

ABOUT PRACTICE

Who has not heard that technique is only a means, not an end? However it remains, above all, the tool that will open the doors of Aiki. Therefore, we should ask ourselves "since the technique is not an end, what is then the purpose of technique, its goal?"

Aikido is primarily a physical practice. It is through the body that O'Sensei proposes we find harmony in ourselves and with the world. It is the instrument with which we study movement and enter into a relationship with the other in order to perceive that this movement is the movement of the universe itself and that we must move in accordance with its laws, physically and mentally.

In a previous article, I wrote that Aikido was practiced physically, intellectually and emotionally. I would like to explain today what I mean by that.

First, I would like to say there is no real separation among these three aspects of the practice, which forms naturally a whole. A practice that is solely physical, intellectual, or emotional will lead to an imbalance that will limit the progress of the practitioner and generate an insensitive skilled technician, an intellectual without talent, or a blissful saint. Still, during our martial journey, we are led to practice one of these aspects more than the others, or to be more precise, to take an interest, at a given moment, in one of the three.

Physical practice

It is the most obvious, concrete, and essential, which does not mean the best understood because it is based on the study of the movements both of Tori and Uke.

One of the first motivations of the practitioner should be therefore to acquire the movements in his body. To do this, the body needs only one thing: to train. By training the movements over and over again, the practitioner patiently teaches his body to move in accordance with the principles on which his discipline was founded. And only when he can move in accordance with these principles without thinking does he start to practice Aikido, a bit like the pianist who has to forget his fingers to "interpret" the music. However, to forget does not mean that he no longer needs the technique; rather, that his fingers themselves have acquired, notably through practice, the ability to move naturally, without him needing to pay attention to them nor think about them. Only from that moment can his practice enter another dimension, one that will allow him to forget his body, forget the technique. As long as his fingers or his technique pose problems, he cannot claim to play music or practice Aikido.

Of course, it may seem foolish to claim that technical study could be forgotten. Indeed, it never is and that is the reason why even the greatest virtuosos practiced the basic exercises they were taught in their infancy regularly. The same applies to a practitioner of Aikido: he must never stop practicing, training, in the role of Tori as well as Uke (left hand and right hand). Age does not make the task easier, especially for the part of Uke. But here again, the proper physical acquisition of the principles, that is to say that which I would call "the understanding or intelligence of the body" should permit the less young practitioner to extend his practice of Uke into old age. "The intelligence of the body" is this instinct that the body develops through training, more exactly through repetition, which allows him to react even before the brain has had time to assess the situation. Nobody forgets how to bike, even after a long period of inactivity: very quickly we are riding again without having to relearn. The examples are many of practitioners who emerged unscathed from a head-on collision on a motorcycle thanks to their ukemi and each of them will testify that they did not even have time to think, their bodies had already responded intuitively.

If the practitioner wants to be able to continue training as long as possible, he must, at some point, consider the movement he performs, its *raison d'être*, its purpose, its meaning. Indeed, the mechanical repetition of a movement in itself would not ensure that the body will be well educated and "that the fingers will move on the keyboard by themselves." There are several reasons for this:

- 1) The original demonstration of the movement that the practitioner has to reproduce must be impeccable. In general, this role falls to the teacher and this is his primary function. But how to teach to write well if the original letters are not correct? It is a heavy responsibility and a practitioner should think twice before deciding to teach. Indeed, if the practitioner reproduces an incorrect movement, who is wrong?

But Aikido is not written like music. On the other hand, the physical laws of biomechanics are.

It is therefore essential to respect the score before wanting to interpret a movement, in both senses of the word. Teachers should not forget that they must above all, irrespective of their own interpretation, teach the theory of Aikido. When one listens to Furtwängler or Toscanini conduct the 9th Symphony, one has the impression of hearing two completely different pieces, even though they both scrupulously follow the score written by Beethoven.

This responsibility is even greater with regards to teaching children who still have the ability to "steal" the movement and to reproduce it instinctively.

One could also say that for an aikidoka, the study of movements (of techniques) is similar to the study of notes for a musician or of steps for a dancer.

Certainly, one can become a musician without studying music theory. This is especially true for children because their intuition (from Lat. *intuitio*: image reflected by a mirror - Gd Robert "direct and immediate form of knowledge, which does not resort to reasoning ") has not been dulled by the dualism of matter and spirit.

