

SMAA JOURNAL



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ANNOUNCEMENTS

2011 DUES REMINDER

SMAA dues should have been paid on the first of January, 2011. Please make a point of sending your payment to our Michigan headquarters on or before this date. Prompt payment helps the SMAA to run smoothly, and it reduces the amount of labor and cost associated with sending late dues notices.

SMAA PATCHES

The SMAA HQ is selling official SMAA patches for your gi. They're great looking patches that embody the spirit and honor instilled in members of our group. They won't fade or bleed when you bleach them, and yet we've been able to keep the cost down. Each patch is basically a 3½ inch circle featuring our logo shown below.



Our patches were produced using state of the art digitizing and ultra-modern technology to create an accurate and attractive embroidered emblem. They feature tight stitches, sharp detail, clean lettering, and top quality craftsmanship. There's no jagged stitching, but we've still got plenty of stitches so that the background doesn't show through.

OBJECTIVES OF THE SMAA

1. To promote and aid in the growth of Japan's traditional arts and ways.
2. To assist the public in achieving spiritual growth and physical development through budo/bujutsu.
3. To further friendship and understanding between Asian and Western martial artists.
4. To establish goodwill and harmony among martial artists of various systems.
5. To offer Western martial artists access to legitimate budo/bujutsu organizations and teachers in Japan.
6. To give practitioners of authentic budo/bujutsu recognition for their years of devotion to these arts.

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修道館武道会

The patch should be worn on the left side of your gi jacket near your heart. SMAA policy mandates only one patch per uniform to maintain the sense of dignity associated with traditional budo.

These new patches are a great way to show your respect and enthusiasm for our group; we hope all of our members will order at least one. **And the best part is the patches are only \$5.00 (US) each!** (E-mail shudokan@smaa-hq.com about special shipping for international orders.) To order, just send a check or money order made out to "SMAA" to:

SMAA HQ
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PAUL MARTIN'S JAPANESE SWORD SEMINAR

By Coneyl Jay

I was happy to attend the talk given by the acclaimed Japanese sword expert Paul Martin Sensei on July 9, 2011. The event was arranged by John Evans Sensei of the London Fudokan Dojo. The day started with a tameshigiri (test-cutting) session led by Evans Sensei. It was interesting to see a range in the quality of swords being used. In Nakamura Ryu battodo, swords are practical and personal, they are not ornaments or status symbols, in that respect it's fulfilling to see their application in the test cutting of mats. Tameshigiri focuses the mind and reveals much about the practitioner.

It was a rare opportunity to meet someone with a genuine and deep knowledge of the Japanese sword. The first part of the talk was a history of the Japanese sword from its creation in time of legend to its practical development and current status. The slide show was detailed and informative. It gave a clear understanding of the evolutionary progression of this unique weapon.

WE'RE ON FACEBOOK!

The SMAA has its own Facebook page. Drop by <http://www.facebook.com/ShudokanMartialArtsAssociation> to get the latest SMAA news. Check out the cool photo albums featuring top SMAA teachers. And become a fan of our new Facebook page, so you don't miss out on all the latest SMAA activities.

Not a Facebook member? Don't worry; registration is safe, easy, and you'll have lots of fun once you have your own Facebook page.

Some surprising facts were thrown in by Martin Sensei, SMAA Senior Advisor. For example, not all of us realized that the percentage of deaths in combat caused by the sword was very small, compared to long-range weapons like arrows and ancient guns. It shows that despite many of us having practiced martial arts and studied for many years, some of us (me) still have a slightly romanticized vision of times past in feudal Japan, with the sword being uppermost in the imagination. It was good to get that bit closer to understanding the reality of how things were.

One aspect I found particularly fascinating was Martin Sensei's insight into the subtle and vast world of the hamon, a visual blade pattern along the edge of a sword. Martin Sensei showed slides of natural phenomenon and talked of how they related to the effects achieved by master swordsmiths and how they were used to define particular styles and schools. Every hamon tells a story about its maker and its time. Hamon seek to evoke naturalistic phenomena as diverse as the Milky Way



Paul Martin Sensei, SMAA Senior Advisor

to berries growing on a plant. He also talked about the process of appraising a sword and how its beauty can be appreciated by understanding the relationship of its different qualities.

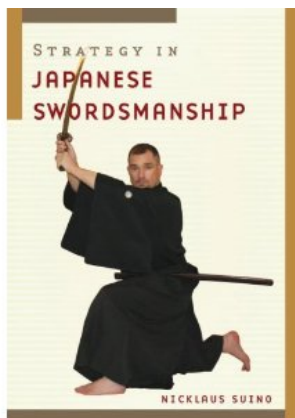
After a very tasty lunch provided by members of

London Fudokan, we were treated to an edited version of Martin Sensei's excellent film *Art of the Japanese Sword*. Afterwards three members of the school presented three very different katana (swords) for his keen examination. All through the day Martin Sensei's passion had been self evident, but this hands-on session definitely piqued his interest. Of one particular sword-smith he was able to tell us what they had been doing previously, and what they had achieved now, a father and son team who had recently become master craftsmen. Since the sword had been bought a few years ago on a recommendation, this news made the owner very happy. This, along with his technical observations, definitely enriched the ownership of these real katana, something of a bonus.

About the Author: Coneyl Jay practices Nakamura Ryu swordsmanship in the United Kingdom.

EXCERPTS FROM *STRATEGY IN JAPANESE SWORDSMANSHIP*

By Nicklaus Suino



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READING AN OPPONENT

Now that you have begun to acquire the skills of an expert swordsperson, you can turn your attention to learning how to evaluate your opponent. Indeed, mastery of this art requires that you develop the ability to instantly sense your opponent's strengths, weaknesses, and intentions. In what has

by now become a martial arts cliché, Sun Tzu advised that, "If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles."

Fortunately, if you have worked diligently to learn the principles taught in this book, half your work is already done. By learning how and where to direct your attention, you have improved your ability to recognize when an opponent fails to focus at the proper moment. By learning how to wield your sword, you have learned when your opponent's sword is weak. Learning correct distancing has taught you to feel when your opponent is too close or too far away. Practicing angular avoidance and counterattack drills has helped you to know when your opponent moves into a dangerous position. Your understanding of timing includes the ability to respond to your opponent's timing, whether she initiates the attack or reacts to yours.

On the simplest level, reading the opponent is nothing more than seeing her positional strengths and weaknesses. If you have thoroughly practiced all the drills leading up to this chapter, it should be a fairly simple matter to look at your opponent's static position and readily evaluate her. The amount of bend in her front knee, the angle of her sword, and the distance she chooses will each help you understand what sort of attack or defense is most likely to succeed.

More information can be obtained by watching your opponent move. You can learn a great deal about her ability by determining whether her balance is good or bad, whether her sword movements are smooth or jerky, and whether her rhythm is confident, hesitant, purposeful, or vague. For that reason, it is sometimes a tactical necessity to force your opponent to move. As you know by now, this can be done by attacking, offering a target, or retreating.

The second half of the process of learning to read an opponent is the more difficult one. It involves learning to feel her intentions so that you can defeat her attack just as it occurs. Such a deep understanding of your attacker requires you to use all your senses. Your eyes determine the strengths and weaknesses in her stance, your ears tell you when she inhales or exhales, your nose helps you decide if she is brave or fearful, and your sword gives you feedback on her tactical readiness. The mind puts all this information together to give you an accurate reading of your opponent's intentions.

Another way to describe the more advanced form of opponent-reading is that you are attempting to feel the flow of energy ("ki" in Japanese, "chi" in Chinese) between you. Though there are some who dislike using such an esoteric concept in the otherwise very precise world of swordsmanship, it can be a useful form of shorthand to describe the proper synergy of all the concrete perceptions we have discussed up until now. It helps to conjure up the feeling experienced by the swordsperson who

has trained his eyes, mind, body and sword. In the real world of interacting with swords, it turns out that an expert can perceive, with a high degree of accuracy, the tactical mood of the opponent.

To achieve the greatest awareness of your opponent's intentions, your state of mind is crucial. While a negative state of mind interferes with your ability to read an opponent, a positive state of mind facilitates energy flow. It may seem odd to say that one should feel a sense of goodwill toward an opponent but, if you are well trained, going into battle with a light heart and a confident feeling is better than wearing armor and helmet. The highly-trained, happy swordsperson is best able to infer the intent of the opponent.

Indeed, at the highest levels, success in swordsmanship is directly tied to the quality of one's character. A swordsperson with a strong, healthy, and focused mind will triumph over one with a weak, diseased, or scattered mind in virtually every battle, regardless of how much training the latter has had. By throwing yourself into your training, body, mind, and spirit, you give yourself the chance to experience the very character benefits that will put you in a position to prevail. Much more will be said about this in the final chapter of this book.

MASTERING SWORDSMANSHIP

Mastering swordsmanship is very difficult. Most students lack sufficient time and discipline to make quick progress. Those who can devote the hours to practice and who have the willpower to do so still face barriers to advancement. Our martial arts backgrounds are almost as varied as our fingerprints, each of us comes to the dojo with different degrees of talent, and the trajectory of our lives does not always maximize our opportunities to become experts. Even for the truly gifted, one barrier to mastery is the simple fact that there may not be a clear plan available for how to proceed. Indeed, forty years of martial arts study

has shown me that there is no such thing as a “one size fits all” method for achieving mastery.

