

THE NON-VIOLENCE IN AIKIDO¹

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Aikido is a non-violent martial art. That much Aikidoists can all agree on. But what is *non-violence*, and what about Aikido is non-violent? *Non-violence* is in some sense the opposite of *violence*, so let's start by examining that concept. The American Heritage Dictionary includes under its definitions of *violence* : "Physical force exerted for the purpose of violating, damaging, or abusing." "Abusive or unjust exercise of power."

How does Aikido practice stack up against the elements of this definition? To begin with, it is clear that Aikido does use physical force. No matter how gentle or efficient our technique, to the extent to which we use any physical pressure on uke's body, we are using some measure of force. The "official" purpose in an Aikido technique is to not be violating or abusive, and it is fair to say that most Aikidoka in fact are not intending to violate or abuse, though of course there are violent Aikidoka.

There remains the issue of whether the force used in Aikido is damaging and whether the force is meant to be damaging. This is not simple. To the extent to which Aikido is damaging and meant to be damaging, perhaps Aikido would fall under the definition of *violence*.

Let's consider some Aikido techniques. A standard paired jo practice is a shomen strike countered by a parry and a yokomen strike to the back of the neck. In class practice that strike would be stopped a few inches away from the neck, but in actual combat the strike would be landed. That is a killing blow! But it is a standard Aikido jo technique. It is clear that the jo strike uses damaging force and that the force is meant to be damaging. In class practice the force is not damaging, but still the technique is designed to be damaging.

However, not all Aikidoka practice jo, and maybe a jo technique is not representative of unarmed Aikido. Let's consider a move similar to the jo technique -- an irimi nage defense against a shomen uchi strike. The move starts with a parry. Then nage spins uke around and simultaneously reaches out and presses uke's head to his/her shoulder with a hand. In some

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styles of practice, the back of the lapel is grabbed instead. Next there is a reversal of movement, and uke is thrown back.

At the moment when the direction of movement is reversed, there is considerable twisting force applied to uke's neck. All that saves uke from having her/his neck broken is skill in ukemi: uke reverses her/his own movement to survive. On the street, the attacker wouldn't know to reverse his movement, and his neck would be snapped. If by chance that didn't happen, then the back of his head would like be bashed in as he landed on his back and his head snapped back and hit the concrete. The style which grabs the lapel would not exert any torque on the neck, but it would still result in a severe blow to the back of the head. In either case, damaging force is used, and the technique is designed to apply damaging force.

In the first style, you would have the option of holding uke's head loosely so that there would be no torque. And in both styles, you would have the option of holding uke up rather than throwing her/him down. Irimi nage could be made to be non-damaging, in which case it would become primarily a movement meditation. The only way in which it could function as a self-defense technique on the street is by redirecting the attacker's energy until he decided not to continue attacking. This certainly could work for on-the-street self-defense, but you would have to be extraordinarily adept to pull it off.

However, in their simplest and most direct self-defense function, Aikido techniques are inherently very dangerous and damaging. Any joint lock could lead to serious damage. Any throw could lead to serious impact injuries. Many Aikido techniques would be quite lethal used on attackers with poor ukemi skills. Moreover, the techniques are meant to be damaging. We cannot reasonably say that techniques which are designed to cause damage don't include the intention to cause damage. That would be like saying that someone meant to jump out of a window but did not mean to fall. There's something wrong with that way of thinking. So we are left with the conclusion that the non-violence of Aikido cannot lie in the fact that Aikido techniques do not use force or do not create damage or are not for the purpose of causing damage.

We could rescue the idea that Aikido is non-violent by giving up the idea that Aikido is effective for self-defense or is supposed to be. Then we could restructure the techniques so that they never actually exert any force on joints or throw an attacker down, but I would prefer not to go in that direction. Are there any ways of maintaining the idea of a non-violent art that do not deny the inherent dangerousness of Aikido techniques?

Some Aikidoka try to find a way out by saying that they aren't using any force, that uke's force is simply returned to uke. Doing irimi nage, uke's own force applies itself to uke's neck, so he causes his own injuries. The Aikidoka is helping someone to break his neck, smash his head, and die but without actually using any force or doing any violence. This seem pretty disingenuous, though, doesn't it? If my skill results in someone's neck being broken and head being cracked, even though I didn't use force on uke to do that, I caused his injury, and I have to accept responsibility for it.

