

REALITY CHECK

Having read a number of articles and books on Aikido which talk at length of its harmony, symmetry of movement, its beauty and its wondrous dance like qualities all of which add to Aikido separating it from other more technically based arts I have felt a growing need to take a reality check.

While all of these books and articles go a long way to promoting the esoteric qualities of Aikido they often fall very short in their portrayal of the practical effectiveness of Aikido which for myself is disappointing and ultimately excludes a great number of potential students of Aikido from taking that vital first step onto the tatami.

Furthermore once we have students on the mat how many Aikido instructors focus exclusively on the high level sophisticated ideals of Aikido and never attempt to explore the practical effectiveness of Aikido when the practitioner may find themselves in need of it.

In addition how many others take this a stage further and study its application not in a situation where you are working with a helpful Uke but in a situation where the Uke is putting the Tori under pressure forcing them to work at a level which is nearer a 'reality' situation. From my experiences and discussions with others in the world of Aikido the answer is not many.

This for me is a shame and ultimately damaging to Aikido.

- Potential students are discouraged from taking up Aikido because they doubt its practical value
- Once students start training they can feel that it is unrealistic because the traditional attacks while designed to promote learning in a conducive atmosphere, are not overtly practical. So they gain what they believe is an understanding of Aikido and leave taking away an unfavourable impression of Aikido to spread far and wide.
- Students that continue to practice through thick and thin often practice in the belief that they are doing something that has practical effectiveness when it may not if they are focussing only on the artistic qualities of Aikido. This is bad enough as we Aikido instructors may be misleading our students but what is worse is that come the day of reckoning when a real life situation is forced upon a student he may well find that he has nothing of value to defend himself.

OK there are many out there clamouring to suggest that any training is better than none – I could agree with this in some respects as students will be used to physical contact but the great danger is that we are instilling unrealistic self-belief into students which may lead them into danger.

So what can we do to help our students, ourselves and Aikido?

1. Firstly recognise the fact that Aikido has a number of qualities that make it different to other Martial Arts but beneath its sophisticated veneer it also has a great many similarities without which it would not continue to be a Martial Art.
2. Look at the practicality of your Aikido from time to time. Aikido is a highly effective art equipping a skilled practitioner with a devastating potential – where it differs from other arts is that it allows the exponent a choice; IF, WHEN and HOW to apply that potential. If all you've learned is how to break an arm or nose of an opponent then that's what you may well do if put under pressure. All well and good unless its your Uncle Fred whos had a beer too many at christmas or your 16 year old son flexing his rugby muscles. So understand that Aikido gives you a choice. The responsibility for that choice is yours.
3. Recognise the expectations of your students. For some who come to practice Aikido the attraction is the elements that differentiate Aikido from other arts. Over time this may become the case for the majority of students as they rise up and beyond Dan grade but for many others particularly those unfamiliar to the practice of Martial Arts their initial objective when commencing Aikido is to learn an

effective Martial Art that will be of use when they need it most . Training should be tempered to the expectation and level of each student but as the saying goes ‘fail to prepare then prepare to fail’.

4. Start with a good martial base and build on it. To me this seems natural and sensible – Houses are built from the foundations up – you don’t paint them first, likewise when we practice we start with kotai and pass on to jutai , kitai etc (if we are lucky!). This means that first and foremost Aikido needs to provide this martial effectiveness. If it can’t then it shouldn’t claim to be a martial art. The niceties of Aiki can come later once the martial foundations have been laid. If you do it the other way it can be like casting pearls before swine.

This is something that is not acknowledged in much of the Aikido press that I have come across suggesting that Aikido sells itself short to much of the general public and also to the martial arts community. Does this matter? Well my feeling is that Aikido has something positive to offer, it can change peoples self-perception and improve their lives and the lives of the people they meet. For this reason I think it is important that it is promoted and recognised for what it is.

In the Aikido Dojo in Bristol where I practice the majority of new students come with an initial objective of learning to defend themselves. Some wish to take this a stage further and develop fighting ability in case they ever need it but most just want to be able to live their lives and only fight if they have to . They often do not know the differences between the multitude of martial arts ‘out there’ nor do they care. This was certainly where I was coming from when I started training.

Generally they just want something that delivers their objectives of ‘self-defence’ and many are more than a little perturbed by the fact that so many Aikido articles talk of ‘flowers’ ‘flying and ‘dancing’. To the “average-man-in-the-street-who-just-walked-into-a-dojō” the prospect of dealing with some 16 stone Glaswegian enquiring slightly less than politely “Deed yae spill mae pint?” by dancing or waving flowers offers little comfort.

What they want to know is, does something in this Aikido stuff have some use when the brown stuff hits the fan?.

Well I believe the answer is a resounding YES, if I didn’t I wouldn’t be doing it.

Looking back on the courses and summer schools we have attended who remembers Pierre Chassange saying “Aikido is a MARTIAL Art” and “In your mind you must kill him”. Quite a few based on some of the impressions I have heard (All very respectfully done I hasten to add). Well what does he mean?

