

English Special Topic, 2008/2009

Aikido.

“The Way of Peace”



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Part One

The Term “Aikido”

What Is Aikido?

“Aikido is not a sport. It is a discipline, an educational process for training the mind, body, and spirit.”¹

This quotation indicates the philosophy behind the techniques *Aikido* works with. But what exactly does this philosophy signify? Before discussing this highly interesting matter, one should become acquainted with quite a few background information to be able to understand the deeper meaning of philosophic approaches.

Thus, in the following, I shall be concerned not only with the philosophy of Aikido but also with the life of the Founder, Morihei Ueshiba, and the martial art itself.



AI

Love

Harmony

KI

Energy

Spirit

DO

Way

Path²

¹ Saotome, Mitsugi: Aikido and the Harmony of Nature. United States of America 1986, 1993, p. 245

² cf. <http://www.aikikaidornbirn.at>; Menu: “What is Aikido?” 28.02.2009

Aikido is a relatively young Japanese martial art based on several old martial arts like *Jujitsu* (martial art without weapons) or *Kenjutsu* (swordsmanship) which were practiced by the samurai. It was developed by Morihei Ueshiba, embodying his studies of various martial arts, his religious beliefs and his philosophy.³

The term can be translated in many different ways. “*The Way of Harmony of the Spirit*” is one way; another one is “*The Art of Peace*” as the Founder declared. The “*ai*” in *Aikido* indicates its non-violent approach and it could be said that *Aikido* is first of all an art of self-defence, involving throws and joint locks, working by redirecting and neutralising the attacker’s energy in circular and spiral motions.⁴

Viewing *Aikido* on a purely physical level, it is one of the most effective forms of self-defence taught today (when trained long enough, though). Additionally, it keeps one’s body healthy and is often practiced to a high age. However, besides physical fitness, many *Aikidokas* – this is the name for people who practice *Aikido* – find upon closer examination not only physical health and self-defence techniques but also spiritual enlightenment and peace of mind.⁵

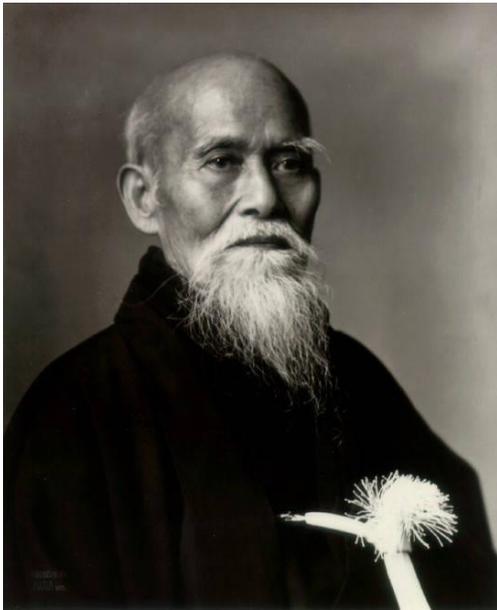
³ cf. <http://www.aikikaidornbirn.at>; Menu: “What is Aikido?” 28.02.2009

⁴ id.

⁵ id.

The Founder

1. Morihei Ueshiba (1883-1969)



Morihei Ueshiba, born on 14th December, 1883, grew up in Tanabe City, Japan. This area is said to be a region where the samurai had lived and is also a place of spiritual beliefs (allegedly the Shinto Gods were born in the mountains near Tanabe).⁶

In fact, the Ueshiba family are the descendents of a great warrior tradition and many of their ancestors were renowned for their great physical strength. People in Tanabe were commonly stubborn, hard working and in possession of explosive tempers – traits Morihei displayed throughout his life.⁷

To describe the eventful life of the Founder, I decided to give a short overview of Morihei Ueshiba's life and be subsequently concerned about a few aspects of his biography in more details. Therefore, I omitted the aspects I will later deal with in the following:

In 1902 Morihei married Hatsu Itogawa, a distant relative, who accompanied and supported her husband all his life. She gave birth to four children, a girl and three boys, two of which Morihei and Hatsu lost to illness.⁸

In December 1919, Morihei's father became seriously ill. Therefore Morihei turned over his whole property to another martial artist and left Hokkaido for good. On the journey back to Tanabe he encountered the grand shaman Onisaburo Deguchi because he stopped in Ayabe to pray for his father. Morihei Ueshiba was impressed by Onisaburo's theology which emphasized the divinity of each and every human being. He later entered the religious life of

⁶ cf. Stevens, John: The Shambhala Guide to Aikido. United States of America 1996, p. 1

⁷ id.