However, if you are truly committed to success, there are common steps that can be applied both to technical swordsmanship and to the personal development that is an inherent part of it. Using these steps to guide to your training can help you understand what to focus on first, what to look for when you begin to make progress, and where you may be straying from the path of efficient personal development. At the same time, it should be clear that you can learn nothing profound without a commitment to constant practice and reflection. The advice in this chapter can only be understood in the context of regular training sessions involving strategic interactions between swordspersons.

An academic understanding is insufficient. You must internalize each lesson if you wish to advance your swordsmanship and your character. As in every exercise that came before, the keys to true understanding are careful reading, diligent practice, and deep reflection. You must make swordsmanship a part of your daily life. If you do so, you will one day look back and be astonished at how much your abilities and your character have changed.

SELF MASTERY

(1) Focus on the goal

Progress in swordsmanship requires us to constantly focus on our goals. We aspire to cut the opponent without being cut and to move toward perfection of character. It is critical to remember these aspirations whenever we practice and not to get sidetracked by aspects of training that do not move us forward. This does not mean that we ignore details or fail to practice complicated techniques. On the contrary, a swordsperson’s keen awareness should take in every facet of an interaction with an opponent. Focusing on the goal simply means that we evaluate the strategic and tactical characteristics of each aspect. If it furthers

our progress, we continue to practice it. If not, we put it aside.

When facing an opponent, for example, we notice a detail and immediately characterize it in tactical terms. If the angle of our opponent’s sword is too sharp, we recognize that that allows us to move closer and may provide an opening for attack. Such a detail is important because it may help us prevail. If our opponent happens to wear a purple hakama, we may find it amusing, but, because it has no bearing on our tactical approach, we simply file the information away without taking any action.

When choosing a technique, we must carefully consider whether practicing it will be an effective use of our time. After careful reflection, if we find it useless, we discard it. If it can be improved, we modify it accordingly. When we experience a mood or feeling during practice, we consider whether it is helpful to our tactical state of mind. If not, we find a way to cultivate a more beneficial mood.

Great progress is most often made by those who are obsessive about their pursuits, who constantly focus on a specific goal. This is true in martial arts, in creative endeavors, or in business. When a person is easily sidetracked or tends to change his mind frequently about his goals, he tends not to accomplish much. On the other hand, those who know exactly what they want and who consistently reevaluate their actions to ensure that they are on the right path are generally the ones who reach the highest levels of their field.

In the area of character development, we strive to become deeper and more in tune with our art, with our opponent, and with the principles of right action. We do this by training with energy and commitment, by reminding ourselves to pay careful attention to the feedback we get from the people and the world around us, by reflecting on our growth to ensure that we are on the right path, and by seeking the advice of those who have gone before us, whether that advice is found in books or

in the words of our teachers.

Focusing on the goal means knowing what you want, carefully considering how to get there, consistently evaluating your progress, turning away from dead ends, and choosing the best or most efficient means of moving forward. To advance in Japanese swordsmanship, recognize what the goals are and keep them uppermost in your mind as you set out to learn the techniques.

(2) Learn the essential techniques

Once you have established what your goals are, set out to learn the techniques that help you move toward them. In swordsmanship, the techniques of choice are the formal kata of iaido, drills from kenjutsu and kendo, and tactical exercises such as those found in this book. Study all the legitimate techniques that you can find, whether from a qualified teacher, a book, or a video. As you study, pay careful attention to each component of each technique, making sure that you understand not only how to do it, but also why it is done a certain way and what it is intended to accomplish.

Many new students of martial arts try to invent techniques. While their creative spirit is admirable, techniques invented by novices are not very effective or efficient. Creativity in martial arts, as I explained in *Budo Mind and Body*, is the expression of mastery, not a means of achieving it. Many great martial artists have come before us, perfecting the skills of their arts for hundreds of years, so it pays to be humble about your own ability to create something new. Complex endeavors follow the rule that greatness follows diligent study of the existing methods. Intuitive leaps are made possible by a deep understanding of fundamental concepts.

To advance in swordsmanship, learn the techniques that constitute your style. Make it a point to learn each one as well as possible, considering the guidance of your teacher, the technique's place in the overall structure of the system, and how it

prepares you to interact with opponents. Determine exactly what are the checkpoints of a properly performed technique and practice until you can execute all those checkpoints.

(3) Master the techniques

After identifying the techniques in your chosen art that help you move toward your goal, master their components by practicing with energy and commitment. Devote yourself to being able to perform each technique as well as you possibly can. This devotion involves constant practice and reflection on your progress. When you are not practicing, watch others to see if there are aspects of the technique that they are doing better than you. If so, incorporate their methods in your own techniques. If they are making errors, confirm that you are not committing the same ones. Seek out feedback from your teacher, actively requesting advice that will make you better. Put aside your ego and remember that even the greatest martial artists have room to improve themselves.

The great golfer Tiger Woods is a wonderful example of a person who was able to put aside his ego to improve. After having the most wins of any golfer in the first ten years of his career, he recognized that his swing could be made more effective and more consistent. He sought out the advice of the greatest teachers in the game and reinvented his swing. Having done so, he radically improved his game and proceeded to win more tournaments using the new method.

Many of my own most accomplished students of swordsmanship are martial artists who have achieved high ranks in arts such as karate, jujutsu, or aikido, yet they have been able to put aside their knowledge and accept advice from me on how to be better swordspersons. As a result, they become experts in more than one art. Being able to study swordsmanship like beginners in spite of their other achievements is a critical part of the reason they become great.

Indeed, the very act of striving for mastery is one of the cornerstones of our progress toward perfection of character. As we practice our skills over and over, each time refining them, we begin to get at the essence of martial arts. We become aware of our strengths and weaknesses, building on the former and gradually overcoming the latter. We come to understand exactly how each technique should be done. We see over and over that our negative moods interfere with our ability to perform at our best, and that our positive moods facilitate excellence. With great repetition, fatigue overcomes our analytical minds, and the techniques almost begin to perform themselves. At certain moments, if all the factors are in place, a kind of magic occurs in which we almost feel that we are watching the interaction from outside, and our bodies flow effortlessly into the correct positions. Small openings in our opponent's defenses seem huge. A fraction of a second contains a hundred perceptions, enabling us to respond instantaneously, and we feel invincible.

Constantly focusing on the goal, we learn the techniques of our system, then tirelessly work to master them. Once we achieve mastery, we then turn our attention to our opponents.

FOCUS ON THE OPPONENT

(1) Carefully observe the opponent

When you are competent in the techniques of your system, begin to pay close attention to the actions of your opponents. You have been involved in two-person interactions all along, but your focus during the first stages of development should have been primarily on your own actions: the techniques, how to execute them, and how to refine them. Now, having achieved sufficient ability that you can act by reflex, you begin to carefully observe the actions of your training partners.

We have already discussed much of what you will look for when facing an opponent who is armed

with a sword. The issues are the same as those you encountered while improving your own tactical skills, such as whether she wields her sword in an effective manner, whether she stands too far away or too close, and whether she uses angles and timing effectively. In the dojo, you can repeatedly interact with an opponent and thereby learn a great deal about how she behaves. Focus your attention on one aspect of each interaction and analyze it carefully before considering the next.

For example, watch the way your opponent moves forward to engage you. Does she move forward in balance and adopt an appropriate posture that suits the purpose of the drill? Are her feet positioned to give her the best possible means of moving forward to attack? Are the motions of her sword properly synchronized with her body movements?

At this point, try to discipline yourself to observe carefully without immediately trying to create tactical advantages for yourself. Designate a period in your training when you allow yourself to soak up information about your partners without trying to triumph every time. Think of this form of observation as "listening" with the eyes. The more you quiet your inner voice and your will to win, the more information will reach your mind. In Chapter 6, we discussed drills meant to help you develop a reflective mindset. Recall your state of mind as you practiced those drills and try to reproduce it as you improve your ability to observe your opponents.

The skills you develop during this type of training will benefit you in all areas of your life. You are probably already aware that most people in western countries are poor listeners. The few that are not, however, are surrounded by friends, since a good listener is highly prized. Many successful people have excelled because they have truly developed the ability to listen, and as a result they notice information that most others miss.

Careful observation is another cornerstone of our

continued character development. Hearing what the universe is telling you requires a quiet mind trained to pay attention to very subtle cues, such as the life lessons contained in our successes and failures and the guidance we receive from people who lead by example. Teaching yourself to carefully observe the actions of your training partners will start you toward the mindset needed to receive the most subtle of messages. As you become better at observation, you can begin to adapt your techniques so your responses move you toward your tactical goals.

(2) Respond to the opponent

A tall opponent's sword will move toward you at a different angle than that of a short opponent, and an opponent who is naturally quick will force you to respond more rapidly than one who is slow. Careful observation will tell you what to expect. As you sharpen your perception, you will learn to shape your responses even as the attacks unfold.

