

Realizing Aikido's Potential.

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The virtues of aikido

The popularity of aikido both in Japan and abroad is a post-World War II phenomenon. Early students of Founder Morihei Ueshiba such as Koichi Tohei, Kisshomaru Ueshiba, Gozo Shioda, Kenji Tomiki and others, followed by their students in turn, were mainly responsible for the growth of the art on an international scale.

What factors are responsible for aikido's broad appeal? Many people observing the art for the first time comment on the beauty and gracefulness of aikido techniques. The attacker is thrown in a seemingly effortless manner yet suffers no apparent harm from the encounter. The promise of a self-defense art that protects the individual while sparing the aggressor is an attractive concept in philosophical and moral terms in a world where the specter of warfare seems ever present. Aikido's ethical basis appeals to man's deep-seated instinct for survival. At the same time, the art provides a unique alternative to the violent techniques of other martial arts—techniques that elicit moral repugnance in many.

On a physical level, aikido has much to offer for the health conscious. The accumulated benefits produced by warm-up, stretching, throwing and falling exercises are considerable. Many practitioners have undergone dramatic physical transformations through aikido training on their way to a fitness lifestyle.

The social milieu that develops in aikido dojos is an important part, too, of the training experience for many practitioners. Aikido tends to draw from a wide age range and students continue longer than practitioners of arts centered on competition, primarily the domain of young people. Also, I think it would be accurate to say that, as a percentage, aikido has a higher ratio of female participants than any other martial art. All of this contributes to a strong sense of community. For many students of aikido, the dojo is an extension of or even a substitute for their family.

Aikido: the non-martial art

For all of the positive benefits of aikido training, the art has not yet realized its great potential as a social force for promoting harmony among peoples. Although the relationship may not appear obvious, I think this is due in large part to the art's distancing itself from its martial roots. It is the martial

atmosphere of the dojo setting that allows students to develop real-world skills and elevates the level of training beyond that of a mere health system. The neglect of the martial side of aikido can be explained in part by historical circumstances.

Japanese society in the postwar era rejected the military mentality that led to the country's involvement in the Second World War. Given this inhospitable climate where the practice of martial arts was forbidden for several years, the martial nature of aikido was suppressed. As a consequence, what remained of the art that was embraced by hundreds of thousands of practitioners was—with few exceptions—something quite different from the original concept of the Founder. The techniques of aikido retained only the outer form of a martial art and tended to be practiced in a setting devoid of martial intensity. Let us look at some of the factors that cause aikido to fall short as a martial art.

Weak attacks

The root of the problem as I see it lies in the weak attacks that are commonplace in aikido dojos nowadays. Students are seldom given training in how to execute an effective attack, be it in striking, grabbing or the occasional choking or kicking techniques. The situation is further exacerbated by a lack of committed intent or focus during attacks. This absence of firm intent on the part of the attacker affects his mental state and that of the person executing the technique. Both sides are aware—at least subconsciously—of the minimal risk of injury in training under these circumstances. Accordingly, the focused mind-set needed to develop realistic self-defense skills is absent from training.

Neglect of atemi and kiai

A study of the art of the Founder will reveal his emphasis on *atemi* (preemptive strikes) and *kiai* (combative shouts) as an integral part of techniques. O-Sensei can be seen executing atemi and kiai even in films from his final years when his aikido had become much less physical. Atemi and kiai go hand in hand and are important tools for stopping or redirecting the mind of the attacker and successfully unbalancing him. Even if a physical strike is not actually employed, a mental state that preempts or disrupts the attack is a vital component of the aikido mind-set. Yet in many dojos today, the use of atemi or kiai will draw scorn from the teacher in charge who regards them as crude, violent means that have no place in an art of “harmony.” This common misconception bespeaks a lack of understanding of the martial origins of the art and the theory and practice of the Founder.

Failure to unbalance attacker

The combination of weak attacks, lack of atemi and kiai in aikido practice lead inevitably to practitioners attempting to execute techniques without first unbalancing the attacker. An uncommitted attacker having foreknowledge of the technique to be applied is not easily brought under control. This introduces an artificial element of collusion into the interaction between practitioners and results in a training atmosphere that is fundamentally different from the intensity of a real encounter.

