

Here, There, and Back Again

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The art of Aikido is important to the world. It is a means, a process for development that contains the potential for transformation to a more subtle level of consciousness by the individual. In other words, Aikido can be a technology of the Self, directed toward achieving and maintaining an awareness of the highest kind. Aikido has done this since its inception, and this it can still do. Along the way Aikido has faced its share of challenges—things that got in the way of Aikido being the Universal soteriology that it; was meant to be, of it being meant for all Humanity and for all Times. There was / is its connection to governmental motivations, global modernization, and cultural uprooting, for example. Nevertheless, , Aikido has managed to survive, and has remained for the most part intact. For this we should be thankful. We ourselves are very fortunate to be connected to an Aikido lineage that has functioned via a direct body / mind transmission though Chiba Shihan, to O'Sensei, to the sacred archetype of Budo, *Okami Sarudahito*.

However, Aikido still faces challenges. As Aikidoka, we must see that Aikido's challenges are our own challenges. We must, without adopting a superficial and impotent romanticism, be wary of the effects; that consumerism, materialism, and the displacement of the group by the individual-trends of contemporary times—may have on the art. Today, the modern world, by which I mean any portion of the global culture that wishes to participate in the modern economic-political dialogue, seems to be missing the sacred archetypes needed to ensure that Aikido remain something for all Humankind and for all Times. For example, Aikido emerged from a culture, which believes that the group comes before the individual; this is a fundamental tenet of Budo. Everything about this past cultural environment emphasized this fact—myth; ritual, etiquette, religious practices, food practices, economic practices, kinship systems, body practices, etc. All spoke this historical "Truth." Much of Aikido's awe and wonder cannot so easily be uprooted from this cultural soil, as a plant might be repotted. As our myths become silent, our meals less sacred, our kinship systems less reliable, our economics less personal, we may, as members of our own Time and Space, be quite prone to weaken our link to Aikido's purer forms of transmission, even with the best of intentions to do otherwise.

Today, world popular culture functions to produce what would be called a "secular spirituality." One that out of ignorance denies the sacred within us and instead functions more to serve the ego. This is undoubtedly connected to the modern primacy given to the individual over the group (among other things, such as a lack of connection to the natural world). Now, martial arts in general are being redesigned (as they may very well have to be) to meet the desired aims of this "secular spirituality." And in this sense, martial arts share a great deal with the contemporary "self-help" groups that are also a product of the cultural paradigm shift that marks our time. Aikido, having the reputation of being a spiritual art, is not exempt from this trend. Without trying to sound nostalgic, I want to suggest that Aikido was nurtured in a soil that sought the embodiment of a particular form and function, one that could resonate into greater patterns of the invisible/sacred, here and now in this profane world. This soil was fertile ground for transforming, and thus transporting, the practitioner from the mythic/symbolic realm (that of knowing) to the sacred/archetypal realm (that of being). However, today Aikido belongs to a soil that seeks self-empowerment, assertiveness, confidence, physical conditioning, self-defense, etc. Hence it should be noted that while transformation is possible within this soil of self-help, transportation is not only rarely achieved, it is most often not even sought. In a way, the journey is absent from contemporary Aikido training.

We must all wonder, then, what is left of the Path, of the Way-of Do. In other words, if Aikido was meant to include a journey from the concrete to the abstract, and, if there is no process of traveling from one to the other, are we not left only with the concrete? Is Aikido *waza* the whole of Aikido, or is *waza* all that we are primed to see nowadays? Can we see—is it still possible for us to understand—that while mastery of the Art leads to a kind of physical prowess, physical prowess in no way leads to mastery of the Art? Do we still have it within us to not see Aikido as linear—as a tenet of scientific cause and effect— but

rather to see it as cumulative, progressive, and holistic in nature, where the lesser elements are contained in the greater whole but not the other way around?

