

## **Go no sen / sen no sen / sensen no sen**

These three terms refer to the different kinds of timing used in dealing with an attacker in budo training. At one of the aikido summer camps in Denmark, Ulf Evenås and I once asked Saito Sensei about these terms. He said that they were used in iaido or kenjutsu training. I have never heard Saito Sensei use these terms himself when referring to the timing of the response to an attack in aikido. I believe his attitude towards the use of these terms came from O-Sensei.

In an article from Aikido Journal there is an interview with O-Sensei from 1957. The following is an excerpt that pertains to this subject:

**O Sensei:** In Aikido, there is absolutely no attack. To attack means that the spirit has already lost. We adhere to the principle of absolute nonresistance, that is to say, we do not oppose the attacker. Thus, there is no opponent in Aikido. The victory in Aikido is masakatsu and agatsu; since you win over everything in accordance with the mission of heaven, you possess absolute strength.

**B:** Does that mean ou no sen? (also called go no sen; this term refers to a defensive response to an attack.)

**O Sensei:** Absolutely not. It is not a question of either sensen no sen or sen no sen. If I were to try to verbalize it I would say that you control your opponent without trying to control him. That is, the state of continuous victory. There isn't any question of winning over or losing to an opponent. In this sense, there is no opponent in Aikido. Even if you have an opponent, he becomes a part of you, a partner you control only.

In O-Sensei's first statement of the excerpt he says there is no attack. I believe that he is referring to a combative situation as I will describe in full later on in this article: the attacker has already chosen his role. His intention to attack is clear. What also must be taken into account is the fact that O-Sensei possessed such a high level of perception that he surpassed this kind of concept of timing completely. O-Sensei also refers to two important terms: masakatsu (correct victory) and agatsu (self-victory). This is a reference to one of his favorite sayings: "masakatsu, agatsu, katsu hayabi" (correct victory, self-victory, the day of swift victory). This is often interpreted to mean that correct victory is winning over your own self or ego. When reaching this state of selflessness, then this is the way to swift victory (not only in martial contexts but also in life itself).

O-Sensei goes on to say that it is not a question of sensen no sen or sen no sen. As stated earlier, O-Sensei was on a much higher level of perception than the concepts these terms indicate. But for those of us who follow the path of aiki without possessing the martial genius of the founder of aikido, I hope that my examples of these terms can be of some help in understanding the intricacies of timing and awareness inherent in the fascinating world of aikido.

The Japanese character for "sen" can also be read as "saki." It means "before" and even sometimes "after" in certain contexts! But in the terms go no sen, sen no sen and sensen no sen, it is an abbreviation of sorts for the word "sente" meaning initiative or lead. The "te" in sente means hand, so sente directly translates as "before hand." In budo, sente refers to an attack or the initiative to attack. In karate there is a saying: "karate niwa, sente wa nashi." This means "in karate, there are no attacks." This is a fine example of the defensive attitude found in traditional karate. This defensive attitude is inherent in traditional budo in general. There are, however, ways of taking control in a combative situation and leading the opponent's "ki" or intention, without having to wait for the attacker to start the attack.

When facing an opponent in a combative situation, the conditions are already set: you are facing a person intent on fighting you. The case should be, if you have behaved according to proper etiquette, that you have given the attacker no reason to fight you, and you have attempted to resolve the impending confrontation by all means possible, to the extent of removing yourself from the

presence of the attacker. When all else fails, then it is time to defend yourself. This is the presupposed basis of the situation that we are in when we face our opponent during budo practice. Therefore it is morally justifiable to, if necessary, use a technique that draws forth an attack from your opponent, hereby creating a possibility to counter the opponent's attack: *sensen no sen*.

To start from the beginning, let us look at *go no sen*. *Go* means "after." *Go no sen* is the timing that is often used in budo when responding to an attack. In aikido, an example would be stepping to the inside of the line of attack, parrying the attacking hand and executing *shihonage* when defending against *yokomen uchi*. In aiki-ken it could be exemplified by *migi awase*, with *uke tachi* stepping off the line of attack to the right and counterstriking with *shomen uchi*. In *migi awase*, we move in harmony with the attacker, but it is the attacker that is taking the initiative in the attack and we are mirroring his or her movements.

