

TRADITIONAL AIKIDO

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An exploration of the various levels of waza and ukemi from a qualitative perspective.

4 Levels, 4 Corners

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In the Iwama dojo during the time that I trained there, the techniques were divided simply into either kihon variations (basic solid techniques) or ki no nagare variations (more advanced flowing techniques). Distinctions within the above 2 levels were rarely drawn, but were occasionally resorted to when didactics demanded it (particularly with weapons practice or with advanced practices such as counter techniques).

On a few occasions and for short periods of time, Sensei emphasised three levels distinctly: (hard) katai - (soft) yawarakai - (flowing) nagare (see volume 5 of the original Traditional Aikido series for more detail). However in the Iwama dojo easily 80% of the regular training was kihon at the 'hard' level within a repeating core group of techniques. The rest of the system and the different levels became gradually apparent over time.

The following essay comes from discussions with fellow aikidoka's where the question of the various levels within both ukemi and waza was often brought up in discussing problems encountered

whilst training.

For example, it is often the case that a technique shifts to another level, which in turn demands an appropriate shift in uke's ukemi in able to absorb it. This shift can sometimes be a problem until it is appreciated that the different levels are distinguished qualitatively and that it is a qualitative shift that is required. Mismatching of levels between uke and nage is one common source of problems in ukemi.

Another common problem is the tendency in either individuals or Aikido styles as a whole to get stuck or gravitate to one particular level: either overdeveloping the harder more solid levels or avoiding them through staying with the more flowing and 'lighter' levels. However in my opinion this does not truly represent development as such but is actually more of a misunderstanding. Solidity without movement can easily become a trap while movement alone without real grounding has no power.

Ideally, training in Aikido should result in a rounded-out ability to respond flexibly in different ways. Overdevelopment in one area is always leads to underdevelopment in another. But can we see it? And even if we can, are we interested in working in the shadow areas of our ability?

This essay is my own understanding distilled from O Sensei Morihei Ueshiba's writings and Morihiro Saito Sensei's direct teachings and hopefully it will help those interested in balancing out their Aikido ability in different qualitative areas by shedding light on some of the distinctions and subtleties involved.

Techniques employ four qualities that reflect the nature of our world. Depending on the circumstance, you should be:

*hard as a diamond,
flexible as a willow,
smooth-flowing like water,
or as empty as space.*

Morihei Ueshiba

We can understand the above poem as descriptive of four levels of practice as follows:

1. katai keiko (hard solid training) - diamond
2. yawarakai keiko (soft training) - willow
3. nagare no keiko (flowing training) - water
4. ki no nagare no keiko (flow of energy training) - space

In Aikido contact is emphasized from the very beginning and yet the quality of that contact progresses from harder more physical contact at level 1 to more subtle energetic contact at level 4. This refinement of contact is reflected in both the execution of technique and in the receiving of it in ukemi.

Lets consider ukemi first.

At level 1 (katai) uke responds to nage through contact only. ie when pushed for example, he responds through yielding only upon physically experiencing being pushed.

The key issue at level 1 is to develop a solid ability to receive that is not resistant or stiff but rather grounded and solid in nature.

At level 2 (yawarakai) uke responds to nage but the contact is 'softer'. Ie to continue with the example of being pushed, there will be minimal 'lag' or delay between nage's push and his yielding response as uke seeks to 'melt and join' with nage.

In level 2 a key issue is to be able to drop resistance and 'soften' our boundaries in the face of attack. We allow the attack 'in'. In a very real sense, our reflexive 'body armouring' is released. This is a delicate and gradual process and as can

be appreciated, is much more than just physical: while fearful or aggressive we can never allow this process to unfold. Armouring and stiffness of the body begin in the mind.

At level 3 (nagare) uke responds proactively to nage initiating his response before contact has taken place. ie uke will be in movement ahead of actual contact and will 'join' the push.

In level 3, having achieved a minimal of integration between body and mind we are in a position to flow and merge with the attacker as a whole. Joining is the key issue. Water is the perfect image: it is heavy and non resistant and it's nature is of being inclusive.

At level 4 (ki no nagare) uke responds to nage fully through the 'feeling-awareness' of the encounter ie in receiving the push from nage the response takes place as in level 3 but is expanded to fully include the whole event right down to nage's intention to push before physical movement takes place. Physical contact may or may not be a part of uke's response.

As can be seen, uke's responsiveness progresses from the more physical at level 1 (the end of nage's impact process: the actual push) to the more subtle of level 4 (including the beginning of nage's process: the intent or initiation in consciousness to push)The level of 'reading' and 'communication' increases and deepens. In training to deepen towards a connection with the intent behind an attack or technique, the instruction is to constantly 'seethrough' your partners physical movement to 'where it is coming from' and to eventually be able to blend with it from there (level 4).

