

Aikido as Philosophy

Richard Ostrofsky,
Ottawa Aikido Circle
quill@travel-net.com

Version 1; October, 2007

Note: This article may be copied, used, translated and distributed freely, on condition that it not be altered, and that the author is duly credited. Comments and criticism will be appreciated.

Reflection is an active process of witnessing one's own experience . . .
This can be done in the midst of an activity or as an activity in itself.
The key to reflection is learning how to take perspective on one's own actions and experience – in other words, to examine that experience rather than just living it.

Joy Amulya, What is Reflective Practice?
<http://crp.mit.edu/documents/whatis.pdf>

Introduction

In their encounters with life, thinking people of all times and places have asked the same Big Questions, offering different answers in keeping with their received concepts, their cultures, and their life-situations. In modern English, we might phrase these questions so:

- **About reality:** What is *real*? What is merely an illusion in my mind? What does it mean “to be?” How did the world come to be, and to be as it is?
- **About knowledge:** What does it mean to know something, and what can I know *for sure*?
- **About the good life:** What is a human life, and what is its proper aim or purpose? What should I do with mine?
- **About ethics and strategy:** How should I deal with other people, not all them well-meaning toward me, and all of them with needs and interests different from mine?
- **About society and politics:** What is “society,” and what claims can it legitimately make upon the lives of individuals? What are my obligations toward it, and how do I fit in?

All these questions figure prominently in Western philosophic and religious traditions; and aikido touches upon them too, in its own way, and from the tradition that influenced its founder. While there is nothing the aikidoka¹ is required to *believe* regarding these questions, there is much that our practice *suggests*. One thing that thirty five years of aikido has suggested to me (being a bookish sort of animal) was a fair bit of reading in the Taoist, Zen and Shinto traditions behind our practice, and in some relevant Western philosophy – both classical and modern. Finally, these efforts left me with the problem of reconciling two very different educations – Eastern and Western, on the mat and off – and working out my own commitments.

I say *commitments* (rather than *beliefs*) to emphasize that my conclusions need not be yours. A belief is a belief that something is *true*; and what is true is supposed to be true for everyone. A commitment is merely a promise (perhaps only to oneself), that one intends to keep. About ideas, it is a thought one firmly holds, and that one leans on as a basis for choice and action. In aikido we speak a lot about keeping one's center, moving from one's center, knowing where one's center is. That may mean only the physical center of the body – about two inches below the navel – or it may mean the system of ideas and values that shape your choices and, in the long run, your whole life. Since people's lives are legitimately different, my commitments need not be yours any more than the physical center of my body is yours. Still, as aikido demonstrates, interesting interaction – even sharing – between our centers is possible. In that spirit, I have written this piece, and you are kind enough to be reading it. *Onegai shimasu!* Let us practice together.

Two ground rules at the beginning: As already emphasized, these are personal reflections only. They are not meant to be authoritative either about aikido or the history of philosophy, and I brush lightly over subtleties in both. There would not be space here to do otherwise.

It should be mentioned too that I will not be treating aikido as authoritative on any of the questions considered here – merely as one position among others. For this reason, I refer to our founder not by the title we give him – *o-sensei* – but by his name, Morihei Ueshiba. For our present purpose, he is not a portrait over the *kamiza* (shrine or altar) of the dojo, but a great man and thinker, now deceased, who lives on in the history of thought. Whether this is a demotion or the opposite is for the reader to decide, but in this piece I want to consider Ueshiba and his system on equal terms with other thinkers and systems. In the critical spirit of philosophy we'll allow ourselves to question *all* the great teachers and teachings, saving any reverence we feel for its proper occasion.

¹ aikido practitioner

Our present purpose is neither to learn aikido nor celebrate it – nor even discuss it *per se* – but to locate our practice in context with the historic conversation on perennial questions.

Reality: What is *real*? What is merely a construction of the mind? How did the world come to be, and to be as it is?

