



Nidan Essay
by Christina Vaccaro
O Sen Kan

Resoluteness

I had always preferred to be Uke. And react, move, follow. In my Shodan essay, I described my inner struggle of impersonating the right *shin* (heart, mind, spirit) for conducting a technique as Tori. How should I summon the rather dominating attitude, the commanding virtue of the Tori, when I did not like to “rule”? I did not find it in my mind, but even less in my heart.

Four and a half years have passed. Have I in this moment truly continued the transformation from my favouritism of being Uke to incorporating being Tori? Two years of no or disrupted training periods have not helped to develop. However, for one thing, I realised that I missed my “Aikikids”-teaching classes. And there, obviously, I lead the way. For another thing, I felt and feel the need to progress. After all, I started my Aikido journey at the end of 2009. After about 10 years¹ of working very hard and somewhat more successfully on the Uke role, the neglected Tori role deserves more focus. After all, Uke and Tori should be seen as one. There is not one without the other. Yet, these reflections and wise phrases could not solve my struggle in reality. I needed something I would be able to fully embrace and to profoundly change my mindset regarding the Uke-Tori-dichotomy and my personal part in it.

What was it that still, after having been aware about the unbalance in my Aikido for several years, kept me from finding myself fully accepting and living the Tori role? It was after two Aikido seminars that I found the answer. I had to take Ukemi for hour after hour. In my later reflection I realized: There was no trace of hesitation in my teacher’s “Tori-Aikido”. There was pure determination in every single instant. And that was it for me. Not “timing” and “distance” but resoluteness. Of course, on a technical level it is all about timing and distance (*ma-ai*). On an inner level, however, you cannot teach somebody to be resolute.

Martialness and form

I struggle each time being Tori because I am not resolute. I hesitate. Still, after many years, I am sometimes unsure about the correctness of my technical knowledge, about details and forms. After all this time of practicing Aikido, one sees several teachers and their different styles. One knows basic techniques and variations; one remembers exercises where something was done another way. It can get all mixed up in one’s head. But these are excuses. The point is: As Tori, you need to know what you do and trust in yourself and this “knowing”. You need to have at least an idea before the Uke

¹ I had stopped to practice Aikido for two years because of an injury.

attacks. A plan might change as the encounter evolves. Each “fight” is dynamic and unpredictable in its outcome. But being Tori is not about planning the defence until the end. Being Tori is not about formal perfection. What really matters is that at each moment you (re)act in a martial way, i.e. you go out of the line, break Uke’s balance and get yourself in a position of control. These are the basic principles, independent from form. And these require resoluteness and determination, instead of hesitation about the technique’s formal correctness and misplaced perfectionism. Forms matter, of course. They are tools and the more of them you know (and the more accurately you know them), the more extensive and effective the toolbox you may utilize in any given situation is. However, no matter what form, form cannot excel primordial martiality. I have never seen a good teacher hesitate. Even when teachers need to change the technique in the middle of the praxis, they do not hesitate. My teacher Jürgen Schwendinger is a prime example for that when conducting a technique as intended to and when being forced to adapt to the Uke’s behaviour. Even if he has to change directions, he does so with ease and sovereignty.

Practicing Aikido for a long time may make one forget about the underlying and more meaningful principles than technical procedures. As you so much crave to learn and practice technical forms correctly, indeed perfectly, you may not see the forest because the trees are that close. Of course, through technical accuracy, a form can work (as effectively as it should). However, the inner resoluteness is what will lead one in any form or “free movement” to apply actual martial skill. In a grading or in any advanced practice where the stage of form is overpassed, the essence is to live the martiality within it. Form alone is not enough; there must be the right *shin*. Really, it is about believing in oneself and one’s Aikido. It is about me believing in my own Aikido.

Teacher and student

Aikido has taught me many things – and Aikido is transmitted through teachers. This transmission would deserve at least an entire essay about it. Here I merely wish to express my gratitude of having had great teachers in my Aikido life. At the top of those I wish to express my deepest gratitude stands my teacher Jürgen Schwendinger. He has not only formed me and believed in me for many years now, he has earned my profound respect as being one of those rare teachers who inspire and radiate esteem without pressing down on students. I do thank him with all my heart. In addition to my teacher, I would like to thank those who have shaped me as well. Without Jürgen Schwendinger, Mark Pickering, Tony Cassells, Anne Ducouret, Jules and Leonie McGough, Frank Edelmaier, Wolfgang Petter and Michael Schwendinger I would not have become who I am now.

Christina Vaccaro
1st Dan
Dornbirn, Austria
March-April-May 2022