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Aikido—Body, then Mind

On one of my early trips to Japan, I accompanied Saito Sensei as his *otomo* on a trip to Shikoku Island for a *gashuku* with a local university club. We stayed in a small hotel nearby and, after a wonderful dinner with the club, retired to the hotel for the night.

Sensei sent me out for some late night refreshments and on my return we sat for awhile and talked. This was one of the first opportunities I had to interact with him on a one-to-one basis. While we talked on various subjects, one comment he made startled me, and I wanted to know more.

“In Aikido,” he said, “up to fourth dan you train your body. After that you train your mind.”

My first inclination was to simply accept what he said at face value. It sounded very straightforward and clearly gave an inflection point to one’s training—almost like graduating from school. After all, during my formative training years, I had so much fun acquiring new techniques and figuring out how they worked, that I had no time to dwell on the philosophy of Aikido. When I first returned to the United States after my first stay in Japan (during which I began training), I found, for the first time, people actively discussing the meaning of Aikido. Most of these people were relatively new to aikido and their technique did not seem to correlate with their understanding of the philosophy. This was a new experience for me. Clearly there seemed to be a dissonance between talk and walk.

Sensei’s remark also seemed to belie the fact that he never spoke about aikido philosophy during practice. After all, he was an eighth dan, I thought, and should be steeped in philosophy. He should be willing to pass it on, if nothing else than to seed new fields. However, in the dojo his emphasis was always on correct technique. We practiced under his watchful eye. If someone made a significant error in technique, there was a loud *dame* (lit., no good) and the class was stopped for an explanation. He would carefully explain why such a move must be done in a certain way. There was always a good reason. No one was ever made to feel as if they were inept. His explanations were always objective—and beneficial. We students, on the other hand, began to feel that *dame* was an award—How many did you get tonight?

His statement to me was very pithy. He explained that one comes into Aikido knowing nothing and acquires skills hitherto unknown. Right practice from the beginning was necessary to develop strong physical skills and set the frame for the understanding of the principles involved. These principles, the aikido philosophy, he felt, were slowly building up during this period of physical training. He maintained that fourth dan was a turning point in that one’s physical training had depth to it and was the point when the

student had the maturity in the art to begin developing aikido in an individual direction. He called it finding your own aikido.

This conversation hit home a few years later, when he and I were sitting in the dojo one afternoon just before I was expecting to return to the United States. He had just told me that he was giving me fourth dan.

“From now on,” he said, “you are no longer a member of this dojo. Of course you may come back and visit and stay as long as you wish, but you are no longer a member of the dojo. You have to develop your own aikido now.”

For the rest of my stay on that trip I took no more ukemi for him. He corrected me no more. Strangely, I felt connected more than ever with him and the dojo. I was beginning to see also a path that I was expected to take. He wanted me now to examine my own abilities based on what I had learned and to be introspective and critical of myself to keep on progressing. Without a teacher to tell me what to do, I had to find it out for myself. He gave me the tools. I had to learn to sharpen them.

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