

## AIKI NOTES by Steve Seymour

### AIKI - What is it ?

*Aikido, - the way of aiki.*

Why did some of the toughest military men of Japan, as well as some of its strongest and most knowledgeable martial artists, view Ueshiba Morihei with awe? Why was his teacher, Takeda Sokaku, able to exhibit skills thought only to reside in legends and myth? Why were a few of Takeda's other students – a very few – regarded with respect equal to that of Ueshiba ?

The answer.....

Internal Strength or Unified Energy or *kokyu*, breath power, or **aiki**. The manifestation of this power is different in its effect according to the practitioner. Some, using minimal movements, express unbelievable energy, as if detonating a controlled explosion in a small space. Others exert an inexorable force, like a boulder tipping over on top of you. And still others disappear, a ghostlike absence when you are sure that you have grabbed them, but you, feeling as if you have clutched smoke or stepped into a void. *It is the instantaneous exertion of untraceable, unstoppable force*

A so called external martial art uses very sophisticated methods to enable an individual to use their body at the peak of its natural reflexes and potential. An internal martial art, on the other hand, attempts to transform the body's natural response to force- and at a higher level, to allegedly change the way one's body actually functions. This internal training came from China and was integrated into jujutsu, and other Japanese martial arts, eventuating in Daito-ryu and aikido. **Aiki** is a technique to extract or pull-out, the opponent's power. A quote from the 1899 book "Budo Hiketsu-Aiki no Jutsu". ***The most profound and mysterious art in the world is the art of aiki. This is the secret principle of all the martial arts of Japan. One who masters it can be an unparalleled martial genius.***

This remarkable power was manifested in the 20<sup>th</sup> century by Sokaku Takeda and 3 of his direct students, namely Morihei Ueshiba, Kodo Horikawa and Yuki Yoshi Sagawa. They in turn taught many but few actually got it. In fact, due to the time in which they lived, they never intended to pass on the secret teaching. For Sokaku Takeda it was his livelihood and he was a fearful, paranoid man who had many enemies, he had no intention of giving away the thing that allowed him to survive. Sagawa refused to teach it until well into his 80's. Of Ueshiba's direct students only a few got it. Most notable were Shioda, Tohei, & Yamaguchi. Bill Gleason, who was in Hombu in the 70's states, from personal experience taking ukemi from them, that besides Tohei, Shioda and Yamaguchi the only Japanese aikido man alive today who has/had it is Saotome. ! BUT ...Most practitioners of modern day aikido and Daito ryu however estimable, do not seem to have even a scintilla of that legendary power. . Gozo Shioda, states : *While it was referred to by different names in different martial arts, Originally it was certainly a part of all Japanese martial arts. But somewhere along the line it fell into disuse. I believe that therein lies the decline of Japanese martial arts.*

To illustrate what jujutsu was- at least some jujutsu- Here is an account of a man named Ukei Kato. of Kito ryu jujutsu from the early 18<sup>th</sup> century.... UKEI KATO was a jujutsu master in his 70's at the time of this episode. A senior ranked sumo wrestler challenged Kato while the two of them were dining in a teahouse. Kato first tried to demur, but the wrestler insisted and when he made ready to attack, Kato suggested it would be more legitimate if the wrestler waited until he was off-guard. The wrestler agreed and Ukei sat down and started eating and drinking. After a while, Ukei summoned the young servant girl too bring him a cup of sake. As he took a sip, the wrestler rushed in to knock Ukei down with a tremendous shove. Ukei moved slightly, seeming only to pluck the attacker's hand lightly away from his shoulder, but actually sending him sprawling to the floor. When the wrestler looked up he saw Ukei seated just as he had been, sipping his sake calmly, not having spilled a drop. The wrestler was annoyed and left, but hid and waited for Kato to pass in the night, then attacked him again. But, just as before, Ukei sent him sprawling into the dirt with just a small shift of his body, not even disturbing the flame in the paper lantern he carried. Only then did it dawn on the sumo wrestler just what sort of individual he had challenged. Suddenly a bit frightened, he apologised profusely. But then he asked somewhat confused " Uh, by the way, did you actually throw me or did I just stumble and fall down on my own ?" To which Ukei replied "Well, that's hard to say, I'm not so sure myself"

This is highly reminiscent of the "forgotten ki" mentioned above and suggests that Ukei himself had reached a state in which he was not overtly conscious of his own actions.

