

Dr. Amnon Tzechovoy

On harmony, Efforts towards Effortless Being, and Remembrance; Some Notes
on Chiba Sensei's Notion of Martial Awareness

For years a certain question kept bothering me, a question I would like to share with my audience: if the art of Aikido is inherently natural and is of harmonious flow, why should one exercise for so long, and be intensely engaged in the endless Aikido practice in order to gain the smooth, effortless motion, the so-called natural, spontaneous movement.

Now, Chiba Sensei's essay *The Study and Refinement of Martial Awareness* provides, so I think, invaluable clues for answering questions such as the one mentioned above concerning the efforts needed for gaining effortless motions. To begin with, Chiba diagnoses ailments inherent to our Western civilization, ailments which obstruct access to man's and woman's innate nature. Thus, Chiba sees in over-developed mental activity and conscious behavior a major shortcoming of our Western culture; such over-development interferes, according to Chiba, with the deep fundamental logic of nature. Such logic – manifest in the behavior of animals – becomes almost inaccessible for man and woman. Union with nature is the highest achievement and horizon open for mankind. It means among other things a good deal of forgetfulness towards many layers of conscious mental activity. One has to renounce many of the benefits offered in the West for over-cogitative, incessant rational verbalization. In my view, Chiba insists on the necessary return to instinctual way of life free of all sorts of cultural coverings which prevent man and woman to be

one with nature. This oneness with nature is equivalent to Chiba's notion of complete, totally open martial awareness. As he says:

I consider the term "martial awareness" to be largely associated with type of instinctive spontaneous sensitivity which gives rise to action that is altogether natural.

Thus, Chiba's ideal of union with nature is, as I understand it, *re-union* with our lost heritage and potential of self-identification with nature. As suggested above, it is so difficult – and thus in need of excruciating, repetitive Aikido training - because of the present way of things in our Western civilization.

At this point I would like to contribute a hypothesis concerning the dynamics of the Aikido return to nature and its forces, as I understand it. For the question remains: How can we understand the process of Aikido transformation as reaching, in Chiba's terminology, true martial awareness? Since in Chiba's thought Aikido discipline is closely associated with consciousness (the concept of martial awareness is of this quality), we need to think in terms of transformation of consciousness in order to understand ourselves as Aikido-practitioners seeking to attain to our goal (martial awareness). It is of course a long way stretching ahead of us (I mean thinking of Aikido transformation of consciousness). What concepts can we use in our reflection on Aikido development? Here, in this paper, I suggest that in-depth memory, remembrance or recollection, are helpful in our preliminary effort at connecting Chiba's thought with the psychology of Aikido consciousness.

I borrow the concept of in-depth memory from the great Plato. In his dialogue titled *Meno* he says:

Socrates: If the truth of all things always existed in the soul, then the soul is immortal. Wherefore be of good cheer, and try to recollect what you do not know, or rather what you do not remember.

In this beautiful dialogue Socrates brings a boy to realize that he knows a certain mathematical truth (the Pythagoras' theorem) by progressive recollection thereof. The boy is a simple servant; he has never learned any mathematics. But lo, he brings to life a deeply buried memory of a sophisticated mathematical truth! He successfully retrieves an almost inaccessible piece of knowledge. Thus, knowledge, according to Plato, is truly in-depth remembrance of being and cognitions available beneath our current behavior and awareness. This is the type of universal, deeply buried or concealed, non-individual mode of remembrance and awareness implied in Chiba's conception of martial awareness.

There are obviously big differences between the type of awareness possible to man and woman according to Plato and that type of awareness implied by Chiba. I am using Plato's theory of knowledge (or awareness) as memory in order to start thinking on Aikido practice. What matters to me is the existence of layers of being made newly accessible by various means of remembrance, layers made available to us by virtue of our real, already in existence nature. We do not create martial awareness out of nothing. Chiba recommends spontaneous, smooth, elegant, instinctual motion. As I understand it, he means to say: we Aikido practitioners move towards effortless martial awareness by means of efforts towards a very special type of remembrance. Thus, by our harsh Aikido discipline and efforts we come to remember and be who we truly are, also perhaps who we have really always been.

