

Aikido, Reconciliation and Community

by [Alan Drengson](#)

Roots of Violence and Disharmony

Violence and disharmony take many forms in modern technological societies, and are now major problems. Technology increases the ease and magnitude of violence, although conflicts often have their roots in old habits of mind, such as competition and desire for revenge. Violence leaves damaged persons and communities in its wake, and damaged people harm each other and the world. Violence and disharmony spread in ever-widening circles from self to community and world, and then back, like the ripples in a pond. Even if individual persons cannot immediately change the coercive social structures that perpetuate violence, they can at least set their own lives straight. The ecology of “self in relationships” is a commendable study. One of our discoveries from this study is that we each have the inherent power to change our selves and relationships. Our relationships depend on how we are and how we act. The direction of evolutionary development and maturity is in expanding our capacity to take responsibility for ourselves and to care for other persons and beings.

Our sense of responsibility should increase along with our technological power. Self-defense, in this interdependent world of powerful technology, must include defense of and care for others. Our efforts should be directed to creating a universal sense of global civility among diverse local communities through shared concerns for one another and the Earth. These reflections lead me to these urgent questions. How do we end long habits of violence and discord so as to turn to more constructive ways? We are exploring practices by means of which to correct ourselves, heal our relationships, and bring harmony into our lives.

A Peaceful Martial Art

People are often surprised to find a positive response to these questions from a *martial* art. Military arts are most often propagated for purposes of intimidation, restraint, domination, and killing of “opponents.” The warrior arts are used in competitive, international contests based on the psychology of winning and losing, not on peaceful cooperation and coexistence. But there are some martial disciplines (*Budo* in Japanese), such as *Aikido*, that follow a different path. Aikido emphasizes many of the traditional values of the Warrior Way (Bushido in Japanese) such as self-discipline, honor, respect, courage, strength, loyalty and endurance. It cultivates concentration, teaches skills and develops physical and spiritual power. But it is noncompetitive, nonviolent and teaches reconciliation. Its ultimate aim is harmony in all our relationships, including with the natural world and its many beings.

Aikido teaches us not to oppose force with force, or to answer violence in kind. It inculcates respect for ourselves, others and Nature. Its practice helps us to root out the

sources of discord and violence in our own minds. It teaches us to harmonize with a would-be opponent, not only in physical movement, but in spirit. Instead of creating contestants, Aikido helps us to create partners and friendships with other persons and nonhuman beings. The founder Morihei Ueshiba said the practice of Aikido is an active process that creates a community. It is a most appropriate practice in this technological era of weapons of mass destruction. Its study teaches us that our discord begins with our basic judgments about others, including the natural world. In studying Aikido we are studying ourselves and how we relate to others. Its practice teaches us to be not attached to certain ways of viewing the world, but to be open to all possibilities.

The word “Aikido” reflects the basic philosophy of nonviolence that is at the heart of this spiritual Art. As noted earlier, the word is composed of three Japanese characters that together mean “the way of harmonizing with the universal spiritual energy of the universe.” “*Ai*” means harmony and is also a homonym (in Japanese) of the word for love; “*Ki*” means universal, living, spiritual energy; “*Do*” means the Way (as in the Chinese Tao), that is, a spiritual path.

Aikido was founded in the twentieth century by Morihei Ueshiba (1883-1969). Ueshiba was a martial arts prodigy, and at an early age mastered the traditional Japanese martial arts. As an adult, a serious illness and a deep spiritual crisis led to a personal transformation that gave him profound insight into the deeper meanings of “budo,” the Martial Arts Way. Budo, as he saw it, should lead beyond the shallow conflict of wills or egos, to a deepening respect and appreciation for the values of self and others. As he said, “True budo knows no defeat. Never defeated means never fighting.”

Aikido is based on a practical philosophy of mutual respect and interpersonal harmony. Its training extends beyond the all-too-familiar territory of conflict, battle, victor, and vanquished. In Aikido there is no violent combat, no competition, and no encouragement to fight with and defeat an opponent. We work as partners, not opponents. Our aim is to purify ourselves of the seeds of conflict, so as to work more cooperatively with others and Nature. “Winning means winning over the mind of discord in yourself.” (Ueshiba 1991)

A Tao or Way

In Oriental traditions, a Way is a practical philosophy of life that helps human persons to realize the values resulting from harmony with the Way or Tao of Nature. By following the Way as a discipline, our aesthetic, moral, physical, and spiritual elements are unified through a natural practice, one that activates the energies of universal compassion. This love is in turn expressed for specific persons and places. To quote Ueshiba (1991): “Those who have a warped mind, a mind of discord, have been defeated from the beginning. . . There is no discord in love. There is no enemy in love.” Although Ueshiba was deeply influenced by rural Shinto teachings on Nature and compassion, the basic philosophy of Aikido is strikingly close in spirit to the ethic of love taught by Jesus in the *Sermon on the Mount*. Jesus urges his listeners to love others as they would be loved and to return love for hatred. Transform your enemy into your friend.

