

## **Aikido and Conflict Management**

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The name, ai-ki-do, means roughly “the way of unified or harmonized spirit.” Unlike many other fighting arts, it is not a sport. In fact, one of the basic ideas of aikido is that competition has no place in combat. What the aikidoist never does is square off with an opponent for a fair contest to see who is the better man. Aikido works on a completely different paradigm: In a real fight, there is always one person who is attacking, and another who is being attacked. The theory of aikido is that the attacker (by definition) is over-reaching himself – going outside his proper sphere and putting himself off balance. Therefore, in committing an act of aggression, he is really defeating himself. The problem is to help him to realize this: to help him see the error of his position—preferably without hurting him or, at any rate, not hurting him more than necessary.

Aikido is sometimes called the pacifist’s martial art, but this is not quite correct—for two reasons. First, you cannot practice your beautiful aikido techniques unless someone cooperates by attacking you and letting you throw him around. The only reason anyone will do that (until you get to be an old instructor like me) is that you are doing the same for him. Accordingly, in a real aikido class, you will spend as much time practising attacks as defences against those same attacks. Second, it turns out that the skills of attack and defence are very nearly the same. The movements of a really good attacker are fluid, flexible and focussed. Neither the attacker nor the defender knows what is going to happen next. Both must be alert, relaxed, present to the situation, ready for anything. Actually, the whole physical fitness side of aikido training is in the rhythmic drill of attacking, getting thrown, rolling out and up on your feet, and then attacking again. The better the other guy is, the less he actually does!

Another important thing to understand is that for the aikido practitioner, physical combat is only the extreme version of a situation that happens all the time. I have been practising aikido for thirty years, have never really used it in the street, and never expect to—not even when I go back to New York City (where I grew up) for a visit. But I use the ideas of aikido constantly when I fight with my wife—or with anyone else whose ideas and interests happen to differ from my own. Jesus taught that we should love our enemies. Ueshiba, the founder of aikido, might have added that no one can do this until he has become very skilful at handling conflicts with his friends. An old Japanese proverb says that “Amateur tactics cause grave wounds.” A real pro handles a conflict situation. He can deal with aggression and violence without becoming aggressive or violent himself. That is why it is entirely appropriate to introduce a potentially lethal fighting art like aikido into a workshop like this one on peacekeeping and conflict resolution.

In this very brief workshop, I will try to share four very basic ideas that are demonstrated and practised in every aikido technique, but that are also very useful for the family and work-related quarrels of everyday life:

**1. Stay In Your Sphere** (*kokyu dosa*)

Aikido theory visualizes a ball of energy centred about two inches below the navel, and extending out from there, potentially in every direction. This centre is the point around which movement and breathing are organized. In aikido we spend a lot of time learning how to move and breathe from this centre, and experiencing what happens when we lose our centres. We discover that centred movement is powerful and graceful and effective. When the connection to the centre is broken or over-reached, we become clumsy, weak and vulnerable.

Given a strong, clear centre, it becomes possible to think of body movement as a rolling sphere of energy—and later as a spiral wave form, projected from a single point. In aikido we practice to stay centred, project power from the centre, control an opponent's centre, avoid being controlled by his. This sounds very mystical, but it has real implications for conflict management in everyday life: Know who you are and where you are. Never over-reach yourself. Never contend with power on its own terms. Make it come to you and contend with you on yours.

**2. Go to Meet the Attack and Get Out of Its Way**

(*tenkan, irimi* and *irimi nage*)

The critical moment of any real fight is the instant of engagement, the moment when adversaries first make physical contact. Before that moment, they are manoeuvring for position and sizing each other up. By the time they actually engage, it is already decided who has the advantage of the ground, who is afraid of whom, who is attacking and who is being attacked. One of the great strengths of aikido among the martial arts is that it enables us to practice this moment of approach safely and realistically, at full speed and power. Aikido also teaches a characteristic strategy for this preliminary phase of combat. You should, of course, anticipate the situation as it builds, and do everything you can to defuse it. But if an attack develops, you should go to meet it—and then get out of its way. Aikido footwork is designed to let you meet an attack without becoming aggressive, and then, at the last instant, to step out of its path leaving your attacker confused and off balance, and yourself in control of the situation.

### **3. Join and Lead, Don't Force**

*(katate tori tenkan, ten chi nage, breaking a choke hold)*

If you hope to influence someone, you have to convince him that you are on his side—that you and he have basic concerns in common. The use of power in aikido is very interesting: We do not aim to destroy or injure an opponent. We aim to control and neutralize him, and we seek to do this much more by subtle influence than by brute force. An attack without commitment can be ignored or brushed aside. An attack is dangerous only to the extent that it is committed—that it has a real intention and focus. The first problem is to get out of the way of that intention, not to allow one's self to remain its target. Only then are you in a position to re-direct and steer the intention of the attack by adding your own intentions to it. That is the key: In aikido we never meet and oppose force and try to overcome it. If an opponent has lost his centre, you must become the centre for his movement as well as your own.

### **4. Let the Process Do the Work** *(shiho nage)*

In human affairs, the concept of ripeness is one of the hardest things to understand. It is difficult to be patient. It is difficult to trust a process and wait for it to produce its results in its own good time. In aikido you do not throw your opponent to the ground. You create a movement (between the two of you) that works to your advantage. It is the movement, not you, that makes the throw.