## AIKI NOTES by Steve Seymour

Another example from Yuki Yoshi Sagawa, considered to be the leading successor of Takeda Sokaku. Matsuda Kenji, a student of Sagawa, explains in an interview from the 1990's: *Interviewer*; When you touched Sagawa, could you feel physical strength? *Matsuda*; No, I couldn't feel power. You could feel him touch you, but it was really soft. Instead of a feeling of him throwing you and sending you flying, it was more of a feeling of being knocked down and rolling around. *Interviewer*; Did it feel like he was using your own power against you? *Matsuda*; I don't know what it was; when I touched him, he just made me fall down. I don't understand what it was.

These skills are not unavailable to us today. Not only are there schools and teachers explicitly carrying on such training within one or another tradition, among both Chinese and Japanese martial arts, there are other men who have attempted to distill its core principles, beyond one or another martial art, in essence, "hacking through the brush to get directly to the spring".

We need to revitalise this art to the best of our abilities and be sincere to ourselves.

None of us have been given exercises to cultivate this *aiki*, and few of us would have experienced this power first-hand, either as uke or nage. I personally have met many 7<sup>th</sup> & 8<sup>th</sup> Dans who are supposed to be the representative or pinnacle of a life's study of aikido, yet I haven't experienced any magic from any of them. So what has happened? When Tohei Sensei split from Aikikai, he proclaimed that his teaching would cultivate this "*ki power*". He didn't manage to produce anyone with the same capabilities as he himself had. Many proclaim to have it though.

### Aspects of correct practise

Y Suzuki stated when asked how to develop *aiki*, said that in his experience, there were 2 ways. One is through *ukemi* and the other is through practising slowly with concentration and focus.

### Ukemi

So what do we think *ukemi* is? The essence of true *ukemi* is a body that can receive power from another and redirect it at will. This phrase indicates an action that may not even entail falling. Uke thus, really receives power and energy, not so the other can "throw" them, but to study and increase his or her ability in *aiki* itself. This would also apply to tori and the practise between them would become less delineated between thrower and thrown. Uke's role then is to develop a body in which there are no handles or levers by which force can be applied. If a person has "handles or levers", when force vectors are applied, such an individual cannot absorb and flow with said forces, cannot channel them into the ground, or cause them to resonate and amplify within a trained body, and more importantly, send them back into the aggressor.

Shioda stated: "People say grabbing the wrist is ridiculous. And this is exactly right. In reality you would execute the technique before this. The purpose of allowing the opponent to grasp your wrist is for you to study how to modify your own body movements in accordance with the changes in his power. We learn to move our bodies in response to different types of power exerted by the opponent."

The forms of aikido techniques are preparation to unlock and soften all joints of our body. This is the concept of "*kasutori*" or softening the body through removing the sediment from the joints. Martial responsiveness and sensitivity is only possible when this softening process is accomplished. Kanshu Sunadomari states "The Founder, Osensei, clearly stated that basic technique is *kasutori*. In other words, through the performance of basic techniques, we remove the tension built up in our partner's joints. Contrary to popular belief, these techniques are not for the purpose of knocking down others." *Kasutori* takes place in *ukemi*. Ueshiba retained a small body of techniques from Daito-ryu to put uke through that softening process. This is where true martial skill is born. *Ukemi* in this sense is not referring to "falling", whether or not the uke ends up on the ground. The word means, literally, "receiving body", and although "taking a fall" may be the result when one is totally unbalanced, this merely represents a moment of total defeat. Properly understood, *ukemi* is the **mastery of force** – the act of absorbing and redirecting energy, and even adding it to one's own power and sending it back to the attacker. *Ukemi* includes a sophisticated training of the body so that force can be channelled within it. Kaeshiwaza is not simply the ability to position oneself at the best angle to neutralize the attack of nage – *one changes the angles within one's body* and further, strengthens one's body and trains one's nervous system in particular ways so that one can direct incoming force and leverage with a combination

## AIKI NOTES by Steve Seymour

of body and will. All of this requires specialized practise. Eventually you become so exquisitely sensitive and responsive as an uke that even the inept and vicious cannot hurt you (with the exception of course of cheap shots during pins that uke has already allowed to occur).

