

by Stanley Pranin

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Many years ago I conducted an interview with a well-known aikido shihan named Shoji Nishio. Nishio Sensei related a fascinating episode that left a deep impact on me and that I have never forgotten. Not only was the actual event he described memorable, but his analysis of the ethical differences between aikido and sport martial arts—judo specifically—was highly perceptive. Here is the story he told the Aiki News staff that day in 1984:

Mr. Tohei went to Hawaii in 1953. On his return, he brought back a leather coat which was impossible to obtain at that time in Japan. It had fringes like the ones you see in western movies. He had a leather coat when it was impossible even to obtain leather shoes! I really thought it was amazing. Then, that coat was skillfully stolen. That was what had happened when I turned up for training. I saw that all of the uchideshi had been made to sit in seiza and Mr. Tohei was shouting something. Then I heard that Tohei Sensei's coat had been stolen. At that time Mr. Noguchi, Mr. Genta Okumura and Mr. Sunadomari were some of the uchideshi. Then O-Sensei appeared asking, "What's up?" When Mr. Sunadomari explained what had happened O-Sensei responded: "Oh, it was stolen, was it?" (Laughter) Then he came into the dojo. Tohei Sensei also sat in seiza because O-Sensei entered. O-Sensei started to walk around them. We were really wondering what he was going to say. What he said was: "You're the one to blame, Tohei." Then, he disappeared.

Koichi Tohei is one of aikido's most famous figures. He first traveled to Hawaii to introduce aikido in the islands and enjoyed great success. Tohei's efforts produced many aikido dojos and thousands of students in Hawaii, especially from among the ranks of judo and kendo practitioners. He returned to Japan after about a year's stay and was regarded as somewhat of a hero

among the uchideshi and students of the Aikikai Hombu Dojo. He eventually became aikido's first 10th dan.

Nishio continued with his story:

Tohei sat silently for a while. Then he, too, disappeared. Everybody was relieved and started training. (Laughter) After practice, I was leaving for home and ran into O-Sensei who was on his way to the bathroom. I went up to him and said, "O-Sensei!" He said, "Ooh!" I asked, "A few minutes ago when Tohei Sensei had his coat stolen, you said he was the one at fault. Why did you say that?" He answered, "Don't you understand why? Those who practice budo shouldn't have that kind of spirit. One shouldn't show off things which people desire to have. You can show off things you can give, but otherwise you shouldn't act that way. Poor man, he took the coat because he wanted it. However, by taking it, he became a thief. It's all right to have the coat stolen, but he was made a thief. Stealing is a bad thing, but the man whose coat was stolen committed the original sin. He created the occasion for an opening (suki) in the man. As a budoka, that's bad." I was really amazed and I learned the depth of Aikido.

Budoka's suki

O-Sensei's reproof of Tohei focused on his ostentatiousness in owning such a flashy coat and his negligence as a martial artist in allowing the theft to occur. What's interesting about this anecdote is that O-Sensei's reaction to the situation reveals his perspective as a man of budo. Because of his religious orientation, much of the founder's teachings is couched in Shinto-based imagery that contains allusions that are not understood by modern Japanese. This would cause students who were exposed to his frequent lectures in the dojo to become completely lost and cease paying attention to his words. Here we have a teaching easily understood by anyone, that cuts to the

chase and confirms the martial spirit of aikido.

Tohei was a young and hugely talented teacher who was enjoying an effusion of adulation among his aikido peers and juniors for his achievements in America, the victor in the Pacific War. Through his technical and teaching skills he had demonstrated his ability to dominate and charm the martial arts community of Hawaii that included many strong experts who towered over him. Certainly a show of ostentatiousness on the part of a young man under the circumstances is understandable.

From the standpoint of the budoka, the theft of the coat raises a series of interesting issues. One could point to the obvious lapse of alertness on the part of the victim of the theft who left such a valuable and desirable object in a place where it could be stolen. Another consideration in this case is the notion of attachment. The theft of his prized coat was particularly irking because Tohei felt a strong attachment to it because of its uniqueness and high cost. Such attachments are for budoka weighty concerns that cloud the mind and adversely affect judgement.

On another more subtle level, O-Sensei's response suggests that budoka should be acutely aware of their surroundings. They should understand the social, economic, and political situation of the environment in which they find themselves. They should be able to sense potential danger to persons and property and plan accordingly. In short, budoka should assimilate the training and lessons learned in the dojo and apply them to daily life. In Japanese, this type of opening to an attack is called a "suki." A simple suki or attention lapse can lead to dangerous consequences for the budoka or anyone else.

On a philosophical level, I think this story reveals something of the level of humanity inherent in O-Sensei's teachings. It recognizes a responsibility that we all have for the consequences of our actions or inactions on the lives of others with whom we

come into contact. The founder viewed all human beings as part of a world family and possessed of a divine nature. While we may not be able to directly control the actions of others, we can certainly exert an influence for better or worse depending on our level of awareness and moral character. By keeping this constantly in mind, we can modify our behavior in such a way as to emphasize good deeds whereby we establish a karmic credit balance through the course of our lives. Through good works we can gradually become aware of our divine nature and reach an enlightened state of mind; such is the thinking of the founder.

