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Examination of Aikido and Injury – Own Reflections

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The idea that “I will get injured” seems to be a problem for many people who want to begin or have just begun practising martial arts. “Is it really the case that practising martial arts necessarily results in some sort of injury?” is the main question of this paper with specific reference to the Japanese martial art: Aikido. As for potential martial arts practitioners, the philosophy of martial arts, the self discipline and the other virtues involved in them is very attractive. On the other hand, the phase of practice seems thorough from outside. As for the potential martial artist, he/she mostly watches martial arts via the internet, shows, or events, performed most of the time by advanced martial artists. They watch and see the Sensei or advanced students performing. The performance of a Sensei is most of the time realistic and fast, which gives the idea that it can work in real life situations. On the other hand new beginners or potential martial arts practitioners most of the time forget that the attacker may have been working together with the Sensei for many years or is at least an experienced martial artist. The aim of this paper, from the viewpoint of sports science, is to analyze injury in a specific martial art, aikido and to consider the argument whether practising Aikido is risky or not? For this research and understanding, the material studied ranges from empirical studies to quasi-empirical studies known as qualitative studies and finally to phenomenological and personal experience.

Aikido is simply based on the principle of not harming the other. It is to be in harmony with the entire universe. Its aim is love. One of the main ideologies of Aikido, as explained in the word Ai (合), means to be in harmony, which also

means “not harming the other”. Aikido training is done in pairs based on the “not harming principle”, and it follows that it should not have a disadvantage like injuring the other, in other words, if one becomes in harmony with the universe which is the ultimate goal in Aikido, one should not injure the other.

The important question is, is the “not harming the other” principle, as Aikido suggests, true? “Is this belief justified by empirical studies?” The internal virtues are not specific to Martial Art Aikido, as many martial arts share that ethos. In that sense from a public image point of view, martial arts do have a positive effect on practitioners’ personalities, whereas on the other hand, in some societies, martial arts practitioners are seen as “fighters” in the negative sense thanks to popular TV shows such as UFC (Ultimate Fighting Championship). In academic circles this negative public image also holds its position. According to Fuller misleading public images of martial arts mask the rich grounds martial arts can give to researchers [Fuller 1991]. Another point Fuller makes is that there are very few studies when compared to other sports disciplines, and a lack of quality in these studies [Fuller 1991]. We will try to have a look at those studies involving Aikido and injury.

In Aikido, although studies are very rare when compared to competitive martial arts like Judo or MMA (Mixed Martial Arts), there are however two main studies, which contradict each other. In Zetaruk’s study which was conducted on 223 martial artists the risk in Aikido is more than in Karate-Do. In this study by Zetaruk and colleagues Aikido was found to be the martial arts with the second highest risk of injury [Zetaruk *et al.* 2005].

On the other hand, in another study by Yard focusing on pediatric injuries, the findings are almost the opposite of those of Zetaruk. Aikido is in the unspecified section together with Kung-Fu, Kickboxing, and others which together still total less than Karate [Yard *et al.* 2007]. These findings contradict each other. These two rare academic articles indicate the point that more studies are needed on the subject of injury in martial arts especially in Aikido.

The contradictory results of the empirical studies of Aikido, could be caused by the questions they posed, and by the methodology adopted to answer them [Sentuna 2010]. Where there is little known in a research field, one of the best things a researcher can do is to conduct qualitative research. When research is lacking in an area, the researcher must emphasize discovery rather than validation or confirmation [Kratwohl 1993].

There is only one study focusing qualitatively on Aikido and injury. In this study practitioners were asked about the advantages and disadvantages of practising Aikido in an open-ended style. The evidence showed that the most-reported disadvantage of Aikido training is, “not having any disadvantage”. The second most-reported disadvantage of Aikido, which is mostly reported by “new beginners” is centred on injury [Sentuna 2010]. Having no disadvantage proves Aikido’s statement whereas injury seems to be problematic. At the beginner level practitioners are mostly scared of being injured. The understanding of injury as a concept also becomes important. When moving from beginner to advanced practitioners, the reporting of “injury as a disadvantage” becomes less in number which proves that either the number or the idea of injury changes from beginner to advanced level.

In this research there are weak points. It is conducted on a limited number of people in limited conditions. For proof or disproof much wider, empirical, statistical data is needed. In this shift from empirical studies to philosophy, we must figure out that philosophy aims at meaning and analysis. Apart from its proof or disproof, which is not the aim of philosophy, the underlying philosophical idea of Aikido and injury and my personal experience in this area is discussed in the rest of this paper.

