

"If you dare to attack me, Prepare to Die" (Chiba Sensei);

Some Notes on the Notion of Danger

A year ago, practising Aikido with Chris Mooney Sensei in Uzes, France, I experienced an alarming yet meaningful moment of danger and risk inherent in our school of Aikido. Mooney Sensei was about to attack me with a Tanto. He moved forward ferociously, forcefully. I reacted as fast as I could, but my heavy Gi, which hung somewhat loosely behind, got stabbed through and through. The hole was startlingly big.

Chris smiled. "Every time you wear this Gi, you will remember," he said. If I had not moved so quickly, if I had reacted a little bit late, I would have been injured very seriously.

I kept thinking about, dwelling on, this moment, feeling the weight of danger. As time passed, the experience of this split second event became most meaningful, bringing home to me the essence and philosophy of our Aikido school.

Danger is indeed a necessary part of our school of Aikido. When practising with real weapons we aim at the body and head of the opponent. We train our disciples and students to be aware of the dangers inherent in our practice, and to defend themselves adequately. This is an exciting characteristic of our school.

In an article from 1985 (*Aikidoists Beware*) Chiba Sensei asserts:

"The martial art (budo) is truly a frightening thing...martial art is back-to-back with death...if we were to find the unchangeable ethic in our Japanese

budo, its source should be found in the relative balance of tension between life and death and between the self and others.”

Danger according to Chiba is not a mere incidental aspect of Aikido, but rather an essential component of our practice, without which a school of martial art is not worth the title.

Many practitioners of Aikido think that O-Sensei invented a new martial art different from the traditional Japanese ones. However, Chiba insists that this is not the case. He asserts that O-Sensei does indeed offer a new way for developing human potential. According to Chiba Sensei, O-Sensei's road to human development via martial art incorporates the traditions of these arts. Chiba Sensei explains:

...the transcendence of Aikido from the traditional martial arts as a new way of personal development does not mean it ceases to be a martial art, just as it is impossible for humans to stop being human or conversely to assert that their existence has been non-human.

. Elsewhere Chiba suggests that in the martial arts, there is no dichotomy of harmony and conflict. Harmony and conflict are complementary. The Aikido universe is complex, deep, paradoxical. Harmony, grace, and non-violence are as essential as deadly danger.

Why do we expose ourselves to real risks implied in our Aikido practice? What is the phenomenology of danger underlying the experience of Aikido? The co-existence of life and death generates excitement of unprecedented intensity. Men and women approach the further reaches of their capacities and endurance. Co-existence of life and death energizes personal development, checking feelings of depression and confusion.

Some people would consider these explanations as inadequate; why are people exposing themselves repeatedly to danger?

Part of the answer is to be found in the concept of the experience of real danger described by the French Jewish philosopher Immanuel Levinas (1934) . This, Levinas says, presents an invaluable opportunity and occasion for experiencing psychophysical unity.

Who would dare to deny the value of such an opportunity? As Aikido practitioners on Chiba Sensei's school, we know about all this first hand. We have at our disposal mere glimpses of the much desired unity of body and soul. Due to the Aikido discipline and experience we sense the gaps between our present incomplete condition and the ideal of total unity. Awareness of such gaps intensifies the motivation to improve and grow. As Chiba says in his article *Discovering the Body*:

Recognition of an imbalance, disharmony, or disorder within one's system, sensed within the body, as well as between the body and consciousness, is a starting point for growth. One might characterize the development of this recognition as a conversation or dialogue which occurs between one's body and one's consciousness. As the dialogue develops, awareness becomes clearer, and one begins to perceive the natural power or potential ability which has, until then, been hidden.

Friedrich Nietzsche; the 19th century German philosopher, explained in Thus Spoke Zarathustra (page 7) the meaning and value of sheer danger as opposed to mere survival which is the characteristic of "the last man" (*der letzte mensch*). Such a person, tired and weak, obsessed with survival and security, is truly inferior and undeveloped.

Mankind is a rope between animal and overman – a rope over an abyss. A dangerous crossing, a dangerous on-the-way, a dangerous looking back, a dangerous shuddering and standing still. What is great about human beings

*is that they are **crossing over** and a **going under**. I love those who do not know how to live unless by going under, for they are the ones who cross over.*

In contrast to the last man, Nietzsche glorifies the existential condition of the 'overman'. This denotes a man who creates his own values, who dares to take risks in order to develop and grow.

Chiba Sensei's insistence on the value of intense danger is not entirely different. We, Aikido practitioners in Chiba's school of Aikido, take risks in our daily practice. Struggling to become better and more individual human beings, we gradually reach towards transformation and development. Exposed to actual danger and pain, we face fear and anxiety. Some of us cherish the opportunity lying in danger, but not all of us do.

I think we should become aware of the value of danger but also wary of fascination with danger; or, rather 'danger in danger', namely, the psychological danger of dissociation under circumstances of imminent threat to body and soul. As much as danger in our practice of Aikido is an opportunity for growth towards unity of body and soul, danger can also create a schism between spirit and body. We see practitioners who master techniques of martial arts but lack a true spirit underlying the quest for unity of body and soul. Hence, rather than being used as an opportunity for development towards unity, danger can bring about a split between body and soul. Those masters of technique who lack spirit are 'without souls' or an authentic sense of value. They are competent yet shallow. This danger in danger, namely, of becoming body without soul, is rooted in the practicing martial arts.

Another danger in danger is the withdrawal of the body. A person might be facing danger and yet lack the ability to master the body, as it were, make it work.. The Israeli master of Judo, Arik Ze'evi, recently explained the cause of his failure in

the Olympic Games in Beijing. Ze'evi was knocked out of the tournament in the first round despite winning an Olympic bronze medal in 2004. Zeevi talked of "uncontrolled surge of hormones", of sobs and cries in the days following his premature knock-out. The body was not there in the crucial moment. Ze'evi failed to unite body and soul.

His experience highlights the dangers of the split between body and soul. An injury to the body will heal in time but a schism between body and soul amounts to a betrayal of what it is to be human. This forms the core ambition of the practice of Aikido.

Chiba's Aikido provides a version of controlled, disciplined martial art serving the quest for unity of body and soul. Danger is an opportunity for making a move towards unity, yet there is no 'safe route' by which to reach this goal. A true Aikido practitioner never tires of heeding the danger in danger as he advances towards the unification of body and soul.

Bibliography

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