

GOING FOR A WALK IN THE WORLD:

The Experience of Aikido

By Ralph Pettman

The dream that makes us free
is the dream of an open heart
the dream that there might be
one world
lived together while living apart.



This calligraphy was done by Shuken Motomiya, an old and much venerated Zen monk. When he did it, he lived in a temple at Fujinomiya, at the foot of Mt. Fuji. The character means “Dream”. A lovely piece of calligraphy that was brushed especially for this book

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION.....	1
WHAT IS AIKIDO?	2
WHAT IS AIKIDO FOR?.....	5
CUTTING THROUGH SPIRITUAL MATERIALISM.....	8
ENDS AND MEANS	10
A WAY TO HARMONY WITH THE UNIVERSE.....	12
THE PHYSICAL DIMENSION	15
SEXISM AND HOMOPHOBIA	19
THE MENTAL DIMENSION.....	21
DEEP WEIGHT	22
THE CENTRED SELF	24
EXTENDED STRENGTH	26
BODY EGO AND BRAIN EGO	29
THE SPIRITUAL DIMENSION.....	33
A KIND WORD AND AN OPEN FIST	36
CONFLICT AND CONFLICT RESOLUTION.....	39
STRESS MANAGEMENT	41
THREE DIMENSIONS IN ONE.....	44
AFTERWORD.....	47
ABOUT THE AUTHOR.....	50
LICENSE.....	50

INTRODUCTION

Doing aikido I often feel it's more a matter of aikido doing me. My partner and I take turns at being attacker and defender (this is standard aikido training procedure). Our movements get faster and more open, the ebb and flow seems to intensify, and we begin to lose any sense of time and place. There is a feeling of renewal and this feeling begins to grow as new energy seems to rise up within us and through us.

Moments like these are very affirmative and very invigorating. They are very creative too. The whole experience is a joyful and a liberating one. Every moment feels comprehensive and alive.

From a distance we look like we are doing a kind of dance. Aikido is a dynamic art and when it is done in free-form the locks and throws follow each other in rapid succession. Trainees come together and move apart, their "hakamas" snapping and swirling. ("Hakamas" are the pleated culottes that black-belt students wear over their judo-style training suits).

Like a dance the movements can look rather contrived. They can confuse those who have never seen aikido before, not least because what the onlooker sees is actually a training method, not a form of combat. There is no winner or loser in an aikido class or demonstration. What you are watching is a lesson in sensitivity. Training partners are not trying to prevail. They are trying to become more aware. The self-defence capacity they get is almost a by-the-way one. Compassion, not combat proficiency, is the point of the training process.

I have talked to many people who do aikido and they give very different answers when I ask them how it feels. I have given one brief account above. Here is another by a friend of mine: "It must have been about a year after I started. I was being thrown ... when for a tiny second there was a sort of endless expansion. I had the sensation of floating in a place where there was no up or down, left or right, and although I was aware that such things still existed, they no longer seemed relevant. For such wells of renewal do we train!"

WHAT IS AIKIDO?

Aikido is a modern Japanese martial art. It was created in the 1930's and 1940's by a Japanese martial artist of rare skill and dedication. His name was Morihei Uyeshiba. He died in 1969 at the age of 86.

I never met him. All I know about him I've learned from what he wrote, from demonstration films he made, from films made about him, from books by his students, from conversations I've had with some of those he taught, and from practising the art he bequeathed.

Uyeshiba was a farmer, a soldier and a master of many traditional Japanese fighting arts. He was also a very religious man who looked long and hard for an answer to life's mysteries. The answer he finally found inspired him to create aikido. He came to this answer over a long period of time, though there does seem to be one moment that was decisive for him.

Accounts differ as to what happened at that moment. All of the accounts agree, however, that Uyeshiba was being attacked by a swordsman. While the attacker tried to cut him over and over again Uyeshiba found that he was able to avoid the cuts without having to fight back.

This incident seems to have marked a turning point in his life. In a book later written by Uyeshiba's son there are a few sentences, by Uyeshiba himself, about that key incident. "At that moment" he writes "I was enlightened". At that moment he believed he understood the true source of every fighting art. That source he called God's love.

What did Uyeshiba mean by "God's love"? From his writings, in this essay and elsewhere, it is apparent that for Uyeshiba "God's love" meant "the spirit of loving protection for all beings". Such a spirit, he said, was everywhere. For him it filled the universe. He felt that he had come to embody it himself and in doing so he felt that the whole cosmos had become his home. The earth and the moon, the sun and the stars had become his personal domain. In one luminous instant, he had felt it all.

The sense of universal love, Uyeshiba said, was a uniquely liberating one. "I had become free" he later wrote "from all desire, not only for position, fame and property, but also to be strong".

This freedom was not detachment. It was not the objectivity and lack of passion of someone who doesn't care. It was non-attachment, which sounds the same as de- tachment, but isn't. Non-attachment means objectivity minus emotional concern. Detachment means objectivity plus emotional concern. Detachment means standing off from everything, like someone aloof. Non-attachment means being free to love all beings with understanding and compassion.

Using this feeling of freedom and love Uyeshiba began to synthesise all the fighting arts he knew - a synthesis so original and so compelling that it became a whole new martial art. Using his new-found awareness Uyeshiba began to research his knowledge of sword, stick, spear and unarmed fighting techniques. He began searching for natural ways to move. He began looking for loving rather than hateful ways, protective rather than aggressive ways, ways that encouraged

reconciliation not counter- attack, ways that fostered a universal sense of space and time rather than a local sense of swapping threat for threat.

Uyeshiba was far from the first martial artist to have had such a realisation and aikido is far from the first martial art to be built upon the principle of love rather than hate. Aikido is one of a long list of alternative martial arts.

This alternative tradition has always been more than physical or mental. It's always been part of a spiritual quest that sees in the martial arts a way of enlightening the soul rather than simply overcoming an opponent or remaining calm in combat. To quote Uyeshiba, to study the martial arts is to "... take God's love ... [and to] assimilate and utilize it in [y]our own mind and body". Those who study in this spirit don't have to be told that mere fighting is bad. They come to this awareness through the practical effects the training has on their bodies and their minds.

The spiritual basis of his work placed Uyeshiba squarely in the alternative tradition of what he called "true budo". This alternative tradition has never been as popular as other sorts of budo but the millions of people who practice aikido today bear witness to the sort of interest there is world-wide in martial arts as a meditation-in-movement.

Uyeshiba set out quite deliberately, in other words, to develop a way of educating the soul. In doing so he was carrying on the work of many fine martial artists who had preceded him. The originality of his contribution singled him out, however, as one of the greatest martial artists of all time.

At first Uyeshiba only taught private students. After World War Two, however, he made aikido public. He wanted Japan rebuilt in a constructive and affirmative fashion and aikido was his contribution to that project. He gave many demonstrations and with the help of his senior students he quickly established aikido as a new martial art.

In this way he was able to show, over and over again, aikido's relevance not only to the body and the mind but also to the spirit. He talked of transcendent awareness and transcendent power and his demonstrations were convincing manifestations of both.

Since his death Uyeshiba's students, and now the students of his students, have continued to teach and to give demonstrations of the art he founded. They teach, as did Uyeshiba himself, by direct and indirect means. They show how to do aikido, and they explain what it means, in both word and deed.

Physical demonstrations are more compelling than prose (though watching a demonstration is nowhere near as convincing as doing the art for yourself). Unless you do aikido movements you can't actually know how they feel and what they ultimately mean. No amount of talk about love or compassion will get round the limitations of language itself. Nor will just watching others train.

It's like learning to play the piano. You can read a hundred books about playing the piano and you can go to countless concerts but unless you actually practice at the key-board you won't

know how playing the piano actually feels. You won't know what piano music means to someone who plays it for themselves.

Aikido is the same. Aikido can be shown. It can be described and explained. But there is no way to feel the movement other than to do it for yourself.

The photographs reproduced here, for example, show a range of aikido movements. The photographer is a student of aikido himself (he also studies the tea ceremony) and he has tried to show not only the outside form of aikido but its inner feeling as well.

Note how in every photograph the defender looks very calm and still. He looks like he is going for a walk. The defender in the photographs is Yoshinobu Takeda and he is a contemporary master of the art. The picture of each of his partners is often blurred. The speed and power of every attack is obvious. But so is the extraordinary composure of Takeda under attack.

It is also obvious at a glance how well, in fact, the defender understands each movement. The moment on film is only part of a much longer and larger process but it's easy to see in that frozen moment how Takeda is simply there. He is watching what happens. He is not caught up or confused. He is poised, relaxed and aware.

There are a number of poems in this book that also describe aikido techniques. By saying what is meant in poetic form the writer is trying to come, like the photographer, a little closer to how these techniques feel.

Aikido is a physical, mental and spiritual art. In plain words this can be very hard to show. It can be said, of course, but saying it does not show it. Saying it in a poem, however, can help convey what is meant in a way plain words often can't. Prose is literal. Poems are more lateral, giving us many different feelings at one time, just the way aikido can do.

There are also some examples of Japanese calligraphy made especially for this book by an old Zen monk who lives at the foot of Mt. Fuji. The spiritual themes he addresses and the free flow of his brushwork parallel precisely the meaning and form of aikido itself.

WHAT IS AIKIDO FOR?

The meaning of aikido is old but new, simple yet profound. It is: find your inner world! You have the universe within you now. Aikido is for realising that fascinating fact.

By "inner world" I don't mean the thinking world of reason and logic. I don't mean the inner world of the intellect. The inner world I mean has nothing to do with the mental skills of the conscious sort that we use in the scientific study of the cosmos. That's a world we already know quite a lot about. It's the one we enter while reading a book like this.

The inner world I'm talking about is a non-conscious and non-cognitive one. It's the world of our intuitions, for example. It's a world we tend to know much less about, though, like the intellectual, conscious world, it's a world of thinking too. The thinking done by this part of the mind is fuller and richer and more encompassing than the thinking done by the intellect. And the "knowing" it provides is a knowing without doubts or questions.

