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Aiki: Yielding and Unyielding Energies in Concentric Spirals by David M. Valadez

Aiki is one martial strategy among many. Aiki can be translated as “Union with Ki.” Among its many understandings, it has an implied tactical meaning of “being in harmony with an opponent’s body/mind (i.e. his/her will or intent, attack, etc.). Aiki, as with all things of Japanese traditional martial arts, has both a surface meaning (Jp. “omote”) and an acroamatic or deeper meaning (Jp. “ura”). Though these two aspects of Aiki cannot really be separated from each other, I will try to speak of only the omote aspect of Aiki, or on how to harmonize with an opponent’s body via a blending of his/her attack with our tactical response. In particular, I would like to discuss how one could employ Aiki in order to travel from the inside of a strike (i.e. Yokomenuchi) to the outside of a strike. This method would stand in contrast to the common option of blocking. I would also like to provide a bit of general information on the strategy of Aiki as it is relevant to this exact application.

The strategy of Aiki is found in nearly every combative system – though it goes by many names or even remains unnamed. It is often associated with great learning and/or great skill. This is because the strategy of Aiki allows a practitioner to increase both his/her defensive and offensive performance envelopes. In the case of the former, this occurs because through Aiki we do not have to be able to generate more energy at the point of contact than our attacker (i.e. needing a block that is stronger in its stopping power than our opponent’s strike is in its penetrating power). Hence, we do not have to be stronger, or even relatively close in strength to our opponent, when applying Aiki martially. In the case of our offensive performance envelope, through Aiki, we are able to meld our offense and defense so that our tactical response becomes immediate and thus less likely to be countered. Hence, we do not have to actually be physically faster than our opponent. It is no coincidence then that the more mature martial artist often demonstrates Aiki, and that it is he/she that often proves the most challenging to folks who are used to capitalizing upon their strength and/or their speed in order to gain victory.

Through Aiki, one allows a strike to continue, more or less, upon its continued projected Angle of Attack. Aiki has no need for blocks that function at sharp angles to the Angle of Attack, and so Aiki is about continuous motion – not about stopping or pausing in our action. Through Aiki, the attacking strike is not interrupted, and so then too neither is the attacker’s perception of “success.” Thus, an attacker is much less likely to follow-up, adapt, and/or counter since the need for such tactical reconsiderations is not made evident until it is too late. Moreover, because as defender we are not physically or mentally preoccupied with the strike itself, through Aiki, by allowing the attacking strike to continue upon its path of action unimpeded, we are able to engage the center of the attack, or the main mass of the attack, more immediately. In this way, a defender is able to follow the old Roman Legion adage of, “Fight the archer, not the arrow.”

Keeping this adage in mind, let us look at the Aikido basic Yokomenuchi (trans. “strike to the side of the head”) and one of the many ways in which Aiki can be employed against this strike so that we can tactically travel from the inside of the attacking limb to the back-outside of the attacker. (Note: Yokomenuchi is Aikido’s abstract representation of any kind of energy that may be traversing the horizontal plane. Therefore, one can employ the following tactics against roundhouse punches, hooks, high roundhouse kicks, haymakers, etc., in much the same way, allowing for modification as needed.) The key to allowing Yokomenuchi to continue unimpeded is to make use of concentric spirals. Through spirals our defensive energy can be yielding where necessary and unyielding where necessary. Both aspects, Yielding and Unyielding (i.e. Yin and Yang), must be present and in balance with each other for Aiki to occur. Simply allowing a strike to continue unimpeded is not the sole mark of Aiki. This is why though retreating defensively may also allow a strike to continue unobstructed, this is not an employment of Aiki - this is simply “getting out of the way.” Getting out of the way and employing Aiki do not reconcile the same tactical considerations and/or provide the same tactical opportunities. Hence, there is much more to Aiki than simply getting out of the way. Aiki is about engaging an attack, not retreating from one.

