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Speed Without Speed: Two Approaches
My Aikido Sho-Dan Essay
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As I was brainstorming topics for this essay in fulfillment of my Aikido Sho-Dan requirements, two of the topics that came to mind were:

- Using Aikido on the street – I don't get in fights, but I do fall off my bicycle from time to time.
- Temporal foreground/background switching - A training method that I developed (but I made up the fancy name for this essay).

I realized that it would be difficult to fill up an entire essay with either of these topics. But then I realized that I could combine them, because they have something in common: speed without speed (SWS). So, here's what I mean by SWS. A martial arts technique has SWS if it is perceived as fast by the audience, and/or defeated attacker, but from the performer's point of view, it is performed leisurely with respect to time and space.

Using Aikido on the street – I don't get in fights, but I do fall off my bicycle from time to time.

One aspect of SWS is that feeling of slow motion that many of us have experienced in situations such as automobile accidents, as depicted in the movie The Matrix. I've had two very strong experiences of this phenomenon. One of them was falling off my bicycle.

I've actually used Aikido twice on the street, and both of them were falling off my bicycle. One of them used plain old speed (POS), and the other used SWS.

The one with POS – While I was riding, my front fender broke off and fell into my front wheel. The front wheel stopped spinning, but me and the rest of the bike kept moving. The rear wheel came off the ground, and I went flying over the handlebars. The whole thing took me totally by surprise. One instant I blissfully riding down the road, the next instant I was on my feet, having just completed a perfect Aikido roll over the handlebars. The fall was fast, I perceived it as fast, and moved fast. Fortunately, the roll was programmed into my muscle memory by zillions of repetitions.

The one with SWS – This time, while I was riding, I hit a patch of ice, and both my wheels slid sideways. As opposed to the previous situation, this time a back fall was called for. As I started falling, I started to position my arm to catch myself on my hand, wrist crooked (like the "Stop" gesture, in other words the wrong way, where you can break your wrist). At that point, the slow motion kicked in. I had time to have a little conversation with myself. "You know not to catch yourself that way. You'll break your wrist. Do it the right way," I admonished. "OK," I replied. Then, I switched to the correct technique, and everything worked out fine.

My other strong experience of this slow-motion phenomenon also happened to take place on my bicycle. I was stopped at an intersection, when a car full of delinquents pulled up. They all proceeded to simultaneously spit at me. I distinctly remember the image of those loogies gracefully spinning towards me in slow motion as I leisurely ducked and watched them pass ineffectually by.

Although these were my strongest experiences of this phenomenon, I have experienced it to a lesser extent many times during martial arts training situations. I wish I could do it strongly, and at will, but as of yet, it only happens in rare instances of being "in the zone."

Temporal foreground/background switching - A training method that I developed (but I made up the fancy name for this essay).

A well executed Aikido technique can seem very fast to Uke (the attacker). At one moment, well into the attack, Uke can fully feel that the attack will succeed. At the next instant, s/he is flat on his/her back. Ideally, Uke should be off balance and/or being hit immediately upon making contact with Nage (the thrower), if not sooner. Nage has very fast reflexes, it seems.

If you are walking down the street, and are suddenly surprised to find that a punch is a fraction of a second from connecting with your face, and then you pull off a nifty martial arts technique, that would be an example of fast reflexes (or fast reaction time, POS or possibly with the aid of the slow-motion experience). But, suppose that you can both choose when the punch comes, and have several seconds advance notice. Then, it would be less about reaction time.

The magic of a well executed Aikido technique comes when the attacker and/or audience perceives it as the former case, when, in fact, Nage is setting up the situation in the manner of the later case.

In the POS case, the entire technique begins with the abrupt appearance of imminent danger, be it the feeling of your rear wheel leaving the ground, or the sudden appearance of a fist the size of a grapefruit. You have to recognize the danger and choose, initiate and execute a response, all within a fraction of a second.

In the case of SWS by set-up, the most important part of the technique is over before the moment of imminent danger. It's like the card trick, where you pick a card, and the magician finds your card. It appears to you like the trick takes place AFTER you pick the card. In fact, the most important part of the trick is over by then. That's the part where the magician forces you to take the card he wants you to take, while you believe you are picking a card at random.

Temporal foreground/background switching trains you to focus on the portion of the technique that takes place before the moment of imminent danger. I will begin to explain it by describing its opposite. The opposite is the way of the beginner who has yet to learn

about Zan Shin (literally translates to "remaining mind", it is the sustained attention after the technique is physically over).

The beginner is typically very focused from the first contact with Uke until the moment, after the throw, of breaking contact. Then, between techniques, the beginner might feel free to space out, turn his or her back to Uke, scratch himself, etc.

Once, the concept of Zan Shin is learned, the student progresses to paying attention to Uke between techniques. But the intensity of the attention between techniques is still much less than the attention while in contact with Uke. In other words, the attentional foreground is the period while in contact with Uke. The background is the period between techniques.

"Foreground" and "background" are typically used to refer to different regions of *space*. For example, you might think of the foreground of a donut as the part you eat, as opposed to the background space around it. But, you can switch foreground and background by focusing on the hole, which, after all, defines the donut. Many optical illusions and Escher paintings play with foreground/background switching.

In *temporal* foreground/background switching, foreground and background are different periods in *time*. Here is how to practice it. Face Uke with a heightened intensity of attention. Keep very alert during the attack. Upon contact, recall the way you used to space out between techniques when you were a beginner. Maintain this low level of attention during the entire throw. After the throw, the moment you loose contact with Uke, click into a heightened state of alertness. Repeat.

I have found that by focusing on the periods between techniques, the opportunities for setting up successful techniques pop out. With a skillful set-up, by the time contact with Uke is made, the most important part of the technique is over, so, despite the low level of attention, it's hard to fail.

Conclusion

A skilled practitioner of Aikido, or any martial art, moves in a way that is simultaneously fast, and leisurely. In this essay, I've used the phrase "speed without speed" to describe this, and have explored two aspects of this paradoxical skill. Sometimes, however, plain old speed is unavoidable.