We are all conditioned these days by the need to consciously, intellectually, analyse. Contemporary education teaches us to think that our future lies in what we learn and how much we come to "know" in this way. We are fed a lot of information and we are coached in the analytic skills on which our modern scientific and commercial culture is based.

This is part of the story. It's the part that many people think is the most important too. But then they "think" too much. That's the problem.

The other part of the story is about the non-analytic mind. It's about the intuitive world of the non-conscious. It's a world that's accessed by developing a sense of the natural energy flow of the universe. When you "know" something this way there is no need to analyse. The "knowing" is "being". You embody the knowledge. You experience it in the "heart" as well as the "head".

This sort of awareness is hardly likely to drop out of the sky. Getting access to it is very rarely a straight-forward affair. This is where aikido comes in. Aikido can take us to there. Aikido is one way to go looking for knowing of this profound and experiential sort. Aikido is one way to relax, one way to loosen the grip of the conscious mind, and of the "ego" that the conscious mind helps define and defend. Aikido's caring gestures open both the heart and the mind. They lead quite naturally, without force or fuss, to deeper levels of awareness.

Aikido is one way, in other words, to develop better intuition. It is one way to access our most comprehensive capacities for understanding, and like those capacities, it is both mysterious and fascinating. It has a magic all of its own.

Aikido gets more mundane as you train longer and as you get to know more about it. But the mystery and the magic of aikido never completely disappear. Later, if you train harder still, if you train well, if you train, in other words, in a way that is natural and open and free, the art opens into another realm. This realm is not mundane. It is truly cosmic. Then the mystery and the magic grow too big for these words to mean much any more. You find for yourself the cosmos you carry within - and the teacher who awaits you there.

You will come to know for yourself that there is no place you are bound to, no point where you need be stuck, physically or mentally or spiritually. You will come to know something, however fleeting or diffuse, of the universe as a whole.

Anybody can do it. Anybody can access the spiritual dimension to their lives. Many disciplines offer such access and many techniques have been devised to help people to come to such an awareness.

Aikido is one such discipline. In aikido you come to this awareness by doing aikido training.

A book can't teach you how to train, however. A book about aikido is just that, a book about aikido. It can't be used to access your inner world. It can talk about that inner world, but it can't take you there.

You also come to such a book with knowledge of your own. You are not an empty vessel. You read a book like this selectively, knowing what you already know. You read into it what you want to, getting a point here and a point there and maybe missing the more comprehensive meaning of what is being said.

I hope that doesn't happen here but that's the risk any writing runs. I want to describe and explain what aikido is and what it means but I can only describe and explain those things. I can't determine how a reader will respond to my descriptions and explanations.

Why run such a risk? Why not remain silent and simply train for myself alone?

That is certainly very tempting. Descriptions and explanations like this do prove useful sometimes, however. They do give an account, albeit a rudimentary one, of what aikido means. They do reflect, however dimly, something at least of how it feels.

Anyone who trains in aikido develops their own account of the art. As they train harder they explore this account and refine it for themselves. Because we are all different we express these ideas and feelings differently. This is inevitable. We are born with different personalities and we are born into different life situations. We react in individual ways. We feel differently, we think differently, and we develop complex and integrated versions of who we are and what we are doing here.

These ideas and feelings sit inside us like stones. The trouble begins when we start to use them in competition with each other, when we try to control each other, when we try to impose our conceptions of aikido upon each other as a way of policing "the truth" about it.

Perfect knowledge is an illusion. There is no "truth" to be had about aikido, in the secular sense at least. Knowledge is open-ended. That is why the account of aikido given here can't be a closed one. That is why it reaches continuously into the unknown.

Uyeshiba's techniques are in a sense research tools for a unique kind of space and time travel. They are ways to reach for new experiences, new understandings and an ever-expanding sense of awareness.

The techniques themselves are limited. They are limited because they repeat specific movements in stereotyped ways. This presents an immediate problem. How is it possible to use limited means to reach for unlimited ends? How can someone repeat particular movements over and over again and expect to learn spontaneity? How can the practice of set responses teach us to be flexible enough to find un-set feelings?

This is a mental and spiritual problem and not just a physical one. How is it possible to become more creative if what we do teaches us how not to be? Clearly, we can't. So how we train matters. It matters a great deal. To experience something we don't normally experience, we have to practice in ways that do not reinforce our normal knowing-ness. We have to train in ways that do not reinforce our pre-existing sense of the work-a-day world.

The founder of aikido was aware of this problem. He didn't want his techniques to become static and mechanical. He didn't want people to imitate him or his students in a stereotyped way. He knew that those who just copied what he did could not expect to transcend the limits of the conscious mind.

What did he think people should do, then? His whole life was an answer to this question. He suggested, both in what he wrote and in how he lived, that change itself be allowed to show the way. He suggested we accept the significance of an ever-changing universe from the very start.

He didn't sanction change just for the sake of it. What he did observe however, and what he advocated in turn, was purposeful change of a compassionate sort - change that was capable of reaching deeper and deeper inside the self. He believed in open-hearted, open-minded change that opened the soul and made us more humane and more aware. And he believed that anyone could do this, whatever culture or country they came from. They didn't need to believe in an ideology. They didn't need to convert to any sort of religion. What he taught was more profound than any ideology. What he taught is what all good religions want us to be - open in heart and mind to all other people and to the universe as a whole.

"CUTTING THROUGH SPIRITUAL MATERIALISM"

There is one spiritual well that waters the whole world. It is fed by a spring of pure water. It is the water of compassion. It is the well of love. All people want to drink there. It is, whether we know it or not, our deepest need. Nothing else will meet this need. Nothing else brings true peace of mind. Nothing else brings real happiness.

Many people draw from this well. Many beliefs and faiths hold out cups to the thirsty.

We often pay whatever is asked for the chance to drink from them. Many of us are desperate. Many of us also live in cash economies, where money is an important measure of worth. We believe that money is the only way to get what we want. If we don't pay, we think we're not getting anything worthwhile. And the more we pay the better we believe the solace will be. This isn't so, but there are plenty of entrepreneurs ready to behave as if it were.

Spiritual commercialists sell something they get for nothing. This can make for a very profitable business. Aikido, too, has often been commercialised in this way.

Aikido is not one way any more. There are at least thirty different schools of aikido by now. Uyeshiba's early students followed the example he set but each did so in his or her own way. They emphasised different aspects of what they had learned. Each took a different approach to the art.

Some of these approaches were not aikido. Their teachers used the name of aikido but they were doing something else. Some had developed something new. Some had gone back to something that was done before aikido was invented. And some of these schools became very commercial. The people who ran them were more interested in making money than fostering human awareness and a feeling for people as one world family. They used the language of aikido but they did not practice what they preached. They made profits from the need that all people have to live happy and meaningful lives.

There is nothing new in this. If we look at the history of arts like aikido we see the same pattern again and again. We see, for example, someone who struggles to understand what is true and beautiful and good. Such a person studies the work of other great artists. They look far inside themselves. They meet many obstacles and they end up overcoming them. They end up making a new kind of art. They invent a new way.

What they find or what they see is not new. Many pilgrims have gone before them. But how they talk about what they have found or seen, or how they show it to others, can feel new. It can be truly inspiring. It can be so fresh and alive that others want to share the same vision. They become disciples. They feel with great force the significance of what they are told or shown.

These disciples then they go off to show what they know to anyone else who'll listen. "This is what I felt" they say. "This is what is real". They tell the truth as they see it. But each tells the truth in their own way. Everyone is different and for each disciple "the way" is different too. Each has their own idea of what they were shown.

Sects spring up. There are arguments about what the great teacher meant by what he or she said or did. Different disciples use the same words but they often mean very different things by them.

It's like the old story of the blind men and the elephant. One blind man feels the elephant's trunk. "An elephant is like a great snake" he says. Another blind man feels the elephant's leg. "An elephant is like a tree" he says. A third blind man feels the elephant's flank. "An elephant is like a wall" he says.

Disciples often act like these three blind men. They research their art, and what they find they then proclaim to be the whole way. They teach new students and these new students act like blind men too. These students start groups of their own. There are more and more ideas about what seems real or true. Like ripples on a pond awareness runs out from its historical source.

Why don't these disciples get together? You'd think they would. You'd think they'd share their wisdom to build a clearer picture of the whole art from the part each knows. But they are proud. They really think they understand the whole. They really think they see. They don't believe that they live in the dark.

Finally another person comes along with the same gifts as the great teachers who have lived before. Like those teachers this wonderful individual studies and struggles and finally finds a new way so fresh and alive that many others want to follow it. Many others come to study the new/old knowledge. These people go away to teach and the cycle is repeated again. This is the way it is all over the world. This is the way it's been for thousands of years and this is the way it'll be for thousands more.

Some of those who teach are self-deluded. Some are out-and-out cynics, using what they know because it makes them a living. They are not interested, whatever they say, in making a better world. They are not interested in opening minds and helping others to know more about harmony and love. To them spiritual teachings are mental goods in a world market-place and it's mostly a matter of selling spiritual commodities at whatever price the market will bear.

Some sell aikido this way too. The sincerity and the integrity of aikido teachers is not always easy to assess, especially if you don't know much about aikido. But it is common-sense that those who want to raid your pocket are not going to give you a greater awareness of non-material matters.

What such teachers say has to be seen in the light of what they do. Though their words may seem to meet your needs, it's still worth asking some key questions: what example do they set? Is their example one that will make me more free? Do they live by the principles they preach? Are they what they say they are?

Spending money is not the way to enlighten the spirit. Nor is following a con-artist, however convincing the con-artist may be and however heartfelt the desire to be led.

