

Dojo talk:

Is Aikido a Martial *Art*?

By

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I turned to my pupil. A few days earlier we had a conversation about aikido as a martial art.

– I am sorry that I had to leave abruptly, I apologized. But at least we touched on the subject of aikido as a MARTIAL art. Now we are supposed to talk about aikido as a martial ART?

– I certainly had a lot of thinking to do afterwards, he said.

– No wonder, I said. It's a very complex issue. Sometimes I feel that aikido is like a Chinese box of paradoxes. Anyway if I remember correctly, you wondered why we don't compete, only doing kata or prearranged forms. It's not very life like, you objected. Right you are. But on the other hand it would be even less realistic if aikido were a competitive sport.

– How come...?

– Well, we are not living in an ideal world governed by fixed rules and fair play. Not really...

– Perhaps not... what do you mean?

– Well, competition means fixed rules that do not change during the game. Just imagine a boxing match where the weaker of the combatants suddenly is not allowed to hit the torso, and the big fellow may hit below the belt.

My pupil laughed.

– Ridiculous, he said. Down right unfair.

– That's how ridiculous and unfair life can be, I said. Not at all like a game of soccer or golf. In real life the rules change during the game, and what is even more rotten – more frequently than seldom they are set and changed by the stronger part. A fat wallet, for example, is able to make or remake rules just like that. Power does it. Here in this dojo I may change rules. But for you it may not be that easy.

– So, that is why we do not compete in aikido?

– There are several reasons. Actually, we have witnessed many attempts at creating aikido-competitions. But none have been successful. For one thing, I can imagine that it's far from easy to create rules not imposing technical limitations.

– I have friends training karate and judo, he said. They play around a little just for fun. But when I try aikido, it does not work at all. Either the techniques do not work at all, or if they work they hurt, and the guy becomes furious. No fun at all.

I nodded.

– In my younger days I had the same experience, I said. Nowadays I refrain from such experiments. One should not try to force a square peg into a round hole.

– Could you please, explain?

– I shall try, I said. Look, as you know there is distinct difference between jutsu and do. Jutsu means techniques, without any frills like ethics and philosophy attached. They are supposed to be purely functional. If they work in real fights they

are kept as they are considered to be good techniques, if not... well they are left in the gutter together with the loser who tried them. These aiki jutsu techniques, tested in brutal fighting, are our tools when studying how conflicts can be controlled and mastered in a constructive way - which is the inner purpose of aikido. Here is the real paradox: we use lethal aiki-jutsu techniques, often relying on atemi or at least an attitude of atemi, working for what O-sensei called universal love.

He opened his mouth as to say something. But settled for just looking a bit worried ... or perhaps embarrassed. Perhaps Universal Love carried a too heavy accent of stale New Age.

- One may consider that sword masters like Munenori, tough and learned guys who more than once had seen death at closed range, were on the same track . Having seen too much of death and destruction, vengeance and hate, they were preoccupied with the idea how a sword of death could be transformed into a sword of life. They shared the opinion, that if a death-bringing sword would become a life-giving sword, it had to keep the original powerful martial edge. Only then it could peacefully remain in the scabbard. The same goes for aikido. If it loses it's martial connection, the whole concept will be like a balloon, an empty and airy illusion.

-Thus, on a practical level, it is kind of difficult to compete in aikido. The aiki-jutsu techniques cannot be restrained by rules, as they are supposed to break rules in order to be effective in that ugly context that life provides. If you want them to work against an evasive and non cooperative partner, you must force them through all the way - and then there is a danger of inflicting bad injuries. In a way it makes sense. These building stones of aikido, not fit for competition, constitute a system that does not involve competition.

However, the issue is not limited to the very techniques. Basically, competition does not in a wider perspective agree with the principle of awase training, and mind you, awase is one of aikido's corner stones, its essence in fact.

I paused. Did he follow me?

- As nage and uke are co-players in a process where both have predetermined roles, there are no losers and winners - and a competition where no one can win is contradicting the very idea of competition. Nage executes the techniques and uke accepts them. Nage and uke co-operate, uniting into a single system where the duality between the subject and the object is transcended. This is a practice of mutual learning, not of fighting or competing. However, when awase becomes integrated in all your movements, it works of course in competitions and fights. But that is a spin off effect of secondary interest - and, as I said, does not agree with the philosophy of aikido.

- Excuse me, he said. We live in a world of winners and losers. We know them in person, we read about them in the newspapers and we see them on the television screen.

- No doubt, I agreed. The genius of Aikido is that it realises the fact that this is a tough world without mercy, and yet it does not succumb to pragmatism, but in form and practice adheres to the ideals set by O-sensei. I believe that's the spirit of Mahatma Ghandi, of Martin Luther King and of Nelson Mandela.

