

Introduction to Jo

Jo is one of the traditional weapons found in Japanese Budo. The jo is very versatile, since both ends as well as the length of the jo can be used. Jo techniques are to be found in many different Ryuha (martial arts schools or styles), and schools such as Muso Ryu teach wonderful techniques using this fascinating weapon.

I would like to emphasize that the jo techniques as taught in Aiki Jo differ from the usage of jo in other styles in certain ways. It is important to stress the fact that this does not mean that one way is right and another wrong, merely that the movements, body positions and tai sabaki (body evasions) are connected to the empty handed techniques of aikido and therefore in certain areas do not resemble the other jo styles.

The Lineage of Aiki Jo
The lineage of Aiki Jo is less clear than that of Aiki Ken. In my book "Bukiwaza," I have written: In the period during his military service 1903-1906 O-Sensei trained in a Yagyu Ryu school in Osaka, possibly Yagyu Shingan Ryu. In 1937 Ueshiba, together with his disciple Zenzaburo Akazawa, formally enrolled in the Kashima Shinto-ryu sword school based in Kashima, Ibaraki prefecture.

Ueshiba invited instructors to come and teach regularly in Iwama. These sword forms form the foundation for the Aiki-ken techniques - unique to Aikido. In regard to the jo as practiced by O-Sensei, the technical lineage is not as evident as with the ken. According to Stanley Pranin (Aikido historian and editor-in-chief of Aiki News/Aikido Journal), Aritoshi Murashige (an early student of Ueshiba) would sometimes practice the jo at the Kobukan Dojo in the early 1930s. Murashige had studied Katori Shinto Ryu within the context of the Kobudo Kenkyukai at the Kodokan.

The jo techniques that O-Sensei compiled and taught seem to be a creation of his own, encompassing the movements of weapons such as yari (spear), juken (bayonet) and ken (sword), as well as having a strong influence from the tai jutsu techniques. Of course there are similarities to be found in the movements of aiki jo and other schools, seeing that there are only a certain amount of ways to rationally move when using this weapon. But the rotational movement of the hips, the connectedness of the weapon to the body positions and much more indicate that aiki jo truly is a creation of O-Sensei's own.

The Connection between Aiki Jo and Tai Jutsu
My teacher Morihiro Saito Sensei often quoted O-Sensei, saying "when doing weapons, you should have the feeling of tai jutsu, and when doing tai jutsu you should have the feeling of doing weapons." The more one trains in Aiki Ken and Aiki Jo, the more evident this becomes.

The crossover influence of weapons to one's tai jutsu - as well as vice versa - is very evident. Saito Sensei would tell of O-Sensei often saying "Its all the same!" meaning weapons and tai jutsu. In traditional aikido one does not have to use a different system of body movements, evasions, parries or techniques depending upon what you are defending against - it truly is "all the same!" The basic movements of strikes, thrusts, parries, evasions and more are all to be found in the Suburi forms.

These forms teach you how to make the jo a part of you, and not just a stick that you move around with your hands. Every movement you make with the jo you will find a hip movement that goes with it. You never move the jo - and thereby the arms - without moving the hips. And this is as it should be in tai jutsu as well. You use suburi to learn to move the jo in connection with your seichusen (centerline), both in thrusts as well as in strikes. Arm movements follow the centerline, and do not stray off to the sides of your body.

I always think of Saito Sensei telling people "It's not baseball!" when seeing them making big swinging movements when striking with the jo. Saito Sensei would say that we should always be in a good stable position when using the jo, so that one could use the jo to throw one's opponent if necessary. He would also stress that one should be able to go change into a tai jutsu application, such as a jo dori or a takedown or pin, at any point in our technique, hereby further emphasizing the importance of always using stable natural stances and movements in our weapons work.

The position of the hands also reflects the connection to tai jutsu: the use of tegatana (the handblade or sword-edge of the hand) is the basic foundation for the way we use our hands in aikido. It should be that when we open our grip when holding in aikido our hand opens up into the tegatana position (there are of course certain exceptions to this rule).

The same is the case when holding the jo: our hands should be holding in a natural, strong position, without excess rotating or bending of the wrist. Our arms are also held in the slight arc that constitutes the extension of the tegatana hand position, clearly exemplified in the Kokyu Ho tai jutsu forms. The arms should be neither too straight (overextended) nor too bent, thereby creating a 90 degree angle at the elbow. The 90 degree angle weakens the arm.

We also learn to move to a 45 degree angle when performing many of the suburi movements. In the old days, Saito Sensei used to teach the tsuki (thrusts) and uchi komi (strikes) of the suburi with a large 45 degree body movement to the off the line of attack. He later emphasized a more straightforward attacking form in the suburi, and introduced the tai sabaki when practicing the paired forms of jo awase.

This was to emphasize the difference of the roles of uchi (attacker) - moving in a more straight line for the attack, and uke (defender), using the defensive, off-the-line tai sabaki forms. Way to Improve in Aiki Jo When practicing jo (or ken for that matter), Saito Sensei would always emphasize the benefits of training in front of a mirror. He would always say "The mirror is the strictest sensei!" Using the mirror also teaches you to focus outwards - to see yourself from the outside, so to speak. Look at your posture to make sure you are in balance in all directions. Seen from the front, when performing strikes, your head should be in a nice straight line with your centerline. Oftentimes when practicing weapons, people tend to tilt their head in the direction of the movement of the weapon. In striking movements this is not necessary.

When performing tsuki (thrusts), the body is in a more sideways position (hito-e-mi), with the hips sideways as well. This makes keeping the head pointing completely straight forward a bit too much of a strain on the neck. The head may be turned slightly, and this will bring the head more in line with the centerline of your body, and also loosen the tension in the neck. Give yourself time in "Zanshin." Zanshin means "continuing spirit." It refers to the final position of your technique.

You should have a feeling of your energy surging outwards even after the actual physical movement is finished. While holding your final form, let your energy continue outwards, and at the same time listen to what your body is telling you. You will, if you keep the position for several seconds, feel if you are off balance or are out of line.

Doing this in front of a mirror will greatly improve your weapons work very quickly. But you must give yourself time to look and listen to your body.

When training aikido, or any other martial art for that matter, we must be able to do our techniques with confidence and conviction, yet at the same time always keep ourselves open to sensing where we need to better ourselves. We need to do each technique as if it were the first and last. And at the same time, be able to sense and register our weaknesses, to make our next "first and last" execution even better!

Gambarimasho! (Let's do our best!)