ENDS AND MEANS

The corruption of aikido by con-artists is one example of the more general principle that how we train is what we learn. What gets done on the training mat is what we come to know. The process becomes the end- product.

If you think, for example, that materialism will lead to spiritual awareness then you are likely to be sadly disappointed. You will only get more of the same, namely, more materialism. If you learn to move in ego-defensive ways then that is what you'll get, namely, greater ego-defensiveness. And so on.

How we train has to be designed to get where we want to go, or where we think we want to go, or we won't get there. This is a simple proposition but it's a very important one. Ends create means. This is not only the case for aikido. It applies to life in general.

If, for example, our training is mostly about physical technique then that is what we will end up knowing most about. If our training is all about making mental images of stability or supple strength then those things are what we'll achieve. If we train in a way that opens our hearts then our hearts will surely open, bit by bit.

Life's the same. If we value order and security then we're likely to think of people as basically bad. We're likely to see life as a battleground where it is the strong and the cunning who mostly win. We'll likely think in terms of beating others before they can beat us. We'll wonder how people can be controlled so that decent lives can be led despite all the selfishness and cruelty in the world.

On the other hand if we value justice (as anything more than an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth), or if we value freedom or equality, we'll think of people as good too. We'll think that life is also about helping each other. We'll look for ways to be just or free or treated equally. And we'll look for ways to understand and help others so they can be treated this way too.

If we believe in both order and justice (or freedom or equality) then we will see people as both good and bad. We'll think that life is about finding a balance. We'll look for ways that make the most of both one and the other. We'll practice tolerance, for example, or forbearance, or compromise.

All of this is reflected in training. Competitive training (like competitive living) will reinforce our feelings of competitiveness. It will cement our egos and cease to teach us much about love or harmonious living.

On the other hand cooperation in how we train (and live) will give us just that - greater awareness of the rewards of reciprocity.

Partners who go further, however, who take turns in helping each other, will find in that feeling of collaboration something more. People who give up every idea that they should either compete or cooperate will find there is much more to aikido (and to life) than throws and hold-downs and

blending with attacks. They'll find something opening inside themselves onto a bigger and better way of being.

Many aikido teachers talk about harmony and yet their students are very competitive. How can this be? The whole question of competitiveness is quite complex. On the surface the movements made in an aikido class may blend together beautifully. Underneath, however, it may be a different story altogether. There may be all sorts of ego tussles going on, all sorts of conflicts, and a highly contrived kind of reciprocity. There may, in fact, be a deep aversion to aikido. If students believe: "I could really resist this" or "I'm only taking this tumble because I'm letting myself be thrown, not because you've caught my balance and broken it" or "I'll tumble for you if you tumble for me" then what's being taught is not aikido.

Doesn't defensiveness make sense, though? Don't we need to know how to protect ourselves in this world? Don't we have to be highly selective about who we cooperate with? These are a fair questions. It would seem to be only commonsense to practice using struggle in case we have to deal with a struggler somewhere else.

This is a case where commonsense is misleading. In practicing aikido the way Uyeshiba wanted it practiced the answer becomes obvious. Struggle can be dealt with by transcending it. Uyeshiba developed a way of doing this that he called aikido and unless every moment on the training mat is spent trying to transcend rather than perpetuate conflict, then the means will defeat the end, and whatever is learned, it certainly won't be aikido.

A WAY TO HARMONY WITH THE UNIVERSE

Why is this question of non-conflict so significant? Let's go back to the first question I asked: what is aikido? Freely translated from Japanese into English "ai-ki-do" means something like "way to harmony with the universe".

A "do" is a way, the way of a saint, the way to transcendence. It denotes something like the deep truth at the heart of the universe. "Ai" means a cover. The image is that of putting a lid on a hole. It is also that of putting things together, mixing them, balancing them, combining them harmoniously. "Ki" means "spirit". It has a profound meaning in Japanese. It is used to describe the energy or life-making force that in ancient Eastern thought is believed to pervade the cosmos.

The translation I've just given suggests that aikido has a physical dimension, a mental dimension, and a spiritual dimension too. I've used these categories already and I want to look at them more closely because they are very helpful in explaining aikido in words.

The training methods used in aikido are physically very dynamic. Uyeshiba developed his own techniques and his own ways of doing them. Many tried to copy the form of the art Uyeshiba made and many aikido teachers still see their main task as trying to preserve Uyeshiba's techniques unchanged.

What this means is hard to say since Uyeshiba changed his techniques over the years. As he got older and as he refined what he was doing his movements changed too. Those who use Uyeshiba's techniques from the 1940's look different from those who use his techniques from the 1950's and 1960's. The techniques from the earlier period, when the art was still being developed and was closer still to aiki-jutsu, look rougher and less compassionate than those developed later.

Uyeshiba did concentrate on a number of basic forms, however. From the time he started to develop aikido, right up until his death in 1969, he worked on a basic repertoire of techniques. It is possible to concentrate on these techniques and Uyeshiba's son and grandson continue to teach Uyeshiba's techniques in the way they think Uyeshiba would have wanted them taught.

Technique-oriented training can become very frustrating, though. Students begin to argue about what is technically "correct". The arguments become very specific and since there's no way to bring them to an end except to appeal to some higher authority, and the highest authority of all, Morihei Uyeshiba himself, is now dead, no-one can go to him anymore to ask: "Who's right? Who's wrong?"

Many years ago I trained for a little while with an aikido teacher who felt very different from anyone else I'd ever met. It didn't matter how hard I attacked him or how fast, whenever I did so I felt as if I was falling into a hole. There was nothing at all at the point of attack.

Not only could I not help myself from falling into this hole. Not only did this happen whenever I attacked the man. It also felt good to fall. It was a real pleasure to tumble over. It was so inviting to collapse flat on my face that I couldn't help doing so. There was real joy in disappearing into the void that opened up wherever he stood, whenever I attacked.

What's more, whenever I was pinned by this teacher with a hold of some kind, I could feel no physical force making me stay down. There was no pain or pressure. I simply lost the will to move. I simply didn't want to do anything but lie still. It was a pleasure not to fight, not to resist.

This was aikido of a sort I had only read about in books. It was a new experience for me, though I had trained for many years in many parts of the world. It was my first glimpse of the deeper meaning of Uyeshiba's aikido.

Uyeshiba's idea of what he was doing always involved more than clever tricks with balance and the body. There was much more to training than the repetition of set moves until they could be done smoothly, until they had become second nature, like some exquisite machine.

The "much more" involved closeness and collaboration. It involved great sensitivity since each partner is different and moves in a different way. It involved the freedom to make adaptations, to improvise, to make things up.

Developing this sort of sensitivity means developing a lively sense of how different and interesting people can be. It is practical training in respect for difference and in how to foster the harmony of the social whole.

Sensitivity lets us do a particular technique well regardless of who our partner happens to be. If a partner is awkward then sensitivity lets us turn that awkwardness to our advantage. We can follow the movement into another one, a more appropriate one. Sensitivity lets us do something else more suitable for our partner and more relevant to the way in which we've been attacked. It lets us respond freely and naturally to the situation in which we find ourselves. It shows at the same time how we can live with other people without having to be any less of an individual.

Sensitivity means more than responsiveness to the differences between people. It means responding to what they do. People impinge. In aikido training we are being attacked and there are an infinite number of ways in which this can happen. Sensitivity means being responsive to the unlimited range of possible movements attackers can make.

This kind of sensitivity also shows us how infinitely varied people are. It makes for a real sense of camaraderie in any group that cares to practice it consistently. It shows very clearly how we can express ourselves to the full while affirming others at the same time.

This sort of sensitivity can't be taught. A teacher can set up opportunities for others to learn this feeling, and the better teachers are better at making opportunities in this regard. Good teachers can tell what the next step will be for each student and will set up the chance each student needs to take that step for themselves.

Much depends here on the direct feelings that come from the teacher to the student. Again, the better the teacher the clearer and stronger and more creative these feelings will be.

What are we stepping towards, however? Sensitivity and harmony were not, in Uyeshiba's view, ends in themselves. They were means to another end and that end was a spiritual one. Without a spiritual purpose, the sensitivity to move freely and creatively could not be found.

A spiritual purpose is difficult to define verbally. It can, though, be found through intensive practice, which is why we always come back to physical movement.

Aikido is a meditation-in-movement. It is a way of refreshing the soul so that something more pure can come through. It is a way of rehearsing the feeling of loving-kindness so that loving-kindness can happen more readily, not only on the mat (as a martial art of compassion not counter-attack) but off the mat as well (as a way of living that brings people together rather than putting them further apart).

What should we concentrate on as we meditate? How are we to treat our souls in this regard? What are we to do? It's all very well to say: "Relax and let go!" Or: "Be aware!" But that's like having someone at the top of a ladder saying: "Climb up! Climb up!" when there aren't any rungs.

I've just used the image of a ladder. It's an interesting image but there's a sense in which it's very misleading. The ladder suggests a spiritual hierarchy. It suggests that there are higher and lower states of awareness. It suggests that there are better and worse ways for us to be and it sees better or worse in a vertical, one-dimensional way. Those who enjoy the better and higher states are presumably the winners in the climb to heaven.

This is not a good image to use for aikido. Personal change through aikido feels more like an expansion, a multi-dimensional opening out in all directions at once. Personal change through aikido is a four-dimensional expansion of the sort Einstein described. Ladders are part of the three dimensional, up-down-and-across universe of Copernicus and Newton. They don't work where space and time are one.

None of which tells us what, in practice, we should do. We have to concentrate on something. There has to be some method or other we can use to clarify the soul. We have to rehearse some feeling or other. If we can't climb the rungs of an imaginary ladder, how are we to go about this business of expanding awareness and opening the heart?

To answer this question we need a more thorough explanation of aikido as a training method. We need a more detailed description of what aikido does and how it might be done.

