

The Way of Harmony
Practicing Aikido in Everyday Life
By
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As a young man, in my twenties, I became a practitioner of Aikido for several years, until work, kids, and other priorities prevented me from continuing. But I have never forgotten the basics of my training, although this assumption has never been put to the test and I don't expect it ever will. Aikido, for me, was never about learning self-defense. I was attracted to the philosophy of it, which, like its movements, is based upon the natural rhythms and patterns of life. Learning Aikido does not require us to practice contorting our bodies into unnatural positions until we are able to do astonishing and unnatural feats, like jumping six feet in the air, breaking blocks of wood or concrete with our fists, or running sideways up walls and whipping an opponent with our long braided ponytails. Aikido means to live in harmony with nature and its movements mirror the natural motions and positions all of us make as we go about our lives.

Aikido training is, therefore, more about practicing what the body is already capable of than about learning new positions. Again, *Aikido* is often translated into English as "The Way of Harmony," although, since the suffix "do" refers to something that is practiced, it could as easily be understood to mean, "The Practice of Harmony." That's an insightful way to think about harmony, as something we should practice. As our species knows all too well, living in harmony with nature doesn't seem to come natural for us. Working, instead, to bend nature to our wills, we have created one of the worst and most threatening periods of mass extinction and climate change in Earth's 4.5-billion-year history.

To be clear, nature is not always harmonious. It is as much the nature of nature to either force species to adapt to its own changes and rhythms, and of various species to shape nature to suit their needs. Kali Ma is a goddess in Hindu mythology akin to our notion of Mother Nature, only instead of being purely creative, she also has a terrible and destructive side. Hurricanes, tornadoes, earthquakes, forest fires, floods, droughts, plagues, and diseases are among her natural disasters. So, sometimes Mother Nature works against us and sometimes she works for us. When she's working for us and we're working for her, we are in harmony, which is what's happening when we experience the calm and awe of being by the sea, or on a lake, or in the forests and mountains. And that is what Aikido is about, the practice of living in harmony with nature.

The normal Aikido stance, for example, called *hanmi*, is to stand with one's body slightly more forward on one side than the other, with the front foot cocked slightly outward for optimal balance, which comes easy because it is the way most people naturally stand. During training, students face each other in this stance, taking turns practicing a variety of moves. But all of its movements are rooted in just four basic moves, all of which also represent philosophical mindsets about living in harmony.

Standing in a natural position when confronted by an opponent enables us to do so with poise, calm, balance, firmness, and receptivity. But this is also a useful mindset when facing many things in life. As with stoicism, such a position reminds us that resisting, running away, or pushing back against life's challenges is often futile or only makes matters worse. The *hanmi* position, which is

the most comfortable and stable position to be in, is about meeting life's challenges by facing them with calm and poise and acceptance.

I'll talk about how Aikido's four basic movements help us with what comes next, after we have positioned ourselves well to face whatever is coming at us, but first I want to mention something else about this philosophy that sets it apart from other, so-called, martial arts. Although it is practiced in a club among other practitioners, the Way of Harmony is a personal practice. It is self-discipline. It's about repeating the basic motions, not merely so that we can defend ourselves if we get into a fight, but so our bodies begin to move in harmony with nature and that, beginning there, their principles seep into our minds and psyches so that we are able to be in harmony with nature in body, mind, and heart.

This is why there are not Aikido tournaments in which participants compete against each other for titles and trophies. This is also why Aikido only has white and black belts, to discourage competition and ranking among its students. For this reason, a student may still wear a white belt after many years of practice. Nor is Aikido violent in its motions. Every move is meant to bring one's opponent back into harmony with nature. In some self-defense systems, for example, students might learn to bend an attacker's hand backwards, over the wrist, causing it to break, leaving one's opponent severely injured. In Aikido, the Way of Harmony, the wrist is bent forward, in a natural position, enabling the practitioner to gently guide an attacker in any direction. In most clubs, students are forbidden from ever using Aikido to harm others. As its founder, Master Morihei Ueshiba taught us, "Warriorship is none other than the vitality that sustains all life,"¹ and that the only enemy to defeat is the "malice, selfishness, and desire"² within our own "souls and bodies."³ For, "As soon as you concern yourself with the 'good' and 'bad' of your fellows," he said, "you create an opening in your heart for maliciousness to enter. Testing, competing with, and criticizing others weakens and defeats you."⁴

