

The Unification of Self

UNCOVERING MY TRUE NATURE THROUGH THE PRACTICE OF AIKIDO

Sandan Essay by **Nico Secunda** • Aikido of Santa Cruz



"There is no form and no style in Aikido. The movement of Aikido is the movement of Nature - whose secret is profound and infinite."

- Morihei Ueshiba, OSensei • Founder of Aikido

As human beings, we have the amazing ability to adapt to our environment. We are able to survive in the scorching heat of the desert or the frigid snow of the arctic circle. We can live alone as mountain ascetics or in the enormous communities of the world's largest cities. Not only do we adapt to the environments we live in, but also to all those that we move through. We relax when we are on vacation. We may shift our personality when visiting our grandparents. We tend to alter our behavior and character between eating breakfast at home with family, giving a presentation to our co-workers and boss at work, and again when meeting friends in the evening. Most of us are constantly in flux; shifting, melding and adjusting ourselves to "fit" into our environment.

I grew up in ever-changing environments. From the time I was only few weeks old, I was traveling the world with my parents, as my father taught various seminars and retreats on shamanism and holistic health based on the model of indigenous cultures; specifically, the Huichol tribe of Mexico with whom he lived for twelve years. This constant shifting of place, people and culture was a gift, offering me a unique upbringing for which I will forever be grateful. At the same time, this constant flux created a situation wherein I would find myself acting differently depending on my environment. My personality would shift slightly when sitting down at my desk in school and then again alter itself once the bell rang or when I was sitting around the fire in the Huichol village or on the flight back home sitting next to a stranger. This phenomenon is something I have noticed since I was a young child, but in recent years, I have begun to work ardently on unifying myself: striving to find my most natural self and to allow that to be steady no matter my external environment.

I started my Aikido training when I was six years old, and this has most definitely helped me to unify my body over the past twenty years. The movements of Aikido consistently teach us to reconnect to center. Our training partners offer a sounding board, showing us when we stray too far from center and begin to use muscular strength to manifest a desired movement.

Over time in our Aikido training, we learn various skills and tricks to help us successfully apply a technique. But these tricks can later become roadblocks to the deeper exploration of Ai-Ki (harmonizing

energy). Our repertoire of small micro-movements, preemptive positioning or specific hand placement may work ninety percent of the time, but suddenly become useless when we find an unfamiliar training partner or when our teachers decide it is time we expand our Aikido vocabulary. In these moments, I often find myself flipping through my playbook of tricks; trying one trick after the next in quick succession, hoping one will finally allow me to move. This is like walking blindly into a brick wall again and again until I stagger upon the doorway and eventually pass through to my destination.

Recently, I have been pushed in my training to go beyond these “tricks” and to focus my awareness on the most natural movement in any given moment. To not move with a premeditated plan, but to heighten my awareness of my training partners so that I may blend with them more naturally. It has been a struggle to let go of these layers of ingrained technique in order to discover the natural movement of the moment.

Is this not the same as letting go of our personal facades so that our true self may shine more brightly? As Motomichi Anno Sensei has said again and again since I first met him, “We must polish ourselves,” getting rid of all the rough edges, to find our center. Recently he has been telling us that “we must go beyond technique” and follow the movement of nature. I strive to apply these teachings not only to my physical training but also to my spirit. The spirit in which I practice Aikido, the spirit in which I approach my work, the spirit in which I interact with every person, the spirit that exudes from the character of my inner world, my soul. How can I let go of the habits that keep me from experiencing each moment anew? How do I practice a particular technique so that the movement does not become solely automatic, but rather natural? How do I let go of myself to find myself? I have been told again and again... ..practice.

I have heard from various teachers, that we should practice, practice, practice until we learn. And then we should forget everything and start fresh once more. It has been a gift growing up in a Dojo which embraces various styles and teachers, promoting a training ideology in which we wholeheartedly strive to practice what is being taught in the moment rather than getting stuck solely in habitual movements. This approach to training stimulates an increased focus and awareness, which highlights our individual patterns and pushes us to look at everything from multiple perspectives.

One might think that this way of training lacks a solid foundation and does not develop a strong core of technical skill. My experience has been that instead, by trying things in different ways, we discover the common aspects of a specific technique for example. We train, train, train, many different variations of a technique until one day we see a glimpse of the thread that ties all those countless variations together. As Linda Holiday Sensei has said, “The differences in Aikido are interesting, but the similarities are profound.”

With this in mind, it is illuminating to pay attention to how we change when we step on and off the mat. Do we suddenly stand taller? Most of us probably move with more awareness once we put on our

Gi (training uniform) and bow onto the mat. I know that there have been countless times when I personally have straightened my posture and focused my intention when the teacher walks in the door.

As I look forward in my training, I am striving to maintain the “good” and throw out the “bad.” To let go of the habits and false facades that keep me from maintaining a constant connection to center. To polish myself so that I am consonant with nature whether I am standing next to my teacher or alone on a mountain top. I aspire to express myself naturally and without pretense no matter the situation, place or people I am with. I am working to find that common thread within myself so that I may follow it to my core, to my heart. This is bound to be a lifelong journey, but I remain inspired by the endless well of Aikido that flows from nature. With joy that I pray will continue to grow, I look forward to the path ahead and to many more years of exploring the endless secrets nature has to offer.