- 2) If indeed humans had the innate ability to reproduce a gesture by imitation (according to the theory of mirror neurons), we have to wonder why we do not all practice the Aikido of O-Sensei. If we assume that the theory is valid, something in our social, cultural, and education model seems to weaken that ability over time and, even if it is true that children use it intuitively, few adults seem to have retained it. Thus, even assuming that the original is perfect, nothing ensures that the student will have the ability to see and reproduce the movement instantly. Thus, the movements he will perform by imitation in the early stages of his practice do not resemble those of the original; that is to say that his body will learn incorrect movements from the beginning.

It is almost a question of fate, of a test, or of a paradox. Our uncertainty about our ability to perceive a movement and reproduce it faithfully, combined with our lack of ability to assess whether the original we have before us is correct - in the sense that it functions correctly - give us the quasi-certainty that we will spend the first years of our practice teaching our bodies incorrect movements. And the icing on the cake, if I may say so, is that we will spend the rest of our training life, if it is serious and diligent, correcting these errors and "relearning to walk."

In the world of sports, competition is one of the pedagogical tools that can lead to the development of the "intelligence of the body" because it relies on intense and regular physical training whose goal is to build the body structurally so that it can respond to the specific physical demands of the sport in question. With regard to educating the body, it is preferable to begin training at an age where it is developing biologically, approximately between 7 and 21 years maximum. Most champions are young and the more a discipline involves physical abilities, the younger they are. Moreover, the spirit of competition matches perfectly with this stage of life when we enter into conflict with the outside world, and thus provides a good motivation for them. But my intention is not to justify competition or to argue for its introduction in Aikido. It is simply to show that the teaching of any physical discipline whatever it is, and Aikido is included here,

is based primarily on the physical practice of the movements that will teach the body to act by itself, intuitively.

But there is a fundamental difference between a do and a sport: their goal. The former is a system to improve the broader aspects of the man and the latter aims mainly to improve his performance. This does not mean that a swimmer who trains hard cannot improve himself personally; but it is not his goal and he does not even think about it. Similarly, an adolescent is willing to suffer physically during training because it could help him win a medal, that's his motivation. But what might be the motivation of a practitioner of Aikido that would make him repeat Suburi for an hour or more?

Everyone must have their own motivation/s or, at least so I imagine! But if it were enough to train to progress, all champions would automatically become Masters. Certainly, all the Masters that I have met have seriously trained their bodies.

For this reason, the practitioner cannot be satisfied with just a physical study to learn the principles of his discipline. Otherwise, the body may solidify bad habits that will be difficult to correct without a complete retraining.

One of the means available is to invoke his ability for reasoning and discernment. I have called this the intellectual aspect of practice.

Intellectual practice

As we have seen, the study of technique should not be limited to the reproduction of form, which is only a representation, a graphics support, or should I say, choreography. It is through its simplicity that the form ensures its survival in the sense that any human being gifted with his physical and motor abilities will be able to reproduce it without difficulty and therefore transmit it without alteration. The form is only the physical manifestation of a principle and every one must take care not to confuse the finger pointing at the moon with the moon.

To understand better this aspect of practice that I have called 'intellectual', I would like now to point out that it is not just a matter of natural curiosity that causes the practitioner to become interested in the culture - in the greater sense - tied to his practice, nor a mere accumulation of knowledge but, rather, an investigation, a theoretical and speculative study of movement.

For the physical practice, the body acquires the movement by repeating it. Still it is also necessary to have a good comprehension of the movement before allowing the body to replicate it. To comprehend has a double meaning: to embrace as a whole (to encompass, to incorporate, to contain in itself, to enter into the whole)

and to grasp, to realize the causes, reasons, motives and nature of something, in the occurrence of movement. The intellectual practice therefore calls upon our cognitive capacity to understand the movement by analysis, introspection, reflection, criticism, and even controversy, if it does not make us become emotional. In other words, the practitioner will have to strive to define the how and why of the movement.

Indeed, if the teacher raises an arm while turning, a student can be satisfied with this observation and repeat endlessly what he saw, while being convinced that he is faithfully reproducing the demonstrated movement. But at some moment, he will have to face the fact that his movement does not produce the same effects as that of the Sempai, the teacher, or Sensei.

The imitation of the external form of the movement or technique involves the physical aspect of practice but a movement cannot be studied independently from its effect: what is the result I want to get by performing this movement?

