make up its name. The essence of "Aikido" can be understood through its components: 合 (ai), 氣 (ki), 道 (do):

- 合 (*ai*) means "harmony";
- 氣 (*ki*) represents "spirit," understood as "energy" or "life force"—the energy that sustains all things;
- 道 (*do*) means that which leads, understood as path or, more accurately, the way.

The journey Aikido proposes leads individuals to harmonise their energies with the vital force and spirit of the Universe. It is essential to recognise that there is only one way to achieve this result: "Aikido is not something one learns; it is something one practices".[6] The path to harmonise the practitioner (*aikidoka*) with the world, therefore, is to train with every other *aikidoka* encountered, whether within one's own dojo or in

[6] Nobuyoshi Tamura, *Aikido. Méthode nationale*, 1977, Univerpress, Paris

any training experience, regardless of their level, gender, or school of origin.

A Brief History of Aikido

Tracing an authentic history of Aikido from its origins to its present form is no simple task; it is, in fact, occasionally contentious. We encounter narratives that, departing from reality, have become myth, shaped by the difficulty of finding accurate historical sources—particularly concerning the early years of the discipline—often fragmented or biased.

Like many other disciplines, Aikido is woven with a complex and multifaceted history that extends beyond mere tales of great masters and heroic acts. As we will see in the following pages, this complexity enriches its connection to the second concept we explore here: Life Skills.

Seeking historical truth requires acknowledging that the origin of the Aikido system, long imagined as distilled directly through the charismatic figure of Morihei Ueshiba, O-sensei, is, in fact, more intricate. Historical research indicates that Aikido's evolution was shaped through pivotal encounters that influenced its development. First, Morihei Ueshiba's meeting with Sokaku Takeda and the practice of Daito-Ryu Aikijujutsu provided the technical foundation of Aikido. Second, his encounter with Onisaburo Deguchi, founder of the neo-Shinto religion Omoto-kyo, was transformative in at least two ways: the spiritual dimensions of Deguchi's

teachings (visions, esotericism, the idea of "uniting humanity") merged with Aikido's spiritual practice, while Deguchi's influence opened doors for Ueshiba that were previously inaccessible—such as access to the Imperial Court and the training of Japanese military personnel.

In many ways, the outcome of the Second World War defined the next chapter in Aikido's history. The defeat shattered an entire way of life. Already by 1942, Morihei Ueshiba—who had, in the preceding decade, achieved status, fame, and a substantial following—entered a period of personal and spiritual crisis. He withdrew with his wife to Iwama, in Ibaraki Prefecture. During this retreat, a key figure in the story of Aikido emerged: Ueshiba's son, Kisshomaru, to whom his father entrusted the management of the Tokyo dojo and leadership of the Aikikai Foundation.

Kisshomaru Ueshiba was instrumental in spreading Aikido worldwide, and his contributions should not be overlooked despite his father's central role. He was a man of remarkable intellect and culture, with the vision necessary for disseminating his father's teachings. After the war, his insight shaped modern Aikido, fostering the training of new teachers and the establishment of dojos worldwide. In this sense, Morihei Ueshiba's enlightenment may not have been the dramatic episode of his encounter with a naval officer, where he reportedly understood that the purpose of *budo* was not death. Instead, perhaps the true insight lay in his acceptance of his son's vision—one that echoed the spirit of Omoto-kyo (or

what we might now call universal brotherhood) and resonated profoundly with the burgeoning countercultural movement.

This was, in fact, the second major factor in the success of Aikido. The peaceful philosophies of Aikido, in a world just beginning to recover from the devastation of war while new conflicts loomed on the horizon, aligned naturally with the ideologies of the emerging pacifist movement in Europe and North America during the 1960s.

With Kisshomaru Ueshiba at the head of the main school, Aikido entered a new phase of evolution. While his father continued practising and teaching in Iwama, Kisshomaru devoted himself to the global spread of the discipline. His efforts led to the training of a new generation of teachers who, in turn, disseminated Aikido worldwide.

In the years immediately following World War II, an extraordinary fervour began to ignite among Morihei Ueshiba's direct students. During this period, the training halls became vibrant laboratories of ideas, where the most expert of his students began to develop their own personal styles, reflecting their unique experiences under the Master's guidance.

Some dedicated themselves passionately to developing the martial side of the art, honing their physical skills and refining the techniques O-sensei had taught. Others were drawn to the art's spiritual dimension, seeking to grasp its deeper meanings and connections to Eastern philosophy. From this crucible of talents and visions, distinct

schools emerged, diverging from the central lineage of the Aikikai, the main organisation based at the Hombu Dojo in Tokyo.

Each school bore the mark of the historical period during which its master had trained with O-sensei, as well as the various places where the founder had practised. The Masters, each with their own history and unique experiences, transmitted an Aikido that evolved not only over time but also in philosophy and technique. Some of these styles achieved global recognition, creating networks of independent dojos that followed paths distinct from the singular vision proposed by the Aikikai.

Over time, however, many of these schools faced an inevitable challenge: with the passing of their founders, reintegration into the Aikikai became a reality. The increasingly organised Aikikai began to standardise interpretations of techniques through a rigorous system of examinations and seminars.

As we can see, the history of Aikido is a journey through Japanese culture, spirituality, and philosophy. Through crucial encounters, diverse influences, and unwavering dedication, Aikido has become far more than a martial art; it has evolved into a pathway for personal growth and global peace. And while mythological narratives may persist, it is important to acknowledge the complexity and richness of the true history behind it.

Technical and Philosophical Approach

Aikido has a unique approach to martial techniques, influenced, as we have seen, by two roots. In terms of technique, its lineage can be traced to the contributions of Daito-Ryu Aikijujutsu. Although the mechanical essence of the *kihon* (basic forms) originates from Daito-Ryu, the intention behind Aikido practice diverges significantly from conventional martial arts. Unlike many modern combat sports focused solely on effectiveness, Aikido emphasises a different paradigm: using its techniques to redirect an aggressor's force without causing harm. Here we can see the influence of its spiritual foundation in Omoto-kyo.

This combination constitutes Aikido's distinctive philosophy and cornerstone, highlighting a practice that, while deeply physical in essence, fundamentally excludes any notion of competition.

This approach shifts the focus toward personal growth and self-mastery rather than dominance or aggression. Through dedicated practice, individuals cultivate the ability to face life's many challenges without resorting to violence, showing strength when necessary and extending compassion when fitting.

For this reason, Aikido practice does not involve competitive combat; instead, practitioners are encouraged to improve themselves and fully integrate their personalities, embracing both their lighter and darker aspects. By understanding and

accepting these facets of the self, practitioners develop a profound understanding of human nature and foster empathy and awareness.

The Role of the Teacher

The complexity of Aikido requires expert guidance to fully grasp its philosophies and techniques, which go far beyond mere combat. In this sense, the personal example set by the teacher becomes essential for the proper learning and growth of students. An Aikido teacher is not merely a martial arts expert; they aim to be a mentor who guides practitioners on their personal and spiritual journey, teaching them Aikido's core values—respect, humility, and the pursuit of harmony—while also inspiring them to commit to their practice and develop the discipline needed to progress.

Becoming an Aikido teacher is a path that demands dedication, passion, and a deep understanding of the philosophy underpinning this martial art. There is no single profile for those who aspire to mastery; people of all ages and backgrounds can undertake this journey. However, certain essential qualities can facilitate the road to mastery.

First and foremost is a strong personal motivation. Aspiring teachers must be ready to invest time and effort into regular practice, delving deeply into the techniques and theory of Aikido.

Discipline is vital, as growth in this martial art happens gradually through years of training.

Another important quality is the ability to learn from others and to teach with patience. Aikido teachers do not merely excel in techniques; they are also skilled at conveying concepts clearly and accessibly. As we note, the figure of the teacher is central in Aikido, acting as a guide and role model for students.

Empathy is a crucial quality: a teacher must understand and respect the limits and needs of their students, adapting their teaching to suit diverse personalities and abilities. Furthermore, the teacher plays a pivotal role in fostering an atmosphere of respect and cooperation, essential for the students' progress.

The continuous pursuit of personal and spiritual growth is vital for a teacher. True Aikido Masters are committed to developing not only their technical skills but also their character. This inner growth nurtures a broader vision of Aikido as a path to peace and harmony.

As we have suggested, the practice of Aikido is interwoven with the very Life Skills that we will explore in greater detail in the next chapter. Here, we simply wish to treasure a reflection made during our partner meeting in Ireland.

Morihei Ueshiba and Life Skills

As we observed earlier, the story of Morihei Ueshiba—beyond myths and tales—is fascinating

in its own right, as it portrays an individual who, with distinct qualities and flaws, succeeded in navigating his life and fulfilling his own story.

In the context of this text and its study of the relationship between Life Skills and Aikido, this provides an intriguing way to reinterpret Aikido's history. This insight, especially highlighted by Aikido master and historian Simone Chierchini, was central to the initial reflections in our research in Ireland.

Perhaps, then, a fresh way to look at Aikido's history is to consider Ueshiba as a young man—a "nobody" at the time, yet brimming with potential, energy, strength, and vision, though occasionally troubled. Today, we might describe him as an introverted person with something gnawing inside, someone who had not yet found his path.

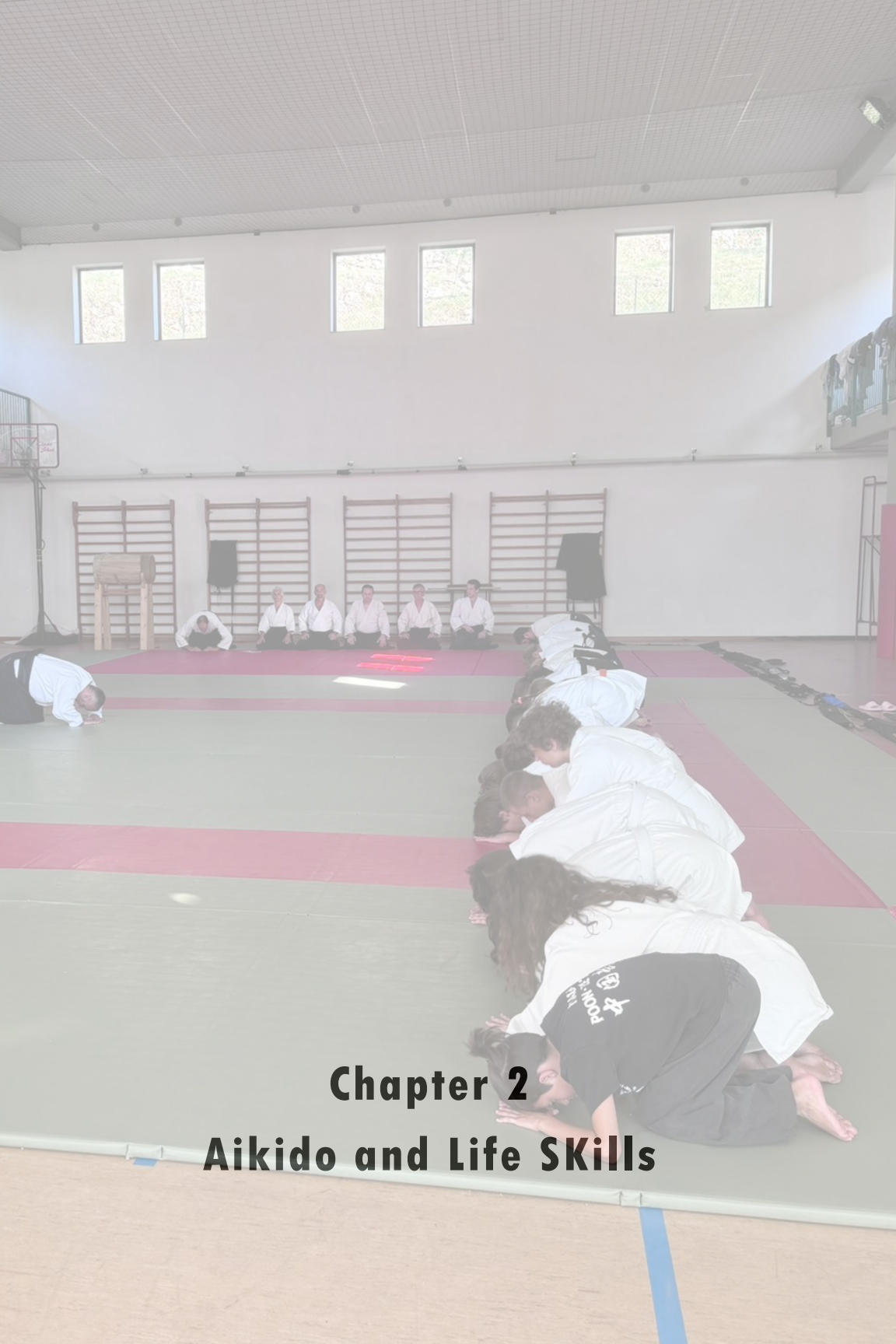
Privileged but not of Samurai status, Morihei Ueshiba sought in his youth a system of qualities—which we now recognise as Life Skills—through martial arts practice. His desire to make something of himself, and also to contribute to others, manifested repeatedly throughout his life. This drive led him to create something new, as seen in his attempted colonisation project in Hokkaido[7] and his expedition to Mongolia with Onisaburo Deguchi.[8]

[7] In 1912, Morihei Ueshiba, the founder of Aikido, joined an expedition to Hokkaido, the northernmost island of Japan, as part of a government program to encourage the colonisation and agricultural development of the then sparsely populated lands. In Hokkaido, Ueshiba settled in Shirataki, where he became a pioneer and local leader, contributing to the construction of roads and infrastructure for the new community.

[8] In 1924, Morihei Ueshiba joined Onisaburo Deguchi's expedition to Mongolia, driven by the spiritual goal of creating a utopian kingdom of peace. Deguchi, the leader of the Omoto religious sect, and Ueshiba, who followed him as a protector

In a sense, we can view Sokaku Takeda and Onisaburo Deguchi as the two mentors who shaped Ueshiba's search, fostering his inherent qualities and setting him on the path that would ultimately culminate in the story of Aikido.

and martial arts practitioner, hoped to establish a new community based on peaceful ideals. However, the expedition came to an abrupt end when they were arrested by Chinese authorities and faced life-threatening dangers.



Chapter 2
Aikido and Life SKills

At the outset of this chapter, it is essential to clarify the underlying rationale guiding the promotion and realisation of the Erasmus ACRE project (*Applying Aikido as a Conflict Resolution Method in Youth Education*). From the initial stages, it became apparent that a thoughtful and nuanced exploration of the relationship between Aikido and the transmission of Life Skills was necessary, recognising both the complexity and specificity of their interplay.

How might these two domains be interconnected? To assume their natural alignment under the shared principles of martial arts – with their ethics and discipline – or, more broadly, sports as vehicles for promoting Life Skills and enhancing practitioners' well-being would be overly simplistic. Not all sporting experiences, including those related to Aikido, result in positive outcomes. Similarly, the notion of modifying Aikido training solely to promote Life Skills appeared, to many instructors, as a potential betrayal of its essence.

Aikido and Life Skills occupy distinct theoretical and practical realms. While they share common value-driven reflections, they remain separate in their aims, practices, and intentions. Treating their integration as obvious or natural risks reducing the richness of both Aikido and Life Skills transmission. Aikido retains its integrity when its primary aim is the mastery of the martial art itself. But what happens when the objective shifts to "promoting Life Skills for well-being"? Does the traditional path—the *Way*—still hold, or does this shift necessitate a new approach? And if so, to what extent does this

reorientation alter the traditional role of Aikido instructors?

To adequately develop the Erasmus ACRE project, it was crucial to identify a way to connect the Aikido system with the empowering approach of Life Skills without compromising the integrity of either.

A particularly insightful concept that informed our reflection was the notion of "Polar Tension," as elaborated by Romano Guardini.[9] According to the Italian-German philosopher, living beings are characterised by the dynamic coexistence of opposing forces that do not cancel each other out but rather balance one another. This balance is not a blend, compromise, or higher synthesis, but rather a manifestation of both elements in their unique interaction. Guardini describes this relationship as a distinctive unity:

> "This peculiar relationship in which two moments exclude each other and yet connect to one another, this relationship that appears in every quantitative, qualitative and formal determination, I call 'opposition'."[10]

[9] Romano Guardini (1885-1968) was a German-Italian theologian and philosopher known for the concept of 'polar opposition', central to his thought. This idea expresses the dynamic coexistence of opposing forces, such as freedom and order, individual and community, that balance each other without cancelling each other out. In his thinking, Guardini considered this polar tension to be the basis of the human condition and consequently of the understanding of the world. The development of this theory can be found in the works *The Polar Opposition* and *The End of the Modern World*, in which Guardini comes to identify - in every sphere relating to the living - eight categories of polarity: act/structure; fullness/form; singularity/totality; production/disposition; originality/rule; immanence/transcendence; affinity/particularity; unity/plurality.

[10] Guardini R., *L'Opposizione Polare. Saggio per una Filosofia del Concreto Vivente*, Brescia, Morcelliana, 1997, p.29.

In light of the need to balance the relationship between Life Skills Transmission and the discipline of Aikido, we found it fruitful to follow Guardini's intuition, viewing this relationship as a form of polar opposition. This perspective avoids reading it as "a 'synthesis' of two moments into a third. Nor a whole of which the two represent 'parts'. Still less a mixture in view of some compromise".[11]

This approach allowed us to outline a potential organisational framework for Aikido training[12] that integrates both realms while maintaining their distinction. Such an approach offers several advantages: Aikido is not subordinated to Life Skills, preserving its essence as a martial art. At the same time, the promotion of Life Skills, aligned with contemporary theories in sports psychology, can find its own spaces and methods for application and enhancement in everyday life.

In this respect, the challenge is to establish a framework that allows the needs of Life Skills transmission and assimilation to align with the requirements of Aikido, ensuring neither is compromised and preserving the purity of the art.

Thus, having explored the history of Aikido in the first chapter, we now turn to a closer examination of Life Skills theory to derive elements for further reflection.

[11] *Ibidem*, p.41.

[12] In the following chapters of this work we are going to try to outline this structure by suggesting activities or reflections to help other dojos in their own training practice related to Life Skills Transmission.

Life Skills: Origins of the Concept

When we speak of Life Skills, or skills for life, we refer to a set of psycho-social abilities that enable individuals to effectively face the challenges life presents. Life Skills encompass a range of competencies, such as emotional regulation, effective communication, problem-solving, critical thinking, empathy and resilience. These skills not only equip individuals to navigate the complexities of social and professional life but also play a vital role in their mental and physical well-being.

Although humanity has always needed particular qualities and abilities to enhance well-being throughout its history, the concept of Life Skills gained theoretical prominence in the late 1980s and early 1990s. During this period, the World Health Organisation (WHO) recognised the importance of teaching these skills to young people as a means to prevent behaviours that endangered their well-being, such as substance abuse, violence, school dropout, sexually transmitted diseases and early pregnancies.

Early programmes aimed at addressing these issues were heavily prevention-focused, relying on control and deterrence, with a primary emphasis on disseminating information. However, these approaches often proved inadequate, as mere knowledge about dependencies, diseases, or other risky behaviours was insufficient to influence individuals' choices positively. Beyond providing information, it became necessary to develop a system that fostered behaviour and experience-

based skills: "The theoretical premise underpinning the teaching of Life Skills is Bandura's Social Learning Theory (1977), according to which learning is an active acquisition that occurs through the transformation and structuring of experience."[13] This approach ensures that learning becomes immediately usable and applicable to real-life situations.

Consider, for example, the many young people who begin smoking or consuming alcohol excessively. The health risks associated with these behaviours (cardiovascular diseases, respiratory disorders, cancer, etc.), including the potential for dependency, are widely known. Despite numerous school prevention campaigns, health warnings on product packaging and regulations aimed at restricting use and distribution, persistent smoking or excessive drinking is still prevalent. These behaviours are often influenced by peer pressure, social norms, or cultural factors.[14] The issue lies in the distinction between possessing information about health risks and being aware of those risks. Developing such awareness requires a different set of competencies.

For this reason, many international organisations, including UNICEF and UNESCO, have advocated for Life Skills education programmes

[13] Marmocchi P., Dall'Aglio C., Zannini M., *Educare le life skills. Come promuovere le abilità psico-sociali e affettive secondo l'Organizzazione Mondiale della Sanità*, Trento, Ediz. Centro Studi Erikson, 2004, p.19.

[14] See. WHO, *Alcohol, e-cigarettes, cannabis: concerning trends in adolescent substance use, shows new WHO/Europe report*, media release, 25/04/2024, available at https://www.who.int/europe/news/item/25-04-2024-alcohol--e-cigarettes--cannabis--concerning-trends-in-adolescent-substance-use--shows-new-who-europe-report [accessed on 17/10/2024]

in schools and other educational contexts. These initiatives highlight the importance of these skills in shaping individuals holistically, as explained in Article 1 of the final declaration of the World Conference on Education for All (Jomtien, 1990):

> "Every person – child, youth and adult – shall be able to benefit from educational opportunities designed to meet their basic learning needs. These needs comprise both essential learning tools (such as literacy, oral expression, numeracy, and problem solving) and the basic learning content (such as knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes) required by human beings to be able to survive, to develop their full capacities, to live and work in dignity, to participate fully in development, to improve the quality of their lives, to make informed decisions, and to continue learning. The scope of basic learning needs and how they should be met varies with individual countries and cultures, and inevitably, changes with the passage of time".[15]

Life Skills education is now recognised as a vital complement to traditional schooling. While conventional educational systems primarily focus on intellectual and technical skills, Life Skills teaching addresses emotional, social and relational domains.

[15] See United Nations Children's Fund, *The State of the World'sChildren 2021: On My Mind – Promoting, protecting and caring for children'smental health*, UNICEF, New York, October 2021

The introduction of structured programmes in schools and other educational settings is particularly important during childhood and adolescence, pivotal periods when young people shape their character, identity and social abilities.

Teaching young people how to manage stress, make responsible decisions, cultivate self-awareness, build positive relationships and resolve conflicts constructively and peacefully is a critical step towards fostering a more cohesive and resilient society. As UNESCO and WHO emphasise, the goal should not be limited to academic or professional success. Instead, it must also focus on equipping young people to lead balanced and fulfilling personal and social lives.

Life Skills education's importance is further underlined by its impact on mental health. Numerous studies have shown that young people who develop skills such as resilience and emotional self-regulation are less susceptible to issues like anxiety and depression—challenges that are becoming increasingly significant across Europe.[16]

The focus on youth should not suggest that Life Skills training is confined to a specific age group or context. These competencies can be learned and developed throughout life and in various situations. A central aspect of Life Skills dissemination is their adaptability to different cultural and social settings. Social and relational skills can be taught in diverse environments, from urban schools to rural

[16] See United Nations Children's Fund, *The State of the World's Children 2021: On My Mind – Promoting, protecting and caring for children's mental health*, UNICEF, New York, October 2021.

communities, and tailored to meet each community's specific needs.

This versatility has made Life Skills programmes highly effective and widely adopted globally. They are applied not only in formal education but also in community development projects, non-formal education initiatives, and programmes aimed at unemployed or disadvantaged youth. Such efforts provide individuals with the tools they need to navigate the world of work, adapt to personal and social changes, and build stable and rewarding lives.

In recent decades, sports have emerged as a significant avenue for promoting Life Skills. Sport is a powerful medium for learning essential life competencies because it engages young people in activities that promote collaboration, leadership, resilience and respect for rules.[17] The sports arena provides a real-world context where participants experience emotions, manage stress, solve problems and work as a team—core Life Skills that extend far beyond the playing field.

Organisations such as UNICEF and the International Olympic Committee have championed the integration of Life Skills into sports programmes. These efforts recognise sport's transformative potential as a driver of social change. Young

[17] See, amongst other, Papacharisis, V., Goudas, M., Danish, S. J., Theodorakis, Y. The effectiveness of teaching a life skills program in a sport context, in *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*, 17 (3), 2005, pp. 247-254; Petitpas, A. J., Cornelius, A. E., Van Raalte, J. L., Jones, T., A framework for planning youth sport programs that foster psychosocial development, in *The Sport Psychologist*, 19 (1), 2005, pp. 63-80; Gould, D., Carson, S., Life skills development through sport: Current status and future directions, in *International Review of Sport and Exercise Psychology*, 1 (1), 2008, pp. 58-78; Camiré, M., Trudel, P., & Forneris, T., Coaching and transferring life skills: Philosophies and strategies used by model high school coaches, in*The Sport Psychologist*, 26 (2), 2012, pp. 243-260.

participants in these programmes not only improve their physical abilities but also learn to become responsible citizens and active community members.

The relationship between Life Skills and sports is now well-established and acknowledged internationally. This integration is particularly effective in educational contexts, where sport's formative potential helps create resilient, responsible individuals capable of positive societal interactions. Through these initiatives, sport continues to demonstrate its value not only for physical well-being but also for the personal and social development of young people worldwide.

However, a critical issue requires attention: while sport can promote Life Skills, the translation of these skills into tangible, everyday abilities is not automatic. The lessons learned during sports practice do not always seamlessly transfer to the complexities of daily life. Bridging this gap requires intentional strategies to ensure that the competencies developed on the playing field can effectively support individuals in navigating their broader lives.

> "In order for a skill to be characterised as a life skill, it must not only be used in sport but must also transfer and help youth succeed in non-sport settings […]. Furthermore, in order for life skills to be learned, they must be intentionally taught in an effective manner by competent coaches. […]"[18]

[18] Camirè M., Forneris T., Trudel P., Bernard D., Strategies for Helping Coaches facilitate positive youth development through Sport, in *Journal of Sport Psychology in Action*, 2:2, 2011, pp.

As we shall see later, sports psychology has amply demonstrated that in order for these social skills to be directly transferable to people's life contexts, work specifically dedicated to this must be carried out within training programmes and sports projects, creating environments that promote the translation of Life Skills, and training coaches, managers and participants for this purpose.

