

## Duality and Aikido



Many things have been said and written about Aikido; how it is an excellent martial art with unlimited potential, offering simple but effective self-defence and can be studied by everyone regardless of age or gender. Those people who have stuck with the art for some time, can say how liberating the practice is and how Aikido has transformed their lives for the better. They cite less stress in the workplace and home and better social interaction with other people coming from all walks of life. Aikido is considered to be true Budo.

Those who have been following the more philosophical aspect of Aikido have realized that this art should be used to address conflict both within ourselves and the outside world including psychosomatic traumas caused by external factors (such as wars, environmental disasters, violence both domestic and social), as well as internal factors (such as low self-esteem, long-term abuse, loss of loved ones and problems stemming from poverty and social deprivation).

There are organizations, such as Aiki Extensions that exist to integrate Aikido with everyday life. I will refrain from going into too much detail on the subject and I encourage you to do some research for yourself. The scope of the present article is to focus on the fundamental Aikido principles as highlighted by the founder of the art, Morihei Ueshiba O'Sensei.

O'Sensei was very prolific in writing books and articles on Aikido and there is also much published material with anecdotal stories and speech transcriptions of him lecturing in various institutions. What is essentially contained within these materials is his unwavering belief that Aikido is a pathway between mankind and the divine and that this art is founded in love, compassion, harmony and peace. For O'Sensei, Aikido practice leads us to a realization of the inner self and is a conduit to generate change both at the internal and external level. He believed that we cannot lead a change in society or even within a family, unless we can change ourselves first. I believe this means that we need to know ourselves before attempting to generate change in others. "Know Thyself" was a famous inscription at the ancient temple of Apollo in Delphi, Greece, and similar teachings are found in every civilization, both ancient and modern.

The majesty of O'Sensei lay not only in his tremendous technical ability, but also in making his physical practice reflect his philosophical teachings. Tying these two

together is a feat that few people manage to emulate. Equally, I believe that many practitioners fail to understand what he was actually saying and this leads to practicing in a way that is inconsistent with O'Sensei's ideas. Practicing Aikido technique without practicing the philosophy of Aikido simply isn't Aikido. It is thus vital to refer to his writings and the wisdom of the (few) original students that studied under him to really understand the true meaning of the art.

Before I delve deeper into the meaning of the fundamental principles, I will attempt a brief overview of what Aikido is in the eyes of the beginner or the curious. Aikido consists of two partners, one called uke, who is the person that initiates the attack and ultimately takes the fall. The role of the recipient (the tori or nage) of this attack is first to accept what is happening and then to neutralize it. At first, the type of attack is agreed between the two partners and is executed in a way that means both partners can practice safely and learn the technique's finer points. It may appear at first very elaborate, static and unrealistic in terms of self-defence, but it does provide the partners with a basic framework to build upon in the future. As training progresses, the attack becomes stronger, faster and more purposeful and tori's movement becomes more fluid, precise and determined. The uke still attacks the tori with preset attacks, but the response times of the tori are significantly reduced and the throw or pin comes on immediately. If the tori is up to the task of reacting successfully to the attack, the uke is led to the ground with stylish élan. The result is pleasing to the eye and looks harmonious, unhurried and effortless, all of which is true.

With training, partners build a bond of trust and fear of injury, both accidental and premeditated, ceases to be a consideration. Then the practice becomes freestyle, more realistic and techniques can be executed in the blink of an eye. The result is often very dramatic and borders on the fantastic. This sort of action attracts both fans and detractors. The paradox lies in the fact that the more advanced the attack, the more effortless the result of the action. Some people call it fake; others call it the ultimate in martial arts. The only way to know for sure is to feel the technique for yourself.

Watching advanced students practice will reveal that the tori does not wait for the uke to move and then try to respond to that attack, but rather like a dancer, senses the uke's intention to attack. The tori can become proactive in the movement and may encourage the attacker to strike a specific place by presenting a part of himself as a target, creating the illusion that the exposed part of the tori's body can be hit. In so doing the uke feels compelled to attack allowing the tori the best opportunity to blend with the uke and dissipate the attack before anyone gets hurt. This shows a high level of proficiency in martial arts and is seen as an exemplary strategy for stopping the action before it begun. But is this the scope of Aikido?

I briefly talked about harmonious blending and effortless reaction, but there is more than meets the eye. To get to the highest level of martial efficacy, you need more than timing. The physical takes second place to the philosophical aspect of the art of Aikido. What does blending really mean and how can we use a physical movement to control a situation in a real-world scenario? The tori has to achieve inner peace and tranquility and compassion towards others. The tori must always be engaged with the uke and be proactive throughout the physical engagement. The tori must be connected in mind and spirit with the uke and use that unity to become one with the

other person<sup>i</sup>. Once that connection is achieved, then the fight ceases to exist. The tori allows the uke to express his movement while guiding that intention to a peaceful conclusion.