Spirals allow for a balancing of Yin and Yang elements because spirals consist of both circular and linear energies. Aiki’s spirals are concentric because they must happen across three different types of physical action and they must do so at the same rate of travel and at the same degree of travel. In particular, one’s spiraling action, or one’s balancing of Yin and Yang energies, must take place simultaneously within one’s handwork (Jp. “te-sabaki”), one’s bodywork (Jp. “tai-sabaki”), and one’s footwork (Jp. “ashi-sabaki”). At an embryonic level, in this case, we are dealing with nothing more than an inward parry, and outward parry, and an advancing step. However, when these universally common basics are brought together according to the specific tactical requirements of balancing yielding and unyielding energies, a synergy is produced that gives us a great advantage over our attacker.

With our footwork (i.e. our advancing step), we must recognize its Yang character, thus we must enter or advance in harmony with our attacker’s Yin energy. This means that we should enter at the time that the attacker’s strike is going up, and/or going up and back, and/or when it is traveling from the guard position to the striking position, and/or when the attacker is inhaling in preparation for his/her strike, etc. All of these things mark Yin energy and thus all of these things mark our opening for entry (Jp. “Irimi”). However, our footwork must not be so unyielding that it risks clashing with the main body-mass of the attacker. Thus, we should not move straight ahead but at an angle, with our lead foot moving first and being closer to the Line of Attack and our rear foot moving second and being further away from the Line of Attack. Being off the Line of Attack, through such an entry, we are already in a Zone of Sanctuary regarding the opponent’s cross-lateral weapons, but we can more guarantee this by making sure our hips rotate slightly so that they are nearly in the same plane. Together, this footwork and this hip rotation give our overall entry a kind of spiraling geometry as we will have combined both linear and circular movement in order to perform this type of entry. This type of entry, along with its timing, already does much to have us move the target (i.e. side of the head) outside of the oncoming strike. Our handwork then can act as a redundant system of defense to this footwork, and thus readily occupy itself with offensive measures.

As we are entering during the Yin phase of our attacker’s strike, our lead hand should attempt to both guard our upper quadrants as it seeks to make contact with the inside of the Yokomenuchi. In order to facilitate the spirals of our handwork, contact should be made with the outer portion of our forearm – which also lends itself to strategies often particular to knife fighting. To repeat: The lead hand is in a concentric relationship with our lead foot, thus the lead hand should seek connection with the opponent’s attack during the Yin phase of its architecture. As our opponent’s strike begins to enter its Yang phase, and in

conjunction with the initial yielding of our rear foot taking its angled position in relation to the Line of Attack, the lead hand begins to yield by rotating the strike's energy around it. This is done by rotating the arm counter-clockwise (when the lead arm is the right arm) and allowing it to travel (also in a circular fashion) from the right side of our body to near our centerline. Now having completed its initial task, and being for the most part on the outside of the striking limb, the lead hand can now go on to complete its intended or main objective – engaging the opponent's cross-lateral shoulder from the rear or his spine at the neck from the rear.

As the lead hand is traveling to its main tactical objective, it passes the attacking limb and its continuous energy to the rear hand. The rear hand thus begins its engagement at or near our centerline. The rear hand should not reach too far across the centerline. Reaching too far across the centerline opens our rear side up to various types of attacks as the elbow becomes too “un-anchored.” In addition, the rear arm in that position must rely on weaker muscle groups (e.g. deltoids) that can often cause our tactical response to lose its structural integrity. At the centerline, for reasons of facilitating our spiraling action, the rear arm should also make contact with the strike with the outer portion of our forearm. The timing of the rear hand should commence when the attacker's strike is entering its second Yin phase. Its spiral is concentric with the rear foot's completion of moving off the Line of Attack and with the hips' rotation into the same plane. Thus, as the hips rotate into their final position, the rear-arm should allow the striking limb's energy to continue unimpeded by rotating from a thumb-up/palm-in position to a thumb-down/palm-out position (when the rear arm is the left arm). (Note: The rear arm does not travel from right to left as much as our body re-orient itself around the arm.) With the rear arm now also on the outside of the strike, it too can go on to complete its intended or main objective – engaging the opponent's homo-lateral or lead shoulder. As defender, we are now in prime position to dominate the majority of the attacker's mass. We are now fighting the archer – not the arrow.