### Some Principles of Kokyu Power

**Shioda** states: In Aikido there are rather unique methods of using power and moving the body. If you simply move around without any knowledge of what you are doing, there's no way that you will manage to use Aikido techniques. In order to produce great power, an effective posture is one in which your **back is straight, your shoulders are down, and your feet are firmly placed on the ground**. Moving your body while maintaining this type of posture will bring forth a much more powerful force than muscular strength alone. This power is called "*kokyu* power" or "focused power" and it is not affected by age. As long as one continues to do the proper training *kokyu* power can be produced regardless of one's age. The only problem is whether or not you practise in such a way as to develop it. The basis of *kokyu* power is "**centre power**", which is the power that keeps the body's **centre line absolutely straight**. In aikido we train in order to develop one straight line between the head, the hips and the tips of the toes. If your central axis is unsteady, you won't be able to make any technique work. Every one of the basics in aikido is geared toward the maintenance of this centre line.

By bringing together the strength of the hips, the legs, the knees and the abdomen when moving forward and by **focusing this into one point**, whether that be the arm, the shoulder, the elbow or anywhere else, immense power can be produced. This power is referred to as focused power. When the entire body is disconnected in its movements, this kind of power cannot emerge.

Focused power is the method by which you send forth your own power. By combining a certain **state of mind and rhythm with focused power**, what you get is *kokyu* power. This state of mind is one of emptiness, or nothingness. Another way to describe it is a "psychological focused power" which is a much more intense focused power. People are defeated by their own plans, thoughts of all sorts. When you remove all thoughts from your mind and reach the stage of nothingness, you will be able to read the movements of your opponents mind. You won't perceive how he is going to advance in your head, you'll sense it in your skin. It will be as if the so-called "mind's eye" or 6<sup>th</sup> sense is at work. The use of rhythm is tied to your breathing. Inhaling and exhaling is not just carried out on a whim. It is rhythm that adjusts breathing according to the situation at hand. Your focused power should be infused with this breathing and rhythm and when you have brought these things together perfectly, true *kokyu* power will result. When you can do this well, the opponent will lose his ability to resist and be completely at your mercy. He has no intention of letting it happen this way but this is just how it will end up. *Kokyu* power is also the ability to lead the opponent into a state in which he is willing to co-operate with you. This means there is no such thing as *kokyu* power without the existence of the opponent.

Shioda continues: With steady practise, one day something will click, and your mind, technique and body will unite and out of nowhere you will be able to produce *kokyu* power. You will have achieved the ability to produce *kokyu* without realising it. *Kokyu* power is not something that you can do because you want to. It won't work if you consciously try to produce it. You have to go about it naturally. It is no easy thing, and just because you produce it once doesn't mean that you'll immediately be able to do it again. When you haven't been able to do it for some time, or if you've forgotten about it altogether, out of the blue you will produce it without thinking about it. In the course of normal continuous training, these isolated cases will gradually increase in frequency and things will start to connect. Somewhere along the line you will have acquired the ability to use *kokyu* power at will. The feeling you get the moment *kokyu* power comes forth is an extraordinary and magnificent one. You will feel refreshed and it's as though your entire "self" has disappeared. The state of mind is "nothingness" There is absolutely no feeling of struggling with the opponent. *Kokyu* power is not something you can teach. It's a feeling that can only be captured on your own. No matter how much you study, even if you put great effort into it, the feeling of *kokyu* power can't be deduced by studying alone. Rather than trying to understand it mentally, it is important that you experience it physically.

You have to be able to **remove your strength** and at the same time firmly maintain the form of the technique. When an opponent uses strength and comes in to grab you, you have to do the opposite and lose your strength. In reality, letting go of your strength is an extremely difficult thing to do. Maintain the centre line firmly throughout your body and

## **AIKI NOTES by Steve Seymour**

let go of your strength, then you can take in the opponent's power and control it. You mustn't even have the slightest resistance at this point. This is the goal toward which aikido strives. It's not about technique or anything else. If you can't let go of your power like this, you won't really be able to go up against an opponent who is physically stronger.