For example, if you notice that your opponent sometimes keeps her weight on her back leg as she attacks, you can formulate a tactical approach that takes advantage of her weight bias. Stay sensitive to the motions leading up to her attacks. When you sense that she is back-weighted, match her downward strike, then press downward with your sword while you enter. You may be able to drive her backward with your body to set up a finishing strike. The same tactic might not succeed with a forward-weighted opponent. Observations of this sort can mean the difference between victory and loss.

Every response you make to an opponent's attacks can be carefully tailored to fit the exact nature of her movements. Of course, you must already have developed a sharp sense of observation and an ability to execute your techniques. Now is the time to concentrate on honing your ability to respond based on your observations. As you improve the precision of your responses, you will find that your ratio of success in achieving our primary physical

goal – cutting the opponent while avoiding being cut – improves greatly.

Moreover, internal development is part and parcel of this stage of the mastery process. The sensitivity you are developing can and should be applied to your experiences outside the dojo. There is constant feedback from your environment, whether you are in a match with swords, at a job interview, or on a walk in the woods. How clearly you receive the messages and how accurately you respond to them, keeping your ultimate goals in mind, will determine how successful you are. In time, this mindset will permeate your entire existence.

(3) Master the opponent

Mastering the opponent means clearly discerning her intent, responding accurately to her attack, responding at just the right moment, and responding in such a way as to set up a decisive counter attack. This requires capability in all the areas that precede this one: keen perception, a strategy that focuses on the goal, and an ability to execute techniques with a high degree of skill.

Learning to master opponents requires consistent, long term practice of interactions between swordspersons. You must have repeated opportunities both to observe how your actions affect your opponent and to adjust according to what you observe. There are many formal techniques, and the variations and interplay between opponents in a duel with swords is infinite. This means that many, many practice sessions are required to experience a wide array of attacks and defenses. To truly respond well while dominating your opponent, you must cultivate an unbroken awareness of all the important aspects of the interaction. Like most other aspects of mastery, this one requires constant dedication to the principle of trying to cut the opponent while avoiding being cut. Look for every chance to attack. If this is your mindset whenever you practice, you will find that your swordsmanship becomes more and more successful.

Your determination can mean the difference between becoming a merely capable swordsperson or a really exceptional one. If you have followed the progression of skill development drills set forth in this book, you may have found that you can be vigilant and defend against your opponent's attacks without necessarily trying to dominate. Perhaps you occasionally attack without much hope of success. Some students reach a plateau at this level, able to compete with opponents of many skill levels, enjoying themselves, noticing details, and gradually deepening their ability to feel the energy flow between partners. While they will make progress, they will not become truly masterful until they take it upon themselves to make the effort to dominate every opponent.

You must learn how to dominate, even if your personality is not a dominant one. This is because a complete technique in martial arts, whether it be a finishing stroke with a sword, a knockout punch, or a full-point judo throw, requires a unification of technique and intention that is impossible to simulate. Despite the great benefits of solo practice, as in iaido or karate kata, nothing can substitute for the insights and abilities gained by overcoming an opponent who is trying to avoid or overcome your techniques.

FOCUS ON THE INTERACTION

(1) Flow with the interaction

Faced with an opponent who is armed with a sword and who is trying to defeat you, a victorious technique must be performed with a strongly wielded sword, at the proper distance and angle, and with perfect timing. In pre-arranged drills or cooperative practice, the swordsperson makes a conscious decision to execute the finishing technique. In sparring, however, a technique that originates out of conscious thought will rarely succeed. The interval between seeing an opening and executing a technique is too short to allow for reflection. Instead, the technique must simply

“happen” at the instant when the conditions are right. This occurs when the swordsperson is extremely well practiced in his art, and when he allows his movements to happen without interference from his analytical mind.

Such a swordsperson has learned to let his highly trained reflexes take over in a sparring session. While his mind is fully conscious of the interactions between himself and his opponent, it does not focus on them. Instead, it stays apart from or above the swordplay, almost as if he were watching the interaction happen rather than participating in it. He does not choose which techniques he uses, but is part of an interaction in which his techniques simply occur. The mind does not stop on any single aspect of the battle, but smoothly reflects every detail. This dispassionate, continuous mindset is sometimes called a state of “flow.”

It can be very difficult to move from conscious execution of techniques to a state of flow. Even the best practitioners have difficulty overcoming the impulse to control every motion. You must have a systematic method for cultivating the proper state of mind.

In theory, the method is simple. Gradually add more and more inputs until the conscious mind is overwhelmed and the trained reflexes take over. In kendo or judo sparring, this can be done by agreeing ahead of time with your training partner to maintain a feeling of lightness (rather than strength) in your techniques, and to gradually add more and more speed. You may find that your conscious mind refuses to let go and that you still consciously select which techniques to use. Be persistent, however, and engage your partner again and again. If you keep trying, you will find that you can suspend conscious thought by overloading your ability to process inputs with speed and complexity. Once this happens, your techniques will begin to “happen” in real time. Over repeated practice sessions, your techniques will also become more effective, particularly as you begin to work on

the next two stages of mastery: reflecting on the interaction and mastering the interaction.

(2) Reflect on the interaction

When you are able to regularly achieve a state of flow during practice, you can begin to elevate the level of your responses. When a practice session ends, reflect on what took place. What worked well, and what did not? Was there an aspect of a formal technique that interfered with its execution against an active opponent? If you are experienced in martial arts it should be no surprise that some techniques work well in practice but do not work well for sparring. There are many reasons for this, including that you may not be as good as you should be or that a modification is required to fit the exact circumstances of the sparring session.

If you are not as good at as you need to be, the obvious solution is to practice in a controlled setting until you are comfortable enough to try the technique in sparring again. For techniques that need to be modified, however, you will need to consider exactly what needs to be changed. Make the changes and practice until the modifications are reflexive. Try the techniques again in sparring to determine how well they work.

Do not be discouraged if new techniques seem awkward when you begin sparring. It is normal to have difficulty achieving a state of flow with new techniques. The key, of course, is to keep practicing, again gradually increasing the speed and complexity of the interaction until the conscious mind is overwhelmed and you find yourself acting without analytical thought.

(3) Master the interaction

By now you have experienced the state of flow in at least some of your interactions with swords. You have also stepped away from the interactions, thought about how to effectively interact with opponents, and determined how to readily achieve a state of flow. Now is the time to work on

mastering each interaction. This means controlling the tenor of the entire battle: the speed, the rhythm, the ebb and flow of energy, and the amount of aggression you put forth. To achieve this extraordinary level of control requires excellence in all the skills that came before, including expertise in technique, a deep understanding of opponents' actions, an ability to react instantaneously, and an ability to observe and analyze an interaction even as you participate in it.

You must have many opportunities to observe the give and take between yourself and your partners. In the midst of continuous swordplay, you must make conscious decisions about how you want the interactions to develop. How will you prevail? Will you be energetic or passive? Will you accelerate the tempo to overwhelm your opponent? If so, what tactics will you use? What subtle adjustments can you make to bring the character of the interaction in line with your wishes?

Keep in mind, however, that regardless of how accomplished you are, your aspirations for an interaction with an opponent must be realistic. Unless your ability level is substantially higher than your opponent's, her will to win will also affect the outcome. If you overlook her ability and energy, you will fail. Go into each interaction seeking an acute understanding of your opponent's strengths and tactical approach. If you do so, your chances of success are high.

Begin by selecting drills that offer the chance to interact with your opponent for more than a few seconds. Warm up by running through the drills several times. When you are comfortable with all the elements, repeat the drills, concentrating on doing your techniques exactly as they are taught in your style. Next, modify them to fit your opponent's particular style. Spend a few repetitions concentrating on your opponent's techniques, analyzing strengths and weaknesses, adapting to the overall rhythm, and trying to perceive her tactical energy.

Speed up the drills. Pay attention to ebb and flow of energy between you and your opponent. Notice when you feel dominant and when your opponent is dominant. When you perceive a pattern or a key aspect of the interaction that affects the flow of energy, apply everything you have learned to consciously affect a change. If you want the interplay to be slower, slow it down. If you want to dominate for a larger percentage of the interaction, do so. If you want your opponent to attack more forcefully, lure her into doing so.

Practice making adjustments in the midst of a session without losing the unbroken awareness and sense of removal that characterize the state of flow. When you achieve this, you will be able to direct the battle without consciously executing the techniques. You will be able to decide what you want to happen in the interaction and it will simply “happen” at the appropriate time. This is an extraordinary feeling, and one that is not easily experienced. You can experience it, however, by tirelessly practicing with the goals in mind.

FOCUS ON THE LARGER PICTURE

(1) Increase your awareness

The first step in focusing on the larger picture involves increasing your awareness of your environment while you are engaged with an opponent. What you pay attention to at first is of little importance, since you are simply trying to train your sense of awareness. Begin by choosing a sight, sound, or smell, and pay attention to it during the practice of drills. For example, if you are practicing during the summer months, try to hear the sound of the fan blowing. When your eyes follow your opponent’s movements, try to notice the shape of the room behind her. Smell the oil on your partner’s bokken as it passes your face. Feel the weight of your montsuki on your shoulders as you move your arms to strike.