Life Skills education contributes to basic education, gender equality, democracy, active citizenship, child care and protection, quality and efficiency of the education system, promotion of lifelong learning, quality of life and promotion of peace.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) defines Life Skills as

> "a group of psychosocial competencies and interpersonal skills that help people make informed decisions, solve problems, think critically and creatively, communicate effectively, build healthy relationships, empathise with others, and cope with and manage their lives in a healthy and productive manner. Life Skills may be directed toward personal actions or actions toward others, as well as toward actions to change the surrounding environment to make it conducive to health".[19]

[19] WHO, Skills for Health. Skills-based health education including life skills: an important component of a Child-Friendly/Health-Promoting School, 2003, p.8, available at https://iris.who.int/bitstream/handle/10665/42818/924159103X.pdf [accessed on 17/10/2024]

Indeed, Life Skills can be countless, and their nature may certainly vary depending on the socio-cultural context in which they are considered. However, the World Health Organisation has identified ten core competencies[20] that should form the central nucleus of any prevention programme aimed at promoting the well-being of children and adolescents, regardless of the context. These are the relevant definitions as presented by the WHO document:[21]

1. Decision-Making: This is the ability to approach decisions constructively in various life situations and contexts. Decision-making skills positively influence health by teaching individuals how to actively decide on their actions through an informed evaluation of the different options concerning well-being and the effects these decisions may have.

2. Problem-Solving: Similarly, it helps us tackle life's challenges in a constructive manner, whether in work or community settings. Significant unresolved problems can cause mental stress, leading to physical strain. Problem-solving involves breaking down a problem into its components, considering possible solutions and then selecting the best one without conflict.

3. Creative Thinking: This is the ability to see or do things differently. It consists of four components:

[20] The precise number and definition of Life Skills is a debated issue, however the reference to the list of Life Skills promoted by the WHO is internationally recognised, as are the skills to which the list refers.

[21] Cfr. ivi

fluency (generating new ideas), flexibility (changing perspective easily), originality (conceiving something new) and elaboration (building on other ideas). Creative thinking aids both decision-making and problem-solving by enabling us to explore available alternatives and the potential consequences of our actions or inactions. It also helps us respond adaptively and flexibly to everyday situations.

4. Critical Thinking: This is the ability to analyse information and experiences objectively, evaluating their pros and cons, to make more informed decisions. Critical thinking contributes to health by helping us recognise and evaluate the factors that influence attitudes and behaviours, such as personal and social values, peer pressure and media influence.

5. Effective Communication: This means being able to express oneself, both verbally and non-verbally, in ways appropriate to our cultures and situations. It also includes being able to express opinions, desires, needs and fears, as well as seeking advice or help when necessary.

6. Interpersonal Relationship Skills: These are the skills that help us relate positively to the people we interact with. This may involve forming and maintaining friendly relationships, which are vital for our mental and social well-being. It may also mean maintaining good relations with family members, who are an important source of social support, or ending relationships constructively—a fundamental aspect of well-being today.

7. Self-Awareness: This involves recognising oneself, including one's character, strengths,

weaknesses, desires and dislikes. Developing self-awareness can help us identify when we are stressed or under pressure. It is often a prerequisite for effective communication, improved interpersonal relationships and developing empathy towards others.

8. Empathy: Empathy is the ability to imagine what life is like for another person. Without empathy, our communication with others becomes a one-way street. Empathy helps us accept others who may be very different from us, improving social interactions, especially in situations involving ethnic or cultural diversity. It also encourages caring behaviour towards those in need of support or tolerance.

9. Coping with Emotions: Managing emotions means recognising emotions in ourselves and others, understanding how they influence behaviour, and responding to emotions appropriately. Intense emotions like anger or sadness can negatively impact health if they prevent appropriate responses to situations.

10. Coping with Stress: Managing stress involves identifying sources of stress in our lives, understanding how they affect us and taking steps to control our levels of frustration. This might involve changing the context or our lifestyle and learning to relax so that unavoidable sources of tension do not lead to health problems.

Young People in the Dojo - General Guiding Considerations

What has been discussed so far highlights how

what happens inside the dojos where we train is not at all separate from what happens outside. Reflecting on the quality of life, well-being and development of the boys and girls who attend our dojos means recognising, to some extent, that society itself raises its members, and every social learning opportunity supports the growth of young people. For any teacher leading a dojo, this implies understanding how to take on such a responsibility.

This involves asking precise questions about what happens within our training halls: Who should address this objective? What qualities should they possess? How should I structure my teaching? But it also involves looking beyond the tatami: What are the outcomes outside? What is this boy or girl's life like?

As can already be seen, the approach we are trying to structure in the Erasmus project *Applying Aikido as a Conflict Resolution Method in Youth Education* invites us to strengthen an "educational perspective" in working with young people.

During our meeting in Ireland, the project partners shared their opinions on the young people attending dojos in Ireland, Italy and Poland. With few exceptions, in the regions represented by the project partners, Aikido does not have a widespread following that draws the general public to Aikido dojos (certainly not to the level of sports like football, volleyball, or basketball). Children, in particular, are introduced to Aikido at school, during open workshops, or through parents who are involved in martial arts, holistic activities, or Japanese culture.

The children we meet in our dojos choose Aikido for various reasons. First, young people are often attracted by the allure of Japanese culture and the

martial aspect of the art: “I like samurai.” Another significant motivation comes from parents: “I want my child to become disciplined, organised, respectful, etc.” In many cases, Aikido is chosen as an alternative to more popular sports, where the high number of participants and the organisational style can lead to disinterest: “I used to play football, but I left because they never let me play”. In other cases, the philosophical and spiritual approach of Aikido, with its focus on peace and personal growth, offers a refuge for those escaping unpleasant social situations: “I didn’t like how the coach and teammates behaved”.

Children and young people often appear to deal with high levels of stress. They seem overwhelmed by numerous commitments: homework, exams, other sports, recreational activities and artistic endeavours. On one hand, they experience intense competitiveness, instilled by their environment and a structurally competitive culture; on the other hand, those who struggle with this competitiveness may become passive, displaying little interest. Generally, they tend to have limited ability to focus and concentrate. While they often overthink, they lack effective tools to critically assess their experiences. Moreover, their relationship with authority is often underdeveloped and immature.

Based on the experience of various teachers within our group, a number of challenges appear linked to the children’s life contexts:

- In the regions where children are often indoors due to the climate, they tend to be shyer and more introverted. For these children, the primary

goal is encouraging them to step out of their shells through basic movement.

- While differences in motor skills by age are natural, children today often arrive at the dojo (and other sports environments) with low confidence in their movement and body awareness.
- In Aikido dojos, children with specific challenges or special needs are more noticeable and cannot mask their struggles. Similarly, children with family issues often isolate themselves. In such cases, movement and the challenges it presents can unlock dynamics that tend to stagnate among peers who share a school environment.
- With younger children, there's a tendency to focus heavily on movement and fun, especially during time-limited school projects introducing Aikido. Here, the most important aspects include establishing order (e.g., forming a circle) and creating rituals during sessions. In these cases, especially without teachers' collaboration, identifying difficulties and fostering a trusting and serene environment for children is the biggest challenge.
- Children respond empathetically to imaginative scenarios, and some teachers use imagery to help young students accept the discipline: "This is my kingdom, and these are my rules" or "I am the captain of this ship".

As children grow, it is worth noting that children and young people are highly attentive to words—or,

more precisely, to the quantity of words. They need to be engaged and encouraged to actively participate in practice. Avoid the temptation of engaging in *proselytism*, where an overwhelming flow of knowledge risks becoming preachy or overly religious. Instead, it is better to provide space for personal exploration and engagement.[22]

Reflecting on those involved in Aikido within our dojos, we asked teachers to identify the skills they hope children and young people will develop for their well-being. These include:

- Stress management
- Self-awareness
- Interpersonal relationships
- Sense of community
- Communication skills
- Self-confidence

Once these aspirations leave the dojo, what environment do they encounter? How much of what we offer during training—our attitude, knowledge, presence and example—actually transfers into the children's daily lives? Since they are still growing, we are, in a way, accompanying them through their formative years.

The Erasmus A.C.R.E. (Applying Aikido as a Conflict Resolution Method in Youth Education) project seeks to highlight the connection between the inner and outer dojo. We summarised this approach

[22] As it will be seen below, this refers to Deci and Ryan's theoretical framework on self-determination, where, in order to promote the individual's self-determined adherence and not passive participation, it is important to create a space of experience in which to promote his agency.

with the motto: "To build the inner dojo of the student, we must carefully structure the external dojo."

This underscores the need for a balanced approach that integrates life skills into Aikido projects. These skills are not learned through mere information but through experience. However, applying life skills requires transferring acquired abilities to different contexts and experiences.

The structured environment of the dojo, with its attention to young learners, already forms part of the instructors' training. However, the complexity of life—with its pervasive interconnectivity, rapid changes and utilitarian tendencies—makes the teacher's role central to promoting life skills.

Finally, it is important to present theoretical frameworks to help address natural resistance from some instructors who might reject the idea of making "educational speeches", favouring practice over theory. Encouraging reflection on their role as educators, alongside their position as martial arts guides, is essential for holistic growth.

Life Skills Transmission: Theoretical Frameworks and Practical References

The meaning of the word Aikido is rooted in the kanji that compose it:

- 合 (*ai*): "harmony".
- 氣 (*ki*): "spirit", understood as "energy", "vital energy", the energy that sustains everything.
- 道 (*do*): "that which leads", understood as "path" or "way".

Thus, the path proposed by Aikido leads individuals to harmonise their energies with the vital energy and spirit of the Universe. For a living being to thrive, they must harmonise their energy and organise their effort to adapt to life's changes. Part of this depends on their own will and ability to align their efforts with change. However, another part inevitably depends on the context in which they live—a context that, given the complexity of our current historical period, is not always conducive to personal development and well-being.

This is why reflecting on Life Skills and incorporating them into Aikido training cannot be confined to the walls of the dojo alone.

As highlighted by Christina Kwauk and Amanda Braga in their research on the connection between social change and Life Skills education for young women:

> "While there is a consensus on the importance of life skills education, there is less consensus on how to design, deliver, and measure effective and empowering life skills education. At the heart of this conundrum is a lack of attention to social change. Specifically, practitioners often overlook the dynamic and social processes through which life skills development in the individual girl can actually help girls to transform their life outcomes and circumstances".[23]

[23] Kwauk C., Braga A., *Translating skills into empowered action. A framework for linking Girls' Life Skills Education to Social Change, Center for Universal Education at Brookings*, November 2017, p.4, available at https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/translating-competencies-empowered-action.pdf [accessed 17/10/2024].

The authors highlight three fundamental questions regarding the challenges associated with Life Skills development:

1. What is the process by which the development of Life Skills translates into empowered and conscious action that not only maintains the status quo but fosters real change in living conditions?
2. What factors act as enablers in facilitating this translation into action?
3. At what stage of life should programs aim to promote the development of Life Skills?

Numerous studies suggest that young people develop Life Skills most effectively through extracurricular activities such as music, theatre and sports[24]—contexts that are inherently experiential. In this light, Life Skills development becomes a cornerstone of the theoretical framework supporting Positive Youth Development (PYD).

PYD emphasises health, well-being, and the acquisition of Life Skills as key indicators of positive youth outcomes. Rather than viewing young people as "problems to be solved", PYD adopts a strengths-based approach, focusing on the skills they can develop, the positive qualities they exhibit and the internal and external resources they can leverage to promote well-being and prevent risky behaviours.[25]

[24] See Larson, R. W. (2000). Toward a psychology of positive youth development, in *American Psychologist*, 55(1), pp. 170–183. See also Cronin L.D., Allen J., (2017) Development and initial validation of the Life Skills Scale for Sport, in *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 28, pp. 105-119.

[25] See Cronin L.D., Allen J., (2017) *Development and initial validation of the Life Skills Scale for Sport*, cit.

Positive Youth Development encompasses various approaches, models and theories applied to youth development through sports projects.[26] A common concern across these perspectives is identifying which elements within sporting environments have the most significant impact on the development and growth of young individuals.

This perspective aligns closely with Aikido training, as its philosophy and practice provide a rich experiential framework. Aikido can foster essential Life Skills like emotional regulation, interpersonal communication, self-awareness and resilience—skills that translate beyond the dojo into broader life contexts.

Further insights could involve examining how structured Aikido programs integrate elements of PYD to maximise their impact on youth development, particularly by promoting empowerment, agency and well-being.

> «In particular, Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) seems a promising theory for investigating the mechanisms by which young people develop their life skills through sport. Self-determination theory suggests that autonomy support, satisfaction of the three

[26] In this sense, in the Erasmus A.C.R.E. project (Applying Aikido as a Conflict Resolution Method in Youth Education), by taking on these theoretical frameworks of reference we are implicitly looking at Aikido training as a sporting activity assimilated to others, at least in reference to the structuring of contexts and the relational approaches of coaches. Clearly we are aware of the distinctive qualities and possible conflict in attributing the label of sport to a martial art. However, we believe that the theoretical frameworks of PYD and Self-Determination Theory - which we will discuss below - remain valid approaches in the promotion of the project. The premises on polar opposition made in the opening of the chapter are intended to preserve precisely the martial side of the art and all related issues within the practice.

> basic needs (autonomy, competence, and relatedness), and self-determined motivation all relate to a person's development and well-being". (Ryan & Deci, 2000)[27]

The three fundamental psychological needs identified by Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci) provide valuable guidance for structuring environments that foster well-being during activities. These needs are:

1. Autonomy – The feeling of being free to make choices and the sense of being the origin of one's actions.
2. Competence – The need to feel effective and capable of overcoming challenges.
3. Relatedness (Belonging) – The need to form meaningful connections and feel accepted and valued in relationships.

To integrate Life Skills promotion into Aikido training for children and youth, it is essential to adopt practices that align with these psychological needs:

- Focus on Strengths and Resources: Shift from viewing children and young people as problems to valuing their potential and resources, fostering a positive and empowering attitude.
- Creation of an Enabling Environment: Design the dojo as a space where individuals feel valued, supported and motivated to grow.

[27] Cronin L.D., Allen J. (2017), Development and initial validation of the Life Skills Scale for Sport, cit. p. 109.

- Intentional Promotion of Life Skills:[28] Incorporate deliberate and conscious efforts to develop skills such as self-awareness, emotional regulation, teamwork and problem-solving.
- Encouragement of Transferability: Ensure that Life Skills learned during training are applicable beyond the dojo, promoting holistic growth and well-being in various life domains.

Two key factors make this approach practical and impactful. Firstly, focus on resources instead of problems: this avoids placing the teacher in a therapeutic role (curing), instead emphasising the enhancement of individual strengths and capacities (caring). Such an approach is both feasible and beneficial for an Aikido dojo. Moreover, this perspective encourages creating a relational context within the dojo, a method well-known and inherently practised by teachers, enhancing both the individual and collective growth.

Life Skills consist of a combination of knowledge, abilities, and attitudes that strengthen over time through practice and critical reflection.[29] For these competencies to translate into empowering actions, the environment must:

- Provide Opportunities for Engagement: Offer structured activities that encourage active participation and leadership.

[28] See. Theokas, C., Danish, S., Hodge, K., Heke, I., Forneris, T., Enhancing life skills through sport for children and youth,in Holt N.L. (Ed.), *Positive youth development through sport*, New York, Routledge, 2008, pp. 71–81.

[29] Cfr. Kwauk C., Braga A., *Transla□ng Competencies to Empowered Ac□on. A framework for linking Girls' Life Skills Educa□on to Social Change*, cit., p.4.

- Encourage Agency: Enable participants to take ownership of their learning and decision-making processes.
- Foster a Sense of Belonging: Build a dojo community that values inclusion, collaboration and mutual respect.

By addressing the fundamental psychological needs identified by Ryan and Deci, Aikido training can create an optimal environment for nurturing Life Skills and promoting well-being, ensuring that the principles and benefits of the practice extend beyond the tatami.

> "According to Hodge, Danish, and Martin's (2012) conceptual framework for Life Skills interventions, the basic needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness are the underlying psychological mechanisms that contribute to personal development within all Life Skills programs".[30]

It is appropriate to mention here that:

> "Self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985b; Ryan & Deci, 2000) has proposed that individuals have three innate, psychological needs. These are the need for competence, which concerns succeeding at optimally challenging tasks and being able to attain desired outcomes […]; the need for autonomy,

[30] Cronin L.D., Allen J., (2017) *Development and initial validation of the Life Skills Scale for Sport*, cit., p. 109.

> which concerns experiencing choice and feeling like the initiator of one's own actions […]; and the need for relatedness, which concerns establishing a sense of mutual respect and reliance with others […]. This latter definition of needs leads not to the assessment of need strength, but instead to the assessment of need satisfaction. Everyone is assumed to have these innate needs (regardless of the strength of their reported desires for those outcomes), so the degree of a person's need satisfaction is hypothesised to predict positive work-related outcomes. When need satisfaction is assessed, determining which aspects of the work context allow need satisfaction becomes a matter for empirical exploration, rather than for assumption. Use of this approach to defining needs and assessing need satisfaction could shed new light on the long-standing debate concerning the satisfaction–performance relation".[31]

In whatever activity we are involved in, the fact that we feel able to perform it autonomously and competently, as well as the fact that we feel we are in a relationship with others, helps to sustain our motivation to perform the activity, improves the results we obtain and the well-being we feel in that context. In essence, the view suggested by the theoretical framework we are adopting is that all opportunities that ensure the fulfilment of the three

[31] Baard P., Deci E., Ryan R., Intrinsic Need Satisfaction: a motivational basis of performance and Welle-Being in Two Work Settings, in *Journal of Applied Social Psychology,* 34, 10, 2004, pp.2045-2068.

basic psychological needs only facilitate self-motivation in the developmental pathway as well as optimal functioning because

> [they] "facilitate internalisation of extant values and regulatory processes, and they facilitate adjustment because need satisfaction provides the necessary nutriments for human growth and development […]. In contrast, thwarted satisfaction of the needs will undermine motivation and have maladaptive consequences […]".[32]

Once accepted this theoretical framework, it then becomes necessary to identify practical methods to harmonise the educational need to intentionally address Life Skills and individual well-being with the art of Aikido. There is specific literature available on the creation of workshops dedicated to promoting Life Skills. Drawing upon this literature, we will now examine the ways in which the promotion of Life Skills[33] can be integrated into Aikido training.

Training and Life Skills – Inner Dojo and Outer Dojo

As this book aims to support teachers who wish

[32] Baard P., Deci E., Ryan R., Intrinsic Need Satisfaction: a motivational basis of performance and Well-Being in *Two Work Settings*, cit., p. 2047.

[33] Cfr. Ken Hodge, Steven J. Danish, Julia Martin, Developing a conceptual framework for Life Skills Interven□ons, in The Counseling Psychologist, 41(8), 2013, 1125–1152, p.1129.

to incorporate Life Skills training into their dojos, it is essential to adopt an educational perspective aligned with such an aspiration. We have observed that this necessity is grounded in scientific literature from the field of Sports Psychology, which highlights that the transmission of Life Skills within sports processes cannot be considered an automatic outcome.

In projects aiming to integrate Life Skills development into sports programmes, careful attention must be paid to the role of the coach (in our case, the teacher or teachers), the structuring of the training environment and the awareness of an educational approach that prioritises the well-being and health of young people. This is particularly crucial if the intention is for Life Skills to be transferred from the training context to the broader life context of the individuals involved.

> "The nature of what children and adolescents learn through their participation in youth sports depends on many factors. Youngsters are constantly observing their environment and the actions of others within this context. Although a variety of individuals impact the social learning emanating from youth sport participation, the coach occupies a key position in terms of this experience […]. The youth sport coach may in fact be the most significant individual in determining the values and life skills that children learn through participation […]. Much of the learning that occurs in this context is dependent on the coach and the environment this individual constructs. Smith

> and Smoll (1991) concluded that youngsters are very accurate in their perception of coaching behaviours and readily internalise these perceptions. Because coaches are in positions of authority and influence, their values and philosophies regarding the sport experience may directly impact the participatory experience for the youngsters in their charge […]».[34]

Regarding the relationship between sports and the teaching of Life Skills, scientific literature emphasises the importance of considering an educational vision that necessarily transcends mere athletic development. Essentially, for the coach, who plays a central role in such programmes, this entails incorporating moments of verbal communication and attitudes of care and organisation of the environment into their practice sessions. These should be geared towards the promotion of Life Skills. As noted,

> "An important determinant of the values and life skills that youngsters learn from youth sport participation relates to the ability of coaches to identify and teach desirable values and behaviours. Participants are unlikely to learn selected values and life skills unless the environment is structured in such a manner by the coach to promote these outcomes."[35]

[34] McCallister S., Blinde E.M., Weiss, W.M., Teaching values and implementing philosophies: dilemmas of the youth sport coach, in *Physical Educator*, 57, 1, 2000, p. 37.

[35] Ibid. p. 38.

For our project, this means envisioning the work of teachers both "on the tatami" and "off the tatami",[36] distinguishing between what primarily pertains to the art of Aikido and what can be enhanced by applying Life Skills theory.

By using these expressions, we aim to practically organise the tension we discussed earlier—a desire to maintain a reciprocal relationship between the two domains rather than blending them completely or separating them entirely. This tension reflects a dynamic relationship where each domain enriches the other, enhancing the well-being and health of young people. "Tension" implies "connection". It does not mean "merging", nor does it mean complete "separation". Indeed, the way we teach "on the tatami" will inevitably incorporate methods relevant to Life Skills transmission. Conversely, how we structure activities related to Life Skills education must also consider the specific needs of teaching the art of Aikido—for example, the hierarchical relationship between teacher and student, the emphasis on physical practice over verbal instruction and the preference for experiential over cognitive learning.[37]

"On the tatami" primarily refers to teaching the art of Aikido in its purest form. As discussed earlier, teacher training programmes already provide guidance that goes beyond the technical aspects of

[36] With this distinction 'inside the tatami' and 'outside the tatami' we will try to structure the more practical chapters of this book, where we are going collect good organisational practices divided into the three main areas of Life Skills.

[37] Tamura N., *Aikido. Méthode nationale*, 1977, Univerpress, Paris, p.15

the art, covering dojo management and interactions with local institutions. Therefore, "on the tatami" is not limited to the literal training mat but broadly refers to what is specific to the art and the teacher's training in Aikido.

"Off the tatami", on the other hand, represents an outward-looking, educational perspective that extends beyond the traditional activities of the teacher. It involves focusing on care and structuring the training context to meet the conditions outlined in the previous section. This ensures the intentional promotion of Life Skills and their application to the individual's broader existential context.

Below, we outline several attentions and practical suggestions that can assist teachers in structuring their practices to facilitate the transmission of Life Skills.

The Responsibility of the Coach in Teaching Life Skills

It must be clear that dealing with Life Skills is a specific choice in our programmes:

> "However, lessons learned and improvements in health and well-being are not the natural byproduct of sport involvement. Rather, life skills must be purposefully taught so that the athlete understands the skills are transferable and how to transfer these skills from one setting (e.g., soccer field) to another setting (e.g., home, etc.) (Danish, 2002). The responsibility to teach life skills is naturally

placed on the coach".[38]

This also entails the responsibility to acquire appropriate training, both by familiarising oneself with the topic of Life Skills and by developing the knowledge and abilities required to address not only the physical and technical needs of young people but also their emotional and psychological needs.

Caring for and Developing One's Coaching Philosophy

A coach is a figure dedicated to the development of others, whether through direct engagement or by organising their practice. Many coaches, often working voluntarily and with great commitment, take on the needs of children and young people, playing a critical role in sustaining sports organisations, even in areas with limited financial resources. However, it is crucial to acknowledge the responsibility that comes with guiding the development of others. This responsibility requires the coach to care for the individuals under their guidance, their experiences and the context in which they train.

> «A crucial first step for coaches in establishing an effective coaching practice consisted of developing a well thought-out philosophy that prioritises the physical, psychological, and social development of athletes. When developing their philosophy, coaches

38 Bodey K.J., Schaumleffel N.A., Zakrajsek R., Joseph S., A strategy for coaches to develop Life Skills in Youth Sport, in *The Journal of Youth Sports*, 4, 2, 2009, p.16

> considered the context in which they operate (e.g., What is the mission of the school?), the performance demands of their sport (e.g., What type of commitment is needed from athletes?), and the developmental level of their athletes (e.g., Are my athletes freshmen new to the sport or experienced seniors?)".[39]

Reflecting on one's coaching philosophy and the journey planned for the season involves continually questioning one's approach, the extent to which athletes are learning, their degree of positive development, and the quality of the experience they have within the sports environment. A good practice would be to present this philosophy at the start of the season to all stakeholders—athletes, parents, and collaborators—and to create opportunities during the sports season to analyse and reinforce the practical foundation of this philosophy. It is evident that this approach comes with certain costs: in terms of time, organising meetings and moments of reflection; in terms of emotions, as it involves engaging with values that may differ from one's own and ensuring that collaborators implement the same vision.

Developing meaningful social relationships with athletes

This begins with demonstrating credibility:

"Many coaches quickly realised that in order

Camirè M., Forneris T., Trudel P., Bernard D.,Strategies for Helping Coaches facilitate positive youth development through Sport, in *Journal of Psychology in Action*, 2, 2011, pp. 92-99, p.93.

> to gain athletes' respect and make the coach-athlete relationship work, they first had to demonstrate a certain level of credibility. This meant demonstrating to their athletes that they had the knowledge and skills necessary to coach effectively".[40]

Building strong relationships with athletes enables the optimal structuring of the training environment. It allows for reassessment and adaptation of one's coaching philosophy, as well as a better understanding of the athletes' internal resources, such as their skills or Life Skills, and external factors, such as their context or personal history.

To foster meaningful relationships, group activities can be organised, such as sports camps during holiday periods, or activities outside the sporting context aimed at team building, such as social dinners or guided visits to cultural attractions.

Every opportunity should be utilised to better understand the people working and growing alongside you. Key actions to support the transmission of Life Skills include organising individual sessions for feedback and reflection, as well as group debriefs.

