

What is Tenkan?

Aikido is about blending with the energy and intent of others. Aikido is to teach how to “reconcile the world”. The value and usefulness of Aikido supposedly extends far beyond the dojo or simple self-defense. Aikido purportedly teaches us about coping with forces and circumstances beyond our control. And, Aikido supposedly teaches us about communicating and resolving conflicts in non-violent ways.

Aikido is not just for the strong. On the contrary, they say, Aikido is especially for the small, the weak, and those who are not blessed with great physical prowess or genetic perfection. This is precisely one of the great advantages of Aikido - that it can adapt to the person who applies themselves to its study.

These are all wonderful claims. Through years of study, sweat, and discomfort (maybe pain) - through bowing and reciting appropriate foreign words and dressing-up and copying everything just so, we develop black belts - and third or fourth-degree black belts who are authorities on Aikido: what it is; what benefits it holds for society; and how to achieve proficiency and to pursue perfection in Aikido.

In time, they profess to know how to “manifest the Aiki spirit” in everyday life to show the ways of perseverance and benevolence and gracefulness and adaptation. And, these high-ranking experts have said: "Jim can't teach tenkan".

This is because from birth, Jim has not been a perfect physical specimen structurally capable of so-called “perfect” movement. Jim cannot articulate his ankle in a certain manner popularized by a particular high-ranking master. Jim does not move as these high-ranking black belts fantasize a real, live samurai would move. So, “Jim cannot teach Tenkan”.

Thus, despite twenty-odd years of deliberate study - despite overcoming a greater physical challenge than any of those fourth-degree black belts ever dreamed of - despite displaying greater tenacity than any three of them combined could hope to muster - despite having come from a level where he could not walk without falling down to the point of a second-degree black belt and manager of his own dojo - Jim, they will still say, “cannot teach Tenkan” – “Maybe the kids’ class”, one will charitably offer.

Perhaps, to them, Tenkan exists only as an exemplary demonstration of perfection of sublimely-blending movement, hakama flowing about the legs like water in a wild raging river, Uke flying as a streamer on a stick they twirl betwixt their nimble yet powerful fingers. A worthy reverie, but, alas, none of them are likely to be mistaken for the Doshu any time soon...

To me, Tenkan isn't a thing in this world - and neither is Aikido, for that matter. To me, it is somewhere between a force of nature like gravity - and an idea - like calculus. Neither of those things may be seen directly: One may only witness (or conjure) examples or manifestations of them. All the while, Aikido (like gravity or calculus) itself remains invisible and formless - a PARADIGM rather than a collection of stuff or "a bag of tricks" as the late, great Tony Graziano put it.

Tenkan, the concept, the theory, the metaphor, the life-skill, and even the physical self-defense skill - has little to do with skeletal structure. A person in a wheel-chair could learn to do the physical movement. So, I would consider a so-called "cripple" teaching it as a huge advantage. I would consider it so for a number of reasons:

First, homage to the founder who was himself not perfection at birth. Although a small and sickly child, he grew into the founder of Aikido through exemplary tenacity and ceaseless determination - the kind of determination that leads a guy with cerebral palsy to become an Aikido teacher.

Second, inspiration to the power of possibility that Aikido offers for personal growth and development. Inspiration to all those who would think Aikido beyond them, but who could discover in such inspiration a doorway to their own possibilities.

It would be an advantage precisely because the structure of the second-degree black belt "cripple" is different from the students - who themselves are statistically unlikely to be "perfect physical specimens". It would illustrate, as no ostensibly perfectly-constructed Sensei can hope to illustrate, exactly how readily Aikido adapts to the unique physicality of every person who pursues it sincerely.

It would be an advantage because the difference of skeletal structure will more readily show the difference between the microscopic example of one very narrow interpretation within the extremely limited manifestation of "Dojo Tenkan" - and the principle of Tenkan that we are supposedly carrying into and offering the world.

I would consider it an advantage as an opportunity for the Aikido community to walk their talk about Aikido being "for everyone" - about Aikido being something that anyone can do. It would be living, breathing, walking, talking - Uke-tossing proof, right there in the imperfect flesh. It would be proof that Aikido (the self-defense, the activity, and the community) are about principle more than about macho, self-aggrandizing, self-deluding, ego and supposed physical prowess. (Although, none of these third or fourth-degree black belts run much risk of being mistaken for Arnold any time soon, either)

In the end, there remains the question "What is Tenkan?" If it's perfection of movement by the physically perfect in the dojo, then who will teach it - and who will qualify to even try to learn it? And, what use will it be if they do?