Asleep in bed, we dream of things that disappear when we wake up. Sometimes we imagine things that are not there, just as we sometimes believe things that are not true. We draw a useful distinction between *facts* (which are definitely true) and *interpretations* (which are merely ways of looking at things). Yet, on a second thought, we notice that it is not possible to see or look at anything at all, except from some individual viewpoint, and in some definite way, with some specific intention or purpose. “There are no facts, only interpretations,” we have learned to say. Yet this is not right either, because some interpretations seem to force themselves upon us, while others feel more discretionary – as acts of personal interest and power. When you break or lose something, you do not have it any more. When you stub your toe, it *hurts*; and while the pain is only a construction of your nervous system, while it lasts it’s more “real” than anything else. Such events strike us as facts, whatever post-modern philosophers say. “When you throw it out the door, it comes in through the window,” a Russian proverb says. A genuine fact cannot simply be re-interpreted and wished away. On the other hand, given a law that impinges on your freedom of action, you use a lawyer (if you can afford one) to get the law interpreted in your favor, while the government pays a judge, or a whole Bench of judges to decide what the law really means in that particular situation – and whether and how you are to be punished for breaking it. So while it may be true that “There are no facts, only interpretations,” the fact remains that some interpretations are much more forceful and exigent than others.

One hundred years after Nietzsche’s death, the argument about what is really *real* continues, though the branch of philosophy that deals with it – known as *ontology* or *metaphysics* – remains inconclusive, and has largely been abandoned to various categories of scientist:

- to biologists and neurophysiologists who explain life and mind as functionings of matter;
- to physicists, who still cannot tell us what matter really is or how it came to be, but who have gotten very good at describing how it behaves;
- to psychologists and sociologists of various schools who seek to explain how people’s opinions about reality are constructed and negotiated from the suggestions offered or put to them.

The first great question about reality: “Why is there something rather than nothing? Why is there anything at all?” remains largely a matter for speculation. From peering around at the universe, and applying what we know of the laws of physics, we infer a great explosion – a “Big Bang” – that happened about ?? billion years ago, and that resulted, just a fraction of a second later, in a vast cloud of sub-atomic particles rushing away from a point of origin at very high velocity. What caused this great explosion, and what (if anything) came before it, we do not know; and the modern description by astrophysicists improves only a little on the flat statement in Genesis that “In the beginning, everything was all mixed up.”²

Of what came after – how we got from that primordial chaos to a richly ordered world with ourselves in it – three basic stories have been told – of course, with many variations of each:

One story, taking sexual reproduction as a paradigm of creation, sees the universe as coming into being from the intercourse of god and goddess – a different kind of “Big Bang” theory, you might say. The familiar Taoist story of Yin and Yang is a more abstract, philosophically sophisticated variant on this sexual theme. A completely different story, seminal in Western thought these last three thousand years, takes the *Logos* – the king’s *Word*, as paradigmatic. The Jewish God (a bachelor) says, “Let there be . . .” And lo! There is . . . The universe comes into being as the product of a Divine Thought, followed by a Divine Command. A third story, to my mind the most interesting and intellectually promising, rejects both Thought and Sexuality (head-magic and belly-magic³) as explanations for How Things Came To Be – positing instead that things “Just Grow’d,” all by themselves, through a process that we now call *self-organization*. This idea too is actually an ancient one, and may also be attributed to Chinese Taoists with their concept of *wu-wei* – the self-so, though it was left for Darwin to suggest a mechanism through which order could emerge from chaos all by itself. Today, natural selection is not the only known mechanism of self-organization, and this concept is intensely studied and applied – not only in biology, but in other fields as well.

Now, the connections of aikido to these various stories, are profound though indirect since, as a martial and spiritual Way, its interest in metaphysics is at most tangential. Still, the intellectual roots of our practice in Taoism, Shinto and Zen bring echoes of all these stories: From Taoism, there is the concept of

² The Biblical Hebrew reads “*Be reshit, ha kol haya tohu va vohu.*” “*Tohu va vohu*” is a nursely word like “topsy turvy” or “mish mash.” The word “chaos” is already too philosophically sophisticated for what is being said.

