

Aikido for Self Discovery:
Blueprint for an Enlightened Life

Book Review

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Introduction

In reading *Aikido for Self Discovery: Blueprint for an Enlightened Life*, one might be surprised to learn that Stan Wrobel holds a Ph.D. from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and is a practicing chemist. *Aikido for Self Discovery* is unique in the library of Aikido books in that Dr. Wrobel doesn't describe specific techniques. Rather, Dr. Wrobel discusses Aikido as an art. It's the practice of Aikido *as art* and not merely as the collection of techniques that leads to an enlightened life. But what is art?

Art is a personal expression. It is not a cloning process. The learning process leads to originals and not to mass-produced reproductions of somebody else's expression. (Wrobel, 2001, p. 16)

It's precisely the nature of Aikido as art that shapes a practitioner's very being. More specifically, Aikido is a personal expression involving at least two people.

The art of Aikido is an interplay where I engage you and you engage me. It goes beyond the paradigm of attacker and defender. It cultivates unisons where life just is and we create our experience. All of the descriptive words that establish distinctions lose their power to control our thinking and actions. In the interplays of our experience, we stay connected, spirits and energies merging in our reality. We choose our experience: but who are the "we" that organize the minds that shape our behaviors? (Wrobel, 2001, pp. 130-131)

At its core, then, *Aikido for Self Discovery* is a spiritual text. However, it's not a spiritual text in the historical sense (Gleason, 1995) nor does it suffer the pitfalls of a romanticists view of Aikido (Friedman, 2005). Dr. Wrobel systematically connects distinctive characteristics of Aikido to the practitioner's integrated development (mind, body, spirit). In this regard, the book's subtitle, *Blueprint for an Enlightened Life*, could be the main title.

Summary of Content

The book's organization progresses from a very basic discussion reading human beings by watching their movements. Dr. Wrobel next asks probing questions regarding perception and awareness.

If perceptions are conditioned behavior patterns, then changing the way in which we view the world provides us with a way of learning how to learn to do things differently.
(Wrobel, 2001, p. 41)

This is the level on which Dr. Wrobel engages the topic. Aikido is specifically brought into the storyline in the form of short vignettes. He then uses elements of the vignette to map elements of the art of Aikido to the impact those elements has in altering the practitioner's relationship with the world (which includes the practitioner's own self).

The middle of the text is concerned with higher order aspects of Aikido practice: Nature of Attack; Receiving and Blending; Controlling and Leading. The vignettes often narrate the internal conversation in a practitioner's head during some aspect of Aikido training. This internal chatter has a very familiar feel to it; it's very easy to identify with the conversation. This literary mechanism works well to make the material more personal and relevant.

The book ends strongly with a discussion on more complex aspects of Aikido: Presence, Self, Experience of Flow, and Awareness of Center. While these terms may or may not be familiar, Dr. Wrobel adequately covers the material for any level of familiarity.

Strengths and Weaknesses

Aikido for Self Discovery is an approachable text even without prior experience with Aikido. This is not a technical book and there are no techniques to learn. However, it is a book

that discusses the major characteristics of a complex and often subtle art. It is a more approachable text should one have *some* training experience.

Structurally, the text follows a logical progression and builds upon previous material.

Mechanically, the writing style is easy to digest with clear prose.

Conclusion

Aikido for Self Discovery delivers on the goal of outlining the key elements of the art as a Blueprint for an Enlightened Life. It never intended to describe Aikido techniques but there are many good texts available (Shifflett, 1999, Stevens, 1984). Aikido for Self Discovery is a nice complement for Living the Martial Way (Forrest, 1992) which covers developing mental strength and for Aikido and the Dynamic Sphere (Westbrook & Ratti, 1970) which covers the philosophy of Aikido.

References

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