Morihei Ueshiba was born in Japan in 1883, to a respected family. He was the great grandson of a famous samurai warrior, and, despite being an unusually frail child, he eventually became a national war hero himself. Having lived through both World Wars, including the atomic bombing of in his own country, Master Ueshiba came to despise violence and to understand its futility. "There are getting to be more and more in the military who are reckless and indiscriminate with their power," he lamented. "They have forgotten the importance of helping people, of relieving suffering. A bunch of fools, they strut about displaying their violence, their narrow-mindedness, and wanton destruction of life. What idiots to go against nature..."⁵

So, he turned down a request from the Japanese military to train soldiers and instead became a farmer, having come to believe that cultivating plants is the purest form of *Budo*, meaning "martial art."

The Way of Budo is to put new life into the original universal life force which gives birth to all things. Harmony, love, and courtesy are essential to true *Budo*, but the people who are in power these days are only interested in playing with weapons. They misrepresent *Budo* as a tool for power struggles, violence and destruction, and they want to use me toward this end. I'm tired of this stupidity. I have no intention of allowing myself to become their tool. I see no other way but to enter into retreat.⁶

Perhaps his greatest student, Saotome Sensei, who introduced Aikido to the U.S., also a World War II survivor, mirrored his master's sentiments when he said, "Abiding deep within his heart was the belief that the path of *Budo* is the path of compassion; that the task of a true *samurai* is to make the world fertile for peace and to protect all life."⁷ So Aikido, translated as the Way of Harmony, isn't about learning to fight, but learning not to fight. "The Way of Harmony is invincible," Master Ueshiba said, "because it contends with nothing."⁸

Aikido is also an outgrowth of Japan's pantheistic naturalism. Master Ueshiba practiced Shintoism, Japan's indigenous religion centering on the veneration of *Kami*, a nature spirit believed to dwell in all things. This is why he retreated from war and violence into nature, and why he taught his students:

Those who practice the Way of Harmony must protect the domain of Mother Nature, the divine reflection of creation, and keep her lovely and fresh. Warriorship gives birth to natural beauty. The subtle techniques of a warrior arise as naturally as the appearance of spring, summer, autumn, and winter. Warriorship is none other than the vitality that sustains all life.⁹

He also said, "Now and again, it is necessary to seclude yourself among deep mountains and hidden valleys to restore your link to the source of life,"¹⁰ and told his followers to, "Create each day anew by clothing yourself with heaven and earth, bathing yourself with wisdom and love, and placing yourself in the heart of Mother Nature."¹¹

The three Japanese characters making up the word *Aikido* include *Ai*, the image of a group of people coming together under one roof, meaning something like harmony, balance, blending, or peace; *Ki*, the image of a stream or river bubbling up from a rice bed, meaning something like, life force, breath of life, or vitality; and *Do*, the image of a man walking down a road, meaning something like way, path, art, or practice. So this is what Aikido is, the path, art, or practice of being in harmony, peace, or balance with life, universal energy, or Mother Nature.

And it is because of this underlying philosophy that I still consider myself an Aikido student, even though I have not been part of a club or practiced its physical movements in many years. There is a saying in Aikido, "Wooden sword, metal sword, makes no difference." To understand this, it helps to know that all Aikido moves are based on the movements of Samurai warriors. Although practitioners don't hold or use swords, every movement of one's hands, arms, legs, and feet are reminiscent of one who does.

