

Aikido as a modern Budo.



The common translation for Bu is "martial" and 'do' is commonly understood to mean 'path' or 'way'. Hence a Bu-do tradition can be understood as a path of self development and self knowledge through training and confrontation in the martial arts where conflict and it's management are the arena of practice and study.

For the moment I would like to concentrate on the first term, 'Bu' as the second 'Do' deserves a whole essay in it's own right.

So what actually does this term 'Bu' mean?

The common english translation for Bu is simply 'martial' and is somewhat misleading in it's incompleteness. The Japanese character is actually formed from two sub characters meaning: 'violence, arms of war' and 'to stop, prohibit or bring to an end'. Hence a more comprehensive understanding of this term would be 'to stop violence' or perhaps even, 'to bring about peace'.

Modern day Budo (Kendo, Iaido, karate-do, Judo, kyudo, Aikido...) are the contemporary descendants of the traditional martial schools of Japan (Bujutsu, Koryu, Bugei).

In 1987 the Japanese Budo Association (of which the Aikikai Foundation is a member) was formed to foster, develop and uphold the fundamental

principles of traditional Budo in Japan. The member associations drew up a charter as follows (www.nipponbudokan.or.jp):

- **Object of Budo:** The object of Budo is to cultivate character, enrich the ability to make value judgments, and foster the development of a well-disciplined and capable individual through participation in physical and mental training utilizing martial techniques.
- **Training (keiko):** When practicing daily one must constantly follow decorum, adhere to the fundamentals, and resist the temptation to pursue only technical skill rather than the unity of mind and technique.
- **Attitude:** In matches and in the performance of kata, one must manifest Budo spirit, exert himself to the utmost, win with modesty, accept loss gracefully, and exhibit temperate attitudes at all times.
- **The Dojo:** The dojo is a sacred place for training one's mind and body. Here one must maintain discipline, proper etiquette, and formality. The training area must be a quiet, clean, safe and solemn environment.
- **Teaching:** In order to be an effective teacher the Budo master should always strive to cultivate his own character, and to further his own skill and the discipline of mind and body. He should not be swayed by winning or losing, nor should he display arrogance about his superior skill; he should instead retain the attitudes suitable for a role-model.
- **Promotion:** When promoting Budo, one should follow traditional values, seek substantial training, contribute to research, and do one's utmost to perfect and preserve this traditional art, with an understanding of international points of view.

All of the above clearly point towards training in a modern traditional martial art (Budo) as something much more than about learning techniques for self defense or engaging in competitive fighting sports. Training in a Budo is a path of self discipline and self knowledge which as such, should be a source of richness in one's life and a positive contribution to the society in which one lives. It does this by promoting in it's practitioner's not only the qualities of skillful technique, physical strength and mind-body unity but also politeness, sensitivity, serenity and appropriate engagement with a view to restoring harmony and peace when under conditions of conflict and discord (and this last aspect is particularly relevant to the philosophy of Aikido).

So given this underpinning philosophy, how should the regular training in the Dojo be carried out to foster the above ideals? Before looking at actual

technical practice three basic attitudes or orientations to the training need to be addressed that inform all of the Budo Charter ideals as follows:

- Etiquette (reigi).

Trust and Respect are the cornerstones for the practice that takes place in a Dojo. Without them the training environment can easily become a jungle and injuries a real possibility. The bowing etiquette that takes place serves to set the practice in this context: that our 'opponents' are actually our partners and that our engagement with each other is for the sake of our mutual learning and development. Another related aspect of reigi is that in training we are also training our sense of presence and awareness, without which all the martial techniques are of no real use. Sensei once commented succinctly on reigi in that 'a polite person is an attentive person'.

Trust, respect and attention. Without these elements pervading the training, one is not engaged in a Budo regardless of the techniques being practiced or the ideals being espoused.

Beginner Mind (soshin).

This term refers to the attitude of mind that the student should have as a budoka. It should be open, hungry for real understanding, and free of preconceptions. This attitude should be present whether one is a beginner or an advanced student (and especially as an advanced student or teacher). Without it one's 'learning' is effectively blocked.

My own first big lesson in 'beginners mind' took place in the following incident during my training in Iwama under my teacher Morihiro Saito Sensei.

Practicing under Sensei with so many skilled seniors in the Dojo was always an intimidating experience and I got used to the feeling of never really being able to feel comfortable with my level of skill. One evening though I was practicing right at the front of the Dojo as usual (on the left of the shomen to the left of Sensei) when for the first time shiho nage felt like it was really 'working'. No matter how strongly uke attacked, my technique felt irresistible – and more surprisingly, easy. So this was how this technique was supposed to feel – finally! Knowing Sensei a bit I could see that he was watching me with some level of growing irritation (he had a habit of becoming restless in his knees when irritated) but I was unconcerned. What could he say? Shiho nage was finally mine! At this point he stopped the class and started to deliver a talk, which I, as regular translator for him at that time, was obliged to interpret for the benefit of the non Japanese speakers present:

‘When I was a nidan I thought I understood shiho nage, but upon reaching godan I realized that I knew nothing about this technique. Now I am an eighth dan and still I am not confident of my ability with this technique. In training one should never feel that one has mastered any technique!’

