

Look Into the Mirror

In 2000, we released a thesis on progressive Aikido training methods. Within that work, we offered a concept dubbed “mirrors” or “mirrored techniques”. This article is a short synopsis of that concept.

This is the entry from our current student manual referring to mirrors:

Mirror (mirrored entrance, movement, or technique):

Applies to an Entrance, Movement, Method or Technique that may be employed regardless of the side or lead from which the opponent launches aggression because the same movement will build a technique regardless of the “sidedness” or Matched/Unmatched lead of the attack. (syn: Symmetrical Entrance, Movement, or Technique). Mirrored Movements and Methods are generally taught and practiced in pairs. This installs two techniques at once; makes use of twice the spatial references; and builds generalization that speeds response time.

The concept sounds a bit odd at first, but study with a partner will demonstrate its utility.

It is based on two premises:

1. O’Sensei knew what he was about when he started using movement to evade and confound attackers.
2. “A reasonable plan, violently executed immediately is better than a perfect plan, ready next week.” - Patton.

Here’s a classic example:

1. We assume right hanmi, and Uke is also in right hanmi (matching lead), and we work from an attack with Uke’s lead hand (In the US, this is sometimes called “New York style” attack), we’ll interface ai-hand, ai-hanmi. We perform what most Aikidoka would recognize as classical Ikkyo Ura. This is body-movement or foot-work that we call “taisabaki”, moving to the outside of Uke’s sphere of influence.

Our right hand attached at Uke’s right wrist, and our left hand interfaced at or near Uke’s elbow. We turned and cut downward.

2. We next maintain right hanmi, while Uke changes to left hanmi (unmatched lead), and we’ll again work from an attack with Uke’s lead hand, to interface gyaku-hand, gyaku-hanmi.

We perform the identical footwork, taking care to make atemi as we approach within range of Uke’s free right hand. We enter deeply, taking Uke’s balance, and attach at Uke’s left wrist with our right hand, and with our left hand interfaced at Uke’s left elbow (prepared position for one of Aikido’s classical kokyunage methods). We cut down strongly, throwing Uke.

In the above example, we have practiced a “perfect mirror” - a technique that allows identical movement irrespective of the lead from which Uke attacked.

The foot-work was identical; The interface was identical (wrist and elbow); and the completing cut can be identical (although the Ikkyo portion is smoother with an ura-direction finish and the Kokyunage portion is smoother with a straight-line cut).

It is possible to use the identical foot-work, using Udekimenage for one termination and Sumiotoshi for the other. This is another “perfect mirror” combination.

After experimenting with this concept, it can be discovered that there are many “perfect” mirror combinations, and many that are not quite perfect - and that the concept applies to every standard entrance foot-work in Aikido.

For example, notice that ai-katatetore kotegaeshi (omote) is a very close mirror to gyaku-katatetore nikkyo (obi no sage version).

The existence of these relationships should not be a huge surprise, nor should they be discounted as an interesting point of trivia, as the training implications are substantial:

1. The need for knowing the sidedness of an attack is minimized if not negated. While an ai-hand attack opens kotegaeshi, a gyaku-hand attack opens nikkyo. The choice can be made after the initial threat has been evaded.
2. Every one movement has at least two applications, and may be practiced from multiple stimuli - facilitating stronger generalization of skills and reducing mental stalls under pressure.
3. Every entrance practiced this way is as if practicing two different entrances under the previous way of observing technique. This is more than a two-for-one discount because if techniques are practiced in pairs, the constantly-shifting sidedness provides twice the spatial landmarks for the mind to utilize in locating “strong position”. It in fact requires nage to be ever mindful of position in a more dynamic manner rather than a rote one where uke is simply expected to stay in place.
4. Every terminating technique likewise provides a similar two-for-one discount, as well as a more extensive exploration of the relevant anatomical structures (rotating both clockwise and counter-clockwise in the Kotegaeshi-Nikkyo example).

More Reflections:

Mirror-type practice may also be discovered when working against combination-type attacks, or follow-up attacks (more realistic attacks).

For instance, we can work a classical ai-hanmi jab-style attack, with taisabaki footwork (as above, like ikkyo ura form), but finish with kotegaeshi. This is very straightforward and quite common.

Change to gyaku-hanmi, and work the taisabaki movement against the jab - and we'll move to Uke's "inside". We'll need atemi to keep Uke occupied, but he'll likely throw that cross behind the jab - either as a follow-up to our encroachment, or as the second half of a jab-cross combination.

In either case, this affords us the opportunity to work with a more dynamic (and realistic) interaction with Uke, and as we deflect the second punch, we'll again acquire a kotegaeshi finish - on the hand that threw the cross.

