

AIKIDO AND ZEN

by Daniel M. Furuya

Furuya sensei has studied aikido for 26 years, having begun at age 12. He holds a BA in Oriental Studies from USC and an MA from Harvard. After studying with Kanai sensei in Cambridge, he studied with the second Doshu in Japan. Furuya now directs the Aikido Center of Los Angeles.

I believe that fundamentally Aikido should be studied from the standpoint of Aikido, and therefore, I have always kept my studies in other martial arts and disciplines at a happy distance from my Aikido training and have only called upon them to enhance my understanding of Aikido but never to alter it. In the last three years, however, I have pursued my Zen studies quite wholeheartedly. I have had an interest in Zen for quite a few years now but recently it has come to have profound meaning for me and has become inextricably intertwined with my perspective of Aikido. At present, I find my Aikido and Zen training very compatible. Although I would not proselytize Zen in Aikido to my students or others; Zen, in many ways, has answered many questions for me and shaped a new perspective within me and my thinking. I hesitate to use the term, "answer," because they are more like distant glimmerings at the end of a long dark tunnel.

We have probably all studied Zen, in one form or the other, at one time or the other, for all the same or similar reasons. I was searching for "enlightenment," spiritual inspiration, focus, guidance, etc. I found inspiration and guidance through my Zen masters but, at the very same time, I discovered that these are exactly all the wrong reasons for entering into Zen training. A great Zen master, Sawaki Kodo Roshi once said, "The only reason for doing Zen is because you like Zen." In other words, practicing Zen for

"enlightenment," inspiration, knowledge, insight, etc. are only selfish, one sided motives of personal convenience which dilute or distort the actual practice of Zen. We should not seek out Zen as some kind of universal placebo but we should only "do" Zen.

In the same respect, I think we enter Aikido training for the same or similar reasons at first. We want to become strong, "macho," we want to grasp KI, we want to throw people to the ground or cause them pain with some mysterious hold or lock. When I first started Aikido at a very young age, I wanted to become a great Aikido master but it took me nearly thirty years to realize what folly it was. We have basic human needs to affirm ourselves and our existences. We practice Aikido for a number of years, sometimes ten years, twenty years and even thirty years or more, and then, unless we disillusion ourselves completely, we find that not much has really changed within ourselves or all around us. There is still fighting; there is still much suffering and there is still much conflict within ourselves and all around us.

Although we know deep down inside that this is so, we spend our entire lives avoiding, running away or fighting this reality. This, I think, creates a deep inner disappointment about our Aikido and our lives. We think that Aikido can "solve" all of our problems and cure all of our ailments. This disappointment creates great desire for satisfaction or relief within ourselves. And, as we try to satisfy this desire, we attach ourselves to power, fame, money, notoriety, etc. The list is endless. And as we realize that we cannot control the reality of our existences we try to control others. This leads to endless fighting and suffering. I do not believe this is the message of Aikido. It is said that "a contented man is never poor and a

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discontented man is never rich." Once, Sawaki Roshi was asked, "What benefits have you received from Zen?" Sawaki replied, "I have practiced Zen for over thirty years and have received nothing."

This is not a negative or dismal outlook to take. Sawaki Roshi meant that we should practice Zen for the sake of Zen itself. In the same respect, we may want to consider the possibility of practicing Aikido for the sake of Aikido itself without ulterior motives or selfish reasons. Dogen (1100-1153), the founder of Soto Zen, wrote that Zen sitting is enlightenment itself. We continually fall into the state of "becoming" and we rarely are "what is." In other words, we practice Zen "to become enlightened." Or, we practice Aikido "to become strong." Our practice becomes colored by our personal aims for gain. In Soto Zen

sitting, sitting is enlightenment and there are no certificates of mastery, no trophies, no prizes, no hearty pats on the shoulder and no shouts of "Well done." If we relate this viewpoint to Aikido, the practice of



Aikido becomes the realization of Aikido itself. There is no causal effect and there is no "becoming." In other words, there is no space between "what is" (reality) and

"what I want to become" (desire). If the practice of Aikido is the mastery (actualization) of Aikido, it becomes essential to throw everything of ourselves, body and soul, into our training because every moment of our training "is" the actuality of what Aikido is. Suffering and conflict becomes a part of our training and if we can accept it wholeheartedly, a transformation takes place and it no longer becomes what we are fighting against. Please do not misinterpret this to mean that we must artificially create suffering and conflict in our training. There is plenty of misery and suffering to go around for everyone as it is. We must see how the suffering in our lives is a part of our lives and if we can see it as such, it is no longer suffering. If somehow we can penetrate this problem, the Aikido path of non-fighting will be discovered.

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