THE PHYSICAL DIMENSION

Seen from the outside aikido looks like an endless physical flow, made up of an endless variety of specific forms. We see a wide range of throwing or holding-down movements, repeated again and again. These movements Uyeshiba derived from sword, stick, and spear techniques, and from particular techniques developed by the practitioners of an old form of jiu-jitsu.

Once he started developing aikido Uyeshiba never stopped. He developed techniques that he went on refining for the rest of his life. He also went on inventing new ones.

There is a story told about one of Uyeshiba's students. This man started to write down all the techniques he saw Uyeshiba use. After listing a couple of thousand he gave up. He realised that his teacher's movements were spontaneous. Uyeshiba was improvising. There were certainly many techniques he seemed to repeat. Others, however, he made up as he went along. This meant that there was potentially no limit to the number of aikido techniques.

Uyeshiba's ability to improvise set a powerful example. There are no limits to the ways in which we can be attacked. There are no limits either to the ways in which we can respond. Improvised forms flow naturally from unselfconscious movement.

Unselfconscious movement can be applied in a myriad contexts. Aikido is a single response, yet that one response can be adapted without effort to an infinite variety of self-defence situations.

It was the unity underlying all Uyeshiba's movements that enabled him to respond to surprise attacks in a creative manner. His techniques were really variations on one single theme. This theme began long before the attack began and it continued long after it was finished. Uyeshiba saw himself synchronising his movements with those of the universe. Because he felt himself to be part of the cosmic energy flow there were no surprises in the space and time in which he moved. He never looked out-of-step. His movements were deliberate. They were also in harmony with those of his opponents. They never had a chance.

There is a piece of old movie footage of Uyeshiba in which he is attacked by a ring of swordsmen. He is surrounded by about fifteen men with Japanese swords. They attack together. Suddenly they are all in a heap and he is standing a short distance away looking back at them. It looks impossible, even a little ridiculous, like a comedy routine in a circus.

I watched this film on video once and slowed it down to try and see what Uyeshiba did. Advancing the video frame by frame I could work out what had happened. As the swordsmen attacked Uyeshiba sank down slightly. Then he moved with astonishing speed out of the ring, passing between two of the swordsmen. He moved so fast that on film his image was blurred. He was moving, in other words, faster than the film could shoot.

As he passed between two of the swordsmen he grabbed one of them and threw him into the ring. The attacking swordsmen, realising too late that their target was now one of their own, could not stop. It all happened too fast. The substitution was almost instantaneous. They tried to

stop so as not to cut their colleague but it was too late. They collapsed in a heap in their confusion, while Uyeshiba calmly turned to watch.

Few people ever master movement like this. The great swordsman, Musashi, was one and he wrote about how such movement feels in his classic work "A Book of Five Rings". It's not necessary to be a master to catch something of the same feeling, however, and both Musashi and Uyeshiba have inspired many others at least to try.

In physical terms aikido students train in pairs. The opponent partner uses one of a basic set of attacks. The set of attacks used in aikido are a summary of all the ways in which the body can be hit or grabbed. The attacking partner takes the defender's wrist, for example, with one hand or two, or strikes at the defender's abdomen or head. This is done from the front or from behind. The defender does not parry the attack but blends with it, following the force until it falls naturally into a lock or a throw. Blending can be done by entering directly or by turning with the attack in a circular way.

Blending with an attack is easier said than done. It takes a lot of skill and coordination. It only comes after a lot of practice. You can't get it just by copying what you see. It's best learned, in fact, by being an attacker, not by being a defender at all. It's best learned through "ukemi", which is the Japanese word for the process of first attacking and then receiving the result of your partner's defense.

This may sound very aggressive but aikido is about reconciliation not competition, and this applies to "ukemi" as well. Attacking has to be done in a collaborative way for the defender to be able to learn something. It's no use taking a defender's wrist, for example, and holding it limply. The defender can learn nothing from that. It's no use, either, overwhelming the defender with a show of strength.

The best chance the defender has to catch the feeling of good movement is the chance the attacker provides by entering with the force most appropriate for their partner-of-the-moment. Everyone on the mat is different. They have different skill levels and different personalities. As a result, the force an attacker uses has to be different for everyone too. For some it may be very strong. For others it may be less so.

Giving and receiving sensitive attacks builds a collaborative teaching environment and the chance to learn without fear or apprehension. Fear creates physical stress. The defender then either freezes up, like a rabbit in the headlights of an on-coming car, or physically resists. This leads to a fight which the physically stronger wins just because they are physically stronger. Either way the chance to learn anything more comprehensive is lost.

Attackers who attack in a non-competitive way can move very freely. They don't have to worry if they're getting the movement right or not. They don't have to think. They can pour out their energy in a pure stream. They can wake the defender up with the power and energy of their purpose. They can watch how this energy works as it flows out towards the defender. They can blend with their partner's defence, at the same time as their partner blends with their attack.

It is true, though, that you can't feel your own "ukemi". You can attack but you can't know how your attack feels except for the way your partner responds to it.

Likewise you can't feel the impact you have on other people in your life. You can only see what you are and what you do in how others respond to you.

Your partners in aikido, like your partners in life, are your mirrors. You can see yourself in how they react when you act. If you are stiff and defensive, for example, then they will be too. If you are flexible and accommodating then it gives them the chance to be the same. If you are pessimistic and grim they will respond in kind. If you are positive and cheerful they are more likely to be that way too.

"Ukemi" - attack - that is open and giving provides an attacker with a lot of information. A good attacker can feel a defender very directly. They can feel what the defender is like inside. "Ukemi" also tells a defender a lot about the attacker. You can't lie with extended touch and it works both ways.

You can lie with what you say but not with what you freely give with all of your body. As you develop greater sensitivity - particularly as an attacker - you get it as a defender too. You can know, without asking, a lot about others' confidence, fears, health, moods, weaknesses and strengths.

Even those who don't do "ukemi" with an open and giving heart are saying something about themselves. The closed feel of their attacks says a lot about their need to guard their souls from the chance to change.

One of my oldest aikido colleagues was a good example of what I am saying here. Whenever I took hold of his wrist I could feel nothing at all. This was unusual because I can normally feel something in everyone. In his case it was like taking a high wall in my hand.

Then one day he changed. One day, in the middle of a lesson, I attacked him in a familiar way. I took hold of his wrist. I got quite a shock! Inside his wrist I could feel, running down the middle of it, like a thin stick of peppermint, a very fragile presence. He was there! For the first time in all the years we'd trained together I could feel inside the wall!

Gradually over the next few months this little fragile stick seemed to fill out his whole wrist until he was fully present, alive at last and with us in every way. It was a wonderful thing to feel.

A competitive spirit will not let feelings like this come through. A competitive spirit will not feel such things, indeed it will have the opposite effect. Competition closes down awareness. It creates indifference at best and it creates conflict at worst.

To compete is to fight. To compete is to create countering movements. It is not aikido. The smallest desire for conflict defeats the purpose of this art. This is why there are no tournaments in aikido. Any negative feeling reduces consciousness to physical technique. It reduces every encounter to an ego-tussle. It precludes compassion. Which is not to say that those who win a

fight won't treat those they defeat with honour or kindness. But the fighting itself is without compassion.

SEXISM AND HOMOPHOBIA

Aikido is a non-fighting martial art. Doing aikido means letting go of the desire to use physical strength in response to an attack. This can be very difficult for males to do since they are usually more used to using muscle power than females. They're usually more used to fighting with physical force.

This can put many female trainees at an advantage since they're less likely to use brute force to apply a technique or to rely on physical power to prevail. They're more likely to use movement itself, that is, to use aikido. On the other hand many females lack body-confidence as a result of years of learning inhibitions and of being taught to defer to men.

I'm over-generalizing now, but many females, after a life-time of being conditioned to submit and defer, find it hard to feel very sure about their personal power. They find the language of attack and defense intimidating. They find it very difficult, at least in the beginning of their aikido training, to move freely. They feel clumsy having to tumble and they may give up before they learn that aikido is a joy.

Women bring their inhibitions onto the training mat with them. They seem to find it hard to let go of the awkwardness that a male-dominated society has encouraged so many of them to feel.

Men bring their inhibitions onto the mat too, of course, and this doesn't help either. These inhibitions are of a different sort, though. They may, for example, bring their ideas of male dominance into the training hall with them. They may try and police on the mat the sort of power they have in society at large. Letting that inhibition go can be very difficult for them.

Some of these men can find the liberating effect aikido has on female students too much to take. They start attacking too hard, ostensibly to help their female partners to respond more positively, but really to intimidate them. They often aren't even aware of what they're doing. The females in the class will know though, - often painfully so.

Males like this don't want to think of females as equals. They're threatened by the democratic way in which aikido gives everyone the chance to be truly free and strong. The "ukemi" these men give can be competitive and awkward and down-right unhelpful to female partners.

The existence of sexism in aikido is hardly surprising. Male domination is universal. In principle aikido should have nothing to do with sexist discrimination at all. In practice men are often highly discriminatory which is why an awareness of the pervasiveness of sexism is necessary to give aikido students the best chance possible to confront it in a constructive way.

The issue of sexism is compounded by that of homophobia. Aggressively heterosexual aikido students can feel disconcerted or threatened, for example, by partners who are homosexual, whether they are female or male. In principle there is only the training. In practice personal prejudice can make training very difficult for all concerned. Combating discrimination is no easier in aikido than it is in daily life. Unlike daily life, however, aikido does provide regular

practice in loving- kindness. This is notably better than regular practice in more-of-the-same, but like all practice, it takes time.

THE MENTAL DIMENSION

Aikido teaches harmony and harmony is about sensitivity. Sensitivity's more complex than it sounds, however, including as it does feelings of a "centred" self, feelings of "extended" strength, and the ability to anticipate what a partner or opponent will do next.