Rising above revenge

Nishio's story contained another recollection from his previous experience as a judoka that shed further light on the depth of aikido compared to martial arts that have become transformed into sports:

To tell the truth, when I was practicing judo, Mifune Sensei's* house was robbed twice in his absence. Those incidents were written up in a monthly magazine entitled *Judo* published by the Kodokan. Mifune Sensei was quoted as saying, "The next time he robs my house in my presence, I will catch him no matter what happens, even if I am killed!" An old man, nearly seventy was saying he would catch him even if he was killed... I was really impressed by Mifune Sensei's reaction at that time.

However, there was a big difference between O-Sensei's and Mifune Sensei's words. One was saying he would catch him even if he was killed and take him to the police. The other was saying that the thief took it because he wanted it and that he should be let to have it, that it was the person who was robbed that was at fault. There was a world of difference between the two spirits. I thought that even though one practiced judo all of his life, he could only reach this stage. On the other hand, I thought that the depth of aikido as a martial art was great. It was

that incident which caused me to stop my judo training. O-Sensei's way of thinking appeared in practice itself. He said, "It's wrong to use the words 'winning and losing.' You shouldn't think in those terms." His words were great. As we continue to live I think it's important to digest all of his words.

* Kyuzo Mifune (1883-1965). One of judo's most famous experts considered by many to be the top technician of all time.

Mifune Sensei too was the victim of theft, not once but twice, and had an emotional reaction similar to Tohei Sensei's. However, he was a much older man whose code of morality was unlikely to change at this stage of life. His reaction was to become angry and frustrated, probably similar to that of an untrained person. Nishio Sensei, echoing the founder, is stressing that the budoka cannot afford to behave emotionally like the average person, that he must be free of attachment to material things and even to life itself given the serious nature of his chosen path. Yet here, Mifune Sensei—one of the most highly regarded judo teachers—was basically bent on revenge. Let us delve a bit more into this subject.

The theme of revenge is a ubiquitous one in any culture and at any point of history. Famous examples from western literature that center on this theme include Hamlet, Moby Dick, The Count of Monte Cristo and countless others works of literary art. Revenge has also been a highly successful formula for the hugely popular action movies of the likes of Bruce Willis, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Sylvester Stallone and many other movie heroes. Martial arts films too often focus on revenge with movies by Bruce Lee, Jackie Chan, and Steven Seagal providing examples of this genre.

The desire for revenge is an emotion that virtually everyone deals with at some point on a personal level, although an individual might not identify it as such. This powerful and

complex emotion is sometimes masked or sublimated into complex forms of behavior not readily recognized as acts of vengeance. For some, revenge becomes a major life's theme with predictably unpleasant and unforeseen results.

Although revenge is often glorified, especially in works of art, as a sort of just retribution, in the real world it can produce undesirable consequences not only for the target of revenge, but also for the instigator. Engaging in acts of revenge creates an internal conflict in individuals embarked on such a course that is highly destructive. In normal life, most people act according to what they consider in their best interests to achieve their objectives. They strive to realize their definition of happiness by attempting to better their position in life, acquire more wealth, power, or whatever they regard as complementary to their goals.

However, when people set out to achieve vengeance against someone for a perceived wrong, a part of their vital energy is diverted toward damaging their target by attacking their person, reputation, or assets, according to the type of reprisal they have chosen. By electing such a course, they set up an irreconcilable psychological dichotomy whereby they simultaneously act in their own interests while attacking the interests of another. Revenge can sidetrack the avenger from productive pursuits in his own life or even ruin his life altogether and forfeit his freedom should the legal system later prosecute him for damaging his victim.

Revenge sometimes set up a vicious cycle where vengeful actions spawn acts of counter-revenge that spin out of control. Take the case of road rage where enraged motorists give tit for tat sometimes with fatal consequences. I was once in a car with my aikido teacher who became extremely upset by a tailgater on the freeway. Finally, he lost his temper and braked to a complete stop in the fast lane where traffic moves at 70-80 miles per hour! I thought I was about to meet my maker!

Revenge can even snare an entire family and pass over into future generations. An admittedly extreme example of this is the infamous feud between the Hatfields and McCoys.

Revenge and the martial artist

Vengeful acts have no place in the life of a budoka. Most martial arts, even when practiced as sports, at least give lip service to character building as one of their central goals. It's hard to conceive of a more damaging character flaw than the passionate quest for revenge. Many martial artists develop exceptional fighting and strategic skills that could easily be misused to bring harm on someone, whether or not the situation appears justified. To the extent that the avenger cum martial artist succeeds in his quest, he in turn becomes a target for the legal system that would visit punishment on him to exact justice. All in all, revenge is a loser's game, martial artist or not. As keenly observed by Nishio Sensei, the founder's approach was enlightened and points to its inherent differences compared to other arts. We would do well as aikidoka to give serious thought to digesting O-Sensei's words.