

A Roban for Shodan

## **Aikido and Karate-do**

**Hans van der Voorn,  
Riai Aikido, Wellington, New Zealand**

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Before commencing my study of aikido five years ago under the tutelage of Sensei Henry Lynch, I was fortunate to have also trained for a number of years at karate. Having now reached the point of being asked to test for my aikido shodan, I am going to compare my two martial arts experiences and discuss how karate and aikido training and philosophies relate to each other.

I started training at karate in 1976 at the age of 21 at the Seido Juku Dojo in Christchurch. My teacher was Sensei Renzie Hanham, now a 7<sup>th</sup> dan Shihan. I gained my shodan 6 1/2 years later. The following year a work transfer took me away and apart from a brief period in the mid 80s I didn't actively train again until commencing aikido in 1997.

As a young man, karate (of which the full name is karate-do, meaning "way of the empty hand") suited me very well. In particular the school I went to and the training from Sensei Hanham (as he was then) were very good for me. I developed strength, self discipline and confidence at a time when it was not very obvious that I would ever become a useful member of society. The training was very rigorous in the early days. The rigour was balanced by a modern approach to the technical aspects of the art and training methods. Traditional karate training can be very repetitive but we were able to learn in an intelligent and interesting way. Over the time I was there the training evolved with increasing emphasis on providing access to karate training for everyone, regardless of age or gender.

The commencement of my karate training coincided with the founding of the Seido Juku system by Kaicho Tadashi Nakamura, based in New York. Kaicho Nakamura explains his core philosophies and approach to teaching in his book, *The Human Face of Karate*<sup>1</sup>. Faced with the increasing commercialism and apparent lack of concern for students' welfare and safety in the Kyokushinkai system, of which he was one of the most senior instructors, Kaicho Nakamura resigned to set up his own karate system. He named the system Seido Juku which means a special place to train (Juku) in the way of sincerity (Seido).

*Sincerity is the way of heaven  
To follow this sincerely  
Is the way of mankind*<sup>1</sup>

The cornerstone values of Seido Karate, based on Kaicho Nakamura's family motto, are Respect, Love and Obedience. The Seido Wellington website<sup>2</sup> describes these as follows:

*LOVE: - the unselfish, loyal and benevolent concern for the good of another. We learn to be benevolent in our actions as well as our word – giving ourselves for no gain but to benefit others.*

*RESPECT: - an act of giving particular attention, consideration and esteem. Respect for others is paramount in developing a caring attitude and benevolence for fellow human beings.*



*OBEDIENCE: - an act or instance of obeying. Obedience to the higher moral values that must make up our society for everyone to flourish. Our responsibility to other members of society must never be forgotten and also [be] a reminder to ourselves of our duties as citizens and responsible members of society.*

I must say that as a young man I could relate to the first two values fairly well but “Obedience” didn’t resonate with me at that time. While my general behaviour and outlook improved considerably over the time I trained at karate, it would be misleading to pretend I became a model citizen or paragon of virtue overnight. However seeds were sown and when I encountered aikido I was much more open to the possibilities it offered than if I had not previously been part of Seido Karate. While it may be a surprise to many aikidoka, the ethical and spiritual dimensions of Seido Karate do not appear to be vastly different to those of aikido. Not exactly the same certainly, but to similar purpose.

At karate I used to train frequently and hard. The main reason was that I loved it. While the ethical dimension was there, it was more about gaining control over mind and body. A good class was dynamic and focused, the sweat came quickly and easily, kiais were loud, the spirit and camaraderie were good. We learnt how to use our whole bodies, coordinate strange arm and leg movements, remember long and complex combinations and katas. At the end of a hard training session we felt physically tired but still energetic and happy. The training was cathartic. It may have been the endorphins. I like to think it was because the mind and body were working together. The training was such that it wasn’t easy to daydream. You had to be focused to cope.

We learned to deal with pain and tiredness through creative visualisation. In one exercise we had to stand in the horseriding stance and hold our arms out for long periods, sometimes holding an object. The way to deal with it was to imagine helium balloons or similar holding up your arms. This is not dissimilar to the visualization of the unbendable arm exercise of aikido.

In my childhood and youth, although good at schoolwork, I had always been a mediocre sportsman and physically weak, mainly because of asthma and late physical development. In karate I found something physical I could succeed at. I think this is relatively common in martial arts. A lot of people who grow up being naturally good at sports lack the perseverance necessary to succeed at martial arts, whereas the less gifted are happy to graft away, building on incremental improvements. This applies equally well to aikido as it does to karate.

From training at karate I also found that I was a lot tougher than I had realised. As a white belt I broke my arm sparring, but not wanting to give in, and not realizing it was broken, I continued with the class. While this is not something anyone at either aikido or Seido would or should encourage now, it did give me an insight into what was possible. After a few months off I went back to training and broke it twice more before being banned from sparring for two years. This, as well as injuries to others, led to a change in approach with contact sparring later being restricted to 4<sup>th</sup> kyu and above (in a 10kyu grading system). Protective equipment also became compulsory for sparring. The current approach of being concerned with safety and the welfare of students is very similar to my experiences when I started aikido at Riai.

