

Weapons Work and Aikido

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Despite countless claims to the “ultimate martial art” that permeate the martial arts ether, no martial art is complete. I have seriously studied three of them and would hazard that I would need three more to be a well rounded martial artist. That said, Aikido is more complete and interesting than many others but can be enhanced by a study of weapons, and specifically the sword. This is why I spend my some of my limited training time as the iaido study group leader at Roswell Budokan.

My weapons training outside of Aikido has primarily been Mugai Ryu iaido, which I have practiced for ten years. Before beginning iaido and Aikido, I had training, as part of my karate curriculum, in the traditional Okinawan kobudo weapons of bo, sai and nunchaku, with most of that concentrated on the bo. So I have followed a well-worn path of supplementing my Aikido with iaido and my karate with kobudo. These are popular combinations and for good reason. Aikido traces its origins from the Samurai class in which the katana was at the top of the weapons hierarchy. Indeed O-Sensei could often be seen wielding a bokken or jo as Aikido techniques are derived from the samurai arts. Most Aikido styles have aiki jo and aiki ken techniques as a core part of their style. The karate and kobudo connection is equally natural as both originated from the peasant class, perhaps as a defense against the katana carrying bushi warriors.

Many years ago before I knew his background, I saw a video of Nishio Shoji sensei (7th Dan, Aikikai) performing at one of the early Aikido Friendship Demonstrations. I was drawn to his flavor of Aikido as seemingly more practical and in line with my own thinking on the matter. All of the shihan performing that day were excellent but his Aikido was the one I could relate to the most. Later I found out that he had extensive training and ranking in karate, judo, iaido and jodo. Much of this experience was had before his Aikido career began and I think his sword training was a major influence on him. What drew me to his techniques were his intentional entering movements that were obviously derived from other arts and how he incorporated them into Aikido. I understand now that his style of Aikido was a bit out of the mainstream and some criticized him for it but O-Sensei did much the same thing, combining his varied experience into our modern Aikido. Many of the early Aikido shihan also went their own way yet remained Aikikai affiliated or broke from the Aikido hombu and have major Aikido styles extant today.

While Aikido uses the sword as a means to an end, in iaido it is the end. Therefore the practice, on the surface, is quite different. Aiki ken is more flowing and blending with energy. The goal is to improve empty hand technique by using the wooden sword as a training aid. The movements tend to be big and somewhat stylized and are meant to help with tai sabaki, balance, posture, extension and ma-ai. The details are not paramount but rather the concepts are. It is more a “do.” Iaido movements are more precise and codified. The goal is not to improve some other martial art but to master the sword itself

and defeat an opponent who also has a sword. While still a “do,” it certainly is more toward the “jutsu” side of the spectrum.

Both arts are practiced to improve ourselves. While we all know a sword fight is not going to happen in our daily lives, the intention of Aikido is to deescalate an altercation once it starts or to avert it altogether. We want to protect our adversary to the extent possible. The iaido goal, once engaged in combat, would be to defeat our opponent, as a professional warrior would. Both arts take pains to avoid the conflict. Verbal Aikido can avert a fight and would be viewed as the highest form of the art. In iaido we are likewise admonished to “hide the koiguchi,” meaning to conceal the shame of having had to draw one’s sword in a duel.

Weapons work is but another lens to view the same picture. The training itself tends to exaggerate technical flaws, making them easier to see and correct. These corrections carry over to the taijutsu techniques of Aikido. Iaido helps me refine what I believe are core elements of Japanese martial arts:

- Stance, Posture and Balance (kamae) – When swinging a heavy sword it becomes readily apparent when my body is not aligned with my weapon. There is extra effort needed to start and stop a sword so a solid base is essential. Having a foot pointing 20 degrees in the wrong direction, being careless and having the front leg straight or having the back heel rise off the ground are bad habits that are highlighted with weapons training. While these attributes are not necessarily emphasized by all Aikido instructors, it is one thing that I immediately detect when watching other Aikidoka and it speaks volumes as to their skill.
- Breathing – While my style of iaido has no specific teachings on breathing, the majority of my martial training has detailed the importance of breathing. Breathing is life itself and very important for developing Ki. In fact, maintaining health is directly related to the quality of our breathing. Proper breathing is so universally important toward a healthy mind and body that both eastern and western athletics and sciences incorporate breath teachings. Think Aikido, karate, yoga, tai chi, dance, weight and strength training, aerobics, meditation, zazen, biofeedback, hypnosis, treatment for panic and anxiety attacks, and overcoming fears and phobias. A skilled opponent can read your breathing pattern and attack at time when you are most vulnerable. A good defense for a body blow is to exhale and tighten your abdomen just before you are hit. Good breathing can prolong your stamina and concentration as well as help you relax completely. Breath control can also improve kime and zanshin.
- Ma-ai (timing and distance) - Kumitachi, bokken dori, or any weapons partner practice is an excellent teacher of ma-ai. Amazingly the first time you are hit accidentally because you are too slow, too fast, too far away or too close, it is a wakeup call. Solo drills, non-contact sparring, kata and suburi have their place but don’t offer the “pucker factor” that a stick heading toward your head has. An oft-cited criticism of Aikido is the non competitive, non contact nature of it. Yes, I know breakfalls are not without contact but I am referring to what happens to the nage if they fail the technique. Usually they start again or at the worst, get admonished by their sensei. Weapons training ratchets up the concentration level in a good way.

