

## Bukiwaza and it's place in Aikido.

At the present time, the question of weapons and it's place in Aikido is divided mainly among three groups:

1. Those who claim that weapons are not important.
2. Those who have incorporated weapon systems from other traditional weapon schools into Aikido.
3. The weapon system handed down from O Sensei to Saito Sensei (itself a system rooted in older traditional systems and transformed by O Sensei in the light of his understanding of Budo).

O Sensei was apparently cautious in both teaching his weapon system and in giving permission to instructors in teaching it themselves. Saito sensei studied with him for over 24 years and to my knowledge was the only recognized successor to this particular body of knowledge. Many of O Sensei's other students were already well conversant (if not already masters) with other weapon systems and later when becoming teachers in their own right readily incorporated this background into their own understanding and teaching of Aikido.

From what I have seen, this has become the dominant weapons influence in the Aikido world today: the result being in fact a hybrid system consisting on the one hand of Aikido taijutsu and on the other, Iaido, Kenjutsu and Jodo techniques incorporated and themselves modified by the movements and principles of the empty handed side of the art. The value of such an 'incorporation' is certainly debatable and can be argued either way. It is however beyond argument that the original spirit behind these arts is fundamentally different from Aikido. Iaido is the Art of Killing 'through unsheathing the sword' and Kenjutsu is the Art of Killing 'with the unsheathed sword'. Aikido is fundamentally not about defeating or killing the other but about reconciliation and neutralization of conflict. O Sensei also made this patently clear through the recorded talks, writings and poems he left behind. It is this going beyond the dichotomies of either winning or losing, killing or being killed which sets Aikido apart as a unique Martial Art and makes it particularly relevant (to my mind) in today's world where when we face conflict (of any kind) we must ask ourselves whether our usual strategies and 'solutions' are not themselves part of the problem. Violence begets violence and what we resist tends to persist.

I make this distinction as to the Spirit of traditional weapon systems with full

respect for those Arts. I think that Iado is one of the most aesthetically beautiful martial Arts I have ever seen. My question is as to the compatibility of Spirit or Intention behind these arts with the spirit of Aiki.

The issue then is what the relationship is between empty handed techniques and weapons and how the latter can enhance the former (and vice versa). Sensei called this relationship and understanding Riai and emphasized that it was fundamental in understanding his Aikido. Within the Aikido that Saito Sensei taught, my understanding is that weapon training is at the root of empty handed forms in the following principal aspects:

1. Basic footwork, hipwork and handwork. General body dynamics (tai sabaki).
2. The dynamics of distance and timing (maai), the rhythms of blending (awase).
3. Zanshin. The broadening of attention and presence beyond the apparent limits of the engagement with another (or others).

These three areas can be seen to relate to work (awase) with one's self (1), with the other (2) and beyond to include the space or environment 'holding' the event (3). All three need to be in balance. Balance is a prerequisite for being centered and functioning from center.

Some of the advantages of weapon training over taijutsu:

1. Body work as a solo practice (suburi and kata).
2. Self control. There is no armor in Aikido. In advanced blending practices, attention, precision and control are therefore strongly emphasized. The strict observance of etiquette is both necessary for reasons of safety and for the training of attention (Sensei once commented that 'a polite person is an attentive person'). Being attentive to the relational process as it unfolds (Presence), is a central (if not THE central) aspect of Aikido practice.
3. Intensity (of intention) and extension (of feeling).

### **Takemusu Aiki Bukiwaza, basic overall structure.**

Ken.

1. Suburi (7 basic suburi; happo giri)
2. Awase (migi/hidari: non-contact; go/shichi: contact).

3. Kata (5 kumitachi; ki musubi no tachi).

Jo.

1. Suburi (20 jo suburi, happo tsuki) Kata (31 jo no kata; 13 jo no kata)
2. Awase (against tsuki; yokomen, etc)
3. Kumijo.
  - 31 kumijo
  - 10 kumijo.
  - 13 no awase.

Ken & Jo.

7 ken tai jo.

(Note: For a clear, detailed and comprehensive account of Saito Sensei's weapon curriculum please refer to Ethan Weisgard's two volume set, Bukiwaza).

The weapon system basically can thus be understood on three levels.

