Meditation is an ancient practice, found in many cultures, and involves various techniques for quieting one’s mind. The ethos of meditation contrasts strongly with today’s pop culture tendency to be constantly turned-on and tuned-in. Contemporary technologies like media players, cellular communications, and the Internet have produced electronic devices which become virtual extensions to our bodies and keep us sensory connected 24X7. Meditation, by contrast, provides us with techniques to temporarily get off of the grid. Generally speaking, we can categorize meditation as being either of a religious or of a secular orientation.

- **Religious Meditation** has a goal of making oneself closer to the divine presence by quieting down worldly and ego-based distractions. Often, the practice of religious meditation is performed in the context of a prayer ritual.

- **Secular Meditation** has no religious context. It is simply a mental discipline to reduce the physical and mental side effects of stress and anxiety by attaining a relaxed, but attentive state of mind.

In earlier times, the existence of warrior cults (e.g. Christian Knights Templar, Islamic Assassins, Native American Dog Soldiers, Buddhist Yamabushi, etc.) made for the frequent use of religious meditation by warriors. However, meditation in contemporary martial arts is inherently secular. The association between martial arts and meditation is simple. A calm mind and a relaxed body are more formidable than a distracted mind and a tense body. This distinction may be difficult to observe in sport oriented martial arts like wrestling or boxing because those arts anticipate a successive and mutual exchange of blows with the contestant having the ability to recover and continue the contest. The concept of martial art meditation becomes much more apparent to the observer with martial arts like fencing. In fencing, a single blow of the sword is considered fatal and decisively ends the match. At the master level of fencing, the window of opportunity in both time and space for successfully executing either an attack or defense is too small for conscious thought. Likewise, the existence of any interfering mental state like nervousness, pride, or anger would significantly interfere with the ability to successfully execute technique. This same principle, while slightly less obvious, also applies to Aikido. It has been noted that Morihei Ueshiba, the founder of Aikido, would meditate several times a day, from minutes up to several hours at a time.

In contemporary Aikido training, two types of meditation techniques are typically employed.

- **Breathing Exercises** are referred to as *misogi* (i.e. purification exercise). They can be performed with motion or from a still position. Some types of misogi include chanting, but the more common forms simply focus on breath control and slow breathing. Breathing meditation is typically the most basic and easiest for beginners.

- **Quiet Meditation** is referred to as *zazen* (i.e. “za” = seated + “zen” = meditation). Zazen is typically performed from a floor sitting position. Quiet meditation is more advanced than breathing meditation, but does not require that one masters breathing meditation first. According to tradition, Bodhidharma became the 2nd headmaster of the Shaolin monastery (northern China) during the 5th century. Upon assuming his responsibilities he became disturbed by the weak physical condition of the Shaolin monks. Evidently, the monks were not physically strong enough to endure the intensity of advanced meditation. To resolve this Bodhidharma instructed them in a series of external exercises which are said to have been the predecessor to what is now Chinese Kung-Fu. In modern times, the Birankai Aikido organization the practice of zazen as well as laido (see meditative practices below) are part of the standard requirements for Aikido teacher certification.
Mantra-style (i.e. the repetition of short phrase to induce a meditative state) meditations are not typically used in Aikido training. There are also some specialized forms of meditation that require special equipment or environmental conditions (e.g. waterfalls, etc.). While they may be practiced by some Aikidoka in certain locations, they are not prevalent.

The **breathing exercises** associated with Aikido training have many variations. These variations can be summarized by two basic approaches. With both approaches, physical relaxation is important and the mental concentration should be on the “one point” in the lower abdomen (i.e. *tanden*, *hara*, or *second chakra*). The durations for inhalation and exhalation should be equal. Begin your practice with an easy duration like 5 seconds each of inhalation and exhalation. Use the *One-One Thousand, Two-One Thousand*, method of counting to yourself. Then after several successful repetitions, add an additional second to your count. Do this progressively until you reach your limit. Over time you will see your limit rise. A reasonable beginner goal is to try to reach 15 seconds each of inhalation and exhalation. When you get more advanced, you can raise your limit. At that time you can also try to stop counting and sense the time intuitively. When practiced in a group setting, the leader will set the breathing pace by clapping. It is important to use only abdominal control to control the speed of your breath. Constricting the nose, mouth, or throat to restrict and slow down the air flow is generally not appropriate.

- **Standing Breathing:**
  1) Maintain good posture (i.e. head up and aligned above the hips). Place your hands in front of you with your palms on your upper thighs. Your feet are flat on the ground and slightly wider than shoulder-width apart. 2) As you inhale through your nose, relax and let your hands rise up, palms down, in front of you as if they were resting on top of a very big beach ball which was being inflated. As the inhalation is complete, the hands should be straight up over your head. 3) Holding your breath, turn the palms out to the side, push the arms down to the side, so that they become perpendicular to your body. Then, with your arms extended out to the sides, turn your palms face up while you rise up onto your toes and sink your breath into your lower abdomen. This downward settling of your breath should take only 2 or 3 seconds. 4) Finally, begin exhaling through your mouth as you lower your arms to the sides. At the end of the exhalation, your arms should be back to their starting position, in front of you with your palms on your upper thighs. 5) The duration inhalation and exhalation should be equal and the downward settling in-between should be 2 or 3 seconds.