While working to add this information to your

consciousness, be sure that you are utilizing good principles of sword handling, maintaining the proper distance, moving at effective angles, and keeping up a tactically sound rhythm. You may find that paying attention to outside factors takes you out of the state of flow. At first, some students cannot both focus on additional stimuli and continue to practice. Some are able to keep exchanging strike and blocks with their opponents but cannot maintain an attitude of domination. These hurdles can be overcome with practice. The point is to keep working until you lose neither your unbroken awareness nor your strategic edge. It may take several months or even years to achieve this added level of awareness, but with persistence you will get there.

It can be useful to add a third person to your practice. Ask one of your training partners to provide a distraction. This could be a distinctive movement or a few words. Whatever form it takes, it should be something unexpected. Maintain your strategic attitude while paying attention to the actions of the third person. If your swordsmanship unravels, repeat the drill with a new distraction. When you succeed in getting through your drills without losing focus, describe the distraction to the third person. Be as accurate and detailed as possible. The third person will let you know how well you did.

As you get better, increase the demands on your awareness by trying to perceive additional factors. The more skilled you become, the more fully aware of your environment you should become. If you struggle, go back to a level at which you consistently succeed, then gradually increase the inputs. With sufficient practice, very little will escape your notice. What starts out as a means of making you invincible as a swordsperson can eventually bring about remarkable changes in your ability to notice and respond to things in all aspects of life.

(2) Incorporate outside factors

Now that you have tuned your senses to detect outside factors in the midst of swordplay, you can begin to incorporate those factors in your strategy. Factors that could have an important effect on the outcome of your contest include people, sounds, light or darkness, obstructions, and uneven or slippery surfaces. A person not directly involved in the interaction could distract your opponent, accidentally interfere with her movements, or join the contest on behalf of one or the other partners. Sudden noises could startle or distract your opponent. Bright light or the sudden absence of light could interfere with your opponent's vision. An obstruction could be used to trip your opponent, deflect her strike, or provide you with protection. You can use walls to corner her. Uneven or slippery ground could cause her to stumble. The possibilities for strategic use of your environment are infinite, but only if you are aware of the critical factors and able to use them to your advantage.

Training yourself to incorporate outside factors involves several steps: (1) pre-arranged practice; (2) practice with a cooperative partner; (3) basic free practice; and (4) free practice incorporating a state of flow. For pre-arranged practice, choose an obstruction or distraction in advance. Agree with your partner how the interaction will progress. For example, if you choose to use an obstruction to interfere with your opponent's movements, agree in advance that she will retreat toward the obstruction as you attack. When she is close to the obstruction, employ a tactic that causes her to stumble over the obstruction. Practice this way using a variety of factors, thinking deeply about how to use each one, and experimenting until you are comfortable employing many outside factors in your training.

Practicing with a cooperative partner involves engaging in swordplay without your partner knowing in advance what outside factors you will employ. Your partner will agree to react defensively, protecting herself from your strikes but allowing herself to be moved according to your

attacks: backward if you attack aggressively, to the left if you drive her in that direction, quickly if you move quickly, and so forth. Practice moving your partner into position so that the obstruction or distraction does its work. This will not only develop your skill at moving opponents around, but will also gradually improve your ability to employ outside factors as part of your tactics.

For the basic level of free practice, choose an environment in which there are several obstructions or other factors that can be used tactically. Without planning ahead of time which factors will come into play, engage your partner in lengthy interactions. Consciously employ the various obstructions to disrupt your partner's swordplay. Repeat the exercises many times until you are completely comfortable using aspects of your environment as part of your strategy.

The ultimate practice method for the material presented in this section is free practice incorporating a state of flow. Using all the skills you have developed to this point, engage your partner in a training area where there are obstructions or distractions. Practice until you experience a state of flow. Continue to practice until you can block, attack, advance, retreat, force your partner to move, and employ obstructions, all without allowing your mind to focus specifically on any single aspect of the interaction.

As we discussed previously, while in the state of flow you should be fully conscious of the interactions between yourself and your opponent, but your mind should not focus on them. It should stay apart from the swordplay. Rather than selecting techniques, the techniques should simply "happen." The mind should not stop on any single aspect of the battle, but smoothly reflect every aspect of your environment and incorporate it in the struggle.

(3) Victory without fighting

You will recall that the ultimate aspiration of

practice in Japanese swordsmanship is expressed in the phrase “saya no uchi no kachi.” Achieving victory with the sword still in the scabbard is an extraordinary challenge, but you are now close to possessing all the necessary skills. If you reflect on the information presented in these chapters, you will see that all tools are in place to enable you to completely master an opponent.

You have mastered the techniques of your swordsmanship style. You have taught yourself to pay close attention to the actions and attitudes of your opponents, and to dominate through the use of superior technique. You have freed your conscious mind from the need to control each technique, and have thereby achieved a state wherein you can adapt to any circumstance without hesitation. Your awareness has increased to take in virtually every detail of your environment. To prevail without fighting, you must put into practice everything you have learned. Use your heightened senses to take the right action at the moment the battle begins.

The supreme warrior can prevail at the moment he enters the arena of battle. For example, suppose that by turning to the left as you enter a courtyard, you place the sun at your back and a pillar at your right side. Your opponent, having expected you to walk straight in, has unwisely hidden herself to the left of the entrance. She will be unable to attack effectively with the sun in her eyes and the pillar between you. If her awareness is acute, she will realize the futility of attacking an opponent with such keen powers of observation. Guided by your heightened powers of observation, you have acted in such a way that victory is inevitable.

Getting to the appropriate state of mind to win without fighting requires preparation. Most of us do not live in a state wherein our consciousness is fully attuned to our environment, so we must prepare ourselves for the moment. Using the methods we have discussed, clear away every extraneous thought, fully relax your muscles, and put yourself into the state of flow. Engage your

partner and act in accordance with the principles of right action.

It requires a great humility to act in perfect accord with universal principles. We must put aside our selfish or untrained thoughts in order to know what is truly right for the situation. What you must do is not always what you want to do or think you should do. Instead, you must do what is absolutely correct. The better you have trained yourself, the more closely aligned your objectives will be with right action. The more you are able to perceive the total truth in your situation, the more efficient your reflexive actions will be.

ENLIGHTENMENT PRINCIPLES

(1) Release all thought of self

The swordsperson who has expanded his awareness through tireless practice and self-reflection realizes that the most efficient path to victory does not involve conflict. This realization is of monumental importance, because it can free him from the need to fight. It is not the highest expression of mastery, however, since it is still rooted in the self-interested search for victory. To make the final steps in the path toward character perfection, we must begin by giving up our focus on ourselves.

This may seem to contradict earlier chapters in which I stated that a swordsperson must seek to dominate his opponent. There is no contradiction, however, because the different outlooks come at different times in a swordsperson’s career. The first approach is for the intermediate swordsperson. To learn the skills and attitudes of swordsmanship, one must zealously practice overcoming others. There is no substitute for unification of mind, body, and spirit that can be brought about by striving for victory. The second approach, however, is for the very advanced swordsperson. To surpass the limits of the techniques and become an enlightened person, one must give up the wish to

overcome others. On the path of the martial artist, one must experience the first before being ready to experience the second.

Selflessness is important to your ultimate development because any reserve of self interest will prevent you from acting in perfect accord with universal principles. The desire to protect yourself or to enhance your self image through victory can cause you to choose the course of action that satisfies your ego rather than the one that is most efficient. If your self image is out of proportion to your abilities, it can cause you to be overconfident. It can create hesitation if you attempt to protect yourself from harm rather than trying to make the most effective cut.

The selfless swordsperson, on the other hand, will not be overconfident because he is not driven by ego. He will choose the efficient action over the self-aggrandizing one. He will not hesitate, but will act decisively, correctly, and in exact proportion to the circumstances.

True selflessness is not something that can be learned in a short time. You must make swordsmanship an integral part of your life. You must experience consistent daily practice so that clashing with swords is as normal to you as eating or taking a shower. You must devote yourself to mastering the techniques, to interacting with opponents, to giving up conscious control of your fighting skills, and to becoming aware of every aspect of your environment. You must visit the dojo at every opportunity; interact with other swordspersons again and again, throwing yourself into your art and giving absolutely no preference to victory or defeat.

Doing this, if all the factors are in place and if you are very lucky, you will experience moments of complete involvement in your swordplay such that no thought of yourself occurs. This state may last for seconds and be gone for weeks, or it may last for hours. As soon as you focus on it, thinking "I

want more selflessness!" it will be gone. Strive only for more time in the practice of swordsmanship, greater awareness of your surroundings, and a better understanding of universal principles. Continue to train with passion. Reflect on your progress only when you do not have a sword in your hands. If you learn to regularly achieve the state of "no-self" in training, you will be close to becoming the greatest of swordspersons.

(2) Release all thought of others

Just as self-interest creates barriers to the ultimate stages of character development in swordsmanship, so does clinging to the idea that you must overcome an opponent. To advance further, you must give up the notion that there is an opponent to overcome and instead learn to see the situation as it truly exists. At the highest level, there is no "self" and no "other," just a set of circumstances which call for right action.

Like self-interest, fixation on the idea of overcoming an opponent will prevent you from acting in accord with universal principles. It can cause you to focus your mind on the person herself rather than on the entire set of circumstances. If you underestimate her abilities, it can cause you to be overconfident. If you overestimate them, it can cause you to be fearful.

