

A Common Sense Look at Aikido

By Yoshio Kuroiwa



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Since there are no matches in Aikido we should give careful thought to the nature of our practice. The spiritual side of practice is also important, but if we overemphasize it our training becomes idealistic in nature and the realistic aspect is neglected. “Kata” (form) and “waza” (technique) must be correctly recognized in practice.

Kata to Waza

Kata should be practiced according to a certain order or prearranged method which is based on a rational relationship (riai). Thus, we are not falling because we are being thrown but rather we are practicing a kata designed for us to be thrown. When we master a rational movement (kata), it is expressed as a natural movement (waza). That is, if you become able to execute a kata spontaneously as a result of repeated practice, you are no longer performing a kata but are executing a waza. We learn through kata and become unconscious of the fact. In other words, as long as movements require our attention they are kata, when the kata become spontaneous they become waza.

We first practice basic kata (kihon waza, basic techniques) to learn the movements of Aikido. The basics are the standards (the way of seeing and thinking) and a common sense perspective for correctly observing things. We must understand the essence of kata, not their outer appearance.

For example, in a puzzle involving interlocking wooden pieces, one knows the placement (stability) of each piece by understanding its form and nature. In the same way, we can express kata which are common to all people by showing the basic common parts of the structure of the human body (for example, points like the elbows bend only inward) and we should use these basic parts rationally. It may seem exaggerated to use the terms "rational" or "logical" but these concepts are just a matter of common sense and need no explanation.

As long as we persist in viewing kata superficially, we will begin to think that they are of special importance. One cannot systematically or rationally explain any kata merely by learning in a repetitive manner without an understanding of why certain kata are considered to be basic. What we acquire by learning only repetitively is the preservation of form (the transmission of external form) and not the ability to create (understanding of the essence of kata). In other words, one does not understand what he is doing.

Basics are not something to be practiced but to be understood. What they demonstrate are the mechanics of how to unbalance an opponent and create an opportunity for the application of a technique. If you misunderstand this to mean leading and guiding it will give rise to the belief that one can lead his opponent circularly. This happens because one is unaware that leading a partner circularly implies separation and doesn't notice that practice is an expression of yin and the use of power in Aiki involves pushing.

Kata: A Training Tool

In training we practice many techniques but they are all variations of a single stance. Therefore, ikkyo, shihonage and other techniques are the same. The reason they appear different is only because their outer appearance is seen. Kata are the expression of a number of variations through movements from a single stance and are nothing more than a tool for training the body to move freely. The idea that one is all and all are one is not just a spiritual matter. It is true for our bodies as well.

It is not that there is a different method depending on the technique, for example, saying that ikkyo is practiced in one way and such and such a technique in another way. They are all manifestations of a single movement. That is to say, we practice various kata in order to understand an original single movement. It is

not that ikkyo and shihonage are of value as basic techniques. We practice them only as a convenient means to understand the yin and yang of a (fundamental) stance.

Aikido practice is a yin practice. Using Judo as an example, it is like partner practice rather than randori (free practice). Yin practice represents primarily an agreed-upon practice sequence. Thus, the changeover in training from the reception of the attack to the application of the technique is only possible where a difference in ability exists. When the ability of one's opponent is superior this is not possible. This is a key point in practice.

Waza (natural movement) are expressed according to one's level and their substance (techniques) is manifested differently each time. This is because what one naturally possesses (one's ability as brought out through repeated practice) is expressed through certain relations (forms).

Ability is Substance of Technique

For example, suppose we have an expensive, well-crafted fountain pen. No matter how well it is made, its final value depends on the person using it. Someone with poor handwriting cannot write well even when using a good pen. A skilled calligrapher, however, can write beautifully even when using an inexpensive pen. It is not that the pen he uses is good, but rather that the writer's ability as a result of his long experience is excellent. One's ability itself is the substance of the technique. Only those who possess ability can make good use of a well-crafted pen. If we fail to understand this, we will begin to attach excessive importance to techniques (waza) considering them to be secret which is tantamount to our believing that an expensive fountain pen enables us to write skillfully. It is important that we understand that techniques are tools for us to feel "something". This "something" is one's feeling of satisfaction derived when he is able to freely express his natural ability through his body in the form of technique.

Careless Use of "Ki"

Whether technique is expressed as something mysterious or common depends on what each teacher feels, but this should be of no consequence to those who are learning. Someone who attempts to make his actions mysterious for no reason is like a person performing meaningless movements (lit., "octopus dance") without comprehension. As the old saying goes, we must understand that we may lead a horse to water but it is for the horse to choose whether or not he drinks. To treat lightly the results of enlightenment (in Aikido, "ki") based on the ascetic practices of the forerunners who preceded us is like practicing a self-styled Aiki with a deluded mind which is equivalent to a self-styled zen philosophy. It is impossible to understand "ki" so easily. Through daily practice we will one day suddenly come to understand, each according to our levels, the abilities and flexibility that mankind naturally possesses.