Use of force and “make-believe” throws

The logical consequence of the above training lapses is the execution of sloppy, imprecise throws and pins. Since full control of the attacker is not achieved, it often becomes necessary for the person throwing to resort to physical strength in order to complete the technique. This leads to clashing and raises the risk of injury.

Another scenario is that neither of the two partners put any serious effort into the technique and the interplay between them is little more than choreographed collusion.

The progress of practitioners taught in a setting in which the “martial edge” is absent and where sound training principles are not observed will necessarily be retarded. What is worse, some who are products of this kind of training environment will entertain the illusion that their skills would be viable in a realistic situation.

Premature physical decline of instructors

I suspect that a certain segment of the aikido population would agree with the above observations. On the other hand, the next subject I will broach will no doubt elicit controversy in many quarters.

In my 40 years of involvement in aikido I have observed numerous teachers pass from their physical primes to a state of declining health and, in the cases of some, to an early demise. All too frequently they have accelerated the inevitable aging process through poor lifestyle choices. As their bodies age, teachers frequently adapt their techniques to compensate for their physical ailments and decreased ability to move. Moreover, they stop engaging in “give-and-take” practice where the roles of *uke* (the attacker) and *nage* (person throwing) are alternated. They become “teachers,” but cease to be “practitioners” in the way they were in their formative years of training. The withdrawal of teachers from partnered training practice whether or not the result of a conscious decision has far-reaching effects on their aikido careers. By no longer doing warmup exercises and taking falls, they undermine their level of body conditioning and flexibility. Focusing

exclusively on throwing contributes to a overall weakening of the body structure and muscular tone and invites injuries.

As teachers seldom practice with their peers beyond a certain point in their training, an artificial cap is placed on their progress because their pool of training partners is limited primarily to their own students who are almost always of a lesser skill level.

Remedies

Much of what needs to be done to restore the martial nature of aikido in accordance with the vision of O-Sensei involves correcting the poor training habits alluded to above. Here is a list of concrete steps than can be taken that would literally revolutionize aikido and restore its great potential as a force for social betterment.

Teaching attacking skills

First of all, great attention should be given to teaching aikido students how to attack effectively and with resolute intent. This may require some teachers to engage in cross-training of some sort in order to acquire the necessary skills themselves.

What kinds of attacks should be introduced in the aikido dojo? This will be a personal decision on the part of the instructor in charge. I think that basic punching skills from karate, boxing or other sophisticated systems should be considered.

Students should also become familiar with kicking at least at an elementary level. Although not as prevalent as punches, it is quite possible that one might be confronted with kicks in a real encounter.

Learning defenses against kicks also helps students overcome the common problem of “tunnel vision.” For example, beginners tend to focus their attention on the initial, overt aspect of an attack—usually a punch or grab—and fail to recognize the possibility of a secondary attack. When students realize that they must consider another attack such as a kick may be forthcoming, their state of alertness improves.

Learning how to kick properly will also improve the falling skills of aikido students because falls from kicks are more difficult and dangerous. Care should be taken to proceed slowly because the risk of injury is higher.

Among the existing aikido systems, Yoseikan Aikido developed by Minoru Mochizuki takes this sort of eclectic approach that incorporates elements from several arts. Students of this system are taught basic karate, judo and weapons skills as part of their training.

Beyond this, one might want to introduce attacks involving weapons—both bladed and non-bladed. Training with weapons is a useful tool to teach the

importance of *maai* (distancing) under different circumstances and offers many other benefits. The Iwama Aikido curriculum of Morihiro Saito is an example of a systematic approach to weapons training.

The end result of improving the quality of attacks will be a greater focus during training and the creation of an atmosphere of seriousness and respect for one's partner. The risk element always present in martial arts training will be recognized and due care taken to avoid behavior that leads to injuries.

Bringing back atemi and kiai

The use of atemi and kiai should be reintroduced and encouraged in aikido dojos. Atemi and kiai are extremely important in that they may allow a practitioner to overcome physical or numerical superiority in a real encounter. They are invaluable aids in neutralizing an attack and unbalancing an opponent. They pave the way for aikido techniques to be applied without force and against little resistance.

