

# Aikido in Action: Principle Application by Advanced Practitioners

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## Abstract

The forthcoming analysis centers upon an informal ethnographic study and incorporates a series of interviews conducted in two regions within western Kentucky and southwestern Virginia. The intent of this paper is to present cumulative experiential testimony in support of the assertion that successful practitioners of aikido, a modern Japanese martial art, exhibit characteristic historical, philosophical, and physical aspects of the discipline. In doing so, these individuals not only embody unlikely attributes of the practice but also unify themselves within a collective identity.

## Introduction

Morihei Ueshiba, often referred to as O Sensei (“Great Teacher”), established his legacy at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when war and casual violence pervaded Japanese society. Formal military training and study of numerous striking arts in his youth ostensibly inspired the development of technique and underlying principles of aikido (Westbrook and Ratti 29). He sought to incite necessary change in prevailing philosophies and practices by means of an entirely unique approach that emphasized harmony, unity, and a respect for one’s attacker that contradicted his martial upbringing. He is known to have maintained the view that great disorder arises out of conflict and through aikido such disorder can be righted. In O Sensei’s own words, “He who has gained the secret of Aikido has the universe in himself and can say, ‘I am the universe.’ When an enemy tries to fight with me, the universe itself, he has to break the harmony with the universe. Hence, at the moment he has the mind to fight with me, he is already defeated” (Dass and Gorman 173). Modern aikido technique largely derives from preexisting martial relatives, but it diverged early on as an independent entity and eventually captured the attention of

Westerners. Additionally, recent growth in aikido’s global popularity has stimulated thoughtful discussion pertaining to some of the more esoteric intricacies of the art.

An attempt to examine and analyze all relevant aspects of aikido in their entirety would be not only imprudent, given the breadth of such an endeavor, but also beyond the scope of this study’s academic proclivity. Rather, interpretation and discussion of the perceptions, opinions, and behaviors of several long-time aikido students remains a primary focus, in an effort to expand the sociological understanding of the art. A great deal of information can be elucidated from similarities between individuals, and perhaps even more from the differences. Among those who commit to a lifestyle that involves and applies aikido, there exists a common system of values—one that remains rather far removed from our modern Western ideals. Some have even suggested that one establishes a new identity in aikido, effectively assimilating the practitioner into a new culture (Tan 131). Others insist that “progression in Aikido necessitates a challenging of many Western cultural preconceptions about strength, competition and success” (Svarc and Willmington). Indeed, as a practice, aikido emphasizes delayed gratification in a society built on instant fulfillment; blending as an alternative to confrontation; self-control in the midst of chaos; humility rather than boastfulness; and an understanding of human limitation that contrasts with a tendency toward notions of arrogant omnipotence. These distinctions, which exist as integral components of aikido philosophy and practice, inform several noteworthy implications about the art and its practitioners. In an effort to explore several underlying themes and gain a greater understanding of how aikido transforms into a lifestyle for a number of its students in accordance with these ideals, this

study seeks to address one question and its myriad implications: How do the historical, philosophical, and physical aspects of aikido manifest themselves in dedicated practitioners of the martial art?

Traditional Japanese terminologies are included as necessary in reference to common vocabulary used in training. A full appreciation for the practice necessitates their incorporation into training. *Budo* describes the martial element of aikido and many other disciplines. Perhaps the most rudimentary and quintessential relationship exists between that of *uke* (one who accepts a technique) and *nage* (one who applies a technique). *Sensei* are simply teachers of a martial art, while *aikidoka* are nonspecific practitioners. *Shodan* refers to the first-degree black belt ranking, followed by *nidan*, *sandan*, *yondan*, and *godan*; rankings continue in accordance with the Japanese numbering system.