Can there be a sense in which Aikido can be non-violent even though its techniques are designed to use force to damage human beings? To get at this, let's examine an instance of

possible violence. This thought experiment considers a rather extreme situation, but by looking at the logic of an extreme situation that we can clarify the logic of our ordinary thinking.

Let's imagine that someone launches nuclear missiles at England. They land and millions of people are toasted. The whole island is sterilized. Is that an act of violence? That depends. Imagine some scientists in London are working on developing a live weakened virus AIDS vaccine. By accident they've come up with a non-weakened virus which can be transmitted through sneezes rather than sexual contact and which has a two-week incubation time and leads to certain death within a month. It has escaped the lab. It's starting to spread through London. What to do? In a month or two, 99.99 percent of the world's population would be dead. But if England is sterilized, then the rest of the world could survive. The person launching the nuclear missiles could feel real pity, compassion, regret, and respect for all the innocent millions he is killing. I wouldn't want to call this a violent action. Even though there is force used to cause damage, there is no ill will, just a desire to save human life.

Though this scenario may be a bit far fetched, it is clear that an action which includes both damaging physical force and the purpose to use damaging force could in fact not be a violent action. Notice that I have introduced a third element into the definition -- the desire to cause damage, as differentiated from the intent to cause damage. So we can define violence as the use of physical force for the purpose of causing damage based on an desire to do damage. Ill will is the key.

Aikido could be called non-violent even though its techniques include both damaging force and the purpose of causing damage because it is based on the spirit of loving protection of life. This isn't empty philosophizing. This distinction points to something of great importance in Aikido training.

There is a way in which the non-violence in Aikido training not only includes the use of physical force for the purpose of doing damage but requires it. How can this be? It is related to the idea of opposition. As a general rule, Aikidoka call the people they practice with *partners* not *opponents*. There is a reframing happening here. *Opponents* or *enemies* are people that we are alienated from, fear, and hate. When we are disconnected from others, we see them as less than human and are willing to hurt them. By learning to see our attackers as partners, we are learning to connect to other people in a spirit of harmony.

This is certainly a valid and valuable level of practice. However, real attacks are done by real enemies. There is a vast chasm between an Aikido partner offering you a soft yokomenuchi and an enemy full of hate swinging a lead pipe at your head. If you are used to practicing only with partners, will you be able to maintain a loving spirit when faced with real hatred? Practicing Aikido with the idea that uke is an enemy to be controlled and possibly destroyed offers another level of learning.

As an experiment to discern the practical effects of these two different ways of looking at uke, let's try doing a defense technique in two different ways. Doing *tenchinage* will be safer than doing *irimi nage*, so try a few repetitions of *ryotetori tenchinage irimi*. Rather than doing static practice, have uke come in with movement. (These experiments presuppose that you know the

technique well enough that you can turn your attention away from the movements themselves to the underlying tone of the movements.)

First do the technique with the idea -- both on your part and uke's -- that Aikido is a gentle, meditative movement flow which two partners do together to practice harmony. Uke is offering you the gift of motion. You want to join uke, but you don't want to violate his/her freedom by exerting any control on him. What happens to your technique? What do you feel in your breathing, your muscles and your movement?

Next have uke attack with the idea that she/he is really intending to hurt you. I often ask people why they are doing a particular attack movement, and the answer I frequently receive is that it is to give nage the opportunity to practice a defense technique. Of course that is literally true, but it is also very false to the situation. The reason an attacker attacks is to hurt a victim. So have your uke attack with a clear and specific intent to use the attacking movement to inflict a particular injury on you. Perhaps uke will grab your wrists and hold tight while thinking about kneeing you in the groin. Perhaps uke will grab your wrists while thinking about pulling you into a waiting car. (Don't actually execute the second part of the attack. Just think it.) That changes things, doesn't it? How does it feel to defend yourself against an attacker who really means to hurt you?

Most people will find that doing the technique with the idea that it is a meditative dance will produce a feeling of smooth flow. It will be a lovely practice, but it will be airy and un compelling. It will work with a partner but not with an enemy who is intent on hurting you. Many people will find that when faced with an enemy, their movements become tense, jerky, and imprecise. They may feel fear or anger. Breathing becomes ragged. The technique is out of contact with uke and ineffective.

