

Role of swordmanship and the Not-Naming of things in aikido by John Turnbull Sensei



In his book *The Principles of Aikido*, Mitsugi Saotome writes: "On the one hand, the story of the Samurai in Japan is a story of blood, death, and cruelty. On the other hand, out of the bloody turmoil came some of the most peaceful and enlightened men in the history of Japan. Destruction and chaos gave birth to a philosophy of communion with the divine principles of the universe and of love for fellow men."

He goes on to say that no-one can value peace so well as one who has experienced the horrors of war, and no-one can value life so well as one who understands the reality of death. So it is that amid the spiritual poverty of war - we find some of the richest understandings of the way to peace. And so it was that in the training to become great swordsmen and warriors during Japan's feudal era there were concepts which contained the keys to escape from the entanglement in conflict and bloodshed.

The Samurai had to develop a commitment to purpose - whether to protect his honour, his family, his lord or his people - so great that the deliberate ability to sacrifice his own or her own life if necessary was attained. Paradoxically the ability to disregard the possibility of losing one's own life increases one's survival ability dramatically in emergencies, for in being freed from fear there comes freedom from distraction.

In Japanese swordmanship, on which the martial art of Aikido is based, there is the concept of *ai uchi* - in which the defender totally forgoes his or her own safety and risks everything in order to deal a telling blow to the attacker. The annals of swordmanship are rife with examples of altruistic acts in which a lesser swordsman risked his life in order to stop a greater swordsman and thus save his friends or family. But *ai uchi* can only be achieved through becoming aware of the true value of life. The willingness to die in a just cause can only come about by rising above the attachment to life, not by ignoring its precious gift.

The concept of *ai uchi* was encoded into the samurai culture during Japan's long feudal period, and from it arose the consciousness that *satsu jin ken*, the killing of the enemy, was equivalent to spiritual suicide. So there arose the concept that *katsu jin ken*, the saving of the enemy's life, was the only true victory over one's own egotism.

This concept of *budo*, the possession of a love of all life so great that it allows you to love your enemy and the spiritual strength to put that love into practice, lies at the philosophical heart of Aikido says Mitsugo Saotome.

Aikido is a new martial art in that it was developed only this century by Morihei Ueshiba, who became known as O'Sensei - the Great Teacher. Thus it is the latest evolution in the ancient traditions of martial art, and as a consequence can justifiably be regarded as one of humankind's greatest spiritual achievements. But as such it has largely passed beyond the power of mere words to express - its truths must be experienced to be understood.

So important is this principle that many of the classical self-defence techniques used for throwing attackers in Aikido - the *kokyu-nage* or breath-spirit-power throws - have no names. This is a deliberate ploy to

prevent people thinking they have learnt Aikido when all they have learnt is its terminology, the way people think they understand football or golf because they know the names of the moves!

In Aikido we must perceive and comprehend at the true or intrinsic level - anything else is merely self-deceit.

In this it is by no means unique, for as Georges Braque, the modern French artist, said on his seventieth birthday, There is only one thing in art which is worthwhile. It is that which cannot be explained.

And in The way of Chinese Painting Sze Mai-mai says :

The key phrase is ch'i-yun. 'ch'i in movement'. Rhythm is one aspect of the total action of the ch'i'. We can sense its meaning without difficulty but no simple definition can cover it. The fact that it has to be grasped through intuition indicates that an intellectual definition falls far short. Perhaps 'breath' is the best translation if one remembers the ancient concept of breath as soul or spirit. The Sanskrit prana, the Greek Pneuma, and Latin spiritus have the same import as ch'i, likewise ruakh in Biblical Hebrew and the term nefesh, described in the Zohar as the breath and substance of the Fourth Sphere, the world of physical existence.'

Martha Graham, the famous dancer, noted that in true dance: There is a vitality, a life force, an energy, a quickening which is translated through you into action, and because there is only one of you in all time, this extension is unique. And if you block it, it will never exist through any other medium and it will be lost. The world will not have it.

Those who have already trained in Aikido enough to have experienced its wonder can empathise with this. For to fail to experience that quickening of energy - the expression of the world's creative energy which the Chinese call chi and the Japanese ki - in Aikido's wonderful techniques is to miss out on one of the great formative experiences and one of the great joys of life.