

# Aikido as Political Theory

Richard Ostrofsky

December, 2000

Time out of mind, martial arts<sup>1</sup> have been practised by aristocrats and by thugs. Middle-class people, concerned with cost accounting, profit and loss, have had little use for them on the whole, preferring to hire others to do their fighting for them. But young males on the margins of law and the economy have cultivated fighting prowess as a form of skilled labour, as a pre-requisite of illegal enterprise, and as a route to self-esteem and status. From quite a different mind-set, aristocrats knowing themselves born to rule have regarded skills of violence as the prerogative and instrument of government. So long as government was centrally preoccupied in holding and deploying a monopoly of coercive power, familiarity with weapons, love of duty, a touchy sense of honour, and relative comfort with violence and the possibility of violent death were indispensable to the ruling class. Correspondingly, martial arts were crucial parts of the education of a “gentleman.” In wartime they were his business, and in peace his sport and hobby; and there remain echoes of this mentality even today.

*Aikido* is a Japanese martial art, whose name means roughly “the way of unified or harmonized spirit.” Like judo, it is a system cleaned up for practice by modern people, based on the ancient fighting arts of the *samurai*. Unlike judo, it is not a competitive sport. Rather, its founder Morihei Ueshiba refined the old techniques to demonstrate and teach the highest principles of Japanese *budo*. Traditionally, in their outlook, ideals and concepts, these martial arts had been in many respects definitive of Japanese culture. Japan was and is a small, crowded, resource-poor island, constantly under threat from larger and more powerful neighbours. Long before Ueshiba’s time, it had evolved a sophisticated military and political culture which may indeed have something to say to a crowded, dangerous, resource-depleted world. This, of course, is for time to show and for the future to judge – but the founder certainly intended his art to preserve the deepest meanings of Japanese culture for Japan itself, and for the world as a whole.

In this essay I explore the practice of aikido as a metaphor and theory of political interaction in general. Seeing it this way reverses Clausewitz’ dictum that “War is the continuation of diplomacy by other means.” Our starting point, rather, is that every relationship – whether between individual persons or nations – involves both common and competing interests. For this reason, the elements of conflict are always present. Where Jesus taught that we should love our enemies, Ueshiba might have added that this requires great skill in handling conflicts with our friends. It seems paranoid to think, as Clausewitz implies, that conflict is the essence of normal

---

<sup>1</sup> *Budo*, in Japanese.

diplomacy and relationship. But it is certainly true that every relationship contains elements of conflict which must be contained and managed in the interests of harmony and mutual advantage. An old Japanese proverb says that “Amateur tactics cause grave wounds,” a poetic way of stating that conflict situations require skillful handling if they are not to get out of hand, and do more damage than the actual dispute was worth.

Ueshiba actually did teach that the true purpose of *budo* is “the loving cultivation of all things,” and that the aim of aikido is “to find one’s proper place,” and “to help everyone to accomplish his mission.” This sounds far-fetched until we think about peace-keeping missions and deterrent nuclear strategy – and the old Latin saying, “If you want peace, prepare for war.” We might also remember the line from Edmund Burke: “All that is necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing.” In fact, the problem of violence and coercive power cannot be solved by wishing it away. Power has to be contained and domesticated somehow. And, nasty as it is, it has a positive aspect: Art, love, learning, prosperity and physical security can thrive only under power’s protection: in its shadow, so to speak. Sometimes considered “the pacifist’s martial art,” the aikido of Ueshiba attempts to show, in the most concrete and physical way, how the shadow of benevolent power may and must be cast.

My purpose here is to articulate some of its principles as these apply to the politics of groups and peoples and nations. I will do so by discussing several concepts, demonstrated and practised in every aikido technique, that apply also in the quarrels and factional disputes of politics and everyday life.