*Sen no sen* means before the attack. Sometimes this timing is also called *mae no sen*, *mae* also meaning before. *Sen no sen* implies that, for example in weapons practice, *uke* is aware of *uchi's* intention of attacking and right at the time when *uchi* is starting to attack, steps in and stops the attack. This could be exemplified in aiki-ken by the movement in which *uke tachi* steps directly in with *tsuki* at the moment when *uchi tachi* lifts his sword up to strike *shomen uchi*. This movement can be seen beautifully executed by O-Sensei in many of the old films. In aiki-jo, the movement in *kumi jo* number eight is a good example of *sen no sen*: *uchi* is standing in *tsuki no kamae*, as is *uke*. *Uchi* does *hayagaeshi*, intending to attack with *yokomen uchi*. As *uchi* steps forward while lifting the *jo* up and around in *jodan gaeshi uchi*, *uke* slide-steps straight in under *uchi's jo*, thrusting directly forward at *uchi*. In *tai jutsu*, the outward parry used against *yokomen uchi* is a good example of *sen no sen*: as *uke* lifts his hand up over his head and starts to swing his handblade forward in *yokomen uchi*, *nage* slide-steps forward to the outside and stops *uke's* hand before it gains too much momentum.

*Sensen no sen* is an even more refined concept in regards to timing. The term consists of a repetition of the term *sen*. So this refers to the timing before *sen no sen*. It is the case of initiating a movement intended to lead the attacker's spirit as well as to draw forth an actual attack, in order to utilize this attack for a defensive technique. Saito Sensei often said: "*aite no ki wo yobidasu*," to call out the *ki* of your opponent. Some people may think that this goes against the attitude of never attacking in aikido. In this case, one must recognize the training situation, as well as an actual self-defense situation, for what it is: all attempts to defuse the conflict have been tried to no avail, and therefore we are faced with an impending attack from our opponent. The opponent has already decided to attack, the intention is there, and the actual physical attack is impending. In this case, we are not attacking an innocent individual, we are responding to a situation that is clearly a threat to our safety. It is therefore morally justifiable to call out the attack of your opponent. You are making him commit the attack that he already has intended to execute, but you are controlling the circumstances of the situation by leading him.

A good example of *sensen no sen* in *tai jutsu* is *shomen-uchi*. Saito Sensei often referred to O-Sensei's book, entitled "*Budo*," in the case of performing correct *shomen-uchi*. O-Sensei clearly stated that *nage* should initiate the movement by striking toward *uke's* face with the handblade, bringing the hand from the starting position at about waist-height and upward towards *uke's* face. *Uke* blocks this movement, hereby enabling *nage* to utilize *uke's* blocking arm for a given technique. This movement has all but disappeared from most aikido schools. I believe this is due to a misunderstanding of the principle of *sensen no sen*; the belief that *nage's* initiating movement would be considered an attack, thereby going against the defensive principles of aikido. The lack of understanding of this point has resulted, in many aikido schools, with *uke* attacking with a downward-moving *shomen-uchi*, and *nage* blocking this attack. This results in the breaking of an important basic principle of aikido: never to go directly against the force of your opponent's attack

once it is fully set in motion. Saito Sensei often made the point that when defending against a downward-moving shomen-uchi, nage should move off the line of attack and never attempt to block this strike. This results in certain techniques being applicable, for instance irimi nage or kote gaeshi to the outside, or shihonage or kokyu nage to the inside, and others not, for example ikkyo and other techniques based on the same initial movement.

In aiki-ken, *sensen no sen* can be exemplified in the *maki otoshi* movement found in *san no tachi* (third *kumi tachi*). In the initial movement, *uke tachi* sweeps *uchi tachi*'s sword away with *maki otoshi*, and *uchi tachi* uses the momentum of the sweeping movement to continue into a *yokomen* attack. The *maki otoshi* sweeping movement is also intended to create an opening for *uke tachi* to strike *uchi tachi*'s wrist, but this movement can also be seen as a means to draw forth *uchi tachi*'s initial *yokomen* attack, hereby enabling *uke tachi* to parry, and finally to counterstrike in the second *yokomen* attack from *uchi tachi*.

Another very good example of *sensen no sen* in *tai jutsu*, this time on an even more advanced level than in the basic *shomen uchi* techniques, is the technique that carries the beautiful name "yamabiko no michi," meaning "path of a mountain echo." The name of the technique alludes to the initiating hand movement of *nage* resembling the voice being projected outwards, and *uke*'s reaction being the echo. This is an *irimi nage* technique calling for *nage* to start by dynamically initiating *shomen uchi* toward *uke* and, before making contact with *uke*'s parrying hand, flowing into *tai sabaki* to *uke*'s side. This *tai sabaki* to *uke*'s side leads directly into a body turn together with the movement of *nage*'s arm projecting towards *uke*'s face for the *irimi nage* throw. When done dynamically, with full *ki*, *nage* can throw *uke* without making physical contact at all during the execution of the technique.

There are other fine examples of aikido techniques that fit with these three concepts of timing. I recommend readers to try to find them in their training. And although we will never reach the martial genius of founder O-Sensei Morihei Ueshiba, I believe we should study his words and beliefs, and not let these three terms be the limits of our attempts to follow in his footsteps. We should consider them as a means to help us understand the intricacies of perception in budo practice, and strive for even higher levels than these terms represent.

Yours in Aiki,

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