### Methods

This study heavily utilized participant observation as a means of gaining a deeper personal understanding of both aikido traditions and practices. Alternating attendance at two dojos which remain unaffiliated with any higher regulatory organization allowed a unique freedom in comparing experiences and learning to distinguish relevant differences in the natural processes and interactions that occur while training. Invitations for one-on-one meetings were extended to active members of the aikido community in Owensboro, Kentucky and in Roanoke, Virginia at their own convenience. Selection was based upon experience level and personal acquaintance. In total, eight informal interviews were conducted over the course of a six month period. Participants were asked a series of open-ended questions and asked to respond to the extent of their ability and level of comfort. Conversations were then transcribed verbatim and thematically analyzed by manual identification of emergent themes. Although permission was granted by these individuals to reference their experiences and other personal opinions, names have been omitted in my

discussion out of respect for the privacy of those involved.

### Results and Discussion

By many translations of the word, *shodan* refers to a student who has exhibited the qualities necessary to take his or her training beyond the level of a beginner. A basic familiarity with technique enables him or her to practically apply the physical principles, though the vast potential for further development remains not only probable but generally expected. The following section details the chronological progression of an *aikidoka* from the perspective of those who have committed to the practice and preservation of aikido, for the benefit of many. Accounts provided by these eight participants establish an essential framework for elucidating not only how certain aspects of the martial art manifest themselves within high-ranking students, but perhaps more broadly in how they apply more generally to the aikido community.

#### *Getting Started*

The gradual piecing together of this intricate puzzle began with a lingering question: What could possibly unite a group of otherwise unaffiliated individuals under a common practice of aikido before any of them ever stepped on the mat? Perhaps their earliest introduction might provide the necessary insight, particularly if it sharply contrasted to their present experience. At first glance, the responses to this inquiry appeared as diverse as the eight individuals to whom they belonged, but unspoken motivators stirred just below the surface. A message rang clear throughout that transformations of purpose strongly coincided with transformations of the person, and neither occurred by default. The personal accounts of how it all started, however, offered some quantifiable contrast. Three of the participants can be described as having expressed an academic or philosophical interest, while two explained their entry as preparation for law enforcement positions, and the remaining three discovered aikido by means of a seemingly

unrelated extracurricular interest. Even within these condensed classifications, there existed significant overlap. Previous exposure to other disciplines actually proved inconsequential in evaluating how aikido became the primary martial preference of this select sample. Six of the eight sensei had practiced another discipline previously, or even concurrently with aikido. For reasons that will be discussed in greater depth at a later point, many of the reasons for starting also answered the question “Why aikido?”—that is, what does aikido offer that other martial arts failed to provide? For several, a surprising degree of indifference permeated their initial exploration. One practitioner of twenty-two years frankly stated “I...had wanted to practice a martial art all my life and had never made the time...I realized if I didn’t try [to begin a martial art] I never would. There would always just be excuses.” Another veteran of the art admitted, “At the beginning I wasn’t that interested. I was kind of going against what my parents were saying. You know, that kind of age.” Happenstance, as soon became apparent, drew as many in as any other aspect of the art.

The misunderstandings among non-practitioners and beginners alike provide a context for evaluating how these initial notions transform over time. From the perspective of some three-quarters of those interviewed, it appears that an overarching skepticism pervades most casual onlookers when it comes to aikido. “They see the techniques being applied and... it looks choreographed or scripted.” Similarly, another sensei made the frank observation that, “two people [move] so well together it’s like a dance.” Three individuals specifically noted how a considerable portion of those new to the practice may not fully appreciate the unique philosophies surrounding aikido. All but two interviewees listed underestimation of physical demand and duration of commitment as other potential misperceptions.

Perhaps even more valuable, these responses inform how attrition within aikido exists as a consequence of some of the same aforementioned perceptions about the practice. Popular opinion among three sensei suggested

the lack of instant gratification or competitive expectations, while another three indicated that uncertainties with regard to the philosophy significantly contributed. Along these same lines, a disinterest in subtleties of the art was proposed by two sensei as a likely factor. Physical deterrents such as age and discomfort with close personal contact reflected the opinions of half of the participants.