Changing the focus away from contact sparring at beginner level has opened up the possibility of karate training to a huge range of people who otherwise wouldn’t have been interested. In both karate and aikido ensuring that beginners feel the improvements in their skill levels early on is



fundamental to keeping them interested. Keeping them injury free until they learn how to look after themselves is also an obvious requirement.

At the present time, some 26 years after starting karate, I find that aikido suits me well. In the intervening years I have developed a certain amount of personal and physical strength and self confidence as well as a thick skin. Some years ago I realised that being tough is only a winning formula in certain circumstances. It is easy for me to barge through situations, often not even noticing the effect on family, friends or business colleagues. While training at aikido doesn't automatically provide the solution to this, it does continually reinforce the need to develop sensitivity and awareness of your partner. I now practice my endurance activities elsewhere and can call on skills from both aikido and karate to help with those.

I was actually introduced to aikido by Ben Otang, the head instructor at the Wellington Seido dojo, with whom I had trained in our earlier years. When I accidentally met him that fateful day, I had become quite overweight, unfit and had no intention of resurrecting my martial arts career. At the time Ben was supplementing his karate training with aikido at Riai Wellington. For reasons I don't fully understand I undertook to go to aikido with him that night. It proved to be a wonderful decision.

From the first night I was taken with the atmosphere in the dojo and really enjoyed the body movements, the quiet discipline and the style of teaching. I realised that rather than taking up scarcely available time, aikido provided an alternative to continually being absorbed by work problems. The camaraderie, skill challenges, mind/body coordination, wide range of techniques, physical aesthetics and style of teaching were all similar to what I had experienced at karate. The discipline and attention to the detail of etiquette were there but less explicit, the atmosphere was a generally quieter and calmer and of course no kiais. The only downside was that I got very dizzy.

At that point I was focused on family, work and business and didn't see how I would be able to commit the sort of time to training that I had previously. As it has turned out, my business activities have been much more successful since starting aikido. Realistically aikido is not the only reason why, but I have consciously applied some aikido principles which have worked when other strategies would have failed. Equally there have been times when endurance and toughness have been required. On the family side, both of my children also train at aikido. It gives me great pleasure to see them developing and learning. I also get a benefit from my involvement with the childrens classes.

While karate is not primarily concerned with winning and losing, at aikido it did take me a long time to understand the issue of harmonizing and blending with uke. Sensei Nadeau has described techniques as having both form and flow. I think Karate helped me with the form part of the technique, ie being able to coordinate left and right, understanding how to move my feet etc. However the flow part is a different matter. I'm not sure that previous karate training has made me worse in that regard, but for a long time being able to carry a technique off through strength seemed enough.

In the early days of my aikido training I must have been a very difficult uke at times. I thought it proper to attack vigorously and provide a challenge for the nage. A ryote tori for instance would be accompanied by a strong grip but not necessarily continuing energy and movement. This may have achieved some purpose but not the whole purpose. I would like to thank my training partners of those times for their patience and understanding.



I have yet to discuss the matter of Ki, or energy flow. Karate does not specifically seem to refer to ki or energy flow in the way that we do at aikido. However there is unquestionably energy in karate. Two words often used in association with karate are “kiai” and “kime” (meaning focus of energy). The Riai manual defines “kiai” as “meeting of the spirits”. I find it interesting that “kiai”, which to me sums up the power of karate is “aiki” spelt backwards, the kanjis are the same but in reverse order. There is a perceptible energy that arises in a room full of people kiai-ing together. Is the karate “ki” the same as the aikido “ki”? The laws of the Universe apply to us all equally.

To summarise, both aikido and karate have deep, rich and honourable traditions. I think there are more commonalities than differences. Both arts are both forms of Budo. Of more importance than the choice of which art to practice are the integrity and sincerity of the teacher and student. Students of both arts can learn from each other and should respect each others’ disciplines. For my part I am happy and privileged to have been able to participate in Seido Karate and Riai Aikido.

I will leave you with some quotes from O’Sensei and some famous karate masters.

**O’Sensei:**

*“Your mind should be in harmony with the functioning of the Universe; your body should be in tune with the movement of the Universe; body and mind should be bound as one, unified with the activity of the Universe.”<sup>3</sup>*

**Master Matsumura**, one of the Okinawan teachers of Gichin Funakoshi:

*“...We are like blades of grass or trees of the forest, creations of the Universe, of the spirit of the universe, and the spirit of the Universe has neither life nor death. Vanity is the only obstacle to life.”<sup>4</sup>*

**Gichin Funakoshi**, considered to be the founder of modern karate:

*“ I have always stressed the point in my teaching that karate is a defensive art and must never serve offensive purposes.”<sup>4</sup>*

**Master Higoanna**, an Okinawan karate master:

*“In karate training, as well as in life, when something blocks your path, step aside and move around it.”<sup>3</sup>*

**O’Sensei:**

*“Techniques employ four qualities that reflect the nature of our world. Depending on the circumstance, your movements should be hard as a diamond, flexible as a willow, smooth flowing like water, or as empty as space.”*



References:

1. The Human Face of Karate: My Life My Karate-do – Kaicho Tadashi Nakamura
2. [www.seidokaratewellington.co.nz](http://www.seidokaratewellington.co.nz)
3. Three Budo Masters: Kano, Funakoshi, Ueshiba– John Stevens
4. Karate-Do My Way of Life – Gichin Funakoshi
5. The Shambhala Guide to Aikido – John Stevens



