

## **Some Reflections on Life with Injuries**

**Dr amnon Tzechovoy**

Injuries are part and parcel of intensive physical activity. They are also inseparable from the lives of those who practice martial arts. When Chiba Sensei refers to the Way of Aikido, he says "The pursuit of the Way and its realization demand devotion, sacrifice, patience, courage, and understanding of the purpose of Aikido". I believe that elements such as devotion or sacrifice, and of course patience and courage – are all linked to injuries.

Following many years of training I have seen how teachers as well as their students struggle not only with injuries, but also with their consequences. There is no shortage of instances to recount as to how injuries occur. Indeed, the consequences are at times rather dire.

In this article I will try to show the complex relations between pain and injury. While we tend to identify injury with pain, there is no obvious corollary between the two. I therefore wish to deconstruct these relations, to show how the physical element can unite or be disengaged from the mind, and how personal growth is connected to all this.

### ***The Manifestations of Pain***

Pain has a role, and as such it is beneficial. 'Good' pain tells 'you should rest' or 'you have exhausted yourself to the limit'. It will have a relatively short duration. This kind of pain is a signal pointing to stop action, to divert attention or to rethink behavior. In this sense it 'good'. With 'bad' pain potential injury, or injury has already occurred. We are advised to acquire proficiency that will enable us to make proper distinction between the two types of pain. We badly need this proficiency, if we are in the business of continual physical activity.

Both 'good' and 'bad' pain can limit our movement. Only when pain persists can we consider it a criterion for injury, that is, that an injury has occurred (and also assess the severity of this injury). It is important nevertheless to reemphasize that even experts have no clear-cut distinction between 'good' or 'bad' pain. 'Bad' pain, however, is more likely to endure for a longer period.

So, the conjecture of injury with immediate pain is complicated. We might find accumulative injury where pain appears after a certain threshold has been crossed (e.g. Cartilage erosion). Yet another type of damage is a result of being excited to the point

where the body fails to produce that alerting sign of 'something has gone wrong'. The consequence of this last mechanism might last days after it happens. We cannot move that part of the body that has been hurt.

I have had many opportunities to notice how people respond to pain. Some people over-react to pain, even when minor injury occurs. They might refrain altogether from training. Other people just 'get over' and carry on, as if nothing significant has taken place. I remember all too well the period when I began my career as a teacher. I had broken my wrist amidst one lesson and yet continued to practice to its end. Only then did I approach the hospital for help.

In the world of martial arts in general and in the world of Aikido in particular, those who practice week after week, year after year, need to develop certain skills. Years of physical strain, along some repeated injuries, eventually take their toll. It is of no surprise that some of the top teachers, as well as longtime students, struggle with chronic injuries. The cost is pain, at times considerable pain. I suggest that the only way to cope with that phenomenon is to develop a mature and integrated mind whose conducive achievement is that we would be better able to tell 'which is which', to allocate each pain its true status or role.

### ***The Acquisition of Mature Mind***

When we imagine our bodies we have some internal picture in our mind, as if that image tells us where each part of it rests, what each part is capable of doing. Unfortunately, seldom does this image guide us to conduct ourselves with perfect movement accompanied by adequate effort. One of the more common experiences of trainees of Aikido is the gap between 'seeing what the teacher does', and the ability to follow the instructions exactly. A few seconds after the Sensei has completed a demonstration the truth unfolds, exemplifying how difficult it is to follow even simple instructions. The gap between the image in one's mind and the movements that follow represents a split, as I have just described. If the body is able to perform what the mind has just registered, the physical will unite with the mental so that the outcome represents a psychophysical unity.

I wish to illustrate how psychophysical split actually 'works'. I once arrived in Japan to train at the Hombu Dojo, especially with Miyamoto Sensei. The flight took some sixteen hours, and my body was fairly stiff. When I had finally reached the hotel I realized that I could still manage to participate in a lesson with Miyamoto Sensei, and soon set myself to walk to the Dojo. Miyamoto was very glad to see me, as any teacher would be glad to see a student who made a huge effort to come, and soon invited me to take Ukemi. Sensei threw me to the floor in full gusto, as he often does, yet my body was incapable of responding. I ignored my body despite its poor state. All of a sudden I felt a sharp sensation of pain. As I

was trying to stand on my two feet, I could not move my shoulder. In fact, any movement appeared to cause serious pain. I did not realize what had exactly happened, but assumed .the injury was rather severe

Folly can hurt as much as physical pain. At that moment I could not avoid thinking how futile was this effort, which led me to leave my family as well as my patients (I am a clinical psychologist by profession) and my students. It was extremely frustrating to become almost paralyzed after only few hours in Japan. It took me some time to understand how I became a victim of my own mental condition of excitement. I have come to realize that when strong ambition does not meet a correspondingly coordinated, strong body, a harmful outcome is quite likely. However, I had failed to realize that no harm would have been caused if I were to participate in a lesson on the following day. Being attentive to the body, more sensitive to its condition, would have protected me providing me with vital safeguard.