Ueshiba sensei would say that the body grows old and becomes weak but the **force of will** does not diminish. In the martial arts there is no such thing as deteriorating as you age. The ability to use your spirit to bring yourself to your peak at anytime and anywhere- this is Budo

One thing there can be no mistake about is that training must follow the **fundamental principles**, the *riai*, which are at the root of Aikido. If we are negligent in this regard, we won't achieve any results from intensive training and you can end up doing something completely different. It is senseless to simply repeat forms without any understanding of their meaning. Those who practise solely with the intention of bringing down a partner through the movement of the technique are a problem. These people don't think of the meaning behind fundamental principles. Regardless of how strong they are

### **Other Points to consider**

**Asagao** – One of the interpretations of “applying aiki” is to return or reverse the energy of your opponent by instantly opening your hand the moment it is grabbed. This is a core principle of Daito-ryu. It is less about the opening of the hand than the effortless blossoming open of the whole integrated and relaxed body.

Both Sokaku Takeda and Yuki Yoshi Sagawa acquired phenomenal skills in internal strength, whilst still teenagers. How this came into being is uncertain. They both took what they experienced as youths and over a lifetime hewed it into something as fine as a diamond. Sokaku stated, on many occasions, that one had to restrict how one taught and whom one taught, because *aiki* was so easy to learn. He only truly taught very few. To almost everyone else he taught kata. Daito ryu teaches one how to develop grabbing skills so that one can literally immobilise another with one's grip. One learns how to grip powerfully while simultaneously directing that power in a manner that locks up the opponent. A second level is how to neutralise such locking, releasing the grip – not only the gross locking of a joint, but this more powerful and yet subtle locking up of the skeleton using the grip. Even further, one can move so subtly that the grip is not broken, nor the attacker cast aside. Instead, with an ability that can be likened in metaphor to the surface tension of water, contact is maintained, but the attacker cannot exert any influence or force due to what appears to still be a grip. His power is drawn out and he adheres to the other.

One of the basic training methods in a number of martial arts that focus on internal strength is to take a stance and have a partner push or pull on the standing person's body. The person, without moving, subtly organises his or her body to direct the incoming force through their structure into the centre of gravity and/or into the ground. *Hanmi handtachi* are considered basic techniques and there is a tremendous amount of information to be learned from them in relation to the ever changing lines of force experienced in rising from the ground up whilst debilitating force is applied.

### **Solo training exercises**

Solo training seems to be a common link among Daito-ryu practitioners, and the various methods of this training develop different types of internal strength. Such training can include: a) wringing/twisting/coiling of the body to develop the connective tissue; b) methods of breathing to generate “pressure”, which builds power from the inside out; and c) mental imagery and focussed attention that causes subtle micro-adjustments of the nervous system that, in essence, “rewire” the body so that it functions at increasing levels of efficiency, without unnecessary conflict between extensor and flexor muscles, for example.

### **Breath Training**

An essential part of aikido which is never taught or practised is breath training. Both Ueshiba and Sugawa practised specialised breathing methods. These methods correlate with Chinese internal martial system practises. This seems to be the vital ingredient missing from modern practise. It seems that whilst Ueshiba practised these openly, his students paid little attention to them, dismissing them as part of his strange and unfathomable Omoto-kyo beliefs.

## AIKI NOTES by Steve Seymour

They preferred to slave away at the partner practise and this was the beginning of the decline in aikido's effectiveness. Osensei when asked how he learnt such a wonderful budo, replied "Through *misogi*". His "*misogi*" was acquired from a group called "Misogi no Rensenkai". This was a group dedicated to exploring and teaching methods that could be used to draw on a kind of "psychological" or "spiritual" strength beyond mere physical strength, to draw out *ki*. Some of these exercises are still practised in aikido but are simply the shells, or empty movements, lacking entirely the knowledge of how to practise them correctly. For instance here are a few common ones, there are many more though, not practised at all;

- *Ameno Torifune no Gyo* - "rowing exercise" to train the breath with coordinated movement. This can range from smooth flowing movements, to micro movements to delineate the shifting of weight and power in the body, to an instantaneous shift from relaxation to explosive power.

- *Furitama no Gyo* - "shaking" the clasped hands in front of the body - one uses force from the ground to create a wave motion throughout the entire body.

*Otakebi* and *Okorobi* - The former is a two handed sword cut from above the head to below the belly, coupled with a very powerful kiai, forcing all the breath from one's body. The latter, "two-fingered" sword cuts with the hands, are similar otherwise to *Otakebi*.

