

Aikido and Shugyo

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What is Aikido? Many books have been written to address this very question. The intention of this essay is to briefly discuss the history of Aikido, its underlying philosophy, and finally, the concept of *shugyo*, “the intense physical and internal training to perfect character and realize one’s true nature.”

Aikido as a distinct system was developed by Morihei Ueshiba (O’Sensei) early in the 20th century. A synthesis of a number of traditional Japanese arts, it encompasses joint locks, throwing, pinning, and weapons training with *bokken* (sword), *jo* (staff), and *tanto* (knife).

Various life experiences contributed to the formation of the unique philosophy that distinguishes O’Sensei’s art of Aikido. Conflict was prevalent throughout his life, ranging from the Russo-Japanese War to the horrors of World War II. In addition, O’Sensei became deeply involved with the Omoto-kyo religion and its charismatic leader Onisaburo Deguchi. O’Sensei’s martial arts training started at a young age and included traditional *jujutsu* (throwing and pinning), *kenjutsu* (sword), and *sojutsu* (spear fighting). The synthesis of these experiences led O’Sensei to the realization that “the sword of death is also the sword of life.” O’Sensei’s Aikido became a vehicle for transformation - altering the way in which people relate to conflict. As he aged, O’Sensei’s vision expanded to the possibility of Aikido bringing peace to the entire world.

Aikido transcended mere training in a martial art to become a path to develop the individual. The idea of *shugyo* “is the daily training of purification, the day-to-day struggle, the work of education to refine and purify the quality of life.” Aikido is somewhat unique in that O’Sensei saw it as a means of cultivating oneself rather than simply a system of combat techniques. There is no competition in Aikido; no tournaments, or even sparring. Instead, all training is done in a cooperative manner with a

partner. There is as much to learn for the person receiving the technique (*uke*) as there is to learn for the person performing the technique (*nage*). Each must be sensitive to practicing at a level commensurate with the ability of their partner.

At the same time Aikido has devastating martial applications. One of the reasons O’Sensei shunned competition was that most of his techniques would be debilitating, if not lethal, when applied in earnest. However, through the give and take of cooperative training, Aikidoka can practice these dangerous techniques in relative safety.

Aikido is studied as a series of specific techniques. Even so, the founder often referred to the phrase “*Takemasu Aiki*.” The idea is that Aikido is an expression of the universal laws of nature. As such there are actually an infinite number of techniques to respond to the unlimited ways in which two people might interact. It is through the dedicated study of the basic techniques (*kihon waza*) that one becomes aware of these fundamental natural laws. Once these are internalized, the specific techniques give way to an infinitely spontaneous response to any conflict. This process of training, understanding, and growth is *shugyo*.

As we follow along the path of Aikido, our understanding of the universe and human nature deepens appreciably. This insight applies both on and off the mat. Our level of practice improves, allowing us to train with more intense attacks from all sizes, shapes, and manner of attacker. Our technique becomes more fluid and relaxed, more peaceful. Off the mat, the very nature of our interactions with others begins to subtly shift. We become more aware of what is around us as we walk down the street. When faced with conflict of all kinds, we blend and diffuse rather than oppose. In this way, our character develops as a direct result of our training. This is O’Sensei’s Aikido!