⁸ cf. Stevens (like annotation 6), p. 2

the *Omoto-kyo* sect. By the time Morihei arrived in Tanabe, his father had died. He then moved to Ayabe and lived there with his family.⁹

Throughout his life, the Founder lived as a true samurai in the ancient Japanese tradition.¹⁰ He led a highly spiritual life and still trained daily as an old man. However, his health gradually declined and in 1968 he began to suffer from liver cancer. Morihei Ueshiba died on 26th April, 1969, aged 86¹¹. Among his final words was the declaration:

“Aikido is for the entire world.”¹²

2. Childhood

Born as the only boy in the household and descendant of a great warrior family, his parents, Yoroku and Yuki Ueshiba, had high expectations of their son who was doted on by them and his four sisters. Yet Morihei was small, rather sickly and appeared to be a delicate and sensitive child.¹³

Morihei’s early life was shadowed by illness. He was often daydreaming, identifying himself with the great Buddhist teacher Kobo Daishi. Anyhow, the young Morihei already featured spiritual and religious traits which would play an important role throughout his life.¹⁴

However, encouraged by his father Yoroku, Morihei later became more active and built up his body by working on the local fishing boats, learning to wield a harpoon, taking up sumo wrestling and doing a lot of hiking in the Kumano mountains, where he learned much from nature.¹⁵ Morihei Ueshiba later declared:

“No matter where I am, part of me always remains absorbed in the sacred space of Kumano.”¹⁶

Intelligence and a quick-witted mind must be cited as other characteristics of the child. Furthermore, young Morihei loved to read and to concern himself with spiritual and religious

⁹ cf. Stevens (like annotation 6), p. 7

¹⁰ cf. Saotome (like annotation 1), p. 7

¹¹ cf. Stevens (like annotation 6), p. 19ff

¹² id., p. 21

¹³ cf. id., p. 1f

¹⁴ cf. Saotome (like annotation 1), p. 7

¹⁵ cf. Stevens (like annotation 6), p. 2

¹⁶ id.

education. But Morihei didn't like being shut up in a classroom, so he left middle school in his first year. He continued his studies of esoteric Buddhism at a local Shingon temple, though.¹⁷

3. Profession and Career

Morihei's first job was that of an accountant, but this type of work did not suit him, thus Yoroku sent his eighteen-year-old son off to the great metropolis of Tokyo. There he did quite well as a merchant, establishing the Ueshiba Company, which employed quite a few employees. However, his heart was not in commerce and he was soon back in Tanabe.¹⁸

In 1902, he prepared to enlist in the army but he was an half inch too small, thus he hung up from trees with heavy weights until he fulfilled the preset conditions. He was very successful in the military and returned home unscathed in Tanabe, after the Russo-Japanese war with a lot of enthusiasm. Morihei was even asked to consider a career in the military; but he declined.¹⁹ "I instinctively felt that there was something terribly wrong about combat; there are no real winners in a war, there is only death and destruction"²⁰, he later said.

After his discharge from the military, Morihei's life had no direction; but soon he deepened his path in the martial arts and led the self-sufficient life of a farmer. In doing so, he put into practice his idea of the essential unity of *Budo* ("the Way of the Warrior") and farming. Having virtually no income, he lived in extreme poverty, training body and spirit and working the soil. Morihei Ueshiba remained farmer till the end of his life.²¹

4. Political Commitment and Social Activities

Believing that change could occur only through action, Ueshiba became involved in many social reforms. In 1909, for instance, he came under the beneficial influence of Kumagusu Minakata, a very literate man, with whom he teamed up to "*spearhead*" what was likely to be modern Japan's first environmental protest movement. Although Morihei did not refer to himself as such, he remained a keen environmentalist throughout his life.²²

¹⁷ cf. Stevens (like annotation 6), p. 2

¹⁸ cf. id.