If he wants to move forward, the practitioner must ask himself about the why and how of the movement, its physiological, biomechanical, physical, structural, and multidimensional aspects. He will have to understand, for example, in order to enter the movement of Uke, he has to visualize the trajectory of the attack - and thus the kinetic energy - to be able either to destroy the energy (Irimi) or to guide it (Tenkan).

This study should lead him to understand that the human body is a high-precision mechanism capable of producing impressive movements once we learn to operate it properly. It will also help him to realize that aikido is a perfect application of the laws of physics, as long as he respects them.

This intellectual approach should naturally emerge on the way to the degree of Shodan, that is to say, when the practitioner has demonstrated to have acquired the form of the techniques. The proof is that this degree represents a "start, a beginning." But the beginning of what, exactly? Has anyone already answered this question?

Perhaps the beginning of another kind of practice!

To return to the analogy with music, the musician trains physically when he practices on his instrument and intellectually when he studies music theory. The analogy is worth what it is worth, but it is always better for a musician to be able to read music. And I think I can confirm that there is theory in Aikido, even if not written: the laws of physics and biomechanics.

Thus, when the practitioner begins to get an idea of the how and why of the movement, he will know better how and why to guide his body when he trains.

Contrary to popular belief, the mind works slower than the body. To convince ourselves of this, it suffices to recall the many phases of learning we have engaged in throughout our life; for example: learning to bike, swim, or draw a

kanji. Initially the body is slow and hesitant because it is awaiting instructions from the brain. The body does not see the movement, does not hear the explanations of the teacher. It sees and hears only what the brain recorded for it. It is thus through the intermediary of the brain that body gets the instructions that enable it to reproduce the demonstrated movement. At the beginning, our understanding is limited and the movement we reproduce exemplifies this. Then, gradually, our understanding improves, or should improve, and will improve because without this understanding, the movement has no meaning. "Quid omnibus, nihil if comprehendum? (Cicero) (Why hands if there is nothing to "grasp"?)

Thus, properly instructed, the body will always grow more confident and pass on its impressions to the intellect for analysis and correction, and so on...

Master Nishioka, my Master of Jodo, always insists on the fact that a practitioner must maintain the same level in Ken and Jo. You should know that the practice of Jodo requires learning not only Jo, the techniques, but also Ken, since all Jo techniques have been developed against sword attacks. Yin and Yang: Tori and Uke in Aikido, Ken and Jo in Jodo. "Your level in Jo should allow you to raise your level in Ken and vice versa. » he repeats incessantly. Similarly, a good intellectual understanding of movement - what we have to do and why we must do it - will allow us to correct our errors and thereby improve subsequent attempts in a continual process of adjustments.

But the practitioner must be careful however not to be seduced by the siren's song, meaning that it is easy to become complacent in intellectual practice because it is less tiring, and many can be satisfied with only this understanding to evaluate their level in Aikido. You just need to attend a few seminars to observe that, with few rare exceptions, practitioners are more skilled at explaining than demonstrating and their explanations quite often are above what they are able to demonstrate.

The study of Budo could be likened to a puzzle: each piece of the puzzle corresponds to a kihon, a basic movement. The practitioner knows he must put all pieces together so that the image is complete and coherent. His work will be much easier if he already has an idea of the final image that he will have when all the pieces are assembled. Without this image, his work will be longer and much more uncertain as he has no idea what he is putting together. This image, this overview, I have called the intellectual practice because the movement can only be studied for **itself** - the form: it (the movement) must also be viewed in relationship with all the others or, in other words, with the image they are supposed to represent together: the background, its *raison d'être*. The only difference from an ordinary puzzle is that a good familiarity with each of the component parts allows the creation of as many images as desired. Perhaps that is the freedom the masters speak of: for a long time, we must reproduce the image of that which we draw on technically and assemble the parts in their own

way until we develop the ability to create our own images, and the method to reproduce them.

This study, or intellectual practice, can lead to studies as diverse as fluid mechanics, quantum physics, astrophysics or Zen, for example.

Without going that far, the simple awareness of all unnecessary tensions in the execution of a movement is part of this study. In this case, it will be a question of a dialogue between body and intellect that should lead to the ability to find the solution that will lead to non-resistance, and thus to harmony. That which must be found first: the research stage, until the creation and development of intuition: the metabolism stage.

The process of intellectual development of all the notions and concepts conveyed by our practice also enter into this study, from the simple memorization of the various Japanese terms (names of kata, techniques, periods of Japanese history and who knows what else!) to the writing of this article.