It should be possible to apply atemi or use kiai at virtually any stage of an aikido technique, not just the beginning. Students should be coached on how to recognize an opponent's openings at every opportunity. Shoji Nishio has developed atemi skills to a high level and his martial-form of aikido is a valuable reference.

At a higher level, atemi may not even have a physical manifestation. An advanced martial artist can achieve the effect of an atemi through subtle body language alone as long as a mind-set preempting the attack is present. If you watch films of O-Sensei carefully you will see this principle in operation and it is a key element of so-called "no touch" throws.

Keeping the attacker off balance

A fundamental yet often neglected principle of aikido is the importance of unbalancing an attacker and maintaining control from the beginning of a technique to the decisive point involving a throw or pin. I have often observed techniques being taught to students where the attacker's balance is first taken only to be given back immediately before the throw!

One only has to carefully observe the center of gravity of uke to determine whether or not his balance has been taken. Students should be constantly vigilant of their partner's center of gravity in order to determine if their techniques are being effective.

Before leaving this subject, an interesting exercise when attending an aikido demonstration is to watch the movements of uke rather than nage. If uke's balance is being controlled throughout the technique then you are observing a true master.

Posture and breath control

Other areas that are often overlooked in aikido training are correct posture and breathing. Nage should cultivate good posture and keep his balance throughout the technique.

Attention to breathing habits is seldom stressed in dojo training. By pacing your breathing it is possible to create and maintain an internal body rhythm that will reduce fatigue and make it easier to keep one's composure under the stress of vigorous training. Learning to observe one's own breathing will also develop the ability to "read" an opponent's breathing. This is useful to sense the timing and intent of an attack at a stage prior to its physical manifestation.

Instructors should get back into training

The most common reasons given for aikido teachers ceasing to participate in normal dojo training are the limiting effects of aging and the accumulation of injuries. It is certainly not possible for anyone to escape the effects of time and the wear-and-tear on the body of vigorous aikido training.

This being said, there is nothing to prevent teachers from training within their individual limits and at their own pace. As I see it, the key element is to continue to do stretching, warmups and take falls to the extent possible. You either do it or you don't!

The Founder maintained his suppleness well into his 80's and was even capable of doing the splits. Also, he can be seen taking falls for a child at about age 79 in one of the surviving films.

In many kobujutsu schools it is the custom for the teacher and seniors to assume the role of attacker and take falls for junior students where required. You will see this if you attend a demonstration of classical martial arts.

Imagine for a moment how it would change things if the top aikido instructors were capable of and actually took falls for their students during demonstrations! And what better way than this would there be for teachers to accelerate the improvement of their students?

I truly believe that it is possible to add ten good years to one's aikido career by adopting the approaches suggested here. I'll let you know in about 20 years time how this theory works out in my personal case!

Cross-training

I think one of the most positive things that instructors and practitioners alike should consider is cross-training in other arts. Here again we can look to the example of O-Sensei who studied a number of martial arts in his lifetime. He also arranged for the marriage of his daughter to a famous kendo expert and allowed a kendo group to form and practice in the old Kobukan Dojo. At age

54, the Founder formally enrolled in the Kashima Shinto-ryu, a classical school with a several-centuries-long tradition. He drew heavily from the Kashima Shinto-ryu curriculum in developing his aiki ken. O-Sensei also invited masters of other arts to the Aikikai Hombu Dojo to visit and give demonstrations. He was always prepared to “steal techniques” from other experts through keen observation.

One of the prime purposes of the annual Aiki Expo event sponsored by Aikido Journal is to encourage and facilitate cross-training among different groups.

Conclusion

I have attempted to explain how what is accepted as “modern aikido” is really a permutation of the original concepts underlying the aikido of the Founder. Due to the considerable spread of the art in the postwar Japan and abroad and the passage of more than five decades, these changed forms of aikido have come to be considered the norm. The assumption of most is that these new approaches reflect the intent of the Founder whereas, to a large degree, this is not the case. Most of the criticisms of aikido today arise because the modern forms of aikido have strayed from the Founder’s main precepts. The suggestions offered in this article would, if adopted by a significant section of the aikido population, produce a major change in the quality of the art and how it is perceived by sceptical outsiders. It is our intention to lead the way toward this desirable end by organizing future events such as the Aiki Expo.

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