¹⁹ cf. id., p. 2f

²⁰ id., p. 3

²¹ cf. id.; cf. Saotome (like annotation 1), p. 10

²² cf. Saotome (like annotation 1), p. 4

In 1912, the Japanese government announced the beginning of the Hokkaido Project, encouraging people to settle in a northernmost, undeveloped island. The frozen land was harsh, inhospitable and unwilling to yield. The first two years brought poor harvests and spirits were low, but Ueshiba encouraged people, setting an example by his optimism and ceaseless hard work. Then the situation changed and the land yielded its long-awaited harvest.²³

After lying low for a while, Morihei resumed his position as senior instructor to the main military academies in Tokyo and Osaka, being, in fact, one of the most important and influential people in Japan at that time, being the government's minister of *Budo*. During World War II, Morihei Ueshiba remained in active government service during the initial years of the war, though later becoming disturbed by the increasing brutality and senselessness of the fighting. In 1942, he resigned all his official positions, pleading serious illness, and he withdrew to his farm in Iwama, located about two hours from Tokyo, where he and his wife lived in a little hut. He cut all his ties to the world and devoted himself to the spiritual discipline he then called *Aikido*.²⁴

However, this does not mean that he discontinued his social nature. After the war he thought that *Aikido* would play an essential role in Japan's recovery and in the emerging world civilization, bringing peace and harmony.²⁵

5. Martial Arts and the Development of Aikido

Morihei's life as a martial artist took its beginning in moving to Tokyo, where he gradually began the practice of several martial arts. After his service in the military, Morihei practiced more intensively, becoming extremely proficient at sumo wrestling, bayonet and sword fighting.²⁶

Morihei continued to practice martial arts in Hokkaido, often engaging in sumo contests and other tests of strength, remaining undefeated until he crossed paths with the legendary Sokaku Takeda, a man with great physical strength. Then he began training with Sokaku.²⁷

²³ cf. Saotome (like annotation 1), p. 8

²⁴ cf. Stevens (like annotation 6), p. 13f

²⁵ cf. Saotome (like annotation 1), p. 10

²⁶ cf. Stevens (like annotation 6), p. 3

²⁷ cf. id., p. 5

Although he gained much from Sokaku, Morihei was still searching for something deeper than expert technique and devastating power as Morihei's quest was always primarily spiritual rather than martial.²⁸

A turning point in Morihei's career as a martial artist was his journey to Mongolia with Onisaburo in 1924, in search for Shambhala, the fabled kingdom of heaven on earth. The group came face to face with death, encountering bandits, soldiers and the Chinese army. They got caught and only narrowly escaped summary execution²⁹. Back in Ayabe, Morihei resumed his training with an intensity that both amazed and alarmed his students and friends. He trained, for instance, outdoors in the woods almost every night.³⁰

On the advice of Onisaburo Deguchi,³¹ Morihei opened the "Ueshiba School" of martial arts. His personal students – including several women – were chosen after careful screening, involving several tests of inner strength and volition. In 1923, Morihei officially named the art *Aiki Bujutsu*³². The Founder only started to call the discipline *Aikido* after he resigned all his official positions and devoted his life to the art.

His dojo was called "*Kobukan*", which indicates a search for truth by transcending ordinary human consciousness. It was nicknamed "*The Hell Dojo*" for the severity and thoroughness of the practice sessions. Later, the name was changed from *Kobukan* to the *Aikikai Foundation*, which was headed by the Founder's son, Kisshomaru Ueshiba.³³

After World War II, all martial arts were banned and *Aikido* training resumed again in earnest in Tokyo around 1950. Over the following two decades, the practice of *Aikido* spread rapidly both in Japan and abroad.³⁴

Even though Morihei spent much of his time in prayer, meditation and study in his final years, he travelled extensively, deeply impressing new students with imposing displays of *Aikido* techniques and, at the same time, totally confounding them with his mysterious explanations of the secrets of the art.³⁵ ("You know, I couldn't follow a thing you said.")³⁶

²⁸ cf. Stevens (like annotation 6), p. 7

²⁹ A summary execution means that the person is killed on the spot without trial. See also: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Summary_execution (06.01.2009)

³⁰ cf. Stevens (like annotation 6), p. 10

³¹ "You should make Budo your life. You have the strength to move mountains. Do it!" (Saotome, p. 10)

³² *Aiki Bujutsu* is the "blending of spirit based on classical martial movement. Jutsu is technique." (id.)

