

One Explanation of Shugyo

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At the request of the TTC, Victoria began a pilot shugyo specific class aimed at 18 to 35 year old students. The idea was to replicate the high intensity training that Sugano Shihan often did as part of his early instruction in Sydney. During this training he would wear everyone out to almost complete exhaustion, to empty them of their physical strength and then what was left at the bottom of the well, was Aikido. It was in this space that many of us first began to get a glimmer of what Aikido was really about .

The why of shugyo

Shugyo is often translated as ‘austere training’ meaning a deep, concentrated study period and, in an Aikido sense, continuous intensive training of the techniques. The term shugyo perhaps began in a Buddhist context, describing a sincere, intense level of study of Buddhist scriptures. Highly skilled samurai would undertake ‘musho shugyo’, where they left the comfort and safety of their home dojo and would wander Japan perfecting their technique against all comers. If they were bested they would often join the dojo and learn everything they could from that person. Again, a period in their lives of really intense, continuous study of their form. Sensei didn’t use the term ‘shugyo’ very often but he often included this style of training as part of his early dojo regime

He explained it as the ‘forging’ process where you moved from conscious, analytical or basic training to a more natural, instinctive understanding of movement. In the early days, when he was a dojo instructor, he said this process (shugyo) was necessary to truly understand the nature of Aikido.

How does shugyo vary from normal class training? Answer: It shouldn't! Having said that you need to be aware of what the shugyo mindset is and how it can often differ from what the average student thinks and reacts to training. This may also reflect western and eastern (specifically martial training) views on education.

The how of shugyo

In the west we receive education like hungry baby birds, our beaks wide open, chirping for someone to throw something down our gullet. It is, to a large extent, a passive style of learning, we turn up and expect someone to teach us something, be mentally fed.

In eastern philosophy and in particular shugyo, imagine yourself with a catchers glove and the balls of information/understanding are rapidly flying through the air in all directions. You need heightened concentration, to focus and catch a ball before it whizzes past you. By the time you see it, it may have already flashed past, so you must know to instinctively grab it in flight and then be instantly prepared for the next one. This level of alertness cannot diminish during the whole class, otherwise what gems of information might pass you by?

This metaphor may give you a clue as to the physical and mental agility required when in a shugyo mindset. Your mind is really alert, your eyes searching for every visual clue, where are the instructor's feet and hands positioned, where is the body placed, what was the demeanour of the instructor when the technique was performed, is your body prepared to copy it all as exactly as you can, moving and following naturally. Copy every aspect of the instructor's movements, even to the facial expression.

During a 'normal' class you may turn up and (unintentionally but mindlessly) perform the rote movements you did last week or a year ago. It may be hard physical training but are you really learning all the lessons that are flying past you with every second of the instructor's demonstration and during your own and your partner's movements?

Originally, O Sensei conducted his classes without specific instruction, just demonstrating what he wanted the students to do. The techniques didn't even have names back then! The student had to use his/her eyes, watch everything, copy exactly and concentrate very hard to learn what it all meant. There were no lengthy explanations. When reviewing any texts on martial training by old masters they usually finish a written point with something like.. 'you must study this intently!' The explanation given was just the starting point for your training, to truly understand it you have to train hard, and constantly look for the real meaning in the movement. During training Sensei would punctuate a movement with the same admonition - 'study this hard!' There are many points to study hard.

Smibert Shihan often says in classes, you don't study Aikido in order to learn it, you learn Aikido in order to be in a position to study it!

Physical shugyo

In Aikido you could easily confuse 'hard' training with just intense physical effort. The physical nature of shugyo is to be sure your body is obeying the mind, is it adopting the correct posture and position, are the body parts where they should be? Or, is your body doing a vague approximation of what you'd like it to do? Are you really making sure you have the right distance, the hands focussed where they should be, the whole body moving in the correct direction. This is the 'physicalness' of shugyo and Aikido training. Sensei never used physical strength to throw people, although he was very strong, it was always a natural consequence of movement and his energy leading yours. Like a wave picking you up and taking you further towards the beach. When that wave broke on the beach things could get quite exciting. The wave is following a natural course, it is not specifically throwing you on the beach, you are simply caught up in the movement.

Mental shugyo

The 'power' of the technique is in your understanding of the dynamic of the energy flow between yourself and your partner. If you have to use strong physical force you know you've missed the point! Study harder! Look to see where the energies work together so that one leads and directs, not pushes, the other. There should be no effort. This has to happen at a sub-conscious level, much faster than the conscious mind can step through the process. It has to be instant, reflexive and natural. To gain this level of understanding you need to perform the

techniques over and over in a continuous method until the two persons training become one movement, the light and dark, the yin and yang of each other.

Munen, mushin (No thought, no mind). Shugyo.

Shugyo and ukemi

To do all of the above requires good ukes. It is only because uke completely gives of herself/himself that nage can learn to move in this fashion. Once the lessons are internalised, nage will be able to perform the movements regardless of uke's abilities. But, in the early days we all need to be really good ukes. We have to give of ourselves to create movement, follow nage's directions (not ahead or behind them) and be able to fall well and safely. Good ukemi is a essential for shugyo training, it allows you to maintain continuous contact between the two partners. Uke receives the movement, falls and in one flowing motion is back up on the feet attacking again, there is no pause, no loss of connection, between the two partners. Shugyo training should produce excellent ukes. Light and dark, yin and yang.