2. On Chiba Sensei's school of Aikido

What is the essence of Chiba Sensei's Aikido? What is the core of us, as disciples of this school of Aikido? There are many Aikido-schools; they all teach such values as harmony, soft and powerless motion and yet, *there is a difference*. This is what I wish to explore in this paper.

A clear and obvious answer does not immediately come to mind, in a sense, it is impossible to say. For the essence of our Aikido-discipline is embedded in the body. Aikido-essence exists in deep layers of our bodily identity, layers that are not easily accessible to people outside our school. Thus, there are objective difficulties in transmitting it. Moreover, in principle it is impossible to transmit true the essential elements of our experience and perspective on life for the sake of people who do not have the "Aikido vibration" in their flesh and blood. In other words, verbalized articulation of Aikido experience is inherently paradoxical. This knowledge might well be obvious to practitioners, yet remote and almost mysterious to outsiders. Chiba has long pointed the importance of the psychophysics unity, hence the dangers inherent in processes of excessive verbalization and ratiocination. Such processes, he argues, removes people from their inner potential. Yet another issue is at stake here: If adequate expression of Aikido's experience and meanings is inherently impossible and if verbalization and language are often obstacles on the way to connectedness with one's innermost being, why try to verbalize in the first place? Why, in other words, write an article? The answer I give is this: it is important to understand what makes Chiba Sensei's Aikido school of experience and thought different from other schools. It is important for us, Chiba's disciples, to distinguish ourselves from all sorts of truisms and clichés prevalent in the world of Aikido practitioners and disciples of

many kinds. In this effort to make the distinction, to offer definitions however inherently inadequate and preliminary, language is necessary.

What makes our school of Aikido what it is? To begin with, let us turn to Chiba's own words, in his article *The study and Refinement of Martial Awareness* (p.4):

"I would like to offer my observations of Aikido in contemporary society. However much a practitioner's technique may appear splendid and well performed, in the absence of the three aforementioned elements, I consider what s/he is doing to represent somewhat of departure from Martial aspect of Aikido. I can appreciate the skill and accumulated efforts behind the movements; however, they appear to me like a fascinating display of human swimming on dry land."

By his powerful metaphor of "swimming on dry land" and his reference to "martial awareness", Chiba points to the essence of our Aikido school and thereby establishes its distinction. For me, Chiba's words are most important as a challenge towards our understanding of ourselves as disciples in Chiba Sensei's school. As I suggested above, reduction or translation of Chiba's truth to ordinary modes of communication implies serious difficulties. Now, equipped with Chiba's own reference to the issue, I am on better grounds to elaborate further. To begin with, Chiba is harshly critical not only of current culture in the West but also of today's numerous Aikido schools of practice. Something is lacking, he says, in contemporary Aikido schools. What is it? Martial awareness, says Chiba.

As suggested above, it is impossible to explicate the meaning of martial awareness in our practice and experience. The presence of such a mood and kind of positive alert

and openness in situations of danger and immediate challenges is too subtle, deep, buried in the unfathomable psych-physical unity of our body and soul. Chiba insists upon such a unity beyond apparent multiplicity of psychological and physical phenomena.

It is somewhat easier to comprehend the physical side of the experience. Naturally, one does wish to avoid any harm to the body. The psychological dimension is nevertheless more complex. One may well ask why we should undergo such an intensive process of overcoming fear. But yet, this exactly the point, the constant effort to overcome fear we continue this process to keep on moving and search the limitations of our body and soul. This is undoubtedly an element with enormous value, one that empowers the process of practicing Aikido. It turns one into a better Aikidoda and eventually helps one to become a better person, more courageous one. As the process continues, one becomes apt to handles difficulties and this amount to some kind of personal transformation. Exactly this virtue is to be found in the centre of Chiba's perception of one's development, or rather transformation, from a novice practitioner of Aikido to a teacher and to a teacher-cum-disciple.