## **1. The Sphere**

Aikido theory visualizes a ball of energy centred about two inches below the navel, and extending out from there in every direction. This centre is the point around which movement and breathing are organized. 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. This sounds mystical, but it has real implications for conflict management in everyday life. In plain English, the image of the sphere evokes ideas of self-possession and self-containment, with nothing sticking out to get knocked off or abraded off. The idea is to know who you are and where you are – not to over-reach yourself in projecting power, and never to contend with the power of others on their terms. The strategy instead is to make the other’s power come to you, and to over-reach itself in doing so. By refusing to become aggressive yourself, and thereby meeting aggression on its terms, you put that hostile power to a choice: Either it must withdraw its threat, or accept the risks of attacking. In attacking it oversteps its sphere of autonomy and trespasses into yours. In withdrawing, it retires within its own proper domain which you, in turn, must accept or invade. Assuming both parties prefer to avoid the dangers of aggression, the outcome is a stand-off. From one perspective, this means no more than an armed truce. But from another it signifies a

relationship of mutual respect from which trade and all manner of reciprocal association may develop. In aikido then, the sphere is a paradigm of freedom, security and autonomous personhood. Peace prevails so long as everyone keeps within his own sphere, or enters another's only as a welcome guest, with permission and at their pleasure.

Now, if everyone stayed within his own sphere at all times, neither aikido practice nor life would be possible. In fact, we make tentative incursions all the time, if only to see what kind of response we'll get. The most respectful or amicable negotiation involves some probing of the other's position to see what is and is not possible, what the other will or will not accept. Attempting to make love to a sleepy wife (or, indeed, to anyone at any time) is a good example of the sort of speculative aggression I have in mind. Problems arise when the individuals concerned are not reading each other's signals, or when the aggressor can't or won't take no for an answer. In the real life of emotional adults, there is a clear distinction, but no sharp boundary line between sexual diplomacy and unacceptable sexual aggression. Skill is needed on both sides if "grave wounds" are to be avoided.

Correspondingly, the art of *ukemi*, (to use the Japanese word) – of attacking, being thrown and taking the fall without getting hurt – is as important to aikido as the elegant technique that makes the throw. Actually, as the *aikidoka*<sup>2</sup> comes to learn, the skills of attack and defence are much the same. The movements of a really good attacker are fluid, flexible and focussed. Neither *uke* (pronounced "ooh-kay"), who attacks and gets thrown, nor *nage* (pronounced "nah-gay"), who defends himself and makes the throw), knows what is going to happen next. Both must be alert, relaxed, present to the situation, ready for anything. In fact, the whole 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 *nage* is, the less he actually does!

The relevance of aikido practice to the politics and diplomacy of ordinary life (where physical combat, fortunately, is the exception and not the rule) derives from this conceptual distinction between *uke* and *nage*. The *aikidoka* practices both roles by turns; in advanced practice, the two roles may shade into each other so that the players simply engage and come to grips: It need not be decided ahead of time who is attacking and who is being attacked. Still, unlike many other martial arts, aikido is not a competitive sport, and one of its central ideas is that sportive competition has no place in combat. What the *aikidoka* never does is square off with an opponent for a fair contest to see who is the better man. Its paradigm is completely different and, I think, more realistic: In a real conflict, there is always the person or persons attacked, and another or others who are attacking – an *established* power and a *revisionist* power, so to speak. The theory of aikido is that *uke*, the revisionist attacker is to some extent

---

<sup>2</sup>

Aikido practitioner.

over-reaching – going outside his proper sphere and putting himself off balance. He cannot help but do so; and accordingly, with other factors not hopelessly unequal, and “best play on both sides,” he will lose. His persistent aggression is necessarily self-defeating. By his attempted violence, he really defeats himself. *Nage*’s problem is just to help him to realize this – help him to see the error of his ways – preferably without hurting him or, at any rate, not hurting him more than necessary.

Real life, we know, is not so tidy. It is just not the case that violence and aggression never pay: They have been known to pay handsomely. However, as generals have long recognized, there is a considerable advantage in the defensive position. It usually requires a certain definite superiority in numbers, or weaponry, or morale, or intelligence or the element of surprise, to offset the inherent strength of a competent defence. Moreover, as the theory of deterrence suggests, strategic security is achieved more readily through a defensive than an offensive posture; and, in projecting power and getting one’s way, cloaked or tacit threats are the most effective. As another martial arts proverb has it, “A sword is useful so long as it remains in its scabbard.” When a policeman has to draw his pistol, he is trying to rectify a failure of law enforcement that has already occurred.

As already noted, the individual’s sphere is defined by a strongly held and conscious centre, and it has a centre line or *axis*. In aikido we spend a lot of time learning how to breathe and move from this centre and centre line, 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 and weak and vulnerable.

