

Reflections on East-West approaches to teaching and learning Aikido.

I have spoken with some of you occasionally about my own experiences as a student in Iwama, Japan and how Saito Sensei's teaching methods (and those of other Japanese teachers I have studied under) differ so much from the way I, and other, western teachers, teach at present. It is interesting to consider the essential differences, with both their advantages and disadvantages.

The traditional Japanese method puts the challenge of learning squarely on the student. The teacher demonstrates minimally, and rarely if ever, teaches the key points. The student is expected to 'steal the technique' through being able to perceive and 'feel' what the teacher is doing. Students are expected to be 'hungry' for knowledge and thus motivated intrinsically towards the art. Discipline and persistence in the form of regular practice are a must, there being no short cuts.

The western method puts much more weight on the role of the teacher. He should not only be a good example of the art but should be able to didactically transmit it in such a way that it is both interesting and inspiring (and if he is also entertaining - then even better!). Students still have to train hard to make the art their own but the orientation and key points towards the acquisition of skill are given more openly and comprehensively by the teacher.

The big advantages of the traditional method are that the students who are really motivated need to 'learn how to learn' and must become strongly self reliant. It has been said that an external martial art can be learned from observation alone, while an internal art must be felt from the inside out through direct contact. Aikido has both external aspects (form) and internal aspects (principles). Both must be integrated and worked with. In the traditional method whereby the student must 'steal' the technique it is the internal aspects that he must connect with in his teacher and through a kind of 'mutual resonance' recognise and develop in himself. This pushes him to develop his perceptive and empathic abilities (among others), which are essential for developing real ability.

The main disadvantage of the traditional method is its exclusivity. In Japan the dojos are not full of skilful practitioners as most westerners who have never been there imagine. Most are happily confused and struggling with what the teacher is showing while only a few seniors students are 'in the ball park' of the teacher, so to speak. Furthermore, in my experience, the dropout rate in Japanese Dojo's where teaching is done this way is very high. So many people for whom it could be said that aikido has much to offer are lost to the art. It is an 'elitist' system for the few 'hungry wolves'.

Having said the above, I must note that Morihiro Saito Sensei was an exceptional teacher by any standards. In Iwama he taught in a very logical way such that the 'system' was apparent (although it was years before the whole system came more or less into focus for me). He was also very clear about emphasising the key points in the techniques. However it was not until I was in a position to take regular ukemi from him and thus 'feel' the quality of what he was doing that the internal aspect of the techniques began to open for me as a clear orientation to work with. But Sensei was clearly traditional in his teaching to my mind in that if he showed you something but you were unable to see or pick it up he would leave you alone until you could (if ever) grasp the point. As far as he was concerned the concept of the 'hungry wolf' in the traditional sense definitely applied.

The advantages of the western teaching method on the other hand are a more systematic approach and a greater didactic orientation towards the development of ability, both

external and internal. I see aikido as something which all who feel drawn to can benefit from on many levels. Teaching which is didactically differentiated according to the level of the students, whether beginner or more advanced, is more accessible and user-friendly in nature and many students who would never be able to train in a Dojo following the traditional method, have the opportunity to do so when the teaching is carried out in this way.

In my own teaching I try to give an understanding of the 'system' (as I learned it from Sensei): the techniques with their levels and the underpinning relationship of the principles with the techniques. Having an overview or understanding of the rationale of the system and its levels gives students more understanding and orientation as to where they are working and what they are working on, while training particular techniques and exercises forms. For the western 'skeptical' mind set, most students feel they need to know the 'what' and 'why' before they can give themselves more fully to the practice.

The disadvantages of the western approach are that, in the teaching being more 'open' and therefore the student being supported much more as to orientation, he can become less self-reliant and perhaps even dependent on the teacher for his learning process. Too easily we accept the explanations and answers given by another without looking into the matter ourselves and coming to a direct experience of what is so or not. This can, by making it more 'easy', make it in a sense, more difficult to go really deep into the art. We copy forms but can fail to make them really our own.

A fundamental objective of the traditional martial arts is to not only produce technically effective practitioners but also individuals who are 'free' and able to 'stand on their own feet'. In the Japanese martial ways such a person is known as a 'tatsujin'.

The traditional system is a confusing and often lonely path. Little is explained and even less help and support is given. So the student has to grasp the matter himself. The emphasis in the traditional system is experience first, then knowledge (or to put it more precisely, 'conceptual translation for the purpose of communication after direct experience'). In the west it tends to be the other way around: first concepts then (perhaps) experience of the matter. And this is precisely the problem with all our forms of education which are heavily conceptual and abstract in nature: how to get experience out of information. Knowing a lot and being able to do a lot are different things in Aikido. In Japan this problem is well appreciated and therefore there is always a strong emphasis on cultivating a 'beginner's mind' (shoshin) which is open to possibilities and which is comfortable with 'not knowing'. For most westerners 'not knowing' is not a place we are comfortable working from as a baseline state and we would much rather move on quickly from being beginners to being experts.

Another aspect to this whole topic of east and west approaches is the teacher-student relationship. In Japan this relationship is entirely different from how we see these things in the west and is essentially much less personal. If the teacher-student relationship becomes personally entangled with excessive projections, expectations and demands (from both sides) then the student can end up trapped as a 'student' while the teacher himself can end up becoming equally trapped as a 'teacher'.

But if the ultimate aim of training a Way such as Aikido is freedom from the limitations of the 'self' (this is the 'do' in aiki-do) then ending up becoming identified with being a 'good student' or as a 'highly ranked teacher', is not the point and falls far short of what is possible.

In Japanese Archery (Kyudo) this flowering of the potential of a martial art is expressed as 'the universe makes the shot'. This means that the fulfilment of the training process and its expression in action goes beyond the person. The person is transcended and in that and only in that sense is there 'freedom' and 'fulfilment' . There is never fulfilment or freedom for the 'person' or complex constellation of conceptual tendencies and patterns in consciousness that we take to be who we are. So the teacher student relationship should ideally give space to the student to grow and find his own way. And to then go further. As I once came across somewhere, 'the only disciplines worth studying are those which transcend themselves'. Aikido is in my opinion such an art.

A last word from the great Haiku poet Basho who speaks to us all, teachers and students alike.

Do not seek to follow in the footsteps of the men of old.
Seek what they sought.

Lewis Bernaldo de Quirós.