

Contrivance and Training

In most martial arts, there are Kata forms; there are choreographed partner practices; and there is some form of sparring - or what Aikidoka call randori.

If we organize these things according to their level of choreography or “degree of contrivance”, kata forms and choreographed partner practice would be at one extreme - with sparring near the other extreme (the defining end of which is actual combat).

Most seem to consider sparring a “yes or no” issue, without allowing for a possibility of something that isn’t fully choreographed and also isn’t competitive or ego-centric in nature.

The trouble with this “approach of extremes” is that we learn footwork, techniques, and fine motor skills in very sterile circumstances - then are thrown into the sparring or freestyle environment where we’re expected to magically, spontaneously develop the ability to manifest these sublime techniques against a fast, slippery, moving, or resisting opponent.

Without any training to bridge the gap, the result is often frustration - sometimes to the point of despair and even discontinuance of training.

Sage teachers with decades of experience admonish young students and spout wisdumb such as: “It takes many years to be able to use kata techniques in fighting”, or “It’s a life-long study”, or “It takes a long time...”, or even “Aikido is a lousy art to learn quickly how to overcome an opponent.”

If that’s the case, why bother doing Aikido when Yoga is probably just as healthy and easier on the joints? Go do Yoga, buy a .38, and call it good.

Another of my favorite comments, from a supposed authority: “If it's an attack you are not used to, then of course you’re going to have trouble blending with it.”

So, we can only blend with attacks (and people, presumably) that we’re “used to”?

Do these people believe this stuff - and if so, why are they still doing Aikido?

The sad answer is: “preserving tradition” - at least the tradition they were given: watch; copy; repeat - like androids. The tradition of the Aikido founder as innovator, experimenter, and original MMA-dude seems to have been forgotten if not suppressed by an oppressive culture of dogma.

The (most common) Aikido technique-naming convention is: [attack]-[finishing technique], e.g. "tsuki-kotegaeshi". I'll swear more about this in another article, but for the moment, I'm just observing this is how most Aikidoka organize their practice. Assume that some unknown, unnamed thing happens between the attacking stimulus and the terminating technique, and that this unnamed thing could be called an "entrance" movement. Aikido methods would then be comprised of three parts: stimulus, entrance, and termination.

The degree to which practice is contrived is directly related to the degree of precision which can be achieved (in practice), and is inversely related to the degree of dynamic-energy management skills built. The concept of "continuum of contrivance" is closely tied to the concept of continuum of motor skills, and the deterioration of motor skills under acute-stress circumstances.

Continuum of Contrivance Table:

Continuum of Contrivance Training Benefits		
<- low Contrivance	intermediate	High Contrivance->
timing & dynamic work	bridges innoculates against stress & confusion	accuracy & precision

Continuum of Motor Precision		
<- low Precision	intermediate	High Precision->
power	coordination & timing	fine & precise
body movement deflection	atemi gross manipulation	fine manipulation control

Motor Precision Degradation / Acute Stress		
<- High	STRESS intermediate	Low->
<- low	PRECISION intermediate	High->

Contrivance by Degrees:

1. (3 of 3): Typical Aikido training, wherein all three components are fully choreographed: Partners know the attack in advance, and Uke knows both the entrance movement and the terminating technique he will be receiving. This is good for initial introduction; for accuracy and precision, hand-pick-ups, etc.; and for learning ukemi. It's not so useful for timing, or for handling dynamic energies.

We call this "fully-contrived" training, and for application purposes consider it appropriate for only a small portion of the training diet, lest we become spoiled children by having our way too often, and too easily. It's the training wheels of Aikido.

2. (0 of 3): Randori: Attacks are mostly unknown, although somewhat constrained to "familiar" - whatever that means for that dojo. Same for movements and terminations. This is good for timing and for experiencing dynamic energies to a degree. However, a steady diet of this will create sloppiness in the finer points, and a presupposition of non-resistive "attackers".

