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CONQUERING SPEED:

A Matter of Space and Time

by Rev. Kensho Furuya

We are all fascinated by speed. Even if one day we can travel at the speed of light, we will still want to go faster. Today, we associate speed with our advancements in science, technology and business: a more devastating, accurate missile; a quicker, greater-capacity computer; speedier relay of information on stock and commodity transactions. Yet speed is always a matter for the warrior and soldier. Even before the age of Christ, the Greeks, Romans and ancient Chinese were concerned with the matter of speed in military operations. Sun Tse

There are few techniques which are equally superior in speed, power and balance. One is always compromised for the others to a greater or lesser extent. The superiority of any technique may be to the degree in which speed, power and balance are utilized to their fullest advantage in a single movement.

said that the “one who manages his forces with the greater speed guarantees his own victory against the enemy.”

This idea can be readily applied to the martial artist as well. From earliest times in man’s history, we have always had to “beat others to the punch.” But man is not a missile, not a computer, not a fast car. As fast as he can develop his personal speed, age is simultaneously working to slow him down. As a result, we are always impressed with the great masters of the past, who even in their 70s and 80s seem to demonstrate incredibly fast technique. Even the ambitious youngsters cannot keep up with them.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, we seemed to develop an even greater fascination with speed of technique. The lightning-fast moves of Aikido’s 86-year-old founder, Morihei Ueshiba O-Sensei, for example, or the charismatic Bruce Lee and his own Jeet Kune Do, still inspire many today. One pioneer of American *kendo*, the late Torao Mori, was so quick with his bamboo *shinai* that he would have to inform his totally oblivious opponent that the point had already been taken. Thirty years later, his exploits are still legendary, and *kendoists*, here and in Japan, speak his name with great reverence and awe.

Aikido is often promoted as a very passive, soft art—and it can be. At the same time, Aikido techniques are smooth, strong and quick. We have to give some credit here to Mr. Steven Seagal, who has done more than quite a few other people to

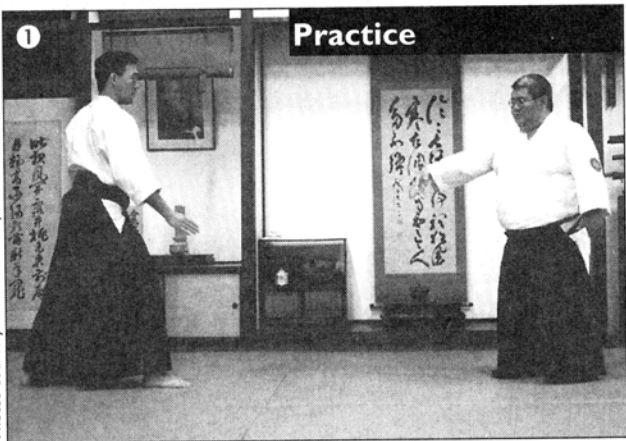
introduce Aikido techniques to the general public in his popular films.

We spend a lot of time on speed; it is often discussed in martial arts magazines and in thousands of dojo across the country. In the simplest terms, we do something over and over and over again until we can do it faster and faster and faster again. And, ultimately, if we can execute a move more quickly than our opponent can, “beating him to the punch,” we have a very good chance of beating him.

The problem we generally meet in our practice is that of sacrificing balance for speed—or speed for balance. In addition, we often question whether power is being gained at the cost of speed, or, conversely, if power is being diminished in order to gain speed. There are few techniques which are equally superior in speed, power and balance. One is always compromised for the others to a greater or lesser extent. The superiority of any technique may be to the degree in which speed, power and balance are utilized to their fullest advantage in a single movement. This is what we are striving for in our practice. This is one of the most fundamental problems in martial arts techniques.

It is interesting to note that speed is not emphasized in orthodox Aikido training, yet techniques become very effectively quick. This is an interesting study for martial artists in general as well as aspiring and beginning Aikidoists.

I believe it was UCLA basketball’s legendary coach of several decades ago, John Wooden, who often admonished his



Establish proper distancing.



Allow your partner to make a real attack, strong and quick.

players to “be quick, but don’t hurry.” These words have always inspired me in my own Aikido practice. I believe they are important words for all martial artists (as well as star basketball players). To “be quick” is important, of course, but the key words, “don’t hurry,” are equally meaningful and deserve greater consideration and study. I take “don’t hurry” to mean, “not too fast, but not too slow.” Wooden is not talking about speed itself, but speed and timing. And, for the martial artist, timing may be the greater skill to strive for.

Timing

What is timing? Timing is not simply a well-tuned motor. It is not just knowing when to attempt a kiss with your date on a romantic evening. It is not how long a chef takes to poach a filet of fish.

In Aikido, we have to look at timing from two standpoints: first, our own timing and how we move our bodies; and second, how we coordinate our timing with that of our opponent’s attack.

Our own timing can only be developed through proper



Allow your partner to grab your hand. Don't do anything or react in any way. Just observe the attack and partner's movement. Do repeatedly.



Just as you “feel” the partner's attack, move your hand away. Do repeatedly.



As you “feel” how to escape his attack, however quick it may be, you can strike at any time.

training and correct execution of the techniques. Whatever can be said about timing, nothing can be understood until one gets his body and mind moving and working. At the same time, how we negotiate the opponent’s attack is also a matter of hard work and discipline. There is no other way to understand it.

