

The Power of Intention*
Interview with Bruno Gonzalez

When you hear the word aikido, what immediately comes to mind?

The word “art”: freedom within a structure.

Aikidokas, like artists, are craftsmen experimenting, evolving, and constantly trying to become more aware of their practice to better understand its underlying principles in order to move towards perfect communication: the right attitude at the right time.

Do you follow any particular Seinsei?

Christian Tissier for the concept I just mentioned. B. Brecht said, “He who is not willing to study should not teach; he who teaches must teach people to study.” It is that which we study that we teach best; in that regard, Christian Tissier is a researcher.

The dojo is considered a privileged setting for aikido; what should an aikidoka bring to it?

That depends on one’s personal approach. In my view on training, the dojo is a demanding place. Therefore, commitment and perseverance are the primary qualities that an aikidoka should bring.

The quality of a student’s listening skills and the confidence placed in the selected teacher are primordial because the student doesn’t always understand what is being taught. For that matter, can one really understand before physically experiencing it, before it becomes *savoir-faire*?

Students have a huge responsibility in the ultimate path they take; they must remain active. By experimenting and questioning they must try to rediscover the teaching they have followed, to become researchers themselves. In other words, they must reflect on their practice to make teaching their own. It sounds obvious, but is not as readily practiced.

A student may sometimes get the sense of being the discoverer of a technique or a principle, although the teacher might have already shown it ... for ten years.

A famous kabuki actor once said, “I can teach you the gesture of ‘pointing at the moon’, but between your fingertip and the moon is your responsibility.

Which references to the founder should be maintained?

Heidegger said that listening to tradition does not mean being tied to the past, rather meditating on the present.

* Original French version published in *Aikido Magazine*, June 2011

The idea of respect is very important in aikido. What does it mean? How does it come across in practice?

Respect is an attitude of openness, an ability to listen, but which is often hindered by our own fears or even our assuredness. The challenge is to overcome those barriers, to become freer. Basically, it is to attempt to communicate through our practice, in order to mutually educate one another. In this sense, practicing aikido should make us increasingly respectful.

Why is competition absent from aikido?

Competition generally invokes thoughts of clash and ranking, with all the negative aspects; but we shouldn't forget there are also positive effects.

Intensive practice includes phases of learning where we must develop our body, determination, confidence, martial potential, credibility, experience, etc. – this applies to *uke* as well as *tori*. We all know that duel relationships exist between aikidokas during those phases. We try, more or less, to impose our way of practicing while having a certain result in mind. This is inevitable since our study is based on situations of physical conflict. Normally, however, when we reach a certain level, we recognize the limits of that type of practice rather quickly, both the physical limits and the limits to aikido itself in a larger perspective (aikido being governed in part by the anthropological principle of economizing and simplifying: optimizing one's actions using minimum effort).

We also have exams that confirm our progress and whose primary aim is to encourage a higher level. It's a goal that promotes preparation, often with success because it draws students out of an attitude which tends towards mimicking, too often the norm during class. That, I believe, is the main benefit of exams. (Of course, they also fill an organizational need in a national network.)

In short, the notions of clash and ranking exist in aikido practice. It is important to be fully aware of this and avoid their perverse effects (for example ego problems) that hamper our efforts. To me it seems that practicing aikido is first and foremost a process where the notion of results is both subjective and relative. The process is important, as are our progression and our responsibility to remain active in aikido (regardless of taking exams).

For the moment I don't see how incorporating competition into aikido, other than focusing on practice which we already do, could serve our goals. However, learning a competitive sport (boxing for example) can help enrich our progression in aikido, depending on how we use it.

In what ways is sword fighting present in your aikido practice?

Sword work is about decisiveness, determination, and control; it is intention and action in their purest state. Studying *ken* develops these and other qualities. In my opinion, it is what gives aikido practice a large part of its martial potential as well as its potential for communication (the threat of a sanction and, at the same time, clemency: control).

Unless you bring an action to an immediate end, this credibility becomes a factor of communication in that it suggests to the partner how to react.[†] *Uke* thus has the choice, more or less conscious, of whether to accept the outcome that you propose.

The challenge is to systematically develop a technical structure (form) filled with intention (substance) that functions regardless of *uke*'s level of perception and without codes.

In *ken* work, the longer the move lasts, the more communication is required. The difficulty in communicating properly is to make your intentions clear and credible and to be sufficiently available to perceive them.