.In other words, we need a mature mind, something that is quite hard to attain

Young men in particular badly need to acquire mature mind. They are at peak of their strength, but lack the ability to match their aspirations with their efforts. Their superior bodily condition is misleading, causing them to believe that the body is immune or almost so. This lack of judgment inevitably leads to injuries. The root of these injuries also suggests that body and mind are not quite one. They might move in separate routes, unable to support or 'inform' each other. My main argument draws on this separation, to suggest that behind physical injuries lay a psychophysical split. This split and its complimentary term, psychophysical unity relate to the coexistence of mind and body.

### ***Towards Psychophysical Unity***

One can thus imagine the kind of development that molds our mind as years go by. The process begins when we reside in a rather strong, able body. At this stage our awareness is not as yet as developed so as to safeguard the body, which sends signals of potency without limits. Of course this is all an illusion. Nevertheless, if we are lucky, whatever injuries that befalls on us might not leave a lasting impact. As we grow older, the body gradually weakens and repeated injuries inflict even greater damage. Healing takes so much longer. Being alert, attentive to any alarming sign, is now needed – more than ever before. However, maturity now comes to our aid.

At this stage sacrifice and patience, alongside devotion, are also much needed. I dare say that courage is in demand too. It needs courage to continue practicing once we are so much more aware of dangers. With far reaching experience we assess our ability much better.

.The match between ambition and ability could now manifest itself in perfect harmony

My view is that, as we become older, our ability as Aikido artists reaches a much more meaningful plateau. Performance improves with time, despite the process of aging. This ability is the outcome of long years of training that gradually results in close cooperation between body and mind. I am in fact describing a process that results in certain type of unity, but begins with a gap between the real ability of the body and the perception of this ability. Realization takes time. It is a rather lengthy process. Chiba Sensei once said that injuries are like medals worn by soldiers, suggesting that they might be a source of pride. To the best of my understanding medals can also serve as metaphor for personal growth, for transformation. The pain is thus a carrier of the memory of endless efforts of the trainee through the years. Pain provides a sense of physical continuity. Memory and continuity are intertwined with our identity. Pain is absorbed in the body, in its sensoric memory, to .become later a major component of our innermost intimate self

In the process I have portrayed here, lack of coherence between the consciousness and the body (psychophysical split) can lead to injuries. At the same time, injuries and pain .endanger our mental harmony

Maurice Merleau-Ponty, a French philosopher from the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, holds the view that the body bridges between the inside and the outside. There is an objective body, a biological entity, and then – a certain awareness of the body. As long as harmony between the inside to the outside persists, we pay no attention to how the body performs, as if the body was invisible. Pain creates a schism in this harmony by drawing our attention to it. The body now needs 'special treatment', it can no longer be ignored. Yet the source of this vital transformation is precisely this situation that creates the need for regaining harmony. For example: after many years of training with wooden swords and using the sword as part of Iai-Batto-Ho training, I began to suffer from 'tennis elbow' in my two arms. Strong pain accompanied whatever movement I made. I was first paralyzed, and then tried many medications that promised healing. Gradually I learned to move without pain. All of a sudden I understood the 'language' in which my body was trying to communicate: my technique has improved immensely. I gave up the more strenuous movement of the hands, and adopted softer movements that have eventually proved to be much more powerful. I still suffer from chronic infection but the pain has ceased and the .'body has again become 'invisible

I have clearly undergone personal transformation, a process where pain had a vital role. Pain has had a major impact on my personality. It has caused me to give up certain rigidity. I still remember myself as being both mentally rigid as well as quite aggressive in my

movement. Looking back on the past, I feel that pain gave me the opportunity to decipher what lies behind the motivation to train in martial art. This motivation, so I now realize, was deeply rooted in a sense of omnipotence accompanied by denial. I have spent many years in denial, not recognizing how fragile my body can be. I have come to recognize that the body is not an extension of my intellect; that is has its own needs and demands.

The psychologist Kurt Lewin has once coined the term approach-avoidance to describe a conflict, a situation of ambivalence when a person desires that which contain both negative and positive aspects. We want something yet fear the consequences. I truly believe that approach-avoidance reflects what happens to a person training in Aikido. The occurrence is .not rare at all and to be found whenever ambivalence is ignored, with injuries that follow

Kurt Levin claims that the source of the problem is fear that creates patterns of avoidance. A session of training begins; the trainee is being attacked but his body somehow resists. There is a possibility to overcome this resistance, and the outcome will be positive (approaching). If fear takes a leading role, the body will not respond efficiently (avoiding). The avoidance might take two forms: it will respond in some exaggerated manner or surrender altogether, in total denial of fear. Injuries are bound to follow, when bodily response is either out of proportion – to the magnitude of the stimulus, or stop the motion .(altogether (collapse

#### Final Note

O-sensei emphasized harmony as a crucial element in our martial art. Harmony can of course mean different things on different occasions. Nevertheless, I am now quite certain that harmony is first and most related to being able to interpret reality in a very precise manner. This is no trivial thing, to gain that ability, that precision. O-sensei had figured it all out at a very early stage of his career. I hope to have understood what O-sensei really .meant upon emphasizing harmony