³ As Camille Paglia called them.

the self-so and the opponent who throws himself. From Taoism and Shinto both, there is a notion of a cosmic duality or sexuality even – yang and yin, heaven and earth, *uke* and *nage*, *omote* and *ura*, that generate all things by the interplay between them. From Zen there is a vision of clear, creative mind using alert, unfocused intuition to apprehend all things in the present moment – recognizing and showing them to their proper place.

So our conclusion, it seems, is that aikido draws from all three stories, without feeling any necessity to choose between them. Perhaps the reason it can do this is another suggestion I take from it – that reality is what a human body – **my** body – feels and does, while all else is abstraction . . . or *illusion* as the Buddhists say. But feeling too is ephemeral and insubstantial, so it is easy to conclude that only movement is real. Perhaps this is what Hui Neng, the 6th Zen Patriarch meant when he said, “Fundamentally, not one single thing exists.” If so, then back in the 7th century, in certain circles, Whitehead’s point was already understood – that from the most objective standpoint, only process is real; that every supposed *thing* disappears when you look closely at it. Reality, then, becomes a matter of perspective: There will be different “realities” for different purposes and situations. One has to ask then: “What becomes of our concepts of truth and knowledge when this insight is taken seriously?”

Knowledge: What does it mean to know something, and what can I know *for sure*?

Not all beliefs are trustworthy – or “true,” as we say for short. A belief may give good service for a long time, but then betray you one day with a disastrous or fatal result. This is always a possibility, but only philosophers have the leisure and relative security to spend much time worrying about it. For most people, most of the time, it is more important to act with sureness and confidence than to be right. This has been true in combat down the ages, and it is still true when we practice aikido on the mat. Probably due to such evolutionary selection pressure, we are not much inclined to question our beliefs, even when there is ample leisure to do so. Still, sometimes we do seek to reassure ourselves that we are right about something; and even more often, need to demonstrate our overwhelming *rightness* to ignorant others who disagree with us. Accordingly, there is a branch of philosophy⁴ concerned with knowledge claims: When are we entitled to claim to know something, rather

⁴ known as *epistemology*, from the Greek word for knowledge: *episteme*.

than merely believe, or have an opinion about it? On what grounds can such a claim be supported? What counts (and does not count) as *evidence* and/or as valid *argument* when such a claim is made?

Because knowledge claims are advanced in many contexts, with different types of evidence and argument in their support, a lot of ink has been expended over such questions. It is one thing to believe that there is a cat on the mat because you see her there. It is something else – various other things – to believe that John Doe is guilty of murdering his wife, or that some distant star has planets, or that the Pythagorean theorem is necessarily true on any flat surface, or that life evolved through natural selection, or (on the contrary) that it was designed and created by a loving God who is your personal savior. On what grounds can such diverse beliefs be justified? Conversely, on what grounds can they be dismissed? What would it mean to *know* these things, as opposed to merely *believing* them?

But even to frame the problem of knowledge in these terms is already to prejudice it in the direction of theoretical or propositional knowledge – that is to say, in the direction of knowledge which can be articulated in true-or-false statements. For there are other types of knowledge, with overt or implicit knowledge *claims*, for which the distinction between knowledge and mere belief breaks down, or does not work as we might expect. For example, when someone gives an aikido class (or one on ballet or carpentry or brain surgery), he or she is implicitly professing knowledge in the area (which is why they are called *professors*) and implicitly claiming a right to teach, that their students do yet have. Yet only part – in the case of aikido, a very small part – of their knowledge can be expressed in flat propositions. “You can’t learn aikido from a book!” How many times have you heard that from your instructor? And of course, the same is true of any other craft or art where true beliefs are not enough – where some measure of (what we call) “skill” is needed also. For this reason, Western philosophers came to draw a distinction between theory and practice – between “knowing that” and “knowing how,”⁵ and the relation between these modes of knowledge (and even the validity of the distinction) has been a vexed issue in philosophy since the days of Plato and Aristotle.

