

Dylan Amerine
Nidan Essay
May 15, 2004

How many times have I tried to explain what aikido means to me? To friends, family members, or someone who happens to notice my t-shirt... it is a question that anyone who studies the art will eventually have to contemplate. As the years pass, I find that who I am becomes more and more deeply embedded in my training, and as changes and growth occur within me, changes and growth occur within my training. It becomes more and more difficult to separate the interrelationship of my life to my aikido. Every time each one of us steps on the mat for training, every piece of ourselves, both the known and the subconscious, come with us. Through our individual expressions of aikido we are given a great opportunity to learn about ourselves and each other.

I remember distinctly the day I first began my training. I was heavy in heart, mind and body, and was searching for something new. I knew nothing of aikido or martial arts, so when I saw the teacher, a tiny, nerdy-looking asian woman, effortlessly tossing about an intensely fierce and relentless larger man, I knew that this was something I had to learn. The movements felt foreign and awkward, but I attended every single class and soon moved on from the small class at the university to the dojo of Sunset Cliffs Aikido. Initially, I was both intimidated and intrigued by the movements. I coveted the grace and ease with which so many people seemed to execute their movements. Entering into such a large pool of people, however, my lack of confidence and fear of being judged by my partner led to quick frustration, often to the point of tears. I learned quickly which partners helped me to maintain a positive attitude towards my training and which partners to avoid when my mood was fragile. At this early stage in my

training, emotional and physical self-preservation were some of my main objectives.

As the years progressed, and my skill in aikido grew past mere survival, I began looking at some of my personal patterns. I noticed a strong tendency to apologize constantly, and to anticipate corrections by tearing my own technique apart before my partner had the chance to. This is not to say that I have conquered these things, but the awareness of them has allowed me the opportunity to look into the reasons for their existence.

In a normal interaction between two people, we are able to maintain a distance and emotional separation that is comfortable for both parties within the situation. In training, however, we are not offered the same luxury. We are forced into actual physical contact with many different people that are often foreign to us, in situations that can be at times uncomfortable or awkward. The relationship between uke and nage is an intimate one, and one which tends to speak more truths than most words. Every time we take ukemi from our partners' technique, we are given an opportunity to choose our response. I began to notice how, at times, my mood would be stubborn, and my attitude resistant to my partner. This could stem from a bad event earlier in the day, a poor attitude towards myself, or a negative internal response to that specific partner. Likewise, my mood could affect the manner in which I expressed my technique upon others. We have all experienced working with an uke that may seem stiff or resistant, and may have at times been such an uke. Each of these experiences are again an opportunity to think about the origins of any conflict or resistance. It is much easier to avoid dealing with someone you have resistance to, or a mood that doesn't blend well with others. I have found that looking for ways to work through such resistance has allowed me to gain more control over my emotions, and to not be so easily discouraged when a situation is not ideal. Often, the times when I have trained

through such obstacles, I have gained the most insight in my technique. I feel that through such insight, I have learned how to better create and maintain healthy and honest relationships.

Ultimately, this relationship between uke and nage is a reflection of our ability to connect with our partner, to blend harmoniously the energy of the attack into the dissipation of the fall. Any aikidoist can tell you about the beauty within the feeling of a clean, smooth blend. In trying to reach this level of internal blending, I find that personal expectations towards myself, my partner, or the situation occupy my mind and hinder my physical ability both in technique and in ukemi. To be able to exist within that single moment in time, when all that matters is the movement of energy through the purity of the form; this is where the physical movements can become the expression of a spiritual search.

Far before I felt ready for it, I found myself in a position of trying to help someone else learn the technique demonstrated by the teacher. Realizing that my ability did indeed surpass the knowledge of some others, and that I had the power to pass that knowledge along, helped allow my confidence to grow. Having to stand before Sensei and the school for tests was still a harrowing event, but even that began to lessen. As the years passed and my rank increased, I found myself more and more often in front of a class; exposed for all to see and critique. At first it was all I could do to get through the class, with my hands shaking and my mind racing over everything I had said and done. Yet the physical confidence I had in my technique, founded in years of daily practice, always got me through. Then, more and more I began to enjoy exploring the relationship between the student and the teacher, feeling joy in seeing the light of understanding cross a students' face and feeling empowered in the ability to help place it there. I started to find questions, that might have previously torn at my self-confidence, to be a good challenge to

form and discuss my own opinions. I begin to see clearly now that the art implied in the term 'martial art' is an essential expression of individualism. I am learning to truly appreciate my own individual value, as well as the value within others around me.

I now contemplate how this process is similar to nearly every other in life, from childhood to becoming functioning and successful adults. We all begin with little or no knowledge, and with perseverance and luck end up in a position of passing that knowledge on to others. Most of the time, it seems to me, we end up on the two-way road that lies somewhere in the middle.

For most of our lives, and definitely for the duration of our training, we are passing on what we can while constantly working to advance ourselves. This path of self-discovery is not one that is unique to the martial arts. This path can come from any direction, with only the will to grow and explore. However, the path I have chosen of studying aikido has become inextricably tied to my personal development. My training continues to provide daily opportunities to better understand myself and my relationship to others around me.