

On step and measure in aikido

by Stéphane Benedetti

In the beginning was the step: the walking step, the dancing step. The focused walk of the gatherer, the silent walk of the hunter... always calm, walking and breathing in deep harmony with each other. Sometimes, a longer run... that would leave the hunter out of breath.

The first dance, the deer dance. The dance of the shaman and of the hunter, heavily stomping the ground, imitating the animal's trample, moving forwards, moving backwards... until they fell into a state of ecstasy and entered the awesome realm of the Gods. Feet hitting the ground, hearts beating at the pace of the dance, emptied minds inviting trance.

But men also make war, and dance records the gestures of war. Young warriors dance...

How can someone who practices a martial art, an art of movement, such as aikido, not know how to walk, when this is the primordial gesture, which determines the whole of aikido?

Why concentrate on technical details, when the whole of aikido is based on IRIMI and TENKAN, entering and opening, the two modalities of the step? I have come to the conclusion that it is because of our brain, which is not (not anymore, not yet?) adapted to this form of practice. It is enough to take a look at how our brain functions to know that hands and vision have a prevailing place in its mapping of our body (body schema).

To put it simply, we experience ourselves as a huge head with oversized eyes, to which enormous hands are connected, the whole resting on a midget's trunk and legs.

When it comes to the lower part of our body, the genitalia alone catch our attention. We become aware of our feet's existence only when they hurt.

But it so happens that in aikido practice the hands are of little use, central vision (color perception) even less so; we could very well make do with black and white. Our feet and peripheral vision (movement perception), which are "left behind" in our usual perception of the world, should here play the main role.

The step, through its pace, gives the movement its rhythm and measures it through its amplitude.

Rhythm is obviously linked to breathing, and amplitude to distance, or more accurately to *maai*, space-time. First of all, we must walk "in step" with our breathing, so that step and breath do not hamper each other. We now have to determine the basic unit of the step.

There is a natural stance, called *shinzentai* in Japanese: stand upright, relaxed, with your legs hip-width apart, your head steadily resting on your shoulders, rib cage relaxed. In order to find the exact *shinzentai* position, you only have to jump up and down on the spot, keeping body and mind relaxed: without even trying, you will land on your feet in the wanted position. Its first characteristic is to enable pelvic breathing since in this posture, in contrast to the military's "standing at attention", the ribcage is not open; this leads to a vertical movement of the diaphragm, as opposed to a costal one; the second characteristic is to allow a greater potential freedom of movement: as only a minimum number of muscles are assigned to maintaining posture, those not involved are still available. Finally, but not less importantly, the visual field is maximized without any exertion. Thus, walking consists merely in putting a foot in front of the other, with the proviso that, in aikido, the step is taken without counter-twisting the upper body. Right foot, right hand, left foot, left hand...

This is often called “changing *hanmi*” or more accurately “*namba aruki*”. This way of walking causes less structural distortion in the body, it disturbs less, and obviously allows a greater availability... The amplitude of the step is the same as the distance between the two feet in the *shizentai* position, which means that walking is nothing but the dynamic version of *shizentai* and that this stance is the actual foundation of our *shisei* (posture)...

This distance, which is the same as that between our hands, corresponds to the distance between the center of our hand and our elbow, i.e. exactly the distance between our two hands necessary to apply *ikkyo*...

This means that altering the step destroys equally both the fundamental structure of our body and that of the technique. In as much as there are only insignificant differences in the size of this building unit between individuals, it seems that in applying a technique consciously ensuring a regular stride is more important than any other aspect... The calmness of the step and of the body is linked to the calmness of the breath, and since breathing is the link between body and mind it is therefore essential to the calm of the mind... and it is the mind that sets the step... We touch here upon oneness and harmony, i.e. upon the very heart of our practice.