Discussion of the centre is really inseparable from that of the sphere; but it is convenient to postpone remarks on displacement, rotation and the mechanics of centred movement until after the next section on engagement – the situation of two (or more) spheres in contact and seeking to control or penetrate one another. Meanwhile it is enough if we can imagine the sphere as the symbol of posture, balance and stability, of non-contention, of discovering and keeping one’s proper place within some shared situation. The potential for conflict begins when someone moves into another’s defended sphere, and then both sides had better be accurate in assessing and responding to each other’s power, or someone is likely to get hurt. The desirable outcome of political life is that everyone comes to understand his proper place and, for the most part, keeps to, and intelligently defends that place.

## **2. Engagement**

The critical moment of any real fight is the instant of engagement, the moment when adversaries first make physical contact. Before that instant, they are manoeuvring for position and sizing each other up. In their circling and feinting, information is exchanged and evaluated, and conclusions are reached. By the time the opponents 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 the approach and instant of engagement safely and realistically, at full speed and power.

The general tactic is to invite the attack you want, go to meet it, and then get out of its way. The footwork is designed to meet an attack boldly but without becoming or appearing aggressive. The posture is described as being present to your opponent. The state of mind is “Here I am. Come and take me. Give it your best shot. . .” You move toward the aggressor, closing the distance between you to dominate the rhythm of his attack. Then, at the last instant, you step out of its path, leaving him confused and off balance, and yourself in control of the situation.

There are several ways to do this: The most direct is to enter obliquely across the line of the attack, avoiding a direct collision, but spinning *uke* around – in effect, turning his flank – so that he is facing in the direction from which he came. Another method is for you yourself to turn, outside the line of attack, drawing *uke* into a kind of “orbit” around a centre which you occupy. Yet another method is to retreat, drawing *uke* off his line of attack, and off his balance as well. There are other possibilities, and variations on these, but the general idea is to control the situation from the outset, never allowing even the possibility of a fair fight. The *aikidoka* tries to anticipate the situation as it builds, and does everything he can to defuse it. But as the aggressive intention develops, he attempts to dominate not just the opponent’s physical movement but his intention and his spirit – his *ki*, to use the compact Japanese term<sup>3</sup>.

From the perspective of engagement, it is misleading to think of aikido as a pacifist’s martial art. In fact, as one master explained, from a certain point of view it is the most aggressive style there is. As already stated, Aikido is not a competitive sport. Accordingly no steps are taken, as in many other styles to make the conditions “fair.” The aikido student practices with everyone on the mat – not just with others of his own size and weight. He practices taking weapons – sword, staff, and knife – away from an armed opponent. He takes his turn attacking, surrendering the advantage of defensive posture. He learns to attack with “sincerity” – that is to say, with focus and commitment, and to take the consequences without getting hurt, and as smoothly and economically as possible, so that he can withdraw safely, or return to the attack. He learns to offer himself to the attack, and then come to meet it. But what he learns above all is that combat is not a game or a contest of strength or speed or even skill. If

---

<sup>3</sup> Again, this word *ki* is less mystical than it sounds. *Spirit* is probably the closest English equivalent, provided we bear in mind such kindred words as “*inspire*” and “*respiration*.” The concept comes from an ancient vitalist tradition, which sees *ki* (or *spirit*) as a substance which makes the difference between a living body and a dead one. When you die (*expire*) your *ki* leaves the body. While you live, breath, mind, volition, intention, energy and charismatic power are just so many aspects of the same process.

of anything at all, it is a contest of clarity and centeredness. The ideal is to control the situation so completely that an attacker never has a chance – so that realizing this, a potential attacker realizes he will do better to keep the peace.

In ordinary life – family, business, politics, diplomacy – the entities concerned mostly leave each other alone (remaining outside of and respecting each others' spheres). But sometimes they engage each other on amicable or hostile terms. Politics – taking this word in its broad sense – is the process of working out terms of engagement and relationship among the individuals concerned, given their respective situations and their common and differing interests. The art of politics, as we'll discuss below, consists in recruiting the cooperation of others for one's own cause. But, first of all, it consists in taking pains not to clash with them directly where there is any chance of avoiding to do so. We approach other people, and tentatively engage them, without knowing whether they will be friends or foes, allies or adversaries, in whatever projects we have at heart. But we make contact, try to feel them out, reveal what we wish to of ourselves – all without giving or accepting the shock of head-on collision. Normally we do not even stand or sit directly facing them, which would be too threatening. Instead, we face them at an angle, to avoid the body language of direct confrontation.

