

Dojo talk:

Is Aikido a *Martial* Art?

By

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– Pardon me...!

I turned around.

– May I please ask a question?

The polite request arrived from one of my pupils. Third kyu. Carrying three, perhaps four years of diligent training in his rucksack. A serious student and a bright fellow.

I smiled benevolently.

– Of course, if I am able to give a satisfactory answer is another thing.

– Is aikido a martial art?

I must have looked somewhat dumbfounded as he quickly added:

– You see, some friends of mine say that aikido is not a real martial art.

One of them even says that aikido is not real budo, but some diluted remains of something that once may have been real budo. I felt stupid, as I was not able to come up with a definite answer.

– I see your dilemma, I said.

At first the question, or rather questions, sounded a little silly and naïve. But questions sounding silly and naïve can really be tricky when you look below the surface.

– Allow me to start with the second part of the question, I said slowly. Aikido is indeed budo, believe me.

Then giving it a second thought I added:

– Well, at least the kind of aikido that we train here, and most aikido I know of... But of course I cannot vouch for any weird mutant emerging from some dark corner.

Both of us laughed. Any joke, even below standards, offers thoughts some elbow space.

– What does martial art mean ... really?

I sighed. Fellows like this one may lure you out into deep water.

– Martial is derived from the war god Mars implying that aikido has its origin in warfare. Physical combat in other words.

– That much I know, he said with a hint of impatience. Do you think that the aikido we perform is really martial? Is it budo?

I told him that the martial quality is essential in any movement that aspires to be member of the budo family. After all, the word bu, means war. On the personal level of you can say ‘bushi-do’, the warrior’s way.

–The old aiki-jutsu techniques, were devised to work as well in the battlefield as in a street fight - to kill or maim. O-sensei modified them so that they would control or neutralize the opponent, thus offering a constructive choice. Here we find the essence of aikido - how to cope with

a conflict in a constructive way. No winner and no loser, no one has to get hurt. In the world of business it is called 'win-win'.

– Does not that mean that the martial quality has become kind of diluted?

– No, on the contrary. There has been a change in quality - a raise in quality in fact - that is badly needed in our world where the aggression is usually met by escalated violence in a destructive spiral with increasing fear and aggression. Aggression and fear, as you know, are the two sides of the same coin. A wase, or blending, breaks that spiral and opens the door to a peaceful solution of a conflict. That is probably the nucleus of O-sensei's saying that aikido is a road to universal love.

–One cannot stop a bullet with a silk glove, he said.

I smiled.

– Nor with a glove of iron, but you'll need neither if you move out of the bullet's way. But in a way you are right. Masters of the sword, say that the most efficient sword is the one that never has to be used. But, if the sword will remain in the scabbard, you to have to be pretty skilful when using it. We have to train diligently, and yet realize that we'll never become perfect. It is a journey without an end station.

– Wait, you are talking as if there is just one kind of aikido. I have not been training for very long, yet I have seen several kinds of aikido, all looking very different from each other. And when you talk to people from different styles they often are sure that *their* aikido is the only true aikido. By the way, when you can be called a master, have you not reached the end station by then?

– If other people say that you are a master, it may be nice, but of very little importance. Watch out when somebody calls himself master, be a shodan or a shihan. The odds are high that the guy has slipped behind his once so noble vision, and now primarily guards his territory, strives for political power and aspires to be a sect leader. Aikido as such, with all its joy and creative spirit, not only drops way down the hit list, no pun intended, but also becomes gelded. The guy is tragically stuck in the mud. This also goes for entire organisations.