For me he is saying do not take the ‘Martial’ aspect out of your Aikido. At all times when training imagine your Uke could be our Glaswegian friend. Of course he isn’t so temper your training accordingly so you both survive (as its his go next!) and continue but in your minds eye visualise a sterner test. Pierre is not suggesting we all take up first degree murder but quite rightly insisting that within our practice we retain the option of maximising its effect so we have something to fall back on if we ever needed it.!

For Aikido to be taken seriously within the Martial Arts world this attitude has to prevail, there is not really any substitute for regular hard training with a martial objective otherwise you might as well lift weights or take up dancing. This of course need not be expressed in the same way for everyone - Aikido is broad and subtle enough to accommodate virtually any preference for training method whether dictated by size, sex, injury, physical impairment or whatever provided you are mentally tuned in to what you are looking for, BUT if you come onto the mat looking for some magical fantasy ideal then the good news is that is what you will get – A fantasy!

It is possible to come and enjoy the movement, camaraderie and everything else that comes with Aikido but if the Martial element is removed are you sill practising Aikido or something else? The tree of Aikido has its roots in jujitsu and Japanese sword. If you sever the tree from its roots what happens?

This may provoke the question “So where is the harmony of Aikido ?” in this attitude. It certainly did a couple of summer schools ago. Pierre’s answer was along the lines that ‘harmony’ was not something you

could just have, perhaps by plucking it from the air, but that it was something that could be gained or earned, and if earned through Aikido then through many years of hard and diligent training. On this point I often wonder if the concept of Aikido being an art of harmony has been somewhat misconstrued. While harmony is achieved during practice it is often realised through 'Misubi'. A blending of movement caused by Ukes reaction to Toris action or visa-versa.

Having gone through this arduous process of long and diligent training then it may be possible to achieve some form of harmony in your daily life. You will have self-confidence, You will recognise the ability of others and maybe you will realise that violent conflict is rarely the answer to the questions posed by daily life.

This to me makes common sense and explains where some of the higher principles of Aikido can be realised. They are the icing on the Aikido cake. Unfortunately this cake can take a long time to bake. Remember with a good cake the icing goes on last when the rest of the cake is in place.

So what can we do in our training to make sure we retain this martial base?

1. Look at what you are practicing – Ask why? Is it a technique or an exercise to develop something? If you can understand the difference you don't waste years of practice trying to perfect something perhaps to use if attacked in a certain manner when really what your instructor was showing you all those years ago was just an exercise to develop body movement. Look at standard Aikido practice – lots of wrist grabs and the like. People do not attack you like this in the street or the pub, well not in Bristol. So whats it for? Its just an exercise with a partner to develop, breathing, distance, timing, body movement and so on. If you realise that then you can focus on what you are trying to develop and not get too confused.
2. Consider the martial principles of Aikido in your practice – Are you in a safe position when you execute a technique? Are your techniques appropriate for the position you are in?
3. Put yourself under pressure occasionally. Its often possible to practice wonderful flowing Aikido with a friendly smiling Uke but its something else to practice flat out with a couple of keen first kyus who are full of the pre-shodan aggression. This is where the cracks can appear but this is a good thing – no one is perfect and if you know your weaknesses you can address them. Lets be honest with ourselves – If attacked in the street you will be in a much better position if you've prepared a bit under pressure with some adrenaline surging around!
4. Hit something occasionally – Lots of Aiki moves are fine in the dojo but for reality if the worst comes to the worst atemi can be vital, I have to admit this is a very under-used element of Aikido. I'm not suggesting that everyone needs to be Lennox Lewis but if you've got a half decent strike in your repertoire then that can only help you. For anyone that's not into punching (and there are lots who aren't keen on smashing their knuckles into someone's very bony head) a good slap with body weight behind it will do nicely.
5. Consider what you want from Aikido – If it's a bit of self defence then work towards that, If its to be an effective fighter then work towards that. Maybe its to learn a bit of self control. Whatever it is be honest with yourself and match your training intensity to your expectations.

So remember Aikido does have a very important ethical side which takes it in a different direction from other arts but you don't have to sacrifice the martial aspects to gain these things.

Train hard and train safe.

About the author: Daren Sims is a good looking bloke from the Bristol stable who believes Leeds United will win something this season

Disclaimer!

I wrote this article a few years ago for publication in the National Aikido Federation newsletter

Experience (not all good) has tempered my views slightly but I still feel the article bears some weight and is worth a read. As the popularity of Templegate dojo has increased so has the diversity of the students, their view and their needs. Not everyone prescribes to the no pain no gain theory and my own injuries over the years have introduced a more careful element to my practice.

However, I still think it's a good read and worth a spot on our website – Its also a lot more accurate than that rather rash statement about Leeds United, but I still am quite good looking in my old photos.

If you wish to pass comment – send it to our website editor.