

## “Aiki” in Aikido (Yondan Essay)

The longer I practice aikido, the more interesting and challenging become the principles of spacing (*maai*), timing, and body movement (*tai-sabaki*) as represented by the triangle (entering), circle (rotating), and square (sinking).

On the one hand, I am increasingly able to see and appreciate the practical linking of these principles when demonstrated firsthand by Freddy Khong Sensei, Fukakusa Motohiro Sensei, and other sensei at seminars. On the other hand, although I seem able to combine some of these elements in my own practice some of the time, it is still difficult to integrate them all together at the same time smoothly and consistently.

In addition to these external principles above, I have also found my attention shifting more and more to include internal factors such as centering, connection, energy flow, and breathing power (*kokyu-ryoku*).

I think the beginning of this change was stimulated by some remarks Funakoshi Mitsuo Sensei made at a seminar organized by Freddy Sensei in Singapore a few years ago. He told us not to treat our partners as objects and to stop trying to “do” aikido “to” them. If I understood him correctly, I think he was telling us instead to first connect with our partners then just move ourselves naturally – if the *aiki* was correctly established our partners would also move because they were thus connected to us.

Of course this is much easier said than done and I am still working out how to learn and practice *aiki* on the mat. Things generally seem to work better when I am able to stop thinking about performing a technique and instead feel and retain more sensitively the connection and flow with my partner and his/her energy and intention.

Another thing that seems to help is to establish a centre-to-centre connection with my partner early, well before we actually make physical contact. I think this started becoming a bit clearer to me when Fukakusa Sensei was teaching the paired sword kata *Ki Musubi no Tachi* at a seminar a couple of years ago. He would have us start the kata from a regular sword-tip *maai*, then gradually increase the interval between partners each time until we were literally facing each other from opposite ends of the dojo. As his *uke* one time I could clearly feel his energy pressing on my centre from so far away, and I felt that he would immediately sense when I had decided to start moving (even perhaps before I knew it).

As a result, I now regularly try to connect my attention to my partner’s centre and try to feel when he/she has formed the intention to start moving, at which point I can ideally begin to enter the space between us a split-second beforehand. This somehow allows my energy to influence my partner’s energy and the shape of his/her movement to a small extent even before we have actually touched physically.

Once physical contact has been made it becomes easier to feel the centre of my partner’s structure and power, accept his/her energy back into my own centre, and then flow back out from my centre and start rotating my hips while keeping this connection (this all happens very quickly but takes much longer to try and explain).

So the hands and arms may create and keep the connection but do not “throw” the partner. Instead, the movement of my hips begins to generate the technique by rotating my partner around my centre. *Uke*’s balance may then be further destabilized when I take another step behind or around his/her now-compromised centre of gravity.

This is all somewhat difficult to write about but the point I am trying to make is that I no longer regard technique as an external formula in which I try to physically move my partner. Instead I now find myself focusing on and being more interested in the non-physical energy, connection, and flow aspects of every aikido interaction between partners. *Kokyu-ryoku* is now more important than muscular power.

Although I am now able to apply these *aiki* connection principles most of the time with grasping attacks and *kokyu-ho* types of techniques, I have less regular success with striking attacks where the initial point of contact is faster and shorter, or with more complex types of *tai-sabaki* which involve multiple combinations of *irimi-tenkan* (the first one may be all right but the connection sometimes gets weaker or broken on the second or third one). Perhaps I need to extend my *ki* further and/or correct weaknesses in my *tai-sabaki*.

I am also looking for ways to study and develop these *aiki* principles off the mat. At work for example, instead of trying to force ideas or answers onto situations or other people (similar to doing techniques "on" partners), we find more lasting success with first engaging through respectful dialogues (connecting) and then letting shared solutions/agreements emerge creatively and flexibly from the mutual interaction (flowing and finishing more naturally).

Of course I still have a long way to go both in and outside of the dojo and I humbly realize that this will be a gradual, ongoing and long-term process with many ups and downs along the way. Thankfully, there are numerous other people to practice with who are similarly engaged and motivated by this challenging but rewarding process.

I would like to take this opportunity to congratulate Freddy Sensei on his 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of aikido in Singapore and Fukakusa Sensei on his 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of aikido in Thailand, and to express my gratitude and appreciation to them both for their patience and guidance in teaching us aikido these past several years.

吉岡芳之介 (Edward Yoshinosuke Yoshioka)

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