Take for example the study of Reishiki: what would it look like? On the one hand, it would involve all the information gleaned here and there from the teachers and fellow practitioners. It begins as soon as the practitioner puts on his keikogi for the first time; to end with, possibly the study of Ogasawara tradition, currently in use at the imperial court of Japan.

Secondly, it would include all the personal research that the practitioner will have undertaken to understand the meaning and purpose of the Reishiki, which can be limited to a simple reflection or to an exchange of views with friends during the traditional beer after class.

And finally, it would involve the ability to integrate Reishiki in his own practice, which will manifest itself through awareness and changes in behavior, both personal and social.

Let's say, for short, a good intellectual understanding of his practice will help the Aikidoka as much as the mastery of music theory helps the musician. In any case, for both, it is an aspect of their practice that they cannot ignore.

Having reached this level of physical and intellectual understanding, which should correspond, according to my personal criteria, the rank of 4th dan, the practitioner is supposed to have acquired "the intelligence of the body." The fingers move on the keyboard themselves, without intervention of the brain. In fact, at this stage, when the brain interferes, it interrupts the natural movement of the body because the inopportune intervention forced the body to reduce its speed to that of the brain.

And it is here that the emotional practice naturally begins to have a meaning. This certainly does not mean that the practitioner had not faced emotion before reaching this technical level: he confronted it in the first fall in his first class. But more than being armed with the ability to move his body properly thanks to

the physical and intellectual understanding he has gained, he now has the means that allow him to analyze and understand his emotions, which are primarily made up of our fears and those which they cause.

Indeed, entering the void, for example, is scary, especially if the body does not know how to move. Who has not found themselves hesitant before making a jump? Certainly, it is always possible to throw someone in the middle of the lake so that he learns to swim. In this case, he will be immediately immersed (no pun intended) in the three aspects of training:

- physical: he must move if he does not want to sink,
- intellectual: he must quickly find a way to move to save himself if it wants to reach the shore and not sink,
- emotional: this does not seem to need an explanation!

It would be the same, to maintain the parallel with the martial arts, for a guy who enlisted during a time of war and was sent to the front after one month of training.

The study of Budo is less immediate and traumatic, however! It is thus voluntarily and gradually that the practitioner takes this path. And now we're back to the famous question: why does one practice? But we will come back to it later because, of course, there is a fourth aspect of practice.

Therefore, armed with a well-educated body and a good understanding of what he does, the practitioner enters into what I have called the emotional practice.

In other words, how will the practitioner, who is well prepared and conscious of what he knows, behave in a real "simulated" fight or on a "virtual" battlefield?

Emotional practice

To begin with, let me clarify here that this is not about listing and analyzing all the emotions that each of us feels subjectively due to the simple fact that this is a physical discipline. Indeed, this type of practice necessarily involves physical contact and each one has his/her own way of reacting to a hold / grab / attack, even simulated and simplified. Thus, depending on the person in front of you, this physical contact can cause a range of emotions, especially among beginners, which will manifest themselves through involuntary physiological reactions, such as: accelerated heart rate, involuntary blinking, nervous laughter, extreme muscle tension, blushing. This demonstrates, if there is a need for such, the practitioner has been immediately plunged into the emotional aspect of practice in his first class. This practice will lead him, consciously or not, to enter into a relationship with the other. Aided by the physical practice, which allows him to respond technically to this contact, and by the intellectual practice, which makes

him understand the why and how, he will be more able to manage these emotional reactions so that they do not disrupt his movement or his opponent / partner.

However, this aspect of the emotional practice does not at all distinguish the martial arts from any other physical practice, from ballroom dancing to soccer. Physical contact generates a range of emotions different from those, which a practitioner of Zen will feel when assuming his meditation posture.

Still, more so than others, martial practice has a specific means that lets us enter into our fears and do so through the front door since it proposes, through its system of training to get on familiar terms with the ultimate fear: the fear of death. Of course, to really confront this fear, the warrior must be in a situation fighting for his life, and it is, for that matter, not necessary to practice the martial arts to experience this. However, the distinctiveness of the martial practice is to propose a solution to study, understand, and control this fear. Or, more precisely, to familiarize ourselves with it without necessarily having to risk our life.

The emotional aspect of the practice is thus the study of this emotion, regardless of how it is perceived by each practitioner. But it seems difficult, if not impossible, to separate the cause from the effects. If we can say objectively that all practitioners will feel that fear at one time or another during their journey, we cannot infer that it will manifest itself in the same way in each of them.

