

Aikido and Weapons: The Last Word?

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[Aikido Journal #108](#) (1996)

The debate about whether aikido should include weapons training is a long-standing one and we have frequently offered a forum to proponents of both sides of the issue in the pages of Aikido Journal. I have both observed and been a participant in these discussions and would like to bring up a few points which I don't recall having seen mentioned elsewhere.

First of all, I think a reasonable starting point would be to review where Morihei Ueshiba stood on the subject of weapons. Without engaging in a lengthy historical assessment of this subject, let me simply point out a few facts. As we have documented exhaustively over the past ten years, the major technical influence on aikido is Daito-ryu aikijujutsu. Ueshiba's teacher, Sokaku Takeda, was a master swordsman and weapons expert who spent many of his formative years studying a variety of weapons. Takeda only settled on jujutsu techniques as the main component of his martial arts instruction in deference to the times, when the carrying of swords was prohibited by law. Takeda's bujutsu was comprehensive in nature and can in no way be considered to have been limited solely to jujutsu techniques. Daito-ryu technique is built on the principles of the sword.

Another fact: from 1942 through at least the end of the 1950s, Morihei Ueshiba spent a great deal of time at his country dojo in Iwama experimenting with the aiki ken and jo. One of his main students at that time, Morihiro Saito, was a first-hand witness to this process and the body of knowledge that remains from that effort on the part of the founder can be seen in Saito Sensei's aikido today.

One of the criticisms voiced against the above observation goes something along these lines: "O-Sensei was merely dabbling in the area of weapons and never really developed this aspect of training into a finished discipline like his taijutsu or empty-handed techniques." The problem with this view is that the period of time involved amounts to nearly twenty years. This certainly would be enough time for a skilled martial artist like Ueshiba to integrate such a body of technical knowledge into his training. Remember, too, that as early as 1937 the founder took active steps to expose himself to the weapons-based classical art of Kashima Shinto-ryu at his Kobukan Dojo. His blood-oath even appears in the enrollment records of that school! Furthermore, I would point out that many of the common technical terms in aikido are derived from kenjutsu. Words such as tegatana, shomenuchi, yokomenuchi, and shihonage clearly reflect an underlying knowledge of swordsmanship. Likewise, a major body of techniques characteristic of aikido, iriminage, are based on thrusting and entering movements with the sword. In fact, the whole concept of irimi or entering is borrowed from sword technique.

Let us be clear: the study and practice of weapons was a long-term passion of the founder. Those who would suggest otherwise are either ignorant of aikido history or are politically motivated.

It is, however, a historical fact that the founder prohibited the practice of the ken and jo at the Aikikai Hombu Dojo, EXCEPT for Saito Sensei's classes. A rather revealing fact, I would say! Should it then be surprising that the Hombu Dojo of today has publicly stated—I refer to the published comments of Dojo-cho Moriteru Ueshiba and 8th dan Masatake Fujita—that weapons training is not part of aikido?

The answer to the question of whether or not aikido includes weapons training depends then on the definition of the authority you consult. There is no universally accepted agreement on what aikido is, either technically or philosophically.

Moreover, the average practitioner looks to his immediate instructor as the final authority on the subject of the art. Even an organization cannot impose its viewpoint on the content of training at the individual dojo level unless it is willing to adopt and enforce a rigid set of regulations. Such an approach seriously inhibits the growth and influence of the group as has been shown many times.

As an illustration, within the Aikikai Hombu organization—whose official position as we have seen excludes weapons training—well-known teachers such as Shoji Nishio, Nobuyoshi Tamura, Kazuo Chiba, Mitsunari Kanai and numerous others incorporate iaido in their curricula. No attempt has been made to prevent them from doing so. From where I sit, the whole debate boils down to semantic quibbling. There will never be a satisfactory answer to the question of weapons and aikido that is convincing to everyone.

All of the arguing in the world about the virtues or demerits of such training will not change this fact. Those whose personal teachers advocate weapons training, or who independently arrive at the conclusion that weapons are an important adjunct to taijutsu training, will proceed according to their convictions. Those who have been persuaded that the practice of weapons is harmful or inappropriate to their progress in taijutsu will reject weapons altogether and inherit a set of prejudices that serve to justify their belief.

Is this the last word on the subject? I doubt it, but I hope to have contributed a few new perspectives to the debate.