

# Doka: The Poems of Ueshiba Morihei

## Insights for a Modern Way of Life

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Among those Poets and Warriors who recorded their insights and enlightenment was Morihei Ueshiba, the founder of Aikido.

During Japan's feudal era it became very popular to write poetry. These poems were used as love letters and as ways to express the writer's deepest feelings. They started with the nobility in Kyo (or Heian-Kyo; now Kyoto), and continued when the military shogunate moved to Kamakura and then later to Edo. The writing of poetry was picked up by the samurai class, where it became a favorite pastime at celebrations such as national holidays and birthdays. Even though the class system was abolished, some accomplished martial arts instructors continued the tradition.

Thirty-two of Ueshiba's works were found in one of the first mimeographed paperback books on Aikido, called "Aikido, Maki no Ichi." These poems have been referred to by Aikidoka as the great secrets of Aikido. They are probably right, but some of these poems may not even relate to Aikido per se.

Ueshiba is no longer with us to interpret what he meant by the poem, and knowing the circumstances for which the poem was written would allow insight into its meanings. Most of Ueshiba's Doka (poem of the Way) were written when his arts were primarily physical and when Aikido would still be considered Aiki-budo, a very martial kind of art. Since it seems that these doka were written before Ueshiba emphasized the primary principles of modern Aikido, such as the principle of Loving Protection for All Things and Masakatsu Agatsu – True victory is victory over Oneself, not all of them may be considered applicable today.

Although not all of Ueshiba's doka may fit in today's aiki world, Seidokan Aikido has incorporated five of them into regular training. Seidokan believes that working with these doka will lead to greater understanding of his teachings.

The first of these poems is:

Airitoaru Tachi-o narai-te

Tadahitosuji-ni omoikiru-beshi

All kinds/ of sword art/ to learn

Following one path/ firmly decide on

(In other words:)

"What good is it to study all kinds of sword arts; make a firm decision to follow only one path."

Ueshiba had studied many different arts and realized the number of techniques you know or how elaborate they were was not important. Learning the fundamental principles of one art would prevent you from getting lost and confused. The more you study the fundamentals, the deeper into the art you get. Staying on one path allows the training to become part of ourselves and opens the way for growth.

Morihei Ueshiba provided us within the aikido doka, the principles of aikido: Ki – the binding force of mind and body, and aikido itself. Koichi Tohei followed Ueshiba's path, developing the principles of Aikido through "Unification of Mind and Body," Ki

development, Shin Shin Toistu Aikido and Kiatsu-ho. Continuing of that path, Roderick Kobayashi has contributed the balanced practice of mind, body and Ki for a modern way of life, relating aiki-taiso to Aikido, applications of doka, aiki-ryoho, and Seidokan Aikido.

Where Ueshiba's path will lead next has yet to be determined. Those continuing on the path will have many options open to them as well as having a very strong set of principles to work from.

People who have strong principles are not "scared off" when dealing with a conflict or when opening themselves emotionally. When energy (either an attack or other situation with a possible negative outcome) moves toward you; by entering the situation intentionally you can protect yourself and move on to deal with whatever direction it may go. Using conflict as the situation, consider the concept of Hitoashi Yokete ("One Step Aside"):

Tachifurui mae-ni aruka-to osokuru	A swinging sword/ standing in front of/ comes attacking
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Teki-no-ushiro-ni ware-wa tachi-kui	Behind the enemy/ I stand
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"Swinging a sword and attacking, thinking I am in front, I am standing behind the enemy.

In other words, by deliberately entering into the situation you can move to a place of safety.

There are several Aikido techniques that move directly into the attack, avoiding collision, and emerging behind the attacker. There is a similar teaching in the Shinkage-ryu sword school. The poem reads:

Furikaburu tachi-no shita-koso jigoku-nare	Beneath the raised sword/ is like hell,
Mi-o-sutetekoso ukabu se-mo-are	Throw yourself away/ there may be a way out

"It is like Hell standing beneath a raised sword, be willing to sacrifice yourself, there may be a way out."

One can imagine the poet watching a leaf flow downstream only to be pulled into the rapids and then appearing later below the falls. Could this be "irimi-ho," the entering method?

A poem that reflects the fundamental element of martial art is probably the following by O'Sensei Morihei Ueshiba:

Tekbito-no hashirikitarite utsutoki-wa Hitoashi yokete sugu-ni kirubeshi	Enemy comes running/ when strike
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Take a step aside/ immediately/ must                      cut

“When an enemy comes running and strikes, take one step aside and cut immediately.”

This is the fundamental theory of martial arts: simply step off the line of attack and execute the most direct technique. Unfortunately, this was probably written while the art was still *aiki-budo* and not *aiki-do*. Ueshiba realized that if you attack the attacker, you remain on the line of force. To be victorious, you must be the stronger. The poem’s meaning changes slightly to fit current Aikido principles. No longer do we “cut immediately” to deal with a conflict but rather we lead and control with compassion.

We can develop this compassion and harmony by training in accordance to the principles of Aikido. O’Sensei was probably trying to foster this idea through the doka:

Makoto-oba sara-ni makoto-ni  
neriage-te  
Kenyuichinyo-no shintai-o shire

Fundamental truth/ further/ earnestly/  
to polish up,  
Oneness of everything/ the truth of/ to  
seek.

“Earnestly keep polishing the fundamentals, and seek the truth of oneness of the universe.”

Aikido is described as the “way of harmony with nature” but it can also be interpreted as “harmony with everything.” By harmonizing with nature, life, everything..., then everything becomes part of the one.

“Earnestly polishing the principles” also leads to the concept of “practice what you preach.” It does not matter what techniques are practiced as long as the fundamentals are followed. This can hold true even between different styles and arts. Most martial arts have basically the same principles with only techniques making the difference. This doka, concerning fundamental truth (makoto), at least for Aikidoka, should remind us to go back to the basics and keep working from there. Roderick Kobayashi, the founder of Seidokan Aikido, was so taken by this doka that he used it for the name of his system. (Makoto is also pronounce Sei, hence the “Sei” of Seidokan.)

There is much to learn from O’Sensei’s doka and the writings of our contemporaries. This work is valuable and needs to be done but that is not all there is to do. Practicing what you preach and working in accordance with the principles is what is really needed to become aiki.