

The Experience of Self/No Self in Aikido

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The Sense of Two

Abstract. Most people pursue awakening in the same way they go after a new car, or a mate, a college education, or becoming CEO. But this is not the same. Those are relative goals. Achieving those things, we use skills that can be learned, whereas awakening does not result from education, as in a gathering of knowledge. Awakening is the very highest art form, the art of letting go of “doing” and dropping into resting in awareness itself. This shift away from achievement and acquisition is the perfect and complete unification of all aspects of life, of directly knowing and experiencing in the same instant. Waaa! It all comes together!

In the practice of Aikido, we say that the purpose of our training is to be one with the universe. I don't think anyone, in any school of thought or practice, ever says that our purpose in life is to be separate. We are all inspired by this idea, and look forward to finding a way to make this experience of “oneness” a reality in our lives.

And yet, our habit is to see objects and people as separate from us, not only in space, but also in time, even though we all only experience existence right here in this place, and in this moment. In terms of time, we can experience a memory of a past action or occurrence, and we can posit a future possibility in our imagination, but both past and future are always experienced here, now. Spatially, because we locate our sense of self here, in this body, we tend to perceive all else that is outside of our body as not-self, or other. In other words, this way of identifying our self as subject, in space and time, causes us to objectify everything else. In this way we create, strengthen, and maintain a solid sense of self and other, a subject/object view of existence, or separation.

Additionally, because of this way we have of viewing how things are, we experience ourselves at a distance from objects, slight or great, as the case may be, not only in relation to our own body, but also our feelings, thoughts, and sensations. Another way of saying this is that we keep a sense of ourselves a little bit distant from the actual experience of being alive, which is always either our senses, our thoughts, or our emotions. We find ourselves looking from a slight distance, a reflection on what is, not in what is. We say, “I have a body,” “I have a feeling,” “I have a thought.” Subject “I” and object “thought, feeling, body.”

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When I first came upon, or noticed, this phenomenon of misperception and found myself apparently inextricably bound to it, I decided that the intelligent approach would be to somehow discover a method to eradicate this pesky sense of self, which seemed to be causing all the problems. However, I soon discovered that this pursuit presents an impossible paradox. How can the self eradicate itself? The traditional search always comes back upon itself, as we discover much to our dismay, that the self we are searching for is in fact the self that is searching. Without a mirror, the eye cannot see itself. And a mirror is not the thing itself, but merely a piece of glass, reflecting a picture of what is.

When I began training Aikido, forty years ago, I immediately noticed that no one seemed to have any concern about this “self problem.” My teachers, Shinichi Suzuki Sensei on Maui, and the founder of our school of Aikido, Master Koichi Tohei, in Japan, told me that by following “the practice,” I would discover the precious freedom from separation that I so longed to experience, and not by thinking about, trying to figure out, or brooding about the sense of, or nature of, a self. In “the practice” this kind of struggle turned out to be a moot point. As Yogi Berra famously said, “In theory, practice and theory are the same. In practice, they are not.”

This “practice,” turned out to be just living my life, but on a very, very deep and committed level, with undaunted attention to what is happening now. We often see a talented sports person, in the midst of a game, exhibit a period of incomprehensible performance. When this happens, we say he or she is “in the zone.” What that “zone” may or may not entail, and how one might come upon such a fantastically useful ability, is a question of great debate, not only because of arguments about method, but because of the apparent intense level of commitment and awareness that must be brought to the moment for this to be achieved, which is completely out of reach, if not unknown, to most of us.

The practice of Aikido that I speak of is essentially repeating over and over, in the *dojo*, on the sitting cushion, and in all relationships, the choice of returning to being present in the moment in full and inclusive awareness of all that arises in experience. If we can be right in it, experiencing immediately and spontaneously, then we have no sense of a separate self, and hence no sense of space between self and other, and we often even have no sense of time passing. We are just in it, with all faculties operating at their maximum, mentally, physically, and emotionally. This is what we are referring to when we say, the purpose of our practice is to be one with the universe. This means to be in our life, in the experience of our life, one hundred percent. This is what we might call “living life completely.”

But when we turn our attention back on ourselves, looking inward to try to discover the sense and purpose of this “self-ness,” we automatically turn away from the natural state of living life completely, as it is. Instead of stepping back away from all that is arising new and fresh in the experience of this right here, right now, we not only engage, but are completely subsumed by, life

itself. When we experience this heightened state of awareness there is only experience itself, not some “one” experiencing, standing separate and apart while observing and reflecting on what is occurring.

Of course, this kind of letting go of our subjective obsession with knowing about what is happening, instead of directly knowing through the immediacy of life, is the deepest of challenges. This is what we call “knowing the nature of original mind” directly, as opposed to knowing about what original mind might be, and being able to explain or describe it to someone else. This would be akin to eating a picture of food when hungry, instead of eating food itself.