³³ cf. id., p. 11

³⁴ cf. Stevens (like annotation 6), p. 18

³⁵ cf. id.

³⁶ id.

To conclude, the event-filled life of Morihei Ueshiba is the process that gave birth to Aikido. It is the result of his intensive spiritual training and his ceaseless pursuit of truth.

In fact, Morihei Ueshiba practiced over thirty martial arts – most for less than three months as he was able to master most techniques very quickly. *Daito-Ryu Aiki Jujutsu* was the discipline Morihei studied longest, and which had the greatest influence on the technical development of Aikido.³⁷

6. Fame and Honour

During the Russo-Japanese War, the stories brought back by Ueshiba's comrades, telling of his great courage under fire, made him a living legend. He was respectfully called "*the Soldier Kami*" among the troops.³⁸

Also, by the time the world heard of a martial artist with enormous powers – he was sometimes called "*martial art wizard*" – all kinds of fighters came to test Morihei for themselves. He sent every single challenger flying.³⁹

Nevertheless, his main popularity among people was not due to his martial talent but to his honesty and devotion. When the situation of the new settlers of the Hokkaido Project changed to the better thanks to Morihei, people began to call him "*King of Shirataki*" (*Shirataki* was the land's name) and whenever there was a problem, they went to him and he helped them with all his might.⁴⁰

7. Supernatural Powers

After his narrow escape from death on the journey to Mongolia, Morihei is said to have manifested superhuman, even miraculous powers. Energy would seem to swirl about him, doors and windows would rattle whenever he entered a room.⁴¹

His incredibly ability to dodge bullets would save him twice from death. Allegedly, he encountered a military firing squad two times and they were not able to hit him because, as he later explained, he saw the bullet before it was shot in shape of a tiny light, embodying the

³⁷ cf. Stevens (like annotation 6), p. 7

³⁸ cf. Saotome (like annotation 1), p. 8

³⁹ cf. Stevens (like annotation 6), p. 12

⁴⁰ cf. Saotome (like annotation 1), p. 8

⁴¹ cf. Stevens (like annotation 6), p. 10

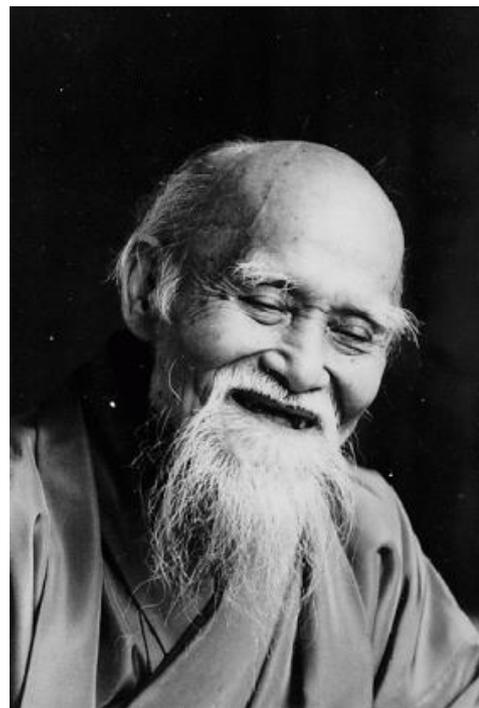
aggression of the shooter he needed to pull the trigger with the intention to kill a human being⁴².

During training session, Morihei would extend his bokken (wooden sword) in front of him and encourage five students at a time – all young and fit – to push on it. They could not move it an inch.⁴³

However, as age demanded its price, Morihei Ueshiba was very fragile and needed help going downstairs. Even more astonishing that on the mat he was powerful, still displaying unbelievable powers. In an interview he once revealed: “Usually it’s tough because I’m old. But once standing in the dojo in front of people the usual Ueshiba disappears... I forget that I’m old!”⁴⁴

8. His Teaching and Philosophy

As Morihei spoke in a kind of “twilight language”⁴⁵, his students complained that his style of speech was too old-fashioned for them to understand, Morihei would reply with a chuckle: “No, no, what I am saying is the very latest.”⁴⁶ Understanding this statement is crucial to understand *Aikido*’s philosophy. Morihei’s teaching focused on all the concerns of today: “The necessity of unifying mind and body; conflict resolution instead of confrontation, everyday life as an act of worship, as a celebration; maintenance of a healthy lifestyle; the importance of regular meditation; and concern for and care of the environment.”⁴⁷ Only these actions would bring peace and harmony.