As I often say in my seminars, man is not psychologically programmed to enter voluntarily into an attack. Instead, his genetic programming prompts him to flee. The martial practice is therefore an alternative to the survival instinct because it teaches that it is often best to confront a problem rather than trying to avoid it.

The emotional aspect of martial practice is therefore to enter gradually and voluntarily into an emotional situation that the practitioner could experience if he were actually fighting for his life. Every practitioner has experienced or will experience this virtually, be it during a competition, when being promoted, or when being Uke for Sensei.

This approach is gradual because it depends on our ability to absorb the attack so that Tori is scared for himself and Uke is afraid to touch Tori. It is not uncommon to see Uke interrupt his attack with the certainty that he would have touched Tori. Many are reluctant to enter into this space/time and I would say they are right to listen to their survival instinct because it intuitively shows them they are not yet ready.

There is, in Ken, a cutting exercise for two where Shitachi perfects his trajectories, while Uchidachi develops his capacity to receive (ukeru) the strike from Shitachi on his Bokken. This exercise, with tried educational value, immerses the two practitioners immediately in the emotional aspect and perhaps

Uchi even more than Shi because it is he who receives the blow so his survival instinct orders him to avoid it.

Another is Kiri-Otoshi (Chokusen Irimi in Aikido) since the technique is only used if Shitachi lets Uchidachi enter very deep into the attack so that he makes him believe that he will touch him.

In his book "Aikido" Tamura Sensei expressed it in these terms:

"More important is to forget the body, to enter and to stab while thinking of being stabbed, to enter directly without the slightest hesitation.

You press Aite with your mental power, until he is forced attack; using, taking his attack, you enter! "

But I know many practitioners who place themselves in danger without even realizing it. It's just proof that they have not yet studied enough physically and intellectually, as they do not understand the situation.

It is only when the practitioner develops a good physical and intellectual practice that he will be able to make real and objective progress on the third aspect of practice. Indeed, just the intellectual understanding of the situation does not provide him the physical and technical means to confront it. This does not mean he will not feel emotion, just the opposite and often too much, but rather the emotions will overwhelm and prevent him from acting, from being Aiki. Or yet, if he has the physical and technical means - and notably a good physical condition - without sufficient understanding, he risks hurting his Uke, and in any case, this deficiency will prevent him from acting, from being Aiki.

I have to mention that weapons training, perhaps because of the danger they represent in the popular imagination, is a great way to enter this aspect of practice. That does not mean that Aikido is not a way, just the opposite. But I remember a few sessions of Jo or Ken kata with good friends when it was not necessary to "miss"! But I do not remember any less from my early days in Aikido when I was Uke for Chiba Sensei: he gave me the opportunity to experience an impressive variety of emotions.

I would like to clarify therefore once again, that the practitioner can only really study - not to confuse with feel - the emotional aspect of practice when he has acquired "the intelligence of the body." Or at least he will understand during the "emotional experiences" that he will certainly experience throughout his martial career, that he needs this intelligence if he does not want to be a victim of the involuntary physiological manifestations that they provoke.

To use an analogy, the study of this aspect of practice would be a little like being at the wheel of a Ferrari when you have mastered all the aspects of flying. What good would it be to someone who has no idea of the double pedal. The analogy is interesting because in fact the martial art immediately puts a Ferrari

at the disposition of the practitioner, and many still use it as if they were driving a VW Bug or a 4x4, even after years of driving.

The task that consists of placing yourself voluntarily in situations of danger, i.e., the ability to remain "motionless and impassive" until the point of no return at Uke's attack, makes us enter into a new dimension and measure to what point the two other aspects of practice are as essential as unnecessary. Or, in other words, to understand this phrase from O'Sensei: "I do not teach you how to move your feet, but how to move your spirit! It is however undeniable that one understands better when one knows how to move his feet...

Having reached the stage where his physical, intellectual and emotional practice have become harmoniously balanced and developed as "a whole", the practitioner like the musician is able to play all the pieces in the repertoire, without technical error and with all the nuances set by the score. From an objective point of view, he has become a warrior in the sense that he has acquired all the abilities that will allow him to lead a fight with a good probability of exiting the winner. He can therefore devote himself entirely to perfect his performance - or efficacy, depending on the point of view one takes - keeping in mind that it is personal and therefore, cannot be communicated: only theory can be communicated!

