

Balance

by

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I deliberately placed the title of this article in a weird place and even though it is a deliberate choice, it feels uncomfortable. Balance seems like such a simple word, but it is profound and fundamental to the fabric of the universe. In our aikido practice, it is essential and is the foundation stone on which everything else balances.

Looking at this from the perspective of the individual, physically, we need to maintain a balanced posture. It is hard to receive or deliver any real power, (*I don't mean physical strength, though it's true for that too*), when you are significantly out of balance. In the Ki Aikido tradition, they employ a wonderful testing system that can show you that you only need to be slightly out of alignment to be knocked over with the lightest of touch.

Once you sort out the physical side of things, then you need to address the mental component. Put simply, it's hard to deliver your best, when you are feeling sad, depressed, angry or any other negative emotion that you wish to add to the list. Again the Ki Aikido testing system offers a great way to demonstrate the impact of having a negative mind. We all know that to do our best in anything, we have to be feeling relaxed, confident and happy. This isn't something that's just true in aikido. We can see that truth in everything, but obviously so in any performance art or sport. The best simply seem to have more time, more style and to be totally at ease with what they doing. It is the same with great leaders.

You won't be in balance until you have mind and body unification and it is no easy task to maintain this state of being. Even O Sensei was not able to maintain that state consistently. In his own words:

“My students think I don't lose my centre. That is not so; I simply recognize it sooner, and get back faster.”

On a personal level, it doesn't stop with your physical/mental self. It expands into the way you live your life. Many of us face pressures from a lot of directions, but perhaps the most common are work, family and self. All too commonly, it seems to me that people's priorities are listed in that order, but for a healthy society, the reverse should be true. It is important to find time to cater for one's own needs, because if you don't give yourself the space to be who you are, then you cannot give the best of yourself to those that you love and those that you commit to. Sorting out the work/life balance in society today is a huge issue and the cost of getting it wrong, as I believe we are, even bigger.

So it is clear that this is a lifetime's work that we probably never truly master. And even if we could, perhaps to truly appreciate the benefits of being in balance, you sometimes need to fall out of it. (*Most of us get plenty of practice at that*).

If this was not enough, then even if you are somewhere on the journey to mastering your own balance, the task grows in scale exponentially, when you have to find balance when engaging with someone else. To me, this is the essence of the art of aikido. We do not live in isolation, and to get the best out of life we need to find a way to work positively with those

people that touch our lives. On the mat, we are presented with the toughest of scenarios, i.e. someone who is trying to attack us physically with the goal of controlling us and potentially destroying us. Our aim is to find unity and to bring about a positive outcome, not just for ourselves but also for our attacker. When we can do this consistently and leave our attackers scratching their heads wondering what happened, or better still smiling, then we know that we really are making progress.

And still the task expands, because it's one thing to begin to master things on the mat and quite another to deal with what life throws at you off the mat. My wife will attest to that! (*It's always hardest to be your best self with those that are closest to you.*) That said, it's dealing with the driver that cuts you up, or the awkward official, or the bolshie teenager, where you can truly measure your ability to turn a negative situation into something more positive, and this is where it really counts. Life is where you get to practice the principles that you learn on the mat and then it doesn't generally matter how good your nikkyo is. It's tough for sure, but the key component to mastering these occurrences is 'keeping your cool,' but all this boils down to is maintaining your equilibrium.

And still the concept of balance expands, because it goes beyond your individual dealings, into your community, (or should I say communities), into society at large, into your country, between countries and then the planet as a whole and beyond that the solar system, the galaxy and the universe.

Our actions, usually seemingly insignificant, reverberate into all of these and it is impossible to know the unforeseen consequences, other than to say, that positive actions generally have positive consequences and negative actions, negative consequences. As we reap we sow and as any good farmer will tell you, if you wish to reap a decent crop then you need to be in tune with the seasons.

March 2018