- Bunkai – Iaido and weapons arts are particular about the precise application of a technique. The application and especially the target of a technique are often what would cause a technique to succeed or fail. It is fine if different teachers have different understanding of the bunkai of a technique as long as it works and makes sense in the context of their teaching. I often tell Aikido students that it is fine to do things their way as long as they are doing it on purpose and can articulate why they are doing it. Therefore there is a difference between a beginner doing the kihon differently each time because they are confused compared to an advance person making Aikido “their own” by trying new versions or applying oya or henka waza. I enjoy the detailed bunkai that iaido offers and readily incorporate it into my Aikido.
- Atemi - At the higher levels of martial arts all strikes are blocks and there really isn't the concept of offensive or defensive techniques. For that matter weapons and empty hand are the same. However one cannot evolve to that point without knowing how to strike to begin with. Weapons training informs my atemi by identifying targets and gaining the precision of a directed strike. By practicing a makko cut in iaido, I am improving my shomenuchi. Iaido's saya biki movement of the scabbard backward while drawing the sword forward helps my understanding the reciprocal motion necessary for a good munetsuki. By mastering kesa giri, I am making my yokomenuchi strong. By applying these atemi concepts to my Aikido, I can take my opponent's balance (kuzushi) as well as his resolve.
- Intent – The seriousness and austerity of iaido keiko along with the accompanying reigi is a benefit to my martial intention. While Aikido is also quite formal, my iaido practice puts me in the mindset needed to “win” the instant I come into contact with an opponent. Everything about the structure of iaido is somehow a martially intended action. Bathing in this atmosphere carries into my Aikido. This means that I do things with a purpose and with a reason. If I intend to give an earnest attack, I will, helping my partner improve. If I intend to defend myself, I will. I won't hurt my partner by accident because I will be careful and I have control. If I do hurt my attacker it will be on purpose because the situation called for it, such as outside of the dojo. My intentions are clear and my mind is focused only on the situation at hand.
- Kime (focus) – Sword training is excellent for kime and something I often see lacking in Aikido practitioners. The skill needed to wield a long heavy weapon and precisely control the power makes my empty hand strikes seem easy by comparison. The sword accentuates every flaw and focuses my attention on basic technique, no matter how many times I have done it.
- Taking the center – weapons only work when pointed in the right direction. That direction for personal combat is toward your opponent. The business end of the sword is the kensen (pointy part) and the center line is the desired location. So there is a competition for the center line with the sword or jo. To have this line is to have a huge advantage. Even a few degrees off that line can be detrimental. In Aikido taking that center line is important as it is where your partner is vulnerable to atemi and where his center is. In keeping your own weight underside and denying your attacker the midline, he will be off balance and weak.
- Angles and shear lines – By learning and understanding how to strike with weapons or empty hand atemi, you naturally gain a feel for when you are at risk of being hit by those same attacks. Iaido is heavily focused on angles of attack and this certainly helps me avoid getting hit in Aikido.

I strive to move just enough to avoid being hit while simultaneously positioning myself for a counter strike. Being able to tell that my partner is not able to reach me from a certain direction frees me to concentrate more fully on the smaller number of possibilities remaining.

- Concentration and maximization of power – The human body is only capable of so much power which is why we developed weapons to extend and maximize our offensive abilities. Weapon arts give us the keys to making the most of these extensions to our bodies.

All of the factors I have mentioned in this essay contribute to my ability to most efficiently use my strength. That is where some of the mystique of martial arts originates. We see a weaker, smaller, older or slower person maximizing his ability by the improvements that come through training with an attention to detail. We see a single person able to handle multiple attackers. We see the ability to control a situation. We see a confident person skillfully avoiding conflict. A famous quote of questionable provenance is "I am a great believer in luck, and I find the harder I work, the more I have of it." Similarly I would say "I like to do things the easy way and the more varied and complete my training, the easier things become."