

Hard, Soft, and Intuition

If you were compelled to categorize Karate into either a Hard or a Soft martial art, you would undoubtedly choose Hard. Conversely, if you were compelled to categorize Aiki into either a Hard or Soft martial art, you would no doubt choose Soft. I agree.

Now, put yourself into an Aiki application, a lock or takedown for example. Your partner is resisting, and the technique is not working as you had expected. Is your first inclination to do the technique softer and more subtly? Most human beings (you may be the brilliant, especially well-trained, and highly skilled exception) would immediately do the technique faster and harder.

You know you can change to a different technique, hit the fellow to “loosen him up”, or bail out altogether, but your natural intuition has already convinced you that harder and faster will do the job. After all, if the lid does not come off the pickle jar easily, you unscrew it harder and faster don't you? Wouldn't it be absurd to think that a subtle change or a softer application would lead to lid removal?

When we learn the movements of any Aiki system, we need to use our natural physical abilities. Performing *Shiho Nage* or *Kote Hineri (Sankyō)* correctly means moving correctly so that your partner cannot easily counter you and so that he will fall (or wince) when the technique is completed. Having reached a black belt rank with the ability to perform our techniques against 95% of the students in our school 95% of the time, it is only logical to think that our proper form and unhesitating execution will put our partner in his place whether he likes it or not. After all, that is what the art is supposed to do, right? In essence, we have learned how to efficiently unscrew the cap of the pickle jar, so if the cap resists, we just do more of what we already have learned. And intuitively, “more” means faster and harder.

But Aiki is counterintuitive. At least advanced Aiki is. The root art from which Aiki systems descend is Daitō-ryū, which is purported to have different types of techniques within its large panoply of *waza*. Over the years these categories have been reduced to three: *ju-jutsu* (pliant skills), *aiki-ju-jutsu* (harmonious spirit pliant skills), and *aiki-no-jutsu* (the skills of harmonious spirit). Without getting into the variations of skills in each group or arguing about what kind of technique typifies each, let's make three simple analogies in order to understand each category.

In applying **ju-jutsu** *waza*, proper form is desired and techniques are applied fast and hard much like kempo or karate techniques. In essence, the technique is done *to* the partner, and therefore the speed and power feel intuitive. In **aiki-ju-jutsu** *waza*, there is more off-balancing and leading of the partner so that he contributes to his own demise. In essence, the partner does

at least part of the technique to himself. The action feels more precise and skillful and seems to employ less energy. In **aiki-no-jutsu** (the most esoteric and difficult category), the practitioner may react to the attacker so subtly that the attacker does not even notice it and then finds himself in a very awkward and/or extremely off-balanced position.

Is there any wonder that aiki-no-jutsu is the least understood and least applied method? When the practitioner barely moves and his partner tends to dance around him either in pain or in an off-balanced state, or is hung-up, frozen in space, it is clearly not a Hard martial art. The practitioner is clearly very skilled, well practiced, and also has been able to suppress his intuitive reactions. If he did not, his Aiki would revert back to aiki-ju-jutsu or even ju-jutsu. In other words, if he did not repress his natural tendencies, his technique would get harder.

This is not to say that ju-jutsu and aiki-ju-jutsu are not effective—they are. But effective Ju-jutsu and Aiki is not necessarily Soft Aiki. In fact, for most practitioners of any Aiki art, the Softer the application, the more rare and more advanced the skill.

Next time: Why Can't Karate Be Soft?