Mechanical practice can't develop the feeling of having a "centre", or the feeling of "extended" strength, or the feeling of a connection so close that two become one. Training that repeats set moves will not generate these feelings. It will skill us in making the movements we repeat, but we can't get the feelings of "centredness", "extension" and "connectedness" by doing only this.

To get these deeper feelings we have to move with some sense of inner meaning. We have to have a mental sense of what we want to achieve that is without the intellectual "friction" of pre-conception and thought. We have to harmonise body and mind.

The difference in practice is the same as the difference between doing physical exercises and studying an art. Doing physical movements on their own is robotic. It's mechanical. It makes people defensive, brittle and light. Harmony training, however, like studying any art, is mindful and expansive. It's about mental awareness and it's this awareness that makes people confident and relaxed, well-balanced and flexible, powerful and free.

DEEP WEIGHT

A couple of simple exercises can make this mental dimension easier to see. I don't want to claim any more for these exercises than they warrant. But it's hard to appreciate just how much difference a change in mental intention can make to our physical performance without experimenting a little with changes in mind and seeing what changes they make to the body. And it's just such experimentation that can start a line of personal enquiry that can lead, through an art like aikido, to a much more profound awareness of what mental awareness means in practical, physical terms.

Stand close behind someone and put your hands under their arm-pits. Tell them to think of their head as being extremely light, like a big, helium-filled balloon about to fly to the ceiling. Tell them to really try feeling empty, as if they were about to go up without effort. Then try and lift them. Next tell them to think of themselves as being extremely heavy, like a deep-sea diver wearing big lead boots and a heavy metal suit. Tell them to really try feeling as if they were stuck to the floor. Try and lift them again.

You will notice at once a difference between how they feel when they are thinking "light" and how they feel when they are thinking "heavy". There is no outward change in what is happening. There is only a change of mind. The result, however, is a dramatic change in what someone seems to weigh.

If your partner is sceptical let them choose which way to think. Tell them to think "heavy" or "light", but to keep their decision a secret. Then try to lift them. You will know at once which decision they've made. They'll know that you know too.

Try this change of mind while standing on the bathroom scales. The needle won't move at all. The difference, in other words, is not a physical one. You can't decrease gravity by thinking light. You can't increase gravity by thinking heavy.

The difference lies in the relationship between you and your partner. A partner who thinks light is actually collaborating with you in your efforts to lift them up. They don't know it but they are helping you to lift them up. A partner who thinks heavy gives you their dead weight - and more. They give you no help at all.

There is no difference in what they actually weigh, in other words. There is a very big difference in how much they are prepared to help, however. This makes a very big difference in turn in how they feel to you.

What does this mean for a martial art like aikido? Thinking "light", with your weight in your head and shoulders, makes you very easy to throw. You will actually be helping an opponent who wants to topple you to do just that. Thinking "heavy", with your weight low in your body or along its underside surfaces, makes you much harder to throw. You can still be light on your feet. You don't have to clump about as if you were salvaging the Titanic. It's more a matter of using your mental weight in a tactically intelligent way. It's more a matter of how you relate to your opponent and the way you picture that relationship in your mind.

Are there implications here for more than aikido? What might this mean for daily life.

Within the limits set by the life you lead, what you visualise is what you actualise. What you see in your mind is what you make happen in your life. Think of yourself as a victim and you will certainly become one. Think of yourself as someone without substance and you'll find it hard to resist the power and influence of everyone you meet. You'll be collaborating in what they do to you. You'll actually be helping them to move you out of the way.

Carry your idea of yourself high in your head and your relationships will all be submissive ones. Think too much and you'll be helpless to resist when others want your compliance. You'll make it easy for others to do what they want. Imagine yourself as someone of weight and significance, however, and the opposite will happen. Let your mental mass sink into your body's centre and you'll stop being so vulnerable. You'll find that you are flexible and firm.

The good thing about sinking your mental mass is that you don't have to deal with feelings of low self-esteem first. These feelings can be there, part of how you are, but they won't matter if you want to change how you behave.

Perhaps you've had doubts about what you are worth or what your life means. Think heavy! Despite these doubts your centre will then come to mean more to you than low self-esteem. Your picture of yourself as someone of substance will become a reality. Every-day encounters that might have been threatening or fearsome will be met with a dynamic density that can't be tossed aside. You will have purpose and drive and the personal capacity not to be so readily swayed.

A simple change of mind can have very positive results. Once you see these results for yourself you will want to continue centring yourself by thinking under- side. This doesn't mean sinking into one spot like a tree, ready to be blown over by the first big wind. It doesn't mean stomping about like Rumpelstiltskin either, trying to convince yourself and everybody else that you are a force to be reckoned with.

It means finding a natural poise, a centre of mental and spiritual gravity that moves as the world moves and isn't upset. This inner point is the still place around which everything else turns. Observing that place in silence makes self-evident whatever is required next. It's like one of those toys that always returns to its upright position after it's been pushed. Poise like this will never let you down. Given a shove and you'll come back to the same mental balance you had before. The better you centre yourself the better this balance will be.

You will still get upset by things that happen in your life, of course. It's a tough world after all. But catch the feeling that you are falling inside and you will recover more quickly and with less fuss. Let your weight sink deep into your abdomen and you won't have to worry about being strong anymore. Strength will be the natural result of not worrying about getting upset. It will be the simple outcome of changing your idea of what you REALLY weigh and of changing your idea of where you want that weight to be. What follows will be self-evident instead of contrived. It will be spontaneous, but very much "to the point".

THE CENTRED SELF

In Japanese martial arts the feeling of body weight is built around the mind/body's centre of gravity. The idea of your body having a centre - a "moving mind" - is basic to most of the Japanese martial arts. They call this centre the "hara". In physical terms it is said to lie in the abdomen, a little below the navel.

Letting your weight sink into this centre leaves your feet free to move while still making you heavy. Your centre of gravity becomes the centre of a sphere of power that not only extends around your body and over your head but into the ground as well. This gives you mobility and solidity at the same time.

Letting your weight sink into this centre frees you from the interference of the intellect and the emotions. It allows the mind/body to express itself through appropriate movements that are fast, precise and strong.

Imagine you have a partner with a centre of gravity like that just described. Imagine feeling your way into that centre by a kind of mental osmosis and following your partner's movements from there with your own. This will bring you very close to them. It will bring you inside their time/space loop, as it were. It will give you direct knowledge of how balanced they are, where their balance lies, and how to upset that balance if need be. With knowledge like this you can control the relationship between you without effort or force.

Your partner, on the other hand, will be encumbered by disharmony. In aikido practice, for example, they will be encumbered by their attack. To attack is to be put at an immediate disadvantage. Attackers have a hard task. They are intellectually and emotionally involved. Their desire to attack fixes them to the moment and place of their attack. This contraction inhibits spontaneous response.

You, by contrast, have the chance to experience this moment and place in a much more expansive way. The potential is enormous. It is infinite. Indeed, it is the experience of the infinite potential of the moment that defines the so-called "spiritual" dimension of aikido, or what is sometimes called "universal mind".

The moment, experienced as it is, has no beginning and no end. A "succession" of infinite moments will be a succession of moments, each of which exists in no-time and no-space. In "succession" such moments define the movements we make, though for most of us, these moments blend into one another. The experience of each as infinite is obscured.

Aikido masters experience movement as an infinite succession of infinite moments. The sense of being completely calm, in the swirling midst of the most dynamic of movements, clearly distinguishes an aikido master from an aikido apprentice. A master's ability to observe movement in the physical world from a central point of stillness, allows a master to move from infinite moment to infinite moment with consummate ease. This exemplifies what it is not to "do" a movement but rather to have a movement feel as if it happened of its own accord.

This kind of centredness is open, not closed. It requires putting conscious care for "others" before the "self". It means trying not to "make things work" - surely a paradox, but a paradox resolved by practice. It requires compassion that is naturally felt and naturally expressed.

When done well centred movements look very simple. Indeed, if they weren't so simple they wouldn't be so difficult. If they weren't so easy they wouldn't be so hard.

This requires a specific kind of practice - one that is "just practise"; one that doesn't contract around the concept of "results"; one that is grateful for the chance to share each moment in a watchful way. Under such circumstances, mere "fighting" falls away. Practitioners become artists, their freedom manifest in the fluid movements of their bodies/spirits/minds, their creativity apparent in the magic their whole natures begin to make - as universally realised beings.

Though "mere fighting" falls away, the martial aspect of aikido is deliberately retained. Attack and defense are kept as sincere as possible. This stops movements becoming dishonest and self-indulgent. Inevitably, any pretence in this regard will compound pretence. Insincerity of purpose will make heightened awareness impossible. Contraction of any kind will kill the ability to act spontaneously and appropriately in any given situation. It will create gaps in the movement, allowing countering movements to be made. The key sense of expanding consciousness will be lost. Practice will lead towards weakness and away from wisdom. Falsehood will proliferate in the name of truth.

EXTENDED STRENGTH

Your centre can be made a source of great strength. By not only sinking your weight into it but also imagining your personal power flowing out of it, every fibre of your being will be invigorated.

This is a very strong image. A fountain of strength surging from your centre can make you a formidable person to meet under any circumstances. It can make you a force to be reckoned with, not only in training but in every day life as well.

A second simple exercise is often used to show this idea of energy flow. It also shows how we use our minds to create different kinds of strength.

Stand in front of a partner and ask them to hold out one arm. Take this arm, then try and push the hand or fist back to the shoulder, bending their arm at the elbow. Tell your partner to push back against you while you try to bend their arm and force their hand directly back. Unless you are much weaker than your partner you will usually find that, with a bit of effort, you are able to overwhelm their resistance and bend their arm.

Now ask them to hold out their arm again. This time tell them to ignore you altogether. Tell them to forget that you are there and to think of their strength as water flowing from the end of their fingers like water from a very powerful fire-hose. Alternately they can imagine that they are reaching far beyond you to push on a brick in a distant wall. Now try and bend their elbow again, pushing the hand back to the shoulder.