Therefore, it is extremely important how we practice. In order to practice effectively, we must understand on a deep level, experientially, what we are all faced with. It is essential that we make our intention clear. “Intention” here means, “What is the purpose of this? What am I doing here in this body, in this life? Why am I doing this practice?” We have to see very clearly this sense of separation we are conditioned to, and how this subject/object view of life causes all of our difficulties, struggles, suffering, our unhappiness and frustrations. We have to see that very clearly, so that we can plainly see the purpose of the training and are inspired to engage in it. If we just take a cursive look at our lives and think, “Oh well, it’s not that bad. I am getting by. Some day I’ll die, but that will be later. Maybe I don’t have to practice right now. I will practice later. When I get older I’ll be automatically wiser.” But if you know any old people who haven’t practiced in their lives, then you know that just getting old doesn’t do it. How you grow old, what you do in every moment, from now until then, determines what kind of experience you will have now and later. What you do today, in this moment, determines how you experience this moment, the next moment, and so on and so forth. So practicing is always now, and directly understanding the “gap,” or separation phenomenon, allows this practice to fully take place.

Stages of Development

A common understanding is that, developmentally, separation is a necessary stage to becoming your self. You have to separate from your mother, and realize that you are a separate individual, and then later maybe you can work on transcending that in some way. You have to be somebody before you can be nobody, don’t you? How does that fit into what I am saying?

Everyone knows we have to go through stages, like learning to drive a car, and that there has to be an observing witness so that we can actually see our behavior and where it may not be in harmony and alignment. We talk to ourselves as we are learning, “Now accelerate slowly, gently let out the clutch, then clutch again, careful now, gently, then shift into second gear, then, oops brake, *brake!*, signal, no that’s the windshield wipers, the other hand, now signal, that’s right, look in all directions, (how can you do that all at once? Ach!) and turn the wheel slowly to the left using both hands,” and so on. Of course, once we mature in our driving practice, all of this becomes what we call “second nature” or “subconscious,” so we no longer need to watch and guide ourselves.

So it is common sense to recognize that there is a purpose for this sense of separation, in the beginning. It gives us a sense of autonomy and participation, allowing us to grow and develop in our own way. The fact that the inability to let go of that way of being ultimately turns out to be the “enemy,” or that which stands in the way of the unification of experience, or living life itself, is also true.

It is said that when we are born, we are experiencing some sense of oneness. And then we begin to experience separation and that develops until we have acquired what some call an “ego,” or a solidified sense of “I.” But along with that sense can come this confusing, and even often agonizing, feeling of separateness, and hence struggle and suffering, because of this schism developed between myself and everything else. And again, even within me, there is separation, between my observer, my “witness,” and my emotions, my sensations, my thoughts. We find ourselves caught apparently irreversibly in this state of a permanent initiation phase, never growing into mature mastery of anything at all. This is fragmentation, not unification, creating and further maintaining a sense of two-ness. And of course the whole point of all practice is that there are not now, and never were, two.

Cutting With My Teacher

During the middle years of my training with my Aikido teacher, Shinichi Suzuki Sensei, we would meet at the *dojo* each afternoon at 5:00 PM. The regular class began at 7:00 PM, so we had more than an hour to practice together on our own. During these years, Suzuki Sensei would cut bokken (the wooden practice sword) with me, every day in front of the mirror in the *dojo*. First he would cut, then I would cut, and as this progressed I got better, and better, and better. My mind and body, my emotional life and physical life became more and more calm and refined. Nonetheless, he always told me, “No, this is still not correct cutting. You must let go of cutting.” During these years, I became convinced that the correct cut must lie right in the mid-point on a scale of too much strength on the one end, and too much control on the other. I had no idea that what he was looking for was something else altogether, something completely outside the realm of the relative world view, a state of mind where such measurable scales cease to exist entirely.

When others saw me cutting in those days, they would often remark at how expert I had become. This made me feel very good, very full of myself. But my teacher just kept saying “No, that’s not it!” I began to be a little confused. I couldn’t figure out what the heck was going on, because as far as I could tell, I was getting really good at this cutting of bokken. But still Suzuki Sensei said, “You don’t understand AT ALL!” Not “You are almost there, you have almost got it. Keep going.” You know, encouragement. There was nothing like that. He said I didn’t get it “at all,” that I was completely missing the point. Can you imagine? This was a great mystery to me.

This process, including the afternoon *dojo* meetings with Sensei, went on for approximately fifteen years. Always he repeated after each of my expert cuts, “No, that’s not it. Why can’t you let go? Cut again.” After this prolonged period of time, I was beginning to feel a bit disheartened,

as you can imagine. What did he mean? Let go of what?!

