

Bewildered and amazed. Children's class in Brandbergen, Sweden. Photo by Gunilla Welin.

Sooner like the youth

It is a common view among aikido instructors that the esoteric forms of aikido are best suited for older practitioners. They think that young aikidoists do better to show off their energy and speed, since that is what suits their age. Not until the years have made the joints stiffen and the movements shrink, should one turn toward an aikido soft as air, and only when the grave is around the corner should one pass over to the aikido that shows emptiness – if one is able to.

Certainly, youthful vigor makes it difficult to turn away from what seems powerful, to be mild as the wind. The young prefer to test their limbs with such force that they almost crack, and to throw their partners to the mat so hard that it whips up clouds of dust. I don't think that there is a teacher born who can make youngsters abandon such games. But we lie about aikido if we say that they should remain in this state until they have lost the power to pull it

off. If that is true, then the aikido of air is weaker than that of water, and the aikido of emptiness is the weakest of them all. That is not true.

Also those who start with aikido in early childhood are able to sense another force than that of muscles, and they desire it. This is particularly true about the youngest ones, who don't let curiosity be overpowered by pride. Telling them to wait and remain in a more primitive form of aikido just because they have not reached a senior age, is nothing but a sin. When people want to pass from a lower to a higher state, we should not try to stop them – but cheer them on.

Sin in training

Behind the term in the Bible translated as 'sin', are three Hebrew concepts. They all have to do with traveling toward a goal, like the arrow heading for the target. One such sin is slowing down on the way to the target, another to take unnecessary roundabouts, and a third to steer away from it. So, what the Old Testament regards as sin is not to hurry as swiftly and straight for the goal as one is able.

Applied to aikido, this means that the beginner of whatever age should be allowed to explore every stage he or she reaches, and to delight in it. It also means that the beginner should be encouraged to move on upward, to the next height, and then the next. Just as it is possible for the teacher to pull the student through the stages in a higher tempo than the student would manage on his own, it is inappropriate for the teacher to have any opinion about what that speed should be. You can only wish it to be high, and that along the way the student will not pause more than needed to gain energy for the next challenge.

The opinion that there is a proper time for everything, is mostly supported by those who wish to remain in a stage they should be mature enough to leave behind. Just as each age in human life has its costs as well as rewards, at every phase of one's development one must desert something in order to achieve something else. Sometimes, it hurts to give this something up. You might hesitate for the very simple

reason that you know what you have, but not what you can get. Unfortunately, he who gets stuck in such a sin prefers to pull others to him, instead of allowing them to pass.

Osensei on film

Morihei Ueshiba, the founder of aikido, is an excellent model to follow, but he is used and interpreted in many different ways. Many want to make him an unreachable ideal, a saint on top of a high pedestal. In their eyes it is almost rebellious trying to learn an equally advanced aikido as that of the founder.

I am not at all sure that he regarded himself as that elevated. If he did, why would he at all have cared to teach his art? Morihei Ueshiba pushed his students along. He was full of explanations and instructions, though they were not always understandable to his students. If we regard him as a discoverer and a breaker of new ground in the martial arts, then the only thing that makes sense is not to halt after his demise, but endeavor to continue where he left off. We should hurry all we can toward the aikido that Ueshiba was able at the time of his death, and move on from there.

I think it is possible. At least I know that it is impossible if we do not try.

Morihei Ueshiba was filmed now and then, through the years. On these films, the development of his aikido is as clear as day. In the earliest known filming of his aikido, from 1935, his strength is considerable, and his techniques are at least as sudden and rough as the attacks. No matter how many opponents throw themselves at him, they are thrown back with even more force. But in the last films, recorded in the 1960's, he does little more than walk around making gentle gestures with his hands, sort of waving at his attackers. This alone makes them fall – at the moment they get ready to charge.

