

Conservation of Energy

Nidan Essay by Leslie Peters

How do I do more with less? This idea is a focus of my day-to-day aikido. Looking back on my practice, I see a series of phases that led up to where I am now.

Bewilderment and Exhaustion

I came to Aikido West after 13 years off the mat, and my first phase in re-acquainting myself to aikido involved a general air of overwhelm and complete exhaustion. I was spending all of my energy just trying to keep up, follow Sensei's instructions, smooth-out my falls, and not to annoy my sempai too much with my disorientation and lack of coordination. At the end of every class, I could have squeezed a glass of water out of my gi, and I often looked around in wonder at those aikidoka who seemed not to be so sweaty and tired.

High—Off—High—Off

After getting my bearings, I moved into a phase where during each technique I was on high-alert, and then unknowingly I was "turned off" from the time uke hit the ground until next attack.

At this point in my training I had a least-favorite exercise. Cyndy Sensei would often have uke give 4 or 8 attacks of any strike (shomen, tsuki, yokomen), and nage's role was merely to get out of the way—blend and move. When I saw this exercise being demonstrated, I was filled with such dread that I wanted to get off the mat and go home. After the first or second attack, I would be caught flat-footed again and again. Paralyzed by indecision, by not being ready, by anxiety.

Several stages later, I realized my problem during this stage was that after each strike I was "turning the stove off," as it were, and not staying ready for the next attack. I could get by with this strategy in regular practice because there was time to be "off": when uke was falling, getting up, and getting ready for the next attack. But in my "least-favorite" exercise there was no "break time," and my high—off—high—off pattern of attention led to an unpleasant practice.

Set to High... Until I Tire Out

At some point I started including ukemi in my practice of staying mentally engaged. I realized that to maintain a martial integrity, I needed to keep track of where my partner was: during the attack, when falling, and when getting up again. So, my ukemi included shorter and shorter periods of "turning the stove off" and more time with the "stove on."

However, the stove was always (unconsciously) set to "high." While I was succeeding at maintaining a better martial awareness as both uke and nage, it was exhausting, and so the stove would stay on "high" until I tired out and had an "off" break.

This pattern was particularly problematic during testing. I became tired even before the test started, and it didn't matter whether I was the uke or the one testing: I had no stamina. When I was helping one of my fellow aikidoka get ready for his test, he pointed out this pattern to me, as he had observed it in my previous testing performances. He noticed that even while being pinned, all of my muscles were still completely tightened, constricting the circulation and oxygen to my limbs and sapping my energy—and I realized this was something I could control and improve.

Low Simmer

It recently dawned on me: what if I could keep the stove on a "low simmer" all the time? At this attention setting I can stay connected and engaged, and when my different muscle groups are not in use, I can consciously relax them, improve my circulation, and keep going. I don't need to be on high-alert all the time; if I am continuously engaged mentally and relaxed physically, I can be in the right place at the right time when my partner attacks.

What's Next

I'm currently mulling over two ideas that build on this "low simmer" concept. The first is an echo in my mind of my first aikido sensei saying over and over, "Maximum effect, minimum effort." The other is something I've noticed Doran Sensei mentioning a lot lately: "first touch". How can I make small movements (minimum effort) right as my partner attacks (first touch) that will have an outsized effect on my partner's balance (maximum effect)?

This is my continuing journey in the study of Conservation of Energy.

*Progress comes
To those who
Train and train,
Reliance on secret techniques
Will get you nowhere*

-- O-Sensei Morihei Ueshiba