Obviously cultural-historical uprooting need not be equivalent with death. And obviously, as was said above, Budo has always faced its own "decay" as it continues to prosper and make itself more refined. In fact, one can hardly read a major Budo treatise of the past without the author mentioning that the woes of the period are affecting the technology of Self he so dearly loved. And perhaps it may very well be the case that it is the perpetual facing of "decay" that actually leads to the art's prosperity. Perhaps it is this encounter that even marks the journey itself, governing its length and breadth: In this sense, Aikido can be understood as the Hero's Journey, that great trans-cultural narrative in which the warrior travels from here to there and back again. For by facing the roots of his own decay, the mythic warrior crosses those difficult thresholds that demand a transformation in the patterns of his/her conscious *and* unconscious life. That is to say, a change is demanded in one's Being—a transfiguration must occur.

What might this "here," "there," and "back again" be in Aikido training? It seems helpful today to understand Aikido from three perspectives: Secular Aikido, which can be thought of as self-defense, the superficial, the profane, the most material, the most readily tangible, etc.; Symbolic Aikido, which might be thought of as the philosophical, the metaphorical, those cognitive lessons learned by geometrical shapes found within Aikido (i.e. the circle, the triangle, the spiral, etc.) and Sacred Aikido, which can be considered an extinguishing or a dropping off of embodiment, of awareness, of being—a fusion of subject and object within the realm of meaninglessness-of no-thing-ness. Of course such divisions are entirely arbitrary and in the end perhaps even false, but this is the whole point of the Hero's journey—that he didn't really go anywhere, but that he nevertheless had to go.

The Hero's journey reminds us, in a way, of the following Zen statement: A tree is a tree; a tree is not a tree; a tree is a tree. The difference is never really the tree. The difference is the mind of the person experiencing the tree. So too with the warrior, though he/she returns "back again," he/she really can never come back to whence he/she left. And yet, so too, did he/she really never leave. But if the warrior never got to a place that he/she could never really leave, the journey is not complete, and thus it did not take place. *A tree is a tree, is not a tree, is a tree* - only at the end do we see the tree for the "first" time. Only in the end do we return to a place we never left.

A jyo is a jyo, is not a jyo, is a jyo. Secular Aikido sees the jyo as a piece of wood—a piece of a tree. It can be burned for cooking; you can use it to point with or even to scratch your back. You can use it as a weapon. All of these things are self-serving and thus limited in their usefulness (*a jyo is a jyo*). Symbolic Aikido sees the jyo as an emblem of power, a symbol of authority. Its rigidity may philosophically demonstrate steadfastness to the practitioner. Its proper use, the way it can become soft and even sticky, can be a metaphor for how to maintain integrity while remaining flexible (*a jyo is not a jyo*). Sacred Aikido invests the jyo, both weapon and metaphor, both secular and symbolic, with the Self, which makes the weapon something more—something greater than the sum of its parts. An intensity between artifact and artist is fostered and cultivated—one that harbors both centrifugal and centripetal forces. One comes to prepare the way for developing a relationship with the jyo. In the beginning the jyo is unruly and does not do what we ask of it. This is an indication of one's inability to communicate with the jyo, which is an unrealized extension of the self - hence, the lack of communication. With practice one gradually gains control over the jyo and can actually give life to the jyo (making the inanimate animate—which is an act of creation). In this way the jyo can become the conduit, the connecting link, between the self (ego) and the Self that is sacred (universal). Here the wood, the shapes of circles, figure eights, and spirals all fuse and resonate harmoniously through the four dimensions, the three planes, and through Time. Here the universal Self, as extender of the jyo and as extension of the jyo, can also come to resonate with the synergistic totality before him/her, and here, for the first time, *a jyo is a jyo*. Our journey occurred. We both returned and never left. The Journey is complete.

Undoubtedly, Aikido is only what we make of it. But let us remember that Aikido is only the finger that points to the sacred—the universal archetype. Let us journey toward that. Let us go nowhere. Let us go everywhere. Here, there, and back again.