Is conflict the absence of a peaceful resolution? Does the tori simply do nothing and accept each situation as it arises? In other words, is there a need to achieve union on both a mental and physical level if you are to going to be successful in resolving conflict? During practice, we use a controlled environment of the dojo to encourage the dichotomy between threat and response so that we can acquire relevant experience to deal with a plethora of sticky situations that arise in everyday life.

As I said earlier, sometimes we see the tori taking a more proactive role by leading the uke right from the start of the technique, thus enabling the tori to always be in control of the situation (in the budo world this concept is called “sensen no sen”. O’Sensei however believed that Aikido was “Masakatsu Agatsu Katsu Hayabi”, a state of continuous victory). Indeed, in the traditional martial arts world, including the initial historical development of Aikido, it was considered optimal to instigate the attack and force the attacker to react. However, we need to ask is this congruent with the philosophy of Aikido?

Let us examine this in a little more detail.

The aim of the tori is to apply their positive energy/intention (also called Ki) to cancel out the negative intention/Ki of the uke and thus bring the relationship back into harmony. As good as this sounds, practice has shown me that relying on the tori’s intention to resolve the conflict does not always work. Sometimes the desire to do good can muddle the situation, as it is easy to misunderstand the true intentions, desires and subsequent (re)actions of the uke.

There is a danger that the tori’s ego/desire can take over and by imposing ki on the uke, the only result is one of resentment. Maybe we come out as being too strong and controlling, creating ambiguity and negative feelings in the uke’s mind and this will not bring about the intended peaceful resolution. This being said, there are times that positive intervention is absolutely required, such as when you witness a mugging or some situation where someone’s life is actually in danger. Our main focus in this article however, is concerned with how we should respond to an attacker whose intention is aimed at us.

The moment we choose to impose an action on the uke, the positive Ki that we possess is in essence reversed. Can we call throwing the uke to the ground a compassionate response to the uke’s actions? Once we project our ego on to our partner/opponent, we tend to have their ego projected back on to us, hence losing the true meaning of control and peaceful resolution.

Perhaps observing how nature works can provide insight. In nature we have, at the global (macro) scale, energy equilibrium. Everything follows the principle of least resistance. If there is an imbalance, processes occur which bring the system back to equilibrium using the shortest path/way possible. At the local (micro) scale, we still have the same principle but nature is a bit more energetic at that level<sup>ii</sup>. When things

go out of balance, there is always a process of bringing the system back to equilibrium, sometimes with dramatic consequences.

Let us look at the natural phenomenon of lightning striking the ground and consider how that works. On a calm day both the ground and the clouds are electrically neutral with an equal measure of both positive and negative charges. Although the physics of lightning is not yet fully understood, generally in a storm we observe negative charge accumulating at the bottom of the clouds and positive charge accumulating on the surface of the earth, so that both clouds and ground are out of balance electrically. Nature has a method of addressing that imbalance, by expelling the negative charge to the ground and the positive charge rises from the ground to meet it. Once we have connection, the charges create a conductive path where lightning occurs and both ground and clouds become neutral again. Balance is restored!

Someone may rightfully wonder: What is the connection between electricity and Aikido? The answer is at once simple and complicated. We need to see how society is formed and how it interacts with every individual. We do not observe excessive manifestation of either love or hatred at the macro scale. We do however want a harmonious existence with each other. That requires patience and understanding at every level of social strata. In metaphysics, we could call it the Tao, the balance, global equilibrium, etc. Any deviation could be welcome as long as society takes steps to ensure that everything returns to equilibrium. Humans, as sentient and educated beings, have realized that it is preferable to have peace rather than war. Maybe that desire is the return of the world back to equilibrium where strife, excess and conflict are no more?

Aikido deals with that imbalance, at both the macroscopic and microscopic level. We have a process of the uke attacking the tori with intention and in the real world, negative Ki, whereas the tori receives that attack with positive Ki. The result of that interaction is the cessation of the attack by canceling out that negativity and bringing things back to peaceful equilibrium, thus enabling preservation of life for both people. By applying the principle of equilibrium, the tori stops the attack with the minimum of effort and maximum efficiency. Does that mean that positive Ki can always cancel out negative Ki?

