

THE KIAI

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A PERSPECTIVE ON SELF-DEFENSE

Many people who drop in the Dojo to observe classes inquire about self-defense. Depending on how they address their questions, I give them various answers. Most of these people, who are interested in defense against physical aggression I point to other martial arts such as jujitsu, karate, tae kwon do, hsing-i, etc., and the model mugging classes offered by BAMM on Sundays in our Dojo.

To some of these people who show interest in the other aspects of Aikido I explain how Aikido helps them in self-defense. But I have never had time to elaborate. This is an attempt to further elucidate the controversial connection between Aikido and self-defense.

In the context of this discussion, self-defense is used as a synonym for self-preservation. Let's define self-defense as any attempt to preserve the Self; with the "Self" in its most comprehensive meaning. In this sense, any action (mental or physical) that is related to the preservation of the physical body, the energetic body, the mental body or the spiritual body is part of self-defense.

Thus, every one of the following situations constitutes self-defense. You get out of an office building late



at night and decide to wait for the company of co-workers to walk to the garage. During the flu season, you increase your daily intake of vitamin C to protect your health. At the end of a long work week you instinctively seek seclusion to preserve what's left of your energy stock. In the middle of a life crisis, you decide to quit it all and take a vacation to preserve mental sanity. You avoid the company of certain profane influences to preserve your spiritual health.

Self-preservation is an instinct of all living things. It makes a plant seek and move toward sunlight; it makes a small animal bite you when you get too close to it; it pumps up your adrenaline when you are frightened; it makes people resist change; it makes people avoid the unknown and shun

other people who are different.

At the animal level, self-defense is strictly based on the instinct to preserve the physical part of the Self, that is, the physical body.

This instinct can be cultivated to a very sophisticated level by training all parts of the Self. This training can be



accomplished through some holistic arts such as Aikido. To understand

how this training takes place, let's elaborate on the definition of Self-defense.

At a holistic level, Self-defense is any movement of the Self to minimize the effects of anything that tends to reduce its wholeness or impedes its natural growth. To defend itself against these adversarial elements according to Aikido principles, the Self must accomplish three things.


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AIKIDO INSTITUTE
5036 TELEGRAPH AVENUE at 51ST
OAKLAND, CALIFORNIA 94609

In the first part of the self-defense strategy, the Self must be aware of the adversarial elements. That is, it must know of the existence of the elements

 that threaten its wholeness and identify their potential effects. For example, to defend herself against cancer, a big-city dweller must be aware that she lives in a pollutant-filled environment that tends to weaken her immune system and makes her more susceptible to modern life diseases such as cancer; a non-informed person may not know about this risk and fail to take preventive measures. To defend himself against possible self-annihilation through an automobile accident, a driver must be aware that wet pavement can cause a collision; a drunken person may not be aware of such risk.

The possible threats to the Self are numerous, but there are certain types that are prevalent in certain locales and time periods. A few thousand years ago a common threat to mankind was probably wild animals. A few hundred years ago threats to the safety of human beings probably came from other human beings or diseases such as cholera and tuberculosis. Nowadays in industrialized nations, those threats include such things as car accidents, cancer, heart attacks and AIDS.

Therefore, martial arts that were developed a thousand years ago by men to defend themselves against other men are no longer appropriate for self-defense in their original emphasis. The contemporary martial artist should be aware that the enemies are now different.

In our current environment, we should recognize that our most likely enemies are accidents, untamed virus and stress. The focus of our self-

defense must change to address these threats. A highly skilled martial artist who dies from a stress-related disease is not skilled in self-defense.

A person who is skilled in self-defense constantly evaluates the risk exposures that threaten his safety presently and in the long run. The sooner those risks are identified, the more effective the self-defense measure. The sooner a smoker understands the correlation between smoking and lung cancer, the better the chance for him to ward off this disease. The sooner a homeowner realizes the risks of living near rivers, on a hillside, or near a fault line, the better the chance for her to defend her home against natural hazards. Awareness of the risks is the first step in Self-defense.

In the second part of the Self-defense strategy, the Self must acknowledge and blend with the adversarial elements. This does not mean passively waiting for the effects of the aggression to show. Rather, it means that the Self should take the initiative to go forth to meet with the opposition and understand it. I observe that good surfers don't wait for the wave to hit them but they swim toward the wave and meet it.


For example, you are involved in a dispute with a teenage child. You can use your adult authority to settle the issue quickly, but that may not resolve the essence of the conflict. A better tactic may be to ask him about his reasons for his behavior or act and listen to him. If the motives are plausible then acknowledge them and use them as a springboard to steer him toward the understanding that you would like him to attain.

