

The Dying Vision of Aikido

by Andrzej Bazyłko

Aikido is an unusual and atypical martial art. No wonder it suffers from many myths. Even the ethical ideal of Aikido seems self-contradictory. It is the avoidance of fighting, and if it has already come to this, fighting without doing harm to the opponent. It has to do after all with the martial art whose aim should be, in the opinion of some, above all efficiency in fighting. Yet this is not the case, which to many persons is quite difficult to understand. Efficiency is not everything. Why avoid fighting? It seems clear that one should not strive for it, but to actively avoid it? How to accomplish this by learning to fight? How to mark out the way by means of techniques? And how to fight, if one is not prepared to defeat the opponent by all means available? The aim is beautiful, but it seems impossible to accomplish it through the martial arts. If somebody was to undertake this dangerous activity, he would be unsuccessful trying to express this by means of technical form. Yet there was a man who could do this. His name was Morihei Ueshiba (1883-1969). The difficulty in the reception of his work is due not only to the striving for master it in the highest level, but also the understanding of the message which is connected with him. The more time that passes since the death of the creator of Aikido, the more misunderstandings there are about it. And there are more and more interpretations greatly diverging from the original.

These misunderstandings concern the way in which we try to achieve the ideal of Aikido. Aikido ranks as a beautiful martial art, cultivating lofty ideals, but its techniques are taken to be ineffective. Beautiful, brilliant, but ineffective. Aikido is treated by many people as the art of movement and not the martial art. Though most critics admit that this movement is in itself fascinating, they consider it much too inadequate in threatening situations. They prefer those who can strike more strongly, so that the opponent is not able to get up or to regain balance. There are more and more tournaments with the aim of comparing the efficiency of different martial arts. From time to time new disciplines appear which proclaim the achievement of maximum effectiveness in the minimum time. They gain popularity for several years, then go out of style, replaced by the next disciplines "more effective in real fighting". This is attested by the incorrect understanding of the notion "martial art" which is often treated as the same thing as "sport of fighting". This also has been incorrectly understood. Searching for ruthless efficiency in threatening situations, striving toward victory in sporting competitions and the many-sided developments in the martial arts do not mean the same thing. There are rather big differences which are often simplified or simply denied.

It must also be admitted that quite a lot of false formulations concerning Aikido came into being in Aikidoka circles. It appears that this martial art can be too difficult not only for those who are not involved in it, but do not shy away from making authoritative claims concerning it, but also for those who are involved in undertaking the work of Ueshiba, not only from the theoretical, but also from the practical side. It seems typical that often negative pronouncements come from those who tried, but did not succeed, or simply lacked patience, and try unsuccessfully to generalize about the discipline. Quite a lot of people, however, continue learning, but eventually stop developing and their incomprehension causes them to utter complicated formulas concerning the spiritual side of Aikido. The ephemerality of the philosophy, often considered unpractical in today's competitive world, and the level of complexity of the techniques does not, however, prevent Aikido from gaining huge popularity. Although it does not involve competition, this is one of the most popular martial arts. It is worth considering why this is so.

Limiting oneself to the physical aspect means losing a significant part of the heritage of the Sensei, those who went the way of Aikido before us, the way of the martial arts. Movement is an integral part of every martial art, but does not constitute its whole. One cannot limit oneself exclusively to techniques. What is more, the spiritual-mental aspect should be treated as superior, because this shapes the given discipline and grants a sense of wholeness. Both aspects, spiritual and physical, are inseparable. A set of techniques devoid of any intellectual heritage in the given sphere is more like gymnastics. And some perceive Aikido like this, not seeing how much they lose in doing so. The uniqueness of this martial art lies precisely in the ethical ideal of conflict resolution in a peaceful way by means of martial techniques. The ideal is usually far from reality, but its existence provides the necessary attitude of the student in learning the techniques and fighting itself. It not only has a practical character, but also educational. Without this message Aikido does not exist. The very existence of the ideal to which we strive means the possibility of development. And though this is spiritual development, it cannot be realized apart from physical movement. The practice of techniques is a form of speaking, a conversation with the partner. Aikido determines the kind of language which we use for the purpose of successful agreement with others. However, this is a conversation on the physical level. Moreover we are put in the situation of conflict which can lead to the destruction of one side. This is what determines the uniqueness of Aikido, that teaching to fight simultaneously teaches to resolve conflicts in a peaceful way. It is worth mentioning, however, that the Aikidoka tries to resolve dangerous situations in a safe way from a position of strength. He does not avoid conflict because he fears defeat, but because he expects victory. If the situation comes to conflict, he is able to leave victoriously from the confrontation. He realizes, however, as a consequence of this, that it did not come