Encouraging athletes to keep a journal can also be a valuable tool. A journal not only provides insights but also fosters reflective thinking, self-analysis, and evaluation of one's progress.[41]

[40] Ibid, p.94.
[41] Ibid, p. 17.

Planning Intentional Development Strategies in Training Practice

We have reiterated that Life Skills require intentional strategies to be effectively taught and learned. One of the best methods is integrating Life Skills training into the practice itself.[42] This involves designing lessons anchored in experiential learning. In this sense, the preseason planning process becomes a critical ally for the coach, enabling them to outline the journey the athletes will undertake.

> «Many coaches do not prepare practice plans because planning is time consuming, hard work, and not always fun […], but successful coaches know practice plans provide the framework necessary to progress toward identified goals".[43]

In this case, the objectives are also linked to Life Skills. This helps structure the season, guiding not only the sporting themes but also those related to Life Skills:

> "The coach must keep in mind the choice of life skill(s) should match the developmental readiness of the athlete and be aligned with the league or sponsoring agency's mission statement. At the pre-season meeting, the

[42] Cfr. ivi, p.96; see also anche Schaumleffel N.A., Zakrajsek R., Joseph S., A strategy for coaches to develop Life Skills in Youth Sport, cit..
[43] Ibid, p.17.

> coach will review the choice of life skill(s) with parents and make changes as necessary".[44]

Combine Life Skills lessons with specific techniques or practical exercises

Anchoring Life Skills to a sporting exercise means trying to imagine practical ways in which Life Skills can be made manifest and thus promote their learning.

> "The life skill lesson should be matched to a sport drill or activity already in the practice plan. The rule of thumb is to keep it simple, and to incorporate only one life skill lesson per practice. While life skill lessons should be a consistent part of practice during the course of the season, not every practice must have a life skill lesson. This is also an opportunity for the coach to show his/her creativity in both designing the life skill lessons and linking the lessons to a variety of sport drills and activities as the season progresses.Planning to incorporate the life skill lesson into a specific practice involves three steps: (a) define the life skill, (b) select the sport drill, and (c) connect the life skill and sport drill".[45]

[44] Ibid,
[45] Ibid, p. 18

Implement the Life Skills Lesson During a Specific Practice[46]

It can be interesting for the coach to take advantage of the practical exercises he or she has combined with Life Skills to create a formative moment, which helps the trainees to bring the specific life skill to life and thus memorise it, through a dialogic mode, in a different way.

> "Typically at the start of practice, the coach will make announcements and give an overview of the planned activities. It would be appropriate for the coach to mention that as part of one of the drills. Dribbling through Pirates, the team was going to talk about the notion of fair play. Practice then proceeds as planned until it is time to implement the life skill lesson. Implementing the life skill lesson involves three phases: (a) message, (b) reinforce, and (c) transfer".[47]

The **message** is the moment when the meaning of the chosen Life Skills is briefly discussed. This is when leaving the possibility for dialogue and shared construction becomes very important, as well as building the link between Life Skills and the skill required in the practical exercise. **Reinforcement** takes place during the execution of the exercise or as soon as it is finished. In this case it is a time for the coach to also manage techniques related to the

[46] See Ibid. See also Camirè M., Forneris T., Trudel P., Bernard D. , Strategies for Helping Coaches facilitate positive youth development through Sport, cit..
[47] Ibid, p.18.

practice sport, which can nevertheless be valuable for offering positive **feedback** that reinforces virtuous behaviour. Also the end of the exercise also offers the opportunity to discuss and analyse the experience.

Reinforcing Life Skills Practice and not just Life Skills Talk

> "Do Not Just Talk About Like Skills, Make Your Athletes Practice Life Skills".[48]

In order to achieve this, coaches can involve their athletes in decision-making regarding certain activities that affect the group and training. Assigning responsibilities and recognising, through special statuses (captain, senior), these responsibilities is also a way of making athletes feel recognised and involved and in this way reinforcing their motivation to participate and learn. Organising actual moments of exercising life skills could be very important, for example by having the group carry out voluntary work. This could create opportunities for Life Skills reinforcement but also for connection between the coach and the athletes and between the athletes themselves.

Explicitly Teach how Life Skills Transfer to Non-Sporting Contexts

«In sum, coaches strived to identify

[40] Camirè M., Forneris T., Trudel P., Bernard D., Strategies for Helping Coaches facilitate positive youth development through Sport, cit., p. 97.

> transferable skills and provided encouragement to help their athletes gain the confidence necessary to use their skills in a wide range of situations. Many coaches believed their athletes».[49]

It means trying to directly explain how, for example, teamwork or a sense of responsibility towards others can be qualities directly appreciated in the workplace, or how, for instance, the ability to set goals can be a valuable skill within an educational journey.

As can be understood from these considerations, the role of the coach in youth sports contexts—in our case, the Aikido instructor and those who support and assist them—is crucial in our social system. This is because they provide many children with the opportunity not only to engage in physical activity but also to learn skills and abilities that transcend the sporting world.

The integration of Aikido with Life Skills is seamless, as its core philosophy of self-improvement and the pursuit of peace aligns perfectly with the objectives of Life Skills education. Both efforts aim to empower individuals to live fulfilling lives and contribute positively to society. Aikido's emphasis on discipline, resilience, and respect resonates deeply with the foundational principles of Life Skills education, which seeks to equip young people with the essential qualities needed to enhance their health, well-being and interpersonal relationships. Through the practice of Aikido and the acquisition of Life Skills,

[49]. ivi, p.97.

individuals are not only better prepared to face the challenges of the world but also to promote harmony and understanding within their communities.

The issue we aim to outline in this discussion essentially seeks to aid the structuring of an educational vision when, in our dojos, we strive to become promoters of well-being and health for young people. The matter of Life Skills demands that our focus does not remain exclusively on the practice within the dojo but extends beyond, towards the creation of a network that enables positive development for young people—perhaps even through the involvement of other educational institutions, such as the family, schools and religious organisations.

In the particularly sedentary world in which we live, the availability of a social space of this nature is fundamental. However, it must be recognised that the commitment and responsibility entailed by such a role in raising members of a community are significant. Sport, while so rich in potential, does not automatically guarantee healthy development and positive formation of young people. The environment and context we create, and into which we invite young people, are our responsibility:

"Coaches are in a preferred position to use the power of sport to positively influence the lives of their athletes in a lasting manner".[50]

From a certain point of view, we should feel somewhat honoured: we are not therapists, yet we

[50] ivi, p.98.

are working with young people who are freely embarking on this journey. Having these students is an opportunity.

One Last Piece of Advice

A final worthwhile recommendation could come from Ronkainen and colleagues: in their work, it is particularly interesting to note their critique of the largely utilitarian intentions that underpin most Life Skills projects.

> "The aim of the present paper is to critically examine the content, the process and the justification of learning in sport that relates to 'things' broader than sports skills. We argue that the life skills discourse has led to a premature narrowing of research focus to 'things' that are deemed useful, positive, teachable, concrete and 'objectifiable'."[52]

In essence, discussions about Life Skills might implicitly focus on fostering positive learning, with the idea that, in sports, there is always a way to make the experience positive and enhance individuals' physical, psychological, and social capital. This perspective, intentionally or not, tends to deny or bypass the potential contribution of negative experiences to the development of existential learning.

> "Few studies positioned within the life skills discourse have acknowledged 'negative

[52] Ronkainen N., Aggerholm K., Ryba T., Allen-Collinson J., Learning in Sport: from Life Skills to Existential Learning, in *Sport Education and Society*, 26, 2, 2021, pp. 214-227.

> developmental experiences' (e.g., stress, ego-oriented climates, social exclusion) in sport too […] However, scholars have typically treated these simply as problems to be removed from the sport experience, rather than opportunities for learning that could have some value. We will return to the role of negative experiences in our section on existential learning, to argue that they carry the potential to trigger questioning and reflection, and therefore should be recognised as carrying valuable potential for human learning".[53]

The space at our disposal does not allow for an in-depth exploration of all aspects of this issue. However, it is worth reflecting on one key point. It is not, of course, about deliberately creating negative experiences, but rather about avoiding the illusion of being able to create a sterile environment that shields individuals from negative experiences—experiences that, in life, are often among the greatest teachers.

In this reflection, we find value in anchoring the integration of Life Skills in Aikido to the idea of polar tension. We have seen how Aikido is fundamentally based on practice, the experience of the tatami, the relational work between teacher and student, and existential learning. The teaching methods of many Aikido instructors often avoid excessive explanations, leaving the development of techniques to the mechanical interplay of bodies—uke and

[53] Ibid, p. 218

tori—engaged in practice.

From this perspective, Aikido teachers are well-acquainted with their path, having learned it through a lifetime of experience. Their testimony, characterised by few words and strong presence, creates space for young practitioners to find meaning in the struggles they face during training. Aikido is an art, and as such, its perfection should be the sole objective. Through this pursuit of perfection, one achieves the harmonisation with the universe that Aikido promises in its name.

Dressing this art with other goals, as we noted at the beginning of this chapter, risks imposing an additional utility to be spent in the social context in which we live. While this approach can certainly be meaningful, it is a sense that, as we have attempted to demonstrate, must be carefully evaluated, reflected upon, critiqued and applied with caution. It requires a vigilant educational lens to ensure that it truly serves existential learning:

> "As opposed to life skills, existential learning embraces the ambiguities of human life and learning, and therefore the content of existential learning cannot be pinned down as a list of 'life skills' (Biesta, 2015; Bollnow, 1959; Saeverot, 2013). In contrast to practical skills, the 'object' of existential learning is the person's whole mode of being; that is, how they are attuned to the world, find meaning and value in life, and make life choices".[54]

[54] Ibid, p. 215.

Once again, we encounter the value of the concept of Polar Opposition. The efforts made to integrate Life Skills find, in the open-mindedness of the Aikido teacher and their expertise in the art, the potential not only to translate Life Skills into real-life contexts but also to frame them as existential learning. This approach is not about compiling simple lists of skills to be achieved but rather about fostering key moments that contribute to a meaningful existence.

Evaluation

The attempt to evaluate and build a research framework for assessment is relatively recent. At the time of the publication of their essay (2013), Hodge et al. noted the existence of only 30 publications in the field and highlighted the need to unify the theoretical framework.[55] Similarly, Cronin and Allen observed:

> "Despite calls for new measures to be developed (Gould & Carson, 2008), only one sport-specific measure is currently available to assess life skills development through sport (i.e., the YES-S; MacDonald et al., 2012)".[56]

It goes beyond the scope of this discussion to contribute scientifically to the debate on tools for

[55] Ken Hodge, Steven J. Danish, Julia Martin, Developing a conceptual Framework for Life Skills Interventions, in *The Counseling Psychologist,* 41(8), 2013, 1125–1152.

[56] Cronin L.D., Allen J., (2017) Development and initial validation of the Life Skills Scale for Sport, cit., p. 109.

evaluating to what extent children and young people develop Life Skills and apply them to their lives and contexts. This is due to a practical limitation: the Erasmus ACRE Project (Applying Aikido as a Conflict Resolution Method in Youth Education) started this year and currently involves only a small number of individuals. Thus, the available data is insufficient for statistically significant conclusions.

Moreover, this book aims to present good practices rather than delve into overly specific details. For further exploration, we refer readers to the Life Skills Scale for Sport (LSSS) by Cronin and Allen[57] and their related works.

Practical Reflections

For our purposes, it may be more relevant, as a good practice, to explore the key aspects to monitor within our dojos.

In discussions among project partners, we sought to identify indicators that help us understand whether children and young people are having a positive experience in the dojo—whether training is effective, promotes happiness, and fosters individual well-being. Importantly, "positive" in this context does not mean they are always happy but that they overcome difficulties and maintain a connection with the practice, staying engaged in the process.

From these discussions, the following indicators emerged:

[57] Ibidem.

- When, during training, there is silence and intensity.
- When, during training, the children are focused yet smiling.
- When, during training, it is clear that each participant is present with themselves.
- When, during training, participants are willing to give more energy than is asked of them.
- When, during training, children discover something new.
- When it becomes evident that they start respecting certain values without being reminded.
- When they commit themselves to overcoming challenges.

Drawing from Deci and Ryan's Self-Determination Theory, we understand that environments that support the satisfaction of three fundamental psychological needs—autonomy (feeling free to choose and originate one's actions), competence (feeling effective and capable of succeeding in challenging activities), and relatedness (forming meaningful connections and feeling accepted and valued in relationships)—foster self-determination and a sense of well-being in continuing activities.

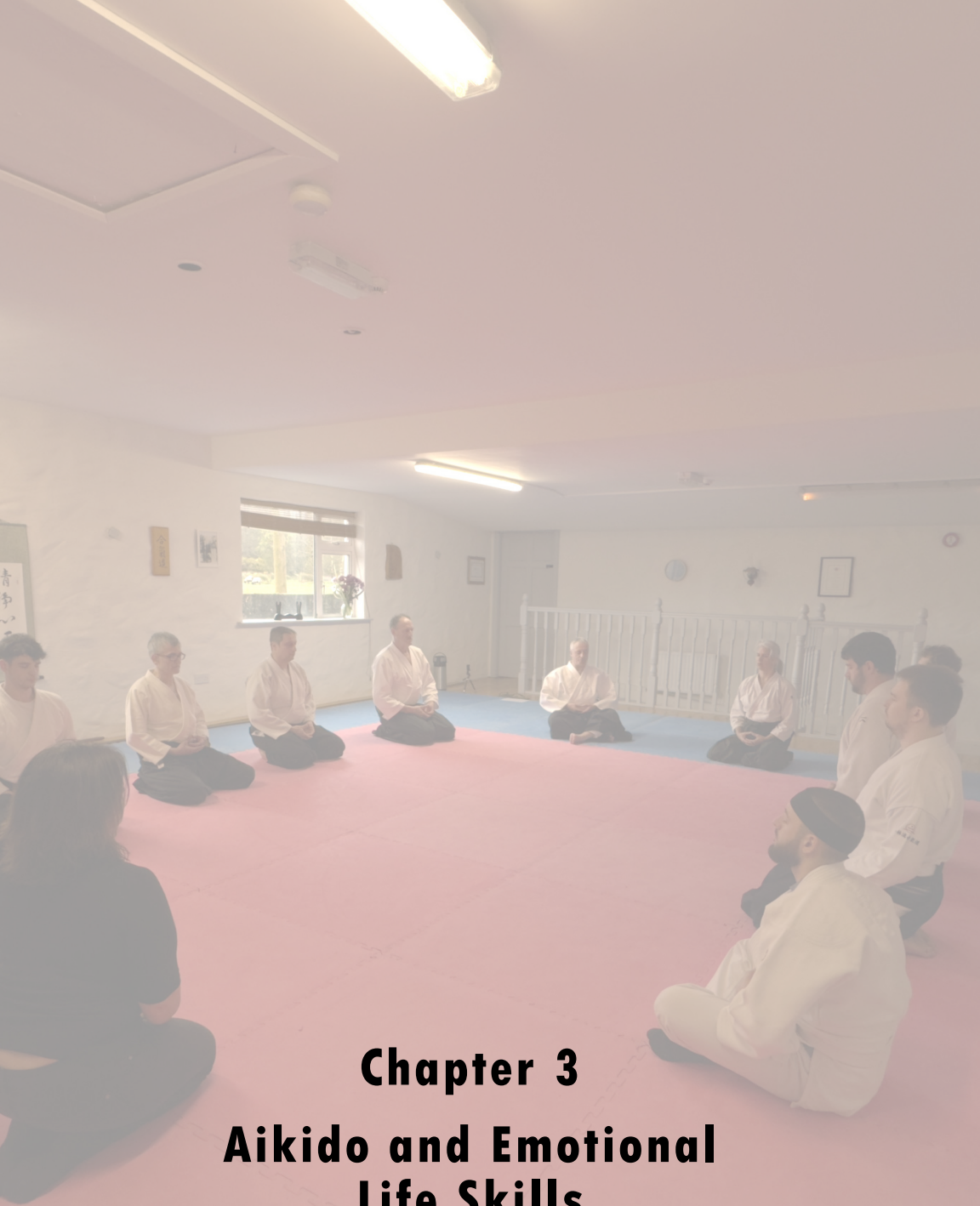
Based on this framework, markers that can be evaluated through questionnaires, direct observation, dialogues and feedback include:[58]

[58] Here, we refer to the items from Life Skills Scale for Sport by Cronin and Allen. For further details, see: Cronin L.D., Allen J. (2017) Development and Initial Validation of the Life Skills Scale for Sport.

- The ability to work in a group means accepting suggestions, building team spirit, helping others, knowing how to step back to make room for others and recognising the good of the group.
- The ability to set goals implies focusing on objectives, knowing how to establish challenging goals, staying anchored to those goals and verifying progress.
- The ability to manage time involves organising objectives temporally, knowing how to make adequate use of the time provided and controlling its use.
- The ability to manage emotions includes knowing how to experience them, understanding when and to what extent behaviour is influenced by emotions, having self-awareness of one's emotional state, learning to use one's emotions to focus on tasks, understanding the emotions of others, and knowing how to approach and help others in an emotional state.
- The ability to manage interpersonal communication involves learning to speak clearly, knowing how to communicate one's needs and requests for help, and understanding the communications of others, both verbal and non-verbal.
- Social skills involve knowing how to interact with others, maintain friendships, engage in activities, understand others' requests for help, and assist without waiting for those requests to be expressed explicitly.
- Leadership skills mean being able to set challenging goals for the group, knowing how to

motivate others, being a good role model, recognising the improvements of others and understanding how to inspire them.

The ability to solve problems consists of applying critical reasoning to issues, creating multiple solutions for the same problem, comparing each solution to find the best one, and evaluating the solution to a problem. By aligning training environments with these markers, we can enhance not only the immediate experience within the dojo but also foster broader life skills that extend far beyond the tatami.



Chapter 3

Aikido and Emotional Life Skills

Self-awareness
Emotion Management
Stress Management

In this chapter, and in the following two, we aim to systematise some of the theoretical issues outlined in the previous chapter. These are tips, suggestions and best practices related to Life Skills that we have shared among project partners, derived from our experience of working with children and young people during training sessions in our dojos.

In building relationships with young practitioners, it is undoubtedly useful to use language and imagery drawn from the dojo itself. Children, in fact, must be introduced to two types of dojo: the *personal dojo*, representing oneself in a given space, and the *communal dojo*, where one interacts with others. These concepts help young aikidoka better grasp the connection between internal and external experiences. By employing this imagery, we can talk about "creating and strengthening the personal dojo" as well as "building the most beautiful dojo in the world."

To "build a beautiful external dojo", one must first "prepare the internal dojo". It is the inner space that projects outward, forming the basis for building a community where "several small dojos come to life". As discussed in previous chapters, it is essential to emphasise that "everyone always carries their small dojo with them". For this reason, one should be cautious of being overly idealistic or relying solely on doctrine or philosophy. Ideology serves no purpose when it skips the essential steps required to build understanding. As we have seen, providing space for experience and fostering an educational vision through relationships is the most effective way to ensure that "the small dojo we carry

everywhere does not remain confined solely to the realm of sport".

For clarity, we have divided Life Skills into three categories: emotional, relational and cognitive.

Sport and Emotional Life Skills

Self-awareness, Emotion Management and Stress management are Life Skills that belong to the emotional domain. Emotional Life Skills are fundamental competencies that find significant expression in the sports context, greatly contributing to athletes' well-being, personal growth and performance. Self-awareness allows athletes to recognise their thoughts, emotions and physical reactions to specific situations, making them more capable of understanding and controlling their emotional state. This skill is particularly useful for identifying one's strengths and areas for improvement, thereby fostering self-efficacy and self-esteem. Furthermore, it forms the foundation of an individual's sense of agency, enabling them to see themselves as the centre and origin of their actions.

Emotion management is another crucial skill, helping athletes maintain calmness and focus despite pressure or challenges—such as belt tests or preparing for *embukai* in Aikido. Being able to regulate emotions prevents impulsive reactions and sustains an optimal mental state, promoting resilience and the ability to face challenges. Aikidoka—whether *kohai*, *sempai*, or *sensei*—learn early on to accept both success and failure and to manage the emotions tied to these experiences. This

skill is vital for navigating everyday challenges. Proper emotion management doesn't equate to control but rather to living emotions with serenity.

Finally, stress management enables individuals to transform nervous energy into a positive resource, minimising stress's negative effects on performance. Many young people arrive at our dojos burdened by numerous commitments, often tense and anxious due to a competitive lifestyle that demands peak performance at all times.

As demonstrated, Emotional Life Skills collectively support an aikidoka's mental balance, promoting well-being and integrated growth that extends beyond physical capabilities. Many targeted activities can enhance these skills, helping students develop a positive approach to practising Aikido and to life itself. Let us explore how these skills are cultivated within the dojo.

Self-Awareness

Maciej works as a computer programmer and spends most of his day sitting. A sedentary posture brings various consequences. Maciej has been practising Aikido for 11 years, and without his knowledge of aikitaiso (wam-up and stretching exercises specific to Aikido), he wouldn't manage his lower back, neck and shoulder pain as effectively. After work, he heads to the dojo. Calm and composed, he prepares for training. Mastering a set of specific exercises has helped him improve his body awareness, easing pain throughout his body.

Self-awareness is the ability to recognise oneself, including one's character, strengths, weaknesses, desires and dislikes. Developing self-awareness helps us identify when we feel stressed or pressured in life situations. It is often a prerequisite for effective communication, improved interpersonal relationships and the development of empathy.

Over the past century, population growth, enhanced mobility and rapid advancements in communication systems have placed humanity at the centre of an exponential increase in interpersonal interactions. Today, we exist within a constant flow of engagements with people and information, continuously reshaping our experiences. This creates a sense of perpetual disorientation, drawing us outward and impeding both effective interaction and self-understanding. In this historical context, it is more crucial than ever to

develop tools that promote self-awareness—not just recognition, but also the ability to assert oneself.

Self-awareness should not be seen as a fixed state, something static or stable. Instead, it evolves and shifts as we navigate our existential journey. For those pursuing self-improvement, such as through Aikido, self-awareness is an essential tool for measuring progress.

Self-awareness extends beyond simply "knowing oneself", as inscribed on the Temple of Apollo at Delphi. Philosopher Pierre Hadot, in *Exercices spirituels et philosophie antique*[59] (1981), suggests it also encompasses "caring for oneself". Aikido serves as a powerful method for both self-knowledge and self-care.

The practice of Aikido fosters a profound connection between the practitioner's body and mind. As students engage with Aikido's physical movements and techniques, they develop a heightened sensitivity to their body's complexities. They learn to discern subtle signals about their physical capabilities and limitations, cultivating a deep awareness of their physical self.

This heightened bodily awareness becomes a gateway to mental clarity and focus. As practitioners enhance their physical self-awareness, they naturally extend it to their thoughts and emotions, enabling a holistic understanding of themselves. They learn to observe their mental processes with the same attentiveness applied to physical movements, fostering a more integrated self-perception.

[59] Hadot P., *Exercices spirituels et philosophie antique*, 1981, Études Augustiniennes, Paris.

Additionally, the structured environment provided by Aikido enhances this journey of self-awareness. Within Aikido training, students are guided by the Sensei, who serves as both a reference figure and a role model on the tatami, offering invaluable insights and instructions. The Sensei acts as mentor, aiding students in their exploration of self-awareness and creating a safe space for growth and development.

Through Aikido, practitioners not only become more attuned to their physical and emotional states but also develop the tools to care for and nurture themselves—an invaluable skill for both the dojo and life beyond.

Aikido Techniques for Cultivating Self-Awareness

In Aikido, the practice of life skills—particularly in the emotional domain, such as self-awareness, emotion management, and stress management—is integral to personal development. Below are key techniques and rituals that foster self-awareness within the framework of Aikido training.

Preparation for Entering the Dojo

The journey of self-awareness in Aikido begins even before stepping onto the tatami. Preparing one's training bag with a clean *keikogi*, washing oneself before entering the dojo, bowing at the entrance and assuming the proper *seiza* position in front of the *kamiza* are repetitive, mindful actions.

These rituals slow down emotional currents and compel practitioners to listen to themselves.

The initial bow (*rei*) performed in designated areas of the tatami—*kamiza*, *shimoza*, *joseki* and *shimoseki*—symbolises the four boundaries of the Aikido world, likened to a ship carrying the practitioner to a safe harbour.

Positioning and Roles

Positioning within the dojo reflects a practitioner's seniority and role, distinguishing the *kohai* from the *sempai*. Identifying one's position fosters a sense of responsibility and an understanding of one's place within the group. This dynamic role evolves over time, encouraging self-reflection and adaptability. The *seiza* position—a Japanese kneeling posture where the feet support the seated body—is physically challenging, particularly for Western practitioners. The discomfort it causes (ankle or leg pain) encourages practitioners to develop bodily awareness and requires control and willpower. Seiza also alters cardiovascular flow, directing more blood to the upper body, further enhancing the practitioner's mindfulness of their physical state.

Seiza (Meditation)

The initial bow toward the kamiza holds profound spiritual significance in Aikido. It invites each aikidoka to turn inward, centring their energy and consciousness on their *hara*—the core of life force and awareness.

Kokyu (Deep Breathing)

Deep breathing exercises, performed both as a part of the bowing ritual and then in a standing position, open up internal energies. The controlled use of diaphragmatic breathing and phonetics generates exceptional energy when applied correctly, grounding the practitioner and enhancing their awareness.

Aikitaiso

Aikitaiso warm-up and stretching exercises aim to harmonise internal energies in preparation for practice. They bridge the practitioner's awareness of their physical state, whether they are in peak condition, recovering from injury, or feeling unwell. These exercises blend physical movements with breathwork, serving as a dynamic meditation. Through this, practitioners connect deeply with their bodies, bypassing verbal communication in favour of bodily intuition.

Regardless of the form—dynamic or static—the goal of meditation in Aikido is to align energy at the *seika tanden* (energy centre below the navel), where breathing becomes centred and the mind quietens. This practice encourages a state of flow, bridging physical activity and stillness, enabling transformative experiences. Practitioners who understand and harness this energy centre can unlock deeper levels of self-discovery and growth, aiding in managing trauma, external influences and personal challenges.