Often, during this reconnaissance endeavor, when you understand the opponent's motives, his viewpoint and circumstances, the solution to the conflict becomes obvious. This initial

study of the opponent is probably the essence of the first part of Sun-Tzu's phrase in the Art of War: "Know the enemy, know thyself and the terrain and you will win a thousand battles".

After the surfer has met the wave and aligned himself with it, then the obvious way to go is to ride its momentum. Aligning oneself with the opposition may seem incomprehensible to most people but lies at the heart of Aikido self-defense.

In the third part of a holistic Self-defense strategy, the Self must act to neutralize the adversarial elements,

 that is, to remove the cause of their existence or transform their nature into something more harmonious. Often, as I mentioned above, when the Self has made the initial effort to align itself with the opposition, the way to restore harmony is obvious. For example, the cure for a disease is some time obtained from using its causal elements. The principle of vaccination lies in inoculating the patient with the same virus that causes the disease with the expectation that it will stimulate the production of antigens in the body to fight off future viral attacks.

Similarly, the effective way to fight obesity is not to drastically curtail the food intake. Rather, the obese person should first study his own personality to understand the reasons for overeating. If stress is a causal factor, then take up yoga or similar practice. In the meantime, eat well and appreciate the food. Take time to taste, chew and savor. Then the food is better digested, nutrient absorption is more efficient and food intake naturally decreases.

As another example, a fire suppression technique is to encircle the fire zone with a ring of fire that would

eliminate the fuel load and isolate the current fire. Another technique would be to create an explosion that would suck out oxygen and deprive the fire of this main causative agent.

In the same vein, one of the most effective techniques for controlling internal outburst of energy such as desires or emotions is not to stifle them or ignore them but ride them then transmute them. For example, stress and anger can often be managed by spending the energy in a workout that would be more beneficial to our health.

In summary, the three elements of Self-defense that we learn and practice in Aikido are: be aware of the potential conflict between us and elements of our environment; connect, understand and align ourselves with those elements; and defuse the conflict by changing the nature of the aggressive element.

We practice these principles daily in the Dojo. When practicing a technique in class, we learn to quickly size up the situation and become aware of our partner's size, timing, distance and weapons and the surrounding mat space. Then we connect, align and blend with our partner. Then, we redirect his energy to the neutral ground or to some place where it can be dispersed without harm to any one else.

While all martial arts incorporate the element of awareness, the elements of connection/blending and neutralization are specific to Aikido and possibly few other martial arts.

So check yourself and look around to check the potential risks; study those risks and understand how they materialize into harm; then find a way of mitigating those risks by changing the course of their manifestation. With daily practice, this principle of self-defense becomes second nature and is used automatically in daily life

without our being aware of it.

In time, the Self of the aikidoist grows and encompasses other elements beyond her individual self such as family and environment. Her idea of Self-defense grows proportionately and takes on a new meaning. Then it may become difficult to respond to a simple inquiry about self-defense from a passer-by.

HOA NEWENS



SANDAN ESSAY

I began studying Aikido a little over ten years ago. Despite my previous interest in martial arts generally and a vague desire to learn a martial art some day, I probably never would have taken up any martial art, had it not been for a friend of mine.

One Saturday in the spring of 1987 my friend spotted the Aikido Institute from Genoa Deli. She suggested we watch a class. So we stopped in and watched a weapons class that Kim Sensei was teaching. The class was interesting. However, not being one for spectator sports, I must confess that I did not sit through the whole class. But that is not the end of the story.

My friend joined the Aikido Institute first. I joined at the end of that same month, following a short vacation. Had I not been able to slip in on the coattails of my friend and take advantage of her new familiarity with the dojo, I might never have joined. But luck was smiling upon me.

Although I have always been athletic, Aikido was different than any sport I had enjoyed. My every move in Aikido was carefully thought through, yet still was awkward and incorrect. I attended three classes a week and for the first few months that I trained my

muscles were always sore. But eventually the soreness stopped, the awkwardness dropped away, and my comfort level with the movements began to rise.

When I began training I had no thought of earning a black belt. The training, learning, and gaining proficiency is what mattered. That is still what matters to me, although I must confess that I am goal-oriented by nature and at some point began to desire promotion to the next level, whatever it was.

