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November 2008

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Important Aikido Concepts (Part 1)

One of the questions I'm asked regularly is "What is Aikido?" I'm sure many Aikidoka experience the difficulty from time to time of trying to answer that curly one. It would be very easy to quote the oft-repeated, near dogma of the Aikido legend however I would like to open the door a little wider and encourage students of Aikido to study and reflect for ourselves so we can form our own perspective. None of the following is written in judgement of those mentioned - far from it - I am ever grateful for the work of our 'martial ancestors' for their efforts in passing on this wonderful practice and inspirational philosophy. These ideas are offered respectfully and with humble apologies for any and all mistakes.

Part of the difficulty in answering the above question lies in the tense – is.

Let's start with ...What was Aikido ... what were its' origins? Well, even that seems debatable. The Aikido History section on our website comes straight from the Yoshinkan manual and while there is some evidence to justify this history, much more is required to put this beyond doubt. It states Aikido was a martial art with its roots in the apparently 1200 year old [Daito Ryu Jujutsu](#) (DRJ) tradition. (This version is also found elsewhere and refers to the development and incorporation of the '*oshikiuchi*' (inside the palace) techniques of the Aizu samurai.) Many martial traditions have embellished their past to gain extra prestige. Is Aikido's history embellished? I doubt it can now be proven either way, but if so, the 'colour' was probably not added by the person considered the founder of 'modern' Aikido. What is credibly recorded is that the founder, [Ueshiba Morihei \(O'Sensei\)](#) studied Daito Ryu Jujutsu under [Sokaku Takeda](#) (self-proclaimed headmaster of DRJ). The '[Aiki](#)' prefix was apparently added to the name by Sokaku Takeda around 1922 even though the term has a considerable history of usage (according to the Kojiki.) For what length of time Ueshiba Sensei studied under Takeda Sensei is another unknown, but it is generally accepted that the actual overall training time could not have added up to more than a handful of years. It would appear he received Kyoju Dairi but not Menkyo Kaiden. (It is also recorded that Ueshiba Sensei studied several other arts in his early years – jujutsu and weapons - some say for relatively short periods while others claim he received Menkyo Kaiden). It is clear that he studied Kashima Shinto Ryu because his name and that of one of his uchi deshi at the time appear in that Ryus' [Eimoroku](#). Some of the kata preserved by Saito Sensei also appear remarkably like Yagyū Shinkage Ryu Kata and it is recorded that Ueshiba Sensei received Menkyo in this art, also from Sokaku Takeda. No matter, tales of O'Sensei's martial prowess and spirituality have reached mythic proportions in quite a short time.

The rose-coloured glasses of hindsight prefer us to see him as either somewhat unworldly or at least quite divorced from the nationalistic Japanese





Government in the lead up to the Second World War. He in fact seems to have been a very well connected and substantially political figure from a respected and well to do family. Furthermore his position within the [Omoto Kyo](#) sect saw him famously involved in a number of controversial incidents including participation in the Japanese occupation of Manchuria and Mongolia. [Onisaburo Deguchi's](#) influence on Ueshiba can not be overstated. Even pre-war, many of his writings were difficult to comprehend without a considerable background in the Omoto world view. Often portrayed as a humanist with a deeply spiritual side, Ueshiba Sensei would also appear to have had some very nationalist associations and leanings at that stage of his life. His own published writings from the pre-war period further hint at this aspect of his past. It must have been an interesting dynamic, given the Omoto sects somewhat anti-government stance while both Ueshiba Sensei and Onisaburo Deguchi maintained very considerable military and right wing connections. It is a delicate subject however, like most of us, Ueshiba Sensei was no doubt very human and probably a product of the prevailing culture of his time.

Did the outcome of the Second World War have an impact on Ueshiba Senseis' environment and philosophy? Almost certainly. He was deeply involved in the Omoto Kyo sect and this must have provided a strange and dynamic interplay. I believe his pre-war spiritual views triumphed over any jingoistic leanings in the post-war environment. Equally certainly and I believe, very importantly, it had a massive effect on the philosophy and practice of his first generation of post war students. Japan was considerably reduced and the Japanese people lived in an occupied country for ten years. History is written by the winners, so it hardly provides an accurate reflection of the rights or wrongs of this time, however Japans' expansionist policies were dealt a severe blow while those of the USA grew unabated.

Pre-war Aikido owed a great deal to the Daito Ryu Aikijujutsu of Sokaku Takeda. It emphasised martial effectiveness (during this period Ueshiba Sensei often referred to his art as a '[Bujutsu](#)'), utilised atemi (vital strikes) and acknowledged its deep relationship to swordsmanship. During the period of occupation and indeed through the following years until his death in 1969, Ueshiba Sensei increasingly expanded his vision of Aikido to that of a more global art with the capacity to sponsor universal harmony. The concept of *Aikibujutsu* fostering 'Yamato damashii' (*Japanese spirit*) was reinterpreted as *Aikido* fostering '*human spirit*'. Atemi and a connection with the use of the Japanese sword was perhaps seen as a little too martial in the eyes of many Japanese, the occupation forces and the world in general and seemed less suitable to the "Art of Peace". These aspects were deemphasized over time, particularly by the post war generation coming through in Tokyo alongside [Ueshiba Kisshomaru](#), his son. Even the strategy of Irimi (entering often performed with Shitei (or Tori) initiated attack / technique sequences) came to be seen by many as 'aggressive and 'un-Aikido'. In fact however, Ueshiba Sensei continued to employ powerful technique, use atemi and incorporate sword and other weapon use right through his life. Many examples are available in photo and film and the technical legacy in Iwama and other locations provides further substantiation.





The usual argument (proposed by advocates of the 'softer, less martial' styles – a somewhat baffling concept in itself) is that Ueshiba Sensei continued to refine the art of Aikido after the war right up till his death and that the pre-war Aikido became quite obsolete. (Advocates of the pre-war styles of course argue that Ueshiba Sensei was at his peak in his 50's) It is probably correct to say that considerable changes in Aikido happened under the direction of his students, while his interest lay in refining his own Aikido. It would be difficult to argue that Ueshiba Sensei continued to improve his Aikido right up till his death as there is sufficient evidence to suggest that he was far from his best physically or psychologically through the 1960's.

So ... what is Aikido now? (Continued in *Important Aikido Concepts Part 2*)

David