The Teacher's Role in Recognising Students' Energy Centre

An individual's seika tanden can shift due to various factors, such as trauma, cultural influences, faith, or even substance use. These shifts may have positive or negative effects, often creating a duality within the individual. Aikido teachers have a responsibility to recognise the energy centre of their students from their very first day in the dojo. This insight allows teachers to better understand each student's needs by seeking additional information from parents, friends, or the students themselves.

Here are examples of key questions to assess and support a student's self-awareness and growth:

- Are children experiencing problems at school?
- Are they subject to bullying?
- What is their personality—more active or reserved?
- What are their interests and hobbies?
- How do they handle challenges or conflicts in group settings?
- Are they comfortable with physical contact and proximity to others?
- How do they respond to instructions and adult guidance?
- What are their expectations in pursuing Aikido?
- How do they experience emotions and stress?
- Have they previously expressed a desire to learn self-defence or martial arts?

Understanding these aspects ensures that the

teacher can create a supportive environment tailored to the unique needs and aspirations of each student, fostering self-awareness and holistic growth.

Good Practices for Organising Self-Awareness in the Dojo

Self-awareness is a way of gathering and organising information that comes from within. Based on this idea, collecting, facilitating collection, organising and assisting in the organisation of information from and about our students is a method to help build feedback that fosters self-awareness in young practitioners. For example, having students complete a questionnaire at the start of the year to summarise their history, qualities, expectations and areas needing improvement is a way to engage their self-awareness. organising moments for personal dialogue with the teacher is another method to leverage young people's awareness and encourage personal reflection. Dialogue with parents or guardians is crucial to establishing a healthy and honest relationship among all parties. It is not uncommon for parents to enrol in courses to practice alongside their children, often with highly positive results.

Specific Advice to Help Self-Awareness

- Discipline, sense of limits and rules. Especially for children, the best way to help them develop self-awareness is to provide them with

rigorous discipline at the start of lessons and within the tatami. When they make mistakes, they automatically learn from them, particularly with a teacher who guides them in the right direction, making it easier for them to correct themselves. True self-awareness in young people does not exist independently; the teacher should act as the lighthouse, the guide that shows the way.

- Create situations for listening and exchange, such as a "circle of words", where each participant shares the feelings evoked by the technique just practised. During training, encourage everyone to focus on the technique's goal, pushing practitioners to self-analyse their work, paying particular attention to external bodily awareness, which can be seen as the "mechanics" of specific exercises.
- Continue to remind, during training, how effective movements consist of the combination of movement and breathing and how, without proper breathing or adequate diaphragmatic motion, every technique becomes ineffective.

Coping with Emotions

Young Domenico is preparing to face his first Aikido grading test. He feels a mix of excitement and nerves. His heart beats fast as he steps onto the tatami. Technique after technique, he finds his rhythm: his breathing becomes steady and his movements fluid. Through the challenges of the test, Domenico discovers the power of emotional resilience cultivated through consistent practice. When his success in the grading is announced, it's more than a technical victory for him—it's proof of his inner strength and determination.

This life skill represents the ability to recognise emotions within ourselves and in others, to be aware of how they influence our behaviour, and to respond to emotional experiences appropriately. Intense emotions like anger or sadness can have negative effects on our health if they prevent us from reacting to situations appropriately.

Emotions form the foundation of life and are fundamental components in personal development. They are so deeply rooted in us that they originate in our primitive brain. Even though they are initially devoid of cognition, their strength is felt from the start, often through bodily signals. From the first embrace of our mother, we feel accepted: physical touch—or its absence—will influence our emotions throughout life, as the need for connection and belonging is a fundamental human need. Feeling

loved and accepted plays a crucial role in psychological well-being.

Our emotional experiences are tied to our heart and senses. Skin and mood connect to emotions, generating a physical memory of what we felt in a given situation. These emotions, guiding our development from our earliest interactions, continue to shape how we relate to others.

Through emotional bonds, we share joys, sorrows and hopes, making human experience collective and interdependent. This bond allows us to develop empathy and mutual understanding, fostering authentic connections that enrich our lives. Our happiness and suffering influence one another, creating an emotional network in which we continuously contribute and receive in a flow of shared emotions.

As such, emotions not only connect us to others but also act as a bridge to deeper dimensions, fostering experiences of spirituality and inner connection. They can lead to profound spiritual experiences and are, in turn, shaped by them, generating a wide range of feelings.

Managing emotions has become a crucial challenge in a world overwhelmed by conflicting stimuli and information. This compass that guides us to our values can lose its orienting capacity, leaving us without reference points. Contemporary society, while valuing emotional expression, often struggles to manage it. Balancing the authentic expression of one's feelings with respect for others is an increasingly pressing issue.

The greatest challenge is that we live in an era of virtual connection, where interactions often occur at a distance, risking reduced empathy and authenticity in relationships—something we experience deeply from birth. Moreover, overexposure to digital stimuli can lead us to fail in recognising and adequately managing emotions, leaving us vulnerable to stress and emotional alienation. Without emotional awareness, there is a risk of detachment from our deeper sensations, weakening psychological and relational well-being.

Aikido Techniques for Activating Emotional Management

The hands are among the most expressive parts of our body, serving as extensions of our thoughts and actions. They allow us to communicate, create, destroy, nurture and wield power over life itself. In Aikido, the hands are the primary tools of practice. *Taijutsu* requires heightened sensitivity to be practised effectively. Self-control is the expression of that care that manifests itself in the desire not to hurt the partner and at the same time to make the techniques effective. On the tatami there is a real risk of injuring the partner, just as in our daily life outside it, if we fail to control our emotional dimension.

To become aware of what we are experiencing through Aikido practice, we must open our sensory systems and activate the perceptions that connect us with our partner—such as breathing, heartbeat,

blood pressure, pain tolerance and even extracorporeal factors that emerge during joint manipulation or muscle-relaxation techniques. Emotional tensions tied to daily experiences, past events, or even ancestral memories can become evident through the practice of taijutsu.

Aikido provides practitioners with valuable skills to navigate the whirlwind of emotions that accompany every challenge. It is not easy to find oneself in the spotlight during a *embukai*, demonstrating techniques refined through practice. The palpable emotion mixes with nervousness and fear. Yet, the true essence of Aikido reveals itself in how practitioners navigate and manage these emotions with grace and clarity.

This involves recognising one's emotional state, understanding its impact on actions, and demonstrating not only technical proficiency but also emotional maturity. Preparing for a embukai goes beyond physical training; it encompasses building mental strength and emotional readiness. Teachers play a crucial role in equipping students with the tools needed to confront their emotional states. They provide guidance on breathing techniques, mental attitude and focus, instilling a sense of calm amidst the chaos of performance. Armed with these insights, students can silence their inner turmoil and execute techniques with unwavering confidence.

The relationship between senpai and kohai is also fundamental in fostering emotional growth and maturity. Senpais act as mentors, guiding their juniors with respect and humility. Through this

dynamic, kohais learn to handle feedback and face feelings of frustration, while senpais develop patience, empathy and the ability to provide constructive criticism.

The embukai, with its element of surprise, serves as a practical embodiment of Aikido's teachings on emotional control. It is about mastering one's emotions in high-pressure situations, performing under the watchful eyes of others. The preparation orchestrated by teachers creates a foundation for students to approach the embukai with determination and serenity, demonstrating their ability to remain composed under scrutiny.

For young Aikido practitioners, the embukai, as a tangible expression of emotional control, offers a glimpse of life itself, teaching them to manage emotions such as anxiety and fear. These skills extend beyond the dojo, empowering them to face daily challenges with grace and resilience.

Aikido is a journey of self-discovery, where practitioners learn to harness their emotions as strengths and, through this process, reclaim their psycho-physical serenity. This discipline teaches them to better manage emotionally demanding situations in everyday life—or at least to try.

Good practices for organising emotion management in the dojo

Learning to manage emotions means developing the ability to recognise, understand and regulate one's emotions in a positive way. On one hand, it is

about promoting the personal habit of those who train; on the other, it is about fostering an environment rich in opportunities to process one's experiences calmly. In this sense, a good practice could be to make the dojo environment open to dialogue in both directions: "inside the tatami", for the students, but also "outside the tatami", for example, for the parents, who bring a whole different emotional world regarding their children. This is not about being therapists but rather about providing opportunities for openness, listening and feedback, and creating that trust in the relationship that allows one to feel supported and encouraged. It is clear that to exercise this ability in a healthy way, those who do so must at least be confident in their own ability to manage their emotions.

Training leaders, upon noticing strong emotions within the group, can facilitate dialogue by positioning themselves as facilitators to help reframe experiences, thoughts and perceptions. When an environment of trust is built, it is not necessary to call someone and confront them directly; sometimes it is enough to let one's presence be felt and make oneself "involved" for things to sort themselves out naturally. Another organisational possibility is to provide, during training, moments of pause that, even if not expressly dedicated to this, allow time to reflect on one's emotions.

On the other hand, for those who manage and organise the dojo, it is a matter of becoming aware of the central role that the relational network of young people plays in terms of well-being in their lives. Working to include the relational system of young

people should be an excellent intuition and a good practice, knowing that this also requires emotional balance and directional skills from those who are in charge. The relationship should not become a place where to complain or let every emotion vent, but a space where it is possible to build together for the good of the young students.

Specific Tips for Helping with Emotion Management

- Change the speed at which students practice techniques. Observe their behaviour. Do they become bored or stay focused when training slowly? How do they react when their technique fails? Do they start to get aggressive, focus on their mistakes, or give up? Can they remain calm during fast-paced techniques, or do they become flustered and defensive?
- Teach each individual to confront their own weaknesses. If someone behaves aggressively, ask them to take on the role of uke, showing them where aggression can lead in the dojo. If someone loses their composure during faster-paced practice, try simpler techniques at a quicker tempo. The timing for executing techniques follows three rhythms:
    - *Jo*: A very slow rhythm that exercises the morphology of the technique, allowing the transmission of radiating energies—difficult to execute without engaging the brain's predisposition.

- *Ha*: A normal rhythm where the body and mind act simultaneously. Challenging to practice unless the rhythm aligns with the partner (uke).
- *Kyu*: The fast-paced rhythm of Aikido technique execution, where there is no time to think and actions are instinctive. This is the most difficult to perform, requiring both experience and good physical condition. All aggression transforms into intensive practice, which, in most cases, leads to a deeply engaging and almost euphoric experience for those involved.

• Be unpredictable so students cannot anticipate the planned training path. Occasionally surprise students by having them demonstrate the techniques they have practised (embukai), varying speeds, or switching technique types during different sessions. This approach, known as improvisation, involves letting movements flow based on the position of incoming attacks from all sides without following a specific model. This is only possible when an emotional connection with the partners is established.

• If someone performs the same technique significantly worse during a demonstration than in paired practice, have them perform the embukai more frequently.

• Reinforce the idea that being chosen for the embukai is an honour for the individual and for the dojo—a chance to learn to manage one's emotions.

• Actively discourage competition and envy, especially in situations where students who started practising together progress at different rates. As in all practices, some individuals are naturally predisposed to excel at sports due to coordination or other innate talents. However, in Aikido, every individual is elevated to their own potential, and, over time, those who have struggled with their limitations may surpass the most naturally gifted.
• Do not allow higher-ranking practitioners to look down on others. Regularly remind the group that a higher rank is both recognition of skill and a responsibility to help less experienced practitioners learn.

Coping with Stress

It is evening. Fiona, six years old, enters the dojo. She is tired—once again. Her afternoon has been filled with school, singing lessons, and classical ballet. And now, it is time for Aikido. She takes a deep breath before stepping onto the tatami, but her foot hesitates. Her eyes are weary. Her entire body expresses her need for rest, and she does not even engage in play with the others. I pause for a moment. I walk over to her and place a hand on her shoulder. "Do what you can. Stay calm".
She relaxes. She steps closer. She tries when she can. Every now and then, she smiles.

Our potential is limited. Managing stress is essential because worrying about something consumes mental and emotional resources, draining energy that could be better used elsewhere. Facing stress means recognising the sources that feed it in our lives, understanding how it affects us, and taking action to help control our frustration levels. This could involve changing our environment or lifestyle and learning to relax so that the tensions created by unavoidable stressors do not lead to health issues.

Living under constant stress impacts mental health, which in turn affects every aspect of a person's interactions—both with themselves and with others. In today's world, stress management has become a crucial skill to navigate the challenges of an increasingly fast-paced and hyper-connected

life, where pressure has risen not only in the workplace but also in social and personal spheres. Our nervous system risks being in a state of chronic alert, overloaded by continuous exposure to information, the culture of hyper-productivity, and the constant pull of virtual interactions—from messaging apps to social media alerts—that demand our attention and leave little room for solitude.

Issues such as anxiety, depression, and insomnia are often the result of stress that, without the right tools to manage it, inevitably affects a person's health and well-being. Poor stress management can also lead to difficulties in relationships, as nervousness and fatigue negatively impact our ability to communicate and empathise with others.

Developing stress management skills strengthens resilience and enhances our ability to approach daily challenges with clarity. Learning to recognise the body's signals and apply relaxation techniques—such as deep breathing or meditation—helps create a balance that promotes overall well-being, personal effectiveness, and healthier, more fulfilling relationships.

The stress experienced during training practice can manifest in different ways:

- Physical stress caused by excessive physical workload, leading to physical fatigue.
- Physical stress as an intentional load introduced during the lesson.
- Mental stress due to heavy cognitive demands, which result in loss of concentration and drowsiness.

- Mental stress from performance anxiety, causing fear, mental blocks, and lack of clarity.
- Emotional stress.

Aikido Techniques for Activating Stress Management

Stress becomes negative when it is perceived continuously. However, in the experience of Aikido, it can also serve as a useful push to overcome one's current skill level. Stress can often be observed during regular practice: executing a technique always introduces a certain amount of stress, especially when it involves numerous physical repetitions or entirely new sequences that require significant concentration. Even the relationship with a partner can be a source of stress during practice. However, stress is useful for observing individual responses and marks the transition from our comfort zone to a new, unfamiliar dimension. In this perspective, the first step for those managing training is to carefully and preemptively define an appropriate level of challenge, suitable for the individual or group, or even different progressive levels.

When the whole group is warmed up physically and mentally, and the lesson reaches its core, it is important to maintain a constant level of emotional stimulation, following a well-prepared logical progression. An instructor should deeply understand the potential of stress and guide their students in managing it, considering both their

internal capacities and external situations, to foster an optimal growth experience.

Many stress conditions experienced by students originate from external factors. Clearly, not all Aikido instructors are qualified to interact with students at a psychological level (and in this regard, a good practice would be organising specific training courses within dojos). However, developing relationships of trust within the dojo is highly effective in managing stress. When students do not trust the system, the space, or the instructor, even controlled exposure to stress under structured circumstances does not translate into improved stress management abilities. In this context, breathing techniques (*kokyu*) are an excellent tool for enhancing trust within the student's internal dojo, building an increased self-awareness, and, consequently, a greater willingness to open up to others.

At the start of an Aikido lesson, students may already be carrying stress from their day. This opening phase presents an ideal opportunity to focus on stress management and alleviate individual tension. The entry and opening rituals, such as *seiza* and kokyu training, help ease emotional strain and calm the mind, creating a clear separation between daily activities and the upcoming Aikido session. Similarly, *aikitaiso* exercises effectively reduce muscle tension, preparing the body for practice.

A fundamental element, always worth emphasising when we aim to strengthen this skill and its application in young people's daily lives, is the practice of *ukemi*, which embodies the core concept of "falling and getting back up", "failing and

trying again". It underscores that falling is never a failure but a foundation for success.

This same principle teaches that in Aikido there is no way to address something without first experiencing it. A dojo is a place where we experience stress under controlled circumstances, equipped with the structure and knowledge to handle it.

In this sense, structures helpful for managing stress include:

- Physical preparation exercises to control movements and emotional states that generate stress.
- Breathing techniques.
- Joint lock techniques.
- Projection techniques and related ukemi.
- Immobilisation techniques.

These are the training instances that can be used to create controlled stress conditions:

- Seiza: prolonging the time spent in this position.
- Warm-up exercises: increasing speed and difficulty.
- Ukemi practice: performing ukemi under unusual conditions, such as blindfolded; combining various types of falls into ever-changing sequences; repeating ukemi numerous times.
- Taisabaki: combining them in unconventional ways, reversing the order, or using irregular timing.

- Waza: Practising them in non-orthodox formats, such as performing 10 repetitions of the same technique or 10 repetitions of 10 different techniques; creating technique sequences with a common start but different endings; performing the previous sequence in reverse order.

Special circumstances

- Randori: free sparring
- Embukai: technique demonstration

Good Practices for organising Stress Management in the Dojo

Stress management is cultivated through a combination of mindfulness, emotional regulation and the development of adaptive strategies. In this context, dojo activities should focus primarily on self-reflection and feedback. Continuously reflecting on moments when stress arises within the dojo—whether among colleagues, students, or their families—helps to recognise stress signals and identify effective responses. Meetings among those involved in the dojo dynamics can provide opportunities to better understand and improve our reactions and adaptive capacities.

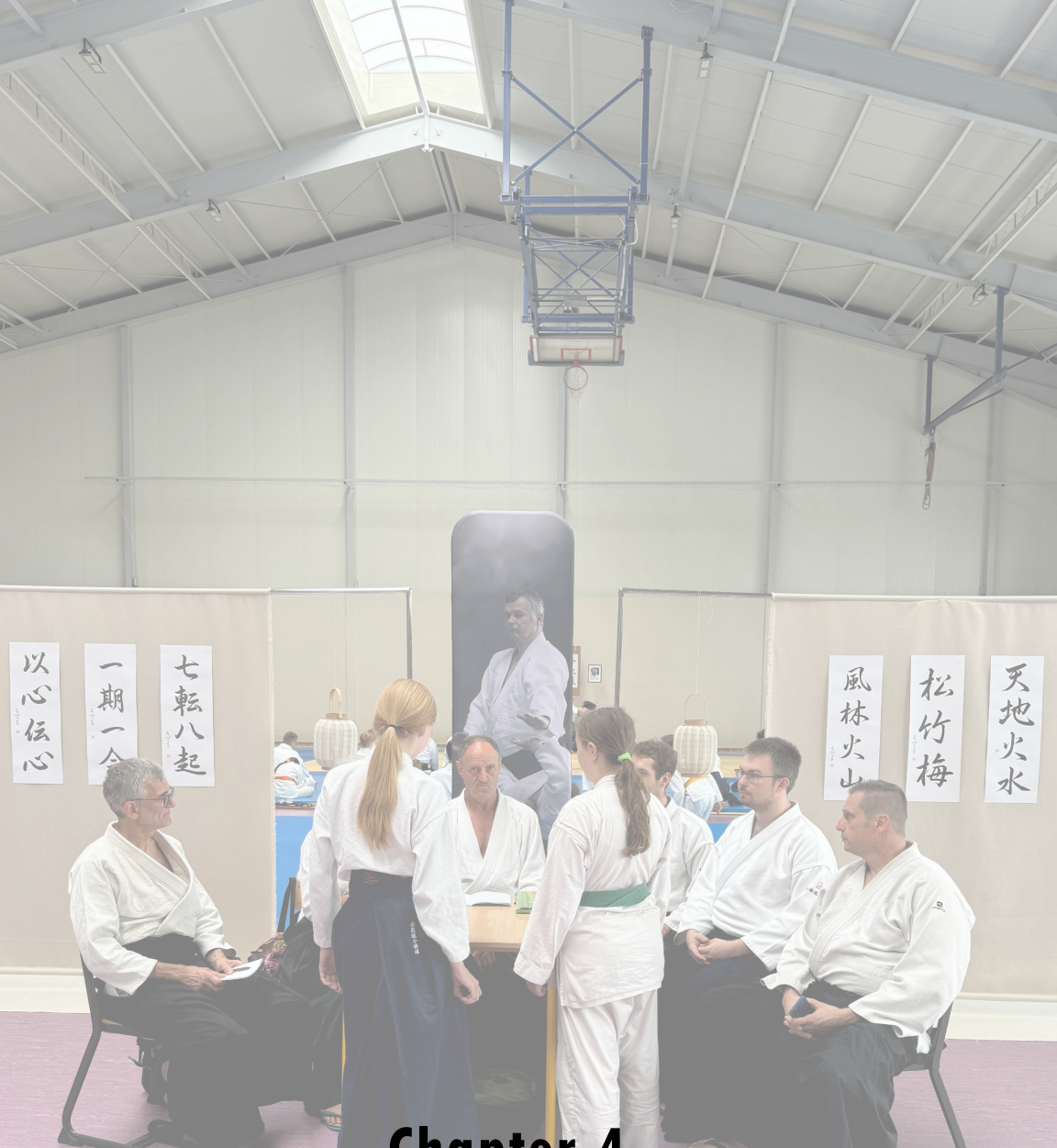
Another crucial aspect concerns the planning and organisation of activities. Setting clear and realistic goals, planning actions and breaking them into smaller steps can help reduce pressure, manage time more effectively and eliminate sources of

misunderstanding. Good organisation not only reduces stress for us but also for those who collaborate with us, whether they are colleagues, students, or their parents.

Finding creative ways to resolve relational issues or misunderstandings is also key. For instance, organising an impromptu dinner or recreational activity can serve as a way to unwind while creating new opportunities to reframe misinterpreted relational elements or grievances that may cause stress in collaborative environments.

Specific Tips for Stress Management

- Aikido instructors should be mindful of the individual tolerance levels of their students. Are the physical limitations encountered in the external dojo connected to the psychological limitations of the internal dojo?
- Attempt to identify specific elements to assess stress. What criteria characterise a stressed individual?
- Engage in dialogue about the causes of stress.
- In Aikido, consider applying a Zen-inspired philosophy that acknowledges the potential for negativity and inherent flaws within humanity. Rather than opposing these elements, accept them, allowing natural processes to transform them into positive outcomes, fostering a joyful and lighthearted approach to life.



Chapter 4

Aikido and Interpersonal Life Skills

Empathy
Effective Communication
Interpersonal Relational Abilities

Sport and Life Skills in the area of Social Abilities

Empathy, effective communication and interpersonal relational skills are Life Skills belonging to the area of social abilities, indicating the capacity to interact effectively with others. In the sports context, social skills such as empathy, effective communication and interpersonal relational abilities are fundamental both for ensuring personal development and for the success and collective well-being of athletes.

Empathy allows individuals to recognise, understand and share the emotions of others, fostering the creation of a positive environment where every member feels valued and understood. This competence is particularly important in team sports, where it helps teammates support each other and respond sensitively to one another's needs and challenges, strengthening group spirit and collective resilience.

Effective communication is essential to facilitate interaction among teammates and with the coach (expressing ideas, intentions and needs) in a clear and open manner. Whether on the field, in the locker room, or in a relational setting, the ability to convey clear messages and listen actively allows for the sharing of strategies, clarification of roles and responsibilities and the reduction of conflicts and misunderstandings. Clear and respectful communication helps resolve problems, maintain focus and improve overall performance while encouraging a collaborative spirit.

Interpersonal relational skills, such as active listening, constructive feedback and mutual respect, enable athletes to build trust and provide mutual support. These skills help group members interact positively even during moments of tension, ensuring a harmonious and productive team dynamic. Coaches, for their part, play a key role in promoting these abilities, modelling empathetic and communicative behaviours and offering examples of respectful and open interaction.

Sport is clearly a privileged place to develop social skills because it fosters frequent and meaningful interactions based on cooperation and the sharing of common goals. Through confrontation with others and overcoming challenges, athletes learn to read others' emotions, communicate clearly and build trusting relationships. These elements create a context in which social skills are strengthened, enriching the sporting experience and preparing athletes to manage relationships even outside the playing field.

Empathy

Mario has been practising Aikido for many years. Despite being only 14 years old, he has always been very open to what happens on the tatami. Tonight, he is warming up with Amelia, a little girl attending her first class. While warming up, Sebastian turns his head and sees that Amelia is struggling. He stops and gets closer to her. Gently, he resumes warming up, demonstrating the movement himself without speaking. Amelia understands his intentions sighs with relief and resumes warming up. Without looking at her, Sebastian smiles.

Empathy is the ability to imagine what life is like for another person. Without empathy, our communication with others is akin to one-way traffic. Empathy can help us accept others, who may be very different from us. This, clearly, leads to improved social interactions, especially in situations involving linguistic, ethnic, or cultural diversity. Empathy can also help encourage educational behaviour toward people in need of care, assistance, or tolerance.

The importance of empathy in today's world cannot be underestimated. In an era characterised by globalisation, where different cultures increasingly intersect, empathy is a fundamental skill that fosters understanding and cooperation among human beings. The pervasive influence of technology, while connecting us, can also create

barriers to healthy human connection. In this context, possessing and exercising empathy becomes essential to decipher the emotions underlying digital interactions.

Moreover, the world today faces complex challenges, from climate change to economic inequalities, political conflicts and wars. Those who possess empathy are able to recognise others' difficulties and collaborate to find solutions that benefit everyone. By understanding others' perspectives and experiences, we can cultivate societies where everyone feels valued and respected.

In building inclusive communities, empathy acts as a catalyst for celebrating diversity and promoting equality. In this sense, empathy is the foundation of compassionate and harmonious societies, making it indispensable for navigating the complexities of the modern world.

One of the key aspects of Aikido is the development of empathy and respect for others. On the tatami, we learn to look at our partner with an open and understanding mind. This goes beyond simply understanding the emotions of the other; it involves physically and mentally aligning with a partner to sense and anticipate their intentions. Practitioners learn to move in harmony with their partners, developing a sensitivity that fosters mutual respect and understanding.

Through techniques such as *kokyu* and *irimi*, Aikido encourages a harmonious union with the energy of the opponent rather than opposing it, promoting a deep and conscious connection.