As one sensei proposed, “...aikido really is for everybody, but not everybody is ready for aikido”. Whether intentional or not, this sentiment echoes a concept conveyed in some of O Sensei’s final words before his passing in 1969; namely that “aikido is for the entire world” (Svarc and Willington). A similar perspective might explain additional trends that have arisen. The topic of attrition provides a conduit for evaluating what poor retention of *aikidoka* says about the type of people that ultimately succeed in this practice. Not to underplay the significant physical barriers that prevent many from fulfilling their desires to pursue a martial art, aikido faces many of the same obstacles that hinder progress in other disciplines. Many of the misunderstandings about the nature and challenges of aikido likely contribute to stagnation or failure for a large percentage of people. To most casual observers and internet viewers, aikido appears, at best, artfully contrived and, at worst, entirely fake. Here, a clarifying point can be made. One of the most essential skills obtained throughout the practice of aikido revolves around *awase*, or blending—accepting the attack of an opponent in a manner that minimalizes static collision, eschewing physical harm for both parties. The uninformed onlooker may erroneously perceive mutual preservation during training for inefficacy. As a result, the use of muscular strength in an attempt to gain control of one’s partner remains another prevalent, though remarkably fruitless, tendency among beginners and even some upper-level students. As one scholar illustrates, in the practice of aikido “one must learn to flow with and blend with an attack, just as a sapling bends under the weight of snow or with a strong wind. It survives

because it is flexible and goes along with the more powerful force rather than trying to resist it. Many a strong oak breaks under the same pressure because it is rigid and unyielding. When meeting force with force, the stronger prevails; when giving way and redirecting force, the weak can overcome the strong” (“Chapter 3” 34). This is not to say that physical fitness detracts from or inhibits the experience, but merely that it is a skill acquired over the course of a lifetime that enables an *aikidoka* to accept, submit, and redirect the energy of an incoming attack.

One notable consistency among responses characterized several psychological barriers to training. Most referred to the fact that many beginners quickly become frustrated and impatient when their expectation of near-instant results or reward-based gratification fails to become reality. Speaking from many years of experience on the matter, one sensei remarked, “People come in hoping for magic and it isn’t there”, while another phrased an identical scenario in a manner that articulated the general, and arguably natural, propensity toward immediate fulfillment: “They want a Happy Meal martial art.” Advanced practitioners of aikido are not unique in that they have never possessed this innate tendency, but in that they consciously accepted the challenges and worked to redefine their own mental boundaries.

### *Fundamentals*

As an art that encompasses nearly all conceivable aspects of the person, practitioners must manage their aikido just as they would any other significant part of their life. Simply stated by one sensei, “It’s part of my body and it’s part of my mind.” In this way, one clearly informs the other. Still, for others this necessitates a means of differentiating between time that should be dedicated to aikido and time that belongs exclusively to work, family, or leisure. There exists an abundance of anecdotal evidence to describe day to day application that, in one way or another, epitomizes aikido for an individual. The behaviors that give rise to habits that, in turn, give rise to a portion of our character may be

influenced by the extent to which we engage our physical and cognitive experiences. “It reminds me of who I want to be, and it’s a way for me to center myself.” “It’s when I wake up and when I go to sleep. It’s the first thing I think about and the last.” In being physiologically aware, application of the philosophy will surely follow. Presumably, the converse holds as well. Participants also provided a context for applying the principles of blending to analogous verbal confrontations. In these cases, the correlation to a physical action on the mat translated to a consideration of appropriate conversational responses and a personal accountability for upholding aikido principles as they would in a training setting.