Most often we simply roll past them and go on about our business, hoping they will do the same. Sometimes some kind of bond is formed and a relationship develops. Now a question of leadership arises: Around whose perspectives, values and projects will the relationship develop? Who will lead and who will follow? Or, how will the leadership be shared? These aspects of politics figure in the remaining sections of this essay, but the moments of approach and engagement must first be gotten through; and, faced with aggressive and tiresome persons, it is never too soon to take the upper hand.

### **3. Keeping the Centre**

Every sphere has a centre. The personal sphere of a human body is centred about two inches below the navel. This point is at once the source of breathing and movement, and (just for this reason) the experienced locus of volition as well. Even in English, we say that a person is “yellow-bellied” (abdominal muscles and blood flow constricted), or that he has “guts.” Thus, there is nothing uniquely Japanese, or specific to aikido about this concept of the body's centre. Dancers, gymnasts, vocalists, all learn a technique that is based on breathing and working from a connection to the centre, along the body's centre line. Performance in every one of these arts depends on mastery of that technique.

But in every aikido movement, there are actually three centres to consider: There is your centre and your opponent's centre; and then there is the contested centre of your mutual interaction – often the point of grip or contact round which you both are moving, that you both will seek to occupy, or use to advantage. Control of the opponent's attack is accomplished through a precise adjustment of relationship among

these points. The general idea is to set up a connection among them, in such a way that relatively small displacements and rotations of your own body are transmitted and amplified to produce disproportionately large results for your opponent's body. By such means it is possible to make spectacular throws with negligible exertion of effort.

The concept of the centre in turn suggests notions of balance, force couples, leverage and torque. It also suggests a classification of forces, and trends, and of processes in general: On one hand, there are centrifugal processes characterized by expansion and dispersion of what has previously been collected and concentrated. On the other, there are centripetal processes characterized by collection and concentration of what has previously been diffused and dispersed. The ancient Chinese called the former *yang*, and the latter *yin*. Heat and fire were considered *yang* because they radiate from a central source: a stove, a burning log, the noonday sun. Water was considered *yin* because it falls from the sky and flows down hill, collecting in the valley. For a household or a government, expenditures are *yang*; revenue is *yin*; and, in the long run, these have to balance. Moreover, in politics and in history there is an observable dialectic between the *yin*, centre-seeking principle of **comfort**, and the centrifugal *yang* principle of expansion, adventure and **fun**. Epochs of risk, excitement and high adventure alternate with epochs of caution and cocooning: minding one's own business and sitting by the hearth. Too much of either becomes uncomfortable and begets its opposite, just as the Chinese thought: Excess of comfort becomes boring and provokes a desire for novelty and stimulation. Excess of fun becomes exhausting and dangerous and provokes a desire for peace and quiet. The tides of politics and of government policy sometimes run one way sometimes the other; but, in general, wisdom lies at the centre – in maintaining a balance between the opposing pulls.

In politics as in aikido, all kinds of advantages accrue to the individual or bloc that holds or dominates the public centre of linkage and inter-connected movement:

First, there is the sense of legitimacy that attaches to established customs and institutions, however exploitative or downright wicked these may be. Just because these are real and habitual, they have a kind of centrality to them. They are criticized and attacked from all directions, but most of the time nothing happens – largely because the attacks tend to cancel each other out.

But this centrality of the actual is just the beginning. In seeking allies, building coalitions, getting elected to office, the problem is always to define a strong central position and get one's self identified with it, leaving the opposition no place to go. In Canada, as I write this, the Liberal party shows signs of being able to stay in power indefinitely, simply because it holds the centre – all other parties having marginalised themselves.

Marginalizing the opponent in this way is, to some extent, no more than self-fulfilling prophecy: People and positions often become marginal just to the extent they are thought to be so. What is sad but remarkable is how often oppressed people and groups cooperate with the attempts of others to marginalize them. To some extent this

is inevitable: As we've seen it is a basic principle of aikido that the revisionist of a situation – its *uke* – automatically gives up the advantages of remaining centred. Still, it is also a principle that *uke* should try to minimize this disadvantage.