– Budo is very complex, I continued, and aikido particularly so. Practically nothing is black and white except the garment we are wearing during training. From an orthodox view the only genuine aikido was the aikido that O-sensei performed. To day it is questionable if there is just one true aikido. O-sensei was never cloned, and his closest students interpreted his unique aikido in their own specific ways according to their unique personalities and dispositions. Thus, every one of them 'filtered' the information somewhat differently. That is a natural process. So, O-sensei's aikido became several 'aikidos', every one of them as true as another one, and every one has its own convinced believers. To make it even more confusing, there may even be a number of 'styles' within the different styles. However, O-sensei himself obviously did not hesitate to look around the corner at other budo systems in order to catch ideas and inspiration, and to create his own interpretations. He was obviously also aware of the new social order following World War II, and adjusted his art accordingly. Well, I am of the definite opinion that in order to get a glimpse of the original true

Aikido we have to look around with an open mind. Just as you get a better idea of the nature of a building if you approach it from several different angles.

– So, a particular aikido technique, I continued, can vary greatly, sometimes even between instructors within the same style. And every dojo member is of course certain that her or his particular sensei exclusively is doing it in the one and only proper way. The teachers themselves have often, but far from always, a broader view. The more mature ones have seen truths change as time passes, realizing that our world is an evolving system where change is irreversible. There is nothing anybody can do about that, even if we can witness occasional and futile efforts to turn the clock backwards, revising history and what not.

–But, regardless of what kind of aikido you practice, you should know the origin of the techniques and how they worked, as close as possible to how O-sensei performed them in other words – and if possible also how the techniques looked like before they were transformed to aikido. Unless you do not know, for example, how irimi-nage originated and how it was performed in the basic form, the essence of the technique is hard to understand. We may also understand, for example, what O-sensei meant when saying that atemi, or displaying an attitude of atemi, constitutes a major part of aikido. This does not mean that we should try to return to some classical budo. We will never become samurais or bushi how much we ever try. ‘Western samurais’ become somewhat pathetic, having the stale flavour of an anachronistic Don Quixote.

– Well then, now we are back where we started. If we disconnect from the martial origin and it is questionable if the aikido we are doing may be called a *martial* art. Javelin throwing, as a comparison, has also a distant martial origin. A fine sport it is, but it can hardly be considered to be ‘martial’ any more.

–But there must be some definition of what is aikido, even in a wider sense.

–I agree, it apparently seems as if some branches on the tree of aikido evolution have grown rather far from the ancient martial roots. That is OK as any open system must adjust to a changing environment, in this case the cultural context. The present society may favour a focus on a particular quality of aikido, on the health promoting side, or perhaps on the aesthetic side developing into something that looks like ballet, or on a combat variety if you live in a hazardous environment ... and so on. I do not say that one branch is better or worse, just that they are noticeably different and responding to a situational demand. The world is big enough for everybody, and diversity is the fertile soil for growth and evolution. Everything is OK as long as the labels are proper and honest. If you are doing butterfly aiki-ballet, then say so, or if you are doing aikido inspired health exercises let the world know.

– It seems very confusing. But how do you know if the labels are honest?

I told him that I have this crazy idea that people in general and my pupils in particular should form their own opinions, after studying, observing and thinking of their own. Do not blindly follow a neon sign, a

guru, or a sensei just because he plays the flute here and now, proclaiming that his beat is the one and only worth considering. There are a lot of flute players in this world. And it is not certain that the most truthful player is the closest one, the most charismatic one, or the one blowing the highest note, or has most followers. But basically I think that the martial connection is immensely important when judging if a particular aikido can be labelled budo or not. If the activity is to be designated as aikido, there must be an awareness of the origin and of the particular aikido system. There are also generic aiki principles that must be followed.

– What principles?

– You have been taught them from the very first day you entered this dojo. Principles building on the concepts of awase, of centring, of ki, of maai, of rhythm, of respect, of humbleness, of natural movement, of economising one's energy - to name some of them...

He nodded.

– Then, is aikido primarily self-defence system?

– It is questionable if self-defence is the main point in our present society, I said. Rather, I think that we train in order to develop 'martial qualities' like self discipline, increased awareness in the present, humbleness in connection with a bolder attitude and ... all together making us able to perform better not only in a physical conflict, but more important, with less anxiety in daily life. Of course, training also satisfies the need of belonging to a group sharing similar values, and where you are encouraged to grow as a unique individual. All that you may find in other kinds of budo, but what makes aikido so unique is the lack of competition – and the concept of awase gives it a precious humanitarian quality.