By the last sentence Sensei was in front of me shouting while my forehead was pressed hard to the tatami and I was no longer making any effort to translate anything as it was clear that this lesson was for my sole benefit.

This was one of the best lessons I ever had and I am eternally grateful for Sensei for knocking me down at that critical moment.

Sincerity (makoto).

This Japanese term has a different meaning than the common English meaning and is easily lost in translation. The following story from the Zen tradition (quoted from Diassetz Teitaro Zuzuki in Ruth Benedict’s *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*) illustrates this point:

Monk: I understand that when a lion seizes upon his opponent, whether it is a hare or an elephant, he makes an exhaustive use of his power: pray tell me what is this power?

Master: The power of sincerity (literally, the power of not-deceiving). Sincerity, that is, not-deceiving, means ‘putting forth one’s whole being’ technically known as ‘the whole being in action’... in which nothing is kept in reserve, nothing is expressed under disguise, nothing goes into waste. When a person lives like this, he is said to be a golden haired lion; he is a symbol of virility, sincerity, whole heartedness; he is divinely human.

And Morihei Ueshiba:

Always imagine yourself on the battlefield under the fiercest attack; never forget this crucial element of training.

(Morihei Ueshiba. *Budo* p. 36)

In training therefore we should not just train our body but exercise and engage our ‘full being’, body, mind, spirit and energy. Saito Sensei would often tell us that repeating just three kata with full attention and sincerity (makoto) was far better than endless empty repetitions. My own experience

in Iwama was that the trainings were so intense that just one hour would demand everything one had and that lack of engagement or attention when training with a senior would result in serious physical feedback.

Commitment, full attention and sincerity were not optional! In the kyudo (archery) tradition this is expressed by the often heard saying, 'one life, one shot'.

So how does all this tie into training Aikido as a modern Budo?

First of all we must recognize that the aims of modern Budo are different from the aims of the former traditional Bujutsu and Koryu whose aims were simply to train soldiers and warriors with one aim in mind: to vanquish the enemy. With the advent of modern technological warfare and the abolishment of the samurai class in Japan, traditional Bujutsu and Koryu schools became effectively obsolete. With their evolution into modern Budo disciplines the purpose of training shifted from combat effectiveness to self development, as outlined in the charter of the Japanese Budo Association mentioned above.

However it is at this junction that we enter a very tricky area. The origin and backbone of the techniques practiced in modern day Budo schools are descended directly or indirectly from older more functionally and practically oriented Bujutsu traditions. With self development shifting to the fore, the practicality of the techniques and the original intention of the training and techniques receded to the background. The battleground was no longer the point – daily life was (although it could be easily argued that this is also a battlefield albeit one far more complex and multilayered...).

To my mind this is not necessarily a problem as long as that functional background as a background is still able to inform and check the foreground training process and the teachers and students understand the concept of levels and where they are currently training at and with what objectives (see previous essay on Levels). The problem arises when that martial background disconnects or disappears from regular practice.

Specifically looking at Aikido practice.

Aikido itself is a modern descendent of older jujutsu and specifically Daito ryu jujutsu. Morihei Ueshiba was also proficient in various weapon forms and in creating Aikido it is my understanding that two streams converged in his understanding and experience:

One was his understanding of the above martial traditions where empty handed handed jujutsu forms and weapon forms became synthesized into a complete single technical system where the use of the body was the uniting

factor (riai). This process of the technical refinement of his system was a long process and went through many stages of development throughout his life (and hence the many styles of contemporary aikido reflecting these different levels of development and the students who trained with him in these phases).

The second convergent influence was clearly of a spiritual nature. Aikido is not just a modern synthesis and extension of older traditions of combat but to my mind represents a radical break with previous martial traditions.

Aikido as conceived by Morihei Ueshiba is the convergence and expression of martial genius and spiritual enlightenment. For the Founder of Aikido, Budo was an expression of universal love and in realizing his intrinsic connection or 'at one-ness' with all things, opponents did not exist for him. The term Ai-ki-do itself can be translated as 'way of blending with the universal energy'.

In the words of the Founder:

'I felt the universe suddenly quake, and that a golden spirit sprang up from the ground, veiled my body, and changed my body into a golden one. At the same time my body became light. I was able to understand the whispering of the birds, and was clearly aware of the mind of God, the creator of the universe.

At that moment I was enlightened: the source of Budo is God's love — the spirit of loving protection for all beings ... Budo is not the felling of an opponent by force nor is it a tool to lead the world to destruction with arms. True Budo is to accept the spirit of the universe, keep the peace of the world, correctly produce, protect and cultivate all beings in nature'.