For Plato, the ideal Forms of things precede their imperfect, worldly manifestations; and Christian theologians assimilated this doctrine to the Jewish idea that things began with a word from God – as a divine command. Accordingly for over two thousand years, people in the West have tended to regard the scholar’s theoretical knowledge as logically prior and more profound

⁵ In these terms, the distinction is attributed to Gilbert Ryle, from his book *The Concept of Mind* which came out in 1949. But the distinction between theoretical and practical knowledge goes back to Plato and Aristotle.

than the craftsman's practical knowledge of his trade – and even as socially superior to it. Only in the last century or so has this attitude been seriously questioned in the West – by American pragmatists like Pierce and Dewey and William James, and by German mystics like Heidegger.

In traditional China and Japan, by contrast, the scholar's "book learning" seemed thin and vague: "The Tao that can be told is not the true Tao. The names that can be named are not the true names. the Nameless is the mother of Heaven and Earth." And indeed, we have in some respects come round to that Oriental way of thinking, with a lot of talk about "spin doctoring" and "the prison house of language." Every writer knows that the words one sets down are only approximately correct, and never tell the whole story.

What one comes to see, finally, in the practice of any craft or skill, is that there is a trade-off between acting surely, and knowing things "for sure." As time permits, you can try for epistemological certainty: You can try to know things "for sure," and to be sure that your beliefs are correct. But when time is limited, you have to act with confidence on incomplete knowledge and guesswork. You can act surely only by accepting that you know nothing for sure – by responding directly to your immediate situation, putting needs for rational control and certainty aside. Aikido is by no means unique in this respect. The condition of uncertainty is life's rebuke to intellectuals in general.

**The good life: What is a human life, and what is its proper aim
or purpose? What should I do with mine?**

"What should I do with my life?" My daughter asked me that question point blank when she was about fifteen. What I said in reply is not important for our purpose. The point, rather, is that teenage kid's confusion – a confusion most of us felt at that age, before we found whatever track we are on. A person of that age is surrounded by a million competing suggestions on what to study and whom to date – meaning what to do for a living and whom to marry – and on lesser subjects as well. She needs to build herself a life, and wants some guidance in doing so. Sooner or later, those choices mostly get made – or left to settle themselves by default. But the question does not entirely go away. As adults, we still have important choices to make from time to time. And our inner teenagers continue to need either reassurance that the choices they made back then were not foolish ones, or else forgiveness from the adults who now must live with those choices and their results. For an aging adult like myself today, the question modulates into the past tense but remains basically the same.: It becomes "What *did* I do with my life?"

All religions and philosophies, in their similar but distinctive ways, offer help

with that issue – and, if you can fully buy into one, they can indeed be helpful. But weighed as alternatives, they simply add to the confusion – as ideological components of the options themselves. At fifteen, when you ask what you should do with your life, the answer you get will depend on whom you ask; you will already have made your choice in choosing your advisor. A half century later, at sixty five, looking for consolations in retrospect, you find that the answers on offer still cancel out. There really is no escaping the anguish of existential freedom except through some form of “bad faith.” Try as you may to pass that buck, you remain the author and judge of your own life.

Now aikido, on one level, is just another possible answer to my daughter’s question – as I was still asking it of myself when I started aikido at 25, with five years to go before my daughter was born, and (between her and aikido) the course of my life got pretty well settled. The core of Ueshiba’s teaching, in the end, is that you should spend a lot of time practicing aikido. As with any art, its opportunity costs are enormous. People who do it seriously fit the rest of their lives around it somehow; and if you look at the black belt as a trophy and think of other prizes you might have pursued instead, it’s hard to see how it could be worth the price.