Here is Plato's beautiful reference to the courage and greatness implied in the effort to know:

"Socrates: and I, meno, like what I am saying. Some things I have said of which I am not altogether confident. But that we shall be better and braver and less helpless if we think that we ought to enquire, than we should have been if we indulged in the idle fancy that there was no knowing and no use in

seeking to know what we do not know; that is a theme upon which I am ready to fight, in word and deed, to the utmost of my power."

All we can do is speculate on Chiba's pregnant ideas and words, keeping in mind our goal; we seek to know ourselves as practitioners of Chiba Sensei's school of Aikido. Let us go back to Chiba's terse and harsh statement above, adding another succinct assertion:

"I regard Aikido to be more than just another martial art form, for its value transcends the boundaries and limitations inherent in the martial art form."

Chiba suggests that allegedly perfect practice and form are not perfect at all. What seems smooth, elegant, and perfect technical form might be far from satisfactory, far from an aim worth seeking. Indeed, says Chiba, it might be lacking the dimension of martial awareness. In our modern world in which, as I mentioned in the first part, we submerged ourselves in indulgent world, so we tend to perceive the potential dangers around us as minimal and hardly perceptible, and hence the martial awareness is virtually unknown. Our school of Aikido is about the resurrection of the attitude of alertness, consciousness of danger as well as harmony and effortless.

Cultivation of such an attitude is the essence of our Aikido school; as I tried to explain in the first part of this paper, it is resurrection of memory deeply buried in our innermost identity. Getting in touch with this kind of memory and remembrance is what we do in our practice; it is the essence of our school of Aikido.

3. Is Non-Violent Martial Art Possible? A note on Aikido Dialectics

Martial awareness is a notion central in Chiba Sensei's vision of life and Aikido. It is a subtle, complex and deep experience hard to explicate by words; verbalization we have previously referred to Aikido state of mind in Chiba's vision as "martial awareness". What is it? How can it be articulated by words?

In order to understand Chiba's thought and unique vision underlying our school of Aikido I resort in this final exploration to the philosophy of Emanuel Levinas. A French, Jewish philosopher who captures in words some dimensions of Chiba Sensei's unique experience and vision of the essence of martial art and martial awareness.

In the following I will try to use Levinas' conception of violence in order to explicate Chiba's Sensei's deep and complex notion of Aikido as a non-violent martial art.

In my first and second parts of this article I have raised questions of the essence and meaning of Aikido practice and experience. The recurrent, fundamental question was: how can we reconcile Chiba's Aikido with the notion of non-violent martial art?

We understand of course that the notion of non-violent martial art is paradoxical; we know that Chiba's Aikido is immensely powerful, replete with dangers to ourselves and others. And yet, it is inherently non-violent. How is this possible?

In his *Difficult Freedom* (1963) Levinas writes:

Violence is to be found in any action in which one acts as if one were alone to act; as if the rest of the universe were there only to receive the action; violence

is consequently also any action which we endure without at any point collaborating in it.

Levinas' conception of violence as associated with inherent negation of the others' existence is very close in spirit to Chiba's notion of martial awareness embedded in the effort to avoid hurting oneself as well as others! In my view, from the psychological perspective, violence takes place by virtue of passivity (on the recipient side) and narcissism (on the acting, violent part) Adopting Levinas' suggestive definition, one is free to participate in an allegedly aggressive action leveled at him or to resist it. If one participates in the action to hurt him one makes that action violent! This is indeed a conception of violence truly paradoxical yet in my view deep and closely related to Chiba Sensei's conception of non-violent Aikido martial art.

Thus, being keenly aware of one's opponent's intentions is a precondition of turning alleged violent action into a harmless activity. This is how awareness becomes transformational, namely, transforming an attack into non-violence. In addition, Chiba insists the need to be receptive alive and active, so the Aikidoka is never a victim, and the situation become inherently dialogical. This is, in my view the essence of Chiba Sensei's notion of martial awareness; and that is how Chiba's Aikido school teaches non-violent martial art.

