

Weapons in aikido by John Turnbull Sensei



People often wonder about the use of weapons without any protective armour in Aikido. Why train with archaic Samurai fighting tools such as two-handed swords and jo which nobody uses for real anymore, especially when they cannot compare in effectiveness with even the simplest gun, let alone the explosive weapons and nerve gases etc. which mark modern warfare?

Well, there are many reasons. Firstly there are certain ways of moving and using one's body (tai-sabaki) which can only be properly learnt through practising with the Samurai sword and staff. These movements not only develop grace, fitness and power, but translate directly into movements which are of great value in unarmed self-defence.

One reason for this is that being struck even lightly by a bokken (oak training sword) or jo (oak staff) is so painful that it makes us learn to be very careful, and this translates directly into pure survival skill in an actual confrontation. Techniques which can be done sloppily when training with an unarmed partner suddenly take on a whole new meaning when that partner is wielding a lethal weapon.

And weapons are great equalisers. A big, strong man who enjoys "throwing his weight about" suddenly finds himself at a disadvantage when facing a slimmer, smaller person who is quick and sharp. It quickly becomes obvious that developing mere muscular strength has disadvantages!! Suddenly it is driven home that the habit of aggressive, bullying behaviour is a terrible disadvantage in real combat. Because the slightest carelessness, the slightest failure to credit one's training partner with the ability to strike painfully, will result in being struck.

On this subject Mitsugi Saotome, a uchi-deshi (inner student) of O'Sensei Ueshiba the Founder of Aikido, says: "To avoid injury in weapons work you must learn concentration, alertness, precision, and decisiveness. All of these qualities are useful to develop, both for your Aikido training and for your performance as a human being. Your sense of timing, balance, intuition and of judgement all become more crucial in weapons work. You can't get away with the degree of sloppiness and inattention that you can sometimes overlook or be unaware of in hand-to-hand technique. You also develop more respect for your partners. If you are not respectful and attentive to them, they have the potential to do you a good deal of harm even if it is unintentional."

Saotome Sensei also points out that it is precisely because the weapons used in Aikido are archaic that they are so effective for self-development. For unlike modern weapons, they are intensely personal. An intercontinental ballistic missile is totally impersonal. The user merely presses a button, and thousands of kilometres away a million unknown and faceless men, women and children are destroyed. But to strike your training partner either accidentally or intentionally with a bokken or jo, you must first face him or her at close range, and then witness in detail the reality of pain and injury on a fellow human being. This ever-present reality helps curb aggression and develop a more controlled and peaceful consciousness.

At the psychological-philosophical-spiritual level, where all true development occurs, weapons training under a skilled teacher brings an end to conceit and self-delusion. It brings us face to face with the reality of our own vulnerability and mortality, thus breaking down egotism, that greatest of all barriers to success in Aikido and in life. In Aikido it is truly said that the only real victory is self-victory. Beating another person is only a partial victory - one person loses so that another can "win". From the point of view of the Universe, no real progress has occurred.

But overcoming the problems within one's own ego not only means discovering reality and true strength, it means truly attuning to the creative energy of the Universe. That is an all-win situation. There are no losers then, and the world has been made a better place.