With the exception of one interviewee who had at some point over the course of a career found it necessary to employ physical techniques, not a single other practitioner had used their aikido in this way. There arose an unexpected divide in whether or not aikido would even be martially effective ‘on the street’, wherein some half of the participants responded in a manner suggesting that they pursued it to a greater extent as an exercise of the mind rather than as a martial art. One sensei blatantly stated, “It has self-defense applications, obviously, but that’s not why I do it, and it affects my aikido. It affects the way I train.” Across the board, the idea of aikido manifested through its ideals pertaining to verbal conflict resolution abounded. The same individual poignantly commented, “...if I took all my ideas about conflict resolution and put them into a dance, it would look like aikido.” A subset specifically noted the connections to mindfulness, balance, and blending with regard to the same intangible applications. This makes sense; if not for self-defense, then for what other purpose? One sensei recalled the story of a fellow *aikidoka* who returned after a considerable hiatus because his wife had noticed a decline in his demeanor and physical well-being since he had stopped attending class. Three others remarked how the consideration for *uke* plays into discrepancies

between the atmosphere in the dojo and outside of the training environment. It was noted that practitioners of aikido are trained to fall in a way that minimizes or entirely circumvents injury, whereas members of the general population are not. Furthermore, sensei must walk a fine line between ensuring the effectiveness of a technique and preventing *aikidoka* from sustaining a lasting injury. There involves great deal of responsibility in both practicing and communicating the necessity of such integral restraint.

The juxtaposition between how participants reported using their training and how they surmised that others use their training offered a particularly useful apparatus for determining the practicality of aikido within the context of daily life. One notable advantage that sensei have over less experienced *aikidoka* involves the ability to participate and observe simultaneously: "...if you get to hang out with that instructor, and just watch them interact with people they don't know that aren't part of the group, you can kind of learn how they're using their aikido in their daily life." This highlights a particularly significant ideological manifestation within *aikidoka*. The near absence of physically confrontational aikido among those interviewed indicates that a heightened personal awareness and a desire to avoid physical altercation exists as a major unintended consequence of long-term aikido study. Perhaps, as was implied by several, this type of martial art either attracts individuals of a particular disposition or otherwise amplifies their preexisting tendencies. This trend has, in fact, proven well-documented among other members of the academic aikido community. For instance, "Although it's easy to imagine scenarios where martial arts techniques will produce a decisive victory, the epitome of self-development enables you to avoid such circumstances in the first place" (Golden 2005). In this way, there exists an almost cyclic redistribution of energy in the preparation for and subsequent renunciation of physical violence.

### *Style, Variation, and Philosophy*

It remains commonplace in aikido literature to refer to the Japanese translation of aikido as 'the way of harmony of energy' (Westbrook and Ratti 17). Interestingly, the manner in which long-time practitioners characterized 'harmony' as a foundational ideology exhibited a surprising degree of commonality. More than half described O Sensei's philosophy as an attempt to regain control or re-establish unity within oneself and one's surroundings. "A lot of times you can't do techniques very well in aikido [because] you are out of control with yourself, rather than you can't control your partner." Two indicated a distinct ideal of nonviolence, suggesting that what sets aikido apart involves the intentional avoidance of direct aggression. According to one proponent, "We don't learn how to fight in aikido. We learn how not to fight." One outlying but undoubtedly pertinent philosophical interpretation was that of love, in the sense that there existed a perceived respect for the attacker that Morehei Ueshiba communicated in his formation of aikido. The sensei who proposed this ideal stated, "The martial arts weren't for destruction, they were for uniting." With regard to the harmonious legacy that O Sensei not only taught but practiced, the same individual affirmed that, "those weren't words, those were decisions."

