



David M. Valadez
Senshin Center
Dojocho

The Martial Side First by David M. Valadez

Often people talk about the martial and spiritual sides of Aikido as if they could ever be anything but one thing. Such is the sign of our times. In such conversations, the two sides scream back at forth at each other – spouting the jargon, truisms, and slogans of the side for which they consider themselves delegate. In the end, things sound a lot like a commercial for a popular “lite” beer: “Taste Great/Less Filling!”

However, I am not so sure the two sides disagree with each other all that much. Rather, what is rubbing up against folks the wrong way is the implied potential consequences of each position taken in isolation. In other words, for folks that are emphasizing “martial practicality and/or applicability,” hearing someone talk so dominantly of spiritual matters and/or concerns sounds in them an alarm – one which brings to mind all those types of Aikido out there that are more routine than art, more dance than martial, more ego-based than ego-reconciled, etc. It calls to mind the discourse that is often used as rhetoric, a platform, a ruse, by which martial matters (i.e. the lack of martial prowess) are not only thought to be less significant but aren’t even considered at all. To be sure, this is happening in the Aikido world at large, and, it is my position, this has been happening for a very long time (relative to the art’s creation and dissemination). Doubtless, this is in a way “ruining” the art (i.e. changing it from what it once was into something new and different).

On the other side, for folks emphasizing spiritual matters hearing other folks emphasize martial matters, the alarm goes off warning them of superficiality and/of crudeness, etc. It calls to their mind a barbarism whereby folks are simply learning how to create more violence (not less), etc. It makes one think of “contest” and of all the material and mundane aspects of contest. Again, to be sure, this side of Aikido is out there. There are folks who train in Aikido and leave it purely at a physical level – one that ranges from addressing coordination issues, to addressing physical conditioning, to having fun moving, to addressing victory in violent encounters. There are indeed teachers out there that will never mention God and/or the virtues of the spiritually cultivated Self. Moreover, if Nature is mentioned, it is at most only the “nature” of the current environmentalist movement – not the Nature of Japanese religious culture. Equally without doubt, this is in a way “ruining” the art (i.e. changing it from what it once was into something new and different).

Yet, somewhere in the midst of all this, somewhere before any sort of potential consequence actually manifests itself, there does exist a common ground. In that ground, we do not have to fear that talking of one side will negate the other. We do not have to censor ourselves in order to understand our art or even to understand it more deeply. So let us say this when it comes to the martial and spiritual sides of training: “Don’t stop at the martial prowess of Aikido, and don’t get stuck in the physical improvements of

Aikido. To stop there is to stop prematurely in one's understanding of the art. Rather, use the understanding of martial prowess that you have gained to understand the prowess of the fully cultivated spirit. Press on in your practice so that you can reconcile fully both martial and spiritual prowess."

Total Aikido requires a deep pursuit of both sides in order to reconcile the apparent (but not ultimate) paradox of Budo. However, let us face it, the only reason any of us need to say that a given aspect of Aikido should not be neglected at the cost of the other is because the totality of Aikido is simply not being taught in most places and/or practiced by most people. I do not think you have to stand on a pedestal to realize that widespread dissemination of the art is having its effect on how intact the teachings remain. It is true that some dojo tend to favor "spiritual" matters over "martial" matters. In addition, to be sure, the vice versa is equally true. So it seems reasonable to ask, or at least we are able to ask, which side is more prevalent today? Though we can all understand that both sides should be present, that they both NEED to be present, we can still ask, in terms of numbers, which side is being more emphasized today?

When I ask that of myself, I say it is the "spiritual" side of things that is playing a more dominant role – at least here in the United States. I think there are of course social reasons for this, particularly the spread of the art to other nations and cultures that are quite different from traditional Japan, etc., cultures where traditional Japan still offers something of the "noble savage" or the "exotic other," but I also think there are very real/practical matters that make such a thing true. In particular, and it short, it is damn hard to be martial with Aikido (and any other art for that matter). It takes a huge amount of skill, and thus of course time, dedication, and endurance, etc. Not many folks will be Olympic athletes, and so it is natural to assume that not many folks will be martially proficient either – regardless of the art being practiced.

On the other hand, I would say that Osensei's spirituality is also quite difficult to achieve, because it is based in mysticism (using the broad sense of the word) – which in all likelihood is even more selective in its participants than martial prowess might be. However, today, little by little, Aikido's underlying mysticism, its core spirituality, is being replaced by a type of spiritual symbolism or by a set of practical metaphors that merely re-present Modern (i.e. Western, democratic, capitalistic) social and ethical norms. Moreover, I am sorry to say, there just is not anything difficult, and thus nothing "selective," about a "spirituality" that is based in practical metaphors and not in actual self-transformation. Hence, more folks practice "spiritual" Aikido. Today, these seem like two very good reasons (i.e. the difficulty of martial prowess and the ease of practicing a "spirituality" that is based in practical metaphors) why more folks tend to practice or emphasize Aikido's "spiritual" side at the cost of its martial side.

If that is accurate, if things have managed to change over time, then we should be able to rely upon history – at least to gain some kind of distance (as limited as that might be) from the topic. That may help us to better position ourselves within our own time. We can ask, first by noting that there was a time, even Post-Kisshomaru, when Aikido did very much have martial concerns (regardless of whether it simultaneously had spiritual concerns or not). For better or for worse, we are all the living legacy of that emphasis and our Aikido was transmitted through the body-minds of folks that never felt they were learning anything that was not martially applicable. With hindsight, we are able to see what that kind of Aikido has been able to accomplish, and it is a great accomplishment (even if it does have some short comings). The world has come to know Aikido (a great accomplishment), and the world's Aikido was carried upon the shoulders of practitioners that were practicing martially. Will our time's Aikido be able to achieve an equally great accomplishment? Can we say that our generation's Aikido, which might (doubting my own position) have more folks with no martial leaning than with a martial leaning, be fruitful enough to give birth to something as grand as we have received and have nourished ourselves off of all these decades?

Personally, I do not think so. Our time's Aikido seems to be too frail a thing to accomplish so much. That frailty, in my opinion, comes from the same source as the space does for a replacement of Aikido's genuine spirituality: a deemphasizing of the martial. Therefore, even though I can say that both sides (i.e. martial and spiritual) need to be included, that both sides are needed for proper understanding, that both sides need to be reconciled, that both sides are really one side, etc., or even if I am quite willing to say that the cultivation of the spirit is the apex of Aikido training, because of the current conditions as I am subjectively experiencing them, I think we should say, "First do the martial side – get that down – it is a must." I must give primacy to the martial side. This I do not at the cost of the spiritual side. Rather, this I do to save the spiritual side from its ultimate and apparently inevitable extinction.