**The first level** is the level of suburi and kata. At this level we work without a partner on integrating and unifying our body dynamic and joining with the weapon, making it an extension of our feeling. This is the first level of 'blending' with the ground, with ourselves (on all levels) and with the weapon.

**The second level** is beginning to work on blending with another through simple 'one (or two) step meetings'. This level is very flexible and although there are a few sequences which have become almost as 'fixed' as the kata, it is a wide area of practice open to experimentation and improvisation. From what Saito Sensei told me, the majority of the blending exercises O Sensei would engage in were on this level of 'simple' awase.

**Level three.** Complex blending through the extended sequences of the kumitachi and kumijo. This level builds naturally upon the previous two and is far more demanding in terms of technical skill and mental/energetic stamina. The different katas and their partner sequences explore specific 'problems' or challenges of maai, intention and blending. The variations are further extensions of this level and again are flexible. Sensei repeatedly stated that the variations of the kumitachi for instance were given as examples and that trainees should explore the possibilities of the advanced forms by devising their own. This is obviously an advanced level of practice.

Overall what can be appreciated is a graduated system of training and progressive development which beautifully complements and enhances the taijutsu aspect of the art when used with understanding. It is a wonderful balance of clarity, precision and flexibility.

Lewis Bernaldo de Quiros. The Netherlands. Mid-winter of 2005.

## Levels of Aikido practice

### Levels of practice and their rationale

Three fundamental levels of practice:

1. Basic (kihon), step by step. Balancing movement with stillness. Clarity and precision of form, distance and timing (maai). Uncovering the Principles behind the Techniques.
2. Semi-flowing. Integration and joining of the basic steps in a flexible way. Engaging the Principles. Working with obstacles.
3. Flowing (ki no nagare). While retaining the 'heaviness' and clarity of the previous levels. Expressing the Principles through the techniques. Emphasis more on 'feeling' than form.

Each of the above levels are in turn flexible in that they can be broken down and put together in different ways according to individual and group didactic requirements.

Level 1 remains the primary and most important level. It is at this level that the lack of body-mind integration and habitual patterns of misuse and tension can be engaged and brought into conscious awareness.

Aikido dynamics are based on natural movements and at the basic level the work is twofold: learning the myriad forms and techniques of the Aikido repertoire and unlearning patterns of dysfunctional misuse on both the mental and physical levels which stand in the way of the free execution of those forms. To the degree that we remain unaware of this second 'unlearning' aspect of training will the techniques stubbornly resist our efforts at improving their quality beyond a certain point (the 'plateau' or the 'wall'). They will simply and faithfully reflect the fact that 'we do as we are'.

The more flowing levels should emerge from a maturing of the training at the first level. So while we should not reach beyond our level prematurely neither should we ignore the direction the practice takes and its larger perspective. Otherwise the danger is of becoming confined to the basic level thinking that is all there is ( a common misapprehension among aikidoka's superficially acquainted with Saito Sensei's Aikido) and what should serve as a basis and solid foundation for further growth and expansion becomes a restriction and confinement. At this point the basics no longer serve as a platform for developing freedom of responsiveness but have become practices which reinforce defensiveness and reactivity. This is a common problem and represents an incomplete understanding of the progressional levels of the practice and of the purpose of basic training itself.

Having said that, it should be made clear that basic or kihon training, whether for beginners or senior practitioners, constitutes the main practice. It is the foundation for all other training and the ground to which we return to work on weaknesses when uncovered on other levels. But it is the understanding or 'operational framework' within which we practice which will determine whether those basics serve us or not in developing the ability to respond freely without becoming trapped by positions (both physical and mental).

The common tendency to identify and invest our sense of self with 'what we can do' seriously hampers our ability to grow beyond and challenge those positions. The great Tai Chi master Cheng Man Ching put it succinctly as follows. One's attitude in approaching the Art should ideally be one of 'investing in loss'.

This understanding of levels (and how they can be used) is a key feature of the Aikido that Saito Morihiro Sensei transmitted from O Sensei in his teaching and runs as a common thread through the whole system, from bukiwaza to bukidori to taijutsu. Please refer to Volume 5 of Saito Sensei's Traditional Aikido series for more insight into this.

Lewis Bernaldo de Quiros. The Netherlands, winter 2005.