Another application of centrality in politics is the phenomenon of the “swing vote.” Any special interest group that remains relatively indifferent to most other issues that divide an electorate can exercise a disproportionate influence on the drafting of party platforms and legislation. In North America today, any number of special interest groups are powerful, out of all proportion to their actual numbers. In effect, each has an effective veto power where its own special interests are concerned. In war and politics, a central position has the further advantage of shorter or simpler lines of communication, making it easier and faster to adjust your position, or transfer supplies, or send a message. In aikido this advantage of the centre is especially striking: *Nage*, the defending party, pivots out of the way of an attack, and then walks forward in a tight circle, turning like a compass around one foot that never leaves the ground. The attacker then finds himself running desperately around his opponent to keep his balance and stay on his feet until, at a certain point, he can no longer do so.

Aikido techniques exploit the concept of the centre in all these ways: by preempting the centre and leaving an opponent no place to stand; by establishing a fulcrum as the centre round which the opponent topples and falls; by applying trivial force at the precise point and instant where it can make the difference; by forcing the attacker to chase in futile circles round an opponent who remains almost still.

#### **4. Blending of Spirit**

The basic idea here is to add your intentions to your opponent's as a kind of vector sum, instead of opposing them directly. If you pit your will directly against his, you must use strength to overcome his strength. By superposing your will on his, if you can somehow contrive to do so, it becomes possible to re-direct and lead him, and thereby use his strength to your advantage. The technique is familiar to confidence men and to parents of small children and is, of course, the basic tactic of every successful politician. It is not unethical or dishonest *per se*. Indeed, it is the precondition for harmonious group life of every kind, and for success in every cooperative effort. The technique certainly lends itself both to ethical and to highly unethical applications, but there is nothing unethical that I can see about its use in aikido, to redirect an aggressive intention so that it is dissipated, or grounded, or returned to its source.

The *aikidoka* does not aim to destroy or injure an opponent, but rather to control and neutralize him; and the art of the thing is to accomplish this, not by brute force but by the subtlest and most economical means, using the general strategy called *ki no musubi* (literally, “entangling or blending of spirit”). This might be described as a kind of constructive subversion, or subversive allegiance, whereby you join yourself with the adversary's purpose in order to steer it, while letting him do all the actual work.

In real life, this is known as “management.” It is not simply a question of achieving leverage and mechanical advantage. Aikido technique aims more insidiously at a takeover of the opponent’s power for your own purposes instead of his.

Among con artists, it is proverbial that “You can’t cheat an honest man.” Quite similarly, in aikido there is no action at all so long as the opponent remains within his own sphere and refrains from invading yours. Even when there is some incursion, it is not always necessary or desirable to do much about it: not all advances, even unwelcome ones, are truly hostile; and a perfunctory attack, without real focus and commitment, can be ignored or brushed aside. An attack is dangerous only to the extent that it is committed – that it has real intention and energy (*ki*) behind it. For this reason, it is often best to wait until your opponent hands you a gift of serious aggression that can be taken over and used against him.

Assuming there is such hostile intention and movement, the first problem is to get out of its way. In doing so, you want to put yourself in a position to re-direct and steer the attack by adding your own intentions to it. That is the key: In aikido you never meet and oppose force and try to overcome it. If an opponent has lost his centre, you make yourself the centre for his movement as well as your own, as we’ve just seen. Once in that advantageous position, a slight nudge may turn the attack back against itself, or send it into a fall or a wall or another enemy, or harmlessly off into thin air.

In politics the comparable methods of persuasion lend themselves to a range of uses, some more ethical than others. But there is nothing improper about helping a group to accomplish its own best purposes by cleverly shading people’s perceptions and intentions to bring them into better alignment. Indeed, that is the central task of statesmanship – of creative politics and government: to arrange necessary compromises toward a result that satisfies the vital public interests, while keeping public discontent within tolerable limits by spreading it around.

In aikido, the basic application of *ki no musubi* (blending of spirit) is to somehow ally or connect one’s self to the attack, so as to take it over and nullify it – render it ineffectual. In politics, the basic application is to build a coalition by submerging the differences and highlighting the common interests and values of prospective allies. Inevitably, the coalition’s success must bring a degree of frustration, as it turns out that the commonalities of its members were only partly real, but partly illusory. But hopefully, for at least the most important followers and allies, there will have been enough real gain to make their participation worthwhile.