There are many aikidoists who hold the 1935 film as their favorite. There, anybody can see what a mighty fighter Ueshiba was. They tend to shun the last films, which give them feelings of confusion and doubt. What he shows there

can't be possible, can it? Isn't it just an old man, surrounded by obliging assistants? So, his aikido became such that even aikidoists started to think that all was prearranged.

In my eyes, those last films are by far the most fascinating and appealing. They show an art that could be explanatory, maybe even give meaning to life. So why not hurry there, as quickly as we can?

The spirits of ages

It is indeed possible to compare the stages of aikido with the ages of man, but we should not demand of people to follow these intervals slavishly, like prison terms. People are so different and unpredictable that we can expect some children to show the form of emptiness, and some aged people to stick to the aikido of rocks. In that way, advanced aikido and people are the same: They don't fit into one single mold, but are unforeseeable by nature. Actually, I would say that in his last days, the age group Ueshiba looked like the most was that of the youth. Not physically, certainly, but in spirit.

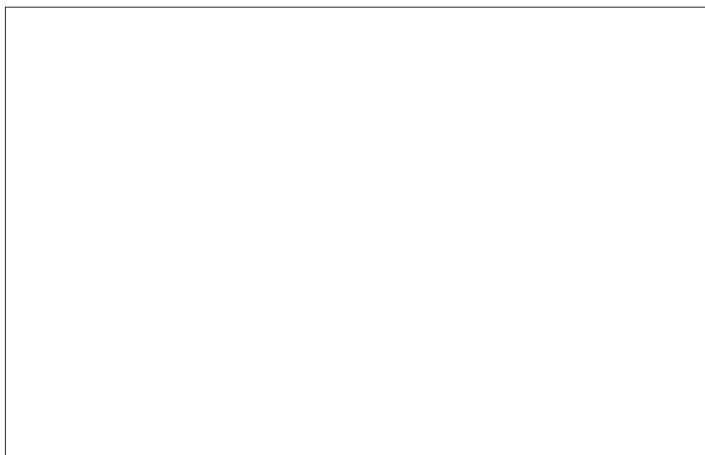
One can glimpse, like a contour, how the spirit of each age group is.

Children are by nature open-minded, swallowing the claims of their teachers without even tasting them first. They don't spare themselves the least when they try the path of aikido.

For the adults, it's not that simple. They have prestige and preconceptions, which they cherish firmly. They are reserved when listening to a teacher, wary of being lured into other thoughts than they had to begin with, and reluctant to discover things, the values of which they cannot at first calculate. Often they are so cornered by their self-esteem that they are unable to learn anything at all. What they manage at the most is by practice to reach some or other skill. They are pleased with this, as if they already knew all about what life could give.

It can take well into their old age before they open up, and if so, with a feeling very close to that of youth.

No doubt, youngsters are often mesmerized by the sim-



Instructor in a jam. Children's class in Brandbergen, Sweden. Photo by Gunilla Welin.

pler aspects of aikido, and can gorge on pure bodily achievements such as strength, stamina, and tempo. But only their bodies focus on that. Their spirits are usually completely different. Youthful minds have an unlimited thirst for life, and they are obsessed by what is probably the most important human trait: curiosity.

Fascination

A child quickly loses interest, and lets the mind fly around like a snow fling in the wind, but a youth can spend all the time and energy on one and the same thing, as long as his or her fascination is aroused. Adults start by asking how they can get out of things, or how they can keep their daily order undisturbed, whereas youths plunge into unknown deep waters without a single sting of apprehension.

Fascination is probably the answer. Youths allow themselves to be fascinated – by charismatic idols, by the biological mechanisms of reproduction, or by a peaceful Japanese martial art.

Fascination is their battery, and the playground slide they throw themselves into. That is an excellent attitude for

making grand discoveries in aikido. Instead of trying to halt the youth who rushes forward, adults would do better to join – or to step out of the way. Only those who allow themselves to be amazed by aikido can ever reach an aikido that is amazing.