

Aikidosphere

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The Essence of Aikido

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Editor's note: The following article appears on the web site of Aikido of Dallas. It contains notes taken from Tohei Sensei's discussion at a seminar in San Antonio in 1997. It reminds us of the loss the Aikido world suffered when Tohei Sensei passed away last year. Our thanks to Bob Mason and Aikido of San Antonio for allowing us to reprint it. Photos courtesy of Lyn Flitton, San Francisco Aikikai.



Tohei Sensei shared the following with the members present at Aikido of San Antonio's seminar on September 6 - 7, 1997. Our sincere apologies to Tohei Sensei for any errors in the following and hope that we captured the spirit of his discussion.

The essence of Aikido is not in the physical techniques. Practicing with the idea that Aikido is only what can be seen will allow you to progress only so far, but not truly understand O-Sensei's Aikido. Rather, the essence of Aikido is invisible. In order to see the invisible essence of Aikido, we need to use "Shin-gan" ("eye of mind"). This is not an easy concept to understand, and is even more difficult to experience and put into practice.

However, it is only through the invisible that members will come to understand the spirit of O-Sensei's Aikido. It is my sincere desire that every member strives to understand this aspect of Aikido. To grasp the invisible essence of Aikido, it often requires practicing Aikido regularly and with a sincere heart. Therefore, Tohei Sensei said that he would practice Aikido until he dies in order to understand invisible essence of Aikido.

There are some groups and organizations that practice an older style of Aikido, based on O-Sensei's Aikido when he was in his 50's or younger. At that time O-Sensei himself was physically very strong, so naturally he used his physical strength, as he used all his attributes. If you view old videotapes, you can see O-Sensei in which he uses physical power in the techniques. For example, the older style of Ikkyo-undo emphasizes the pulling power of thumb, or from the thumb side of the hand. But actually, over time and hard work in developing Aikido, it is often dangerous to pull others into you when they are bigger and stronger than you. O-Sensei's Aikido emphasizes extension in Ikkyo-undo.

Through the long years of hard work and practice, O-Sensei reached the Aikido which does not require much physical power, but instead relies on performing the techniques smoothly and flowingly, almost like flying and dancing. At the same time, Tohei Sensei reminded us that although we should not depend upon physical power, we should not underestimate physical power, either.

Sensei also repeated that in performing Aikido techniques, you must

adjust and control your strength to each uke. Do not perform your technique in the same way to everyone. Tohei Sensei used the term "Baca no hitotsu oboe" (English translation: "stupid person performs only one way to all the situations"). Sensei emphasized the importance of flexibility. When you practice with someone, try to adjust yourself to that person. For example, when you deal with a child, try to adjust yourself to a child. When you deal with small person, adjust yourself to this small person. When you deal with large person, adjust yourself to this large person. Adjust yourself to others, do not try to force others to adjust to you. Do not try to make other people adjust to your way. Instead, try to adjust yourself to others (Aiki). In doing so, you can lead others in your own pace.

The critical point of Aikido is that you, a person who does not have much physical power, can overcome others who are bigger or stronger than you, while using very little of your physical strength. Aikido receives and leads an attacker's power into your pace and returns it to the attacker. Because in competition, each competitor will attack each other, competition has no place with the essence of Aikido. Therefore, competition means nothing in Aikido and there are no competitive tournaments in Aikido. This is both good and bad. One bad point in having no competition is some members practice the techniques without seriousness or eagerness. This leads to their techniques becoming shaky. Therefore, practice seriously with your heart.

Sensei also emphasized the importance of practicing basic techniques. Basic techniques are the foundation of all Aikido techniques - the essential, rudimentary, central movements and techniques from which all Aikido movements are developed. If your basic techniques are shaky and not well refined, it will be impossible to perform other techniques. Basic techniques have at least the following three characteristics:

1. They can be performing at a fast speed;
2. They emphasize keeping yourself in safe place; and
3. Through repetitive practice, strength is automatically developed.

This strength is the kind that does not depend upon physical, or muscular power.

To more easily understand this type of automatic strength, Tohei Sensei suggested that we think of this metaphorically as an engine of an automobile - the faster an engine runs, even a small engine, the more power the engine produces. In response to a member's question involving henkawaza, Sensei indicated that when performing basic techniques, do not think what you do next if the technique does not work, just make sure you're committed in your technique. Sensei emphasized that we should not think, "If my Ikkyo does not work, I will do some other technique."

Tohei Sensei also responded to a question from a newer member.

Question: I read in a book that O-Sensei said "Do not think about only Aikido all day long." What do you think this meant?

Tohei Sensei: Professionals, like Shihan may think about Aikido all day long. Of course, I am an exception among Shihan because I need time to sleep and cannot think about Aikido all the time. I think O-Sensei wanted to say like that "Do your best in your position." In other words, students should concentrate themselves on their own studies when they are in school, business people should concentrate themselves on their business when they are at their companies. Husbands, wives, parents, children, teachers, and everyone should focus on the task at hand and do their very best at every moment. Just as thinking about the day at the office while you are in the dojo is distracting, thinking about the Aikido dojo while you are in the office is distracting.