Aikido is an infinite ensemble of techniques. Which for you are the most fundamental, those that should be practiced relentlessly?

Everything is relative. A technique, at least its approach, can be considered fundamental whenever it is pertinent to someone's development, whatever his or her level. At the beginning, for example, structure is fundamental; it may be less so once it has been "acquired". With experience and as certain fears subside, the priorities of an action change quantitatively and qualitatively, freeing the mind from focusing on them. However as everything can be perfected – basic moves, the structure of techniques, or their application – in a way, it is what we do with a technique (our relation to it) that is fundamental.

When we begin learning, a large number of techniques are available to us (offering a large palette for experimenting, numerous constraints to resolve, etc.). However we can consider that this number shrinks as we have fewer and fewer priorities to manage within an action. The responses thus become simplified and end up similar to each other. For example, one can image handling the attacks *yokumen uchi*, *shomen uchi* or a hook punch in the same way for a given technique (*ikkyo* for example).

To sum up, at a certain level what makes a technique "more fundamental" than another is the number of principles we develop and bring together to apply that technique.

The founder placed ki, energy, at the heart of aikido. What should we understand from this?

For the moment, I have a modest, "scientific" understanding of it. In short, energy is the result of opposing forces. We speak of the quality of energy, based on the intensity of the forces, resistance, and obstacles involved. What puts a force into action in aikido is the intention: an act of thought, for example "I want to lift my arm". In a simplified and practical sense, we can refer to energy as intention.

There exist phases of learning where we must develop our energy. A bodybuilder who wants to model his body must develop more energy, thus more intention, to lift heavier and heavier weights; it's a "positive" course (building experience, accumulating techniques and strength, and therefore developing energy).

More or less in parallel, there exists a "negative" course (a process of eliminating and simplifying), the principle of economy whereby we try to expend a minimum amount of energy for an optimal result. The idea is to reduce

[†] Translator's note: For example, you can counterattack to stop an opponent from continuing his or her attack, and thus end the action. Or you can control your opponent in a way that allows him or her a specific way out of the conflict.

the conflicts and corresponding priorities in an encounter and to have *uke* accept the situation you propose; you try to avoid giving echo to or amplifying the conflicts and even try to diffuse them before they come to a head. That's where I think the "philosophical dimension" of *ki*, energy, draws some of its meaning.

People often talk about harmonizing energies. That means developing, among other things, the ability to adapt in order to create a situation where *uke's* and *tori's* intentions oppose each other as little as possible, or not at all. We commonly speak of using the partner's strength (his or her energy and therefore intention) to execute a move in order to use a minimum amount of energy one's self, giving rise to the principle of "non" action or "non" opposition. In sum, the right attitude at the right time could actually be interpreted as energy at the right time.

When teaching, it can be tempting, whether consciously or unconsciously, to replace a lack of *savoir-faire* with abstract, pseudo "magical" speech; I warn against it and instead recommend plunging into "artisanship". Abstraction is subjective and depends on each person's level of consciousness. However from a theoretical and instructive point of view, we should try to transmit such ideas in concrete, operational, and simple ways. The best method is precisely our artisanal practice.

At its heart, is aikido a budo, a bujutsu or a combat sport?

It is a pathway towards an ideal of communication, marked by principles. And "pathway" implies taking wrong turns, questioning, and experimenting. In the end, aikido is what we make of it.

How does aikido mould a person?

At first, it develops quality matter, then like a sculptor it removes the superfluous. E. Decroux and Paul Claudel said, respectively: The arts are alike in their principles but not in their works. The principle of great art is to strictly avoid the useless.

You teach in France and abroad. What message do you aim to convey?

Firstly, the importance of technical rigor: a precise awareness of one's technique, whatever the style. How can we correct ourselves if we aren't for the most part conscious of what we are doing? This awareness helps develop one's vision, among other things. Variations and subtleties that the teacher shows can then appear clearer. Our own experiments (variations) therefore make more sense, because they become conscious, or "active", rather than happening by mistake or being approximate.

Next, I often evoke the idea of communication that I mentioned earlier (intention and availability) in order to draw a student out of a sometimes slightly "mechanical" or highly coded practice, where a certain type of passivity easily settles in. Codes should not replace or impoverish communication; on the contrary they should provide a framework for developing and enriching communication in the present.

The martial situation is far from being a common one; to me it seems important to avoid playing down its importance.

Of course, I am the first person to whom these messages are addressed.

-- Interview by Albert Wrac'h