But is it not a predisposition common to any and every martial art, namely the insistence of being aware of one's opponent's intentions? This is perhaps true. But Chiba's Aikido experience and training consists also of something else; the Aikido practitioner is required to recognize the other-opponent as necessarily existent, never to be erased, and never be denied his or her being. In terms of consciousness and its

development in the course of Aikido training the goal is no other than mutual recognition of one and his or her opponent.

The requirement of creating mutual recognition of one and one's opponent is of course very difficult to achieve. A person attacked often becomes paralyzed as it were, incapable of response. Chiba's Aikido is about the development of this kind of transformational openness turning a potentially violent into non-injurious dialogue.

How is this done? How is it made possible? It is appropriate to refer in brief to Chiba's Five Pillars of Training:

- 1) Centeredness.
- 2) Connectedness.
- 3) Wholeness.
- 4) Liveliness.
- 5) Openness.

Practicing Aikido in accordance with these principles means connecting of two persons through their respective centers so that they are both fully responsive in body and soul to each other and to the environment at large. It is total involvement and commitment to the other and to the world. In this sense, Chiba insists, Aikido practice produces qualities of martial awareness. Thus, Aikido practice transcends mere mastery of technique and technical competence; it is total training of the whole person.

But do we have true evidence of real moments of awareness and the efficacy of Aikido practice in this respect? I say, yes; we are witnesses to the power of Chiba's Aikido to enhance openness and awareness. In his visit to Israel, Chris Mooney Sensei had a talk in a coffee house with one of my students. At the very beginning of

the talk Chris asked: have you noticed the presence of all the others in the café? My student could not tell. But Chris, fixing his eyes on the student listed and described one by one the others present around. This is openness, awareness made possible by years on the *Tatami*.

Unity of body and soul is Chiba's underlying goal and definition of a successful Aikido practitioner. Such unity is very difficult to achieve, a condition opposed to conventional approaches in the West. The contrast between the essential split of body and self inherent in Western civilization, Aikido practice in Chiba's experience and thought means a movement towards unity of body and self. The question to be asked is the following: how is our school Aikido conducive to experience of body\self identity and unity? We have referred above to the dangerous situation inherent to our Aikido practice. We have emphatically pointed to martial awareness as a necessary dimension in our Aikido practice. We have also explicated in brief the mode of Aikido openness towards others in the practitioner\opponent unified field. How is all this connected with the unity of body and soul? Verbalization fails at this attempt of articulating the most intimate and subtle aspect of our Aikido experience. I turn again to Levinas (1934) for a brilliant and succinct reference to the meaning of those moments of danger and awareness so characteristic of our Aikido universe:

In a dangerous sport or risky exercise in which gestures attain an almost abstract perfection in the face of death, all dualism between the self and the body must disappear...

Levinas was of course not an Aikido practitioner. And yet, in his reflection on danger, consciousness, soul, body and pain he was superb in capturing the meaning of our experience as Aikido practitioners of Chiba Sensei's school. Every one of us would recognize the truth of his brilliant association of bodily pain (an aspect inherent in our Aikido practice) and unity of self and body:

Physical pain can reveal an absolute position. The body is not only a happy or unhappy accident that relates us to the implacable world of matter. Its adherence to the Self is of value in itself. It is an adherence that one does not escape and that no metaphor can confuse with the presence of an external object; it is a union that does not in any way alter the tragic character of finality...

Thus, we recognize an aspect inherent in our Aikido practice by the words of a Jewish, French philosopher. But verbalization, of course does not meet the challenge of articulation of such an experience of self/body unity made possible in our Aikido practice. Martial awareness is rooted in a mode of remembrance deeper than conventional consciousness. It is a layer of animal-like ancient memory resurrected by practitioners of Aikido. In this matter, true Aikido practice leading to transformation of consciousness and recognition is indispensable.

Bibliography

Levinas E., (1934), Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism, in Critical Inquiry, (1990), Vol. 17, No. 1, pp: 63-71.

Levinas E., (1963), Spirit and Violence, in Difficult Freedom, (1990), The John Hopkins University Press - Baltimore. pp: 6-7