So, with a single body movement and an almost identical hand placement, we can practice kotegaeshi against the jab; we can practice nikkyo against the jab; and we can practice kotegaeshi (from the dangerous inside) against the jab-cross combination.

All that, USING THE SAME BODY MOVEMENT AND HAND PLACEMENT.

This is more than convenient, and more than interesting. It's magical.

But, IT'S ONLY USEFUL IF PRACTICED TOGETHER with the specific goal of installing generalization. The student must experience that these are not separate techniques or movements or methods, but that they are in fact ONE movement, with multiple, slightly-varied final endings.

The student must experience this on a regular basis, as a matter of habitual presentation so the perception of "one method - many applications" becomes part of their understanding of Aikido - and therefore part of their application ability.

If not trained in a way that creates generalization in the mind of the student, then the skill will not be available when needed.

How to Use Mirrors in Your Training (as instructor):

Whenever you decide to teach a technique, find that technique in the way you typically would, and perform it once.

Then, keeping your same hanmi, ask Uke to change to the opposite hanmi from his first attack - and perform/discover the mirror.

Doing this the first time is the only challenge. Once you've done it a few times, the oddness disappears and it becomes perfectly natural. You'll quickly find yourself automatically thinking in mirrored pairs of movements and techniques. When you daydream Aikido, you'll daydream it exploring these relationships and patterns.

Point out explicitly to students that we are not exploring two things, but different views of ONE THING. It is important they come understand the technique as one thing, in order to maximize the benefit of this paradigm.

Make sure to demonstrate that Nage maintains RIGHT hanmi twice while Uke gives one attack from each hanmi so that Nage practices both the "inside" and the "outside" versions as ONE iteration.

Then, Nage changes to LEFT hanmi, and maintains it while Uke again offers both sides before the Nage/Uke roles change.

It is important that mirrors be practiced in this fashion to install the generalization the presentation was explicitly designed to create.

I recommend teaching any mirror-capable technique as a mirrored-pair whenever that presentation won't explicitly interfere with some other component of progression or presentation.

There are two other ways to use the mirror concept for teaching:

- A. Work a method to the "outside" (e.g. classical tsuki-kotegaeshi). Then, change hanmi and use the same entrance to the (admittedly more dangerous) inside, working against a combination (e.g. jab-cross) attack. Terminate the interaction using the same technique - in this case, kotegaeshi - against Uke's back hand. This requires a very deep entrance, good timing, and atemi.
- B. Work all three manifestations of the magic. Take the kotegaeshi example from (A) and add to it the obi-no-sage style nikkyo that can be applied against Uke's lead hand from the inside position (the direct mirror to the original kotegaeshi). Again, one needs a deep entrance, atemi, strong movement, but these are things we should be training, aren't they?

In all cases of using mirrors to train, the most important concept to remember is training them together, presenting them as ONE thing rather than related or similar multiple things. The mind understands ONE, and it will seize upon the opportunity to become more efficient.

The primary goals of mirrors training are:

1. Generalization of a pattern, both in the direct physical realm - and in generalizing Aikido throughout the rest of the student's life.
2. Increase efficiency of movement and of learning so every student may progress at an increasing rate of learning and an increasing level of fun.

Experimenting with mirrored pairs in a series of progressing techniques can be most instructive, yielding some fascinating things about related structures and methods. Explore for yourself.

How to Use Mirrors in Your Training (as student):

First, follow your instructor's directions, and don't get off on a tangent in the corner. That's neither polite nor safe.

Provided your instructor doesn't object to this kind of practice, make an exercise of finding mirrors for various techniques. Whenever you see a technique demonstrated or on film, find the mirrors to discover what the reflection offers.

Remember that mirrors - especially perfect ones - are not different things, but different views of ONE THING. Think of them that way; Practice them that way.

You can also practice the "additional reflections" version by working against jab-cross and other related symmetrical combinations, discovering how deeply you must enter; what kind of atemi is required; how to bypass that second hand (whether it's coming high or low) - and to acquire the same terminating technique, regardless of those factors. This will go a long way toward allowing you to work dynamically.

When practicing mirrors, remember that Nage practices twice from the same hanmi as Uke changes. Then, Nage changes and does the other pair. The point is for Nage to do the identical movement twice from the same physical position, but against different stimuli. Only this pattern will install the generalization that mirrors are designed to create.

When practicing before or after class with classmates, train as above, and also search for mirrors of techniques you already know, noting relationships that are smooth and easy and ones that are not. You can't do anything "wrong" as long as you are careful and curious. The worst thing you'll do is find something that you will discover doesn't work well for you. Along the way, you'll find many things that do.

Instructors and Students alike - whenever you want to see something new (or from a new perspective), just "look into the mirror".