⁴² “Before the opponent could pull the trigger, his intention to kill would form into a ball of spiritual light and fly at me. If I evaded this ball of light, no bullet could touch me.” Stevens, p. 10

⁴³ Saotome (like annotation 1), p. 10

⁴⁴ This interview can be seen on <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k-Sugag-Ncs&feature=related> (06.01.2009)

⁴⁵ Stevens (like annotation 6), p. 19

⁴⁶ id.

⁴⁷ id.

Two days before his death, Morihei declared: “All my students must remember, I did not create *Aikido*. *Aiki* is the wisdom of God; *Aikido* is the Way of the laws which He created.”⁴⁸

In the interview mentioned before, Morihei also said that “Aikido is a path to self-perfection”. Transforming selfish instincts of aggression through severe personal discipline and through an attitude of devotion leads one’s life to a higher level of consciousness in order to rise above self-love and love and respect humanity and society instead: A universal and divine love that the Founder called the love of *Kami*, of God.⁴⁹

9. What Remained

Aikido originated in Japan; now it is a part of world culture, practiced by people of many different nationalities in all parts of the globe. Morihei Ueshiba remains a living presence in most dojos in shape of a picture and greetings towards him before and after the training. He was respectfully called *O Sensei*, which means Great Teacher, and is still – you will not find a student not speaking of him as *O Sensei*.

I feel that the best way to express what he left on earth are two quotations from Mitsugi Saotome, once an *uchi deshi* (personal student) of *O Sensei*.

“All who were touched by O Sensei, even for a short time, felt their hearts cleansed by his nobility and spiritual strength, and the radiant purity of his compassion and concern made us deeply ashamed of the selfish aggressions we found within ourselves.”⁵⁰

“When Aikido students think of O Sensei, they often invest his life with mysterious powers of the supernatural. However, looking back over O Sensei’s life, I find this attitude incorrect. [...] His spiritual enlightenment was not magically bestowed upon him. It was earned through a lifetime devotion to truth, dedication to society, and immense courage. [...] [Aikido] has a vital function in this world as a tool to educate and refine society. It is a philosophy of action.”⁵¹

⁴⁸ This is an extract of words he said to his students gathered around his deathbed. The full quotation would be: “You must not worry about this old man. All physical life is limited. Within the course of nature, the physical being must change, but the spirit will never die. Soon I will enter the spiritual world, but still I want to protect this world. That is now your task.” Some pause. “All my students must remember, I did not create Aikido...” Saotome, p. 5

⁴⁹ cf. Saotome (like annotation 1), p. 7

⁵⁰ id., p. 12

⁵¹ id. p. 15

Part Three

The Philosophy

“Is technique born of philosophy or is philosophy born of technique? It does not matter, for technique and philosophy are but one explanation of reality. Each alone is unimportant.”⁵²

As mentioned before, *Aikido* contains all philosophy of life one needs. Its basic principles can be found in everyday life easily. However, it is not enough to deal with the philosophy theoretically for no one is able to understand theory without having first-hand experience with these principles.

1. Terms

<u>Term</u>	<u>Explanation</u>
Dojo	Gym Here the training takes place. The space is treated respectfully unlike any other training place. “Dojo is the place where the Way is studied” ⁵³
Sensei	Teacher
Uchi Deshi	“the inner student” Aikidoka who lives and trains side by side his teacher
Nage (or Tori)	The one who gets attacked and has to defend himself. The Nage conducts the technique.
Gi	White tracksuit consisting of two separate parts
Uke	Attacker, opponent The Uke receives the technique; he is the one who gets thrown.
Bushido	The Way of the Warrior (his way of life)
Bokken	Wooden sword
Jo	Wooden staff
Tanto	Wooden knife

⁵² Saotome (like annotation 1), p. 176

⁵³ id., p. 10

2. The Training

Training takes place in the dojo, where commonly a picture of *O Sensei* is hung up in the front (*kamiza*, see picture). When entering or leaving the dojo, one bows to the *kamiza*. At the beginning and at the end of every training session, the *Aikidokas* bow their thanks to *O Sensei* and to the teacher giving the lesson. Sometimes there is also meditation before or after the training.