We call this "low-contrivance" training, and for application purposes consider it appropriate for only a small portion of the training diet, lest we become sloppy and also spoiled to a lack of "aliveness" or "real-time-feedback" from our partner. This is the BMX racing of Aikido.

3. (2 of 3): Two of the three components of a technique are contrived, while the third is open: (e.g. Stimulus Open: Uke may make any attack on any line, but Nage must use a prescribed entrance, and through that initial entrance achieve a prescribed termination.)

We call this "intermediate-contrivance" training, and for application purposes consider it appropriate for a significant investment of training time. Often, we prescribe entrance, and no termination - and set Uke upon Nage in an unrelenting assault, forcing Nage into continual evasive movement. This is riding a two-wheeler, but just for the distance required to learn a specific wheelie-trick.

4. (1 of 3): One of the three components of a technique is contrived, while the other two are open.

More "intermediate-contrivance" appropriate for a significant investment of training time. Often, we prescribe only entrance, leaving Nage to cope with unknown types and lines of attack - and to terminate as may become appropriate after performing the prescribed entrance. (This particular variant specifically builds the ability to use any specified entrance in response to any line of attack, and it opens the door for a data-compression teaching strategy we call "mirrors", but that's for another article.) Again, this is riding a two-wheeler, but still just for the distance required to learn a specific wheelie-trick.

5. "Bicycle Drills"TM: These are 1-of-3 or 2-of-3 contrivance structures of cyclical nature to develop specific maneuver and/or atemi skills. This is another kind of "intermediate-contrivance" training, which for application purposes we consider appropriate as a staple of the training diet.

These generate massive iterations of practice per unit of time (about four-fold over traditional start-and-stop Aikido), and are designed to create a continuous Aiki interactivity that extends beyond the single input - single output framework of typical training. This practice inoculates against confusion and stress and creates the ability to discover an Aiki-based exit from close-quarters difficulties as it fosters the ability to find an available technique from within dynamic flow.

There are henkawaza and kaishewaza qualities to this training, yet it is different from both in the time-frame, number of iterations, and aliveness qualities. In addition, well-designed Bicycle Drills have built-in "immediate action" for failed techniques. In the bicycle metaphor, this is riding your two-wheeler to the market and back.

6. Resistance Coaching: Uke, acting as coach, may halt Nage's technique, but more appropriately and more often will change, counter, or counter-attack based primarily on breaks in Nage's flow; or errors in Nage's entrance, pick-ups, control, etc. This practice is most safely and easily implemented within Bicycle Drills.

We believe that it is wise to apprise a student of their controlling factors and of how and when those factors can and do falter. The fastest learning curve is established through real-time feedback by a caring-resisting Uke. This is training for how to keep your BMX bike on the trail, despite the rocks and ruts.

We believe that the wisest investment of training time is in intermediate levels of contrivance where students learn how to blend with unknown, unexpected, and unfamiliar attacks; how to find their way into the "slot" position from which a termination may blossom; and how to discover the terminating method most suitable to their dynamically-unfolding circumstances.

We have been using some of these specific methods of training as a staple for many years, and we generally work at conversational distances (rather than the artificially-inflated maai of most Aikido). New students are generally proficient at avoiding random attacks using a prescribed entrance within just a few weeks, and their control of Uke is generally quite strong.

Interestingly, using the same entrance movement for attacks from both ai and gyaku sides - will open the door to a concept we call "Mirrors", allowing data compression methods of teaching that can double the rate of learning termination methods and henkawaza. But, that's for another article...

Sparring per-se is a game for establishing male hierarchy - either a treatment for, or perhaps a symptom of, testosterone poisoning. Though “fun”, it’s not very useful for quality training - or for training quality.

“Alive” training - practice with real-time feedback, is however something I consider essential for workable, let alone quality, martial arts. For bridging the gap between the cardboard-cutout completely-choreographed components of traditional “Any-do” and the desired skills of fighting or defense, I believe that intermediate degrees of contrivance should be staples of the training diet.

“Seek not to copy the masters’ actions: Seek what they sought.” – Zen saying