

AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF AIKIDO

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A SENIOR HONORS THESIS

IN

ANTHROPOLOGY

THE COLORADO COLLEGE

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## NOTES ON JAPANESE USAGE

- Pronouncing Japanese vowels:  
a=(arm)    i=(kee)    u=(ule)  
e=(eg)    o=(oe)    ai=(eye)
- "y" in Japanese words is a consonant.
- A repeated consonant (*bokken*) indicates a glottal stop.
- Japanese don't distinguish plurals from singulars. Like the English word "fish," discern its plurality from context.
- Sensei and Senpai are honorific titles which always follow after names of certain respected people.
- I have written names in the Western style, with given name first.
- I have not distinguished long (double) vowels from short vowels.

## PREFACE

This thesis has two seemingly contradictory guiding forces. The first is the attempt to bring the Japanese martial art aikido to some sort of academic, anthropological understanding. The second is to express my own experiences and subsequent views on aikido in the most honest and accurate way possible. The contradiction appears when the style of writing the first becomes clouded with confusing jargon that makes the second impossible.

If anthropology has taught me anything, it has taught me that there is usually a very rational way to understand such cultural "contradictions." There is no reason to consider the two sorts of understandings I seek--personal and academic--to be contradictory, just as there is no reason to label the platypus a paradox of nature simply because it doesn't fit neatly into our taxonomies of the animal kingdom. Robert Pirsig is insightful on the matter:

The platypus isn't doing anything paradoxical at all. It isn't having any problems. Platypi have been laying eggs and suckling their young for millions of years before there were any zoologists to come along and declare it illegal. The real mystery, the real enigma, is how mature, objective, trained scientific observers can blame their own goof on a poor innocent platypus. (1991: 116-7)

To fit platypi and aikido into our academic understanding, we must take apart the puzzle of life that we have pieced together and rework it so these pieces fit.

The first piece of the puzzle in this thesis is the side of aikido. This side argues that no amount of words, books, or philosophy can yield a true understanding of aikido. One must hit the mats and really sweat it out if one hopes to tap into aikido's greatest secrets. Like Buddhist enlightenment, it must be experienced to be understood. And then, the reasoning goes, one will find the source of the secrecy: the truth of aikido is something that is beyond the scope of human vocabulary.

Then comes the side of ethnography, which seeks almost systematically to defy such assertions. Ethnography is the attempt to put such foreign, difficult, and esoteric understandings into familiar terms, though these terms can be equally esoteric jargon, familiar only among the ranks of anthropologists. Robert Pirsig writes of the protective wall of jargon in social science, which he believes is a sort of gate around studies through which only those indoctrinated to the ways of academic social science may pass (1991: 68-69).

There the two sides sit behind their protective walls of ineffability and jargon, respectively. Ethnography refuses to accept that aikido is ineffable, and aikido refuses to accept the explanations of ethnography. At this point I take a lesson from aikido: the principle of resolving conflict through harmony. Just as aikido teaches that there is a way to move so an attack may be neutralized without injury to anyone, I believe there is a way to approach aikido which doesn't abuse either aikido or ethnography. That is why the personal explorations evident in this thesis are so important to its intellectual explorations, and vice versa.

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