This level of empathy acquired on the tatami can extend to daily life, encouraging practitioners to approach interactions with listening, patience and openness. By creating an environment where empathy is an integral part of training, Aikido becomes a unique vehicle for developing emotional intelligence and participatory responses in various social contexts.

Aikido Techniques to Activate Empathy

In all its complexity, Aikido places particular emphasis on empathy. It is arguably the most prominent of the Life Skills present in this martial art, as, in practice, it is impossible to engage in Aikido without empathy. One of the clearest examples of this, and one of Aikido's most distinctive characteristics, is the ability to practice techniques with any uke, regardless of age, weight, ethnicity, or sex.

This focus on adapting the moves to the person receiving them, rather than the one performing them, requires empathy on the part of tori, who must consider not only the physical condition of uke but also their emotional state. If uke is tense or afraid, tori will adjust the strength and intensity of their movements accordingly.

A set of techniques that particularly embodies this principle is *katame waza*, a series of immobilisation techniques ending with joint locks. When executing these locks, it would be very easy to injure uke, but tori uses their empathy, both physical and emotional, to sense when the locks or

joint techniques are causing pain to uke and when they are helping them.

> "The purpose of executing joint locks in Aikido is their benevolent, rather than destructive, effect on the partner. In the joint lock techniques […] we do not act to cause physical or psychological harm. Therefore, beginners should perform joint locks less dynamically, more fluidly and in a relaxed manner. The performer should have a sense of feeling and avoid forcing the lock on the partner. Meanwhile, the person on whom the lock is applied should not stiffen. Their body should follow and align with the action of the lock. This requires flexibility because stiffening leads to immobility, which can cause significant pain or even injuries. Understanding joint locks in Aikido involves studying and discovering their potential effects on the partner's body. This approach leads to perceiving joint locks as a means of communication".[60]

The type of communication described above can essentially be translated into a form of empathy that begins not with listening to words but directly to the body's language. Finding oneself in a position to apply a joint lock to a partner, and choosing to transform this situation of extreme tactical advantage into the opposite—a situation where the

[60] Gembal R., *Aikido. Edukacjaciała i umysłu* pag. 152

lock becomes a massage benefiting the partner—requires a significant shift in perspective. The situation is entirely reversed.

This implies paying close attention to the partner's condition, which, through physical safety, translates into listening to muscular tension, perceiving pain, respecting physical limits—in short, a complete paradigm shift.

Moreover, during the execution of such a "massage", there is a synchronisation of breathing as both partners exhale. Attention to the physical mobility limits of the partner's joint involves a heightened sense of listening, as well as an awareness of emotions such as tension, pain, discomfort, relief, relaxation and the release experienced by the partner.

When a situation of empathy is established during the execution of a joint lock, combined with synchronised exhalation, uke often experiences the ideal conditions for muscular relaxation. This allows them to push beyond their limits and achieve improved joint mobility, significantly benefiting their physical health.

Specific Advice to Foster Empathy

- Encourage kohai to Work with sempai: Beginners should be encouraged to work with more experienced students. This approach requires more experienced aikidoka to use their empathy to adapt their techniques to their kohai. In turn, kohai are exposed to this kindness from

the very beginning of their practice and are encouraged to extend it themselves. This "form of kindness" should be balanced appropriately each time, without giving kohai the impression of being treated with excessive leniency at the expense of their training.

• Introduce specific exercises to practice empathy. Empathy can be trained through specific exercises in the dojo. For example, two practitioners perform *irimi tenkan* together, standing opposite each other on an imaginary line that does not change position. They must adopt the same posture (right guard facing right guard). The two practitioners move simultaneously and at the same speed. Begin slowly, then gradually increase the speed. Next, add synchronised breathing: inhale while approaching each other and exhale while moving away. Avoid direct eye contact with the partner; instead, expand your gaze as much as possible. Once maximum movement and breathing speed is reached, maintain it for as long as possible.

• Create shared experiences. Plan activities that provide shared experiences for students. Whether it involves practising martial arts techniques, participating in cultural field trips, or engaging in outdoor adventures, these shared experiences foster bonds and empathy among participants as they face challenges together.

• Use peer support. Establish a supportive environment in the dojo where students feel comfortable expressing themselves and supporting their peers. Encourage open

communication and active listening, allowing students to share thoughts, concerns, and experiences with one another. Teach them to empathise with their classmates' emotions and offer assistance when needed.

• Observe and Discuss. Address individual students' challenges in the dojo, arrange a private teacher-student discussion to understand their difficulty, collaboratively create a personalised plan and provide ongoing support and feedback as they work to overcome it.

Best Practices for Fostering Empathy in the Dojo

Empathy is the ability that helps us allow others into our lives, giving them importance and attention. In this sense, the primary characteristic of the dojo—as both an environment and an ecosystem of all who frequent it—must be inclusivity: every person should feel welcomed and respected.

Even outside the tatami, relationships should be guided by openness and acceptance. In this regard, moments can be organised to encourage participants to express their opinions and receive feedback on their behaviours and attitudes. This approach promotes self-awareness and personal growth.

Teaching active listening (which considers the feelings and emotions of both the speaker and the listener) and the delivery of constructive feedback is a way to foster empathetic relationships. These

relationships allow for the clear expression of ideas, needs and emotions in different situations and contexts.

organising workshops on communication skills can be an effective activity to develop empathy. Such workshops can also provide valuable opportunities to create shared moments among students, instructors and their families.

organising moments to recognise and celebrate participants' successes, not only in terms of physical skills but also in social interactions, can reinforce the learning and application of these life skills in everyday contexts. This also helps consolidate the progress made by young people in developing these skills and motivates adults (parents and instructors) to renew their trust in them.

Finally, designing activities that require teamwork and cooperation is essential, as group exercises and problem-solving activities can help participants put themselves in others' shoes, fostering greater understanding and tolerance.

In conclusion, the practice of Aikido provides a profound opportunity to cultivate empathy and compassion both on and off the tatami. By emphasising shared experiences, peer support, and the ability to adapt techniques to individuals, Aikido creates an environment where students learn to listen not only to words but also to body language and emotional cues. Through this practice, students develop the ability to understand and respect others, regardless of age, background, or skill level. By embracing empathy as a cornerstone of Aikido practice, students not only

enhance their martial arts abilities but also contribute to building inclusive communities based on understanding, cooperation and mutual support.

Effective Communication

Martino, 8 years old, is struggling to learn the kaiten movement. Luca, the instructor leading the class that tonight, notices his difficulty. He approaches. As he walks, he thinks about the best way to explain the correct movements to Martino. He stands next to Martino, who feels a bit embarrassed, and prepares himself to listen to the teacher. Luca simply positions himself beside him. With a reassuring smile, he encourages Martino to move. With gentle touches of his hands, Luca guides Martino through the movement until he is able to replicate it independently. Luca has been teaching for many years. He knows that verbal communication is often unnecessary and understands how to use his body to communicate effectively.

Possessing the ability for effective communication means being able to express oneself, both verbally and non-verbally, in ways appropriate to our cultures and situations. It also means being able to express opinions and desires, as well as verbalising needs and fears. Additionally, it can mean knowing how to ask for advice and help when needed.

In an era characterised by rapid and digitalised communication, the ability to communicate effectively has become essential for everyone. When most interactions occur through short and indirect messages, there is a risk of failing to understand emotional nuances, leading to misunderstandings.

Being effective in communication is not only about transmitting information but also involves clarity, empathy and the ability to listen to others while considering their feelings as well as our own.

These are essential elements for building strong and collaborative relationships because, in increasingly multicultural and diverse work and social contexts, they facilitate mutual understanding and reduce the risks of misunderstandings and conflicts.

Failing to recognise the importance of this skill can lead to serious consequences in all contexts. Superficial or unclear communication can generate stress, misunderstandings and tensions, compromising the quality of personal and professional relationships, causing a loss of trust among individuals and groups, and undermining efforts to improve the quality of interactions.

Investing in the development of effective communication strengthens the ability to express oneself clearly and respectfully, to actively listen to others, and to address conflicts constructively.

Aikido Techniques to Activate Effective Communication

One of the foundational principles that can be connected to communication in Aikido is the ability to control oneself and listen: effective communication is not noisy communication. It is necessary to establish inner calm to be able to listen to oneself and perceive the signals from our bodies.

Practices such as meditation, massage and breathing can enhance this ability. Examples include the breathing and meditation exercises that open and close a lesson, as well as aikitaiso.

Prerequisites for Effective Communication: Listening and Silence

In the practice of Aikido, as in communication, the first step is to learn how to be silent and to listen to oneself. Only in this way can we create the conditions to listen to others with openness and awareness.

Effective communication requires a willingness to listen to the other party, which begins with the ability to listen to one's own body and emotions. This deep listening encompasses both what is said and what lies "between the lines". Silence plays a crucial role, as it creates a distraction-free space where listening can occur without interference.

Aikido Techniques as Tools for Awareness and Energy

Certain Aikido techniques can enhance communicative effectiveness by developing awareness and energy management. *Mokuso* is a practice that helps create the internal conditions for concentration and relaxation. This is followed by aikitaiso, which releases muscular tension and prepares the body for work, fostering energy and serenity. Lastly, *funakogi-undo* is a practice that activates individual energy and strengthens group energy, promoting a sense of unity and synergy.

The Importance of Posture and Attitude in Relationships with Others

Aikido, like other physical and spiritual disciplines, reminds us that the body reflects our internal state. When we encounter relational challenges with loved ones, friends, or acquaintances, these tensions often manifest physically as muscular contractions, joint stiffness, or other somatic symptoms.[61]

To alleviate such tensions, we can act in two ways: by reassessing the relationships themselves and/or by working on posture and the body.

Posture is not merely a physical matter but also a manifestation of our attitude and willingness. Through posture and attitude, we express our intentions and openness in communication, making posture a fundamental element for effective interaction.[62]

The Three-Step Approach: Jo, Ha, Kyu

In Aikido, as in life, there is a progressive path of learning and growth that can be described in three stages: *jo* (introduction), *ha* (in-depth study) and *kyu* (mastery). During training, the teacher consistently emphasises the importance of posture, as it is central not only in the dojo but also in everyday interactions. When evaluating practice or an exam,

[61] Lowen A., *Bioenergetics*, 1975, New York, Penguin Books

[62] Ueshiba, M, *The Art of Peace*, 1993, Shambhala Publications [J. Stevens, Trans.]; Tohei, K., *Ki in Daily Life*, 1977, Tokyo, Japan Publications

posture and attitude are as important as the correct technical execution.

Aikido Techniques for Effective Communication

In Aikido, certain techniques provide valuable insights for developing effective communication skills. Here are some of the most emblematic ones that can be applied to communication:

Irimi represents the concept of "entering" into the attack to face it head-on but without direct confrontation, accepting and redirecting the attacker's energy. In communication, this equates to active listening and empathy. "Entering" the other's perspective without judgement allows for a better understanding of the situation and a more effective response.

Tenkan is the act of rotating to evade the line of attack while maintaining control. Communicating in a "tenkan" way means being flexible and capable of adapting one's point of view without losing sight of the ultimate goal. This technique helps defuse potential conflicts and create collaborative solutions.

The principle of *Aiki* involves harmonising with the other's energy, without resisting or opposing it. In communication, this means finding common ground, bringing opinions together rather than setting them against each other. It is an approach that helps build a foundation of mutual understanding.

These principles, when applied to communication, can foster more harmonious and

effective interactions, rooted in understanding and mutual respect.

Specific Advice to Foster Effective Communication

The vast amount of communication flow characteristic of our time leads us to adopt a selective attitude toward the information we receive. This can also affect interpersonal communication, especially during training. It is therefore necessary, starting from a young age, to cultivate the ability to communicate effectively—the ability to understand, be understood, and obtain listening and response.

Teach the Value of Silence. Students should maintain silence to contribute to the creation of a space suitable for learning. The instructor, on the other hand, uses silence to enhance their communicative language (pauses generate reflection and improve the assimilation of concepts) and to perceive the non-verbal messages coming from the students.

Incorporate Silence into Activities. Silence lends itself to many games on the tatami. One popular game, especially among children, is the classic "silence game" often played in schools. The instructor begins by explaining that the first person to speak will have to pay a penalty. Meanwhile, practice begins (e.g., ukemi or tenkan). The first person who forgets and talks might end up doing a set of push-ups as a penalty.

Energise Communication: the instructor should

always aim to infuse energy into their verbal and non-verbal communication—an energy that feels slightly "extra-ordinary",[63] much like an actor on stage—to captivate the class's attention. The tone of voice should be appropriately calibrated depending on the situation.

- **Non-Verbal Communication 1 - Clarity**: For example, when explaining a technique, performing it at high speed serves no purpose. Instead, movements should be made descriptive by slowing them down and executing them in a clear and distinct manner.
- **Non-Verbal Communication 2 - Mirror Neurons**: These are cells that activate when we perform motor actions or observe the same actions being performed by others. When we see another person performing an action or experiencing an emotion, our mirror neurons activate, allowing us to "experience" what the person in front of us is feeling. This happens because those actions or emotions also exist as potential states within us.

Achieving clarity in explanations can greatly benefit from not relying on improvisation. Instead, plan the lesson in detail, covering all its phases in advance.

Remember that our gaze can include only one person at a time—specifically, another pair of eyes

[63] See. Barba, E. *La canoa di carta*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 1993. See also the entry 'Energy' in Barba E., Savarese N., *A dictionary of theatreanthropology. The secret art fo the performer. 2nd ed.* London, Routledge, 1991, pp. 72-92.

looking back at us. Strive to meet the eyes of as many students as possible and establish eye contact with everyone.

Be fully present and attentive when communicating a suggestion or correction. Think carefully about what you are conveying and deliver it intentionally.

Expressing concepts with confidence as well as clarity can enhance the effectiveness of communication.

Sometimes, building mental images to explain concepts can be helpful in making the communication more engaging and understandable.

It is not necessary to fill silences with words. For instance, when interacting with someone with a disability who may not communicate as expected, allow silence to create space for mutual understanding.

Best Practices for Organising Effective Communication in the Dojo

To foster effective communication, the dojo should be an open space where relationships are built on empathy trust, and mutual interest. In such a structured environment, communication is clear, constructive feedback can be given and received, and emotions, while expressed freely, do not overshadow the communicative intent.

With these principles in mind, here are some best practises that can help create a dojo environment

conducive to exercising the life skill of effective communication:

- Design a welcoming training space, possibly including an area and time for relaxation that encourages dialogue among participants.
- organise specific training activities focused on communication skills, such as active listening.
- Plan moments of sharing and reflection with the families of the students, providing the right space for emotions and challenges, and gathering feedback on the dojo's work.
- Instructors serve as models for Life Skills. They should embody these values, demonstrating clear, empathetic communication and emotional control in every type of interaction.
- Set personalised goals, working with each participant to establish individual objectives related to Life Skills. This fosters personal growth, which in turn reflects in the quality of communication and relationships within the group.

Interpersonal Relational Skills

Piotr is doing paired training with Elia. They are students of different experience levels, as is often the case in dojos. Piotr, a more experienced practitioner, guides Elia, a beginner, in the execution of a kotegaeshi technique. Instead of using his experience to impose the technique or showcase his level, Piotr employs a delicate and respectful form of physical communication to facilitate Elia's learning.

This approach is based on deep listening, which in Aikido means perceiving the energy, movement and uncertainties of the other without forcing. The experienced practitioner aligns with the rhythm and strength of the beginner, adapting each movement to maintain harmony. As such, the connection between the two becomes a non-verbal dialogue where both feel respected and understood.

This type of interaction goes beyond teaching techniques: it is a lesson in trust and openness. The beginner feels encouraged, builds self-confidence, and becomes part of a respectful practice community, while the advanced practitioner enhances their awareness and ability to adapt to a partner. Both emerge from the experience with a deeper understanding of communication and harmony, extending beyond physical technique to touch on a fundamental aspect of Aikido: human connection.

These are the skills that help us relate positively to the people we interact with. This can mean being

able to create and maintain friendly relationships, which are often crucial for our mental and social well-being. It can also mean maintaining good relationships with family members, who are an essential source of social support. Furthermore, it may involve being able to end relationships constructively, which today can be a fundamental component of overall well-being.

In this historical period, interpersonal relational skills have become crucial for addressing challenges arising from increasing global interconnection and rapid digital transformation. The world has become a "shared home". Every day we feel the pressure of people, we are submerged with information, stories and events with which we are called to engage in various ways. In a digital context, where face-to-face interactions are reduced, the risk of misunderstandings and a sense of disconnection are increasingly pronounced, potentially leading to conflicts and loneliness.

Now more than ever, we recognise how essential it is to have the ability to listen, understand and connect with others. These skills are vital for building authentic relationships, collaborating effectively in professional and personal contexts, and striving to create a fairer and more inclusive society. Such a society values differences and the unique perspectives of each individual. Without a solid foundation of interpersonal skills, it becomes challenging to build and maintain bonds of trust and mutual respect, both online and offline. This lack negatively impacts psychological well-being, fostering loneliness and stress.

Aikido Techniques to Activate Interpersonal Relational Skills

Relationships are the foundation of human coexistence, whether in an individual's relationship with themselves or in interactions among people, families, clans, villages, or broader societies. Interpersonal relationships stem from needs that range from basic—such as nourishment and bodily functions—to complex, such as expressing one's feelings toward another person. These needs drive individuals' ability to connect with each other.

The use of spoken, written, or gestural language presupposes knowledge of a shared linguistic framework to convey thoughts, a process increasingly facilitated today by digital technologies. In Aikido, relationships are built on established rules and well-defined roles.

The structure of the dojo, with clear guidelines on where to stand and how to behave, allows newcomers to build relationships of trust and respect with their seniors and, later, with their juniors. This ultimately leads to the formation of a master-student relationship with the Sensei, which, when accepted by both parties, becomes unwavering.

The disregard for roles in modern society has failed to provide alternative tools for fostering respect in the formation of relationships. The superficiality of media-driven relationships, which erases any form of intimacy, is creating new ways of expressing thought. Aikido serves as a bridge between the past and the future, fostering relationships *ab ovo*—from their very origin.

Here are some Aikido techniques that, through their principles and execution, can inspire and facilitate interpersonal relationships:

- *Kokyu-ho* (Breathing and Connection Exercise) - Kokyu-ho is a breathing and centering technique practised in a kneeling position, where both practitioners face each other, and one applies a grip on the other's wrists. The goal is for the aikidoka to use their connection and internal energy to unbalance the other without physical force. This technique teaches practitioners to "feel" their partner and use connection as a communication tool. Working on kokyu-Ho requires sensitivity and presence—two essential qualities for listening to and understanding others. When this principle is applied in relationships, it allows for greater awareness of the other's emotions and the ability to respond empathetically without resorting to excessive effort.
- *Aiki-nage* – Aiki-nage is a throwing technique involving body rotation to avoid direct impact with the attack—in this case, a ryotetori grip—by circumventing and redirecting the other's energy. Instead of blocking or resisting, the aikidoka moves in harmony with the partner, maintaining their centre and allowing the other's energy to flow. Aiki-nage is an excellent example of conflict management: it teaches how to avoid reacting head-on, instead redirecting energy to maintain balance and foster a positive dialogue. In everyday interactions, this translates to the ability to respond flexibly, adapting without losing one's centre or giving in to impulsive reactions.

To develop the concept of interpersonal relational skills, let's examine how the definition of roles within the dojo can be helpful: we will analyse the interactions between student and teacher, among peers (student/student), and between uke and tori.

Teacher-Student Relationship

The relationship between teacher and student in Aikido is based on mutual trust and respect. The teacher is not only a technical instructor but also a guide in the student's growth journey. In turn, the student demonstrates respect for the teacher by adhering to dojo etiquette, such as bowing and attentive listening. This respect and trust create a solid foundation that allows the student to develop in a safe environment where the teacher takes responsibility for guiding them appropriately.

Student-Student Relationship

The relationship among students is equally important, as everyone in the dojo learns together and from each other. Practising with different partners, each student learns to navigate various dynamics, skill levels and movement styles. This requires humility, collaboration and openness. Mutual respect is fundamental to creating an environment where everyone can learn without feeling judged or in competition.

Roles of Uke and Tori

In the practice of a technique, the roles of uke (the one receiving the technique) and tori (the one performing it) are essential. Uke places trust in tori,

as they are offering their body for manoeuvres that may involve joint locks and projections which, if not performed properly, could cause physical injury. Tori, in turn, executes the technique with care and precision, avoiding force and maintaining control to prevent injury. This mutual trust is crucial and serves as training not only in the physical sense but also in interpersonal respect and awareness.

The Importance of Etiquette in the Dojo

Etiquette in the dojo is the foundation for establishing clear roles and boundaries. Respecting etiquette—such as bowing before and after class, honouring positions during exercises, and maintaining order in the use of space—is not merely a matter of formality; it is what creates a safe and respectful environment.

Etiquette delineates the relationship between teacher and student, senior and junior, and facilitates respect for the roles between uke and tori. This way, dojo etiquette not only governs interactions but also teaches each individual the value of discipline and consideration for others—essential elements for harmonious practice and a united community.

In summary, Aikido is not just about practising techniques; it is a continuous training in trust, respect and mutual responsibility, all of which contribute to building deep and meaningful interpersonal relationships.

Specific Advice to Foster Interpersonal Relational Skills

- Allow students a degree of self-organisation - Delegate tasks such as preparing the dojo, leaving the older students to organise the work. Do not require too much of them; instead, place trust in them and give them the opportunity to improve through multiple attempts, without expecting perfection on the first try at the expense of their ability to take initiative.
- Frequently change partners during training - Ensure that everyone gets the chance to practice with as many people as possible. Some students (especially if they already know each other because they share a daily life outside the dojo) tend to practice only with one another. Encourage them to practice with others, aiming to form groups diversified by age and sex.
- Organise some activities outside the dojo. Adults can be invited to dinner after training for a brief conversation. For children, a summer camp is a good opportunity. Any leisure activity, such as going to the beach, or visiting places of tourist interest, will work.
- Organise trips or Aikido seminars with other groups. Encourage students to participate.
- When teaching children who speak different languages, use gestures and physical demonstrations to explain techniques and encourage them to imitate rather than relying on verbal explanations. This can be an effective way to overcome language barriers.

- Create an environment where students can rely on one another when preparing for exams. Students should feel comfortable seeking guidance from older or more experienced students, who should be approachable and willing to offer advice.

Best Practices for Organising Interpersonal Relational Skills

Aikido, by its very nature, is a tool for creating various types of connections between individuals, dojos and schools. However, if treated solely as a business, the social component of Aikido might be entirely absent. It is strongly encouraged to preserve the tradition of teaching Aikido as a whole, fostering relationships between the teacher and their students, among the students themselves and between individuals from different dojos.

As people become more experienced and skilled, these relationships grow increasingly strong and profound. These bonds become so robust that communication is significantly simplified. A few words exchanged between Aikido teachers can be enough to organise an event for hundreds of participants. Any logistical or organisational challenges become easy to overcome thanks to the goodwill of aikidoka.

Relationships in Aikido grow as strong as familial ties, represented by the kanji 和 (wa). When relationships reach this level, we achieve Ueshiba sensei's ideal of making the world into one great family.

In this context, best practices for organising the dojo, which we have been able to share, include:

- Encouraging practice between different dojos by continuing to foster interaction through seminars or visits. These occasions should combine Aikido practice on the tatami with opportunities for exchange during cultural outings, outdoor leisure activities, or convivial moments. It may also involve scheduling dojo exchanges on a calendar, in addition to sharing significant moments on the tatami, such as grading examinations.
- Viewing the dojo and its activities as a symbol of familiarity and relational depth, demonstrated by the harmony and trust among all its members. Harmony and trust do not imply an absence of conflicts or tensions, nor do they demand uniformity of thought. Rather, they reflect the ability to manage differences and diversity. In this regard, the relationships within the dojo should include all those who, in some way, influence the lives of its members. This means paying attention to the quality of relationships with parents, institutions, schools and other social actors in the community where the dojo carries out its teaching activities. The ability to build connections is, therefore, a crucial skill.
- Organising courses to develop interpersonal skills. One effective way to create, practise, and enhance interpersonal abilities is by arranging courses, perhaps promoted across multiple dojos, focusing on communication and

interpersonal skills. An empathetic and communicative instructor becomes a role model for participants, helping to foster an emotionally safe and stimulating environment.

• Avoiding self-sufficiency. At times, a dojo might require routine maintenance (such as tending to gardens) or more substantial repairs (like structural interventions). It can be invaluable to involve the network of relationships built around the students, whether in carrying out the work, where feasible, or discussing the challenges. People are often quick to offer their help, and learning to accept assistance can strengthen bonds through mutual gratitude.

• Planning occasional group activities outside the tatami. Consider voluntary, unpaid initiatives, such as an ecological day dedicated to maintaining local walking paths. Teaching individuals to give their time freely helps instil humility and reinforces the idea that no one is indispensable or irreplaceable.

