

Thoughts on the Four Elements of Our Training

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All of us in Birankai have been exposed to the 'Four Elements' of Tai Jitsu (Body Art), Weapons, Iai Batto-Ho and Zazen, which are the foundations of Chiba Sensei's teaching. I believe that the combination of these elements is the essence of Budo, the way of the warrior. Historically the true samurai was skilled in unarmed combat, skilled with the sword, and driven to self reflection through zazen.

Since arriving in Scotland a couple of years ago, I have heard many comments and some confusion about the 'Four Elements' and how much focus should be allotted to each from both students and teachers within both the British Birankai and BCE. This struggle is more apparent here as the typical dojo has classes two nights per week within which to touch upon our four elements. I will try to answer within my understanding of the intent behind the foundation, and how I have tried to lead my students along the path.

It is clear to me that the very basic premise upon which we build our training is the body art. The entire process of forging the Aikidoka's body starts and ends with the body art, stripping away those layers of tension, stress, and tightness which have built up in the body over the years, returning flexibility to the joints via ikkyo through rokkyo, kneading the body until it transforms into a supple, responsive, and alive being that reacts instantaneously to stimulation. This process takes several years (although in my case will probably take longer) and brings to mind a quote that is on my teachers wall. I can't ever remember the exact words, but the gist is that you travel the road through thick and thin, you toil and labor away trying to get somewhere, only to find that it's the process that's important, not the end. It's not the fire, it's the burning. Sensei has written extensively about the Kneading process, the stages of Go-JyuRyu (Hard, supple, flowing) in training, and Shu-Ha-Ri. It is readily apparent to me that in order to make the journey, the practice of Tai-Jitsu must be first and foremost in order of importance.

It is also readily apparent that two vital elements that must be perfected in our study of Aikido are Timing and Distance. Without either of these elements present, one cannot execute the technique. In my opinion, it is quite easy to mask poor timing or distance by the use of brute strength, which can often be seen in Tai-Jitsu practice between a larger nage and smaller uke. This is why the study of weapons is vital to our practice. Physical strength is neutralized due to the larger distance between uke and nage, and weaknesses in timing and distance are more readily exposed, thereby creating the opportunity to perfect ones understanding of these critical items. At the same time, our weapons training focuses us on precision within Tai-sabaki and requires the same tension and at the same time suppleness within our bodies which comes from Tai-jitsu.

Iai batto-ho is important, particularly if one is able to practice with a live blade, because of the tremendous degree of focus and concentration (tension) within the execution of the technique. It is referred to in some circles as 'moving zen', but within our school it is merely an extension of our Aikido. It is a vehicle to increase the student's focus and zanshin within the technique, of being in the moment. During an encounter, which could have life or death consequences, one cannot allow one's focus to waver and be distracted.

Zazen is another pillar of our school, yet over the years I have heard many students dismiss Zazen training on the grounds that it is contrary to their religious beliefs. I find this notion to be absurd, simply a form of escapism. Of course, zazen can be anything you want it to be. There are those among us who have taken vows and become avowed Buddhists. The fact is, zazen within our school is a tool to enable the student to face his or her inner demons, to peel off those layers and layers of thoughts and concepts that have built up over the years. To be able to drop everything, to empty one's mind of every thought but what occurs in that moment, as mentioned above, is vital during an encounter. This is the goal of our zen training, nothing more, nothing less. How we do it is really quite simple. All you need is time and a cushion. Just simply sit in Lotus or Half Lotus for at least ½ hour and count your breaths to 10. Each time you lose concentration in your counting, start again at one. Let go of your thoughts, do not allow your mind to become distracted by them. Let the pain come and ride it. That's it.

Can the four elements that constitute our practice be quantified in terms of how many hours per week should be dedicated to each? I don't think so. There are too many variables involved, and although there are finite numbers of hours instruction in the dojo, some polishing can be done outside the dojo as well. One doesn't need a dojo to practice basic suburi, review Tai-sa-Baki, or sit on a cushion. Be ever mindful that Tai Jitsu is the body of work that we polish, and that Weapons, Iai Batto-ho and Zazen are the limbs that support that body. You can have a body without limbs, but you can't make an Aikidoka without forging the body. This should be our primary focus.