



Shodan Essay by Christina Vaccaro
O Sen Kan / Aikikai Dornbirn

The Art of Harmony

Mastering a martial art is a life-long journey. It is the path of refining one's character and above all, it is hard and continuous work, demanding sincere devotion to the art, to the teacher and to the Dojo. As O Sensei himself had put it: "True budo is not a fighting technique based on a rash use of force against another in order to determine who is stronger or who can win in a contest; rather it is a path centred on daily training with other kindred souls, mutually working together to polish and refine their individual characters."ⁱ What we crave to harvest are not grades but ethical virtues and freedom of self. Chiba Sensei described the transmission of the art by a natural progression consisting of five pillars, where the fifth pillar, *openness*, is "the reification of the psychospiritual virtues such as humility, receptivity, modesty, etc. that are necessary to the process of raising the art to its highest level."ⁱⁱ Aikido is a wonderful art and tool, helping us to conquer our ego-centred greed, ignorance and anger, developing humility and a noble form of self-confidence at the same time. We are humble as we know that we will never master the art to its supreme perfection, and we are self-confident as we learn to face fear and to trust our inner ability to receive and to protect.

After seven years of practicing Aikido, I find myself now in a time of transition. In the past, I have found myself being Uke, i.e. internally taking the Uke role through and through. This has never been a conscious decision, but an unconscious attachment to the virtues of the Uke: to commit (the attack), to give (the centre), to receive (the strike) and to fall. There are two perspectives to the fall. One part is that we have to learn how to survive – the technique; life. We have to learn how to react to blows and painful experiences without being injured and losing the joy of living. Another and indeed personal part is that for some or maybe for all of us it is hard to picture ourselves as a 'winner' and – particularly speaking from a woman's perspective – as the one who dominates. Of course, Tori is reacting to Uke too, but still it is Tori who holds the ultimate position, who leads the way. And even though the domination of

Uke by Tori is not to take his or her life but to give it back, it is still a form of domination which I had had my struggles with.

To Study and Recognize

I remember many occasions where I found myself incapable of impersonating the right *shin* (heart, mind, spirit) for conducting a technique as Tori. Always did I prefer to be Uke, wishing my counterpart to begin being Tori, even as I gradually “climbed” the Kyu ladder and hence was supposed to start as Tori whenever I practiced with someone less advanced than myself. I became to be conscious of my pronounced inner preference very quickly, yet as the years passed, I never found a “solution” to it. However, it became sort of a problem for me. For one part, how was I supposed to improve my technical knowledge and abilities when I so much took to the Uke role? But much more importantly, how could I ever transform the self to be immovable, vigilant, sincere and fresh-minded as expressed by Chiba Sensei? Chiba Sensei named it the “Immovable or Unshakable Spirit” and stated it as the first psychospiritual element for cultivation of martial awareness.ⁱⁱⁱ Here again, I had no problems to incorporate an unshakable attitude as Uke – facing and handling great Ki and power of movement thrown at me. Yet, I did not wish to test the unshakable mind of my Uke when being Tori. The turning point came on an intensive Aikido seminar – only weeks ago. I was practicing with a Nidan and Fukushidoin, taking Ukemi for Kokyu-Ho. Everything went “smoothly” when the teacher approached us and shouted: “No!” Both of us stopped, looking quite aghast. The teacher looked at the Nidan and said: “You want to throw!” and then he looked at me and said in a rather accusing voice: “And you want to fall!” In this moment, for the very first time, besides my usual first thought (“Yes, I want to fall”) there was a strong and clear inner voice protesting: I do not want to fall!

It was an ordinary situation and although I cannot explain why, it had triggered something inside me. There it was: the *shin* I had not been able to locate for so long. It had never been absent, only it had had to be awakened again. In this moment, I saw, like in my life off-the-matt too, how I had not been able to be Tori and how my neglected *shin* of protection, guidance and leadership had enrolled itself in my Aikido as well. And thereafter something was put in its place and I knew that I am able to be not mere Uke but Tori too; I knew I could establish balance between these two and finally enhance integration and harmony.

Developing a Compassionate But Strong *Shin*

As Mitsugi Saotome wrote, “Aikido is not a sport. It is a discipline, an educational process for training the mind, body, and spirit.”^{iv} There are many things I have to learn – on a physical level, on a technical level, but most of all on a mental level. I do wish to study and embody Aikido fully. A coin has two sides; the two of them make the coin. Uke and Tori are interrelated, Aikido needs both. I need to practice both to refine my character and become a person of inner harmony. It is said that you learn Aikido through Ukemi. This is true, but it is not all. As a devoted student to the art, I need to become a good Tori. Only thus will a student ever be able to pass the art on and become a teacher. Something I have neglected ignorantly for many years. A student (I) needs a teacher. But one day, a student has to become a teacher.

Otherwise, the transmission of the art will stop and Aikido will end. Whether I will ever come as far as to actually be a teacher, I do not know and dare not guess; but this is not the crucial point. The key point is that it is part of the way to *try* and be as good a Tori as an Uke.

The Journey in Retrospective: Acknowledgements

It is time to look forward and I am joyfully looking towards the steps still to come. Nonetheless, the future is not yet here, and “you have to know the past to understand the present” as Carl Sagan said. Therefore, I wish to express my greatest thanks to my teacher Jürgen Schwendinger Sensei, who introduced me to the art right at the beginning and has ever since formed the basis of my Aikido, continuously supporting me through my studying years where I could not practice at my home dojo, the O Sen Kan. Thanks to his openness and trust I was permitted to visit many different dojos – as a seminar participant or as an Uchi Deshi. Also, I wish to thank Michael Schwendinger Sensei and Wolfgang Petter Sensei and all members of the O Sen Kan.

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ⁱ Ueshiba, M., and Takahashi, H. (ed.) (2013): The Heart of Aikido: The Philosophy of Takemusu Aiki. Kodansha, USA, p. 52

ⁱⁱ Chiba, T.K. (2007): The Study and Refinement of Martial Awareness. In: SHIUN. The Birankai Continental Europe Newsletter, Vol. 5, p. 7

ⁱⁱⁱ Chiba, T.K. (2007): The Study and Refinement of Martial Awareness. In: SHIUN. The Birankai Continental Europe Newsletter, Vol. 5, No. 2, p. 4

^{iv} Saotome, Mitsugi (1993): Aikido and the Harmony of Nature. Shambhala, United States of America, p. 245