The temptation is great at this level to want to teach his style rather than the method that allowed him to define his style. If we have to teach someone to write, it would counterproductive to teach all the figures of rhetoric at once.

And the practitioner's martial journey could stop there, that is to say is perfecting himself by maintaining the balance among these three aspects of practice. In fact, the study of Martial Arts (Bu-Jutsu) is limited to this: to become ever more effective by maintaining this efficacy in the three aspects of practice.

However there is another dimension, a "fourth" practice. Its distinctiveness is that it is neither mandatory nor automatic, that is to say it will not make the practitioner technically stronger. The failure to pursue it therefore will not prevent him from making progress, as long as he continues to practice physically, intellectually, and emotionally.

It comes extra and it is up to the practitioner to undertake it voluntarily and consciously or not. It is common to all disciplines with the suffix Do in their name. It is best summarized in this sentence from Buddha himself:

"The only real struggle is to lead the fight against yourself!"

Being a question of a battle, the warrior should be the most appropriate person or, at least, the best prepared to lead it.

It is certainly a new dimension of practice. The martial art (Bu-Jutsu) is limited to improve the performance of its followers and that is its function. The martial disciplines (Bu-Do), however, offer the practitioner to use the martial method (having now become obsolete from a specifically "martial" perspective) to perfect himself and become better from a human perspective.

From this point, it becomes possible to speak of "spiritual practice".

Spiritual practice

Many people are attracted to Aikido and the "aura" that emanates from it, by the spiritual, even mystical, dimension to which its founder elevated it. And they are right: Aikido is an Art of Peace, as O'Sensei himself defined it. It is therefore incumbent on every one who undertakes its study to develop strategies that will truly transform them into a peacemaker.

For many years, the Aikido practitioner studies and experiments with the techniques, which consist of all physical, intellectual, and emotional responses, allowing him to confront a physical attack without resisting its movement or dynamics. When his 3 levels of practice are balanced and he is able to respond technically and effectively to all the attacks in the book, his thoughts should naturally lead him to contemplate more about the nature of conflict, its origin, that which has generated it. In so doing, the practitioner begins to perceive the space and time between the intent of attack and its physical manifestation, indeed between non-intention and intention. The more he refines this perception, the more he realizes he can act - and no longer react - even before the moment of attack.

Yoyu is the term used in Budo to define in this ability: the margin. When the practitioner reaches this level, he must choose between hell and heaven, between destroying Uke or peacefully persuading him to change his behavior: Setsuninto (the sword that kills) - Katsujinken (the sword that gives victory), Hei-ho Hei-ho desu (the methods of war become the methods of the Peace).

The spiritual practice, as far as it engages us, rests primarily on our ability to implement our technical understanding of Aikido (physical, intellectual and emotional) in our daily life to manage the inevitable conflicts to which our way of life and thinking expose us harmoniously. How would I react if a guy ignores my right-of-way and hits my car when I'm already late for work because of traffic? How, I don't know, but there is certainly an Aiki solution, otherwise the system would not be valid and its study would not make sense! In fact, what use would a combat system based on the union of energies and finding harmony with each other be if it did not lead to changes in the behavior of its practitioners, in how they approach problems, enter relationships with others, particularly in conflict

situations? And yet curiously, if not paradoxically, there may be no other martial discipline where internal quarrels are as diffuse as in Aikido.

In fact this practice, which should interest all practitioners: beginners as well as advanced, the good as well as the less good, speaks directly to our heart "Kokoro". In this fight, technical skills are of no help and its outcome will depend solely on our ability to interact with empathy.

If he sincerely contemplates, the practitioner must first establish the reasons for which he should fight himself. This perspective should resonate within him like a koan as much as it seems absurd a priori. But if he does not understand the need for it, what sense could this fight have for him?

If he does nothing to resolve this koan, practice will be for him only a means to improve his technique because that is the way Aikido provides him with to improve himself. Indeed, what use would it be to be stronger if that does not make him better?

But to succeed here, he must develop empathy and accept having to question himself. And one might even say that one does not go without the other, in the sense that putting oneself in the place of the other allows one to accept the idea that the other could be right and, therefore, accept the idea that our self-esteem can be criticized. Often this situation is experienced as a loss, a defeat, when it is in fact a small victory in itself. This behavior, this mode of thinking differently is one element that should allow antagonists to realize that there is nothing to gain in conflict and opposition, neither for the one nor the other, which will contribute to their personal growth.