*Ibuki no Gyo* - deep breathing uses tensing and relaxing of the muscles in a manner common with with yoga and progressive muscle relaxation exercises. This was described in Koichi Tohei's book from 1984 "Ki in Daily life". Page 67, listed as "Ki Breathing Method 2". It is also given in his previous book "Aikido in Daily Life", 1966 edition pge 33, "2- Breathing Method used in Aikido". Interestingly, Tohei cuts this particular breathing method from later editions of the book.

Yukiyoshi Sagawa publicly stated that breath training was a waste of time. But, privately he taught incredibly sophisticated methods of breathing, harmonized with mindfully "separating" different areas of the body in positive/negative "poles" (yin & yang) where the musculature and nervous system in each side of the body, for example, would be activated in complimentary ways. Breath training allowed him to almost instantly alter the way the body was organised, resulting in responses to attack similar to Ukei Kato.

### Ukemi Today. The Wrong and the Right

*Ukemi* has become a flip-flopping at the whim of nage in too many dojos these days. *Ukemi* is, when done properly, always an implicit counter. The best *ukemi* puts the uke in the position to reverse the attack of the nage. *Kaeshiwaza*, the exemplar of mastery in aikido, where uke and nage disappear in the same level of skill as seen in freestyle practise, be it judo or xingyi or fencing, is learned through the flesh, not by a step by step compendium of counters. Ueshiba's best students learned because their teacher was skilled enough to put them in all the situations necessary to learn through their body - not only how to survive but how to thrive in the world of force: sometimes razor sharp and focused, sometimes chaotic.

A considerable amount of skill, however, can be acquired by the innately talented simply by osmosis. The act of taking *ukemi* from a teacher who really puts the student through his paces will teach that student some of the body skills without him knowing, really, that he has reworked his body structure. The problem is that the person who learns this way can be unaware of how he learned, and such individuals usually view throwing and locking as the art, rather than the *kasudori/ukemi* training process. Without explicit instructions, one will not learn all or even most of the skills that are possible. They then become teachers in their own right, imitating what they were taught. Imitation coupled with indoctrinated, unaware, and untaught students of their own leads to such second generation teachers into believing themselves powerful and also believing that others will perceive their power with their egotistical performances on the mat. The students learn *ukemi* to make their teacher look good rather than *ukemi* of the "spiritual sword" of which Ueshiba spoke. For this reason there is a generational regress of skills from Ueshiba through many of his students. Ueshiba was incredible, many of his students were superb, and their students are, at best, no more than very good students themselves.

## AIKI NOTES by Steve Seymour

It is through real *ukemi* that real aikido is born. In classical martial arts, the teacher is uke. He templates skill within the student through his mastery of form – he functions at a level that demands that the students perform at the limits of their capacity. Aikido and Daitoryu usually have the teacher performing the technique on the student, which seems an absolute reversal of classical principles. However, if one follows the principle of *kasutori* within ones aikido practise, *nage* is really *uke*, providing the input for the ostensible uke to temper his body like fine metal; this is known as *tanren* in many martial systems. Any style of aikido that responds to resistance with more force is of limited value. Aikido practitioners at a truly high level must learn freedom through responsiveness, with counters and strikes implicit, if not explicit, in their every move. If the student, and even more so, the teacher, is not aware that this is the purpose of aikido practise, the opportunity for uke to learn how to do real aikido is lost.

It is clear that Ueshiba viewed all of his techniques as specialised internal training, deliberately chosen and arranged. He expected that they should be practised as a powerful, balanced, mutual study of balance, physical organisation, controlled breathing, and a study of reciprocal balancing of forces within an integrated body.

### *Bibliography and Essential reading*

1. Hidden In Plain Sight by Ellis Amdur. The history and decline of Aiki in Japanes Budo, specifically Aikido and Daitoryu. <http://www.edgework.info/buy-martial-arts-book-Hidden-In-Plain-Sight.html>
2. Transparent Power by Tatsuo Kimura. The Life of Sagawa Sensei who was an equal to Osensei <http://www.amazon.com/Transparent-Power-Tatsuo-Kimura/dp/1893447103>
3. Aikido Shugyo- Harmony in Confrontation by Gozo Shioda. [www.shindokanbooks.com](http://www.shindokanbooks.com)