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The Family of Aikido

Aikido has evolved from a long history and tradition of Japanese combat. It is a collection of linked practise regimes based on the need for differing outcomes. This article will investigate the different forms of Aikido and look at the influences on present day practice.

Much has been written about the Aikido masters, their history and their achievements. We will explore the motivations, experiences, ideas and practice, that have impacted on the end product, and how both internal and external factors moulded the outcomes.



Fig 1 Morihei Ueshiba (1883 – 1969)

The basis for the vast majority of Aikido practice involves moving to avoid an attack and then restraining the assailant. The attacker's power is used against them and is controlled to an exact degree. This requires the neutralisation of the attack without inflicting undue harm or injury. Aikido techniques are mostly based on twisting or turning the joints of the arm and throwing an opponent using the impetus of their attack. Some whole body throws and open-handed strikes are also employed. As we shall discover it is difficult to find one universally accepted style of approach.



Fig 2 Sokaku Takeda (1859 – 1943) taught Morihei Ueshiba Daiti Ryu Aikijujitsu

Traditional Aikido was developed in Japan by Morihei Ueshiba (1883 - 1969) (**Fig 1**) in about 1925 after years of research, practise and development. Many of the techniques that are found in Aikido date back more than 700 years to the Genji and Heike periods. Ueshiba developed Aikido from studies in Jujutsu at the Kito Daito and Shinkage schools including Daiti Ryu Aikijujitsu under Sokaku Takeda (**Fig 2**). He also pursued religious studies such as Zen Buddhism and integrated these into practise. A major influence in Ueshiba's early development included Onisaburo Deguchi (**Fig 3**) from the Omoto-Kyu Shinto movement. Aikido therefore followed a similar development to Judo, Karate and Kendo all derived from earlier arts and having a number of influences.



Fig 3 Onisaburo Deguchi (1871 – 1948) Shinto spiritual leader

Under Ueshiba, Aikido training focussed on four main elements;
Taiiku - physical, the development of physique produced through practise
Kiiku - spiritual, to cultivate the power of the inner spirit
Toku iku – moral, to keep the mind pure and clear
Chi iku – wisdom, the development of the mind through the practise of harmony

The meaning of Aikido should become apparent through practise.

Aikido is subject to more influences than other martial arts because of the individual nature of the techniques. They may be adapted to the physical and mental attributes of each individual, so become unique to each Aikidoka. Evolving Aikido technique is fundamental to producing an intended outcome. The differing styles respond to “need” some focussed on self-defence others sport and some on a more spiritual approach, all falling into the category of “**Intended Outcome**”.

These “outcomes” continue to be influenced by the personal experiences of an individual coach. They will bring with them experiences that influence how and what they teach. For example, to understand traditional Aikido as practiced by Ueshiba the coach should have a working understanding of e.g. Daito-Ryu Aiki Jujitsu. They may also have other influences such as Kendo, which would alter the way they view and practise Bokken, (Wooden Sword). These “**Experiential Outcome**” developments create a personal pathway that is unique to the individual.

Aikido like other martial arts change over time. There can be several influences within this aspect, for example Judo technique has been altered following its introduction into the Olympics. This worldwide standardisation of rules and the focus on Randori, has undoubtedly affected how techniques are taught and performed. The same process is occurring in Tomiki (Sport) Aikido today. “**Rule Focussed Outcome**” is a determining factor imposing new approaches to meet the requirements of competition Aikido.

Further influences include the “westernisation” of Aikido, in practical self-defence terms due to cultural and historic differences. In Europe punches and even how a knife is handled is different from the Japanese method, therefore adaptations must be made if Aikido is to be used effectively for self-defence. For some groups with a different religious heritage the emphasis on the spiritual aspects of Aikido may not be acceptable. These “**Society Focussed**” adaptations help bring Aikido to the masses but the purists may not see it as true Aikido.

Aikido techniques can be adapted to suit ones own physique. Technical changes can readily be made to ensure that a technique may be performed effectively. This ability to adapt, makes Aikido an extremely flexible martial art, suitable for all ages, genders, shapes and sizes. (Fig 4) Techniques are differentiated for individual practice with a “**Physiological Focus**” in mind.



