

In *kyudo*, Japanese archery, the beginner should have only one arrow in the quiver. Otherwise he or she might think of the next arrow, already when aiming with the first one. You have to be completely focused on what you are in the middle of, what you are doing at the moment. If you allow yourself to be distracted by what preceded it or what comes next, you will have a hard time hitting the target.

Of course, this goes for all that you undertake. The one who is in the process of learning something is sure to make several mistakes along the way. If you allow yourself to let this worry you, it will be twice as difficult for you to progress. Bad performance must be forgotten, not to make the one guilty of it discouraged.

Also good performance can be a hindrance, even for the most experienced, in making him or her worry if it can be repeated.

The optimistic beginner tends to hastily shoot the first arrow, convinced that the next one will do better, and the one after that even more so. He will be a brilliant archer – in his imagination. If he wants this to become reality, he needs to empty the quiver and learn to concentrate on one arrow at a time.

This is far from only a pedagogical trick. It is a basic principle in the Far East.

Nakaima

In Shinto, the old Japanese religion, *Nakaima* is sort of the equivalent of the Judeo-Christian Paradise. *Nakaima* consists of two words. The first means the middle, which refers to right where you are, right here. The other word means now. If you can live completely in the here and now, settle exactly where you are, and not let anything else distract you, then you are surely in some kind of paradise.

In budo, this is practically identical with emptiness, *ku* or *kara*. When you succeed in forgetting the past, the future,



The author at a seminar in Pardubice, Czech Republic. Photo by Leos Matousek.

and every other place where you are not, you become empty. Everything that happens – even that of your doing – is a surprise. Therefore, nothing can get you off-balance, and nothing can forestall your action. You are immediate in everything.

Already done

The samurai in old Japan had a principle, partly derived from Zen, for how to face danger: You need to enter the battle with the attitude of already being dead. Then you cannot lose. The one who holds on hard to life will be paralyzed by his fear of losing it, and thereby be defeated.

If you can tell yourself that all is already over, that you are already dead, then nothing can distract you. You are here and now, completely unconditional. You are empty, and therefore impossible to predict, dupe, or catch by surprise.

When you learn to strike with the sword in kendo and iaido, or with your fist in karatedo, the best is to say to yourself: It is already done. Then your body, and your inner being, will choose the best moment for the strike, and you

will be just as surprised as your opponent. Such strikes can only be avoided by the same kind of empty mind.

Whatever technique you are about to do, whatever situation you are in – if you can feel that everything has already been done, everything is over, then that can neither be stopped nor altered. Such aikido gives the impression of not at all having been done by the aikidoist, but by something else, something higher. If you dare to trust this higher entity, and turn over your actions to it, then you truly get an aikido that challenges no one, but creates peace. It is one with what is natural.

Again, this is not as easy to do, as it is to describe. But it is worth trying, no matter how long it might take to accomplish.

Considering how long we humans have walked the Earth by now, it must be enough with victories that demand defeats of others, advances that demand decline, and people who live at the expense of others. It is worth a lifetime trying to find a way to interact with other people that harms no one, and does not profit one at the cost of another. If you carry this ideal with you, your aikido will eventually not only look like a dance – it will be dancing. A delighted, lively spin. Playful interaction with whoever approaches you.

A shared journey

In Buddhism, there are two ways to salvation: *Hinayana* and *Mahayana*. They can be translated to ‘the smaller vessel’ and ‘the bigger vessel’. They refer to man’s voyage from bewilderment to enlightenment, the great assurance.

Hinayana is to be alone in this vessel. This was most common in ancient India. Many a man, reaching middle age, left his home and family to find the way to a grander truth, the meaning of life – before it was time for life to leave him. To this man, eternity and truth were magnitudes that could

only be reached by the individual, by his inner incurable solitude.

Mahayana, on the other hand, was sort of a group effort. Several people, who wanted to find the meaning in all this, gathered in the vessel and began their voyage together. Thereby, they could give each other support and advice along the way. They were certain that such great truths as the ones they searched could only be reached through the joint efforts of several humans. The lonely ones get lost, they claimed, but the group leads its members in the right direction.

Surely, a universal truth is to be found somewhere in between these two standpoints. Still, while voluntary solitude definitely excludes the support and help of others, the joint voyage hardly makes an individual private experience impossible. Therefore, Mahayana really seems to be a combination of the two. But it must be admitted, and history has proven it repeatedly, that a group can get just as hopelessly lost as a lonely traveler. Also, it is sometimes difficult for someone on such a quest to find like-minded people to share the vessel. When it comes to the eternal questions, there are no guarantees.

Mahayana budo

Nonetheless, budo is Mahayana. We travel together. He who thinks that the training partners are just tools borrowed for his own development will not be able to take many steps on the way. We have to help each other wholeheartedly, and learn from each other in a continuous exchange.

In budo, the symbol of the mirror is frequently used. The partner is a mirror of my aikido and my frame of mind. The students are mirrors of their teacher's insight and ability.

Since old times it is said that the master shall be judged by the accomplishments of his or her students. That is how to discover real grandeur, as well as embarrassing shortcomings. In addition, no practitioner is better than he or she manages to be with the least capable partner. Harmony,



Warm-up exercise at the author's dojo in Malmö, Sweden. Photo by Anders Heinonen.

elegance, and naturalness, should signify the movements of the aikidoist, whoever is the partner.

The techniques are not at all done in order to gain victory, but as tools to exercise harmony and naturalness – for oneself and for one's partner. Both should feel enriched when the technique is completed. As the training progresses, both should get closer to the truth.

Those who enter a dojo only to work on their own development will have a hard time learning anything at all. Someone with this attitude is just too insensitive to discover his own shortcomings or to sense a better way of doing aikido. Such an aikidoist is standing still, and those who train with him will feel discomfort.

In olden times, this would have been described as the budo of death, not of life. It is sufficient for learning how to injure your partner and win one or other battle, but not for giving the partner life and delight. You become a much too hardened blade, which must one day crack. Those who are unable to let go of the thought of self-defense, of becoming invincible, fall into this trap.