There is another way to look at it, however. It is possible to see the time spent practicing not as the investment but as the dividend itself. From that perspective the question is not “What richer prize might I have pursued?” but “How might the time have been better spent?” (Note here that our language almost forces us to regard time as an investment toward some extrinsic benefit – not as the benefit itself. In English, time is profitably *spent*, or else *wasted*, *passed* or *whiled away*. It is awkward to convey the idea that “quality time,” to be experienced just for its own sake, is the stuff of life itself. Other cultures have taken a different, less mercantile view of life and time. The Bhagavad Gita, sacred text for Hindus and therefore influential for Buddhists as well, teaches that one should always act for the sake of the action itself, and not for its expected results. (There is an echo here in Kant’s doctrine that one should act always from *categorical* imperatives rather than merely hypothetical or instrumental ones aiming at a desired outcome.⁶) In any case, aikido like any art can scarcely return the investment it requires. As J. P. Morgan said of his yacht, if you care what it costs you can’t afford it. When students ask what I have gained from my practice of aikido, the only honest answer must be the one I heard my own teacher give in such a conversation – that it had made his life

⁶ In its best-known but fundamentally incoherent formulation, “Act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.” See the Wikipedia article at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Categorical_imperative for a discussion.

more interesting.

Still on the subject of *results*, any concept of the good life requires us to be and present ourselves to others as responsible and competent *agents* – able to make our choices, carry them through, and live with their consequences: the intended ones, and all the others. Especially interesting for Western students, will be the shifted concept of agency that aikido practice demands. Like God creating the world, beginners think to plan something and make it so. They see a technique that the instructor has shown, and apply their muscle power to make it work. But what they learn eventually is that this is not how those movements work at all. Properly speaking, they should not even be called *techniques* in the ordinary sense. They are not really efficient ways of *doing something* to obtain a desired result. Rather they are natural trajectories of movement that both parties follow to keep from getting hurt.

What happens is that the *uke* (the man who attacks) and *nage* (the one who executes the throw) are fellow participants in a movement that the attacker (*uke*) originates and powers. *Nage*'s problem is just to steer that intention, power and movement to his own advantage, leading *uke* off balance until he falls down. The effectiveness of aikido “techniques” derives from the architecture of human bodies and from some basic laws of physics. In this way, the art aligns with a neo-Taoist metaphysic of self-organization and the self-so. You do not perform the technique so much as follow the movement as it happens – getting a little ahead of it as it is happening. You allow the movement to happen in its own way while you participate and help it to the best of your ability. In following the movement from in front this way, you find your freedom and a measure of “control” in the threatening situation.

Thus, in a very physical way, aikido comes to grips with the apparent paradox that freedom must be conceived as a spontaneous obedience to necessity. Philosophers have formulated and grappled with this contradiction in various terms: sometimes as obedience to perfect human law, sometimes as obedience to nature or to “the Tao,” sometimes as obedience to the will of God. On a conceptual level, as they say, “you pays your money and you takes your choice.” The root idea is a reality that aikido gets at more directly than any practice I can think of: You never find freedom doing just whatever you please. You must find it in a real situation that constrains you in many ways, and you feel most free when most at one with that situation.

Ethics and strategy: How should I deal with other people, not all them well-meaning toward me, and all of them with needs and interests different from mine?

As clever, social animals, we face a series of dilemmas in our dealings with other people: We need to be, and present ourselves as clever, strong and competent, without becoming overbearing. We need to pursue our own desires and interests while accommodating and compromising with others. We need to offer and take benefits from alliances and friendships without making demands that will strain our friendships and alliances. As members of a society and culture whose tolerance for deviant attitudes and behavior will extend only so far, we need to be autonomous and authentic without getting ourselves into more trouble than a given matter is worth. From this perspective, life is a balancing act, and we are all of us tightrope walkers. My personal opinion is that ethical philosophy in the West has been too much preoccupied with a dubious ideal of moral perfection – not giving nearly enough thought to the practical problem of managing ethical dilemmas by real human beings who lack full information about the consequences of their actions, have personal loves and preferences, fall rather short in the supposed virtue of disinterested benevolence, and may reject disinterested benevolence even as an ideal.