Then, I remember one Wednesday morning waking up feeling very down about this entire exercise in, what seemed to me to be, futility. As I sat through my early morning meditation that day, I began to become more and more angry at my teacher. Why did he not see how much I needed the encouragement that he so freely seemed to shower on all his other students? As the day rolled on I found it impossible to let go of my anger, and even decided at several points to just stay home that afternoon, and forget the whole thing. Of course, after all of the fifteen years of stubborn effort, and the inherently deep respect I held for my teacher, I could not bring myself to do that. So I went to the *dojo* at the regular appointed hour. And as I drove to the *dojo* that afternoon, I began to notice a shift in my emotions. The closer I got to the *dojo*, the more I began to feel that it was simply hopeless, and that there was really nothing more for me to discover about cutting the bokken. I arrived at the *dojo* in a state of mind completely devoid of hope. I changed clothes into my training gi, picked up the bokken, met Suzuki Sensei on the mat and bowed in greeting. Turning towards the mirror, instead of waiting for him to set the pace by cutting first, I simply cut fully, just once. Suzuki Sensei exclaimed, "That's it! Now do it again." So I smugly cut again, repeating what I thought was the exact same cut. "Nope, that's not it." The shock of hearing his positive response to the first cut had elicited such a self-congratulatory emotional reaction in me, that the second time I cut was full of my own pride of accomplishment. Hope was suddenly and miraculously reborn in me. Thus, naturally, this was not "it."

Following this singular event in my training life, we continued for approximately four to five more years of these meetings, cutting together as before. Now, however, as the true understanding and appreciation of what my teacher had done for me sank deeper and deeper into my mind and body, more and more often he would say, "Yes, that's it. You are understanding." Then, finally, one day Suzuki Sensei simply nodded and said to me, "OK, now you know. You can now teach bokken any time to any one with my blessing."

So here is a prime example of the ongoing paradox in all of our training. If it were not for my continuing sense of hope, there is no way that I would have had the fortitude to stick it out for fifteen-plus years. Therefore it is obvious that hope is an essential element of our practice. On the other hand, eventually I was to discover that my clinging to the hope of success itself was preventing me from awakening to what my teacher was pointing to.

"You may begin to practice with the idea that it will help you in your life, but as time goes on, you realize that you have become more interested in what you can accomplish through the practice (awakening, presence, whatever you want to call it). But as still more time goes by, you come to appreciate that any kind of goal, any kind of objective, prevents you from being present in your experience and, increasingly, the only thing to do is experience whatever is arising as completely as possible."

Ken McLeod

We are often motivated to some kind of practice because, in frustration, we get tired of struggling, and hope for something more. Our understanding of personal development can be a relative, limited one, as mine was for so long in the story above, a notion of gaining something that we have not yet attained, instead of letting go entirely of the idea of gain.

Of course, this kind of phenomenon is by no means limited to the practice of cutting with the wooden sword. We get tired of being isolated and separate from those we love, from every group we know, from the things in our life, and long for more. We feel separated from money, so we want some more. We feel separated from power, so we want to get more. Not only hope and desire, but even a sense of fear of loss is created this way. There is attraction arising in concert with this sense of self, but of course there is also aversion, since whatever we are separated from can threaten us.

This is the great mistake that Chogyam Trungpa called “spiritual materialism.” Whether we are chasing success in the gross or the spiritual domains, if we are still tied to a relative idea of gradually acquiring something we don’t now have, we miss the mark. This is the self-idea strengthening itself, building more internal structure resulting in a deeper and deeper self-obsession.

Is There Loss?

Some worry that they may lose something precious in this process of letting go, and cease to function as well in business or relationships. However, it turns out that quite the opposite is true. We have spent our entire lives building our history, our education, discovering talents, and refining intelligence. And as long as we are alive, it is always here. After all, where would it go?! There is no need to worry about preserving this, or clinging to it in any way. It takes care of itself, and is always here to serve us. Otherwise, how would we find our way to our home again at the end of the day? None of our relative abilities go anywhere, and are always available, when needed. It’s just that we are no longer a slave to seeing things from that perspective, exclusively. By letting go of our desperate need to know and control what is transpiring in order to benefit ourselves and our loved ones, we gradually discover that everything works much more efficiently, all by itself. Our job turns out to be simply paying attention. This kind of living spontaneously can be harrowing, at first, and none of this is going to happen all at once. We begin to loosen the reins a little bit at a time, each moment, each day, each week, a bit more open, a bit more trusting, a bit more free of the illusion of self-control.

