

# Thoughts on "Neru"

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Three months have passed since my arrival in Berkeley. During these three months, I have been closely observing the student's training while I teach them, and I have begun to realize that there are many Japanese words which are difficult to translate into English. (Needless to say, my English is very limited at this stage.) It is especially difficult to try to explain in English those words or concepts which Japanese people understand on a sensory level.

One such word is NERU, as it relates to the body. I consider this concept to describe a most important aspect of our training. I would like to give it some thought here. Because written Japanese uses Chinese characters, which are ideogrammatic, the written word NERU has three basic meanings, each slightly different from the other. First, NERU means to temper or forge steel from iron by subjecting it to heat in order to eliminate undesirable impurities in the iron. Second, it means to soften, impart luster to, and weave fiber. Third, it means to bake in a fire.

The following list presents actual circumstances in which the Japanese will use the word NERU to describe an activity. I would like the reader to try to sense the concept underlying the words:

1. To temper or forge steel from iron by fire to eliminate undesirable impurities for a particular purpose; for example, to make a sword.
2. To soften or impart luster to silk for weaving.
3. To mix flour and water for kneading before bread is baked;
4. To mix the ingredients of clay with water for kneading to the right consistency for use;
5. To mix, harden, and bake in fire;
6. To polish an idea or plan;
7. To polish one's art or techniques in order to cultivate character;
8. To round out one's character through progressive experiences while studying an art;
9. To drill and train the body and mind;
10. To train in martial arts;
11. To improve an activity through the experience of accumulated practice until the act becomes second nature.

Within the above descriptions of the use of the word NERU, two basic uses of the word can be found. The first involves a type of work or study which is done to extract the characteristic potential of a substance. The second involves a type of work or study which trains the mind and body.

In relation to Aikido, NERU means to train the body and the mind through the experience of accumulated practice. However, what does this really mean, in terms of physical training?

In speaking of Aikido, NERU means to stimulate, cultivate and bring out the best potential within the human being. It is natural that the more a student trains, the stronger the body becomes; however, from the point of view of how the body best functions in order to execute a technique properly, to merely become stronger is not the object of training. Rather, a student has to thoroughly drop or eliminate unnecessary body strength or tension. By working on this, the student learns the importance of the flexibility that simultaneously accompanies correct body strength. Furthermore, instead of training the body fragmentally or partially (e.g. arms, wrists, legs) the student needs to train the body harmoniously, as a whole.

This includes the mind. By working on this, the student is able to embody the heaviness of the technique regardless of physiological weight. The presence of this heaviness is one of the measures that reflects whether or not the student has absorbed the concept of NERU.

With the embodiment of softness (flexibility, strength, and heaviness,) come speed. All these aspects are attained through the accumulation of daily training, in which basic training is a key factor. It is therefore vital for the student to conduct practice correctly, with the correct principles.

In thinking about the concept of NERU, specifically in the in the study of training mind and body through Aikido, I would like the reader to be aware of the process by which Japanese swordsmiths extract high quality steel (Tamahagane) from iron. In this process, iron filings are removed from the riverbed with the use of magnets. This iron is then beaten repeatedly within the fire, while a softer, different quality of iron is added to it. The repetitious beating and heating of these two types of iron produces a sword that contains elements of sharpness (hardness), unbreakableness (softness), and unbendableness (hardness) within it.

I will be happy if this short essay on the concept of NERU helps any student to further understanding of training.