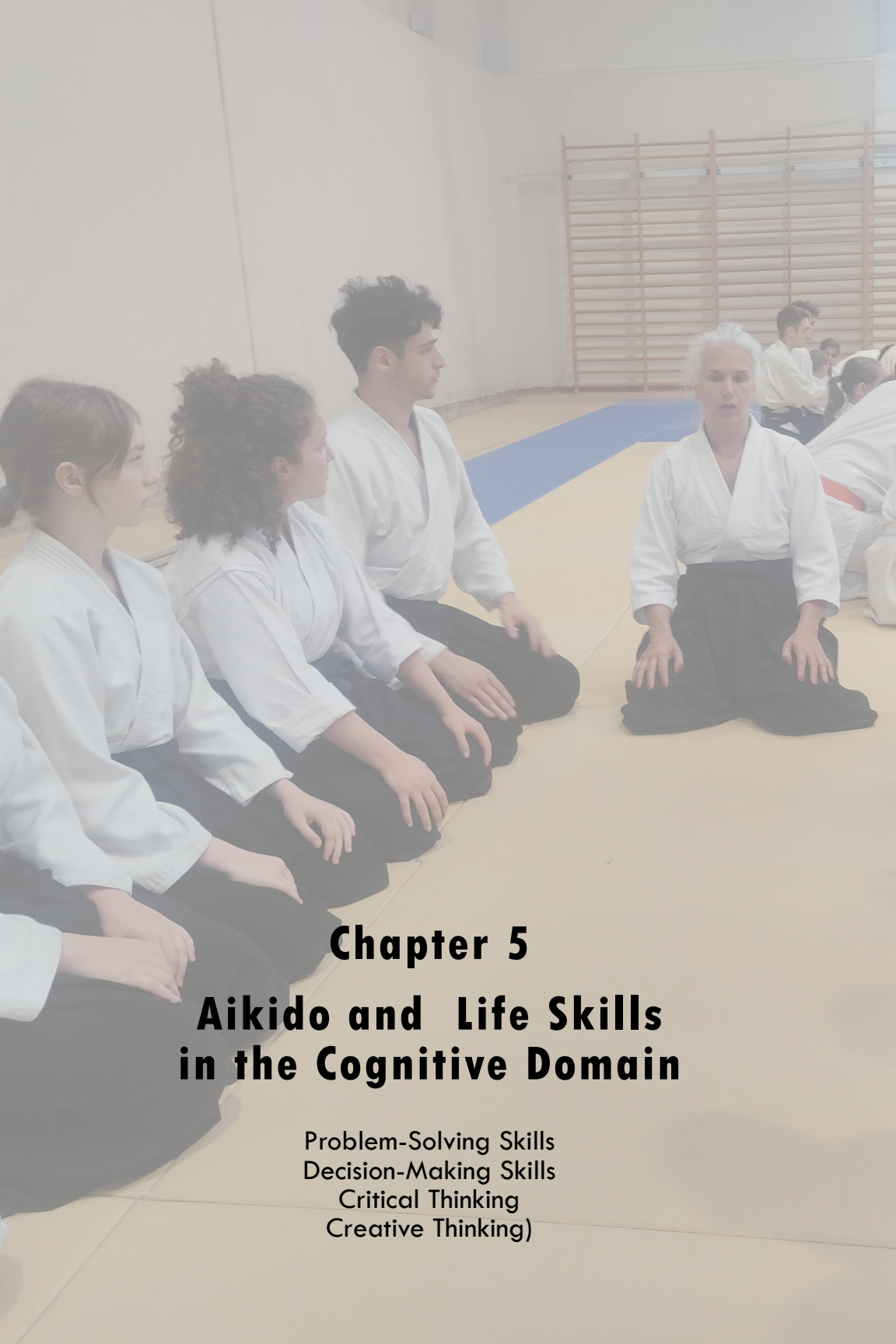
• Organising themed events and recreational activities. Host events like “Samurai Nights” or recreational activities linked to Aikido or Japanese culture, inviting the dojo’s network of relationships to “celebrate” together. Such occasions also provide opportunities to deepen understanding and share meaningful experiences. It is beneficial to organise these events in collaboration with other dojos, thereby building or strengthening connections. Using technology to connect can further emphasise the shared journey of life and awareness that others,

in different locations, are pursuing a similar path.

From the moment we become aware of our existence in the world, every perception becomes an experience that profoundly connects us to the environment around us. Our earliest memories—the warmth of an embrace, the scents of home, the simple taste of food—are all tied to relationships beyond ourselves, drawing us toward the external world. This awakening of the senses is our first contact with reality: a vast and mysterious world, inhabited by humans, animals and plants, all interconnected in a web of life that encompasses and surrounds us.

In this world, we begin to explore with curiosity, discovering our uniqueness and, at the same time, our connection to what surrounds us. We learn that every sound, gesture and shape carries a meaning we can only understand through interaction. Gradually, our identity takes shape in relation to others, and we come to realise that we are part of a greater whole.

This awareness is the first step toward a life of connection and understanding, a journey that leads us to recognise the importance of relationships with the living world. We are unique beings, yes, but not isolated. Our uniqueness is enriched through encounters with others and interactions with every element of nature, in a constant exchange of sensations, emotions and meanings.



Chapter 5

Aikido and Life Skills in the Cognitive Domain

Problem-Solving Skills
Decision-Making Skills
Critical Thinking
Creative Thinking)

Problem-solving skills, decision-making skills, critical thinking, and creative thinking are life skills belonging to the cognitive domain. These skills are valuable for athletes not only in competitions but also in managing their sports careers (organisation , relationships) and daily lives.

Problem-solving skills help to address challenges that arise both during training and in competition. When an athlete encounters an obstacle, such as struggling with a technique or a strategy that fails, their problem-solving ability allows them to adapt and find effective solutions.

Decision-making skills are equally essential. During a sports performance, decisions must often be made quickly and consciously, impacting not only personal results but also those of teammates. The ability to make choices in a short time, based on experience and the current situation, fosters a readiness that can also be applied outside of sports, making the athlete more confident and decisive in everyday contexts.

Critical thinking, besides aiding in understanding the context and actions during a match, promotes an accurate analysis of one's results and performances. Athletes who develop this skill can objectively reflect on their performances, understanding their strengths and areas for improvement, evaluating all the details contributing to the outcome, and learning from their mistakes. Moreover, developing this skill helps to appreciate not just the final score but also the overall well-being linked to the activity itself.

Creative thinking, finally, allows athletes to find

new ways to approach situations and stand out from competitors. Thinking outside the box can make a significant difference, especially in sports that demand a high level of adaptability and innovation. This creativity is also useful in constructing innovative strategies that allow athletes to explore different techniques and approaches, expanding their repertoire and enriching their skill sets.

Sports are a privileged arena for developing these abilities and can therefore represent a comprehensive formative experience that promotes individual development and well-being.

Problem-Solving Ability

Chiara, 9 years old, is preparing for her grading test. She is asked to try techniques in hanmihantachi waza. She has a small physical build, and perhaps for this reason, when she is called and asked to move to the centre of the tatami to begin practice, she hesitates: she doesn't want to leave her place, and her eyes become teary. The teacher notices this. Chiara needs to find a way to succeed. Her teacher thinks about how to unlock the situation. He asks her, "Who is your favorite uke?" She thinks, then she replies, "Silvia". "And your second favourite uke?" "Marta". "Do you want to start with Silvia?" Again, she stiffens. The teacher asks he: "What is your favourite song?" "Italo Disco". Then he asks the others: "Do you know this song?" They look at him surprised, then a smiling chorus responds: "Yes!" The teacher makes a deal with Chiara: "We will all sing your song, and you will come to the center of the tatami and begin practising hanmihantachi waza, but remember to breathe following the rhythm". Chiara agrees. Everyone starts singing. The girl steps to the center of the tatami with Silvia. Silvia attacks. Marta joins later. Everything goes well.

Problem-solving is the ability to break a problem into its components, think of possible solutions, and then choose the best one without entering into conflict. Having problem-solving skills helps us to

constructively face life, work, and social life, allowing us to identify and resolve conflicts or problems that, if left unresolved, could cause mental stress and lead to subsequent physical and emotional strain.

In general, problem-solving is not just a skill but a way of thinking that allows us to tackle complexities, innovate in the face of adversity, and work for a better future for all. This innovative spirit not only drives technological progress but also helps address social situations and problems that today seem overwhelming. In work, as in sports, those who can effectively face challenges and find solutions experience positive outcomes that boost self-esteem and contribute to both individual success and the growth of the organisation or group they are part of.

On the other hand, without strong problem-solving skills, the risk is to feel overwhelmed by difficulties, with consequent negative effects on well-being and self-esteem. The lack of this ability can lead to professional stagnation, poor confidence in one's decision-making capabilities, and, in the long term, difficulty adapting to changes, possibly opting for immediate but suboptimal solutions that could create future problems or even worsen the situation.

Aikido Techniques to Activate Problem-Solving Ability

In Aikido, practitioners use problem-solving to face an increasingly broad and dynamic set of challenges that emerge during years of practising this martial art. This involves adapting techniques to

unique situations, responding to dynamic attacks with appropriate tactics and strategies, managing encounters with multiple opponents, fostering creativity in finding harmonious solutions, and cultivating mental preparedness to remain calm under pressure. Essentially, problem-solving in Aikido enables practitioners to effectively apply principles of blending energies, redirecting force, and non-violent conflict resolution in various real-world scenarios.

In Aikido practice, there is a physical phase where everything seems driven by arm-locks, *atemi*, more or less realistic techniques involving anatomy, posture, muscular strength, and inner strength. This level is achieved through training and years of practice; every step is a problem to be solved, every technique is a problem to be solved. At a certain level of Aikido, however, a new factor arises: the partner, or partners, who in the learning phase assist the beginners empathetically and accommodatingly to avoid injuries or trauma. From 'passive', they become 'active', and the roles in practice reverse, creating a new scenario called *kaeshi-waza*. Here, Uke becomes the one executing the technique, while Tori is the one who must solve it without abandoning the premise of not causing harm. This concept opens a realistic vision of what we normally face in life but does not always succeed in the premise of not causing harm.

What happens to us is not always managed by our abilities; it is normal for us to be controlled by external factors, where the basic concept is that "we must endure", such as facing a problem while being

victims of a violation of our personal space, interference at work, in family, among friends, abuse by banks and insurance companies, or an act of bullying on social media. A communication error can lead to catastrophic consequences. Solving a problem during an attack by multiple ukes from different directions, with unpredictable blows, triggers instinctive reaction systems where rational thought does not find the time to exist.

In Aikido practice, there are many cases where practitioners in their training must apply their problem-solving skills, but one of the clearest examples is hanmihantachi waza. In this style of practice, the seiza position held continuously limits the aikidoka's movement, while the uke or ukes are standing. This limitation in mobility is very effective in promoting problem-solving, as it encourages Tori to face challenges head-on, maintaining a positive attitude and an open gaze toward the surrounding environment. By regulating breath and movement rhythm, tori navigates effectively through difficulties.

In hanmihantachi waza techniques, the strategy is based on timing, for which this style of practice requires a perfect mastery of time, allowing tori to control the attacker with greater mobility of the upper body and limited yet precise leg work. This duality of movements is developed and expanded in the practice of hanmihantachi waza. Understanding the dynamics between one's center of gravity and that of uke, tori destabilises uke's balance at the moment of contact, redirecting their movement.

"In the center-periphery relationship, the more stable the 'center', the greater the movement occurring at its peripheries. Kobayashi Sensei referred to hanmihantachi to demonstrate an important strategic element. The seme-uke, uke-seme relationship in hanmihantachi shows that the one performing the technique (seme) is stable, unlike the attacker (uke), who is unstable. Uke's balance is broken through the stability of the one performing the seme.

Many people place the practice of hanmihantachi-waza in the context of budo. The choice of the combat position "from Japanese seiza" with one or more opponents would justify, according to some opinions, leg injuries and the inability to fight standing. This is an absurd argument. Those who support this have probably never had a severe leg injury, as they would know that seiza is extremely uncomfortable, even impossible to assume in such conditions. It should be noted that the utility of combat, which may derive from the skills acquired in the dojo, differs from the Aikido techniques practised in the dojo, mainly through the conscious direction of energy towards harmonization, not destruction. Teaching utilitarian martial techniques is not in line with the spirit and message of Aikido. Aikido does not promote fighting, and O Sensei said: 'No one in the world can oppose those who do not resist'. A competent aikidoka does not show their

strength, and Aikido does not expose combat techniques."[64]

At the heart of hanmihantachi-waza practice is the concept of finding the optimal relationship between tori's center of gravity and uke's center of gravity. By modifying the direction of incoming attacks, increasing the number of uke, and controlling the types of techniques available through instinctive reactions not managed by rational thought, a new type of *budoka* is formed, who has internalised a programming system dedicated to problem-solving (conflict) without causing harm, based on empathy.

Good Practices for organising Problem-Solving Ability in the Dojo

Practising problem-solving means practising our abilities to identify, analyse, and solve problems by developing strategies for resolution. This implies knowing how to break down problems, brainstorm or generate creative solutions by applying mental flexibility, train to make informed decisions, reflect, and carefully evaluate the decisions made. If we want the dojo environment to promote these skills, it is clear that all our actions and relationships must be conducted in such a way as not to repress any of these qualities. As we have seen elsewhere, this means:

- Creating inclusive and supportive

[64] Gembal R., *Aikido. Edukacjaciała i umysłu,* pp.147-148

environments where everyone can feel valued and heard. This promotes a climate of trust and collaboration.

- Promoting reflection and feedback sessions on dojo activities, encouraging athletes to express their thoughts on difficulties and successes achieved, as well as their ideas about the environment they experience during training.
- Spending time with students, at the end of the lesson, at the restaurant after class, to share convivial moments dedicated to dialogue.
- Giving those who are capable the opportunity to participate in Aikido life as *uchideshi* (student admitted to live with the Sensei's family).
- Promoting collaborative resolution moments, involving, where possible and appropriate, the context in which the dojo is rooted, to evaluate actions and possible consequences together. In this sense, it helps to think that the dojo is not an isolated and solitary entity but part of a larger ecology where everyone has their own role that tends to harmonise proportionally to the time and energy put into social growth.
- Promoting a rotation of roles and leadership. While it is true that the teacher is the teacher, nonetheless, they surround themselves with people who help in organisational management and relationships. Assigning different roles to those living the dojo life and changing them periodically allows problems to be tackled from different perspectives, strengthening the organisational and decision-making abilities of each person. A healthy administrative-legal

structure of the dojo is fundamental to the success of the educational program, especially with children and teenagers who recognise in the Aikido school the cup where they find nourishment. For the parents and guardians of minors, proper administrative and legal management translates into trust and collaboration, absolutely necessary for the survival of the dojo and, consequently, the school.

Specific Tips to Help Problem-Solving Ability

- Start by "centering yourself," meaning finding the position where the point of union is located: be present to yourself and do not let yourself be overwhelmed by what is happening, bringing yourself to a state of calm. To do this, it is helpful to focus on breathing, which must shift from anaerobic to aerobic.
- When the attack arrives, do not fight it: it is much more useful to identify the line along which the attack proceeds and adapt to it so that you can, in turn, direct its direction. To understand this image, try to exaggerate the situation: place a child to work in the center of hanmihantachi-waza with an adult attacker of massive size. The child, by virtue of their light weight, cannot counter the weight of an adult, but they can change their spatial position to redirect the attack and cause the attacker to fall.

Decision-Making

Catherine, a 7-year-old girl, is invited by her teacher to participate in a training seminar in Sligo, dedicated to both adults and children. Catherine is accompanied by her parents, who, however, are not participating in the seminar. When she arrives at the training hall, Catherine sees the other participants, adults, and children, and begins to show signs of emotional agitation. Once she realises the large number of participants, she is unsure whether to take part or not. Catherine's parents talk to the instructor, who asks Catherine to be present during the discussion. At that point, the teacher explains that there will be a dedicated space for children's training, a fun program ready for them, and specialised teachers available to assist them. Reassured, Catherine decides to participate in the seminar, nods, and goes to get changed.

The ability to make decisions is the competence that helps to constructively face decisions in various situations and life contexts. Decision-making ability has a positive impact on health as it promotes agency, teaching people how to actively decide on their actions through a conscious evaluation of the different options related to well-being and the effects such decisions may have.

Today, we all face the same questions. How do we orient ourselves and distinguish what is relevant from what is not? How can we make conscious

decisions in a context like today, where uncertainty, complexity, and the constant flow of information to which we are subjected make analysis and evaluation of situations challenging? More than ever, decision-making competence is a life skill to aspire to, which helps improve individuals' resilience and adaptability. Knowing how to make effective decisions means managing risk and uncertainty, improving a person's agency in making responsible decisions for their well-being.

The lack of this competence can lead to significant consequences: it can result in insecurity, impulsive wrong choices due to external pressures or internal emotional imbalances, or, conversely, decision paralysis. Without strong decision-making skills, people may find themselves continuously postponing choices, trapped in unproductive mental ruminations, or overly relying on others' opinions, thereby compromising their autonomy and self-esteem.

Good decision-making is based on knowledge. Reflecting on the issues being faced is therefore essential, and this must be done through a cost-benefit analysis. In the decision-making process, it is also important to consider the personal and emotional consequences related to the decision to be made.

At a more general level, decision-making is the starting point of an Aikido journey. This process characterises any action undertaken during training: without it, there would be no action, also because there is no point in making decisions that are not subsequently implemented.

Aikido Techniques to Activate Decision-Making

Aikido is a physical activity where the student is constantly confronted with imbalance actions (attacks) deliberately designed by the teacher, requiring a decision to be made in a fraction of a second. To face them, as a beginner, an Aikido practitioner receives skills that help to:

- understand how their own body works (aikitaiso);
- relate to the imbalance situation and adopt the necessary timing and space (taisabaki);
- internally control emotions and feelings (meditation/breathing exercises);
- manage the imbalance situation in different ways (techniques).

Since the ways to react (techniques) to each imbalance situation (attacks) vary, decision-making comes into play. Attacks are initially introduced at a simple and understandable level, becoming progressively faster and more complex. Consequently, decision-making develops, increases, and becomes quicker over time.

Use of Taisabaki During Simultaneous Multiple Attacks by Several Uke

- • Paired training – the attacker receives a specific attack to execute, and the defender is assigned a single technique to apply as a response to that attack.

- Paired training – the response to a given attack is now a given sequence of techniques (variety is advisable).
- Paired training – the given sequence of techniques is now applied to two different types of attack and then to three.
- Increase the number of attackers to two. Same response.
- Increase the number of attackers to three. Same response.
- Three attackers. No prearranged response in sequence, but still only three types of attack.
- Three attackers. No prearranged attack, no prearranged sequence.

Decision-making ability in Aikido practice extends to three times that always concern the future:

Immediate Timescale - instinctive decisions produced by everything we have acquired in our lives, hardly controllable and extremely dangerous, but essential in survival cases.

Medium Timescale - decisions that are implemented when there is time to analyse the situation we find ourselves in: environment, assessment of threat or danger, choice of strategy to use. As a result, we will decide to implement a tactic based on acquired knowledge. Technical decisions with the possibility of modification in case of anomalous variations in the attackers' behaviour.

Long Timescale - decisions aimed at planning the "duel" or "battle." Study and reconnaissance of the battlefield, assessments of the "enemy's" level of

preparation. In Aikido: preparation for exams, assessment of training state, knowledge of the exam program, attention to formalities, agreements with the ukes who will participate in the exam. Long-term decisions are the most effective and secure, and if implemented under safe guidance, they ensure a healthy outcome also in relation to those made in Medium Time and Immediate Time.

Good Practices for organising Decision-Making Skills in the Dojo

To organise the dojo with the goal of practising decision-making ability, it is important to create an environment that encourages critical thinking, creativity, and adaptability. Some precautions can serve as good practices:

- Stressful situations can inhibit our decision-making ability. It is helpful to practice together and share moments with the relational network that constitutes the dojo (teachers, students, parents, other dojos) to train in stress management (breathing, relaxation, meditation). These activities, being moments of sharing, can offer opportunities to strengthen bonds and build trustful relationships while also demonstrating the dojo's interest in others' well-being.
- Consulting with more experienced people who act as guides allows one to receive feedback on their decisions and observe different decision-making approaches. When assigning important

responsibilities or organising events that may involve significant decisions, one can consider pairing people with a more experienced companion who listens to their perspective, thereby broadening the viewpoint and learning effective strategies.

- The teacher plays a key role in shaping the dojo's direction. However, after each major decision, time can be set aside to reflect collectively with other members, reviewing how the decision was made, what was effective, and what could have been handled differently. This process helps pinpoint areas for growth and gain insights from experience. Furthermore, it fosters a positive environment where active listening and constructive feedback are already integrated into decision-making.

Specific Tips to Help Decision-Making Ability

The instructor should focus the student's attention on the following points:

- Adopting a fully inclusive approach to the surrounding environment in both visual and perceptual terms (360 degrees).
- Maintaining the initiative in terms of both timing and energetic approach. In the context of Aikido, the Japanese expression closest to the concept of "seizing the time" is *maai* (間合). Maai refers to the management of distance and timing between oneself and the opponent. It is the ability to position oneself in the right place at the right

time, adjusting one's distance and rhythm to control the dynamics of the interaction. When speaking of “seizing the time,” it also implies a tactical aspect and sensitivity in anticipating and foreseeing the opponent's movements.

- Studying the concept of *sen* (先), which indicates the different types of initiative relative to the opponent. There are various levels of sen:
  - *Go no sen* (後の先): reacting and countering immediately after the opponent’s initiative.
  - *Sen no sen* (先の先): anticipating and reacting at the same time of the opponent’s attack.
  - *Sen sen no sen* (先先の先): completely anticipating the opponent's intention by moving preemptively.

  Together with exploring maai, studying the different types of sen helps to create harmony of time and space, which is fundamental for Aikido strategy.
- Managing space by gaining control of the center through entering and evasion movements or changes in direction.
- Ensuring a variety of response options.
- Setting progressive and personalised goals for each participant or group, providing a series of escalating objectives that challenge the aikidoka to develop their problem-solving skills.

The above leads to increased skills in Aikido training and, consequently, in daily life. Using Aikido to develop the life skill of decision-making offers a practical and profound approach to managing choices based on awareness, self-control,

and respect for others. Here is how Aikido contributes to developing this competence.

Awareness and Situation Analysis

In Aikido, every technique begins with awareness of the attacker's position and one's resources. This promotes careful evaluation of the circumstances, helping practitioners learn to read the situation, assess potential risks, and identify alternatives. In daily life, this translates into the ability to reflect on available options and consider advantages and disadvantages before acting.

Stress and Time Management

During an attack, there is little time to react, but acting impulsively can be counterproductive. Training to make quick and calm decisions trains the mind to remain clear under pressure, allowing for well-thought-out decisions even in moments of stress or tight deadlines.

Focus on Win-Win Solutions

Aikido is based on the principle of neutralising the attack without harming the opponent, seeking a balance that protects both parties. This approach teaches practitioners to seek solutions that consider not only their own needs but also those of others, helping to make ethical and collaborative decisions in daily life.

Responsibility and Feedback

During practice, it is common to experiment and make mistakes, receiving immediate feedback from

partners and the teacher. Accepting feedback and correcting mistakes in real-time reinforces a sense of responsibility for one's choices and the ability to improve oneself.

Adaptation and Flexibility

Aikido teaches adapting to the attacker's energy rather than directly opposing it. This fosters a flexible mindset, useful when it is necessary to revise a decision in light of new information or changing circumstances.

When these principles of Aikido are incorporated into daily life, one gains the ability to make decisions with greater calmness, objectivity, and responsibility, improving personal well-being and interpersonal relationships.

Critical Thinking

Elliott, a 16-year-old boy, is dedicating himself with increasing commitment to Aikido. His skills continue to develop, gradually transforming into personal beliefs and visions, as often happens with young yudansha who begin to forge their own path in the discipline. During aikiken practice, once the suburi work begins, Elliott realises he is struggling to maintain rhythm and, even more, to sustain the correct posture to execute the movements. His teacher, observing the difficulty, prompts him to reflect deeply on the meaning of the suburi. Firmly, he encourages him to see the exercise as a confrontation with himself, an invitation to work on his inner discipline. "Suburi", he explains, "will teach you to look at yourself critically, to use your willpower to overcome the body's resistance to abandoning the exercise. And this applies both to the challenges of practice and those of life". That lesson became a new awareness for Elliott: Aikido is also a path of personal growth, requiring strength and perseverance both on and off the tatami.

Critical thinking is the ability to analyse information and experiences objectively, evaluating their advantages and disadvantages, in order to arrive at a more conscious decision. Critical thinking can contribute to health by helping us recognise and evaluate the factors that influence attitudes and behaviours, such as personal and social values, peer pressure, and media influence.

How can we orient ourselves today and

distinguish what is relevant from what is not? How can we make conscious decisions in a context like the current one, where uncertainty, complexity, and the constant flow of information make it difficult to analyse and evaluate situations? Being able to make effective decisions means managing risk and uncertainty, improving personal agency in making responsible decisions for one's well-being.

The lack of this competence can lead to significant consequences: it can result in insecurity, impulsive wrong choices caused by external pressures or internal emotional imbalances, or, conversely, decision paralysis. Without strong decision-making ability, people may find themselves continuously postponing choices, suffering from overthinking or relying excessively on others' opinions, thereby compromising autonomy and self-esteem.

Good decision-making ability is based on knowledge. Reflecting on the issues being faced is therefore essential, and this must be done through a cost/benefit analysis.

Critical thinking arises from the human brain's inability to process negation. Critical capacity is acquired through life experiences and becomes effective when it produces concrete, measurable, and scientific results. Positive outcomes of critical thinking guide humans toward personal and social growth, both psychologically and materially. Healthy and positive critical thinking leads us to decide that the lives of abandoned children in the slums of Calcutta or Rio de Janeiro could be better or to not resort to crime to sustain ourselves. Healthy critical thinking analyses personal behaviours and decides what is good for our health and well-being. It results

from life experience but, above all, from the teachings received. In the professional world, it is called “foresight”: the ability to anticipate problems in ongoing work that would make the final realisation impossible. This foresight is based on extremely disciplined preparation, combined with the need to solve problems to develop. Critical thinking is essential to foresee problems and avoid suffering as much as possible.

Aikido Techniques to Activate Critical Thinking

There is no limit to the application of critical thinking, whether positive or negative. This concept leads us to use this cognitive ability with the common sense acquired through the formation of conscience and the use of educational methods. Aikido occupies an important position in the formation of self-awareness and collective consciousness, as it expresses these cognitions in every technique or attitude within the dojo.

The interaction between Uke and Tori during technique is the heart of Aikido practice. Most Aikido techniques are complex and require great precision to be effective. This is why it is recommended that uke’s attack on a beginner be very permissive so that Tori has the opportunity to learn the necessary movements to execute the technique. As both Uke and Tori learn more, it is important for Uke to start being more vigilant: an experienced Uke should seize the opportunity to strike, usually caused by an error by Tori, and show Tori with appropriate gestures that something needs to be corrected. However, this behaviour is

very difficult to practice and can easily degenerate into blocking the movement and not allowing Tori to learn. In general, if Uke is not ready, it is better for Tori to be permissive in their attack rather than too rigorous.