If you give up your attachment to the idea that there is an opponent to overcome, however, it will free you to make an objective evaluation of the conflict. You will be neither be overconfident nor fearful. You will choose the correct response rather than one motivated by a desire to differentiate yourself from or prevail over your opponent.

Advanced practitioners of aikido will understand the benefit of giving up the idea that an opponent exists who must be overcome. When an attacker grabs the wrist of an untrained person, that person usually reacts by getting tense and trying to escape using force. An aikidoist, on the other hand, has trained herself to react with just enough force to

resolve the conflict, employing principles of circularity to disarm the attacker without hurting him. Her goal is not to prevail over her opponent, but to bring the situation to a harmonious resolution.

Expert swordsmanship is not much different from this. The natural tendency to clash with attackers limits our growth as martial artists. An overabundant sense of self-preservation makes it difficult to understand other people's points of view. Thinking of others as different, foreign, or as obstacles to be overcome, can cause us to behave with excessive hostility. Recognizing the innate harmony in interactions between people, on the other hand, helps to overcome conflict. If we consider ourselves and other people as equally valuable parts of a universal whole, conflict tends to vanish. In the parlance of contemporary self-help manuals, it is better to seek a "win-win" outcome than to try to defeat other swordsperson. With this outlook, you will rarely be forced to draw your sword, and will naturally turn toward peaceful solutions.

(3) Live in accordance with universal principles

There are countless obstacles to ultimate success in swordsmanship. The desire for money, status, comfort, and expertise are constant distractions, thwarting our ability to live fully in the moment. In training, if we desire victory too fervently, we invite conflict. If we win contests early in our career, there is a good chance we will mistake the good feelings associated with victory for success in spiritual matters. If we are unable to overcome others in spite of our efforts to adhere to the principles of swordsmanship, we may mistakenly believe that we are on the wrong path. None of these states of being is acceptable to the expert swordsperson.

The beauty of a strategic approach to swordsmanship is that the very act of training helps overcome obstacles to enlightenment. The techniques are grounded in martial realism, giving us concrete feedback on what works and what does

not. If you use angles and timing correctly, you will be able to cut your opponent without being cut. If you fail to properly block a downward strike, you will get cut. If you notice an obstacle and your opponent does not, she will be defeated. Our success is linked to our ability to detect the truth and conform to its requirements. When we judge correctly, we prevail.

The progression of training drills in strategic swordsmanship also moves us closer to character perfection. Each time we add another component to training, our sensitivity is increased. When the many discrete inputs become too numerous to focus on individually, our analytical mind is overloaded and we are forced to evaluate our tactical situation by feel. We learn to make intuitive judgments about very complex events and, because we have trained ourselves to act in accordance with those judgments, we take immediate right action. The greatest warriors live in a state of harmony with their environment, since they perceive the most efficient path and take the steps to succeed long before the need to draw swords arises. They are great because they have overcome the limiting concepts of self and other, and the focus on victory.

Such a state is the ultimate that can be achieved using the swordsmanship methods described in this book. As you have no doubt noticed, it is also a very desirable state of mind for life outside the dojo. Being able to take in every detail of our surroundings and respond in a highly effective manner is useful everywhere. Give up your attachment to notions of self and other, gain and loss, victory and defeat. If you fixate on these ideas, your swordsmanship will suffer. Live fully in the moment and your swordsmanship will be without equal. The Way in is training! There is no more meaningful pursuit, nor a more rewarding one.

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SEARCHING FOR AIKI

By H. E. Davey

Illustrations featuring Troy Swenson and Wesley Keppel-Henry

I've spent most of my life captivated by Japanese jujutsu, particularly forms of jujutsu using the esoteric aiki principle. Since I view aikido as being an art that evolved from jujutsu (among other influences), I've also studied with more than one direct student of aikido's founder.

Perhaps the single most fascinating and misunderstood concept in any form of aikido or aiki-jujutsu is the principle of aiki. While many think the word "aiki" is exclusively associated with aikido, some historians in Japan believe this word was used by Takeda Sokaku Sensei prior to the birth of aikido to describe at least aspects of his Daito Ryu, if not the entire art of aiki-jujutsu, which he taught to Ueshiba Morihei Sensei, aikido's founder. So the aiki principle and word seem to predate aikido, and there's some evidence that it predates Daito Ryu aiki-jujutsu as well (or at least Takeda Sensei). Moreover, one could make a case, based on old Japanese books and densho scrolls, that aiki as both a term and principle was found in schools of ancient martial arts unrelated to either aiki-jujutsu or aikido, although these are the two arts that definitely popularized aiki.

Kito Ryu jujutsu uses principles of movement and psychology based on the "rising-falling"—ki-to—of yin and yang. I believe this parallels the aiki-in-yo-ho ("aiki principles and methods of yin and yang") found in Daito Ryu, which is not to say that the two arts are historically related. Likewise, Hakko Ryu jujutsu contains aiki nage, or "aiki throws," and I was lucky enough to practice this art with the late Brian Workman Sensei, who held Shihan Sandaikichu certification in Hakko Ryu, the highest possible rank. As you might guess, I think an

examination of aiki can be beneficial for many martial artists, and I believe it's a concept that isn't inevitably restricted to a single martial art. This, like much of what follows, is merely my opinion, but given my decades of martial training in the USA and Japan, I like to think it is a reasonably well-informed opinion. It is, however, certainly not the only viewpoint that you'll find relating to aiki.

WHAT IS AIKI?

Ai means "to combine, to meet, and/or to harmonize," while the Japanese character ki can be defined as "life energy," and techniques in aikido and aiki-jujutsu should derive their effectiveness from aiki. Naturally, you would assume that a detailed explanation of aiki would be at the top of the list for most teachers of these arts. This isn't always the case.

Aiki is often regarded as being a mysterious concept, at least partially because aikido's founder chose to explain this principle by utilizing words and ideas from Shinto mythology, which most Westerners, and even Japanese, are not familiar with. Since aikido is much more widespread than aiki-jujutsu, this view of aiki continues to be perpetuated (although certain top aikido teachers have developed well-formulated and fathomable explanations of aiki).

However, as Daito Ryu aiki-jujutsu practitioner Ishibashi Yoshihisa Sensei has written, "Originally, Aiki is rational and something any new practitioner can understand theoretically." ¹ Ishibashi Sensei states that aiki begins with a certain posture and attitude which precedes the opponent's attack. He

indicates that it is:

. . . A state where one's body, breath, and mind, all become one.

(1) Stability of one's center when sitting or standing (body)

(2) Concentration of one's consciousness . . . (mind)

(3) Breathing (breath)

It is only when these three conditions are satisfied that one can express his power to the maximum. In addition, these three conditions are also basic to zazen (seated zen meditation). . . . 2

From this stance, it is possible to explosively break the opponent's balance when one is attacked and then continue with a throw or immobilization. Ishibashi Sensei further explains:

Aiki involves the:

(1) unbalancing the opponent

(2) diversion of opponent's attention and neutralizing his fighting spirit

(3) interruption of his kokyu [breathing], rhythm and timing 3

He also compares aiki to baseball, a simple analogy that should be readily understood by many young Japanese and most Americans:

When a batter hits a fast ball, he will foul the ball if he is slow to swing. However, if he can match the speed of the ball, it will travel a great distance due to the power of reaction. The conditions for overcoming the speed of the ball are as follows:

(1) matching the ball (matching your kokyu with that of the pitcher)

(2) striking the ball right in the middle of the bat

(3) turning of the wrists

(4) power of reaction (kokyu power)

(5) stable center and sharp hip twist

(6) bodily flexibility to handle any changes in the situation

When all these conditions are met, the ball is hit for a long distance due to the power of reaction. In the same way in Aiki you can throw your opponent harder and further the stronger his power. 4

Ishibashi Sensei uses the term kokyu, which is somewhat esoteric. It literally means "breath," but more practically, it refers to engulfing the opponent in the overwhelming force of one's ki, and throwing him or her by utilizing a strongly generated momentum and centrifugal force. This is accomplished through the application of an extremely subtle as well as precise timing and rhythm, which can also be considered to be another definition of the use of the word kokyu in aikido and similar arts.

Aiki-jujutsu authority Kondo Katsuyuki Sensei at the Aiki News Friendship Demonstration in Tokyo many years ago offered a different, though related, explanation of the principles of aiki. Kondo Sensei chose to emphasize the following five points as being essential for executing aiki, whether in conjunction with actual aiki throws, or when used with joint locks and immobilizations executed while utilizing the principle of aiki. (The succeeding explanations are my own.)

(1) Metsuke—The use and fixing of the gaze. It has been said that the eyes direct the mind, and this is certainly true in aiki. It is vital that we position ourselves so that we can see every part of the opponent's body as a whole, without having to move our heads or shift our eyes to do so. The eyes should be softly focused on the opponent's chest, in a relaxed manner, which allows us to see every part of the body simultaneously. This of course assumes that one is positioned just far enough away from the opponent so that the entire body comes into view. It is also important to have the feeling of looking through the adversary, which

results in an effective outward projection and concentration of the mind as well as ki.