The respect for ancestry resonated throughout and offered a point of introspection for how *aikidoka* of past and present relate to one another. All sensei acknowledged the extent to which one's own teachers and experiences in life manifest themselves in the practice of aikido. In this way, the greatest commonality is, in fact, variability. Candidly stated, "Everybody imposes on the art whatever they bring physically and mentally to it." By contrast, some participants identified specific aspects of aikido that more or less define their approach to the art. For two participants, a fastidious adherence to small details hasn't been of high priority since their pre-*shodan* days. Several others noted a

deeply connection to philosophical principles as a defining characteristic of their training. One participant compared fellow *aikidoka* to elements of water, earth, wind, and fire as a means of illustrating how aikido encourages, and in many respects necessitates, a coalescence of mind and body in a way that provides a conduit between physical and metaphysical realms. The concepts of blending and nonresistance once more explain how the elements of aikido operate in cohesive harmony within practitioners while still allowing for the development and expression of individualistic elements.

If, as suggested by some, philosophy exists as a vital and intrinsic attribute of fundamental aikido, something must be said about the degree of necessity for all practitioners capturing a similar sentiment. A definitive majority considered the acceptance of central philosophies as undeniably essential to the attainment of proficiency, while another two individuals held the opposing view—that there exists a separation between cardinal principles and physical ability. Several of those who maintained the former view expressed concern that the separation of mind from body gives rise to aikido that lack its *ki* (central energy), or to a form that is not aikido at all. Relating it back to the aforementioned element metaphor, one *aikidoka* stated, “You become that rock instead of the water. You’re no longer doing aikido.” Additionally, some believed that much of the attrition observed may be indirectly correlated with this disconnect, that the extent to which mind directs the body, and vice versa, proves unequivocal in determining the success of one’s pursuit within the practice.

Respect for the founder remains, in etiquette and practice, a central component of aikido tradition, yet in many ways, more can be ascertained from an individual’s interpretation of the essential ideologies that O Sensei was attempting to convey with the original practice of aikido than what may be elucidated from factual records. After all, the perceptive understanding of what Morehei Ueshiba initiated dictates how aikido is both conveyed

and received. As it turns out, relatively few members of O Sensei’s original cohort of students agree on the methodology of aikido as it would be preserved for posterity. As a result of this incongruence at such an influential level of the information flow, aikido continues to be translated into numerous forms that vary according to the most recent or most influential partiality of the lineage. Those who embrace the martial components approach aikido from an entirely different perspective than those who emphasize harmony or the act of bringing chaos into order. This array of forms contributes to the practical diversity of aikido.

#### *What Makes a Teacher?*

In addition to being dedicated students of aikido, another commonality centered upon their experiences as teachers. This revealed a significant universality. The shift in responsibility, whether rooted in an obligation to students, former teachers, or oneself, undoubtedly accompanied the position. A clear illustration of how these responsibilities manifest themselves comes from one practitioner who enjoyed extensive study with several highly-regarded sensei: “I have this responsibility to kind of disseminate and transmit what I learned from those great teachers.” All, to some degree, remarked how certain things seemed new again. “There were a lot of times I felt like I was back at the beginning, trying to learn, trying to understand”, responded one sensei when asked about how teaching has influenced her practice. Some experienced a pressure to entertain, while other noticed how much more intimately familiar they needed to be with techniques in order to adequately instruct both upper- and lower-ranked students. One *aikidoka* stated, “...you have to not only just be able to do the technique, but you have to understand why you’re doing it that way and be able to explain it... and show why that works or doesn’t work.” It is evident that much can be said about the view from sensei’s side of the mat.

Evolution of forms and ideas occur as a part of any practice. Despite the nearly universal agreement that preservation of original values and teachings should remain at the forefront of any aikido establishment, most agreed that westernization and other adaptive influences will alter the course of aikido as it outgrows its state of infancy. Three participants expressed a concern of generational ‘watering down’ in which, with each successive branching from the origin, progressively less of O Sensei’s aikido will remain.