(An account of an experience of transcendent awareness, soon after a contest where, unarmed, he defeated a naval officer armed with a bokken (wooden sword) without harming him; as quoted in *Aikido* (1985) by Kisshomaru Ueshiba).

Such a vision of Aikido as a true Budo is in complete agreement with the original meanings of Budo as delineated above: Budo as a means of restoring peace and harmony versus defeating and winning over opposition.

However, controlling an opponent without injury or neutralizing aggression without employing violence is easier said than done! So in practice how can we realize these ideals or at the very least orient our training and practice to align with them?

The key thing is to find our freedom from reactive defensiveness amidst restriction. In training we work with techniques which embody the

principles of connection, control and neutralization against attacks which seek to restrain and restrict us (holds and strikes). Again and again we are confronted on a deep level with our learned habit of escaping from and struggling against opposition. This is how we seem to be wired up: the flight and fight responses to stress. Yet Aikido asks us to neither escape nor fight against, but to join with, lead and neutralize an opposing force.

This 'third choice' (over flight or fight) requires that we yield our defensiveness and resistance on a deep level. This yielding or letting go of our position versus the world is the spiritual training in Aikido and to the extent that we are able to allow this process to unfold in our experience will our skill as aikidoka's grow and the practice itself take on additional meaning in the rest of our lives beyond the time spent in the Dojo.

So where is the martial 'background' in this practice and why is it relevant?

First, the attacks and holds need to be both 'real' and 'measured' in terms of the ability of the practitioners to both control the attacks as well as 'blend' with them and execute the techniques. We need a restricting environment to temper our ability in.

Second, both nage and uke need to be aware of the issue of 'openings' (tsuki) in the technical engagement. These openings can be on the side of uke as well as nage and can be exploited through either counter techniques or atemi from uke or via atemi and variation techniques (henka waza) on the part of nage.

Third, the mind. When training with one partner we should keep our attention and awareness open so that we are aware of what is happening around us (zanshin) at all times.

Fourth, our intention. The intention is to blend with and neutralize our attacking opponent and not to defeat him. This is the most difficult and paradoxical aspect of the training to grasp but to my mind it is the defining aspect of what separates aikido from other, if not all, other martial arts. The best way to describe this is from my own experience with my teacher. Sensei's techniques felt overwhelming in terms of power and yet I always had the sense of 'being taken care of' and although I would be convincingly neutralized by his techniques I always felt 'safe' and would always come away with a 'wow, that was great- let's do it again!' kind of feeling.

Receiving this from body to body was a 'direct transmission' which allowed me to 'feel' what actually defined Sensei's aikido and has always served me as a guiding light in my own practice. This is why we cannot learn aikido

from books or the internet (wonderful tools as these are) but need to find good teachers who can 'transmit', as far as possible, these internal and defining aspects of the art.

If the practice is informed by these aspects the connection, balance break and control aspects of the training will all be 'checked' as to their 'realism'.

When I practice, even with children, this 'background' as to openings and the unexpected are always present as well as the sense of 'taking care' of my opponents in the techniques.

The agreement at the basic levels in training is that uke does not block nage but allows and receives his technique. Often (very often in fact) in executing a given technique I am aware that even though uke falls, the connection was weak and openings appeared through the engagement. Sensitivity to these issues act as 'checks and balances' in the training/learning process and allow for correction in 'sealing' the openings and deepening the connection from center to center (ki musubi).

In Takemusu Aikido the functional combat level of the techniques is the oyo waza level. This level is not emphasized in our training. Saito Sensei himself would not even emphasize atemi at the basic levels of training but would emphasize correct body use and movement through repetitive hard training in a limited technical repertoire first. This is the 'finding of freedom within restriction' level. Once the body and it's ability to move and blend had been minimally mastered were atemi and other levels introduced. The combat level was taught sporadically and only to seniors and my experience with it was that it served to 'check' my basics and at the same time open my eyes to the older underlining forms of the techniques. It was also obvious that this aspect was always in the background with all of Sensei's technique as I never had the sense that I could 'surprise' him with a sudden attack or escape from an opening in his technique even at the kihon katai level (first level static solid training).

In conclusion.

Although Aikido as a martial art purports to go beyond fighting and violence as the answer to human conflict this dimension needs to be addressed and not avoided in our training.

Real martial ability must inform our practice in order that the ethical choice to neutralize violence rather than oppose it can be made.

Martial ability in Aikido is the result of a lengthy training whereby reactivity has been overcome through a dual process of physical conditioning and

inner relaxation whereby real freedom tempered in a training environment of restriction has been developed under the careful guidance of a teacher who can transmit the 'taste' of non resistance to his students directly.

Oyo waza are the combat or applied level of aikido techniques and are practiced and learned so as to give correct perspective on basic techniques as to their level of connection and potential openings or weaknesses.

So while Aikido is a complex and multileveled practice, the martial level, while not our primary concern in training, should inform and correct our techniques from the background as it were, and thus serve as a check on the level and quality of connection (awase) we are developing in our practice.

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