From Confucius, Lao Tzu and Sun Tzu to Ueshiba, the serious thought of China and Japan on this subject seems more realistic. Social life is not about the assertion and preservation of ideals, but about viable compromises and living arrangements. We have conflicts with our friends and allies, and common interests with our enemies. Accordingly, all our relationships require diplomacy, conflict management and frequent judgments between mixed bags of good and evil. Intimacy, even ordinary social neutrality are just not possible with everyone. The best you can do with some people is prevent them from harming you and yours, the bystanders, or even themselves sometimes – to the extent possible.

More than most other martial arts, aikido takes this last obligation seriously: We practice to subdue or neutralize a violent attack without injuring the attacker more than necessary. More abstractly, with its ideas of sphere and center, *omote* (entering across) and *ura* (turning outside), and its focus on the blending of energies, aikido can be seen as taking seriously and working with what we might call the *politicious* character of human relationships: the mixed bag of conflicting and common interests that characterizes every one of them. Thus what it suggests is neither an ethic of love, nor one of “tit for tat,” but an ethic about managing and making the best of ambiguous, multi-faceted relationships.

To my mind, aikido offers a strong suggestion that people (both oneself and others) are to be seen as separate nodes – centers – of “*ki*” (spirit, energy and intention, as we must render that Japanese term into English. It accepts that conflict is normal and even healthy but that anger and violence can and should be avoided. It points at a possibility of harmony, not merely as an outcome of conflict, but at the core of any conflict relationship. It directs attention not to what another person is now doing, nor even to what he may be consciously thinking and planning, but to the quality and direction of this “*ki*” which you are to meet, blend with, and possibly lead with your own.

For good discussions of the history of this idea, see the Wikipedia articles on *vitalism* and *qi* (the alternative spelling).⁷ Though a dead-end for purposes of science which, in recent years, has had remarkable success in understanding the phenomenon of Life in purely physical and chemical terms, the concept persists (like that of “sunrise” after Copernican astronomy) because for most ordinary purposes it remains useful. It is useful in aikido and other martial arts, because it points at something deeper than the conscious mind – at what we would today call the “unconscious,” and at the metabolic flows and rhythms of the living organism. It proposes that we deal with an attacker, or with anybody, not in any superficial way, but at this deep organic level.

It is this ethical dimension of the concept that commands attention here. That dimension is conveyed by the Buddhist greeting gesture of *gassho* (equivalent to the *namaste* of Hindus and Yogins) – palms together in front of the chest, fingers pointing upward, usually accompanied by a slight bow. Symbolically, it is a gesture of recognition and acknowledgement of the Divine in this other person and in oneself. A translation might be “I honor the place in you in which the entire Universe dwells. I honor the place in you which is of Love, Integrity, Wisdom and Peace.” As such, it undercuts all the dilemmas mentioned above, offering and requesting a direct encounter of *ki* with *ki* – of spirit with spirit.

Society and politics: What is “society,” and what claims can it legitimately make upon the lives of individuals?

In a slim book called *Systems of Survival*, Jane Jacobs picks up on a distinction originally drawn by Plato between two antithetical cultures or

⁷ At <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vitalism> and <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Qi> respectively.

“syndromes” – both necessary for the viability of a political community, but radically at odds with one another, and toxic when mixed.⁸ What Jacobs calls “the Guardian Syndrome” is concerned with the preservation and interests of the group as such – with the taking of what is available for the taking. To the Guardian mentality, trading is dishonorable, but using force – “prowess” – to get one’s way is entirely legitimate and praiseworthy. The ideal Guardian keeps and values tradition, is obedient and loyal to superiors, defends his “honor” and takes vengeance when slighted. He lives richly, distributes patronage and “largesse” to actual and potential followers, and shows fortitude in the face of pain or hardship. The Commercial Syndrome, by contrast, is centered on trade, industry, and the production of wealth. Its central values are thrift, honesty, inventiveness and originality. It has no use for honor (a concept it finds all but unintelligible) but encourages constructive dissent. It promotes comfort and convenience, and invests shrewdly, with an eye to turning a profit. It values trading and the keeping of freely negotiated contracts. Jacobs’ thesis is that each system is necessary and proper in its place, but that confusion between them leads to moral confusion and corruption.