The next level of uke-tori interaction is kaeshi-waza techniques. As Robert Gembal Shihan writes in his book *Aikido - Edukacja ciała i umysłu*:

> "Kaeshi-waza are commonly called counter-techniques. Kaeshi-waza techniques are not based on the opponent's error but on greater experience and the assumption of initiative. [...] *Kaesu* in Japanese means 'to return.' *Waza* is the technique. Kaeshi-waza can be explained as 'reversed techniques' or 'returning techniques.' It is a sophisticated art that requires perfect control of the energy of movement in technical forms. Understanding and integrating kaeshi-waza can only occur at an expert level. [...] Kaeshi-waza requires a deep understanding not only of the structure and mechanics of the techniques. Finding direct relationships between the techniques, how they are connected, is an important part of integrating kaeshi-waza practice. The technique transforms into technique [...] For those using kaeshi-waza, it is necessary to accept the form being performed on them while preserving the stability of their center. Then the form is no longer a danger but instead becomes a driving force enabling their form as a response."[65]

It is advisable, therefore:

- To emphasise the practice of form and technique by studying the correct guard position - Invite children to observe closely and reflect on the correct form and execution of the guard position by facing each other, moving, and always maintaining coverage from potential blows. Ask them to identify what works well and what could be improved.
- When introducing kaeshi-waza, to analyse the strategies - After executing a technique or series of movements in pairs, have one student execute a technique and ask them to react in their own way, bringing out a counter-technique. Then encourage them to discuss and analyse the strategies used. Ask them to explain the reasoning behind their choices and to compare the various available options.
- To promote group learning by assigning a technique to each group, where children work together to understand the counterattack techniques to be demonstrated later in front of everyone. This encourages critical thinking through discussion, sharing ideas, and comparing different viewpoints.
- To encourage children to evaluate their own performance and that of others and to identify areas for improvement. Ask them to reflect on what they have learned from each training session and how they can apply this knowledge in their daily lives.
- To encourage children to explore their spontaneous abilities born from the training performed, suggesting rather than imposing specific counterattack techniques.

[65] Gembal, R., *Aikido. Edukacjaciałai umysłu*

Good Practices for organising Critical Thinking in the dojo

If we want to improve the students' ability to exercise critical thinking outside the dojo, we must somehow give them the opportunity to practice and test it within the dojo by sometimes allowing them to make responsible decisions. The qualities that support good critical thinking are:

- ability to ask targeted and curious questions;
- ability to evaluate sources of information;
- ability to think from different perspectives;
- ability to evaluate pros and cons;
- autonomy of judgement and the ability to suspend it to avoid hasty conclusions;
- ability to recognise one's own preconceptions and biases;
- ability to develop complex solutions in a group;
- ability to self-reflect and self-evaluate, which implies good self-awareness.

Practising critical thinking requires time and awareness, which is why the dojo's environment and activities must be structured with the intention of promoting, supporting, and manifesting these qualities. As seen with other cognitive life skills, it is again about maintaining an open and welcoming structure capable of:

- welcoming the entire relational network that supports the dojo's work and the young people who inhabit it;
- leaving a sufficient degree of autonomy and

some decision-making spaces to test people's agency in taking responsibility for the dojo as a whole;

- accepting and managing feedback, meaning being strong enough to accept criticism or others' ideas, encouraging and promoting open dialogue where everyone expresses their opinion;
- organising moments of analysis and performance evaluation, both in sports terms and organisationally, opening the possibility for interested parties to give feedback and suggestions.

Specific Tips to Help Critical Thinking

The aim of the teachers' actions should clearly not be to provide solutions to students but rather to encourage them to think. Students should be stimulated to find techniques on their own, based on the knowledge they already possess and a quick demonstration. There is no need to immediately fill the space of doubt that may arise during the execution of a technique. Based on the students' needs, the teacher should know how to combine a presence that can stimulate understanding with an absence that pushes the student to solitary reflection in preparation for the next training session.

- When correcting students' mistakes, don't just say, "That's wrong". Explore why it's an error. What can Uke and Tori do to make use of this situation? Perhaps what they are doing isn't an error but a different technique or a different style of Aikido. This will allow students to identify their

own mistakes in the future.

- Remind students of the importance of uke's role. Considering the participants' abilities, ensure uke is as sincere as possible in their attack. For higher-level students, encourage them to look for errors in their partner's behaviour both as uke and tori.
- Show and have your students practice the real applications of Aikido techniques. Explore which elements remain the same and which need to be adapted based on the type of attack.
- At a higher level, the vigilance of uke and tori during techniques can be expanded using kaeshi-waza practice.
- When teaching techniques, emphasise that Aikido is a coherent system. Show the relationships between specific techniques and the general rules that implement them.
- Ask students to reflect outside the dojo on what they have learned.

Creative Thinking

An interesting example of creative thinking is that of Gianpietro Savegnago sensei, who, after losing a leg in a car accident, found himself physically disabled. In just three months, he was able to recover from the accident and begin training with a prosthesis. In this case, the physical disability adds an additional variable to the environment in which randori practice is conducted and serves as an example of using creative thinking (and other life skills) within Aikido. Through the practice of randori, Savegnago sensei was able to more easily face the daily challenges associated with his acquired physical disability.

Creative thinking is the ability to see or do things in a new way. It is characterised by four components: fluency (generating new ideas), flexibility (easily changing perspective), originality (conceiving something new), and elaboration (building on other ideas). Creative thinking contributes to both decision-making and problem-solving, allowing us to explore available alternatives and the various consequences of our actions or inactions. It helps us look beyond our direct experience, and even if no problem is identified or decision needs to be made, it pushes us to respond adaptively and flexibly to situations that arise in our daily lives.

The complex and rapidly changing nature of the world we live in makes creative thinking a crucial skill for both individual and collective well-being. As society faces new challenges and opportunities,

traditional solutions may no longer suffice. Creative thinking enables us to address problems and make decisions from new perspectives, fostering innovation and adaptation to new circumstances. In a world where problems are often interconnected and multifaceted, creative thinking helps us navigate ambiguity and uncertainty with agility and resilience. Furthermore, in a digital era where information is abundant and accessible, the ability to think creatively becomes increasingly valuable for generating original ideas and solutions amidst the vast sea of data.

These skills are vital in Aikido, where the discipline's plasticity and variability make creative thinking incredibly versatile in practice.

Aikido Techniques for Activating Creative Thinking

In the realm of the Aikido randori, the essence lies in skillfully weaving creative thinking into the chaos of combat. Here, practitioners go beyond predefined techniques, embracing fluidity, ingenuity, adaptability, and instinctive reaction. At its core, randori presents an intricate tapestry of challenges, pushing aikidoka to use their imagination to navigate the storm.

> "Executing techniques in response to various attacks delivered by one or more opponents is called aikirandori. The nature of aikirandori brings the practitioner closer to the practical application of techniques in combat, based on Aikido's strategy and techniques. Randori

> tactics rely primarily on movements, which are fundamental to gaining an advantage over multiple opponents. It is essential to avoid situations where attackers can close the space for the practitioner. Another important aspect of randori is balancing the use of omote and ura forms of techniques. Sticking to one tendency does not exploit existing tactical opportunities. By managing the execution of techniques, it is possible to block access to oneself by some opponents. This is significant, especially when a person is attacked by multiple opponents. In this practice, attention should be directed to the timing of techniques and their energy. Techniques based on the concept of irimi will be of fundamental importance".[66]

In Aikido randori practice, practitioners enter a dynamic arena where familiar techniques meet ever-changing challenges. Here, they face scenarios where executing techniques amidst a barrage of attacks is crucial. Tori, the one performing the technique, faces multiple Uke simultaneously, necessitating adaptability and ingenuity. This situation requires managing shifting times and spaces, ensuring energies flow seamlessly to pave the way for successive techniques.

Central to the art of randori is the strategic transition from one technique to another. Aikidoka must not only execute techniques effectively but also anticipate the opportune moment to transition seamlessly from one movement to another. This

[66] Gembal, R., *Aikido. Edukacjaciałai umysłu*

strategic aspect involves reading the attackers' energy, discerning openings, and positioning oneself tactically to shift effortlessly from omote to ura or vice versa. Mastering this strategic aspect of randori requires a deep understanding of timing, space, and the interaction of forces. Aikidoka must tune into the subtle signals provided by their opponents, enabling them to instinctively choose the most appropriate technique for the given situation. Through continuous practice and refinement, practitioners hone their ability to orchestrate these transitions with precision, ensuring a harmonious flow of movement throughout the encounter.

Randori represents a blank canvas for our creative thinking, manifesting in the intricate play of numerous attackers converging with various types of assaults, different attack rhythms, and constantly changing attack directions. In this whirlwind of movement, tori faces a multifaceted challenge. They must quickly discern the most suitable technique amidst the chaos, acting without the luxury of deliberate reflection. Moreover, they must execute these techniques with finesse, ensuring uke's safety even amidst the intensity of the exchange. Additionally, tori must employ creative thinking not only in the choice of techniques but also in strategic positioning, maintaining optimal distance from attackers to effectively neutralise their assault.

There is a serious danger of becoming entangled during randori, which can degenerate into a brawl. Maintaining the concept of non-harm is extremely difficult, especially during intermediate grades, where acquired technique is not yet perfected. Uke's role blends with tori's energy, directing movement and using open spaces between attackers' guard

positions, creating techniques that emerge from the unconscious.

Ultimately, mastery in randori is not just about perfecting a series of techniques but cultivating a mindset of creativity and adaptability. It is about transcending the mechanically learned limits and embracing the fluidity and spontaneity that define the art of Aikido. In the crucible of randori, creative thinking becomes the driving force that transforms the chaos of combat into compositions of movement and energy.

Good Practices for organising Creative Thinking in the Dojo

If we want to improve students' ability to exercise creative thinking outside the dojo, we must create an environment that nurtures this quality, encouraging mental freedom, the exploration of new ideas, and confidence in facing challenges innovatively. To train creative thinking, it is essential to pose challenges that engage students: problem-solving exercises, adaptation challenges, interdisciplinary group work, and experimentation. These activities also imply the possibility of risk and error, which is not always something we allow others. Here are some good practices to stimulate these qualities:

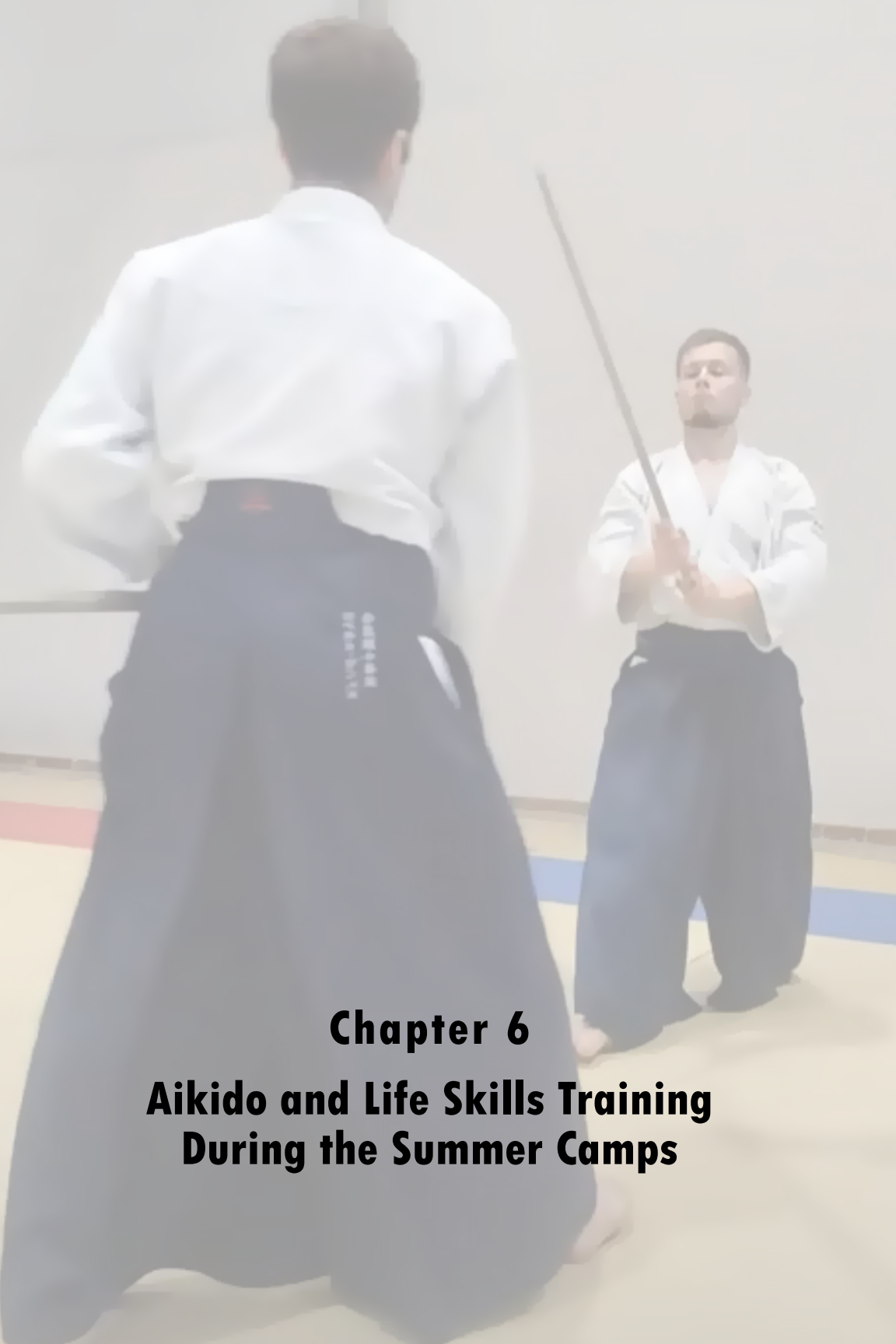
- Stimulate curiosity by organising unusual activities, perhaps related to Japanese culture. For example, choose themes and assign groups of students the task of researching and delving into certain elements to report back to other group members, thereby implementing cooperative

learning. The results of such research and exploration can then be transformed into something that can be presented to the dojo's relational network, such as organising a recreational activity during events dedicated to children and teenagers.

- Assign tasks beyond Aikido. During summer camps, have students take turns managing practical matters such as preparing food, harvesting vegetables, lighting the barbecue fire, or cleaning bathrooms, locker rooms, the dojo, and dormitories. These practices, when conducted with proper guidance, constitute an important formative moment for young people. In many cases, ideas can arise from observing how the same problems are approached from different perspectives. Seeing how others tackle problems can be a way to change how we see them.
- Create relational spaces within the dojo and moments for idea generation.

Specific Tips for Supporting Creative Thinking

One thing we often take for granted, yet is extremely valuable for teachers, is paying close attention to the words spoken by students. These words can then be creatively reused. Often, they hide the keys to understanding unspoken desires (fatigue, the need for lightness, the need for attention). As a teacher, remember to exercise your own creative ability by taking these desires/needs into account, adjusting intensity and objectives to create a different and adaptable space within your lessons.



Chapter 6

Aikido and Life Skills Training During the Summer Camps

There are two main reasons that led us to experiment with the theoretical frameworks we defined through the Summer Camps.

The first reason is predominantly operational in nature. The practice of Aikido Summer Camps is well established, especially in Poland, where for at least 30 years, various schools have organised summer retreats for young people in holiday locations equipped for sports groups. In Italy, however, due to high costs and a lack of adequate facilities, intensive residential experiences have been more limited. Nevertheless, some Aikido groups with a long tradition and a consolidated network of international exchanges have gained extensive experience in both managing the learning of Aikido Ryu and solving problems that can arise during intensive events. On this solid operational foundation, consisting of established skills and knowledge, the management structure of the camps was developed.

The second reason is symbolic in nature. The historical period following the shogunal era in Japan, which saw the birth of Morihei Ueshiba and the founding of Aikido, was characterised by the flourishing of spiritual realities deeply rooted in the animistic interpretation of rural Japan. In this context, agricultural cooperatives promoting harmonious integration with and deep respect for natural elements emerged. On this symbolic basis, the organisational structure of the camps was developed.

These two reasons, combined with the theoretical reflections elaborated in Ireland, inspired the

organisation of the Summer Camps. These events were not only opportunities to practice Aikido intensively and work on Life Skills but also moments where sustainability, respect for the environment, and the holistic development of individuals and their relationships with the surrounding world were emphasised.

The training sessions on the tatami were integrated with common life practices, managed by working groups that alternated in performing tasks aimed at putting Life Skills into action and developing them. For example, the ordinary rules of cleaning common areas immediately highlighted the characteristics of each participant, revealing who was best suited for specific tasks. In any case, a responsible instructor was always present to assist anyone needing support, ensuring an inclusive and constructive environment.

Regarding the relationship between Aikido and Life Skills training, the key moments of the Summer Camps can therefore be identified as: training on the tatami, where the practice of Aikido integrated martial techniques with learning life skills such as self-control, communication, and problem-solving, and activities off the tatami, where experiences in nature, such as farm work and mountain hikes, offered unique contexts for applying the skills learned.

As for the actual training, we implemented a structured method to integrate the development of Life Skills with Aikido teaching, thus promoting an educational perspective. Each instructor was

assigned by the Sensei the task of designing a one-hour lesson focused on a specific Life Skill. These lessons, supervised by the Sensei, were conceived to make the connection between Aikido principles and the skills needed in daily life evident, as also suggested by scientific research on Life Skills training projects. During these sessions, the Sensei took on the role of guide and observer, leaving the instructors responsible for conducting the lessons. Their experience, theorised in chapters three, four, and five, was tested, documented, and discussed within the instructor team during the camps, ultimately becoming part of the study materials archived throughout the project.
For this reason, an essential element of the camp was the evening discussions around the fire. These meetings, characterised by a relaxed and reflective atmosphere, were a crucial moment for sharing impressions, stories, and resolving any difficulties that arose during the day.

Through open dialogue, both among instructors and with the young participants, topics such as conflict management, communication, and resilience were addressed. Participants had the opportunity to express their opinions, contributing to the creation of a reciprocal learning environment.

To be concise and avoid redundancy in the materials, we include here only one study material among those developed for various Life Skills. The material, prepared by Master Luisa Grace Zaffaina, refers to a training session on the Life Skill of

Effective Communication. It is included here as an example.

Effective Communication at the Aikido Camp in Italy (Cereda, August 2024)

During the camp in Italy, we had the opportunity to explore Life Skills, focusing in particular on effective communication. The goal was to connect the practice of Aikido on the tatami with the communicative skills it can develop. Effective communication is that which achieves its purpose, creating an authentic connection between the sender and receiver of the message. It is based on a balanced use of verbal and non-verbal communication and develops through a dynamic process involving various aspects and actors. With this definition in mind, we structured a series of activities to help the participants, a heterogeneous group of about fifty Italian and Polish children, adolescents, and young adults, overcome linguistic and cultural differences.

Communication Activities

1. Discussion in a Circle

The initial activity involved all participants sitting in a circle. A reflection on communication was encouraged through key questions:

- What is communication?

- In what forms does it manifest?
- What requirements are necessary for it to be effective?

Responses were received without judgement, creating a welcoming atmosphere free from preconceptions, where everyone felt free to express themselves. This first step fostered an environment of openness and mutual listening.

2. Non-Verbal Communication in Pairs

Participants were divided into pairs, each consisting of an Italian and a Pole, to strengthen the bonds between the two groups. Each pair carried out an exercise where one person remained silent while the other conveyed a specific emotion (joy, sadness, anger, fear, surprise, disgust) through facial expressions and body language.

This exercise highlighted the importance of silence as a foundation for effective communication:

- Internal silence to listen to one's own emotions and remain centred.
- External silence to truly listen to the other.

3. Physical and Dynamic Communication

To explore physical communication, participants were divided into groups of three. Each group was tasked with forming a human triangle, maintaining balance and connection with the

other members during coordinated movements. The exercise required clear and precise communication to maintain synchrony, emphasising the importance of a shared language to achieve a common goal.

Aikido Practices for Communication

1. Mokuso (Meditation)
Before each training session, practitioners focus in silence to leave daily concerns outside the tatami. This moment of meditation allows them to be fully present in the "here and now," creating the ideal conditions for both inner and outer communication.

2. Aikitaiso (Warm-Up Exercises)
The sequence of movements during aikitaiso develops body awareness and relieves tension, fostering an inner listening that is essential for effective communication.

3. Funakogi Undo (Coordinated Breathing)
Individual breathing harmonises with that of the group, preparing practitioners for Aikido techniques that require a deep level of connection with their partner.

Results and Conclusions

The activities demonstrated that communication, both verbal and non-verbal, is essential not only in Aikido practice but also in daily life. The ability to listen to oneself and others, use the body and emotions for expression, and collaborate to achieve common goals are skills that extend beyond the tatami.

Final Reflections

The method used during the camp proved to be effective and can be replicated in future experiences, offering a transferable educational model in different contexts. The combination of theoretical and practical approaches, both in summer camps and workshops, allowed participants to apply the skills learned in real-life situations, transforming challenges into opportunities for personal and collective growth.

In this regard, practising Life Skills becomes more relevant than any theoretical explanation. A practical approach is necessary—one that, through action and concrete examples, enables participants to internalise values such as perseverance, respect, and responsibility. In this sense, through direct example, the teacher must demonstrate how skills such as leadership, teamwork, and adaptability can be integrated into everyday life, moving beyond a purely theoretical approach.

Aikido, with its focus on harmony and personal growth, proves to be a powerful tool for educating

not only athletes but also individuals who are aware and capable of facing life's challenges with balance and determination

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Key Points of the Project

In closing this work, we believe it is important to summarise the key aspects that contributed to the development and realisation of the ACRE project.

The integration of Aikido with methodologies related to the teaching of Life Skills required an educational perspective and aimed to structure a methodology that could be replicated in future projects.

- Promoting active participation.
- Strengthening individual and group capabilities.
- Facilitating learning through direct experience.

The Erasmus ACRE project has endeavoured to demonstrate that Aikido is not only a powerful tool for improving martial skills but also for developing fundamental Life Skills, applicable both personally and socially. Through an innovative approach that combined martial practice with an educational perspective, participants were able to experience a transformative journey.

The objectives set for the project were:

1. The Development of Life Skills

• Self-awareness: Working on one's physical, mental, and emotional centre helped participants improve self-control and self-esteem.
• Empathy and Interpersonal Relationships: Exercises such as *randori* and guided pair work strengthened mutual understanding and collaboration.
• Resilience and Stress Management: Physical and mental challenges enabled participants to face and overcome pressure with greater confidence.
• Critical and Creative Thinking: Techniques such as kaeshi-waza and randori taught participants to find innovative and strategic solutions.
• Effective Communication: The importance of non-verbal language and silence as foundations of clear communication was successfully integrated.
• Emotional Management: Living together, enduring physical exertion during training, and navigating relationships and new experiences generated numerous opportunities to experience and recognise emotions, both individually and with the support of others.
• Decision-making: The camps were designed to emphasise self-efficacy and the agency of young participants. Throughout the summer camp experience, decisions were continuously made and evaluated for their effectiveness,

whether leading to positive or negative outcomes.

2. Inclusion and Valuing Diversity

• The participation of individuals with different abilities and backgrounds highlighted the importance of an inclusive approach.
• Collaboration between Italian and Polish cultures enriched the project, creating a bridge between different languages and traditions.

3. Sustainability and Environmental Education

• Reforestation activities and a focus on sustainability raised participants' awareness of the importance of caring for the planet.

4. Personal and Community Growth

• Participants reported increased self-confidence and a stronger sense of belonging to an international community.
• The ACRE project, with its experiences across three European countries, provided participants with a platform to explore themselves, build meaningful relationships, and learn to live in harmony with others and the environment. Just as Aikido transforms conflictual energy into harmony, this project transformed challenges into opportunities for both personal and collective growth. The most repeated phrase

during the final goodbyes was: **"We will meet again"**, a clear sign that the bonds created and the lessons learned will continue to flourish beyond the boundaries of this project.