- **Seated Breathing:**
  1) Sit either in the Aikido seiza position or cross-legged on the floor. Even a straight-backed chair can be used. If sitting cross-legged a cushion or yoga block under the hips is helpful to better align the spine and free the diaphragm. 2) Place you hands palm-down on your thighs. 3) Straighten and stretch your back, pull your chin in, and pretend that your head was being pulled slightly upward by a string attached to the top of the head, just over the spine. 4) Inhale through the nose; feeling the stream of air pushing backwards and upwards against your sinuses as your diaphragm and lungs expand. As the inhalation is complete, your posture should be slightly higher, with your head further back than when you started. 5) Then settle your breath into your lower abdomen while dropping your shoulders and aligning to the starting posture. 6) Finally, exhale through your mouth letting your body rock slightly forward as you exhale. At the end of the exhale, make a last push with the diaphragm to force out the last bit of air. 7) For more advanced practice, visualize your tanden as collapsing infinitely in half (i.e. collapsing) during the inhalation and doubling infinitely (i.e. expanding) during exhalation.
Quiet Meditation is done alone or in a group. When performed in a group, the leader will signal the beginning and end of the meditation. The leader may also move around and help adjust people’s posture. In formal zazen settings one of the leaders may have a flat paddle. When someone is feeling sleepy or has muscle stiffness, they can signal to the leader that they want to be smacked on the shoulders by the paddle. For beginners, 15 minutes is a good duration to begin with. Over time, try to work up to 30 minutes. Once you can do 30 minutes well, you should be able to go for longer periods with little difficulty. The quiet meditation process goes like this: 1) the typically posture is the lotus or half lotus position with a firm cushion (i.e. zafu) or yoga block under the hips. The Aikido seiza position can also be used when a cushion or block is not available. 2) The dominant hand is held palm up holding the other hand, also palm up, so that the knuckles of both hands overlap. If you’re right-handed, your right hand is holding the left hand; if you’re left-handed, your left hand is holding the right hand. The thumbs are lightly touching, thus the hands form an oval, which can rest on the upturned soles of your feet if you’re sitting full lotus or on your thighs. 3) Close your mouth and rest your tongue on the roof of your mouth. Gaze slightly downward to a point on the floor about four feet away with your eyes half-open. 4) Rest the weight of both legs on your mat. Straighten the lower back and spine and pretend that your head was being pulled slightly upward by a string attached to the top of the head, just over the spine. Draw in chin and stretch your neck. Align your nose with your navel and relax your shoulders and stomach. Do not lose your posture. 5) Use slow abdominal breathing through the nose for both inhalation and exhalation. 6) Try to think of nothing. As stray thoughts enter your mind, don’t try to suppress or resist them. Just let them go and abandon them. 7) After having entered meditation optionally go through this brief mental checklist: A) mentally acknowledge the physical surroundings (i.e. what is the room around you like, ambient noise, temperature, lighting, drafts, smells, etc.), B) mentally acknowledge your body condition (e.g. posture, breathing, pulse, etc.), C) mentally acknowledge physical comfort (e.g. tired, cold, hot, itchy, achy, etc.), D) mentally acknowledge your current emotional state (e.g. happy, sad, indifferent, elated, depressed, angry, disappointed, etc.). After completing the awareness inventory, just continue the meditation thinking of nothing. 8) Do not move your body while breathing. Periodically self-check your posture and realign it as necessary.

Related to martial arts meditation are certain meditative practices. These meditative practices are not meditation but rather they are designed to require the existence of a meditative state of mind in order to be performed successively. For example, Aikido is often referred to as Zen (i.e. “meditation”) in motion. Even more pronounced is the dependency on a meditative state in some other martial arts. Notable examples of martial arts that demonstrate this are Japanese archery (i.e. Kuydo) and Japanese sword drawing (i.e. Iaido) and Winter Olympic Biathlon. In each of these arts, the practice is performed as a solitary exercise against a set of imaginary opponents. This means that the practitioner must control their body to defeat a set of opponents that exists only in their mind. Another example of a martial art meditative practice is the Japanese concept of kotodama which is related to the concept of ki-ai in martial arts. The idea behind kotodama is that resonate chanting of certain vowel sounds produces harmonic frequencies that influence physical or mental power. This exercise also requires a meditative state of mind in order to be performed properly.

While this document has described the more common meditation techniques found in modern Aikido, the student should not feel restricted to practicing these methods exclusively. By supplementing the techniques described here with their own preferred methods outside of class, the student can increase the frequency and duration of their time spent practicing meditation and enjoy the additional benefits of meditation proportionally. In addition to better martial arts performance, these benefits include:
Aikido Meditation

- lower oxygen consumption
- decreased respiratory rate
- increased blood flow and slower heart rate
- higher serotonin levels and improved sleep
- lower cholesterol levels and less risk of cardiovascular disease
- lowering the levels of blood lactate and reduced anxiety
- relief from chronic conditions like asthma, allergies, arthritis, fibromyalgia
- improved pain management
- improved brain activity
- improved immune system
- and many more…