To understand this connection, Aikido students do sometimes practice by holding a *bokken*, or wooden sword. But the real point here is that Aikido is a spiritual practice. It's not about real sword fighting, or even real fist fighting. The movements are meant, rather, to help our bodies connect with a deeper, inner experience of being in harmony with nature, which includes the care and compassion of all beings and all of life. Having a real sword or a wooden sword, or no sword at all, makes no difference.

The last time I practiced Aikido in a club was in 2008, when I hit the mat the wrong way and injured my rotator cuff. While healing, I had a dream in which a merchant offered me my choice of whichever sword I wanted from his collection of rare and priceless swords. After examining each

of them, the man was surprised that I only asked for a bokken. He recommended a beautiful, shiny, razor-sharp, double-bladed sword instead. “Really, the wooden sword is fine,” I assured him. “It’s all I need. After all, who am I ever going to fight?” He seemed pleased with my decision, nodded in agreement, and handed me my *bokken*. I awoke from this dream, and to my sore shoulder, realizing my training days were over for good, but that I would continue the spiritual practice of Aikido for the rest of my days.

With all of this as background, I’ll now say a bit more about the four basic moves Aikido is based upon, and how the philosophy behind them applies to life in general. The first of these, once you have taken your proper stance of poise, stability, and openness, is called *irimi*, which means, “entering.” Rather than avoiding, denying, or fleeing the challenges before us, *irimi* seeks to overcome them by moving toward them instead of away from them. If we back away long enough, we will eventually run out of energy or space, and whoever or whatever is challenging us will catch up, and we will not be able to escape the reach of their sword. But if we walk right up to the challenger, they need to back up a bit in order to reestablish the distance necessary to attack. If we keep entering the challenge, it is the challenger who must keep backing away until they run out of energy or the space to continue. Thus, we practice *irimi* so that we develop the habit of not only accepting and facing the challenges before us but of moving toward them.

For example, when President Ronald Reagan was running for reelection in 1984, there was much concern expressed about his age. Reagan was already 69 when elected in 1980, the oldest President in history up to then, and it was expected that his age would be brought up again during his 1984 debate with his Democratic challenger, Walter Mondale. But Reagan was ready for it, and when asked if he thought his age was an issue, now that he was well into his seventies, the seasoned incumbent replied, “I will not make age an issue of this campaign. I am not going to exploit for political purposes my opponent’s youth and inexperience.” Everyone in the audience, including Mondale, broke into laughter, the age issue never came up again, and that may have been the very moment Reagan cinched his reelection. Rather than defending himself, Reagan walked right into it, and was able to take all the question’s negative force and spin in a positive direction. That’s *irimi*, entering.

“One should be prepared to receive ninety-nine percent of an enemy’s attack and stare death right in the face in order to illuminate the path,”¹² Master Ueshiba said.

Do not look upon this world with fear and loathing. Bravely face whatever the gods offer ...¹³ Each day of human life contains joy and anger, pain and pleasure, darkness and light, growth and decay. Each moment is etched with nature’s grand design—do not try to deny or oppose the cosmic order of things ...¹⁴ Be grateful even for hardship, setbacks, and bad people. Dealing with such obstacles is an essential part of training in the Way of Harmony ...¹⁵ Failure is the key to success. Each mistake teaches us something.¹⁶

The second fundamental Aikido move is *tenkan*, which means “turning.” This occurs when, instead of directly confronting a challenger, one simply turns and ends up in standing in the very same position as the attacker. In the physical practice, this puts you in a good position to throw your opponent off balance.

More broadly, it reminds us of the value of remaining open to other people's positions, including to the real possibility of changing our minds if, by seeing things from their perspective, we come to agree. Tenkan means being flexible. It means, as Master Ueshiba said, to "Move like a beam of light. Fly like lightning, strike like thunder, whirl in circles around a stable center."¹⁷ It does not mean being a pushover, or not standing firm when our values are in question, but it does mean being able to change positions and to consider the perspectives of others.

