

What Is Aikido And What Does Training Mean To Us

Progress

When it comes to progress, I think we may have to ask how progress relates to aikido. In a sense consciousness to achieve or to progress is the essence of sports. In the world of sports, one is considered to have achieved his or her goal when that person becomes a champion.

However, aikido exists outside such a frame of progress. There is no clear attainment point in aikido no matter how many years one practices. In other martial arts, the results of practice are clear by the number of people one threw in a lesson. Aikido has no such clear results. One must meet the demands of self learning. It can be hard to continue aikido unless one has a desire to constantly learn.

The teaching method, too, is an important subject. In the case of sports, there are matches, so there is a clear result. Since one's progress is apparent, the teaching method has always been studied and evaluated. Meanwhile, in aikido, the basic teaching method whereby students repeat the throws and techniques shown by their teacher and then repeats them has not changed from old days too much. It is important that the teacher tries to make the training meaningful for the students, and it should be done with an intention to help the students develop their ability. No development or the progress will be made only by showing one's strength and preeminence.

Progress also depends on how the students would like to practice. One might simply enjoy training as recreation. For those people who would like to train seriously, it will be more interesting and helpful for the development of their abilities if they have the right kind of teaching and opportunities.

In Belgium, I teach classes called "inner school" in response to the solicitation of students' desire to learn further. I initially limited the classes to only 40 students with black belts. I call it a school program, rather than a seminar. It takes place in a training camp form. There also was a request in the Netherlands, so I started the school over there, too.

Even though there are only few of these schools, there are people who wish to attend programs like this with great interest. I believe that more places and more opportunities should be given to such people.

Kata

It is generally said that aikido is a practice of Kata (forms). However, aikido practice does not include "Kata", but a "repetition of the skills" or "repetition of the movement" to be exact. One tends to have a fixed image regarding term "Kata". If people with some knowledge for the martial arts hear "Kata", they would most likely have an image of something fixed. It is important to carefully choose the terms we use because people tend to anchor a certain image.

In the case of aikido, if one is doing the same Iriminage, one is not repeating the same thing. Subconsciously, the throw changes depending on the partner.

As for the practice of Kata, one must concentrate on it and think about it while practicing precisely as possible. The nature of such practice cannot vary depending on one's physical or emotional conditions. Aikido practice, on the other hand, can be done more freely as it does not have fixed forms which have to be done precisely. I think the fact one can train freely is a positive benefit of aikido practice. Nonetheless, one must make sure that the practice does not end up impulsive and inconstant.

Now, there are many terms used in aikido that are brought from different martial arts other than Kata. For example, "Ukemi" comes from judo. Aikido ukemi is about following the movement of the nage and is different from that of judo. Another example is "Suburi" which is a movement of swinging a bokken. The term comes from kendo. It is difficult to express the exact meaning of the term if the term is adopted from another context. Therefore other knowledge is necessary to display one's experience. Without knowledge, a term is apt to have nothing solid but only mood and feeling.

Levels of Understanding

In aikido, one learns by experiencing through the body. This alone would only result into physical experience, even after 10 years of practice. If one continues practicing for many years, of course, the body becomes strong. However, the level of understanding can still be doubtful.

Everything is learned physically as a result of experience, but to display what has been learned, some verbal expression and other methods become necessary. Hence, one should find opportunities and try to learn various things outside of aikido. Osensei realized it in the Omoto religion. I don't think one could fully understand the discipline of aikido without something like that. Learning by the physical experiences certainly is important, but I think it is also important to experience something new besides aikido to stimulate one's thought and brain.

It is necessary to study basics things without being disturbed by one's own mood and the feelings. The lesson method of aikido is left to the decision of each instructor, and this is a good thing about aikido. If strictly codified, the independence which is the merit of aikido is lost. Of course, balance is important, but I think it is better that one has a good level of skills, specifically posture, the sense of maai, directionality, the principle of the sword line, gaze and so on. It is often seen in enbu (martial art performance) that people just stand straight before a partner waiting for the attack. This is because there is no awareness of the sword line at all.

Osensei frequently talked about gravitation training. Gravitation training is for learning how to lead and go together with the partner's movement. One can learn this using katatetori.

Such basics can be learned through body movements. In other words, the principle of aikido skills will be understood through the apprehension of body movements. Small details of each technique are different, depending on the individuals, but there is always a sense of maai and directionality in any technique. Therefore, as long as there is an understanding of the principle of the skills, it can be applied to all movements.

That understanding is indispensable to progress to a further stage.

Aikido starts from the attack.

Aikido, in a technical sense, is an attack. One does not wait for the partner's attack before doing a technique. One initiates it from oneself. For instance, the instructor holds out a hand when teaching katatetori. I don't stand still in front of a partner and wait for my hand to be grabbed. Instead, I hold out a hand and "let the student take it." I am showing how to set it like that first. However, it is not generally explained that the nage is the one who shortens the maai to set up the situation to do the technique.

In the beginning, aikido is taught in the way of self-defense techniques to help students understand it more easily. Nage reacts to the attack. If it remains at this stage, it would become a habit that one never starts moving unless being attacked. To overcome this habit, it is necessary to know that nage should be the one who sets out first to do the techniques. Only then the depth of your understanding towards the techniques will change, even if one seems to be doing the same techniques.