(2) Kokyu—The use of the breath. Although a brief explanation of kokyu has been offered above, it is also important to stress that just as one's gaze can be thought of as a reflection of the mind, breathing also resonates the condition of the mind. We've probably all experienced the rapid, shallow, and rough breathing that accompanies anger or fear. Likewise, most of us have noticed the relatively slow, deep breathing of a person that is relaxed or asleep. Thus, in facing an opponent, it's necessary to recognize the condition of not only his or her breathing, but also our own, as unstable breathing is one of the first indications that we're losing composure. Steps must then be taken to slow and calm the breathing, while relaxing the eyes as well as calming the gaze. This same awareness of breathing can lead to a deeper understanding of one's self and heightened calmness in daily living.

(3) Maai—The use of space and distancing. As noted in point one, the basic distance that allows us to most easily defend ourselves is also the optimal distance that enables us to see the adversary's entire body without moving the eyes. This is about six feet, although the spacing will increase if an attacker is armed. At this distance, the opponent must take at least one step toward the defender to reach him or her with either a hand or a foot. Obviously, this allows us to more easily anticipate the opponent's attack and forces the attacker to commit his momentum and balance to the assault, which can then be utilized to reliably lead him into an unbalanced position. Nevertheless, it's also important to practice dealing with attacks that are at arm's length, or even so close that both bodies are touching. In this way, it is possible to learn to validly perform at any distance, even when our body has been trapped between an opponent and the ground (as in a grappling situation).

(4) Kuzushi—The use of unbalancing. The above three points amount to what Japanese practitioners

of martial arts sometimes call *ki o totonoeru*, or "the preparation of one's ki." This is a fairly esoteric way of indicating that one must correctly position oneself, as well as coordinate and calm the mind, body, and breath, in preparation for engaging an opponent. Once this has been accomplished, or ideally maintained as an everyday condition, it's possible to swiftly dodge the opponent's attack and commandingly break his or her balance. Without breaking the balance of an adversary, it is impossible to neutralize that person's presumably greater strength, and *kuzushi* is most effectively accomplished not by attacking the opponent, but rather, by letting the attacker initiate the assault. (A response occurs, however, at the instant the opponent breaks the safe distance. Once an attacker does so, it's virtually impossible to avoid committing his momentum and losing his balance, at least slightly. On the other hand, the defender has not yet moved, and thus, ideally speaking, is perfectly stable and balanced.) As one matches the timing of the grab or strike, it is possible to yield to its force, and at the exact moment of contact, lead the force in such a manner that the attacker's balance is broken.

(5) Zanshin—The use of mental and physical follow-through. Once one has evaded the opponent's force and broken his or her balance, it is possible to throw or immobilize the opponent. Surprisingly, however, this isn't the end of a technique based on aiki. *Zanshin* is also required. *Zan* can be translated as "remaining," and *shin* means "mind" or "spirit." *Zanshin* indicates that although the body has stopped moving, our projection of ki and concentration doesn't stop, remaining unbroken. This can be seen in the form of an extremely alert, poised, and stable posture, following the execution of what is often a shockingly quick technique. In fact, Kondo Sensei of Daito Ryu has made the point that the word *shin*, when written with another character, can also mean "body," so the term *zanshin* can also indicate that "the body remains." Therefore, if the body is relaxed, and the concentration is unbroken, it

should be possible to throw or pin an opponent without any loss of balance. Wobbling after a throw is a definite indication of a lack of composure, or *zanshin*, because the body mirrors the psyche.

While these five points give us a working vocabulary to discuss aiki and a general knowledge of this dynamic principle, functional aiki skills have their own unique character. They therefore deserve the following explanation, making use of the technical elements outlined above.

CORRECTNESS OF FORM

In attempting to learn any aiki-based technique, you first must attempt to memorize the correct form of this particular skill, and while it's true that many aiki principles carry over from one technique to another, it is also true that each movement is unique. In all authentic forms of classical *bujutsu* and modern *budo*, the mastery of *kata* is essential, and it's this mastery that allows you to learn the proper structure of an aiki technique. What then is *kata*?

Donn F. Draeger defines *kata* as "prearranged form" and states that:

The kata method is of no real significance to the trainee, who invariably sees it only as something from which he cannot escape. In training he is apt to be overly conscious of his attempts to approximate the kata action. Much of it appears to be grossly unreal in relation to combat. The trainee is instructed to walk into the path of the weapon being wielded by his training partner, as though his doing so were nothing more than a casual matter not involving life and death, and then, at the last instant, to use his skill to avoid being struck by the weapon. But the dojo is a "death ground," a "field of life and death," literally the battlefield of life; the only difference between it and the battlefield of war is that in the dojo the trainee may die many times over and live to count these deaths as beneficial experiences toward his learning skills. These brushes with death occur

each training session; experienced over a period of many years they lead the trainee to develop a balanced outlook on the matter of life and death—seishi o choetsu, literally, "transcending life and death."⁵

In many cases, however, the public's conception of *kata* is based on the use of the term in *karate-do*, since this is possibly the most popular Japanese combative form practiced worldwide. In contrast with *karate-do kata*, most *kata* in Japanese martial arts are not practiced solo and usually involve responding to attacks launched by an actual opponent. (*Iaido* and *kyudo* are obvious exceptions to this, and such exceptions are less common in the ancient Japanese martial arts, or *koryu bujutsu*.) *Kata's* ultimate purpose is to communicate an established principle or principles, which can be freely utilized in a variety of combative situations, including those not found in the *kata* itself.

Thus, the correct study of a legitimate *kata* is not simply an exercise in memorizing random movements, but rather a study of a carefully arranged series of techniques designed to lead one, through actual experience, to an understanding of certain specific principles contained within that *kata*. An old saying in the martial arts indicates that in studying any *kata* we "begin with form and proceed to the state of formlessness."

Contrast this with certain individuals' recent, self-created *kata*, in which the student is instructed to memorize a different response to each kind of attack. These responses are also frequently not arranged so that any technical principles can be absorbed, and are merely a collection of unrelated tricks. Unfortunately, it is rather difficult to remember to use "Response Number 24" to deal with "Attack Number 13."

Once we've had a chance to become familiar with the general movements and principles contained

within a kata, it is then possible to analyze the different stages of each technique, and in doing so, come to understand the electrifying character of aiki. (I realize that unlike jujutsu, not all forms of aikido have sets of techniques that they officially designate as kata, but aikido training is frequently conducted in kata style; in short, it is training in a prearranged form chosen by the sensei.)

NOT CLASHING WITH THE OPPONENT

Aiki has often been defined as the act of harmonizing with an opponent, and indeed, this process of harmonizing with an assailant is involved in the carefully tested principles of aiki. Still, on an even larger scale, aiki is the process of blending with the vibrant life energy that animates nature, and ultimately, the act of harmonizing with nature itself. One's opponent, who exists as a part of nature, is then also harmonized with. Aiki, in its ultimate sense, describes innate unity with nature and the direct, nondualistic perception of a state that transcends conflict.

All methods utilizing aiki must begin from this state of accord, which involves executing tai-sabaki or kawashi, meaning "body movement" and "shifting, evading," respectively. In essence, the whole point of moving one's body is to avoid clashing with the opponent, who may be larger and stronger. Depending on an art's approach to aiki, this movement may be large or small.

No matter how strong we become, someone will always be stronger. Moreover, in any struggle, the person with greater power (strength, size, speed, youth, etc.) will win, and for this reason, it is important to find a means of meeting an individual's force without struggling against it. If we don't encounter the attacker's (possibly greater) force, we will not be incapacitated by it. Consequently, tai-sabaki entails the act of removing ourselves from the opponent's ki no nagare, or "stream of ki," a line of force. By stepping out of harm's way, we do not directly

receive the attacker's power, and it doesn't affect us. Ideally, size and strength become an issue only if we try to struggle against these factors. Hence, one of the key points in the concept of aiki is to prevail unconditionally by not clashing.

When being held by an attacker, the idea of not going against another's ki or strength is still essential. In this instance, we must look for an "opening" through which to escape. For example, when your right wrist is held by the opponent's left hand, an opening exists between the opponent's thumb and index finger. An efficient way of removing your wrist from the grip is by suddenly pointing your fingertips to the inside of the opponent's grip (toward the chest), and moving the wrist through the gap between the opponent's thumb and index finger (*illustration 1*). Moving from the fingertips and thinking of quickly touching your chest will usually do the trick. Definitely don't concentrate on where you are being held. Once your mind gets stuck, your wrist can't as easily free itself.

Even if a person's fingers are so long that the thumb and index finger touch or overlap each other, by quickly moving the wrist parallel to the floor, and toward the thumb and index finger, it's still possible to break free. If the fingers don't touch, moving through them is comparable to



Illustration 1

stepping through a doorway. If, however, the fingers do touch, by using a little more sudden movement it's nevertheless possible to pass through them, which could be compared to pushing open a door. On the other hand, trying to force your way out by struggling against the attacker's palm (moving the wrist in the opposite direction), or by moving the hand against some other part of the grip that doesn't contain an "opening," is like trying to leave a room by forcing your way through a solid wall. In escaping from an attacker's hold, it is vital to avoid clashing by finding or creating an opening to pass freely through.