Fig 4 Bob Jones adapting Hiji Shime (Wake Gatame) against Mick Pratt and Adrian Tipling. This straight-arm lock focuses the energy of the technique on one point of the opponent's body, their elbow joint.

The development of Aikido can be influenced by organisations with a desire to differentiate their practice driven by ideology. The ideology is usually based in a belief in the organisation's founder and that the present day interpretation of their approach is correct. This “**ideological Focussed**” approach can often restrict true learning and open-mindedness.

Finally changes can occur over time as individuals learn more and develop a “**Current best practice focus**” through continued research. This may take the form of looking back to older styles of Aikido and Aiki Jujitsu to gain knowledge and understanding or alternatively looking at contemporary sports science to help improve technique through safer and more appropriate exercise regimes.

All these influences have led to Aikido becoming one of the most diversely practised martial arts in the world.



Fig 5 Tenshi Nage



Fig 6 Tenshi Nage



Fig 7 Tenshi Nage



Fig 8 Tenshi Nage

To highlight this are four different styles of Aikido demonstrating the same technique Tenshi Nage (Heaven and Earth throw) **(Fig 5,6,7,and 8)** Other than the Hakama it is almost impossible to observe any discernable differences in the technique being performed. This is not true of all techniques, significant changes can occur between approaches depending on the outcome. **(Fig 9 and 10)**. Remember that it is true to say that in Aikido “Beginners make mistakes, Dan grades simply make variations”.



Fig 9 Sumi Otoshi (Corner Drop) traditional school



Fig 10 Sumi Otoshi (Corner Drop) competitive school

Morihei Ueshiba

Focussing first on Ueshiba we may discover how specific background and experiences may have influenced the development of different approaches to Aikido.

Over his lifetime there were psychological influences on Ueshiba that must have impacted on his thinking and his eventual framing of Aikido in non violence. Starting with his early religious education, the death in infancy of two of his children, his service in the Russo-Japanese war, the relationship with Onisaburo Deguchi and the Shinto sect he travelled to Mongolia with, and the trauma of the Second World War all undoubtedly framed his thinking. These influences formed part of his personal journey to his enlightenment and could only have only happened at that point in Japanese history. The death of his father and the eventual exploration of his own mortality must have influenced his spiritual approach. It is impossible to fully understand the impact of these on his thinking.

The abiding image of Ueshiba is of a wise old man with a grey beard (**Fig 1**), but his early life he was renowned for his physical strength and practised several different martial arts (**Fig 11**). This led in the early years to the formation of the “**Hell Dojo**” founded in 1931, a major student at that time being Gozo Shioda.

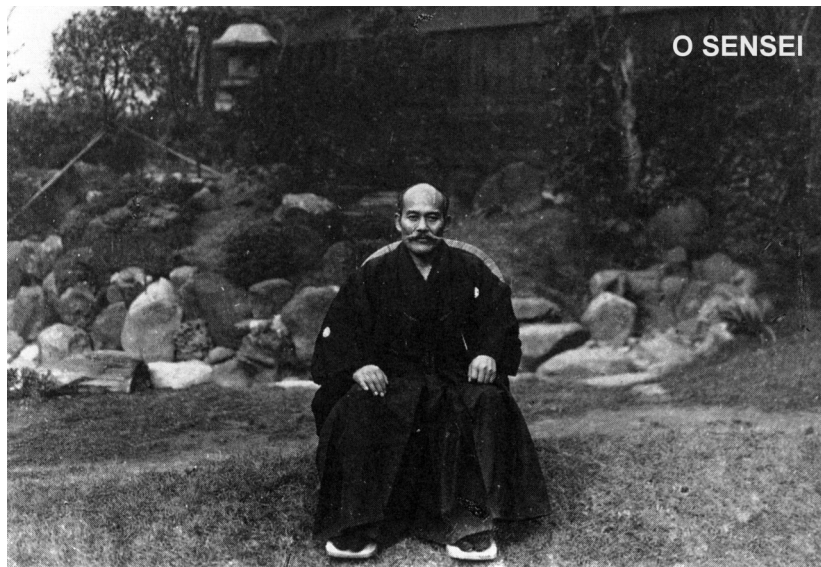


Fig 11 Ueshiba in the 1930s still showing a strong physical presence.