Generally, there is no speaking among students during training sessions. When the teacher is demonstrating a technique or talking about the deeper meaning of a certain movement or *Aikido* in general, students sit down in *Seiza* (see picture). When demonstrating a technique, the teacher often uses an *Uke* (attacker). This could be anyone from the pupils but most of the time the teacher picks a high grade (*Dan*).

When the teacher has finished demonstrating the technique, it is the students' turn to try. When the technique is for partner practice, students build groups of two. You may choose anyone to train with, but you have to be quick because it would be very impolite to refuse if you get asked first by somebody else.

With your partner, you then search for free space on the mat. The technique is conducted four times by the *Nage* before changing sides; the lower grade starts as *Uke*. Training this particular technique lasts until the teacher stops it – either to explain a certain part or the whole of it when he sees that it has not been understood by the students or to demonstrate the next technique if he is satisfied. In both cases, all students sit down again in *Seiza*, silently following the teacher's movements or his words.

A lot of training is essential – not mainly to keep you physically fit and healthy, but to educate your instinct (*honne*). It is crucial that you do not have to think about the movements. In real

life, there would not be the time to do so anyway. The trick is to expect the unexpected; of course only as far as this is possible.

Another very important point is your attitude towards and your perception of training, as often practising *Aikido* and learning the martial art is about tiny, invisible differences in the movements. Sometimes, only centimetres decide whether you use physical strength or the power of rotation; whether you fail or not. For this, it is vital to be in possession of a so called “*beginner’s mind*”.

This kind of sense is nothing *Aikido* teachers have invented. It is rather a natural human characteristic. Indeed, if you are situated in a completely new environment, your alert senses take in everything around you in a much more intensive way. This alertness is necessary for your learning progress. You also need a certain love for detail.

3. Grading

As mentioned before, *Aikido* has no competition. You train for yourself and you do not measure your improvements in fights. Still, *Aikido* has different grading levels. In Europe, you commonly start with 6th *Kyu*. Then it declines until 1st *Kyu*, and rises again from 1st *Dan* to 9th *Dan*.

In order to achieve a higher grade, you have to take an examination, which means that your teacher names you a technique and you have to conduct it. The higher you get the more techniques you have to be able to master. It is always your teacher telling you when you are ready to take the next examination.

As *Aikidokas* should always treat each other with respect, there is often not much difference in the behaviour between the lower grading levels. However, there is a noticeable one towards the higher grading levels.

It is, for instance, the task of a student to place Sensei’s weapons at the *kamiza* before training or to fold together his *hakama* (a part of the training garment which is worn over the *Gi* by *Dans*) at the end of the training.

The *uchi deshi*, the “*inner student*”, occupies a special position. He lives with Sensei in the dojo (not the gym itself but in a room in the same house), accompanies him whenever he leaves the dojo and arranges anything like booking a hotel room or table in a restaurant. He is

the one who has to be aware of any possible dangers around his Sensei and to intervene if he gets attacked. In return, the *uchi deshi* gets educated in the secrets of *Aikido*. Only hand-picked students become *uchi deshis*.

4. The Five Pillars

Chiba Sensei, once *uchi deshi* of *O Sensei* (for eight years!) and respected widely and deeply among *Aikidokas*, has now depicted five basic principles of *Aikido*. These pillars are essential for a good *Aikidoka*:

- *Centeredness*
- *Connectedness*
- *Wholeness*
- *Liveliness*
- *Openness*

Centeredness: One has to keep his or her own balance. You cannot strike if your position is not stable. Furthermore, one should always try to use energy out of the center (your belly). Only this way you stop using physical strength, which is limited and will be surpassed by many others, and start using your inner energy, your so called *ki*.

Connectedness: Being aware of every movement of your partner demands high concentration, a keen sense for slightest movements and an extremely good reaction to follow these. Your connection is your defence and protection. Otherwise, your opponent will strike your open spots.

Wholeness: If you are centered and connected with your partner, you are likely to feel the unity of your and the other body in the movement. You do not longer consist of legs, arms, head and belly, but of one unifying body. Everything is interactive: You partner conducts a movement, you respond to it and he responds to you again. It is one whole thing.