My friends that do not train in the martial arts think that obtaining a black belt is as far as one can go within a martial art. They do not understand that there are levels of black belts and that Aikido is a process and a life style or way of life. To attain a minimum level of proficiency and grow, Aikido takes regular practice over a long period of time. Aikidoka sometimes take breaks from Aikido, even long breaks necessitated by injury or a change in schedule or priorities. But if they have attained a certain level of proficiency before they leave, while they are gone Aikido has been percolating in their mind and body. Upon their return they may be a little physically rusty, but in a short time the rust is gone. And it is clear that their time off the mat was not time away from Aikido..

The attraction for Aikidoka is more than the satisfaction of gaining some proficiency in the art. (Note: Having been very provincial in my training, my perception of the art of Aikido is mostly limited to its practice at the Aikido Institute. My loss, I understand.) There is the wonderful mat. But beyond that we have been blessed with two excellent instructors, Hoa Sensei and Kim Sensei. Few, if any, dojos have two instructors of such high caliber. But the quality of

the teaching alone is not sufficient to compel students to return. Both sensei have an openness and generosity of spirit and both have good souls. They have made the Aikido Institute a safe place to train. That is not to say that the art is without risk, but the risks are explained and the opportunity for risk reiterated when appropriate.

The attitude of the students and people drawn to train at the Aikido Institute is a clear result of the tone set by the instructors. The result has been students who are very dedicated to the art and are eager to learn and incorporate that learning into their practice. Each student adds something different to the practice, different energy, flexibility, and anatomy. No matter the level, there is something to be learned from every training partner. And that addition supports the training of all the students.

Each student's motivation for coming to the Aikido Institute and returning is likely very different. And the motivation may change throughout his or her Aikido career. At first Aikido may just look like fun or a good way to get some exercise, and it is, or it should be. It can be more as the skills learned on the mat transfer into the activities of daily living. But without maintaining the fun and the joy of doing Aikido, of training with partners whom you support and support you and about whom you are concerned both on and off the mat, Aikido is just so much motion.

So, after all it is the joy of Aikido that keeps me returning, the simple pleasure of physical movement and the supportive interaction with my sensei and my training partners.

FEBRUARY 20, 1998

KATHERINE A. MONTGOMERY,
ASPIRING SANDAN

THE WESTMINSTER AIKIKAI EXPERIENCE

On February 7, several of us from Aikido Institute made the yearly pilgrimage to Westminster, California to visit the dojo of Sensei Dang Thong Phong. Phong Sensei is Hoa Sensei's original instructor. He began his study of Aikido under Phong Sensei in Saigon, Vietnam in the 1960's.

Phong Sensei holds yearly seminars which members of our dojo attend. This year, the occasion was the 30th anniversary of the Tenshinkai Aikido Federation, the 10th anniversary of the Westminster Aikikai, and the 40th anniversary of Aikido's presence in Vietnam. The Oakland contingent included Hoa Sensei and his family, Maggie, Ted, Vanessa, Megan and myself. We arrived early on the morning of the seminar and were immediately the recipients of the legendary Westminster hospitality. We were picked up at the airport by two deshi who whisked us to the dojo in no time. Upon our arrival, we greeted Phong Sensei and began preparing for a long day of training.

The first class of the morning was taught by Phong Sensei. The mat was full of enthusiastic practitioners trying their hands at Sensei's wonderful flowing techniques. After the opening class, the seminar was conducted by Masatake Fujita, Shihan and General Secretary of Aikido World Headquarters. Fujita Sensei was in classic form, sharing his sense of humor and strong techniques with the group. Each of us from Oakland enjoyed training with Aikidoists from different styles. We found, as always, that the Westminster students were very warm and welcoming.

After the morning training session, we broke for lunch. The dojo is located in a part of town that is known as

"Little Saigon" so there are a wealth of wonderful Vietnamese shops and restaurants around. Hoa Sensei honored us by joining us for lunch. We went to a Vietnamese restaurant nearby. Sensei helped us to order the unfamiliar dishes by making recommendations. It was an interesting and tasty lunch.

The afternoon training session seemed to fly by, and then it was time for the anniversary celebration. We all stood back out of the way as the Westminster students dashed around preparing for the event. One thing I have learned about Phong Sensei over the years is that he really knows how to put on a great show. We were not to be disappointed this time. We were treated to speeches, traditional Vietnamese music, American Rock & Roll music played by a nine year-old guitar prodigy, a fabulous demonstration by children and adults, and a gift ceremony. In attendance were the mayor of Westminster, a city council member, and several other local dignitaries, as well as many Aikidoists from the surrounding area. It was a full house! Although the event was quite spectacular, I was most impressed by Hoa Sensei's and Phoebe's sons, Richard and Ryan, who sat quietly and were remarkably well behaved during the four hour celebration.