Still, many people, including some practitioners of koryu bujutsu and budo, attempt to "go through walls," and while it may be possible to train oneself severely enough to break down certain walls, other steel-reinforced walls will remain unbreakable, especially as youth fades. However, young and old, big and small, can easily pass through an opening such as a door or window. This is clearly the most peaceful, efficient, and economical way to leave a room. It's also the most effective, no-nonsense method of escaping from an attacker's grasp.

It can therefore be said that one expression of the principle of aiki, on a technical level, starts by passing through an opening when held, and creating an opening for the opponent to pass through when he or she strikes. Basically, aiki commences by creating a situation in which we do not clash with the opponent, and we don't place ourselves in a predicament in which the opponent will clash with us.

GUIDING AND DIRECTING THE OPPONENT

Once we avoid, and thus neutralize, the opponent's force, it can then be guided and directed, so that the opponent's capacity for further violence is securely controlled. To return to our analogy of a room and a door, suppose we stand on one side of a locked door, while another person stands on the

other side. This person will attempt to rush forward and break through the locked door. If we fail to do anything, the person will hit the door forcefully and possibly break it open, damaging the door in the process. However, if we open the door the instant we perceive the person's charge, he or she will stop, or at least slow down, and move through the door in a controlled manner. On the other hand, if we wait until the last possible second, leading the other person to believe that the door is not going to open, and then explosively fling the door open at the instant he or she is about to touch it, that person will fly through the open doorway and probably fall to the ground, suffering an uncontrollable loss of balance. This is analogous to the evasive body movement (tai-sabaki) mentioned earlier.

In the last case, it was possible to compellingly break the individual's balance, and in many cases, throw him to the floor, without the use of force or great muscular strength. By leading the person to believe that he could effectively strike the door, and by suddenly opening the door with the right timing, we were able to practically guide and direct his intention, which is known as *ki o michibiki*—"influencing and leading the opponent's ki."

By using the same approach and timing, when one is pushed or struck at by an attacker, it is workable to lead his or her intentions without clashing. In this way, the opponent can be moved with minimal muscular strength, and without having to struggle. At more advanced levels, if the opponent attacks vigorously enough, with precise timing, it is even possible to unbalance that person without physical contact.

UNBALANCING THE OPPONENT

Once we evade the opponent's assault and guide his intentions by means of a subtle, sophisticated timing, it's only then that we're able to effortlessly break the opponent's balance. Actually, since we guide the attacker in the direction of least

resistance, the attacker really disrupts his or her own equilibrium.

This kuzushi (“unbalancing”), however, cannot be accomplished by attempting to force an individual, who may be bigger and stronger, off balance. It’s better, therefore, to “respect the attacker’s opinion,” letting the attacker move in almost any direction, but dodging his force and guiding it in its fundamental direction, but leading it perhaps a bit past its target. With his balance masterfully broken, the opponent’s attack is taken to its logical conclusion, and this allows the opponent to clearly see the ultimate results of his or her actions, and thus hopefully eliminates the opponent’s desire to fight. In any case, the assailant’s attack will be neutralized as well as controlled in a secure and often stunning manner.

To continue, kuzushi can be created in several ways. One approach entails noticing the direction of the opponent’s intentions and force, and then guiding as well as amplifying it so that the attacker is overextended (*illustrations 2 and 3*).

Another method is to remove oneself from the line of the force, and then push or draw the attacker off balance at a completely different angle, at which there is no resistance. This is especially effective if the opponent’s movement has stopped, hence



Illustration 2



Illustration 3

making it difficult to overextend him or her. For example, if the opponent stands immobile, with one foot ahead of the other in a “T-position,” it may be difficult to break his balance directly to the front or to the rear, since the feet act as braces. However, if the opponent is guided abruptly to the left or right side, or even diagonally to the front or rear corners, an instantaneous loss of balance will result, and he has literally “no leg to stand on” since an angle of nonresistance has been found (*illustration 4 and 5*).

Yet another method of unbalancing is known as *hando no kuzushi*. In this time-honored form of unbalancing, one’s opponent is guided forcefully in one direction; then, as he or she resists, the opponent is abruptly thrown off balance in the opposite direction. Once again, this is accomplished by “respecting the opponent’s opinion.” In some cases, by merely lunging toward the opponent at the right moment, even without making direct physical contact, it is possible to cause the other party to push back against an action that never actually took place. Using this person’s slight pushing reaction, you can draw the person off balance and into an unbreakable immobilization or a riveting throw. However, this can be accomplished effectively only by calming the mind, and by using a firm but relaxed grip on the opponent’s body. In this state, a person can



Illustration 4

clearly and quickly observe the opponent's reactions, while sensing the subtle actions of the opponent's mind, which are revealed through his or her bodily reactions.

GOVERNING THE OPPONENT'S EARLIEST ACTION

To be able to perform a dependable elusive action and then disturb the opponent's equilibrium, it's necessary not to lag behind the opponent. However, in a sense, we are waiting for the opponent's attack during practice, and in a self-defense situation, it is also rarely advisable to react first, for legal as well as ethical reasons. How then is it workable to govern the opponent's earliest action?

First, understand that the initial movement an attacker makes isn't physical, but instead begins in the mind, is translated into the movement of ki, and finally manifests itself as physical action. Hence, it's essential to maintain a condition that allows us to sense subtle evidence of the mind's movement that precedes a physical attack. With this ability, we never begin to react after the opponent's hand or foot is already on the way; but rather, we'll have taken steps to soundly govern this action before it has even started. (Although it's also possible to deal with an opponent's attack after it has been launched, especially if it is a grab,

this amounts to playing catch-up and is generally more difficult.)

If we make a habit of studying how to maintain awareness, use the mind in a positive and alert manner, relax without going limp mentally or physically, and essentially use the body in a natural way, it's then feasible to get ahead of the opponent's attack. Without this alert, coordinated, and harmonious state of awareness, it is difficult to respond in time to control an attacker's earliest action. However, in this natural and coordinated condition, one's ki is dynamically projected to create a 360-degree field of sensitized and heightened awareness. This field of awareness can then alert us to the slightest aggressive movement of the opponent's spirit (sakki), allowing us to prepare an early and commanding response to the imminent assault.

One way of developing such awareness is to face an opponent at an appropriate distance and have him or her step forward to strongly attack, without making actual contact, over and over again. As you learn to relax the body and calm the mind, it is gradually possible to notice certain physical actions, such as rapid blinking, a change in facial expression, a lifting of the shoulders, or tension in the body, that precede each assault. If you repeat this practice and continue to study the



Illustration 5

characteristics of proper psychophysical relaxation, it's possible to actually sense the attacker's sakki, or aggressive intent, which always precedes a true offensive charge. While this does involve an advanced level of intuitive perception (kan), it is never too early for the student of aiki, an art based on just such a supreme perceptive ability, to begin to develop this faculty. Unfortunately, a detailed description of this mental training is beyond the scope of my article.

Nevertheless, one simple aspect of this training includes the detailed study of maai. Try to maintain a distance that allows you to see every part of the opponent's body without having to move the eyes, which are gently focused on the opponent's chest. At this distance, the opponent must take at least one step to attack, which gives you time to perceive and firmly control his or her initial movement. By being able to perceive the opponent's intention to attack, it's possible to subtly position oneself in order to deal with the assault, and to be able to react in time to evade the attack, while grasping the opponent so as to disturb his balance in preparation for a concluding response. In grasping the attacker, the grip must not impede his movement, and in fact, often instantly accelerates the attacker's motion at the point of contact. Obviously, one cannot be late in responding when using the principles of aiki.

It is, actually, this quickness of perception and response that enables us to decisively control an opponent, or even more than one opponent, without struggling. Fundamentally, if we end up fighting with an opponent's force, it's an indication that we were late in dealing with the problem. This statement is just as accurate when applied to interpersonal relationships or even exchanges between nations. The principle of aiki isn't something that's utilized exclusively in aiki-jujutsu or aikido techniques, but rather, it is fundamentally a harmonious way of existing in the world which we carry with us at all times.

CONTROLLING THE OPPONENT WITH A DECISIVE INITIAL MOVEMENT

If quickness of perception allows us to anticipate an assault, dodge it, and unbalance the assailant, then it is the dynamic force of one's initial movement, which includes but goes beyond the act of kuzushi, that determines the success of a given maneuver. Beginners are apt to focus more on the concluding movement (kake) of a particular technique, than on the action leading up to it. However, without a powerful and decisive initial action, which draws the opponent into our flow of ki and motion, it's difficult to ever reach the final portion of a technique.

In many ways, the vibrant physical mechanism of aiki starts at the exact instant that contact is made with the attacker's body. Then, using a powerful movement of one's hara ("abdominal center"), which coordinates the force of the mind and body, it's essential to break the attacker's balance and draw him into a swirling vortex of motion that surrounds the hara, which is the center of the point the attacker will be directed to revolve around in many aiki-based techniques. Clearly, one cannot be too late or too early when executing this kind of dynamic movement.