In most cases you will find a big change in your partner's strength. You won't be able to bend the arm at all. Moreover, if they want to they can talk to you while you heave and strain. They can wiggle their fingers and you still won't be able to bend their arm.

Sometimes you can feel their confidence coming and going along their arm as their faith in their ability to extend their strength also comes and goes. Sometimes, if the difference between pushing and extending is a marked one, they won't believe you were really pushing while they were extending. If this happens you can invite them to decide at random which frame of mind to use, and to do so without letting you know. You can push as hard as possible all the time so they can feel for themselves how much stronger they are while extending their strength. Or you can reverse the procedure and get them to push on your arm instead, so they can feel the difference in you.

In physical terms what is happening is very simple. If someone pushes against you in the way described above and you push back, only your triceps are at work. Paradoxically, the harder you try the less powerful you become. The more physical force you use the weaker you get.

Use a mental metaphor like water-from-a-hose or pushing-a-distant-wall, and the opposite happens. Your biceps join your triceps and they work together. The quality of the strength is different too. It is more relaxed and resilient. It feels less brittle and your arm feels less likely to suddenly snap like a stick.

It's as if we've got some kind of subconscious computer that takes over once the intellect is sidetracked. The deep wisdom of the mind-body, working as one unit, is available only when conscious thinking stops. Our desires actually get in the way of our efforts to act in our own best interests. We try and try but all we get is the opposite of what we want.

This suggests that it is far better to visualise extended strength and to access the unconscious by unconscious means. It is far better, in other words, to let go, mentally expand, not worry, and trust the body- mind. This will achieve much more than any intellectual idea of what your purpose might be and any trying to achieve that purpose. By letting the whole brain deal with the problem you let go of the striving, straining part of it. You allow the more comprehensive understanding you already have, but weren't prepared to trust, to do the coping for you.

Extended strength is relatively easy to use with one arm while standing still. It's not so easy to use with the whole body while moving around. This is one reason to train in aikido. It develops this strength naturally, relaxing the inhibitions that were built in to the mind- body while it grew up. Aikido replaces inhibited strength with confidence. This has much greater physical power as a side-effect. Rather than trying to be strong we become strong because we stop trying to be.

It's the same power babies have before they learn to control and direct their strength. Babies can be surprisingly powerful. Because they haven't learned to inhibit their strength, they grip with great ease.

It's the same power that people use in emergencies, when they act without thinking. When I was young my older brother fell out of a tree while gathering dry sticks. He broke both of his wrists. I ran to our homestead to tell my mother what had happened and she ran out to help him. My mother was very fit but she was also quite fat. I was astonished at how she jumped the fence to the paddock where my brother lay. She was like an Olympic athlete. She put one hand on a fence post and was over the top in one move.

My brother was a teenager then and though he was not tall he was quite heavy. She hefted him onto her back as if he were a child. She climbed back up-hill across the same fence with the same astonishing ease. In my memory this was all one motion that seemed to begin even before she heard my breathless news. It certainly continued long after she had put him on his bed and gone to fetch a doctor. There was a fluid efficiency about every movement she made that day that was the first experience I can recall of extended power.

Again, the martial arts implications are obvious. Think about being strong and you won't be. Try to fight an opponent and your desire to do so will reduce your strength rather than increase it. Use your will and it will be harder to find a way. This doesn't mean giving up or giving in. It means using mental images that allow your power to expand not contract. It means trying not to try.

This is clearly a contradiction in terms. It makes no sense in principle but it does make sense in practice. Letting your strength extend through an attack, for example, rather than focusing on the point at which you happen to meet it, resolves the contradiction by transcending it. Strive for an effect, however, and the striving itself will defeat you.

The implications for daily living are obvious. Get caught up in the power games of other people in your life and your life becomes a struggle to prevail. Play by their rules rather than your own and you lose the initiative. You get bent - even broken - by the weight of other people's resolve.

Extend. Ignore the resolve of others and use your own instead. Relax and let the unconscious skill of your mind/body, working as a whole, working from the "hara", find the most efficient and "natural" response. Give yourself the permission to be unconcerned, rather than let a lack of imagination leave you behaving like a small-minded, self-defeating loser. This way you'll get the chance to lead your own life, in harmony with others. It won't be a life that's a function of someone else's either.

BODY EGO AND BRAIN EGO

In mental terms aikido means "letting go", not relying on physical strength, not depending on the intellectual part of the brain to think of solutions to the problems we face. These are not little things to let go. The thinking part of the brain always wants to tell us that the intellect matters most. It will use that sense of the body that uses out muscles to stay in control.

The thinking brain and the body-in-the-brain both seem to have an ego. They're used to having their own way and they'll try and stop us seeing anything more than their version of ourselves. To get beyond them we have to find ways to change our bodies and change our minds. Good aikido training is meant to help us to do just that and over time, it does.

Good aikido training is pure movement. It is universal movement. To quote Uyeshiba himself: "The secret of aikido is to harmonize ourselves with the movement of the universe and bring ourselves into accord with the universe itself. He who has gained the secret of aikido has the universe in himself and can say, 'I am the universe'".

The feeling of pure movement is hard to catch because our mental and physical egos get in the way. The experienced practitioner says: "relax". He or she says: "Let the feeling of the movement flow so you can catch it for yourself; so it can catch you". He or she says: "Follow the feeling and aikido will teach itself. It is natural movement. Let it come to you. Let it come through you. Let movement itself show you what to do".

But what is: "relax"? The more you try to "relax" the tighter your body becomes. So then you go to the other extreme and become floppy and useless. What is this feeling of flow you are supposed to feel? How can you feel it unless you know what it is already? And if you know what it is already, then you hardly need to feel for it, do you?

It's like a Zen koan. Zen koans are mental riddles used in particular Buddhist training schools to baffle the brain and bring it to the point where it lets go and takes the leap to larger awareness. In the same way learning to "relax" means learning to feel more centred and extended. It means more than copying the relaxed movements of an instructor. It means finding these feelings inside yourself, that is, knowing what a moving centre and relaxed strength actually feels like.

I remember a good example of this kind of knowing in my own training. It showed me very clearly how the body- ego can hang on to one physical feeling no matter how much we may want to change. It showed me that if we don't know what we are feeling for, it can be very hard to know what to do to change what we are and the way we move.

There is one movement in aikido called "irimi nage". To do the "ukemi" for this movement, that is, to attack and then to receive this technique well, you have to bend your back very flexibly and I had trained for years in a style of aikido where you did not bend your back very far at all. This made my "ukemi" very abrupt.

I trained later in a style in which the attacker bends their back as far as they can. This gives the defender a much better chance to learn the feeling of the movement.

I found changing styles much harder than I thought it would be. For example, though I had changed my style of doing aikido I still hadn't changed my old habit of only half-bending my back. This inhibited my partners and prevented both them and me from learning properly.

One of my instructors became very frustrated with me. He kept saying: "Bend your back! Bend your back!" I thought I was doing my best and, in actual fact, I was doing my best! I was bending my back as far as I knew how to and my teacher's repeated requests frustrated me as much as my movements frustrated him.

One day I was attacking this same teacher. In the middle of an "irimi nage", when it came to the point where my back stopped bending and I was about to sit down in my usual half-receptive way, he punched me in the middle of the spine. It was not a hard blow. It was just enough to make me arch my back in surprise. "Now you bend your back!" he said. It was a revelation I shall never forget.

I had finally caught the bigger feeling he had been talking about. Once aware of what he meant I was able to train with more flexibility. I had been taken beyond an old body-ego habit that had been holding me back. Now I was able to start developing the kind of movement he was looking for.

I could have gone on for a long time the way I was. I could have clung to the physical form I knew so well. My egotistical body-sense and my egotistical thinking-brain could have stopped me finding new feelings indefinitely. But my instructor stepped in and with one precise intervention spared me a great deal of wasted effort. As a result my training became less mechanical and I became a little more free.

When I think back I can see that I was stopping myself. My instructor's movements were very clear. He gave me many excellent examples of what good movement looked like. But some stubborn sense of body-movement and brain-use would not let me try what I saw. Then my instructor struck, freeing me with one quick blow from what was a very strong ego trap.

There are always plenty more. If there weren't, we wouldn't need to train. If we're receptive enough, however, every lesson can teach us something new about these ego traps. Each partner can show us something new about how they work.

At one time I was teaching aikido in my usual enthusiastic, chatty way. Instead of teaching by example, which is the clearest and easiest way for students to learn, I was saying "do it like this" or "do it like that". I was stopping students in the middle of movements to tell them what I thought they were doing wrong. With the best of intentions I was making their training time a misery.

The problem with teaching like this is that it is too egotistical. It is impossible for someone to catch the feeling of the flow of good movement if their instructor, however eager, is always stopping them to show them what to do.

Sometimes students do this to each other. One partner assumes they know more than the other and wants to set him or her to rights. But this kind of training makes it impossible to let go of the ego. A partner like this is always interrupting the flow of the movement. As defender they are resisting and not cooperating. As attacker they are preempting and not cooperating. Those working with them are continuously being provoked and they resist. Everyone's egos grows denser and denser. They find it impossible to open up and to let their egos fade away.

In my case my students finally rebelled. I found out that they didn't want to learn from me any more and this came as a considerable shock. Some of these students were senior ones whose opinions were impossible to ignore or to rationalise away. What was to be done? If I wanted to learn from what had happened I had to face what was being said and accept the need for change.

I stopped instructing. I joined classes taught by my students. I tried to find the "beginner's mind" I had clearly lost. I wondered whether I'd ever achieved such a state of mind in the first place. I decided I hadn't. My ego had trapped me again. What I had thought of as humility and helpfulness had turned out to be the exact opposite. When well-meaning friends said something about this to me at the time I had brushed them aside. My arrogance had alienated nearly everyone on the mat.

