

Aikido – The Way of Harmony

Sandan Essay by Ruth Kedar
December 5, 2008

Beginnings

“Right foot, right hand”

“Now turn”

“No, turn the other way!”

“No, no! The other right foot!”

And so it went, time after time after time after time.

Then there were the rolls. Well, multi-edged polygons in my case. What was the “band of steel” all about? I really didn’t get it even though, against conventional wisdom, I did try it at home....

I tried to remember that beginnings can be brutal; the only good thing about them is that you can’t get any worse than you already are.

The truth is that the path for knowledge is always arduous and demanding regardless of whether you are born with an inherent talent or just passionately driven, whether you identify yourself with the proverbial “Hare” or with the “Tortoise” or fall somewhere in between.

And yet, many that set out on the path persevere, and persuaded by promises of brighter days and great rewards they plod along, through the ups-and-downs, the thick-and-thins, picking themselves up when they stumble, patiently tending to it as you would a garden, watering and weeding, seeding and pruning, enjoying the unseasonal bursts of color and the unexpected blossoms in the harsh terrain.

And one day they realize that it’s not about the garden but the gardening.

The Never Ending Path

The Way of Harmony - that was the hook that drew me in. Harmony as the underlying philosophy that manifests itself in beautiful fluid movements. The luminous grace connecting two people in a never ending dance inside a magical circle. Ying and Yang.

Still, in the first years of training all I could do was concentrate on the mechanics. Painting by the numbers, Sensei calls it.

In time techniques became more familiar, and constant practice helped to both add and peel away layers around the basic principles.

I had “eureka” moments - small epiphanies I mistook for enlightenment. These did not last very long, and back I would go to the drawing board, back to basics.

Form and Flow

In many ways studying Aikido is like studying any other art. You start from the beginning, and slowly build upon a solid foundation. It takes years and years of practice before you can call it yours and make it your own. Like the poet who spends years massaging language in order to create the perfect cadence, to set the perfect mood, laying his words in such a way that they seem to spring effortlessly off the page.

And in many ways, Aikido is much more than that.

As I get ready for my Sandan I am reminded of what drew me to Aikido in the first place – the fluidity of its movements and the joyous connection between individuals who are committed to being present in the moment, each contributing to the “Flow”.

But in my daily practice I have also grown to respect the “Form” – the underlying structure that lays the foundation upon which “Flow” can flourish, giving lift and energy to the movement.

It is through the constant study of Flow and Form and their interconnectedness that we progress in our path. One cannot exist without the other.

As I approach this milestone I am inspired by those around me who are able to experience Form and Flow as one entity, and whose connection spans across multi dimensional circles without beginning or end. In absolute synchronicity they blend as one, shifting each other’s energy and intent without any discernible movement.

And as I move on, more comfortable in the knowledge that finding “the right foot, and the right hand” does not require as much conscientious effort as they did at the beginning, I am reminded that this is a journey worth taking and there is still much pruning and weeding to be done.

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I am also reminded that this milestone is not just mine. It’s not about my test, not about my arriving; it’s more than my individual journey and what has led me up to this moment.

It is about the collective coming together to support growth.

It is about how the dojo inspires us to rise and perform acts of beauty, and how in turn we each inspire the dojo, as a whole, to evolve and to flourish. How, connected, each of us contributes to each other’s growth, and how, together, we work on enriching the collective.

I conclude with O’Sensei’s words, far more eloquent than my own, and through them I wish to express my gratitude to all that came before me, to all of you that have been with me in this journey and to all that are yet to cross our paths as we continue to strive in search of harmony.

“A mind to serve for the peace of all human beings in the world is needed in Aikido, and not the mind of one who wishes to be strong or who practices only to fell an opponent. Aiki is not a technique to fight and defeat an enemy. It is a way to reconcile the world and make human beings one family.”

- Master Morihei Ueshiba