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The Softer Side of Aikido



When I first began studying Aikido I worked on the various self defense techniques trying to move my hands and feet as directed. Over the years I became more proficient and enjoyed throwing and being thrown. I wanted to become as strong and powerful as my teachers; they were my role models.

But there was always a question in the back of my mind about the spiritual aspects of the art I loved. I knew the basic kindness underlying Aikido. One never turned a joint other than in the direction nature intended so there was no breaking or causing permanent injury. And there were no striking movements taught that would cause serious injury. In the actual practice, as we alternated roles of attacker and Aikido defender, there was never an attempt to compete or win. The attacker was providing an opportunity for his partner to learn the Aikido self defense movements; allowing himself to become vulnerable so his partner could gain skill and knowledge. All this was certainly kind and helpful but what made it spiritual?

The founder of Aikido, Morihei Ueshiba, was described as a very spiritual person. The art itself originated in his religious enlightenment experience. O'Sensei felt himself to be an incarnate of the golden Maitreya Bodhisattva.¹ The name AIKIDO that he chose for his art can be translated as "the path leading to harmony with the life force of the universe". Unbalancing an attacker and then throwing him forcefully to the ground does not look like a harmonious act. Maybe exploring the term "spiritual" may help.

Spiritual is usually contrasted with the term secular, or "material". It refers to something without external form, the energy underlying the material world. That energy, or feeling, is usually linked to a creative source; and might be called God, Buddha, etc. Scientific theory accepts the view that the material world of form is based on the formless atomic world of nuclear energy; that the two levels coexist

simultaneously. So there seem to be two different approaches, or viewpoints, from which our present existence can be examined. On one level we focus on the physical aspects; the world of length, width, and depth — and of “objects” that can be sensed through vision, touch, hearing, smelling, and tasting. Buddhism adds an additional sixth sense; the mind’s ability to sense thoughts and ideas.

But the second level cannot be found through our sense organs. It is “assumed” to be the “underlying source” from which the material world continually emerges. The material, or mundane world is a manifestation of this creative, formless underlying force that is beyond the limitations of time and space.

Turning our “focus of attention” inwardly, and, without conceptualization and language, leads to a pure “opening” into a total, formless, unlimited experiencing of “presence”. Each of us is this mysterious “appearing” - the combination of “the worldly and the spiritual”. The theistic religions view a creative God as the source of our spiritual dimension. Their goal is then to conform, to harmonize with “God’s will”; and thus lead a spiritual life. Buddhism, as a non-theistic religion, would view everything as a manifestation of the creative life force itself. In that sense everyone and everything is interrelated, a momentary expression of the one life force. The “DO” of Aikido is the

11 K. Uyesbib Aikido 1972, Hozasnsa Publishing Co. Ltd., p. 15.

A BUDDHIST APPROACH TO AIKIDO

There seems to be an initial contradiction between Buddhism and the activity of self-defense. From the Buddhist perspective, the idea of an “individual self” is one of the major obstacles to making spiritual progress. Having an individualized self, a self concept, a personal identity; is certainly of practical necessity in order to function in society. But at the same time it has a serious downside that creates immeasurable suffering. To form the self, or ego, the original totality of experience must be broken up into two groupings, or categories. There is now the “self” on one side, that must relate to everything considered outside this self— the objective world as opposed to the subjective. “I”, the subject, must now be constantly wary and on guard against a “dangerous” external world. Gone is the feeling of original “oneness” where there is just a peaceful “resting” in the totality of immediate experience. Gaining proficiency in self defense seems to be an attempt at exaggerating that splitting, making the “self” stronger and more powerful; rather than seeking to restore the original unity of the subjective and the objective.

A traditional Zen resolution of this seeming contradiction is to become so proficient in

the self defense techniques that they are no longer thought, or planned by the self. They become “habitual responses” without any intervening thinking between the stimulus of the attack and the responsive Aikido defensive response. In other words, there is no self doing, or directing; it is a spontaneous action without an “actor”. And this can lead to amazing power and speed. Yet there is something that leaves me uncomfortable with this explanation; and it has to do with compassion. The “selfless”, automatic, powerful, response has the capability of doing immeasurable injury of a life threatening nature. There is no judgment or evaluation to limit its severity since the intellect has been bypassed with the disappearance of the self. I believe this contributed to the violence of Samurai Class warriors; and later to the atrocities perpetrated by the Japanese military in China during World War II.

Is there some way of gaining that almost unbelievable “selfless” level of proficiency yet still remaining kind and compassionate? I believe there is, and this will be explored in the following section.

THE HINAYANA AND MAHAYANA APPROACH TO AIKIDO

There are two major groupings in Buddhism. The Hinayana is the earlier form that began in India as a modification of traditional Hinduism. It focused on the meditative practice of Mindfulness by monks and nuns. Over the centuries it evolved and was influenced by the various cultures in which it took root. In China it took on aspects of Taoism which led to Chan Buddhism. It became Zen Buddhism in Japan; both Chan and Zen are considered forms of Mahayana Buddhism. But the basic underlying philosophy of all of Buddhism is the seeking to develop both wisdom and compassion. Zen appears to focus heavily on the development of wisdom; realizing that the self, together with the intellectual conceptual process, prevents a more basic, direct, and immediate experience to spontaneously emerge in the present moment.

As previously mentioned, the Zen approach to Aikido would be to “lose the self” in the totality of the self defense technique itself as it becomes an immensely powerful outpouring of energy without any limitation by the intellect. But compassion is “negated” since it requires thought and judgment. The “saving grace” is that the techniques that make up the art of Aikido were designed “compassionately” to eliminate the breaking of joints, etc.

I believe there is another approach to practicing “Spiritual Aikido” from a Buddhist orientation that can still include compassion. It would also be based on giving up the sense of an individualized self but in a different way. Instead of an individualized, self (subject) facing an attacker (object), this ego self would “expand” to now “include the

attacker”. Attack and defense become one total, connected, reciprocal movement. And there is no longer an attacker and a defender; only this single harmonious “happening” that is viewed objectively as “self defense” but is experienced as “oneness” without limit. There is no thought of a self that needs to defend itself against an “objective” attacker; only a moving together without the feeling of any separation. How is this accomplished? Analyzing the use of breathe may be helpful.

One of the methods of developing powerful technique is to coordinate the technique with the outbreath. A kiai, or loud verbal outcry, is seen in many striking arts and with the use of weapons. This is effective for the purpose of focusing energy however there is an inherent drawback; it is only half of the natural cycle of life. The inhalation is neglected. What can be gained by this initial joining and “taking in” of Uke, (the attacker) as simply a pure “sensory experience”. Just as the inbreathe is spontaneous and natural at the end of the out breathe, this “open acceptance” permits a naturalness and an inner openness” that allows an enormous amount of new data to enter one-s awareness. Now the attacker can be “felt” rather than known; he is the “other half” of myself. Now we can move as a “single unit”; in a reciprocal fashion. This has two major advantages. The attacker can be led and controlled without being physically touched. And the second advantage is that his balance can be known so he can be unbalanced with only “finger-tip” force. An unbalanced attacker is of little threat, needing a solid base for any forceful strike. This allows the defending Aikidoist to feel “almost invulnerable”;leading to soft, smooth, precise geometrically accurate movements that are amazing. And here is where kindness and caring are safe and appropriate.