However, the yin-and-yang principle of aikido, manifested in awase, has been recognized by military strategists from the time of Sun-Tsu to the present day -and have successfully been employed by ruthless warriors and warlords. Jutsu, not being elevated by do, makes a death-bringing sword.

– It is also important, I added, to realize that awase simultaneously involves mind, intellect and body. Just an intellectual understanding is just as meaningless as a mechanical repetition of a form without learning the substance. As time passes ability increases and experiences are made, philosophical insights may arrive. One day you may even realize that all the forms we train in kata are the variations of free movements of one single stance. That is the proper way to learn aikido, not the other way around.

He contemplated this, his forehead in wrinkles.

I paused allowing the information to settle.

–You have several times mentioned the absence of rules, he mused. But well, as I see it, most of what is happening here in the dojo is regulated all the way into minute details, how techniques are done, how to behave on and off the mat...and so on.

–True, we are very particular when it comes to form, I agreed. Actually it is the form that constitutes what is aikido. Form can be considered as a guide to how things should be done. Consider form to be some sort of a stylised ideal or packet of compact information that we can refer to when in doubt. It is somewhat like the use of grammar when writing. At school you learn the grammar, and you get scolded when your writing does not match the predetermined form. Though, when you have become an able writer, knowing the grammar, you may leave the formal boundaries. If you are talented, your writing may even become more personal and expressive. The same goes for aikido. Once you know the basic forms really well, your aikido may develop into a personal aikido, an expression of you as a unique individual. One learns in order to forget, it is sometimes said. But mind you, this level cannot be reached until you have built a solid foundation. Actually, there are few aikidokas who climb that high on the ladder

He nodded.

– At that level aikido can be very beautiful, he murmured. Like a piece of art.

– Well, at last we are approaching the main subject of today, is aikido is a martial ART or isn't it? Again we must watch out not be caught in a net of paradoxes. How do we in this context define art? As a skill or craft, or as a fine art? Make any choice and you'll find that competition does not mix well with any of them. Who is the world champion in haut cuisine? Who is the gold medal winner of jazz..., of performing Bach-fugas..., of shio-nage... of repairing cars ... or the world champion in poetry? All of it sounds a littler bit out of tune, does it not?

– But there are competitions in the movie business, he objected. Nominations ...you may win an Oscar for example. And song festivals...

– Well, a movie is, unlike aikido, a product for passive mass consumption, I said. Wow, that film won an Oscar, it must be good one. Let's go! And we pay for the ticket, allowing us to make benefit of the product. The same goes for popular music. Ranking becomes a part of the marketing process. Choosing from a ranking list makes the momentary decision easy, it saves energy. We humans certainly are a lazy bunch.

– But ranking, he said, is a sales gimmick also in budo. The more dan grades a sensei have, the more students he or she can attract, and the more money the dojo collects.

An observant fellow this one, that is for sure.

– Your right again, I conceded. Just like in the church-union-political-charity-sphere. When an operation becomes professional, bureaucracy, money and growth

becomes important – some times even overshadowing the original idea and the core business. In some cases something like MacAikido emerges. In hierarchical organisations little boxes indicating how high up in the echelon you are placed, often become more important than human qualities and competence. I do not mention democracy, as traditional dojos, being very authoritarian, generally do not have that inclination.

– You make it sound awful, he said. Can really good aikido be created in such environments?

– It surely can. Fast food as such may occasionally be nourishing, healthy and even beautiful. Here a lot of good aikido skill and craftsmanship is engineered, just like a premium car must not be made by hand. It is common that the superb chef of a big restaurant wants his cooks to be excellent, but only within the menu's framework – which in fact is a lot if the restaurant has got a star in Guide Michelin. But beware if you, as an employee, try to change the menu to the extent that the original identity is disturbed. Then you had better consider the possibility of opening a restaurant of your own.

–One may also make comparisons with the academic world or the political sphere, where formality and persistence are encouraged within the framework, but creative ambition often is perceived as a threat to the ruling establishment. This is, however, a narrow-minded attitude, as change and evolution are integrated principles of this world.

– By the way, when looking at old pictures showing famous budo masters' dojos, it is often amazing how few students there are. The reason for this may not only have been poor means of transportation, but perhaps that these masters considered personal teaching as immensely important. By the way, there is a tradition that the sensei spends his main attention to the beginners and the most advanced students. My teacher Tomita-sensei acted accordingly. And I know that there are professors on Nobel laureate level who follow the same track.

He looked pensive,

– Then, when does aikido become a martial ART?