Liveliness: When you are aware of this wholeness, your senses may very well awaken. You will feel your body differently and your psychological aliveness will flow through your veins and allow you stronger physical liveliness.

Openness: To rise to the art's highest level, one has to look beyond technique and be aware of the virtue of life with every breath of air. These virtues include humility, receptivity and modesty. It is important to encounter your opponent while bearing your finiteness in mind.⁵⁴

5. Aikido in Everyday Life

Aikido is a mirror. Let me explain this by using an example: If you are scared of falling figuratively – meaning that you do not like to lose control – you will also have problems to fall during training. *Aikido* shows you who you are and where your strengths and weaknesses lie. “True victory is self-victory” is the motto of our Dojo and also a quotation of *O Sensei*.

“Aikido training means not to challenge your partner, but to challenge yourself.”⁵⁵

On the mat, you learn to face conflicts which you cannot escape. Thus, you learn to handle problems in everyday life. In particular, one can learn much regarding relationships. Every person trains differently and you have to be able to adjust to every new training situation.

This adaption is generally necessary in *Aikido*. You have to be flexible and aware of every movement and of every change in the movement. You have to keep the connection with your partner. This is necessary to keep your balance. When you get attacked you use the energy of the attacker. He is aggressive and his impact is powerful. However, is



if you are able to neutralize his attack, the attacker has no chance, as he works with physical strength, whereas you defend yourself with nothing more than redirecting his own impact.

This harmonic approach of a martial art is due to the Asian religion: Everybody has a *karma*. It is your responsibility to defend yourself *and* the opponent in order to keep your and his

⁵⁴ cf. Document of Chiba Sensei about the Five Pillars (pdf) (sent to me by my teacher, Jürgen Schwendinger Sensei)

⁵⁵ Saotome (like annotation 1), p. 184

karma pure. So, one could ask, why then should anybody study a martial art? How could anything unite harmony and violence?

If you ever attend an *Aikido* course, there is a high chance that you will hear something like: “Aikido is love.” Tony Cassells, Sensei of my Sensei, said this once. It is all about Yin and Yang. If you do not know misery, how could you ever feel blissfully? If there is no decay, how can a new being ever possibly grow? Through learning conflict you learn harmony. Through knowing the opponent’s aggression, you learn to encounter him with love.

It is a question of balance. There are always two sides – everyone of us carries both of them. The aim of *Aikido* is to purify our inner ego by losing attachments to our selfish behaviour and become free.



Part Four

Personal Approach

I remember my first *Aikido* lesson very well, though it was neither a “body art” lesson, nor a classical “weapon” lesson with Bokken or Jo, but a Iaido (swordsmanship) lesson. However, it was a Monday and I went to the training sessions four times that week.

People were extremely nice there – not only friendly towards me, their “guest”, but towards each other. The atmosphere was simply fantastic – I do merely dare to try and describe it. Full of energy and a strong compulsion to learn as much and as fast as possible.

For me, it was something completely new. Being female, I was laughed at as a child by my family when talking about wanting to pick up a martial art. Still, I always had the desire to do so and meeting these people made me feel that I was not just a naive girl.

The thing about *Aikido* that really appeals to me is that it is extremely suitable for women. *Aikido* does not work with physical strength, so it is absolutely no problem to be a woman training among men. It is fantastic that it is even of advantage to be one, as men tend to try and use their physical power. Attempting this as a woman, you will lose deplorably.

What is so special about *Aikido* for me are these three points:

- **its harmonious and peaceful approach to life**
- **its connection with the principles of everyday life**
- **the learning process that never ends**

I am really grateful that I found a “physical activity” that suits me so well and often makes me feel free and content, even completely happy. I have attended three *Aikido* courses so far, and all of them were unique and wonderful experiences. It is the spirit on the mat as well as the socialising with the other *Aikidokas* after the hard training that lets one’s vital spirits awaken.

In a world full of speed, pictures and noises, *Aikido* is the quiet place where one can calm down – escape from stress and return back to real life and inner strengths – and find a vital force within oneself. Understanding this, one realises the truthfulness of a quotation of *O Sensei*:

“The real purpose of Aikido [...] is to strengthen the quality of your life.”