Training must be scientific and rational. It is a mistake to carelessly use religious philosophy. The martial practitioners of olden times improved themselves through their experiences (non-philosophical) and then found something in common with the world of religion. If one can understand the culmination of a master's enlightenment from the beginning, he needs no effort at all. By using the word "ki" carelessly teachers introduce complications which make it difficult for students to understand Aikido. The purpose of practice is to allow one to experience Aikido step by step. Therefore, it is meaningless to carelessly speak of the

culmination of the i-deal. It is similar to a university student who tries to make himself look intelligent by bragging to an elementary student about his higher education without an understanding of its value. If one really understands the highest teachings of his predecessors, he can actually lead a horse to the water without bandying about such principles. We should not blindly follow our forerunners but should try to discover the causes, effects and processes of things and their similarities and differences through experience. Aiki is a means permitting us to observe things correctly. It is not the goal of Aiki to create an ideological, know-it-all type of person.

The Yin and Yang of Aiki

All things have two aspects, yin and yang. We must recognize that practice represents an expression of yin emphasizing the uke (the person taking ukemi). Thus, practice is yin and reality (actual fighting and matches) is yang. In a real situation, we need practice plus something more. One is free to permit a certain amount of intellectualization in yin practice since it does not involve actual fighting. However, if we fail to reemphasize the yang element (realistic and utilitarian value) of training and continue to think of it as yin practice, misunderstandings (illusion) will arise. In particular, it is dangerous to carelessly infuse idealism and philosophy to students. The various teachings and principles of our forerunners are the forms of expression they used after having understood yang. So for ordinary people like us they represent the culmination of an ideal. I think the purpose of our training is to approach this state. We will not be able to experience awakening in a single jump even if we advocate an ideology. There are still more steps we have to take on a lower level. Understanding something means actually being able to do that thing. Thus, a mere mental understanding is meaningless.

Pitfalls of Idealism

Since all things have two aspects, yin and yang, it is a big mistake to come to think you understand everything just by seeing yin parts. Kata are expressed in the form of yin. By understanding this you can also express kata in the form of yang. Therefore to understand yin correctly we must understand yang parts. You have no choice but to become idealistic if you are convinced of everything without noticing the existence of yang parts. In other words, one tries to make up for the dissatisfaction he feels being unaware of yang by advocating idealism. To make matters worse, one even begins to deceive oneself by believing he has found answers to questions. Taking baseball as an example, one comes to feel as if he can hit a home run just by practicing swinging a bat while spouting the technical theory and words of famous baseball players of all eras. The reality is that you cannot hit a home run in actuality. The reason is that the practice of swinging a bat is yin while baseball games are yang. We must realize that practice is only yin. Ways of thinking (theory) exist for personal practice. No theory can be separated from practical aspects. It is all over for you if your theory turns into idealism.

Uke Central to Practice

Yin practice is the expression of "shackled" form. Thus, it is first necessary to be shackled. It is important in training to correctly understand the roles of "uke" and "tori". Uke's role is to adjust himself/herself to the movement of tori and tori learns his/her movement with the cooperation of uke. Failure to understand this

will lead to the misunderstanding that uke was thrown or pinned because tori's technique was excellent. Uke absorbs the movement of tori with his body by taking a pure fall. In other words, uke is not thrown but rather is practicing a form in which his role is to be thrown. Thus, the central character in practice is uke.

Usually, in the case of a fighting match, the first requirement is not to succumb to your opponent's attempt to break your balance. To have lost one's balance means to have been defeated. In the practice of Aiki, as uke we unconsciously assume that having our balance taken is a good thing. Here exists an important principle and a danger of yin practice. Unless one understands this (i.e. uke and tori are aware of this), practice is meaningless. Practice is possible only due to the existence of a tacit agreement and failure to understand this is a tragic mistake. A certain degree of Intellectualization is possible after recognition of this agreement. Otherwise, this merely leads to conceptual games and self-satisfaction.

Yin: Practice, Yang: Matches

One is free to conceptualize anything. It is because one is free to do so that we must know the meaning of freedom. However, it is not a boundless freedom. Yin is opposed to yang. Yang today implies matches. In competition we test our strength according to certain rules. Fights in olden times were fought at one's own pace and are never possible or necessary at present. However, if you absolutely had to fight, not in a match, I think you would fight in the old way. In such a case, unless you had actually experienced yang practice, your efforts spent on yin practice would be wasted. This is because yin practice is for developing harmony, not for actual fighting. For this reason, it is inappropriate to talk about winning and losing or strength and weakness in the practice of Aiki. In yin practice, both tori and uke are yin. In yin and yang practice, tori is yang and uke is yin (as in randori in Judo). In actual competition both become yang. Yin practice is a metaphysical practice which unfolds in a world of harmony. Yin and yang practice takes place in a world of partial harmony. Yang practice, that is, actual competition, is the actual world where no harmony exists. Yin practice unfolds in a world shackled by form whereas yang practice takes place in a world where one is free of such forms. It would be nonsense to think that yin practice is what Aikido is all about. However, at the present time, a yin world is what is needed. Unless we fully understand the meaning of yin practice, the achievement of world peace through Aiki as advocated by the Founder will not be possible.

It is easy to believe that Aikido and religion share common points in their ways of thinking. Unless one understands religion correctly, the result will be the same as in the case of Aikido the creation of persons caught in a world of illusion. Since one is not aware that Aiki practice is yin, it is easy to find things in common with the illusion resulting from a shallow knowledge of religion. We must see that religion and Aiki are ways through which we let go of our preconceptions. Knowledge of religion and yin practice is only one step of the process of learning the truth. We need to act in a common sense way while realizing that this in itself is a very difficult task.

(Edited and translated by Ikuko Kimura and Stanley Pranin)