– That depends on what meaning you put into the word art. If you use the wider concept of art as a synonym to skill or craft, then aikido is a martial art, as long as it has not departed neither from the martial origin nor the framework that gives aikido its identity.

– However, a true artist is always pursuing a quest, pushing the boundaries of the present structures in search of a personal truth. Every true piece of art is unique as it develops within a unique person, or through unique cooperative efforts.

– Does that mean that aikido becomes an art as long as it has a personal touch?

– Hard to say. Mostly, art for arts sake has a phoney and artificial flavour. No, the techniques must emerge naturally, and truly reflect the aikidoka as an unique individual. Then they may add new knowledge, deepen one's insight, make a hitherto low keyed quality glow, or perhaps or bring a glimpse of a new dimension. Just clean beauty and lack of effort may be enough, as it tells something of the essence of the art.

– Do remember, that good craftsmanship often supersedes presumptuous arty expressions. The standard procedure when learning a craft is to learn from the masters by studying and copying. That is how art schools and writing schools and dojos work. They learn form by doing katas. Most writers, painters and aikidokas settle with being good craftsmen.

– But how does one notice what aikido is really good... and perhaps not so good?

– On the level of straight craftsmanship it is not very hard to make a fair judgment. It is more a less a matter of following the official manual. On a higher level it is more difficult. What may look formless and soft, may in reality be really powerful and effective...and vice versa. However, it is a must that the basic principles are governing.

– How do mean... the principles?

– In the beginning it is easy to mix up the concept of form with the concept of principles, I said. The principles are parameters; they are universal and eternal - just like the law of gravity in physics. One may say, that they constitute the basic structural demands on a technique and how to move. The principles work discretely below the surface, in the interface of body, intellect and mind. The cardinal principle is that your centre must be connected to the earth and to your partner.

– We mentioned the concept of awase or blending. Generally we refer to the physical aspect, how a technique is performed. However, the basic principles are not merely determining physical form, but they also shape attitudes and emotions..

He looked somewhat bewildered.

– I'll show you, I said. Let us scrutinize this together..

I handed him a bokken and grasped one myself. After having assumed ken kamae I raised the bokken above my head.

I worked up a feeling that I really would kill that guy in front of me, and adopted the meanest attitude possible.

Then, with a formidable kiai, I attacked. The whole process lasted only a second or two.

Petrified he did not move from the spot. I stopped the bokken an inch from his forehead, and gave him my friendliest smile:

– Fright and anger do not create a very functional attitude, do they? You lost your centre.

–You surprised me! he said accusingly.

–I did the unexpected and shorted out your system using my attitude and voice as an atemi, I replied dryly. You became frightened. Your mind regressed to the reptile part of your brain, offering the options to flee or to fight. But not even being able to decide which option to choose, you just froze. Pretending to be a corpse may be a very functional reaction on the battle field. But in a duel it is a very, very self-destructive behaviour. In order to perform awase you have to be centred, your centre has to be connected to my centre. That makes your mind clear and alert, and frees it from anger and fright even if you are challenged by mortal danger.

I returned to my initial position, once more raising the bokken.

– Now...

I adopted my most sinister look, waited for a few seconds ... and attacked.

This time, mirroring my slash, he moved smoothly out of my sword's cutting line.

– Look, I said, you centred yourself, and blended with my attack. That was awase. Perhaps a sample of that kind universal and impersonal love that O-sensei talked about.

– Are you sure? he said.

– No, way, I answered. Pure guesswork. I was born too late to know him. On the other hand, nobody that I have heard of has ever met Jesus or Buddha or

Mohammed, yet there a lot of authorities offering fat guesswork when interpreting their words. There are plenty of members in the guess-work-workshop – if for good or for bad I am not to say.

– Now let us return to the issue of aikido as an art. Basically art it is a communicative procedure of sending, receiving and interpreting information. In the context of aikido, nage and uke are exchanging and interpreting information faster than any rational mind can handle. There is no time for reflection, or the conscious loosening of knots of anger and fright. It is said that a superior ability to improvise is the sign of a master. Here we are touching what is usually called flow, a creative condition having all the meditative trimmings. Your sense of time disappears, you are floating in the present, and the border between the performer and the environment is erased. You are becoming a unity with the action. The whole packet is carried by a happy floating feeling of absolute confidence in yourself – there may even occur a feeling that you are channelling a superior power, rather than being the creator yourself. This is a blessed state of being, a great reward that well compensates the hardship of getting there.

He looked at me.

– How do you say Amen in Japanese? he asked.

I shrugged.

–How would I know? Amen I guess. Why?

–Amen, he said. Those last words of yours were truly spiritual.

Was he pulling my leg? And so what..

– Amen, I said. Let's have a cup of tea.