## **5. Rigging the Process**

Aikido beginners try too hard. They try to throw each other and try to keep from being thrown, and they try to do correctly what their instructor is showing. All this trying is inevitable and necessary: there is probably no other way to learn. Yet it must be

unlearned before real proficiency is possible. The spirit of aikido is thoroughly Taoist. The whole point of the art is get your results as if by themselves; and, just as Lao Tzu taught how to govern China by Doing Nothing, so the aikido student practices to keep out of the way of an enemy's intentions, adding just the minimum necessary to convert the attack into a fall.

This possibility is magically appealing in a meritocratic and technocratic society that prizes skill and effort as the keys to success at anything, but it runs against the idea that everyone brings to his first martial arts class, of becoming strong and tricky and tough. What the student finds there instead is a life-long meditation on the paradoxical nature of power, which lies almost at the opposite pole from what he expected: in becoming gentle and simple and responsive – and flexible above all else. He begins more or less as he expects, by learning basic techniques: how to stand, how to move, different ways to lock a joint and to make a throw. Before long, however, he finds that there are just too many details to keep in mind all at once, and that the problem of staying consciously coordinated, not only in his own movements but with those of his opponent, is just not possible. Meanwhile, his instructor keeps making unhelpful noises like “Relax!” and “Slow down!” and “Don't forget to breathe!” The student gets frustrated and tries even harder, and finds the results are even worse. At this stage, he is apt to feel like a complete moron. Every class leaves him feeling a little clumsier, and more and more that he is wasting his time. But every now and then, a technique works properly almost by accident, which is such a good feeling that it keeps him coming to class. Also, the more senior students and the instructor reassure him that he is right on schedule and coming along just fine – as is indeed the case. This crisis of frustration is a normal, entirely predictable phase of his training.

The student keeps on practicing, and trying harder, and blocking himself. Finally, there is a breakthrough, as he actually begins to feel for himself what everyone has been telling him all along – that all his efforts are counter-productive. What is required is a peculiar kind of negative effort – to stay loose, join the intention of the attack, lead the opponent into a fall. After this enlightenment, his techniques begin to work more reliably, and the practice becomes much less frustrating and a lot more fun.

What has happened? What does this Taoist *wu wei* (Doing Nothing) really amount to? In human affairs, the concept of process is one of the hardest things to understand, at any kind of intimate or personal level. We know about processes in the hard sciences, and about algorithms (i.e. procedures) in computer science, but the idea of our own lives and our social relationships as processes does not come easy because it requires an acceptance that we are not in full control of our affairs. The best we can do is stay in touch with them, maintain the right process, the right relationship, do whatever this requires of us, and hope for the best. In combat this is especially true, as the old sword masters understood and taught. If you go up against a skilled opponent by trying to outwit him, choosing and applying the right technique against his technique, you will be too slow and will inevitably get killed. Your chances are much better if you

trust your instincts and training, and respond intuitively without planning anything. That was the Zen of swordsmanship, still being re-discovered today by every aikido student who really gives himself to the practice. There is no “secret technique” to survive and win a fight. There are many techniques which must be practised until they are second nature but ultimately, combat is a matter of relationship and process, and its outcome is beyond anyone’s control, though it will be influenced by many factors. We Do Nothing (though keeping up with the stream of motion may have us working very hard) because it is the movement that does everything: The movement of centre around centre, developing out of the initial engagement, is what determines a result. When that movement is ripe, someone will fall. Your problem is to set up the process, direct it, follow it and trust it. But it is a dangerous illusion to think you can control its outcome all by yourself.

It is the same with any political process, including combat and warfare as a special case. The best way to project power is to arrange the system and its process to have them work for you. That is what law does, in relation to the predominant interests in any society: By delimiting the possibilities of relationship, the rule of law defines a game, and thereby collects every thing and person under its sway into a single system. Thereby it normalizes and routinizes the exactions of power, rendering them more tolerable to those on its receiving end, and much more lucrative to its beneficiaries, because the exercise of arbitrary power is very costly.

Now the operation of any system achieves a desired result, or progress in a desired direction, through some underlying, cyclical, repetitive process. Keeping this combination of cycle and trend in mind, the trajectory of any system may be conceived as a spiral. The Taoist point is that you cannot compel a desired trend or result through any direct action of your own – or that, even if you can, this is not an efficient technique of management and government. A better way is to control the underlying process and its structure of relationships. That is what law does in society, and what the *aikidoka* tries to do against his opponent. Under law’s constraint, the working of society follows the cycles of the calendar in daily, weekly, monthly and annual routines. These do not just mark time. Rather, they produce long-term consequences – ultimately including changes in the power relationships, in the political alignments and balance, and thus eventually in law and in the social game itself. Surprises are common; but the expectation is that such trends will work to the accumulating advantage of those interests that contrived the system in the first place.