to an immediate confrontation at all. The Aikidoka fears not so much defeat as victory. Defeat only means that we not were sufficiently well prepared to gain victory. What is even worse is that unfortunately we were probably not reasonable enough to avoid confrontation. Many times this cannot be avoided, but many times it is possible. Victory on the other hand means that the opponent acknowledges his own preparation as inadequate. If this only encourages him to train intensively, then we will not have to treat our victory as obvious defeat. If, however, he does not acknowledge defeat and if he does not learn anything from it, our victory will be like defeat, because it will only serve to feed the existing conflict. Victory carries with itself the danger of the continuation of the conflict. Even high technical skills will not suffice to end the conflict. The Aikidoka negotiates from a position of strength, but the aim of the negotiation is not winning without contemplating the interests of the other, but finding a solution satisfying both sides. If he was weak he would not be credible and his opponent would only think about conquering him. The Aikidoka seeks a partner and not an opponent. The best way of resolving the conflict is the separation of personal connections from the problem constituting the basis of the conflict and the attempt to reach a common solution to the problem.

The Aikidoka is able to leave victoriously from confrontations, if it comes to this, because he knows effective techniques. It is difficult to believe this for those who see Aikido exclusively as an ineffective art, though of beautiful movement. They feel that if something is beautiful, then it cannot be efficient. Also, the fact that the techniques, to be efficient, require years of work is used as an argument for the inefficiency of Aikido. According to this, only what can be quickly learned is efficient. Stories of the spectacular actions of Aikido masters are treated as fairy tales, and even the life story of O'Sensei Ueshiba Morihei (see "Budojo" No. 3/2004) is put down to legend. This happens in spite of stories of the extraordinary actions of the creator of Aikido told by those who saw these things with their own eyes. These accounts are many, they come from many people. Doubts regarding their validity can no doubt be explained only by the fact that most often we limit our horizons to that which we are able to do. We fear dreams. We prefer something concrete, more confined, even if short term, than something fleeting, but of great caliber. But it is worthwhile to strive for true greatness, even if we can never reach it. The best justification for practicing martial arts that I know, is the desire to become a master of the martial arts. The best justification for practicing Aikido is the desire to be a master of Aikido, which does not mean that there are no other good reasons, but we can recognize the beauty of Aikido in its entirety only when we set no limitations for ourselves. The desire for victory here and now is tempting, because confrontation allows us to test our present abilities, but one cannot gain mastery in the given sphere. Aikido is known as one of the most difficult, if not the most difficult, of the

martial arts. That something is difficult, however, does not mean success is impossible. Only a few reach the top, though everyone can try. Physical abilities do not determine success, character does. He goes far who does not give in to adversity and wants to reach far. He who does not lose in himself the passion, curiosity, a sense of wonder. He who wants to develop spiritually and physically. The theme of spiritual development is an obstacle to those who perceive only the physical aspect of the martial arts. They feel that this means a departure from the practical, and only training determines the form of movement for health. It is necessary to point out that this is a real danger. If we focus exclusively on the elegance of the movements of Aikido, we will see it simply as repetition of form, then we can easily miss the substance. O'Sensei set before us high requirements. In Aikido to be to efficient it is necessary to be an artist. It will not suffice to be a craftsman. It will not suffice to be very good. It is necessary to want to be a master. This happens in connection to the subtlety of the techniques of Aikido. Subtlety which is not disturbed by the fact that many techniques of Aikido are based on immobilization. The most characteristic in Aikido techniques is what cannot be seen. Though the most well-known are a dozen or so basic techniques, the most typical of Aikido are techniques in which apparently little happens. It is often a prolonged movement of the partner, a change of direction or simply setting up in space and time. This surely sounds strange for those who like literal translation, but there is no literal Aikido. It is subtle. Some techniques are born spontaneously during action and their repetition in exactly same the manner is impossible. A basic aim of Aikido is throwing the attacker off balance, controlling his center of gravity. All throws and gaining of immobilization are executed in the moment in which the opponent is off balance. Precisely because Aikido does not require violence it is accessible to all. The only criterion is the desire for hard work.