In Aikido, we concentrate on our own balance and posture with our energy concentrated in our vital center. The eyes must be clear and directed towards the opponent. It is



1 Face your partner.



2 Allow your partner to strike over and over again. Do not react. Just observe and “feel” the attack. Don’t move at all.



3 Begin to “feel” and “see” his attack each time he strikes. Keep your mind calm and clear.



4 When you begin to “feel” his attack, turn your hips as he strikes, to cause him to miss you. This is called “Aikido entering.”



5 When you develop sufficient skill so that your partner can’t touch you with the staff, you have the opportunity to strike him or apply your technique.

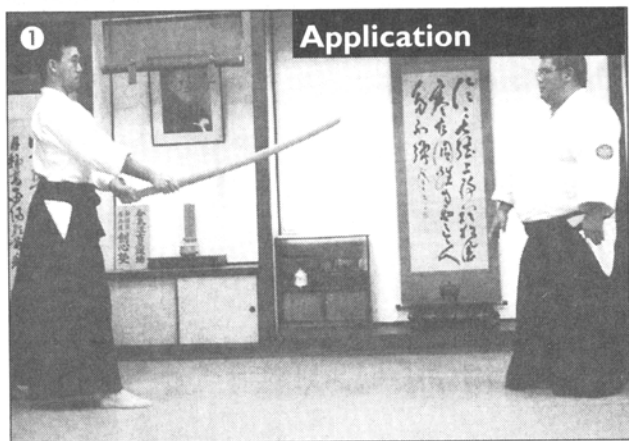
important not to focus on any particular part of the opponent’s body but to focus one’s attention “nowhere” and “everywhere” at the same time. It is essential not to be too tense and stiff, but being flaccid and limp is not good either. It is only through training that we can understand the meaning of “relaxed but concentrated.” It is in meeting these conditions—developed and refined throughout constant practice—that we can respond appropriately to our opponent.

Most students restrict their movement by being too stiff or, the other extreme, too “dead,” meaning no energy. We

waste a lot of movement by shifting our weight unnecessarily or being unsure of ourselves or of the proper movement or technique. This all relates to balance.

Second, we must consider the proper method to negotiate the opponent’s attack. In Aikido, we often speak of “harmony” or “blending.” However, few seem to really know what this means. One way to study this is to view it from the perspective of timing. Catching the opponent’s timing provides the edge against superior speed. Indeed, a defender’s timing can often destroy the opponent’s attack completely. The one condition Aikido requires, however, is to move the body completely out of the range of the attack. It is from this process that Aikido techniques are created. I am sure this has tremendous application and merit for other martial arts training methods as well.

I have introduced a few simple training methods to get a better sense of timing and speed and their relationship to each other. These moves are very common in Aikido but can be applied to many different situations. It is important for your training partner to make a strong, quick attack. It is equally important to develop your movement properly. A half-hearted attack with half-hearted practice is simply a waste of time. It is better to take up embroidering handkerchiefs or making cute napkin holders out of things around



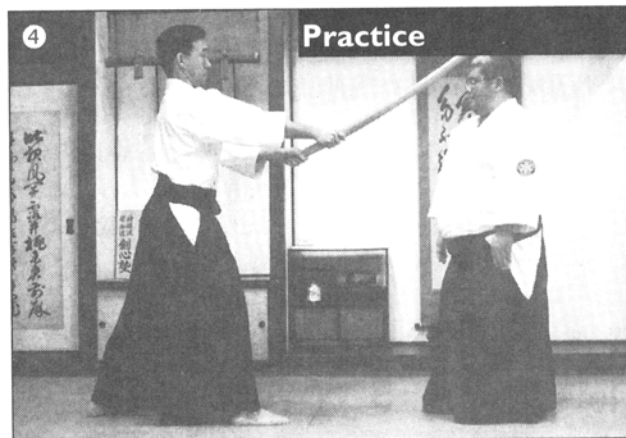
As in the other exercise, face your opponent.



Allow your partner to strike fast and hard. Practice "feeling" his attack.



If you can "see" it, you can evade it. This gives the opportunity to strike or apply your technique.



Now practice with the partner's sword only one inch from your head.

the house. Don't go nuts and try to kill each other; safe practice is essential and the absolute bottom line. But practice until your partner can't touch you, no matter how he attacks. You will find that timing is not just a matter of speed, but of perception, intuition, and concentration as well.

Ma-Ai

Finally, in Japanese martial arts, we speak of the terms *ma* or *ma-ai*. It is interesting to note that this word means both "space" and "time." What word comes close to this in English? "Interval," perhaps, but even this is not a sufficiently descriptive term. The only other term which comes close may be Einstein's famous equation.

Ma can be a room, an interval, or a period of time. Ma-ai, which literally means "joining with time" or "joining with space" is a word or concept that is essential to all traditional Japanese martial arts techniques. A famous philosopher once wrote that the concept of ma referring to "space" as in "living space," and to "time" as in the passing of the seasons throughout the year is the essence of all Japanese culture, philosophy and attitudes. Seeing the proper timing of everything in our lives and each activity we carry out can only enhance and perfect our timing in our own training. This is one of the fundamental methods of Aikido training. ㊦



With constant practice you should be able to dodge your partner's sword, however close or quick he is.

About the author: Rev. Kensho Furuya is the chief instructor of the Aikido Center of Los Angeles located in the Little Tokyo district of downtown Los Angeles, California, and is Shihan for the Los Angeles Branch of the All Japan Iai-Battodo Federation. An ordained Zen priest as well as a noted martial artist, Furuya Sensei lectures and conducts seminars all over the United States.