## **6. *Ai-Ki*: “Unified Spirit”**

Finally, the concept of *ai-ki* is itself central to political experience, although it lacks convenient expression in the English language. What we call consensus, or even unanimity, is only one of its aspects. In the negative, we can say that someone is “*discombobulated*” – which my dictionary defines as meaning “disturbed,”

“discomfited,” “disconcerted.” Precisely, to be discombobulated means that one’s spirit is somehow jangled, out of tune, stressed-out: One feels disoriented or muddled in thought, perturbed or anxious in feeling. In severe cases the discombobulated person experiences derangement in his breathing, digestion, and other bio-rhythms. His timing is off. He is rigid, nervous, clumsy – poorly coordinated. In business affairs, discombobulation is costly; in combat it is lethal. No wonder, then, that “unified spirit” – *combobulance*, if you permit the word – was essential in the training of warriors. It is more than “grace under pressure” or “having one’s shit together.” It is more than poise, or calm or courage, more than aplomb. Becoming combobulated includes all these things, but at a vital, animal level: at the level of *ki*. Combobulance may also be (or fail to be) the quality of a relationship, a group, a corporation, or a whole nation. It would make sense to say that my wife and I were experiencing mild or serious discombobulation as a couple, or that the American polity was discombobulated by its misadventure in Viet Nam. National combobulance – understood as assent and cooperation with the regime’s purposes and policies – is typically a major aim of policy, and the central function of a whole arm of government, namely, its propaganda or “communications” divisions. My point is that if we want some precise equivalent of the Japanese phrase *ai-ki*, it would have to be something like *combobulance* or *combobulation*, because no other English word covers all the meanings of that phrase. Moreover, our word *discombobulated* means precisely what a Japanese would mean in saying that the *ki* of a person a group or a whole society, has become disturbed or deranged.

Aikido, then, may be said to seek a *combobulance*, a harmonizing or unifying of *ki* (vital energy and spirit); and it does so at three distinct levels:

To begin with, there is the personal level. The technique of the style aims at leading and throwing an opponent in a smooth, coordinated flow of movement and breath. At this level, that of the sphere and its centre, the *aikidoka* works to become combobulated within himself.

Second, there is the level of *ki no musubi* discussed above, a combobulance with the attacker and his attack. As in any martial art, and whether anyone makes a point of it or not, the *aikidoka* is being trained to regard a real opponent as just another practice partner to be handled, as I’ve been suggesting, in a characteristic way. In aikido, the opponent is not someone to defeat or destroy, but someone to deflect and neutralize – to render harmless or even useful. Even in real combat, what the *aikidoka* – like Machiavelli’s Prince – ultimately seeks is not a dead or disabled enemy, but a submissive and cooperative enemy: one who (figuratively) pays his taxes, obeys the law, and refrains from making further nuisance. The true *aikidoka* might kill an opponent who leaves him no alternative – but he would prefer not to. Even the opponent’s submission and cooperation, in the last resort, are not what he is after. Finally, all he really cares about is that you respect his sphere: that you not regard him as feasible prey. To attempt coercing you in any way would make him the *uke*, a role

he accepts only with reluctance, when the risk is worthwhile.

The third level of combobulance should be with nature and with physical law. There are two sides to consider here – the first well understood and accepted by people everywhere today; the second ferociously disputed. That natural processes and law can be understood and then manipulated and channelled for human purposes is a commonplace. As discussed above, this principle allows the *aikidoka* to subdue an attack using mostly the power of the attack itself. Elsewhere, perhaps, it allows the engineer to control the course of a river, and to power a whole city in the process, using a system of dams whose gates are raised and lowered with electrical power generated by the river itself. That is one way to be in tune with the cosmic flow. By contrast, the idea that human purposes should be in any way constrained or subordinated to a natural order is among the most controversial issues of our time. Most economists still believe there is no human demand that human ingenuity and labour cannot eventually satisfy. To the contrary, most ecologists warn that the earth's biosphere is a finite, fragile system that will certainly have the last word. Some people think of human life as indefinitely malleable and meliorable while science and technology continue to advance. Others think we tamper with natural systems and processes at our peril. It would be foolhardy to claim aikido for either side of this argument, but its practice seems to raise the issue in the sharpest way. Students arrive expecting to learn the secret techniques of power. Even as their powers develop, they come to perceive this whole ambition as a mistake. For it is a paradox of power, whether in a martial art or in the real world, that it deploys and uses those who wield it in a much deeper sense than they can be said to do with it.