There is a riddle I often use in trying to explain Aikido to non-Aikidoka. If you were trying to learn about cooperation and harmony, would you learn more by working on a project with a group of cooperative, harmonious, friendly people or by working on a project with a group of antagonistic, uncooperative, mean-spirited folks? People ordinarily choose the former, but my answer is the latter. It would certainly be more pleasant with the former group, but what would you learn? Anyone can get along with nice people. It's the jerks we have to learn to get along with, and the latter group offers the opportunity to discover how to get along with people who don't want to get along with us.

If you give up the idea of opposition in Aikido practice, you lose the opportunity to learn how to convert enemies into friends. One valuable way of practicing Aikido is to view uke as a partner, but it is also important to practice Aikido with the idea that uke is an opponent and that you are out to dominate uke and win.

What happens in your body when you think of uke as an opponent? Very likely you become stiff and resistant, and your movements became harsh and imprecise. That's great! It's just what would probably happen if you really did have to defend yourself on the street against a real attack. If you give up the idea that uke is a real opponent, a real enemy, you will not be preparing yourself for the feeling of violation you will experience in a real attack. And when you

actually feel violated, you will very likely respond with the natural feelings of anger and desire to hurt your enemy.

By practicing with an uke whom you view as an enemy, you have the opportunity to study what comes up inside you and change that. If you practice with a view that uke is not an enemy, you will not develop the inner resources which will allow you to see an attacker as a fellow human being. If you are used to practicing with friends, then real enemies will remain enemies. Only if you are used to practicing with “enemies” will you have at hand the skills necessary to see real enemies in a kind way.

What happens in your body when you think of Aikido techniques as lethal? What happens in your body when you think of dominating, possibly destroying, uke? What happens when you think that you must win? Again, it is likely that your breathing becomes ragged and your movements become harsh. Even worse, it is likely that a spirit of anger and destructiveness gets called up by doing destructive movements. That too is great! By doing strong movements we can study and change our dark impulses.

The problem in giving up the idea of opposition is that you leave your inner demons hiding in the dark. If you do *tenchinage* with the intent to cause serious physical damage (making sure, of course, to practice safely), you will most likely find yourself getting physically and psychologically harsh. The *intent* to cause damage brings out the *desire* to cause damage that lurks in all of us. Can you create in yourself a state of loving kindness and, keeping that state undisturbed, see uke as a real enemy and do a technique designed to cause injury or death? That is very, very hard. But doing so is a way of eliminating from your heart the urge to hurt.

It can be very productive to practice Aikido while looking at uke as an enemy, intending to do damage, and all the while remembering to love uke. Of course the ordinary cooperative non-damaging physical form of the technique MUST be preserved, for reasons of safety and ethics. But inside the ordinary form there are many opportunities for the application of damaging *atemi* or force on the joints. Don't actually do anything injurious, but watch for those opportunities and practice the moves simply by being aware of them. And notice whether that orientation arouses the demons. When it does, you will have the opportunity to practice giving up the desire to be hurtful.

So, in the end, the non-violence in Aikido does not lie in the fact that the techniques are not capable of causing damage, or in the fact that we don't apply force to uke, or even in the fact that the force isn't for the purpose of damaging uke. The non-violence in Aikido lies in the fact that it offers a way of transforming the urge to hurt into the remembrance of empathy and the desire to heal.² Without the intent to cause damage embodied in the oppositional view of uke and in

² Precisely how to do this kind of practice is another question. For some ideas, you could take a look at *Tools for Harmony*, a paper I published in *Aiki Journal* and which is on my website, www.being-in-movement.com. For detailed instructions on how to do the basic breathing, body awareness, and centering exercises I teach, see the file *A Downloadable Script for the Eight Core BIM Exercises* on my website, www.being-in-movement.com.

effective combat techniques, there will be no opportunity to raise up and overcome the urge to cause damage.

The public hears that Aikido practice is cooperative and its techniques non-injurious. That is true up to a certain point and is certainly an appropriate level of practice for beginners. For beginners, responding to a mock attack with a meditative, dance-like movement is a way of disengaging from fear and anger and practicing loving an enemy. But for advanced practitioners, the attack and the defense must have sharper edges.

In the end, we can say that Aikido is indeed a non-violent art. Aikido is non-violent in the sense that it is a path which helps us eliminate the urge to hurt and learn to live in a spirit of compassion and protection of life.

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