As usual, Phong Sensei presented us with a lovely bouquet of flowers. Hoa Sensei gave Phong Sensei a beautiful live sword. He told the audience that he had given Phong Sensei a sword as a gift in Vietnam, but that Phong Sensei had been unable to bring it with him when he finally escaped to the United States. It seemed a touching moment of coming full-circle for them both. The Westminster students published a booklet which tells the remarkable story of Phong Sensei's life and mar-

tial arts career, as well as the history of the Tenshinkai Federation. I would urge everyone to read it. He is a true hero and an amazing individual.

Following the celebration, my old friend Scott Howard offered to take our party to his favorite Japanese restaurant. After checking into our hotel, we all piled in to Scott's truck and headed off. It was an incredibly stormy night and we were driving through puddles the size of small lakes, but finally we arrived. I thought Scott must be exaggerating about how great this place was, but I'll tell you now, the meal we had is haunting my memory still. It was a yakitori bar owned by a Japanese Karate Sensei, and it was run like a dojo! We were the only Westerners in there, everyone else was Japanese. They all knew Scott, and when they found out we were Aikidoists, they started yelling and bowing. It was wonderful... We were all grateful to Scott for sharing this treasure with us. I want to go back down there just to eat at that restaurant!

The next morning we met Sensei and his family for breakfast, then boarded our flight home. Thus concluded another unique and educational Westminster experience.

BETH HALL



NEW YEARS TRAINING

The Aikido Institute marked the end of 1997 with a special evening class from 6:30 to 8:30. The first half of the class was devoted to techniques from various ryote dori attacks. Halfway through the class physical training was suspended for a period of silent meditation or rumination, depending on one's disposition.

The second half of class was devoted to vigorously executed kokyu nages.

After which, the glowing Aikidoka departed into the night to continue their New Year's celebrations.

UCHI-DESHI

REDWOOD CITY

On Sunday, February 22, 1998, Hoa Sensei, Ted Vanessa, Kathy, Maggie, Leif and I went down for the Northern California Aikido Association training in Redwood City, at Frank Doran Sensei's dojo, Aikido West. There were three 45-minute long classes, the first taught by Doran Sensei, the second by Witt Sensei, and the third by Bob Nadeau Sensei. As a relative newcomer, I was unaware that many referred to this trio as the "Big Three" and that in years past, they were usually the only instructors at such AANC trainings. It was a special gift for me to see all three instructors in the same morning, as each Sensei has a different style and presentation.

The day began with Doran Sensei, whose flowing style was fun to experience. While I had taken a seminar from Doran Sensei in Fresno in January, it was a treat to experience his style and approach to teaching. Doran Sensei tended to show, more than tell, how to do a technique, and would demonstrate it several times before asking us to attempt it.

Witt Sensei taught the second session, and focused on the basics. It is always fun to take classes from Witt Sensei, specifically to see how he approaches the same techniques that we practice everyday.

Bob Nadeau Sensei was the third and final instructor, and he spent a majority of his time discussing the necessity for people to understand and surrender themselves to the "force" that emerges naturally from the body when doing a technique. He also

spent time talking about the process one must go through when training Aikido and dealing with one's issues from the past and childhood.

The day ended with a Chinese food meal eaten on the mat. Maggie, Leif, Kathy, and I left shortly after the lunch was served, as we were all stiff and ready to rest! On the drive home, a speedy one with Kathy behind the wheel of her turbo-charged red Acura, we discussed how different each Sensei was, and how interesting it was to experience all three within the span of two hours.

MEGAN SWEET



INTERNAL UKEMI

Feeling downtrodden after a day of work, of doctor appointments, and of wondering why me, I made my way to the dojo as class was ending. Everyone there sat in the ritual circle to close class and then closed their eyes and filled their minds with thoughts of healing, thoughts powered by strong intention, all aimed at me. Ki overflowing towards me, to me, into me. As Hoa Sensei described it, I was to work on my internal ukemi to receive that energy and let it help power me.

It is a lonely feeling to know all your reserves are running dry and yet you need to fight for many more days. Walking into the dojo I felt that emptiness within, but walking out of the dojo I felt I had a new reservoir of spirit.

A circle of people forging their thoughts and spirit together is a powerful force. I thank that circle of friends who each gave me a portion of themselves and helped me when I needed it most.

DEBORAH

