

## Ma-Ai

Malcolm Tiki Shewan

If one were to pose the following question to an Aikidoist: "What is Ma-Ai?", the response would usually be: "It means combat distance, or martial distance"! While that would be a fair answer, it is not quite such a simple concept.

When one examines the two kanji characters that make up the word "ma-ai", one should consider that their meaning could be substantially broader.

**Ma** (間) is an interesting character made up of two radicals :

- The first radical 門, on its own, signifies "an opening" or "a door or portal".
- The second radical 日 signifies "the sun" or "the light".

The meaning implied here is: "an opening (as of a door) that lets light pass through." In this sense, the character "Ma" also implies more than just a physical gap. In fact, this reference to an opening or gap also includes a meaning that refers to an interval of time. So, the concept of Ma refers not only to a gap or distance in space, but also contains within it the meaning of an interval of time.

We arrive, therefore, at a definition that includes the concept of both space and time. A separation can be seen in terms of distance (centimeters, Meters, Km., etc.) but also in terms of time (seconds, light-years, etc.).

It is occasionally funny to ask for directions in a city, where you may hear the answer "Oh, it is about a 10 minute walk ...", and then ask the same question to another person, who responds with: "Oh ... it's a good kilometer and somewhere over there...". We are all able to see the separation of one thing from another in terms of distance or in terms of time, depending on the apparent logic - but it's usually described either in one, or the other, of these ways.

The second kanji of "Ma-Ai" is the "Ai" of aikido. I think the meaning of this character has been explained many times to Aikido practitioners. However, it is not useful here to interpret it in usual terms, as: harmony, love, unity, etc.

In this case, the meaning of "Ai" is more along the line of the idea of "a glove that fits perfectly." I do

I am not sure if the expression "like ass and shirt" suitably expresses this, but in any case, it may help to convey a better understanding of the meaning of the term Ma-Ai.

Moreover, as the singular or the plural is not usually indicated in Japanese we may also need to reflect on other possible dimensions.

We have noted above, that our practitioner responded with "It is the combative distance". In the majority of martial art disciplines practiced today, this concept applies very well to situations where two opponents are usually **armed with the same manner and the rules are structured so that the opponents have, as much as possible, an equal advantage** – such as for: Kendo, Karate, Judo, and Aikido shugyosha. In fact, the martial artist must devote a lot of time to develop and assimilate a fundamental understanding of distance.

\* Diagram 1 Ma-Ai.

Generally, 4 distances of Ma-Ai are recognized:

- 1) Tôma - long distance ;
- 2) Chûma (nakama) - intermediate distance ;
- 3) Chikama – nearest, or closest distance ;
- 4) Uchima (Kirima) – striking (or cutting) distance.

The fourth interval in the list above, "Uchima", is usually the first one learned, because it is the distance where the opponent can strike or cut you. It is also the distance where you are able to strike or cut your opponent. This is the same for each side, in modern martial art disciplines. It is the distance where one or the other (or both) are within striking reach of the vital center of the opponent. This distance will be the same (more or less...) within the same discipline (but to define this distance in centimeters would be futile).

Chikama is the minimum distance between two opponents, where they are just outside the distance needed to reach each other with an attack. Indeed, this is a critical distance before entering Uchima. This is the reason why (in Aikido) a lot of practice time is devoted to attacks, such as: katate-dori, kata-dori, etc. because in these movements, the opponent crosses from chikama to uchima with regularity. This type of training instills a good perception and understanding of fundamental Ma-ai.

An understanding of Chûma is developed in the practice techniques involving strikes, such as Shomen Uchi, Yokomen Uchi, Tsuki, etc., where the opponent needs to take 2 or more steps to close the distance in order to make contact.

Tôma is essentially a distance between opponents, where there is a possible engagement, but outside of the reach of an immediate attack. Traditionally, there are usually 6 steps between the two opponents and, in modern disciplines, this is often taught as the distance at which the two opponents greet each other (Rei), at the start.

Each of these four divisions of the concept of Ma-Ai is extremely useful for understanding the larger concept of distance and its importance. Indeed, each stage of Ma-ai presents certain possibilities (or opportunities) that are probably not possible in any of the three others. Thus the practitioner recognizes the necessity and the importance of structuring one's technical study and practice according to a precise regimen, if we hope to succeed - to understand the importance of "what, where and when". This concept cannot be explained in writing – but can only be learned through diligent practice under the direction of a teacher, who has mastered this himself and is able to convey this knowledge (to us).

Having said this, it should be mentioned that this description of Ma-Ai is only a partial one, but forms an essential basic understanding necessary in our martial art practice, and is often considered sufficient. This is apparently true, when you regard it in context, of modern disciplines, combat sports, training in the dojo, parity of opponents, rules, weight categories, competition, sports matches, etc. "Combat" in these contexts is not necessarily the correct word? ... Besides, it is thought that in the old Judo, one usually said "one will draw together" or, in English, "Do you play Judo?", for example.

However, outside the limited interpretation of **Ma Ai**, where it is regarded as referring to "distance", only (as described above), is not enough to meet the demands of a combat situation. The warrior of yesteryear needed to study a considerable number of additional aspects, all of which directly related to the concept of **Ma-Ai** .

In a real combat situation, one of life and death, the warrior had to have mastered, by instinct and through correct perception, the concept of Ma-Ai - (acquired by deep and thorough training and vast experience, accumulated through long years of practice and meticulous study) – when faced with conditions that were unstable, unbalanced, unknown, and unpredictable.

Teaching within a Ko-Ryu (old school of combat) demanded that the concept of **Ma-Ai** include, for example, the ability to instantly assess a situation as to the level and extent of a threat: to determine its gravity, hazard, or risk of death, and to correctly interpret a sound, a gesture, a movement, an action (or, the absence of same), in relation to oneself - in terms of distance, time, opportunity(ies). All of this was of prime importance, to be able to deal with any situation that might arise.

To be certain, a correct estimate of distance is fundamental. But in spatial terms also, a perception of the angle of a threat is fundamental - where does the attack come from? The angle can increase the value of the threat - the danger - for example: someone approaching you from the front is not the same as someone approaching you from behind...

If one considers the combination of distance and of time, one gets to the speed of the action. This coordination of action in relation to the speed of the action of an attacker is, of course, also an aspect of Ma-Ai.

In addition, if you also consider the weight of your opponent – suppose your opponent weighs 200 kg. and an attack comes quickly toward you, how do you act? What influence does his momentum have on the choice of technique, strategy, tactics ?

You must also be able to assess intention - is it an assault? Is this is a real danger? Partial? Harmless? Without any danger?

Knowing how to make a judgment on this is essential in one's choice of action. Clearly, killing someone who approached you for just a cup of tea would not look good – paranoia is different from the mind "alert".

Finally, do not forget that it is essential to evaluate, correctly and precisely, the "nature of the attack". How is the opponent armed? How are you, yourself, armed?

Each weapon has its own appropriate Ma-Ai and way in which it is handled. Each weapon has its strong and weak points, which also vary depending on the circumstances. For example, a large Naginata which would represent a formidable danger on a battlefield, would possibly be a handicap in an indoor situation, in a room with a low ceiling. Are there any weaknesses / openings? Where and what are yours? How can you exploit them?

All of this very succinctly describes the building blocks which must be considered, instinctively and instantaneously (without any pre-conception), to be able to gain a deeper understanding of Ma-Ai and its application in classical Budo. The Path is long...