For the sake of argument, let us place Aikido into the “risky sports” category, a “risky” activity for practitioners. As an instructor and a practitioner of Aikido, where Aikido and Injury is concerned, I do have quite a lot of cases, making it straightforward. I broke my neck 5 years ago while practising Aikido with some large Slovaks, at an International 5-day Aikido Seminar, on the last day and during the last technique, and realized it 2 years ago. Seeing

an x-ray of my neck, the doctor asked, ‘*How did you live? It is impossible?*’ and also questioned me about my sports history. After I summarized it, he said ‘*The only reason you are alive right now is that you are a sportsman because those muscles there prevented your spinal cord from becoming injured and kept the bones intact.*’ Is this a dilemma? I broke my neck because I am a sportsman and did not die or become paralysed because I am a sportsman. On the other hand, it was certainly a “risk”.

One of the famous sports philosophers McNamee, in the only book on the topic “*Risk and Adventure Sports*” which he edited, points out that risky sports do have a problem of generalization to “life span” [McNamee 2007]. For some risk and adventure sports, this could be the case, whereas for Aikido the case is contrary. My Sensei N. Tamura Shihan, one of the legendary masters of Aikido (who has passed away), was assistant to the founder of Aikido, Morihei Ueshiba. Although he was 73 years old, in the last classes he gave he was still throwing everyone around, including me, despite his age. The arguments of “Life span” and taking risks are disproved in Aikido practice. Aikido could be seen as an extreme example. That extremity I guess spoils some arguments in the philosophy of sports.

For McNamee arguments like risk sports are based on supposed age and life plans. Again Aikido stands in the way. As in the case of Tamura Sensei and also from a student perspective, I have plenty of students in their mid-forties, who are doing very well and progressing well on the road to a black belt even though I am a quite young instructor without a white beard and a sweet old smile. As for risk sports there always is the argument “*We have to be open to the different possibilities that life may put our way.*” [McNamee 2007]. McNamee gives the examples of heart-attacks and car crashes. I unfortunately, also experienced this case with one of my black belt students, but in a different way. Not the hypothetical way as McNamee puts forward, but with a real car crash. He still can do Aikido. For Aikido you do not need arms or legs which is quite an extreme argument but in reality the essence of Aikido is done by whole body.

The core of all the arguments on “risky sports” is the following: “*risky activities are pursued for the joys and satisfactions they bring to life, but not in an irrational or carefree way*” [McNamee 2007]. That is exactly what Aikido proposes. An advanced practitioner is raised through the ‘not harming the other principle’ and long years of practice especially not in a carefree way but rather in a disciplined and caring way.

As a result, from all perspectives Aikido is not a risky sport causing severe injuries. Although from a

personal point of view, as a person injured practising Aikido, I do realized that most of the time Aikido injuries result from careless new beginners, turning each other's wrists, especially if they are working with each other in a careless way, rather than in the case of an advanced Aikido practitioner where it will not happen since he can probably, figure out the outcome.

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Studium kontuzji w Aikido - własne refleksje

Słowa kluczowe: ideologia aikido, harmonia, kontuzje, sztuki walki

Streszczenie

Autor pracy, który posiada tytuł doktora w dziedzinie wychowania fizycznego i jednocześnie jest instruktorem aikido, na podstawie własnych badań empirycznych, osobistych doświadczeń i badań naukowych, próbuje odpowiedzieć na pytanie czy uprawianie sztuk walki (w szczególności aikido) musi zawsze wiązać się z kontuzjami.

Filozofia aikido oparta jest na zasadzie mówiącej o tym, by nie ranić innych, co pozytywnie wpływa na osobowość i charakter zawodników. Jednakże w oczach opinii publicznej, a także w kręgach naukowych zawodnicy sztuk walki nie zawsze są odbierani pozytywnie. W przeprowadzonych badaniach nie ma też zgodności, co do urazowości sztuk walki. W jednych badaniach aikido uważa się za drugi w kolejności najbardziej urazowy sport, w innych za bardzo mało urazowy w porównaniu z innymi sztukami walki. W związku z tym autor wskazuje na potrzebę dalszych badań w tej dziedzinie, szczególnie, iż badania zostały przeprowadzone na zbyt małej liczbie osób i w ograniczonych warunkach.

W przytaczanym przez autora studium dotyczącym kontuzji w aikido mówi się o zaletach oraz wadach płynących z praktykowania aikido oraz obawach początkujących zawodników. Wynika z nich, że im większy poziom zaawansowania zawodnika, tym mniejsze występuje ryzyko kontuzji, a zawodnicy mogą ćwiczyć nawet w starszym wieku. W konkluzji autor dochodzi do wniosku, iż aikido nie jest ryzykownym sportem powodującym poważne obrażenia, a kontuzje najczęściej dotyczą początkujących zawodników.