As the general consensus dictates—that evolution of aikido as an art and class of *budo* remains inevitable—the question follows regarding whether or not preferential change might be accepted or even encouraged. A considerable fact of the matter involves the affiliation with regulatory organizations. In many ways, the flexibility within dojos depends enormously upon the ‘higher power’ that governs their aikido. Neither dojo operates as an affiliated entity, though several participants cited this as being a determining factor of direct influence. Still, one sensei from each dojo discernably distinguished the allowance for flexibility as separate from deliberate alteration of technique. “You’re held accountable for the model, and then the things that are extemporaneous... is something that will always happen with the technique or was meant to.” The desire and responsibility to preserve and utilize the forms and ideals of archetypal aikido remains at the heart of modern practice. “I think it’s excellent to preserve what [O Sensei] taught just so that we can refer to it as undiluted aikido, but on the other hand, I think it’s possible that technical changes consistent with old aikido are possible.”

No matter one’s hierarchical standing, personal challenges reveal the direction and motivations of an *aikidoka*. Although two sensei mentioned specific techniques with which they continue to struggle, these constituted a distinct minority. The reality of age as a limiting factor in the practice of aikido was recognized as well. Rather, consistency—in both mindfulness and practice—appeared to

dominate the reports of most participants. Lack of time existed as a major constraint for two in particular, while an additional two described difficulty in deciphering what others expected of them in conjunction with what they expected from themselves. All in all, most everyone agreed that, though sometimes frustrating, many of these challenges impart a unique sense of joy to the practice of aikido. Personal challenges divulge as much about the whole practice as they do about the individual. Obstacles related to technique remained few and far between, indicating that, despite being an ostensibly physical interest that demands stamina and balance, these components remain more easily grasped than the intangible ideals upon which they are constructed.

### Conclusion

It can be said of aikido, which places an emphasis on principles of both mind and body, that there undoubtedly exist commonalities among practitioners based in elements unique to the discipline. As was expected, the eight individuals with whom I spoke tended to agree in many of their responses. This supports the argument of an intrinsic subtlety that differentiates the aikido practitioner from both laypersons as well as from martial artists of other disciplines. Even opposing views among participants provided a necessary contrast for determining not only how they have allowed aikido to take form and interact with other aspects of their being. The distinguishing factor of aikido lies in how the history, philosophy, and physicality converge to manifest themselves within a student of the art—most notably in those who have remained and excelled.

The nature of this study enabled sufficient comparison among and between *aikidoka* that frequent dojos of the same geographic location but could not definitely elucidate whether or not some of the patterns and views resulted from mere proximity; that is, that there exist clear and undeniable likenesses among those who train together. It is expected that, among more experienced sensei who have trained and

mentored new teachers, the comparison is even more pronounced. Nevertheless, the degree of interconnection and contextual overlap of major ideologies, in addition to the substantial diversity of responses, far exceeded that which would have been expected from eight otherwise unrelated individuals. In spite of the circumstances that prevented a more broadly-encompassing extrapolation of findings, evidence provided by independent accounts of opinions, perspectives, and practices established a basis for an ideological tree grounded in the roots of aikido that supplies all other aspects of the art.

The emergent patterns demonstrated a consistency that proved sufficient in classifying the historical, physical, and philosophical manifestations of aikido principles in advanced practitioners. More so, the chronological and sequential manner in which a casual participant transforms into a more dedicated and knowledgeable student outlines the maturation process of an *aikidoka*. A sensei, though still very literally only a serious student of aikido, uniquely characterizes and applies the principles that will ultimately be promulgated about the art.

### **Limitations of the Study**

This project involved a restricted sample size. Considering the amount of information obtained from eight participants practicing aikido in similar regions of the continental United States, all observations remain heavily subjective and therefore not definitively generalizable to the greater population of aikido practitioners. A more inclusive study could provide a more comprehensive perspective pertaining to the same inquiry. Many of the claims proposed could be strengthened or refuted by examining global or regional trends that were not considered throughout the course of this project. Additionally, a similar examination of *aikidoka* who have yet to attain the title of *shodan* could offer valuable insight about the formative processes of these ideals.

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