

## Aiki Development – Paul Stallman

My initial Aikido exposure occurred while I was training in Karate. A group of students rented space at the Karate dojo in upstate New York where I was practicing. I would catch brief glimpses of their intriguing, flowing, circular movements while I prepared for karate class. The movements didn't seem "realistic" enough at the time and I continued training in Karate for several more years.

Later I relocated for my graduate school education to an area with a paucity of quality Karate dojos. Concurrently, a hip injury and my school load precluded training. As my hip improved I decided to give Aikido a try, hoping that it would be less traumatic for my hip. Initial training was interesting in that my Karate background was on the one hand helpful in terms of ki and extension but on the other hand, a detriment in terms of stiffness. As my Aikido training continued I began to realize how different this art was from any others I had been exposed to.

It seems that almost all martial arts teach their students physical self defense, only to be used when really needed. Most arts also offer certain spiritual and psychological benefits to students who remain dedicated. However, for most, the philosophy is one of transient peace which suddenly becomes transformed into aggression once someone is put in a position of having to defend himself. In that setting, the peaceful martial artist has been trained to brutally defeat his offender by striking, injuring and/or throwing. Most popular arts such as Karate, Kung Fu, and Tae Kwon Do teach students skillful and powerful methods of doing that which we essentially already know; block something and strike back.

It seems that this innate tendency almost needs to be unlearned during the training of Aikido. The physical and spiritual blending with attacks that is taught in Aikido is almost unnatural and requires that we significantly change both our physical and emotional responses. I believe this holds true even in the case of irimi movements which might seem aggressive to the uninitiated.

The intellectual understanding of this is quite different and easier than is its physical practice. As I train, I enjoy the physical movements and derive pleasure when I am able to execute them cleanly and efficiently. Receiving techniques and taking high falls can be equally satisfying. However, all too often Aikido training ceases to move past these elements. In fact, perfecting the throw or pin becomes the end in and of itself and degrades Aikido into yet another art focused on defeating an opponent.

For me, ukemiwaza, kaeshiwaza and randori have helped reinvigorate my training and have been tremendous aids to appreciate the more harmonious side of Aikido. Instead of emphasizing just sound technical throwing of an attacker or reversing a technique, this training encourages true blending with the direction, intent and intensity of a technique or attack. I find that when I do not incorporate these principles, these practices become very abrupt and strained. By emphasizing connectivity and blending, techniques become more spontaneous, less muscular and appropriately synchronized with the energy of an attacker or technique being applied. Kaeshiwaza seems to be the ultimate form of ukemi in that one must remain completely connected and sensitive to one's partner in order to flow with his technique and transition smoothly to reversal. In this fashion the nage may not even appreciate that his technique has been reversed until it is too late. Ukemi practice which emphasizes connection and presence through to the end of technique has helped foster this type of experience for me. Hopefully, it will pervade my aikido further as it continues to develop. I do believe that basic technique practice is important and fun but view it more as a building block toward some of these other principles.