The answer is yes, but there needs to be an energy imbalance in the first place. If both partners have positive Ki (during practice), the technique cannot be effective because there is no intention of harm, or manifestation of imbalance. Aikido is very much a mind-body-spirit discipline, so it addresses imbalances when they occur between two people. During practice we can simulate negative Ki through a concentrated effort of the uke to establish that imbalance and the tori tries to find the path of least resistance, thus returning the process to equilibrium. This process is an education in itself as both parties learn to understand the nature of conflict. It teaches us that conflict needs to be addressed in such a way that both parties see a positive outcome. There is no point in the tori imposing himself however forcefully to the uke because the balance is not restored and the tori will have just tipped the scales the other way again. All that has been achieved is for the scales to be tipped in the other direction.

The solution to this apparent paradox lies in the way we execute the technique. If, like the cloud and the ground, we as tori (i.e., the positive charge) rise to meet the

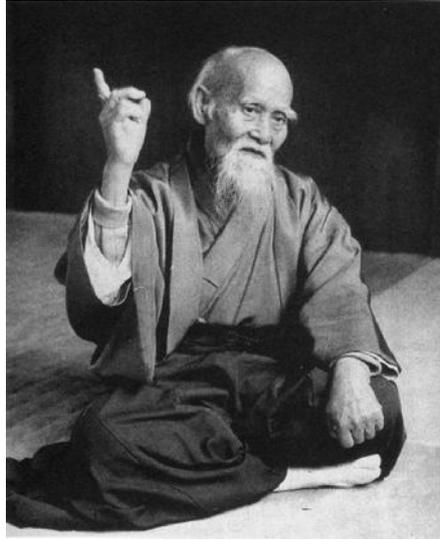
uke (the negative charge) and fully accept (and subsequently guide) the attack, the negative Ki will naturally be neutralized, but not destroyed and the world is restored to equilibrium. Obviously, if there is no imbalance, then there is no need to create a process of returning to a balanced state, since there is no action to create a reaction.<sup>iii</sup> It is only by truly accepting an attack that we can create an appropriate response, which like lightning restores equilibrium to the situation. We may not see a flash of light when performing an Aikido movement, but it certainly feels as if something momentous has occurred and actually the feeling of being thrown in this way is one of joy and well-being.

Being the sentient beings we are, this translates as neutralizing the conflict, restoring peace and returning to equilibrium. In that respect, love is never overwhelming, but it always nourishes and supports the equilibrium. Love accepts conflict, views the situation with compassion and guides that conflict to a peaceful resolution. To a person trapped in a vicious cycle of negative Ki, being shown an alternative viewpoint with compassion and understanding can be overwhelming, but, given sufficient time, it usually breaks the negative cycle and allows the individual to break out and follow a more positive path.

To be able to act with love and accept the situation without engaging desire and ego, is one of the most important things in the world. I believe it is the connection between a human and the divine, the (floating) bridge between the earth and the sky that O'Sensei liked to always mention. Also, O'Sensei was always talking about accepting the attack fully and guiding it with love. By practicing this way, he transcended the nature of conflict and elevated the self-defense martial art into an act of love where the choice to preserve rather than destroy life is considered more important. In short, he gave us a way to create a better world for ourselves and for humanity at large.

There is so much more to be said and written here, but this would defeat the point in writing something (relatively) short and to the point<sup>iv</sup>. I would thus like to invite the reader to do two things: First, try to get hold of more information about the nature of Aikido and how it translates to everyday life. Second, to invite the reader to try to practice the art in a way that is consistent with the philosophical underpinnings that the founder realized after years of practice. If the reader hasn't practiced Aikido before, my best advice is to give it a try; experiencing something first hand is always better than reading about it or watching it. Talking about practicing, to those who practice Aikido already, hopefully see you on the mat soon!

With heartfelt regards,  
Nikos Papanikolaou.



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This article is dedicated to Laura Pugh.

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<sup>i</sup> Unity cannot be achieved without the polar opposites co-existing, a fundamental duality that is also described in eastern cultures as Ying-Yang.

<sup>ii</sup> A way to understand this picture is by looking at the sea from a great height; the sea appears calm. However when we look closer at the surface, the sea may actually be rough.

<sup>iii</sup> This concept is linked to other fundamental principles of Aikido, such as the common centre of mass that the unity between tori and uke creates, as well as the physical processes that occur in order to address movement and resolution of conflict to all appreciable levels, both physical and metaphysical. Further analysis however warrants another article and therefore is outside of the immediate scope of the present thesis.

<sup>iv</sup> This article is far from complete and will greatly benefit from subsequent revisions and contributions from every practitioner.