Early in his career Ueshiba was a notable fighter and was challenged by several leading martial artists to combat, once defeated these often became his students. Each group of students would therefore have seen a quite different form of Aikido being practised by Ueshiba according to the period they were with him.

Ueshiba's Aikido developed uniquely as a reflection of the times and personal experiences giving a specific insight into both technique and philosophy. Traditional Aikido has an emphasis on flowing, circular, dynamic movement and the application of technique to restrain without injury to the opponent. It focuses on the development of inner strength of both mind and body to pacify and neutralise aggression.

Gozo Shioda



Fig 12 Gozo Shioda (1915 – 1994) a first generation student of Ueshiba.

As already mentioned a student of Ueshiba's at the Hell Dojo was Gozo Shioda, (**Fig 12**) he was a first generation student and later founder of the Yoshinkan School of Aikido. (Angry White Pyjamas). He came from a martial arts family, his father had taught both Judo and Kendo and started the young Shioda on a Judo career. Shioda became uchi deshi to Ueshiba where he trained for eight years. This was followed by instruction under Mas Oyama, Kyokushin Karate master. Post war was difficult but Shioda managed to open a dojo in 1950 and established his own unique style of Yoshinkan in 1955. Again if we examine Shioda's personal history it is based on an appreciation of self-defence

applications, which was further embedded by Shioda when invited to teach the Tokyo Police Department. His small frame made it essential to develop effective technique. **“Technique is the means of achieving maximum effect with the minimum effort”** **Gozo Shioda**. In his book, *Dynamic Aikido* he emphasises the use of kata, circular motion to generate centrifugal force, speed, timing and the concentration and generation of power. One of the distinguishing features of this school is the wider basic stance, the openness of the hands and the emphasis on application against determined aggressor(s). It has a no-nonsense, direct approach to self-preservation.

Koichi Tohei

Another of Ueshiba's students Koichi Tohei (1920 – 2011) eventually became the founder of Ki Aikido, his philosophy states that **“The purpose of Aikido lies not in trying to make people strong in the arts of self defence but in helping them learn the eternal truths that form the basis of Aikido and manifest themselves in Aikido practice. Aikido helps the individual to attain the greatest heights of human personality, cleanse his mental and spiritual environment and help make the world a brighter place in which to live”** Koichi Tohei from his book - *What is Aikido* 1962.



Fig 13 Koichi Tohei with Ueshiba in the early 1950s – Tohei experienced Ueshiba's teaching during a more spiritual phase of the founder's life.

Tohei was a sickly child but due to Judo training and physical exercise he became stronger. These early bouts of illness affected the young Tohei and he became convinced that training the mind and cultivating Ki had aided his recovery. He was an intellectual, graduating from Keio University in 1942 and seeing action in World War II. These influences further embedded the belief in the power of Ki, spiritual healing and the power of the mind. **(Fig 13)** The approach looks at the importance of breathing, meditation and the application of Ki in daily life. In 1971 he founded the Ki-no-Kenkyukai and ultimately the Ki Society with the purpose of promoting Ki as a major focus within traditional Aikido technique. Ki Aikido today has a broad range of practise and interpretation, from very soft almost Tai Chi like exercise movements with no physical techniques being performed to more dynamic technique using Ki as a focus. **(Fig 14)**



Fig 14 Tohei demonstrating the theory of the unbendable arm.

There is a wealth of information about Aikido and all the styles practised throughout the world, the core of Aikido, the technical, physical, and none violent philosophical approaches are universal but the training and teaching methodologies may be different.

The summit of the mountain is always the top but there are many routes to get there. Whichever form of Aikido practised an open mind will lead to learning and a closed mind will lead to prejudice. Aikido is a complex art, with discipline and integrity but one that should just be enjoyed.

Written by Bob Jones

