

The Riaï

A Systemic approach to Aïkido

The practice of Aïkido can be likened to a system, that is to say “an ensemble of elements in interaction, united towards attaining common final results...” .

Borrowed from the concept of “systems analysis,” the notion of “common final results,” or of the finalization of something conclusive is pertinent if one is describing an organization, a company or a project, it is seemingly less so in describing Aïkido. For any such global results will necessarily be formalized by goals and objectives. Even if in the context of instructing a seminar teaching via objectives is utilized, Aïkido offers little that can be defined as results-based or finalized or even conclusive. For this reason, the notion of “perspective”, rather than “result”, becomes preferable. A perspective is that towards which one aspires. Considering the practice of Aïkido as a system is not about hypothetical applications of Aïkido beyond the dojo, but rather about specifically comprehending our aspirations “here and now” ; the purpose is to infuse meaning into our experience on the mat, to how we “give life” to that experience. What precisely is the subject ? Within what context do we practice ? What is the essence of this practice ?

If one hopes to understand how a system functions, the simple description of its components remains inadequate. Theoreticians working on systems analysis consider that “to comprehend any organization, it is as important to identify all its elements and the relationships between the elements as it is to analyze independently the qualities and attributes of each one of those elements.” Indeed, the comprehension of a system lies not so much in the listing and the specifics of its parts as in the identification and the clarification of the relationships and the interactions between the parts. This also applies perfectly to the practice of Aïkido. Taken separately any one technic will not reveal a significant interest. Rather, it is the interactions between the technics, channeled by common principles, that give meaning to our practice. Each technic is not an end in itself but a means to developing principles within one or many perspectives. Therein lies the content of our practice. And the role of the teacher – of the Sensei – is to enable this content, to produce principle-based practice.

The notion of Riaï

It is possible to consider a systems approach or analysis as simply a new manner of intellectualizing our discipline through a western filter. However, the application of this analytical method to the practice of Aïkido becomes fully meaningful when informed by the notion of “Riaï.”

This notion is both specific to the martial arts and deeply anchored in the Japanese culture. The Riaï can be understood as the constructive logic of a technique to the degree where, whatever form the specific execution may take, it is the structural principles of Aïkido that are implemented. This same constructive logic runs through the different technics, for despite the strong formal differences, the technics carry these same principles...

Saito Sensei insists on the relationship that needs to be established between practice with weapons and practice with bare hands. For him “both ken and taijutsu have common characteristics. This reveals the possibility of adapting the practice of Aïkido to multiple situations. A veritable comprehension of the Riaï will only be attained through continuous study and practice.

Shioda Sensei explains that the Riaï is actually the condition for martial efficiency. A technique is efficient not because it is executed in a particular manner but because its execution respects the principles “...in the practice of martial arts, this logical ideal of technic, of what we may call its underlying foundation, is known since ancient times as the Riaï. If your body’s movement is aligned with the Riaï, then it is not necessary to have a strong physical force and you will be able to control your adversary with clarity. Simply stated, the aim of the practice of Aïkido is for our bodies to move in unity with the Riaï... To learn “the basic technics does not signify that the Riaï has been attained or understood. In truth, although discussions such as those defining that “kotegaeshi works when applied in this manner” or “nikajo is painful when it is executed in this manner,” are always of

interest for students, they have but little importance. Clearly, such discussions are related to the aptitudes that each student naturally must acquire, but it would be absurd to judge the efficiency of Aikido upon such criteria. What is important is not how to use each technic. Rather, the key lies in discovering the Riaï that exists within the technics... As such, individual knowledge of each Aikido technic will not lead one to the comprehension of the essence of Aikido. This comprehension is only reached when one fully understands the Riaï... “

The Riaï reveals itself in the capacity to see the common elements between technics or between the different manners of completing a technic. At first, in the more superficial, or obvious elements, then, with experience and more mat time, other common characteristics will emerge, those most deeply anchored, most hidden...

The Riaï can be translated by “convergence of truths” : “Ri” meaning truth or reality and “Ai” the same kanji as in Aï kido, meaning union, fusion, marriage, convergence. The Riaï challenges us to find the underlying essence – the hidden truth within each technique and in the many different manners of execution possible. The Riaï reminds us that the truth, that which must remain immutable, lies in the underlying principles. There are as many realities as means to doing any one technique. Within these multiple truths, the Riaï enables us to see what is essential, what must remain common to all potential forms that each technique may take. In this manner, Aikido becomes a common language allowing each of us to express our singularity. Aikido is not a simple monolith, it is multi-directional. The Riaï is about being capable, on the basis of this incontestably real polyvalence, to find similarities and within them their truth, exposing both acceptance and wisdom.

The instruction given at the Aïkikai of Tokyo is conducive towards developing this capacity. As many as a dozen Sensei teach there. Each one is a respected disciple of O’Sensei (direct or indirect) and yet each one is very different. At the outset, only the differences appear, potentially leaving certain students confused and even engendering criticism. But with experience and progression, and even if one chooses one primary Sensei as a mentor, the very differences will nourish the integration and the development of the underlying structural principles inherent to Aikido. To consider that only one particular Sensei is the unique proprietor of the truth, and of “true” Aikido goes against the notion of Riaï...

During belt exams, the content at stake is the notion of Riaï. The formal comprehension of each technique is merely the starting point : what needs to be evaluated on the basis of technical execution is the understanding and the command of Aikido principles, evidently adapted to the required level...

Similarly, teaching via objectives is also a strategy guided by the notion of Riaï. In the sense that it requires the development of thematic logic and coherence to each progression, teaching via objectives obliges teachers to clarify and formalize their pedagogical intentions. It enables not only generalized ideas and goals to be reformulated as pedagogical goals, but also requires that relevant associations between various technics be articulated. In this manner the notion of Riaï becomes a powerful guide.

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