I have a few reservations about her book – mainly that complete segregation between these syndromes is never practicable, and that a certain amount of humbug and hypocrisy has always been needed to uphold a fiction of separation between them. Nonetheless, Jacob’s two syndromes are clear enough in theory, if somewhat less so in practice; and distinguishing them can help us think about the culture shock that sometimes occurs when middle class, North American students start to perceive and internalize Guardian values that their aikido puts at point.

For it is obvious that Western students, even the Japanese today, live in a Commercial culture – a culture dominated by Jacob’s Commercial Syndrome and its values. Aikido, by contrast, even more conspicuously than most other martial arts, stems from the aristocratic, Guardian culture of Tokugawa Japan, and can be seen as a conscious attempt to encode and preserve authentic values of that culture for the modern world through a style of practice suited to Commercial-minded people like us.

The popularity (such as it is) of aikido practice in the world today, and the number of senior aikidoka that can be found today in almost any large city are measures of their success. All the time we’ve spent on the mat is evidence that Guardian values still resonate – still have their appeal. Yet it is obvious too that no amount of aikido practice will turn us into Tokugawa samurai. Nor should

⁸ Thoughtful reviews of the book can be found at <http://www.authorsden.com/visit/viewarticle.asp?id=4686> and at <http://www.reason.com/news/show/30293.html>.

it, for the fact is that we live in an utterly different world. But the practice should give us something to think about – if only that the way we think and live is not the only possible way, and that our North American values and lifestyle may not look like progress to everybody everywhere.

The dojo reminds us of a society – a world – that offered very different possibilities to its members, and made different claims upon them. Western thought takes the individual and individual idiosyncrasy as a given, and sees society as the outcome, or resultant, of individual wills and interests acting with and against each other. The classical Japanese view (as I understand it) saw the group as given, with the person gradually discovering true individuality in the perfection of his role within it. In the true Guardian spirit, originality for its own sake – mere idiosyncrasy – was not a gift and group resource, but an impurity to be overcome through hard training and self-discipline. That mind-set was *both* that culture's great strength and beauty, and its limitation. It is seen in those terms, I gather, by many Japanese today. It can surely be seen so by a Western student trying to have the best of both worlds.

Conclusion

To return, finally, to the question we began with: Where does aikido stand in relation to philosophy, and to Western wisdom traditions in general? How does one reconcile two such different educations?

As we've seen, aikido differs in substantial respects from certain Western ideas that have had a long run and have been very influential. The practice itself and the tradition it stems from do not share the Western fascination and pre-occupation with language. Its metaphysical world-view, insofar as it is Taoist, is essentially bottom-up. By contrast, its view of society is definitely top-down. It does not imagine the human person as a unique and essential locus of Being but more as a role-player and status-holder within a family and society that was there before he arrived and will continue after he is gone. It conceives history neither as a monotonous repetition of cycles nor as painful progress toward a pre-ordained goal, but rather as a spiral, now expanding now contracting, with the cycles of change always leaving their remainder – something depleted or newly created – so that each one begins in a slightly different place. There are many other important differences; the effort to recognize them, think them through and make up my own mind on a few points has been a lifetime of absorbing work.