– By the way, the integration of the genuine budo attitude develops a quality that is at least as important aspect of personal defence as the knowledge of techniques. Remove etiquette and respect and awase and you take a quantum leap backwards to some dark age. You remove the 'do' from bu-do.

My pupil's shrug was eloquent. It said: 'And so what...'

I certainly did not like that answer from a pupil of mine.

– You think that etiquette and respect are luxury items do you? I tell you, we are not dealing with some fluffy, pinkish gloss, but an increase in total efficiency.

– Budo has its origin in actual combat for life and death, the probability of a fatal end was always present. It is in this reality, where useless frills were not afforded, that etiquette and its road companions were born. Every bow in a true dojo increases your martial efficiency perhaps as much as repeating a technique. When the American Marines for trial put budo, primarily aikido, on their training schedule, the soldiers' ability to promptly and adequately cope with sudden and complex incidents, and calmness in stress and chaos increased by measure. The really big news was that the active ingredients in the transformation was apparently not learning the very techniques – ikkyo, nikkyo, sankyo and so on – but the integration of that particular discipline which is an emergent effect of the budo etiquette. Ethics is the backbone of budo. However, I do not think that ethics is a matter of plain good and evil. It is a matter of efficiency. Ethic is an

amazingly effective energy saving device. That is why the good guy wins in the long run.

– Really..?

His facial expression revealed that he did not buy my words right off. Why should wearing a white hat be more efficient than wearing a black hat?

– A lot of things point in that direction. Have you read what O-sensei considered to be the main reason-why of aikido?

My pupil looked a little bit confused and shook his head.

– O-sensei talked about aikido as a mean to bring love to all people, not the kind of sweet pink love that you meet in many Hollywood movies, but rather the universal love that the old Greeks called ‘agape’. And I do not think that O-sensei saw universal love as weakness but as strength. One could also go further back in time and listen to sword masters like Takuan, Munenori and Musashi. They are on the same track.

–I have heard of Musashi, confessed my pupil. A formidable fencer, was he not?

– Myiamoto Musashi, yes you can safely assume that. He was truly a man of the sword, having few equals in actual combat, probably somewhat of a ruffian in real life. He had an outstanding ability to observe without bias and see the consequences of what he saw. He wrote the Book of Five Rings, which on the surface is manual how to wield a sword, or two swords for that matter, but mainly it is considered to be one of the foremost books of strategy ever written. He left nine rules to his pupils. The first of them was that they should never harbour sinister and malicious designs. Can you imagine why?

Another shrug.

– Not because he wanted to be remembered as a holy saint, I am sure, but because an ethical conduct, if possible combined with a noble cause, makes a warrior more effective. An ethical attitude saves energy. And energy is the magic word in budo. The guy who knows how to economise with his energy has a greater chance to survive. It may be as simple as that, if you take a purely functional approach.

I watched him. Too much dust from the old archives?

–Actually modern complexity research and sociological studies arrive at the same conclusion, I added. In the long run it pays to be good. A hopeful glimpse of light in a dark world, is it not? And a good reason to train aikido.

We sat in silence for a minute or less. His brain worked.

– May I add another question?

I glanced at the clock.

– Only if it allows for a fast answer.

– Can we really test our techniques if we do not compete? Training only premeditated techniques is not very life like and martial, is it?

I gave him a long look.

– Katas you mean, I said. I do think so. But now we are approaching the issue whether aikido is a martial ART or not. And that topic has even darker corners than the martial side of the story.

– So, if you don’t mind let us postpone this part of our conversation a day or two? Actually, I have a little bit of hurry ...

I gave him a broad smile.

... and if I do not get home it in due time, and my wife misses her appointment... then I am afraid that I shall experience this conversation, how intriguing it may be, of secondary importance.