Therefore, it is the mesmerizing initial moment of contact, unbalancing, and the actions leading to the creation of a technique that really determine success. If these actions are performed powerfully, i.e., by using a coordinated and harmonious psychophysical posture, it's possible to even back off during the final movement of a technique and throw or restrain the attacker in a less severe manner. (The ability to practically capture an opponent is distinctive of the martial arts practiced in the Aizu clan as a goten-jujutsu, or "an art utilized within the castle." These Aizu martial traditions are thought by some historians to have evolved into aiki-jujutsu, and later, aikido. However, koryu bujutsu that were designed solely for battlefield usage tended to have a more inescapably lethal

conclusion.)

USING RHYTHM TO INFLUENCE THE OPPONENT'S MIND

After the initial movement, many techniques will include two or more steps leading into the final act of neutralization. Hence, an energetic rhythm can (and should) be established to generate momentum as well as to draw the opponent into the technique itself. Michel Random writes:

It is then that rhythm comes in. Every movement is a rhythm, just as in painting, music or poetry. If one is aware of the rhythm, it is possible to sense what is in rhythm and what is not. This new sense would be like a spontaneous master if only one were to heed it. A correct rhythm expresses proportion, balance, universal order.

Rhythms reveal whether they are in conjunction or in opposition to each other. Work on rhythms is already a rule of life and in itself an understanding of harmony and discord, which explains exactly why the martial arts are always evolving and why the basic principles, revived and studied, have developed into new concepts from which new schools and teachings emerge.

When rhythm is achieved, the length of time a contest lasts is neither short nor long. The rhythm is timeless. It can appear to be slow or fleetingly quick. 6

As an experiment dealing with the characteristics of rhythm, you can ask a friend to fully extend an arm and to make a tight fist. After telling him or her to resist all attempts to move the fist, try to lift it toward the ceiling by grasping it with one hand (*illustration 6*). If the other person is of equal or greater strength, it will be difficult to move his or her fist with this kind of crude action.

Next, press down abruptly on the fist, and follow this action by suddenly lifting it. The fist will rise with ease. (Knowing that the opponent will resist

any action to move the fist, you merely use reverse psychology, pushing down in order to cause the other person to push upward and enabling you to raise the hand. Again, we're respecting the opponent's opinion, realizing that his body will respond to the movement of his mind.) This experiment is an expression of *ki o michibiki*—"guiding and directing the opponent's ki"—which was described earlier as a means of subtly leading the opponent's body in a particular direction. It also ties into the aforementioned *hando no kuzushi*, which uses a reversing action.

Nevertheless, how quickly or slowly you attempt to raise the fist after pushing it downward determines the ease with which you can lift it. Naturally, the other person will react to the downward pressure by pushing upward to resist it, but different people react with a slightly different timing. If we attempt to raise the fist before the person has fully begun to press upward, or slightly after his or her upward pressure has ceased, we will not get the same effective result as if we precisely time the lifting effort in conjunction with the movement of the other person's *ki* and body. A precise rhythm, which will vary from person to person, is required.

By trying different kinds of rhythm and timing in this experiment, and by applying this to the execution of various techniques, it is possible to



Illustration 6

more fully understand the extraordinary characteristics of aiki.

ACCENTING THE BEAT TO AFFECT THE OPPONENT'S REACTIONS

In the above experiment, if we press down on the fist in a weak or hesitant manner, and then try to strongly lift it, we will not get the same effortless result as when we press downward decisively, and then let the fist and the lifting hand rise almost by themselves. Therefore, accenting the downward motion in this experiment, and in many techniques involving aiki, is a most effective means of causing the opponent's body to move.

Hence, we must establish a smooth rhythm to keep the opponent moving until the end of the throw or immobilization, but this rhythm is not all one speed. In music, too, one must keep the beat, but even in music, it isn't uncommon to accent the first beat in a measure, i.e., the initial movement. Aiki-jujutsu and aikido, when correctly performed, has a similar accent on certain "beats."

These beats are most effective if they're the downward movements, which will cause the opponent to bounce up, by reaction, thus unsettling the opponent's weight and center of gravity. This, in turn, allows us to throw the opponent more easily since his or her weight is floating, causing the posture to become unstable. However, the defender is performing each action while dropping weight toward the earth, and thus harmonizing with gravity, while letting the body rise naturally as a reaction. Therefore, his or her own weight is rarely unsettled, and stability is maintained during a particular technique.

An authoritative downward action can be created most effectively by relaxing dynamically and letting your arms fall naturally, in harmony with gravity, instead of by tensing the arms, which only slows their descent. Dropping the hips and hara in conjunction with such a movement also serves to

bring the overwhelming force of the whole mind and body into the motion, as opposed to the relatively small force of the arms. All of these concepts ultimately lead us to a clear, direct, and unaltered perception of nature. They amount to a study of naturalness.

Maintaining a constant, powerful rhythm is so important in aiki-based techniques that in the case of techniques that take longer to execute (involving more than one sudden action), I often ask students to count out loud as they perform the technique, to learn its specific rhythm and to ascertain if this rhythm is being sustained. For example, in a technique requiring three downward motions, the steady cadence would be, "ONE-TWO-THREE," with no count for the upward movements (which should happen instantly, as a relaxed reaction to the accented downward beat).

CENTRIFUGAL POWER, MOMENTUM, AND CONTROL OF THE OPPONENT

By using a sudden, powerful initial action to start the opponent moving, and by sustaining this movement by means of an almost hypnotic rhythm, a potent momentum is produced that will fling the opponent off balance, and in many cases, to the ground. Unless this momentum is explosively generated and retained, it's hard work to throw or restrain an attacker. Along with the generation of momentum, one must consider the importance of producing, and not interfering with, centrifugal power.

Relaxing the body without going limp and letting the limbs extend to their natural length while moving freely enables your movements to generate a surprising amount of centrifugal power. This centrifugal power, in turn, lets you vigorously throw an attacker without having to rely on the use of great muscular strength. Actually, excessive tension and contraction of the muscles will serve only to inhibit the speed of your movements, along with the energetic formation of centrifugal power.

If when we perform without an opponent, shadow boxing style, we can't feel centrifugal power acting on our extremities, we're either breaking the rhythm of the technique, or our movements are too tense or unnatural to generously produce centrifugal power. Remember, the concept of aiki, on a physical plane, requires the production of centrifugal force and momentum, rather than any sort of extreme muscular contractions.

STILLNESS IN MOTION

Even when the rugged strangleholds and painful joint-bending immobilizations of aiki-jujutsu are performed, as opposed to aiki throws, the principles of aiki can still be used. For instance, aiki is required to effortlessly guide the opponent into a stranglehold (*shime waza*), and even though the joint techniques of aikido are extremely painful, one should still ultimately rely on aiki, more than mere pain, to throw and restrain an attacker. (In the case of an assailant with a high-degree of willpower—*kiryoku*—and hence a high pain tolerance, or for individuals momentarily insane or under the influence of drugs, simply inducing pain won't always be enough to throw them in a stunning manner, thus ending the conflict.)

Along with the principles of aiki, it's essential to manifest what some forms of Asian philosophy have termed "stillness in motion," or *dochu no sei*. In fact, *dochu no sei* can be considered one of the principles of aiki itself.

What is stillness in motion? It indicates that although engaged in vigorous physical activity, within the mind, we remain calm and at peace. In fact, when *dochu no sei* fully manifests itself, aiki-jujutsu or aikido, and even daily affairs, become moving meditation. This is vital if we're to retain the dependable sensitivity and heightened perception that's required to embody aiki.

Dochu no sei reveals itself perhaps most clearly at the moment before and immediately after the

opponent's attack. Preceding the attack your posture must be light, poised, erect, and relaxed. The face is calm, the eyes aren't blinking excessively or staring; the body does not shift nervously about. The posture appears immovable—as is the mind. Unless we begin from such a calm and coordinated posture, it's virtually impossible to maintain calmness in the midst of motion, as the condition of calmness must exist before the movement commences.

Following the execution of a technique, the body should instantly return to the same still, unruffled, stable condition that it was in before the movement originated. Any wobbling or tension is evidence of a loss of composure that most likely developed during the performance of the technique. This not only weakens one's *ki*, but prevents a surefire response to a second offensive.

By noticing our mental and physical state before as well as following the opponent's attack, we have an effective criterion for judging the condition of our minds during the performance of aiki-jujutsu or aikido. (It's difficult to observe the mind once the action has commenced because the mind is usually focused on what's taking place at that moment.) We also have an effective, visible means of analyzing our personalities and minds, which is undoubtedly, over the course of our lives, as important as the ability to control an opponent.

I realize that aikido and aiki-jujutsu don't inevitably have identical explanations of aiki, but I also know that numerous commonalities are present, despite the claims of some that each art uses "a different kind of aiki." I hope this article gives SMAA members in all martial arts—not just our aikido and jujutsu divisions—ideas that can help them in their martial arts training and daily lives.

Notes

1 *Aiki News*/Ishibashi Yoshihisa, "Letters to the Editor," *Aiki News*, Tokyo, Japan: *Aiki News*, 1988,

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p. 56.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid. pp. 56 and 58.

5 Donn F. Draeger, *Classical Budo*, New York and Tokyo: John Weatherhill, Inc., 1973, p. 47.

6 Michel Random, *The Martial Arts*, London: Octopus Books Limited, 1978, p. 76.

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