When considering technique we can see a similar development.

In level 1 we focus on clear angles and appropriate distances. Clarity of form is the emphasis here and this is where we begin kihon or basic training. This is the diamond image in O Sensei's poem.

Ki no nagare as generally understood tends to include levels 2, 3 and 4 in a fluid and overlapping manner, but there are useful distinctions between these levels.

In level 2 the clarity and precision of level 1 is retained but the sharp edges are taken off the technique. As with ukemi at this level, deeper contact is sought through softness and suppleness (the willow) rather than through hardness. What is retained from level 1 is a grounded sense of heaviness and density of feeling. Level 1 is about being solid, integrated and grounded. Level 2 is about extending that into a dense kind of suppleness which allows us to 'meet' our partner rather than collide with him.

In level 3 whole body power (kokyu) is emphasized strongly through technical movement which is fundamentally flowing and in deep contact with our partner. Level 3 is about flow and one of the prerequisites for developing good kokyu is that the whole body be free to move and transmit power to our partner right up from the ground. Kokyu is thus blocked through stiffness and locked joints during the execution of technique when localised muscular power takes over (ie 'force'). Expansive power becomes contracted forcing.

Therefore levels 2 and 3 in practice are closely related and any 'block', 'stiffness' or 'break' in kokyu in level 3 should be brought down to level 2 for 'undoing'. Hence these two levels are practised slowly and carefully so that blocks and breaks with our partner can be highlighted.

Most flowing practice actually alternates between levels 2 and 3 quite naturally. When working on smoothening out some aspect of connection with our partner or flow of kokyu within a technique, we naturally slow down and emphasise level 2 quality. As the blend comes together we move forward and integrate it with the whole of the attack and the technique in level 3.

Level 4 is based upon the density and groundedness of level 1, the softness and smoothness of level 2 and the flow and deep contact of level 3. But at level 4, just as with ukemi, the 'feeling-awareness' becomes the primary focus and the intensity of practice is generally high. The 'energy' of the encounter dominates awareness.

The red line running through all the above levels, whether as uke or as nage, is contact and communication which manifests in experience as a deepening of the feeling-awareness of the other: ie the other is felt directly as a dynamic relating presence and the encounter has a distinctive feel to it. This is difficult to put into words and may sound in the above contorted language as something rather arcane or obscure but is actually something that is basic and always with us, although generally overshadowed. It is the basic feeling connection we have with our experience before conceptualising and evaluating take place. It is direct, nonjudgemental and impersonal and to the degree that we are unconcerned with either winning, losing or posturing in any form, does it come to the foreground in our experience of relating.

In Morihiro Saito Sensei's didactical system, when problems come up during training the method is to work on them by returning to and emphasising the basics. In the above progression, 'problems' or more properly understood, challenges and obstacles to being in effortless and non resistant contact with our partner usually demand a 'drop' to lower levels. ie if smoothness at level 2 becomes 'lightness' then more 'solid' work on level 1 is called for. Should flowing level 3 practice become 'disconnected' then deeper work on level 2 is called for. If

our 'energetic' practice on level 4 runs into resistance or inappropriate responsiveness in any of a multitude of ways a drop to any of the previous levels may be in order. So while working on technique we must sometimes adjust ourselves within the level we are working, more often than not, the way forward lies in strengthening or returning to a lower level and reworking our understanding and ability from there.

On the one hand, O Sensei's poem presents a spiral or progression of levels of learning and ability in Aikido and yet notice that in the poem there is no hierarchy of value as such. The four qualities are presented as four qualities that reflect the nature of our world (four corners) and are thus not seen as being contrived but as given in nature. Thus while qualitatively different, none is inherently superior or inferior to any other. Likewise in having them play freely in our Aikido, which one comes to the fore in any encounter will be dictated by circumstances and our appropriate engagement with them (as the poem itself emphasises).

To briefly return to the one of the issues and questions that gave rise to this essay, individuals by temperament and body type find themselves more drawn to one level than another and will generally develop that quality more fully as it feels more natural for them. However, 'if the only tool you have is a hammer, then you will treat everything as a nail'.

In Aikido sometimes we stand our ground immovably like a rock and at other times become as fluid as water. Sometimes we receive and bend and at other times we step aside and let things pass. The point is not to take a position, but to respond appropriately and change accordingly.

So depending on our perspective, these four qualities can either be seen as 'levels or corners'. In our training there is an apparent progression from coarse to subtle, from what is easily seen to what is not, but the point eventually is to be free in all situations without choosing this or that. The ultimate strategy in Aikido is 'no-strategy'.

Ultimately you must forget about technique.

The further you progress, the fewer teachings there are.

The Great Path is really No Path.

Morihei Ueshiba