

More Logs on the Fire

The discussion on Aikido and its effectiveness in the 'real' world seems to rumble on - and on.

I have been disheartened, as I know many others have, by reading recent articles on the demise of Aikido and the traditional martial arts in the UK.

I would like to throw a few more logs on the fire.

My martial arts training spans 45 years and includes; Judo, Karate, Aikido and Systema. Longest serving is my 28 years with the Lancashire Aikikai, and over the years I have given considerable thought to the effectiveness of the various martial arts and their application to 'real' life.

Like many of you, I have shared many beers pondering this serious question with friends and colleagues. Three things made me decide to share my thoughts now; my trip to Japan last year, an interesting book I read recently and having now retired from work, perhaps a little more time to reflect.

My experiences of Aikido in Japan are that students don't tend to spend time analysing the whys and wherefores of training i.e. whether Aikido works on the street or is better as a self-defence than Karate, Krav Maga or MMA etc, they simply pursue their chosen art, select a Sensei, train to the best of their ability and enjoy the experience.

Why can't we do the same?

I have no doubts about the potential effectiveness of Aikido in a 'real' situation but would emphasise the word 'potential'. Of course, there are limitations but you only have to read the stories about the early exploits of O'Sensei and watch old videos of the first-generation students to get a flavour of Aikido's awesome potential.

We don't all practice with such gusto these days. Many students of Aikido have no real interest in street effectiveness – and why should they? They need to get up fit and ready for work the next day and it may not be why they started training anyway.

Unless you live in one of the less salubrious areas of the UK, you probably have more chance of being involved in a road traffic accident than being attacked on the street. Although, with knife attacks on the increase, turning towards the martial arts for self-defence is certainly a good option.

I believe that the principles which lead to real effectiveness are still there in modern Aikido, if your mind is free and your spirit is willing to explore the path of Budo*.

All Martial Arts offer some benefit of self-defence, if only that it gets us off our backsides, into the dojo and moving our bodies. Dealing regularly with potential aggressive situations, even within the safe environment of the dojo, trains our mind to react rather than freeze. All martial arts offer benefits but they also have limitations. The most important lesson is to understand and accept the limitations of your art and most importantly the limitations of yourself.

Effectiveness is not in your knowledge of techniques but in how you would react and apply yourself to a situation. Are you sure that you could stay relaxed, move and react effectively if faced with 'real' aggression?

I have recently read a book called 'Living Systema' written by Matt Hill**.

A key message within this book, is that a true martial artist doesn't train 1, 2 or 3 times per week. He/she trains all the time.

My favourite quote from the book is "...do you ever see a tiger doing push ups? Their every movement is training."

If you want to study your chosen art as a pastime or hobby – Go for it! This is genuinely a good reason for study. However, if you want to take your training to the next level and have confidence that you could really handle yourself in a difficult or aggressive situation, then you need to make training part of your life. You need to become a better tiger!

Our effectiveness in dealing with an aggressive situation is down to us as individuals, not the art we study. We are the martial artist. Our chosen art gives us a bag of tools - it sets up a framework of principles for us to work with and gives us an opportunity to develop our own natural skills.

It is important to recognise the difference between study within the dojo and 'real' life.

They are very different. A few things to bear in mind: -

- Competitive martial arts are sports and usually have rules. *There are no rules outside the dojo.*
- Non-competitive martial arts tend to have compliant training partners whose task is to present an empty body and mind, to help improve your technique.
Why then does this sometimes result in tori slamming uke into the mat with gusto and standing back with pride and satisfaction, when uke has just gifted their body, with only limited resistance?
- On the other hand, for two willing and able partners to escalate their level of practice to a higher intensity of training is both exhilarating and is a necessary part of high-grade practice.
It is important to test our limits. It is also important to understand the context and limitation of high-level training.
If we are not careful, however, this high-level practice can lead to an over estimation of our ability, which could be dangerous assumption outside the dojo.
- Your training partner wants to test you but (usually) doesn't want to hurt you.
Outside the dojo the mindset of a 'real' attacker is very different.

I would like to offer up a suggestion Just an opinion – and the proportions are just an indication

- that in a 'real' aggressive situation, your martial art techniques probably contribute only 1/3 of your ability to deal with the situation. Another 1/3 is how you apply yourself, your awareness and the efficiency of your mind and body.
The final 1/3 is testing yourself in a real situation with attackers who are not familiar with your particular martial art.

Not many of us get much experience of the latter (fortunately), so the best you can achieve through your martial arts training is prob 2/3.

This is sufficient to give you a great deal of self-confidence. Good enough for me!

Maybe the stories about O'Sensei referring to 90% of Aikido being atemi, are along similar lines of thought?

You should choose your martial art for your own enjoyment and the benefits it can bring to your whole life – not just for self-defence.

Dojo practice can only take your preparation and development so far. The rest is down to you!

* Budo: The Martial Way – The Way of the Warrior

** Living Systema - by Matt Hill (5th Dan Iwama Ryu Aikido and Systema Instructor)

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