## 7. Conclusion: An Ethical Politics?

In conclusion then, aikido technique with its underlying body of theory affords a remarkably detailed metaphor of politics and governance, and of the reconciliation or containment of opposing interests. The art as a whole may be the most profound and detailed explication ever produced of what Jane Jacobs<sup>4</sup>, following Plato, has called the Guardian Syndrome: the ethic of the knightly warrior and the just ruler. But it goes further, offering the vision of a plane on which might and right – power and ethical conduct – are almost the same thing. Long ago, the Greek philosopher Heraclitus perceived that conflict (the struggle of opposing principles and forces) was creative and necessary – that there could be no social life without it. Eventually, his insight led to Hegel's concept of the *dialectic* – the world argument – and to our modern ideas of system and process. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Ueshiba refined the ancient *samurai* techniques to demonstrate how conflict could give rise less painfully to a harmonious

---

<sup>4</sup> in her book, *Systems of Survival*.

social order, if all contenders played their parts skilfully and avoided foolish blunders. What are we to make of this idea?

We've seen that Aikido offers a metaphor for politics, and expresses an ideal of political behaviour. As an ideal, though, it is based on something more solid than mere exhortation to be nice and love one's enemy. It takes for granted that people have differing perceptions and interests and loyalties, and may well choose, or find themselves compelled to play for their sides – even for stakes of life and death. What it suggests is that **if** conflict is conducted with skill and intelligence both sides may emerge as winners. Without these qualities, both sides are likely to lose.

Such a conclusion is not startling. Both eventualities are matters of common experience. History and personal memory certainly record no shortage of cases in which the parties to conflict miscalculated and over-reached themselves and produced a result in which neither side could rejoice. They also recall instances in which the parties, after a certain amount of probing and skirmishing, were able to gage each other's interests and strengths correctly, and then negotiate a settlement that proved advantageous to both sides. The concept of a *win-win* solution is commonplace doctrine today, though not always realized when it is clearly feasible. Where aikido does have a new idea to contribute is not here, (where Ueshiba's martial art does no more than endorse an idea already thoroughly familiar). But I think aikido does have something new to say about the conduct of those probing and skirmishing operations that make a mutually profitable negotiation possible. Anyone who has ever had to deal with a stupidly stubborn adversary will grasp this point without difficulty. A clever, flexible opponent though theoretically more dangerous is, in practice, greatly preferable to deal with. He will take every drop of advantage that can be won, but will not continue to fight where there is more to be gained by settling. He can be trusted, at least, to recognize his own interest: To come to terms when profitable to do so. Not to continue the war when there is no new information, nor further concessions, to be won. The stupid opponent cannot be so trusted. *Amateur tactics cause grave wounds.*

On this level, the aikido of Ueshiba invites comparison with Gandhi's concept of *Satyagraha* – "truth force" – that drove the British out of India. Ueshiba's teaching complements Gandhi's nicely, and perhaps advances somewhat on Gandhian tactics. It demands less saintliness of the front line troops, and offers better guidance perhaps in handling stupid aggression. Where Gandhi asked his people to lie down on the railroad tracks, and to offer their heads to the policemen's clubs, aikido would have allowed them to take those clubs away while still refusing to break heads themselves. It would have compelled the British to exert naked power for every penny of tax and every local purchase. It would have organized a resistance that remained absolutely calm and centred under all conditions, as evasive as possible, and completely unco-operative except in assisting the occupying force to leave. It would have permitted, even encouraged, armed defence of personal space and property, but would have used weapons only for their deterrent and defensive value – understanding that force

restrained, force withheld is much more powerful than force deployed and used.

But the difference at point here is largely a question of tactics, although it might be said that the advantage of aikido is precisely that the tactics of sainthood are not required. In each case, what is envisaged is a politics that is something more than a contest of power, but actually a contest of rightness. We do not try to “win.” We merely contrive a situation that leaves us impossible to coerce or control, and as difficult as possible to injure.