All this was a powerful lesson for me. In the mirror of my students I had been shown myself. It was a clear mirror without any distortions. I could not fail to see how I'd been carrying on.

Letting go of the ego can be a source of great power. Like some good wizard, Uyeshiba was apparently able to channel ego-less force "at will". When I asked a leading aikido instructor what it actually felt like to be on the receiving end of Uyeshiba's techniques he said: "It was like being hit by lightning. Only there was nothing there".

Someone relaxed and ego-less is a force to be reckoned with. Uyeshiba was reputedly such a person and embodied such force. Perhaps it is one of the side- effects of spiritual enlightenment. Perhaps power like this is a natural consequence of universal awareness and love.

As our science becomes less mechanistic it may be able to give us a natural explanation for force of this kind. At the moment we can only acknowledge its existence, admit that it can't be rationally explained, and refer to it metaphorically with words like "ki".

The Japanese concept of "ki" is a metaphor. It tries to catch in a word the idea of a cosmic force that flows through all things. It brings into the conscious realm a concept that goes far beyond that realm. As such it cannot be precise. It is metaphorical at best.

Modern physics talks of space-time as a continuum and matter as knots tied in the energy flow of the universe. It describes in great detail how these knots are tied. But there is no scientific theory yet that explains all the physical forces we know about in the cosmos in one comprehensive framework. Until there is, concepts like "ki" will have a useful role to play in describing the indescribable.

What if we do get a unified theory of all the physical forces in the cosmos? Will it tell us how to let go of our ego-attachments? Will it teach us how to manifest these forces in ourselves?

Scientific objectivity helps us look at the universe in an ego-less way. But scientific objectivity is an ego trap itself. Perhaps the ultimate one. It is the intellect saying: "What I know is all there is to know" and "How I know is the only way to know".

What the intellect doesn't want to see is how much it needs other kinds of knowledge. It fights to stay in control, despising intuition and making a fetish of its capacity to reason. It wants to be the only way to "the truth".

The ego traps this can lead to are serious ones. They can not only maim. They can kill.

THE SPIRITUAL DIMENSION

Unless we have a larger purpose in mind it is hard, if not impossible, to let go. Our small-minded aspirations will keep us from anything more than small-minded achievements. Our thinking brain will play endless tricks, dominating our behaviour and determining what we do.

A sense of larger purpose is where Uyeshiba began. "It is the way of budo [the martial arts]" he said "to make the heart of the universe our own and [to] perform our mission of loving and protecting all beings with a grand spirit". It is in this light that he declared "[t]he techniques of budo" to be "... only a means to reach that end".

A "grand spirit" is what Uyeshiba said and a "grand spirit" is what he meant. It was this spirit that he believed would "reconcile the world" and make human beings "one family".

Uyeshiba's desire to "reconcile the world" led him to view martial arts as potentially constructive rather than destructive. The destructive arts make for disharmony and discord. The constructive ones make for harmony and peace. They have no interest in competition and seek neither victory nor defeat. They are, in Uyeshiba's terms, "true" budo. Using martial arts constructively means "giving life to all beings". It means, Uyeshiba came to believe, not struggling with or killing each other. The martial art he made - his "aikido" - he wanted to be a "true" budo in these terms. He wanted it to be an art of reconciliation, not counter-attack.

Many people tried to test the "constructiveness" of Uyeshiba and of his art. They wanted, for example, to test its practicality. Did it "work" in a fight, for example? For Uyeshiba, however, there was never any fight. He felt as if he had become one with the universe. As far as he was concerned anyone who attacked him attacked the universe. They attacked themselves and their own discordant minds. They were defeated by their own aggression before their attacks had even begun.

While Uyeshiba was able, very convincingly, to demonstrate aikido's effectiveness, could other people learn to do so too? As it turned out, apparently anyone could. Competitive people could become uncompetitive. They could know what it was to act otherwise. They could purge themselves of their discordant intentions. They could discover more harmonious world-views.

The key to the learning process was quite simple. Uyeshiba was very specific in his answer to questions about it: "You should first" he said "make God's heart yours. It is a Great Love, omnipresent in all quarters and in all times of the universe. There is no discord in love. There is no enemy of love". True budo, in other words, was in Uyeshiba's view a "work of love ...", and love was the "guardian deity of everything". "Nothing" Uyeshiba argued "can exist without it".

It was Uyeshiba's wish that everyone realise a feeling of universal love. He believed aikido could bring a sense of such love to all who practised it, and practise was the key. "You practise it" he said. You don't just talk about it, you do it. You find out about it for yourself and you use it in your daily life. You don't take anybody else's word for it. You try it yourself and you see what happens. This was his way to realise the "great power" of "oneness with Nature" and it was this way he offered others.

True budo, "loving" budo, made its practitioners one with Nature, one with the universe. It united them with the "centre of the universe". It taught them non- attachment to life or to death, or to other people, or to ideas of good or evil. It meant leaving everything to work itself out. It meant leaving everything "to God", not only in self-defence situations but also in life.

A sense of oneness that is also a sense of surrender sounds to many like rolling over to be robbed, cheated and otherwise abused. Nothing could be further from the truth, however. "Leaving everything to work itself out" doesn't mean passive acquiescence and it doesn't mean lying down so others can use their might to make you do what they think is right.

On the contrary leaving everything "to God" means pro-action. It means acting from a deeper understanding of the situation, in ways that are invariably more free, more appropriate and more efficient as a consequence.

This, in spiritual terms, is Uyeshiba's aikido. It is "true" budo. It is a way to help people grow. It is a way to help them play a positive part, however tiny, in the completion of the universe. "Understand aikido first as budo" Uyeshiba said "and then as the way of service to construct the World Family". "Aikido is not" he said "for a single country or anyone in particular. Its only purpose is to perform the work of God".

Uyeshiba was no God. He did think he knew what God- ness meant in the world, though, and he had found, he believed, one way others could find out this answer for themselves.

God-ness entails the "loving protection of all beings with a spirit of reconciliation". It is a process, a practice, since reconciliation, in Uyeshiba's terms, allows everyone to fulfil their own life's purpose.

God-ness means making a world in which everyone can complete their own mission in life. Since there are as many missions in life as there are people in the world this means fostering infinite variety.

One mission is shared by all, however. Everyone has to die, and reconciling everyone to the fact of their impending death requires "loving protection" too.

There's no formula for it, though. There's no set routine for giving people a reconciled state of mind about their personal end-state. There's no ritual practice that fosters everyone's life purpose and meaning.

Specific help in affirming a life from one moment to the next is the one thing that seems to be of most benefit. Again, there is no set formula for providing such an affirmation. Many people suggest many different ways to help in this regard. Aikido is one of them.

Aikido, as a martial art, is designed to cultivate the calm acceptance of death. Spiritual acceptance of the certainty that you will die by the hand of either this attacker or that makes it possible to relax physically and mentally. And a body-and-mind that is relaxed, that has let go of

the fear of death, can respond to an attack more spontaneously and effectively than one that has not. It can keep itself alive.

"I am attacked", the defender thinks. "I may die. Let me embrace my death with all my heart. Let me not fight to survive in a fearful, reflex way". Paradoxically, wholehearted acceptance of this sentiment frees the defender to move more naturally and creatively. The fear of death, which would otherwise have inhibited every response, is dispelled. This increases in turn the chance the defender has to survive.

What about someone whose mission in life is not to understand their own death but to bring death to others? What about someone like Hitler, who in his efforts to "purify" the "Aryan race" instigated the systematic slaughter of large numbers of Jews, Gypsies, gays, Slavs and communists.

Killing like this is "false" budo. It is not "loving protection". It is hateful aggression and a good example of what Uyeshiba called the "devil-mind".

It is the task of aikido, Uyeshiba said, to turn such falseness, such evil, into "spirit". It is the whole point of aikido to foster a world where loving protection prevails. A healthy nation, like a healthy individual, will aspire, in his view, to the same purpose. Those sciences that serve humankind will be motivated by the same ideal as well.

Such a task is not, Uyeshiba said, for inconsiderate people with closed minds. It is for the selfless ones who want spiritual awareness. It is for the sincere ones who want to rid themselves of their own faults more than they want to rid others of theirs.

"Those who seek to study aikido should open their minds, listen to the sincerity of God through Aiki, and practice it" Uyeshiba said. "You should understand the great ablation of Aiki ... and improve without hindrance ..." he said. Such understanding is not for correcting others but for correcting ourselves.

Uyeshiba is talking here about "misogi", which in the Japanese tradition is a powerful form of meditation-by- inner-purification. This inner purification is achieved by joyous training, by constantly reflecting on the training process, and most of all by observing carefully what Uyeshiba called "the genuine images of the totality of creation of the multitude of godly beings ..." By letting these become your "personal foundation", he said, you are allowing for enlightenment. "Without knowledge of these true images ...", he said, you will "...never achieve oneness with the Truth of the Universal". And "[l]acking oneness ..." you will never be able to "...fully manifest in this world the mission of your life as a human being".

The point of "misogi" is not to frustrate a single one of the infinite variety of life-paths open to people. It is rather to affirm the self by knowing the self and by helping others (as a way of knowing the self). It is to return by these means to that sense of unity between the self and the universe that is the source of infinite power. "We learn of an infinite power" Uyeshiba said "when the gods reveal the echo of the soul of the Universal Design, a power which possesses the strength to bind together and unify this world in harmony and peace".

A KIND WORD AND AN OPEN FIST

If anything above sounds obscure, then this is to be expected. The spiritual dimension of aikido is the hardest to talk about. It is hard to say anything about the spirit or the soul without using religious-sounding language. This language talks about people's most diffuse feelings. It talks about big questions like "what is God?" or "what does God want?" It puts these feelings into words and it answers these questions with words, but words alone are not really adequate to the task.