Fighting arises from the desire to defend or expand one's ego-self, tribal-self, or national-self boundaries. Amidst the conflicts in human society, one of the most important commitments we can make is to heal and make ourselves whole, so as to live purposefully and creatively in harmony with others and Nature. One source of wholeness is mature love, which extends our sense of identification and concern. As Ueshiba (1991) said, "By love we are able to purify ourselves. . . *True budo is the loving protection of all beings with a spirit of reconciliation.* Reconciliation means the completion of everyone's mission." When we act as truly unified, integrated, whole and complete human beings, our actions naturally attract and harmonize with others, for we show neither aggression nor fear, and we are gentle and strong. We are then truly centered, and contribute to the mission of helping others.

Aikido takes the martial way to its ultimate conclusion by using the warrior training, virtues, and energies as a Way of Reconciliation. It transforms the will to fight into the spirit of cooperation. Through Aikido practice, the spirit of the Warrior Way is transformed into the Way of nonviolence and harmony with the world. The warrior of Aikido is a knight of reconciliation for self, community, nation, and Nature. "The secret of Aikido is to harmonize ourselves with the movement of the universe and bring ourselves into accord with the universe itself." (Ueshiba 1991) To turn the spirit of reconciliation outward, after it has freed the self of the urge to fight, is to contribute to solving the basic problems of conflict and violence, and compassion is the core of such expansive action. Harmony can spread through our society just as readily as discord and violence, and it has far greater power for resolving our problems, which dominance and violence create in the first place. Aikido helps us to actualize our natural power to love Nature and others.

Aikido is a practical art that cultivates strength *and* gentleness, alertness *and* relaxation. Its ethics helps us to realize that fighting and violence are futile, and that they perpetuate themselves in endless rounds of aggression, reaction, and vengeance, at the expense of all who are involved: the innocent, winners and losers alike. In contrast, Aikido teaches us, with increasing depth, the endless possibilities for constructive, creative, interpersonal actions that benefit all of our relationships. The energies it mobilizes not only unify the self, they also contribute to a growing sense that we can create peaceful communities reconciled with other communities and with Nature. Aikido helps us to act beautifully in everything we do.

In keeping with this spirit of nonviolence and cooperation, Aikido is generally taught in a completely non-coercive way. The lessons learned on the practice mat carry over to daily life. They can ultimately lead us to realize that Aikido is harmonizing with whatever we are doing, so that we can give it our fullest, caring attention. It is easy to see the relevance of Aikido to the arts of peace and reconciliation. It is a path that reconciles the will to fight with the heart of love, the self with others, humans with the natural world. Practicing Aiki, the self can release or stop defending its boundaries to realize harmony with the universe.

Physical Aspects

So far I have discussed primarily the philosophical and spiritual dimensions of Aikido. Let me briefly describe some of its physical aspects.

The physical techniques of Aikido embody its spiritual and philosophical orientation. The movements are spherical, flowing, and spiral in form, reflecting basic patterns of motion and change in Nature. They are practiced in harmonious, complementary interactions with other persons. The warm-up, stretching, and centering exercises (similar to some hatha yoga asanas) increase flexibility, concentration, stability and balance. Aikido practice movements teach one to allow mind and body to settle into a natural state of relaxed movement and coordination. The use of practice weapons such as wooden swords, knives and staves, helps to emphasize the shape and timing of the various movements. The hand-to-hand techniques for throwing one's partner, or for evading aggressive thrusts and grabs, all illustrate the grace and natural power of Aikido as a martial art. Aikido movements do not "go against the grain." When one's Ki (the power that comes from the fully unified body and mind) is flowing, coordinated, balanced and beautiful movement results.

The physical practice of Aikido is vigorous and rigorous. Although its basic techniques are simple, their subtleties are hard to master. Practice is a process of continuous improvement that brings forth physical well-being, psychological balance, and a positive spirit. It is a powerful and effective system of self-development and defense, one of many possible ways to help one become a whole person who can contribute constructively to the lessening of conflict and violence in our society and world.

The design and creation of new, nonviolent education policies, methods, institutions, and technologies requires that the designers be reconciled within themselves, with their communities, and with Nature. They then can build into their designs protection and respect of self, others, and Nature. Such appropriate designers could be the vanguard of a new warrior—an ecoknight; a new discipline, a new corps—a Wild Natural Guard, working in ecosteries ("eco" as in ecosophy, and "stery" as in monastery) in the world, dedicated to nonviolently waging peace, protection and restoration (Drengson 1993). Ultimately, to protect the environment and humankind we must follow a path of reconciliation. To accept this gift of responsibility will make us worthy of the power of our technology. Aikido is one discipline that can help us to grow into this responsibility. The ecoknight of Aikido can be seen as a meeting of East and West, for the Christian knight who is armed with the spiritual sword of the *Sermon on the Mount*, is also dedicated to the loving protection of all. To blend these we should have ecosteries for the education of ecomonks in the Wildway who will be guardians of our wild lands.