The Ten Ox Herding Pictures

To teach this principle in Zen, one of the tools used is what has become known as “The Ten Ox Herding Pictures.” In the story, a young initiate is told by his teacher to go off into the forest and to capture the wild ox, to tame the ox, and then even to get the ox to allow him to ride on his back. Once that is accomplished he is to come back into the village and resume his normal life. This wild ox is of course mind. So the story here is that in the beginning, as a neophyte, he has dual consciousness, an experience of separation, which of course involves all urges, desires, and fears. He is frustrated and he wants to get enlightened, to be free of his suffering. That’s the big desire. In his mind, he wants to be free of his “impurities,” not realizing that that very urge itself is an “impurity,” from his own perspective. So the teacher says to go into the forest, capture and ride the ox, to get to know the nature of mind. In other words, he is being directed to have an experience of non-duality, that which cannot be measured or described or defined or conceptualized in any way. Go and have this experience, and once you have had it, then come back into the village and continue with your job and family, etc. In other words, re-join the dual world. He begins in the dual world, then he has to have an experience of non-dual, and then he must be able to retain that, and yet return to live in both the dual and non-dual worlds of experience at the same time. Dual/non-dual. “First there is a mountain, then there is no mountain, then there is.”

At the beginning you are separate, and then once you capture and are able to ride the ox, you experience unification. But then again, you ride your newfound ox-friend back into the village to live a normal life as before, except that now you have recognized and accepted the ox and you don’t have to seek any longer. You see that there is nothing whatsoever to seek. First, we experience a dual, self and other, existence, and then we mature and have the experience of non-dual or non-separation. But that’s not the end of it. Because this dual existence continues in our world of experience as long as we continue to be in the human body. So we have to come back. Then we can call this living in “dual/non-dual,” which has always been taught and practiced as the highest level of realization.

Both at the Same Time

Again, we never have to worry about losing this autonomous sense, because the awareness of duality is always available to access, as needed. Here maybe is the ultimate paradox. Here is the apparently contradictory experience of unification together with a sense of separation, and they both have to be accepted and lived in at the same time. If we are in either view, exclusively, then that’s not the whole picture. As lived, it feels something like discovering that this duality, or relativity, is a kind of a dream that never leaves us. From this, we get the popular extension that it’s a bit like going to the movies. We laugh and cry, and are to some degree caught up in the action, but we never quite forget that the person up there on the screen is not really dying, those two are not really married “in real life.” However, this cliché of “in it but not of it” doesn’t quite do it here, though it often feels this way. Living it is much more like accepting absolutely everything as it is, without judgment, there being no option to what is.

That said, we can never fully understand this in any kind of conceptual or intellectual way. It remains a kind of mystery. You can experience it and you can know it, directly. But it can never be properly understood in reflection. If it could be understood intellectually, it wouldn't be what it is, everything at once. It's just that the nature of this is not something that we can look at from afar, with a sense of separation or space, and think, "Oh yeah, I think I'll go there. That looks attractive to me." Granted, I do describe these different conditions, and what leads to them, and something about what the experience is like. But it is very unsatisfactory and even potentially misleading. That's why we have to say that these words are not really it. All words are poetry in this sense, merely pointing to something that cannot be expressed directly, except through inference.

In short, as long as you're looking at a picture of it, that's not it. We want it to be pictured for us, so we can see where we are headed on this journey. However, no matter how well the map is drawn, by its very nature it is not the country you will enter into, and to which it is referring. The real can only be experienced. We just draw pictures here in order to tempt you to do this practice so that you can experience it, not to give you a peevish substitute for the real. I don't want you to be satisfied with my stories about it. Never believe. Always doubt and find out for yourself. Who is willing to do this?

When we are practicing, or even now, when you are reading this, is it possible that non-separation is the entirety of the experience for both of us? Or is unification different than this, something to be yearned for, to be obtained some time in the future? There are two people here, but then at the same time, there is only one. How can this be? There is no objectivity, no subjectivity. We don't label the parts of our experience as separate entities, which creates a sense of duality. There is just this experience. It's possible to experience sound, sight, smell, emotion, movement, and thought all at once. This is full awareness. We open ourselves in this way, we open our heart to the experience of this awareness that is everything in the moment. Then there are no longer separate items, this and that. This is mind/body unification and right away we can move, and it's no problem, and your partner follows right along because he or she is now part of that experience you are having, whether it is on the mat, or in any life relationship.

Aikido is the practice itself, and at the same time, a perfect metaphor for this. When I am teaching, I describe it, and also I always demonstrate it. I always want to show these three ways of being, one after the other, dual, non-dual, and then dual/non-dual. However, this can't be properly understood through observation, unless you are actually experiencing them for yourself at that moment. And even then, there is still an element of mystery for all of us. That's the beauty of this life. If it could all be explained away, that would limit the value, since that would always be leaving the most important thing out.

Living this mystery is a wild ride, producing a deep abiding joy, the thrill of being awake and alive and aware, and yet never knowing what's next. Whatever is next is never good or bad, it's just what's next. And it is a breathtaking gift to be alive in this life.

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