This, as stated, often throws others off balance. People are often prepared to fight over their ideas about how things should be, but are taken off guard, sometimes relieved, to find they have been heard. Sadly, this is not always the case. Some individuals don't have the fortitude to compromise or not have things exactly as they want them. They become obsessive, often over minutia, which is an unharmonious way to live. And this is the real value of turning, of tenkan, gaining the inner-peace that comes with not being too set in our ways or controlling of what others do, or of what comes our way, or of our environments, which can only detract from finding true purpose in life, and from attending to the matters that are more important.

The third move, *shihonage*, translates as "four corners throw." Like it sounds, in practice it is a move that takes an opponent off balance by quickly moving in what ends up being all four directions. It's important to remember that Aikido moves are not meant to injure others, but to discharge harmful energy by redirecting it and, hopefully, bringing one's opponent back into harmony with the Universe. Symbolically and psychologically speaking, shihonage means more than just looking at things from an opponent's position, but looking at everything from many positions, many angles, and being open to the many people around the world with different ways and different ideas. It's about keeping an open mind and having a cosmopolitan attitude. Master Ueshiba said, "Always keep your mind as bright and clear as the vast sky, the highest peak, and the deepest ocean, empty of all limiting thoughts."¹⁸ For when we get locked into one way of looking at things, we limit ourselves to other possibilities, and to the nature of reality itself.

Master Ueshiba taught us that "Each and every master, regardless of the era or place, heard the call and attained harmony with Heaven and Earth, There are many paths leading to the top of Mount Fuji, but there is only one summit—Love."¹⁹ This is why he also said, "Aikido is the religion that is not a religion; it perfects and completes all religions²⁰ ... The Way of Harmony that I practice has room for each of the world's eight million gods, and I cooperate with them all. The God of peace is very great and enjoins all that is divine and enlightened in every land."²¹ This is why shihonage is often said to be the true foundation of Aikido, the Way of Harmony.

The final move, *suwariwaza*, refers to practicing all Aikido move from a sitting position. In practice, Aikido students accomplish this by moving about on their knees, but to me this is Aikido's very own version of *wu wei*, doing without doing; or the Jewish Sabbath, remembering the sacredness of rest, quiet, and stillness, or the Buddhist practice of sitting and meditating, or Christianity's doctrine of Grace, that there's nothing we must do or can do to be saved. "Ultimately you must forget about technique," Master Ueshiba said, "The further you progress, the fewer teachings there are. The Great Path is really No Path."²²

So, these are the habits Aikido practitioners practice, facing what is before us, moving toward our challenges, looking at things from the challenger's perspective, being openminded and inclusive of others, and stillness. This, to me, is a good recipe for living life, and is why I still consider myself a student of Aikido, and why any of us can put the Way of Harmony into practice.

¹ Ueshiba, Morihei, *The Art of Peace*, ed. & trans., Stevens, John, Shambhala, Boston, MA, 2005, p. 30.

² Ibid., p. 56.

³ Ibid., p. 49.

⁴ Ibid., p. 48.

⁵ Saotome, Mitsugi, *Aikido and the Harmony of Nature*, Sedirep, Courbevoie, France, 1986, p. 29.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid. p. 30.

⁸ Ueshiba, Morihei, *The Art of Peace*, Stevens, John, trans., Shambhala, Boston, MA, 1992, p. 62.

⁹ Ibid. p. 24.

¹⁰ Ibid. p. 21.

¹¹ Ibid. p. 27.

¹² Ibid. p. 92.

¹³ Ibid. p. 82.

¹⁴ Ibid. p. 83.

¹⁵ Ibid. p. 86.

¹⁶ Ibid. p. 87.

¹⁷ Ueshiba, *The Art of Peace*, 2005, *ibid.*, p. 107

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 43.

¹⁹ Ibid. 1992, p. 42.

²⁰ Ibid. p. 124.

²¹ Ibid. p. 41.

²² Ibid., 2005, p. 171.