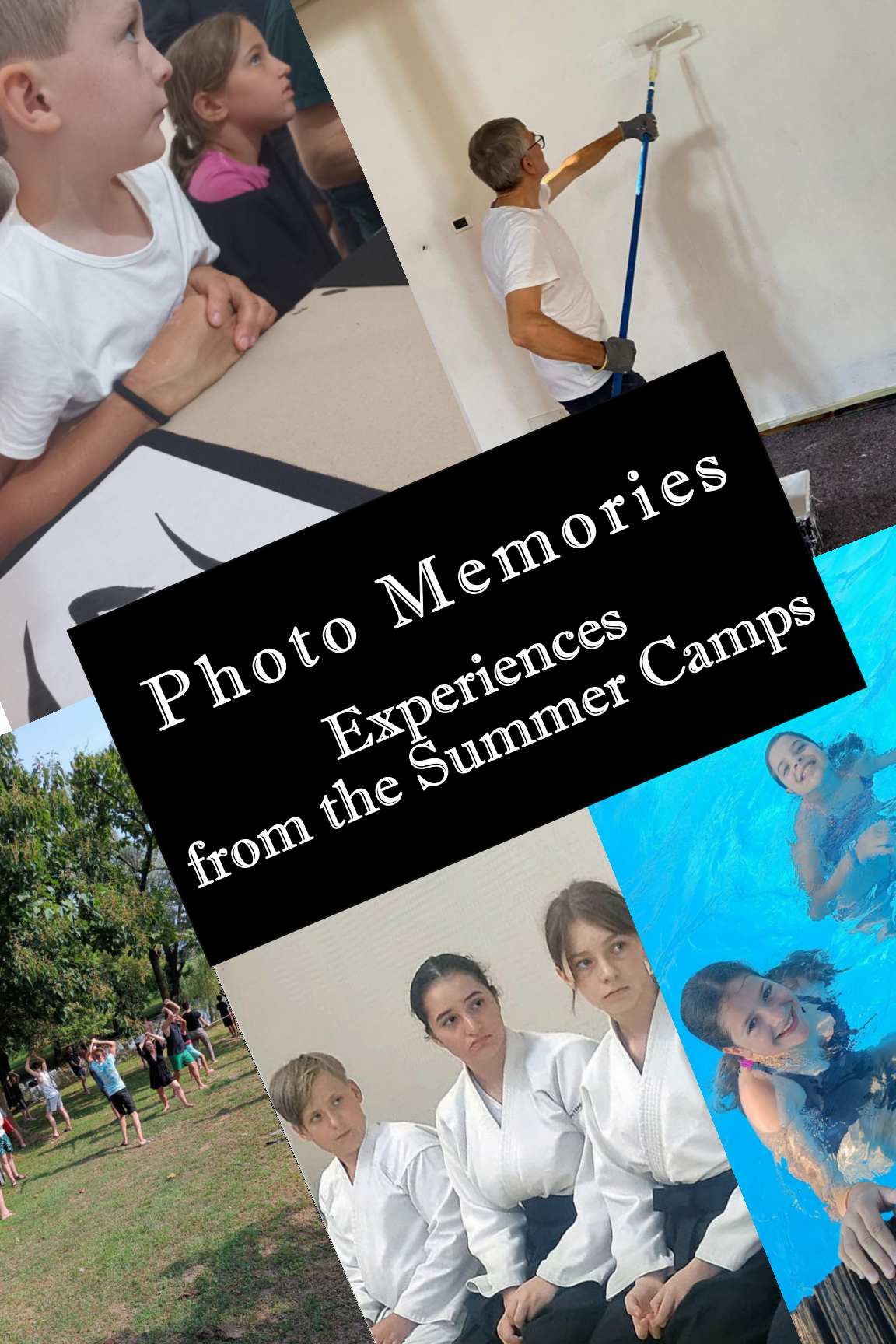


Photo Memories
Experiences
from the Summer Camps

We had several ways to describe what took place during the Summer Camps in Chmielno (Poland) and Cereda (Italy). In the end, we believe it is more engaging to depict the camp experiences through short episodes, like snapshots capturing the existential atmosphere that shaped both practice and relationships, rather than a cold analysis of the theoretical or technical components of Aikido and Life Skills. We consider this approach in line with the spirit that has guided this text from the beginning, fully aware that by the time they reach these pages, readers might be more interested in grasping a sense of the practicability and feasibility of what we have explained so far.

These photo memories consist of images and short narratives, written at different times and in varying circumstances, attempting to reconstruct the atmosphere of the summer camps. They are presented in no particular order—more like a gallery than a chronological account. Just like memories, they emerge through analogy or association, flowing seamlessly from one to another. These images, together with the written accounts, bring out different details and themes of the ACRE project, and collectively, we find that they address all the issues the reader will have encountered throughout this brief manual.

The distinct graphic style we have chosen for this chapter highlights its different perspective—one that does not stem from the organisation of events, but rather from their experience.

A Journey of Growth with the Erasmus ACRE Project – Aikido and Life Skills

My name is Christian, and at the age of 22, my life was turned upside down by a stroke that left me with severe

physical limitations. After months in hospital and a long rehabilitation, I learned to walk again, albeit with difficulty. My determination drove me to seek new ways to regain control of my life, and that is how I discovered Aikido.

In 2022, I began practising Aikido at the dojo in Castelgomberto under the guidance of Sensei Antonio Albanese. When he saw me for the first time, he asked: "What part of you still works?" "The upper body and arms," I replied. "Good," said Sensei, "you will work with the bokken until you start to feel your body again."

It was not easy—every movement was a challenge. But with the support of Sensei and my training partners, I embarked on a journey of physical and mental renewal. In 2024, this journey was enriched by the Erasmus ACRE project, which combines Aikido with the development of life skills. This project focuses on how Aikido can serve as a tool for developing key competencies such as resilience, empathy, critical thinking, and collaboration. For me, participating in the summer camps in Poland and Italy was both a challenge and an extraordinary opportunity for growth. Despite my physical limitations, I was welcomed with warmth and respect, proving that Aikido is truly inclusive and accessible to everyone.

In July 2024, I attended the summer camp in Gdańsk, an experience I will never forget. From the very first day, I faced physical challenges, such as struggling with ukemi, but the support of the teachers and my peers gave me the strength to keep going. Through techniques like shihonage and hanmi-hantachi waza, I gained greater confidence in my movements, learning to use my centre to maintain balance.

The activities were not solely physical: one particularly meaningful exercise involved closing my eyes and allowing myself to be guided by a partner through a light touch on

my hands. This strengthened my ability to trust others, a crucial aspect of both Aikido and everyday life.

Although an injury prevented me from fully participating in the camp in Italy, I still experienced intense and meaningful moments. During a lesson on empathy, I worked with a partner to explore the connection between uke and tori. One exercise, in which one person walked while gently pushing the other, made me reflect on the importance of mutual listening.

Another moving moment was practising nikyo ura in seiza. My partner, noticing tension in my shoulder, tried to help me relax. These small acts of care and attentiveness made me realise how deep the philosophy of Aikido truly is—it extends beyond technique to embrace respect and mutual understanding.

Thanks to the Erasmus ACRE project, I have developed numerous life skills. Perseverance, essential for facing each lesson despite difficulties, has become an integral part of my character. Empathy, cultivated through exercises focused on connection with others, has helped me improve my personal relationships. Critical thinking, stimulated during randori and other activities, has taught me to make quick and conscious decisions.

The Erasmus ACRE project has changed my life. Not only has it helped me improve my physical and mental abilities, but it has also taught me to see challenges as opportunities for growth. I am grateful for Aikido, which continues to be a source of strength and inspiration in my recovery journey. Looking ahead, I hope to share my experience with others, demonstrating that with determination and support, any obstacle can be overcome.

Environmental Sustainability in the Summer Camps

Caring for the vegetable garden, created specifically for the summer camp, proved to be one of the most educational and beneficial activities. Harvesting fresh vegetables at dawn, when the morning dew still shimmered on their surfaces, conveyed an important message about the origins of food. Connected to cooking as a life skills activity, these experiences reinforced the idea that "we are what we eat."

Participants took turns collecting vegetables, and one particularly memorable moment occurred when a child exclaimed: "Look, potatoes come from underground!"

The decision to avoid plastic plates made the cleaning process more labour-intensive, but thanks to the rotation of working groups, we managed to maintain a calm and cooperative learning atmosphere.

Forests and Sustainability: The ACRE Project and Reforestation

The sustainability of ACRE was actively promoted through the forestry project, an initiative aligned with environmental policies developed in recent decades. These policies have demonstrated that planting trees is a concrete action to reduce carbon dioxide in the atmosphere and protect the planet.

Planting trees is not just a symbolic act; it is part of a "territorial culture" that encourages respect for nature and counteracts human impact on the environment. This awareness became a significant theme of the Erasmus ACRE Summer Camps, where theory and practice merged to leave a lasting impression on participants.

Knowledge and Practice: A Conscious Approach

The activity began with an informative session supported by audiovisual materials, including documentaries, discussions, and detailed explanations of the importance of reforestation. However, theory soon turned into action. The most significant moment was the tree planting activity, which involved three key sites connected to the project:

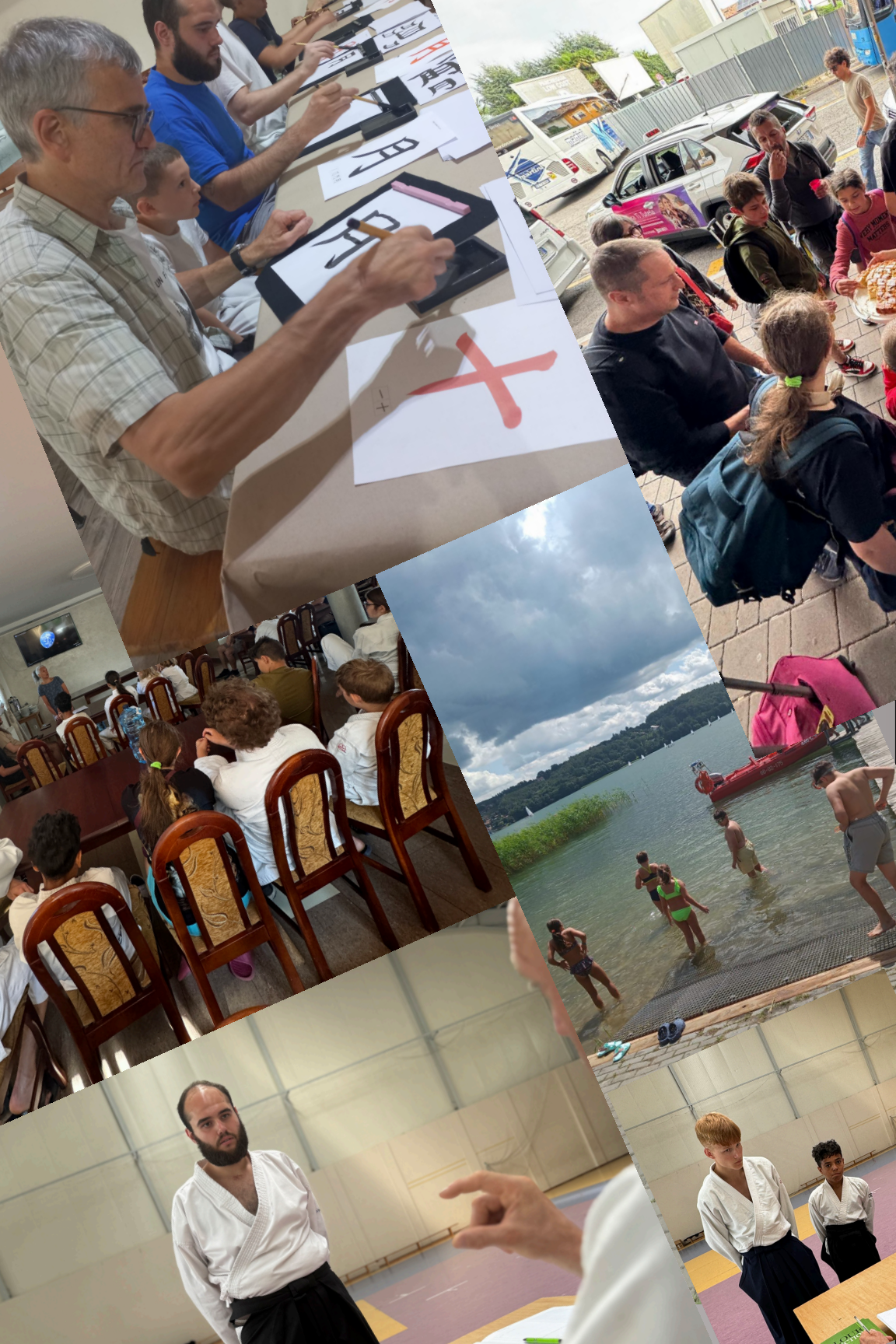
- Chmielno, Poland
- Castelgomberto, Vicenza, Italy
- Cereda, the site of the second camp.

At each location, participants were guided by the forestry expert responsible for the project, a patient and knowledgeable figure who explained the steps involved in planting trees. Every participant directly experienced the practical challenges of forestry work: digging holes using manual tools, selecting the most fertile soil to nourish the roots, carefully watering the saplings, and securing support stakes to stabilise the young plants.

The Tree Planting Ceremony: A Symbol of Unity

The tree planting ceremony was presided over by local authorities who generously provided the land. Within the designated site, a commemorative plaque was installed featuring the iconic quote from Tagore: "Trees are the earth's endless effort to speak to the listening heaven."

At the base of the plaque, the logos of the partner organisations were proudly displayed, highlighting the international cooperation behind the project. The caption



read: “Trees planted on the occasion of the Erasmus ACRE Camp.”

Life Skills and Teamwork

Beyond its environmental value, the tree planting activity was a powerful tool for life skills development. The reforestation project required participants to develop:

- Critical thinking to overcome unexpected challenges (such as difficult terrain or ineffective techniques).
- Teamwork to divide tasks and support one another.
- Resilience to keep going despite physical fatigue.

A particularly moving example of cooperation involved two Polish participants who stood out for their dedication to the hands-on aspects of the project. From the outset, they formed a team with an Italian instructor specialising in environmental sustainability. This collaboration created a synergy that lasted throughout the camp, forging personal bonds that endure to this day.

A Message Beyond Politics

The Summer Camp experience transcended the political agendas that often drive global decisions. It conveyed a deeper message to participants: respect for all forms of life and empathy towards GAIA, our Mother Earth. Each tree planted was far more than just a simple gesture; it became a tangible symbol of a shared commitment to the planet’s future.

Through moments of effort, shared laughter, and a profound sense of responsibility, participants learned that

caring for nature means caring for themselves and for future generations.

Shodo – The Art of Japanese Calligraphy

Among the most significant experiences of the camp in Poland, the Shodo course left an indelible mark on participants. The ancient and captivating art of Japanese calligraphy was met with great enthusiasm, particularly by the Italian participants, who had heard of it but never had the opportunity to experience it firsthand.

Meticulously organised by Polish colleagues, the course transformed a simple space into a small writing dojo, where every detail reflected care and dedication: sheets of washi paper, sumi ink, fude brushes, and suzuri ink stones were carefully arranged, ready for use. The choice of materials, essential for the practice, made the experience truly authentic.

The lessons were conducted by guest instructor Robert Bok, a charismatic and multifaceted figure. A master not only of Aikido but also a 6th Dan in Shodo, he imparted the secrets of this art with grace and authority. Before beginning, the master explained that every stroke in Shodo tells a story: each line, each angle, and each curve reflects intention, concentration, and inner discipline.

"Hold the brush lightly, but firmly," the master instructed while demonstrating on a large sheet. The brush, dipped in ink, glided smoothly across the paper, leaving bold and perfectly harmonious strokes behind.

Shodo and Life Skills Development

Shodo is not just an aesthetic art; it is a powerful tool for developing life skills. During practice, participants experienced the importance of: • Deep concentration: every stroke requires a mind free from distractions, fully focused on the present moment. • Critical thinking: faithfully copying the model demands constant reflection, analysis of mistakes, and a desire for improvement. • Self-awareness: the connection between body and mind becomes evident as the brush translates hand movements into marks on the paper.

These moments of silence, interrupted only by the sound of brushes gliding across the paper, created an almost meditative atmosphere. It was no longer just a manual exercise but a practice through which each participant could reflect on themselves and their inner balance.

Swimming and Cooking: Life Experiences and Connection with Nature

During the Summer Camp in Poland, the landscape unfolded before us like a living painting. The lakes of Chmielno, nestled among gentle, green-dotted hills, reflected a sky that seemed never to set. The colours were so vivid they appeared carefully painted by an invisible hand, while the surrounding silence left us in awe. Not a single sound disturbed the natural calm, except for the cheerful chatter of the Italian children, which almost felt out of place in such a serene setting.

This environment, with its untouched beauty, taught us the value of self-awareness, encouraging us to slow down, observe, and listen to nature.

Summer Camp and Regenerative Activities

The perfectly organised summer camp that hosted us provided moments of freedom, which we filled with simple yet profoundly regenerating activities. Among these, swimming in the lake became a powerful exercise in confronting emotions. Immersing ourselves in the crystal-clear, invigorating waters, playing, and experiencing the lake's restorative energy allowed participants, especially the younger ones, to overcome initial fears and embrace the moment with joy.

The proximity of the lake to the dining hall enabled us to extend these playful moments, enhancing not only our physical well-being but also our mental balance. Swimming before meals heightened awareness of bodily signals, such as growing hunger, fostering healthy habits and promoting self-discipline.

A Lesson in the Mountains: Perseverance and Connection

The meeting was set for 6:00 AM in the square of Cereda, right in front of the dojo. A thin morning mist filled the air as the group gathered in silence, their breath forming small clouds in the cool dawn. The plan was ambitious: an 8 km uphill hike with a 400-metre elevation gain to reach Monte Verlaldo, a peak from which, on clear summer mornings, one can glimpse Venice and the Adriatic Sea shimmering on the horizon.

Gathered in front of the church, the lead guide outlined the "rules of engagement" for the climb: the weaker participants would be placed at the front, the stronger ones at the back, distributed along the line to provide support to those struggling. The group was to maintain a single-file

formation for safety and organisation. This approach immediately highlighted key life skills: the strongest were not there to race ahead but to assist others—a lesson in empathy and responsibility.

The group set off in silence, their steps blending with the early morning sounds of the forest. As often happens on hikes, the younger and stronger participants, driven by adrenaline, surged ahead. They seemed unstoppable, eager to challenge the mountain as their hearts pounded to the rhythm of the uphill path. Yet, further back, others began to struggle—each step becoming heavier, as if the incline itself weighed on their legs.

A Moment of Crisis

As they neared the summit, the lead guide sensed something was wrong and turned back. To her surprise, part of the group was missing. Without hesitation, she retraced her steps and found a young boy "planted"—a term used in mountaineering to describe someone who refuses to continue, paralysed by exhaustion or fear.

This situation is not uncommon in hiking or caving, yet it is dangerous: a delay caused by one person can affect the entire group, especially as weather changes, daylight fades, and resources like food and water are limited. In these moments, problem-solving and resilience become essential.

The guide, with a mix of authority and kindness, took the boy's hand. "You can do this," she said firmly. The boy, surprised by her determined tone, did not resist. With each step, the guide's firm grip became more than just physical support—it was a transfer of energy, an awakening of inner strength that lies dormant in all of us. This moment embodied the skill of managing emotions: when fear and

exhaustion overwhelm us, sometimes all we need is a guiding hand to reconnect with our potential.

Lessons Learned During the Hike

The weaker participants leading the group taught us leadership and how to support those in difficulty. The perseverance required to push through fatigue embodied resilience and emotional strength. Clearing the path of brambles became a practical exercise in problem-solving and collaboration. Reaching the summit reminded us of the importance of self-awareness and the ability to appreciate the beauty and accomplishment of a goal achieved.

For the Polish participants, the mountain became a metaphor for life itself: a challenge to face, a goal to reach, and a reward to savour. The day served as a powerful reminder that, in both Aikido and life, progress is not measured solely by speed or strength but by the ability to move forward together, supporting one another along the way.

The Night Assault in Cereda: When Aikido and Life Skills Intersect

The small gym in Cereda, transformed into a dojo in true Japanese style, had an almost surreal aura. Next to the village church, with tatami mats securely laid and the kamiza carefully decorated, everything was set to welcome the international group of young aikidoka from Poland. The camp's organisation, part of an Erasmus project intertwining Aikido and life skills, was the result of dedicated work: two weeks of meticulous preparation to warmly host the guests.

Every detail was thoughtfully arranged. The dining area

was set up a few steps from the dojo to minimise movement. In the evenings, a path led to a clearing in the forest. There, under a starry sky, a fire burned brightly. It was a rustic, safe, and ancient fire, around which words and cultures intertwined in a magical multilingual harmony.

A Disturbance in the Night

The Polish youths, accustomed to a curfew in Chmielno, found themselves confronted by a noisy local group frequenting the square. They roared around on motorbikes, shouting late into the night.

The first attempts at mediation were polite: the aikidoka, calm and respectful, requested silence from 11 PM onwards. It seemed the matter had been resolved.

That night, however, as everyone slept, the unexpected happened—provocative shouts echoed through the dojo. Some individuals had entered the gym, startling the Polish guests. Students and instructors leapt up, but it was too late—the intruders had already vanished into the night.

Sensei's Intervention

The next morning, the Sensei, a central figure of the dojo and a respected local, took charge of the situation. With a calm gaze and firm words, he reassured everyone: nothing like this would happen again.

That evening, after training, the Sensei walked to the square where the local youths were gathered—some sitting on benches, others astride their motorbikes. With a steady step and a composed voice, he positioned himself at the centre of the group.

"I know two of you train with the MMA instructor in the

neighbouring town," he began, letting silence do its work. Two young men nodded, almost surprised. The Sensei continued, "Your behaviour dishonours you and dishonours our town. We have guests who have travelled from afar, young people who show respect. What you did was not worthy of martial artists."

His words fell like stones on still water. The boys began to deny their involvement, but a student quickly produced a video recording of the incident. There was nothing more to say.

"There will be no consequences," the Sensei continued, "but every morning, you will clean the square of the bottles and rubbish you leave behind. And until 10 PM, we will tolerate your noise—but no later."

As the Sensei spoke, other instructors from the dojo joined him—some Polish, some Italian. No words were needed; their presence was enough, like a dam holding back a river. Eventually, the youths mounted their motorbikes and, precisely at 10 PM, left the square.

Sensei's Vigil

That night, the Sensei did not leave the dojo. He set up a cot by the entrance and stood watch, jo staff in hand, stepping out occasionally for silent rounds. No further incidents disturbed the camp.

In the following days, the Sensei spoke with the MMA instructor, who took disciplinary action against the two involved youths. But the most profound lesson took place in the dojo. "We must not fight those who provoke us," the Sensei explained, "but guide them. If possible, we must bring these boys onto the tatami. It is there that they will learn the discipline, respect, and balance they lack when their anger has no outlet."

Harmony Restored

On the final night of the camp, the fire in the clearing burned as brightly as it had on the first evening. Polish and Italian students sat together, talking and laughing. The sound of motorbikes and shouting had faded away, and the dojo had returned to being a place of peace.

Perhaps, as Aikido and Life Skills teach us, it is never about winning a conflict but about finding common ground. Thus, in that small gym in Cereda, the true confrontation had not been resolved with force, but with respect and awareness. Because the path of Aikido is this: transforming conflict into harmony, even in the dead of night.

The Challenge: When Aikido Meets Life Skills

One of the most delicate goals of the Erasmus project revolves around social inclusion: allowing everyone, regardless of their abilities or difficulties, to feel part of the group. Participants with physical and cognitive disabilities were welcomed into the project with particular attention. Their determination to overcome often invisible obstacles made one fundamental concept clear to everyone: harmony is not the absence of conflict, but the ability to transform it.

As in every group, family, or society, there is always someone who stands out for their "alternative" behaviour—restless, provocative, rebellious, or simply struggling. In the dojo, these labels lose their meaning. The Sensei often repeats that "Aikido leaves no one behind," just as a good mountain guide does not abandon anyone during a climb.

The special attention given to participants facing difficulties became a bridge to a new world. As the Sensei

explained: “If an enemy comes, they won’t ask for certificates or excuses. Life always demands the best from us, regardless of the circumstances.”

The Agreement Technique

One young participant quickly caught the Sensei’s attention. Unjustifiable and undisciplined, he skilfully evaded every practice session. He was an intelligent boy, capable of avoiding lessons with strategies that, in another context, might have been admired. But the Sensei, observing his ability in practical tasks, had an intuition.

“What do you like to do?” he asked calmly one day.

“I like fishing,” the boy replied, surprised by the question.

“Good,” the Sensei responded with a smile. “I will take you fishing, and you will come to train. Deal?”

The boy, surprised but amused, accepted with a smile. Shaking hands, the Sensei explained to the group that this was a binding agreement. It was an old gesture, often forgotten today, but one that communicates trust and mutual commitment.

During an outing, the Sensei arrived with a fishing rod, and the boy enjoyed fishing near the river and pond, proud of his catches.

Crisis and Choice

Harmony, however, takes time. The next morning, the boy did not show up for breakfast, once again skipping the shared moment with his companions. The Sensei walked up to him with a firm but calm authority that only martial arts masters possess. Just before the lesson began, the boy had

already hidden himself in the dining hall, stubbornly refusing to participate.

The Sensei took him by the hand, without saying a word, and led him to the dojo. The reaction was immediate: the boy planted himself in front of the door and began shouting, insulting and provoking, under the shocked gaze of all the participants. The Sensei left him there, unmoving, and looked him in the eyes: "Now the choice is yours."

Conclusion

We have reached the end, arriving at the final image: a boy standing in front of the dojo door. In the end, he did not enter. The Sensei tried in different ways until he convinced him. What ultimately worked was the message: "You can trust me," repeated and demonstrated continuously. But trust is not mere acceptance; rather, it is the pact that a teacher makes with the student's "inner instinct."

In this gallery of small stories, we have seen some of the camp's protagonists, their experiences, and their decisions. However, this final image conveys something more. No matter how well we imagine organising every moment and activity with an educational perspective, relying on the wisdom of our art, Aikido, the final choice, as all these stories illustrate, always belongs to the young person who can be guided but ultimately must decide for themselves. Yet, many stories from the students we train and meet in our dojos teach us that decisions are sometimes only truly understood years later.

That Aikido lesson, which the boy observed from the doorway, was dedicated to a profound theme: unmanageability. How do we recognise and address those who live on the fringes of society, trapped between anger and chaos? What life skill can open a path to the heart of

someone who rejects all rules?

Each of us has that "inner instinct." We sometimes do things that cause harm, either consciously or unconsciously. Why? Because within us exists a reserve of energy that is activated in extreme situations—self-defence against an attack, an illness, or an emotionally adverse scenario. This part of us is fundamental in moments of aggression. It enables us to react, saving our own lives or the lives of others.

However, the way we channel this energy can manifest as violence or harm to others. It is the same energy that, in extreme cases, leads to delinquency. This violent, negative energy within us may serve us one day, so as Aikido instructors, we cannot claim the right to eliminate it in people—nor is it possible. But we can show a way to manage it, or rather, to harmonise it.

Sometimes, the path of Aikido is not only found on the tatami but in simple, everyday gestures: a helping hand during a climb, a promise kept, an agreement that rebuilds trust. What the Sensei demonstrated was that harmony is not achieved through force, but through patience and the ability to see beyond superficial behaviour—sometimes through instinctive actions. In this experience, the boy not only learned how to fall and get back up, as Aikido techniques teach, but he also discovered a new path: one of trust, respect, and conscious choice. Once again, Aikido had transformed a conflict into an opportunity for growth.