Though accessible to all, Aikido is considered an elite martial art. To be elite means that no barriers exist besides those which we ourselves create. It means the necessity of dealing with the pressure of time and with our own weaknesses. In the martial arts one needn't hurry. Every technique is studied and improved indefinitely. The technical repertoire constantly grows richer. Efficiency is not determined by age and the decline in physical abilities. Martial arts can be practiced by all, and all can become better and better. It has no age barriers. Time reveals the basic difference between the fighting sports and the martial arts. Success in sport is relative to physical abilities, therefore the domain of young people. When power or speed is lacking, efficiency decreases. The sportsman prepares himself for a specific contest, his command is not equally high at all times. He has little time anyway. He must master the techniques as soon as possible, coupled with good physical shape, to have time to achieve in sport as much as possible. Here also, all sportsmen practicing the fighting sports have

several favourite techniques on which they work the most and which are for them most effective. Every fighting sport has its own rules according to which the fight proceeds. It is known which techniques are illegal. The existence of rules which directly influence the manner of fighting determines the following distinction between fighting sports and martial arts. Fighting sports do not exist without rules established in advance indicating the boundaries of the competition, though some claim this to be otherwise. There is always something which one may not do. Otherwise this would be a life-and-death struggle. In the martial arts the approach is different. It concerns the manner of the practice of techniques, not their permissibility. All techniques are permissible, but not every way is accepted. The times in which the effectiveness of each school of fighting was tested on the battlefield are over. However, the potential lack of rules in the fight influences the manner of training, on the approach to the possible fight. Both approaches have their advocates and critics. Advocates of the sports approach feel that it's better to put their skills to the test at the expense of the introduction of rules protecting the health of the competitors. Illegal techniques and techniques which in their opinion are most effective are singled out. The technical repertoire becomes impoverished, but competition is possible. Advocates of the martial arts in turn prefer the perspective of constant technical and mental development in spite of age, at the expense of a decrease in the possibilities of verifying their skills. Aikido constitutes a rare example in martial arts in which the practice of the techniques at full speed and with full engagement is possible. The well-prepared partner is not injured even when attacking with full force and at full speed. Demonstrations of Aikido are very efficient and watched with great pleasure. They are also effective, but this is considerably more difficult to perceive. The distinction between a choreographed demonstration in which all attacks and responses are fixed in advance, and an effective defense in a situation in which the attacker really attacks, requires lots of experience. Too often unfortunately demonstrations and training sessions take place during which everything is arranged and one can only admire the physical dexterity of the persons taking part. The exceptions in which the techniques are properly executed, however, are interesting. A person practicing Aikido often recognizes, though not always, the effectiveness of a technique, which does not mean that they can execute it effectively. Not many of them, however, realize how dangerous these techniques can be. A minor modification or even change of tempo, and the safety or sometimes even the life of the attacker is threatened. It's difficult to imagine that a martial art with such a remarkably peaceful message has in its repertoire such destructive techniques. It is, however, true, though the destructiveness of Aikido techniques is only potential. The decision belongs to the Aikidoka. The technique is only the form. The performer decides on the substance. If he is threatened, he thinks strictly about an effective defense. Only when he is in control of the situation can he make a choice. The Aikidoka chooses in situations like this the safe solution for the partner. This is the

message of Aikido. Having the possibility of making such a choice is the justification of Aikidoka. Technical proficiency is required for this. Aikido cannot be mastered theoretically. Meticulous study of the techniques is necessary. The philosophy of Aikido is shaped on the mat, in training. The way through shortcuts does not exist.

It seems to me that Aikido gained great popularity in spite of the fact that the message of O'Sensei had become substantially trivialized. The great power of this message attests to this. O'Sensei himself wished very much that his message reach all people. Though at first he concentrated more on the perfection of martial techniques, he later sacrificed himself completely to the propagation of the idea of peace between people and between nations. It's difficult also to estimate what part the son of Morihei, Ueshiba Kisshomaru (1921-1999) played in spreading Aikido. He systematized the techniques and made great contributions to the organization of the movement of Aikido in the world. All of it would surely not suffice, but for the desirability of the product itself. In the modern world there is much brutality and aggression, so the idea of defusing conflicts which comes from the martial arts is met with great interest. If we add to this the openness for all who are interested and lack of time pressure characteristic of the martial arts, the popularity of Aikido seems understandable. All the more that Aikido also offers a lot to those who will not reach very far. Even the beginning of the way is attractive. Usually, however, Aikido is rated on the basis of the efficiency of its techniques, the aesthetics of its movement or the humanism of its ideal. It is seldom treated as a whole. As the practical manifestation of the idea of the avoidance of conflict, the resolution of it with advantages for all sides involved in the conflict. In spite of the many myths concerning Aikido, the message of O'Sensei, enriched and fully developed by his students, speaks for itself and does not stop arousing interest.

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