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Abstract

This article examines the popularization of aikido in relation to some religious (Shinto) and corporate (globalization) values that buttress the modern Japanese art. The article, written as a memoir, also re-visits a time before the internet, when teachings were most often not visually recorded thus it was incumbent on practitioners to cultivate a sharp eye in observing the demonstration of techniques they would perhaps witness only once or twice. This article is informed by the hoplology of Donn Draeger, the post-structuralism of Roland Barthes and the poetry of Ueshiba Morihei.

Aikido as Myth

by Maurice Gauthier, M.Ed.



Once upon a time many moons ago when I was living in Tokyo, I ventured out one evening on a pub crawl with some aikido friends. At some point deep into the night, a karaoke sing-along we'd been having with a group of dockworkers somehow turned into a loud and disorderly argument. Before we knew it, we were all hauled off to the nearest police box to resolve matters.

Of course, we'd all had way too much to drink and the two stern police officers were anything but bemused. They somehow got us to calm down and began trying to clear up what had happened. This was when one of the dockworkers shouted, "Why are you asking them? You're supposed to be protecting us!"

In those days, Japanese police officers on duty outside these miniature police stations would be issued wooden staves (*jo*), like the ones we use in aikido. Most often they could be seen leaning on this short staff as they whiled away the long hours of their shifts in a peaceful (and gun-less) country with only the odd foreigner walking by whom they could stop and ask for an alien registration card as a way to practice their English.

On this particular night as well, one of the police officers was holding a *jo*. He raised it and gently placed the tip on this dockworker's shoulder. In one slow swoop, the dockworker collapsed helplessly to the ground. And it was in this pinning position that the officer, still standing and still casually holding his *jo*, calmly continued his interrogation.

I had never seen anything like this before. At that time, I already knew all the basic Saito staff and *bokken* (wooden sword) techniques as well as the long forms that Shirata Rinjiro (1912~1993) would demonstrate on his yearly trips down from Yamagata to the All-Japan Aikido Demonstration in the Nippon Budokan. I had even on several occasions witnessed Hikitsuchi Michio's (1923~2004) hauntingly beautiful *chinkon kishin* (lit. calming the spirit and returning to the divine) purification exercises, which he too (it is said) learned directly from the Founder, Ueshiba Morihei (1883~1969). Yet, I had always felt in a way hard to explain that weapon training in aikido was, to a large extent, mostly about little boys who didn't wish to grow up.

Whenever I picked up a weapon, either at the dojo or in the precincts of a local shrine, I invariably would feel a tad sheepish. As if I were not Musashi

Miyamoto but Peter Pan, prancing around the befuddled Captain Hook, with that ludicrous alarm clock crocodile ticking ominously below. Fun, but not serious. Certainly nothing martial and certainly nothing that could lead to any sort of significant personal transformation.

This discomfort on my part was perhaps not even related to the Way of Harmony. After all, as a modern Japanese sport, aikido did resemble *kendo* (sword methods) and *kyudo* (archery), which were also practiced with weapon and *hakama* (traditional clothing), and which were also located somewhere between the past and the present, perched precariously between tradition and modernity. By ritualizing intention rather than outcome, these sports were elevated to the high aesthetic level of flower arrangement, tea ceremony and even the drama of Noh.

By fostering an external gesture through an internal cultivation of intuition, aikido was supposed to allow us to escape concept and enter directly into the immediacy of pure perception. So it went. In my experience, however, after having trained in Japan for almost two years, I was starting to feel that, if anything, I was just getting better at lying to myself. After all, if this were not so, why then was I being asked to explain myself inside this police box somewhere on the edge of a nightclub district?

The police officers slowly continued the interrogation. The odd sight of the brawny dockworker sprawled in a heap on the concrete floor had a great calming effect on the rest of us. Able to move but unable to stand up, he quietly answered when spoken to but otherwise lay there waiting. The wooden jo was wedged snugly across his shoulder. In a strange way he reminded me of myself.

The practice of aikido was not coming easily to me. Mashing my knees into the mat during the kneework and interminable seiza lectures, spraining my wrists and elbows in the locks and wrenching my back in the throws, I seemed to have (in those days) more energy than common sense. Which was fine for the time. But these painful reminders of my physical limitations were easy to bear in comparison to the growing sense that was slowly awakening in me. The late Founder's teachings had quickly and perhaps irrevocably become encrusted in a crude form of ancestor worship.

Even in those days it was crystal clear to me that aikido was, above all, an idea. It was something that Ueshiba Morihei had nurtured all his life. It had been transplanted in him as a toddler singing Shingon mantras in rural Tanabe. It had sprouted in his infantry days during the Russo-Japanese War (1904~1905). It had grown shoots during the harsh pioneering winters in Hokkaido. It had flowered during his later years in Iwama, where, for the longest time, he didn't even have a dojo in which to train.

Aikido was essentially about skillful means. Adapting to conditions. Coming up with the correct response. Being in the right place at the right time. What Morihei had discovered (as per the neat Japanese talent for inventing and not just copying) was a radically new and portable way to train. A kata one could toss into one's pocket and carry around at need. Not unlike its distant cousin, the Sony Walkman.

But just as Buddhism had long ago left India for China, and the dharma of Tibet fled to the West, aikido was dying a painful death in the land of its birth. With the Founder gone, all that remained was the cumbersome machination of a large bureaucratic organization. Also not unlike Sony, just another transglobal conglomerate.

Still, I honestly did enjoy the medieval pageantry and hushed religious dignity of the dojo. Removing and neatly placing our shoes in the main entrance. The obsequious flutter of bowing whenever the teachers were around. The conspiracy of codependence. The asymmetrical power relations of State Shinto.

I really dug starting and ending general practice with a solemn group bow toward the front of the dojo. At the large scroll hanging in the recessed alcove (*tokonoma*) and, just above, the photograph of Ueshiba Morihei. Often though, I would catch myself wondering whether the Founder weren't roaring with laughter at us for having so misrepresented his teaching.

Finally the police officers put away their notepads and decided we were all free to go. Unruffled and unharmed, the dockworker was allowed to stand up. For a short while, we stood there together in the hollow police box under a dim ascetic beam of light.

Outside I could see the dazzling neon art frenetically flashing above groups of office workers, university students, and busloads of tourists from the countryside who were merrily carousing along the street. Far far away from the comfortable certainties of the monochrome world of Kurosawa Akira, I watched people in expensive clothes vomiting all over themselves.

After an ostentatious profusion of apologies, we walked out of the police box and along the crowded street. At the sign of the first bar, our friends the dockworkers invited us in for yet another karaoke sing-along. I, however, did not follow. Instead, I bolted down a side lane and ran back all the way back home. The last thing I remember is setting my alarm clock as I dropped off. Catching a few hours sleep before the morning aikido class.



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