
Like a Leaf on the Wind

Recently I was having students work the contact drill where both people gyaku-yokomenuchi, contact, and use that contact to move to another gyaku-yokomenuchi (I've heard this referred to as yamabiko or mountain echo). And I'm watching a student struggle with this, moving stiffly and not finding the flow and it finally occurs to me to ask him

"Are you trying to cut with this drill?" and he looks a little skeptical and goes

"well, yes". And in that moment, I had an epiphany of "don't try to cut". Or more precisely *this* drill is more about sword mobility and speed. Even being able to connect early with a strike and feel it's direction. Powerful cuts are trained elsewhere.

The image that came to mind was of an aspen leaf perched on the tip of the bokken and my job is to guide it into position as if the rest of the bokken is a column of air. I love this for a few of reasons.

First there's a great article by Andrej Diamanstein Sensei, an laido instructor, where he calls out that a sword is a 5lb chunk of steel very precisely made to do one thing and that is cut. So, you really don't need to worry about having super powerful cuts. As long as the strike is precise, the sword will cut just fine regardless of the power put behind it.

Secondly it made me think grounding. Or un-grounding rather. The sensation of being mobile and not necessarily stuck on any one thing, physically or mentally. A parallel could be drawn from meditation. As you meditate you can let thoughts arise but try to let them go and not dwell on them. The physical practice is equally tricky. A constant adjusting of balance and stance never letting any one stick. It's like trying to blow a balloon across the floor. You have to constantly adjust the angle of your breath (and by extension, yourself) to keep it going straight. The same is true with my leaf perched on my air sword. The body needs to be relaxed and adjustable if you want to keep that leaf

on your sword tip. Getting locked into any one idea or concept of what will happen will cause the leaf to topple.

Coming back around, this can be applied to all of aikido. "Are you trying to find a technique? well don't do that". You need to be supple and sensing. If you try to force a technique it will be just that, forcing. Which doesn't really fall in with the "aiki" part of "aikido". Trying to make a technique happen could be likened to attempting to teleport the leaf. It's theoretically possible, but you aren't likely to do it. Instead, the technique is the leaf and you're the wind. You just have to guide the leaf into the correct position. However, like a leaf in wind, it can take some time to reach the final destination. Patience is a critical component of the process. A gust there, a puff here, a nudge (maybe a wink) and through continuous connection and patience, a technique will arrive.

How I learn aikido

The more I teach Aikido, the more I've become tuned into the different ways people assimilate technique into their own bodies. This has led me to think of how I learn techniques. I think of my process in three stages, positional, skeletal, and energetic. They are increasingly advanced, but they also can be expressed at a range of levels.

Positional is the very basic ma'ai and angles in relation to uke. It's really the basic form and outline of a technique. At the basic end this could also be described as figuring out omote and ura. Needing to step, slide, tenkan, etc to create the effect needed. At more advanced expressions, it could be a twist of the hips, a squaring of the shoulders. But it's all about the position and structure between uke and nage.

Skeletal is how the tension between uke and nage works. All the little tricks to take the slack out, extend fully to make it effective. Like how we describe the "motorcycle twist" in a shionage to increase the tension in the arm. That twist makes the technique more effective all on its own by manipulating how the skeleton works. After all, there are only so many ways to move a joint.

Energetic is the connection component. Being able to sense my uke's energy and have that influence the timing and the breathing and how to incorporate that information. Another way to think of this would be the expansion and contraction of ki between uke and nage. This is how you learn to walk into a strike with confidence.

With these three understandings of how to examine technique I learn by finding the form, taking the slack out, then adding in the connection. This happens in a continual loop. My position can always be improved. I can always find a little more extension. Finding how to connect earlier or more continuously. Every iteration of the loop the details get more refined the form and extension and timing get better and smoother. I almost visualize this as a spiral with the perfect technique in the center. And I spiral down trying to touch that perfect knowledge. I doubt I ever will make it to the center, but getting close is exhilarating.

Aikido is an Advanced Martial Art

Aikido is an advanced martial art. When some one looks at a martial art and starts trying to make it more efficient, able to do it for a long duration, and so on, it won't take long to reach the "Wargames" conclusion. The only way to win is not to play. There's only so many close-quarters conflicts a person can be in before crippling injury or death occurs. However, Aikido acknowledges the human element and understands that "not playing" isn't always an option. It gives an avenue to meet the conflict, but to defuse it and allow everyone to continue unharmed. In doing so it explores the avenues that turn conflict into a peaceful resolution.

And so, it is advanced martial art, moving from "how do I win this fight", to "how to not have fights at all".

When we look at martial arts we delight in the motions, the joint locks, the big throws. As we learn, we first learn "the moves", then we learn how the motions interlink, then we learn how we can apply

lessons from one technique to another and then we look at how those motions can be extended and made more efficient. In Aikido we inevitably find that the easiest throw is the one where uke throws themselves. That aikido has that as a central point is demonstrative of how it aspires to a higher level of practice than simply "make the opponent tap out". Moving beyond that is the entire practice of connection and de-escalation where the fight doesn't even occur because the cause was sensed and resolved or avoided.

I think it is telling that most of O'Sensei's Uchideshi already knew another martial art when they started aikido. It wasn't the "the moves" that was keeping them around. It was the underpinning philosophy. How what they already knew had been extended into the next level. I also like to say that Aikido is everyone's favorite second martial art. I've encountered an incredible number of students that have done other martial arts before finding Aikido. There's a multitude of reasons for this, but an overlying factor is the philosophy while maintaining martial integrity.

Something I find interesting is how deep the Aikido system is. It contains open hand technique, knife, staff, and sword take-aways and throws. Staff and sword kata, Staff and sword paired kata. It's almost as if the entire system is saying "look at all these applications. If you can do it across all of this, do it all throughout your life." I vaguely recall a Shoji Nishio saying something I internalized as: "Aikido is a philosophy that can be overlaid over any martial art." I love the idea that the underlying martial practice doesn't matter. It can still be aikido. I like this idea as it aligns up with why the aikido system is so deep. If I can find multiple ideas pointing to the same conclusion it makes me feel like the conclusion is more true.

All of this makes aikido have a steeper learning curve than other martial arts. From the raw amount of techniques in the system to working on the higher concepts.

[Sandán Essay – Ben Tyler]