Partly despite these differences from Western thought, but partly because of them, I have found aikido practice both to complement and to refresh my interest in Western philosophy. The latter is supposed to be a dialogue – a sort of collaborative meditation – around the genuine concerns and beliefs of its

participants, but all too easily, it can degenerate into a sterile, academic word game. Aikido is supposed to be a *budo* – a “way of the warrior,” and a re-figuring of combat into art. It too can degenerate in various ways. The business of an instructor is to make what he can of the practice for himself and for his students, while the business of the students is to make what they can of it for each other and for themselves. At the very least, aikido practice helped me become something more than a *completely* bookish intellectual, taught me the difference between “the moon” and the pointing finger, and showed me that not all things worth thinking can be put into words.

And philosophy? Philosophy made my aikido practice more interesting – gave me a lot of things to think and read about when I was off the mat, and some perspective for my practice and teaching while I was on it. I think too that it may have helped me to understand a little of Ueshiba’s thought in rendering his practice of various martial systems into the unique *budo* that I encountered in 1969 – the year he died, and that I started.

On trial for his life, Socrates declares to his jurors and fellow citizens that “the unexamined life is not worth living.” Without reflection, he is saying, action by itself is meaningless. If you do not savor and seek to learn from experience, your life has little value, he claims – even to yourself.

Through much the same dynamic by which Ueshiba’s study of martial arts evolved into aikido as we have it now, the interrogations by Socrates of opinionated young Athenians evolved into “philosophy” – an academic discipline, a language game, a play of ideas, something to read and talk about. Philosophy is a practice of reflection *at leisure*, when action is finished or before it has begun. By contrast, aikido is a practice of reflection on the fly – in the heat of action while it is happening. But there is this *koan* at the core of both: We observe that self-consciousness interferes with smooth performance and is better postponed until afterwards. But we also find that the way to improve is to slow down and attend not just to results, but to what our movements feel like in the moment of doing. Language and our teachers can take us only so far. We learn eventually that the teaching we need to follow is this reflective feedback from the movements of life itself.

Suggested Reading

While working on this piece, I surfed around on the Web to see what I could find about ideas I was discussing. Here is a sampling of sites that looked especially relevant and interesting. I include them here to start you on your own explorations. Be warned that their inclusion here is in no way an endorsement. Some of this material I read, but some I only glanced at. Do your own surfing. A journey of ten thousand lifetimes begins under your mouse!

Knowledge:

What does it mean to know something, and what can I know *for sure*?

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Knowledge>

<http://pespmc1.vub.ac.be/EPISTEMI.html>

Knowing how and knowing that:

<http://staff.edfac.unimelb.edu.au/~jquay/QuayIOE2004.pdf>

Finger pointing at the moon:

<http://www.geocities.com/Tokyo/6774/finger.htm>

Enlightenment

http://www.geocities.com/the_wanderling/nutshell303.html

Reality:

What is real? How did the world come to be, and to be as it is?

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reality>

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Self-organization>

<http://www.actionbioscience.org/evolution/nhmag.html>

<http://pespmc1.vub.ac.be/SELFORG.html>

The Tao (Way) and its Power

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tao_Te_Ching

One hundred different translations of the opening lines of the Tao Te Ching can be found at www.bopsecrets.org/gateway/passages/tao-te-ching.htm

The Void

<http://www.hedweb.com/witherall/zero.htm>

<http://www.hedweb.com/nihilism/nihilfil.htm>

The Good Life:

What is a human life, and what should I do with mine?

<http://www.hypatia-lovers.com/AncientGreeks/Section23.html>

<http://www.randomhouse.com/kvpa/gilbert/guide.html>

Concentration, Meditation, Contemplation

<http://www.goodwill.9.co.uk/meditate.htm>

Ethics and Strategy:

How should I deal with other people?

<http://www.iep.utm.edu/e/ethics.htm#SSH1b.iii>

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ethics>

Pacifism

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pacifism>

See also my article, *Aikido as Political Theory* at

<http://www.secthoughts.com/aiki/aiki.html>

Political Philosophy: What is “society”?

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Political_philosophy

http://academics.vmi.edu/psy_dr/political_philosophy.htm

Richard’s e-mail:

quill@travel-net.com