Etymologically, empathy is a neologism which means "to feel inside" and which psychology has defined as the ability to put yourself in the place of others, to feel what they feel. It is thus not completely crazy to say that the study of a discipline based on harmony and unity with each other, as is Aikido, should naturally lead the practitioner to transcend the technique by realizing that the study on the tatami teaches him how to move his spirit, not his feet. It is through practice that Aikido teaches us how to avoid conflict in our daily interactions with the other, that is to say anyone who is not me. It is Uke that plays the role of the other on the mat, but outside the dojo what use will it be?

It addresses, of course, directly our ego, this virtual being to which we give life, like Dr. Frankenstein! Because obviously the enemy we have to fight, this is the ego: this unique and personal creature to which we are so attached that we are ready to attack (but the ego calls it instead: put in one's place) anyone who would dare question it.

The ego is not bad in itself: it is. The problem is the importance that we give to it. But if the warrior has understood well the lessons of Aikido and if he does not oppose all those that will question his image, he gradually will understand that the image that the other has of him can sometimes be more objective. This

ability to change perspective in judgment, this mental elasticity (Junanshin), develops through empathy. But often, the ego is not willing to admit that the other might be right and it opposes the other. In fact, this struggle can be likened to a war in the sense that it consists of a large number of battles, if we consider the number of Uke's we have at our disposal. Every lost battle strengthens the ego and makes us more vulnerable in the coming ones.

Paradoxically, the development of technical capacity is often accompanied by a proportional increase in the ego—to become stronger technically reassures and strengthens it. Thus, the more you progress technically and the more you risk forgetting or better, repressing the struggle against oneself because questioning oneself will grow increasingly difficult, almost unbearable, to accept. As Franck Noël wrote in his book (Aikido - Fragments of a dialogue with two unknowns): "As such, the blisters of the ego that are arrogance or the complacency of one who sees himself as good, who thinks he has understood everything, are the stages through which it is rather difficult not to pass because the evaluation of the individual is an integral part of the journey. And how not to stop there for a while and contemplate?"

But as I said in the preamble, the spiritual practice is not essential to grasp and understand the principles of Aiki and its study can certainly be limited to the physical, intellectual, and emotional aspects, and thus to the contemplation of ego. To undertake this practice means a conscious commitment to wage a real war against oneself, against the ego with its strategies, its compromises, its victories, and its defeats. But the dragon does not die easily. To really kill it, it has to cease to be our reason for being...

Likewise this practice is a response to the question: why does one practice? And as O'Sensei himself said:

"The approach of the" other "can be regarded as an opportunity to test the sincerity of our mental and physical training to see if we are capable of an effective response, in accordance with divine law."

It seems difficult to conclude this chapter without evoking the mystical aspect of Aikido. Who has not seen O'Sensei in prayer for the most movies and photographs he is in? Still, this subject presents a too intimate and personal nature to be directly connected to the martial practice because, on this path, the important thing is to have faith, not what one believes in. Miyamoto Musahsi, in the *Gorin-no- Sho*, summarizes admirably the behavior of a warrior with respect to religion:

"Respect all the Gods, but expect nothing from them."

Mysticism is related to "mysteries," to a hidden belief beyond reason, and Aikido, on the contrary, has nothing to hide! The practitioner can follow this course completely, if he thinks it will open wide the doors of Aiki for him, thus converted by the example of the founder. But even if O'Sensei never preached a religion, or if his was called Aikido, one cannot ignore the ecstatic experiences that punctuated his journey and opened his conscience to the point of being able to communicate with the Gods.

In conclusion, I would briefly like to share why I wrote this article. Indeed, there is currently a proliferation of styles in Aikido which, rather than rejoicing in each other, are opposing each other without being able to find among themselves the AI they are supposed to look for. Each is convinced to have found the right interpretation of Aikido, without realizing it is probably more "attached" to one of the 4 aspects of the practice. If it had balanced them, it would not be in conflict with anyone and would live in harmony with all the others.

Although, as an idealist, I do not dream so far as to believe that "everyone is beautiful, everyone is nice!" I just hope that this article will remind aikidoka of all persuasions not to fixate on just one aspect of practice because, as we have seen, Aikido consists of all of these approaches. In fact, the differences among seemingly discordant styles demonstrate both the diversity and coherence of our Art and highlights the universal character of Aikido as O-Sensei intended.

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