Words do have meaning. Religious words, however, mean different things to different people. It is astonishing how people who share the same faith even (like Christian Catholics and Christian Protestants) take the same words and make them mean different things. The problems are worse when Christians quote the Bible, Buddhists quote Buddhist scripture, and Muslims quote the Koran.

I'm not talking here about differences in interpretation or conception, however. I'm talking about the inadequacy of words themselves to express the meaning of "God", even though words are what we mostly use to talk to each other.

I've quoted a lot from Uyeshiba because he invented aikido. He used his own words to say what he thought aikido meant and he used religious words too. There's not much I can do about the limitations of language. What I can do, though, is to tell a couple of stories that help show in practice what Uyeshiba seemed to mean in principle.

The first story is not one of mine. It was told by Terry Dobson about an experience he had on a train in the suburbs of Tokyo.

Dobson was travelling alone in a comparatively empty carriage. At a local station a large and very aggressive drunk climbed in and began harassing other people. He was filthy and abusive and ready to strike out at anyone and everyone. The other passengers were very afraid.

Dobson was studying aikido with Uyeshiba. He was training every day and he was young and fit and keen. Every day Uyeshiba told him and the other students that aikido techniques were only to be used outside the training hall when it was really necessary to do so and only if others needed protecting. Dobson remembered Uyeshiba saying, over and over again, that "aikido is the art of reconciliation. To use it to enhance one's ego, to dominate other people, is to betray totally the purpose for which it is practiced. Our mission is to resolve conflict, not to generate it".

Despite Uyeshiba's teachings, Dobson longed for the chance to use aikido in a self-defense context. The angry drunk seemed to provide the perfect opportunity. He was clearly a public menace that had to be controlled. So when the drunk turned towards him, Dobson blew him a provocative little kiss and waited for him to charge.

The drunk hunched to attack when a little old man sitting nearby called out. He called the drunk to him in a friendly way. The drunk, distracted but still in a rage, went to menace the old man.

But the old man was not menaced. Instead he chatted on in a carefree manner about the pleasures of alcohol, about sharing a drink with his wife, and about his garden.

The drunk's anger suddenly drained away. He began to cry. His anger had actually been despair. He began to sob out his story. He was lonely and homeless and unemployed. He had none of the things the Japanese good life was supposed to provide. By the time Dobson left the train the drunk was lying with his head in the old man's lap while the old man, still chatting away, was patting his head.

Dobson was mortified. He had wanted a fight. He had wanted to use his aikido to create order by force. He had been more interested in conflict than in conflict resolution. It was the old man who had defused the situation, and what's more, he'd done so with just one strategic shout and his friendly chatter. It was the old man who had used aikido.

Dobson felt, he says, "dumb and brutal and gross". He had seen kindness triumph without violence. He had seen real reconciliation at work. He has seen real aikido.

The second story is also not one of mine. I heard it from Senta Yamada. The story comes from Yamada's years as an aikido teacher in England.

Yamada once told me that after regular training he and some of his students used to go to a local pub to drink and to talk about aikido.

One day they were chatting together in the pub in their usual way when Yamada saw a large Englishman looking at him from the bar. After a while the Englishman came over. He must have known that Yamada was a martial arts teacher because he stuck his fist in Yamada's face and said: "Go on then! Open that!"

Yamada is a slight man and not very tall. The Englishman was very big, with bulging forearms, like Pop-eye. Yamada looked at the clenched fist and thought: "There's no way I can open that. There's no way I can unbend those fingers".

But Yamada could feel the eyes of all his students upon him. He could hear them thinking to themselves: "What's our teacher going to do now? How's he going to meet this challenge? How's he going to cope?". And of course, there was the Englishman, looking down at him triumphantly, sure that he had proved the superiority of his muscle and brawn over the skills of this little martial artist.

Yamada felt he had to do something, so without thinking he reached into his pocket, took out a ten pound note, and offered it to the Englishman. Without thinking the Englishman opened his fist to take it.

Everyone laughed, even the Englishman. He realised he'd been outwitted and in such an unaggressive way that he couldn't take offence. He laughed and went off shaking his head, no doubt having learned something about his desire for money and how it had been greater than his

proudest boast. Yamada's students had been given a good lesson too. The conflict had been resolved. They had seen reconciliation at work. They had seen aikido in action.

CONFLICT AND CONFLICT RESOLUTION

Conflicts of one sort or another happen every day. Some hit you head-on. Some chisel away at the ground under your feet. Others slip up on you from behind, seemingly unseen. Good feelings get crowded out by bad ones. The days turn sour. How can they be made sweet again? How can our daily lives ever be made strife free?

The stories above, and Uyeshiba's comments about the spiritual purpose of aikido, offer a number of clues about how this might be done.

First of all, we have to accept conflict as part of life. It is not something we are ever likely to escape entirely. It is not something we can eliminate from our lives. Because of the myriad ways in which we attach ourselves to life and resist change, conflict can occur anywhere and at any time.

Secondly, all conflicts can be seen as having no particular beginning and no particular end. If you try to trace back the history of any specific conflict you'll find no single point where you can say it began. Follow the conflict through and you'll find no single point where you can say with confidence that you've resolved it for good.

Thirdly, we have to see conflict as something not to be won or lost. If we try and win, we can lose. If we try and fight, we risk being defeated. We can flee, of course, and that may be the prudent thing to do. Conflicts are endless and everywhere, however, and we can't run away from them all.

When we can't run away, aikido can give us another way to respond, a way that is neither fight nor flight. Aikido says: "Don't fight. Don't flee either. Let go instead. Let go of the whole situation. Go inside it. Follow it through. Use only your intuition".

The aikido option is neither defensive nor offensive. It transcends both.

Letting go, following inside and opening out from within, takes a watchfulness that is not easy to find. You can't anticipate. That signals your intentions and draws a countering response. It turns a conflict into a fight. You can't rely on your memory either. If you do so you'll find you're relying on routines from the past. Your thinking will inhibit your awareness of the present. You won't be able to innovate. You won't have the presence of mind to do what the old man did in the train or Yamada did in the bar.

What can you do, then? It's all very well of me to say: "Be watchful. Don't anticipate. Don't think." But if you don't have a natural flair for this sort of thing, expanded awareness of this sort is not easy to come by or even to understand. So what is to be done?

One simple thing to do is to breathe out. As you breathe out physically you can follow your breath into the conflict. As your breath extends, you can watch it expand. You're less likely this way to become fixed on whatever else is happening. You're less likely to get caught up in the emotions that conflicts create.

You won't get so upset, for example, by the anger of others. You won't be so stung by their criticisms or hurt by their accusations or diminished by their judgements. You won't feel so rejected. You'll see more readily through other people's subterfuges, other people's duplicity. And you'll see more clearly the other side of situations.

None of us can avoid sadness and pain but we can be less stuck with it. Breathing out makes us more free.

In aikido training breathing out comes more naturally the harder you train. Thinking about breathing will inhibit how you move. It brings the brain into the act, with all of its memories and intentions, with all of its - and our - egoism. The more you move, however, the more "breathing out" takes care of itself. The more you forget yourself. The less you have to think.

This is hard to do by yourself. That's why good aikido instructors just throw you. By being thrown continuously you cease to be able to "do" anything but enter and receive. The movement is done for you. As you become more tired it becomes harder and harder to hold your breath. You breathe out because you have no choice. You move too much and you get too tired to do anything else.

Breathing out is like dancing with life. "Breathe out ... and leave yourself watching" a colleague of mine once wrote. "Move very closely with life as if you were dancing with every moment. At times of conflict follow your breath into your adversary or into the situation. Dance closely, following and watching with your breath. Don't get involved. Let the breath be gentle and continuous and never consider breathing in. That will look after itself. Dance so closely that you can't tell if you are leading or following. Never get in front, never willfully attempt to change or resolve the situation, and conflict can be your deepest meditation ...".

Conflict can destroy everything you value. It can even destroy your whole existence. How can you avoid the bad aspects of conflict? How can you stop it destroying what you want? Conflict is stressful and confusing. There's no doubt about that. Conflict conditions would seem to be the opposite of those you need for doing meditation. By breathing out, however, even conflict can become an opportunity to go within. Even conflict can be used to watch our awareness at work.

STRESS MANAGEMENT

Breathing out is the basis of a useful technique for dealing with stress more generally. The technique I want to describe now is based on a "misogi" exercise used by Zen meditators. "Misogi", as I've said, means "ritual purification".

Sit in a chair with your spine straight. Or sit in "seiza" (the Japanese kneeling position, where the feet are tucked under the buttocks, the back is straight and the hands rest naturally on the thighs or in the lap). Let your shoulders relax. Close your eyes. Breathe out gently through your mouth for a number of counts, perhaps six or eight. Your head will naturally want to fall forward a little. Let it.

Then pause.

Then let your breath flow in through your nostrils. Aim the breath at the back of your head. Straighten your head up as you breathe in. Use about the same number of counts as you did breathing out.

Let your breath sink down your spine into your "hara" (your body's mind-centre and its centre of gravity). Let it rest there for a few counts before breathing out again. Repeat the whole sequence. Keep breathing around this mental wheel for a few minutes, then continue whatever it was you were doing.

There is a second breathing exercise that can be used for stress management. It is called "gassho". The word "gas-sho" is made up of two Japanese characters, one of which means "to fit", the other of which means "palms". This exercise is often done before and after aikido practice to steady the mind and to concentrate "ki", or energy-awareness. It is used to help energise the present and to let go of the past.

Shut your eyes and watch the centre point between your brows. (Alternately, you can keep your eyes slightly open and look towards a point two or three metres on the floor in front of you). Next, bring your hands gently together, palms facing and level with your face, in the attitude of prayer.

Breathe in and out naturally, without force, as if you were breathing up and down your spine. Breathe to and from the deepest part of your abdomen. Quietly and mildly, The rhythm should not be too fast or too slow. The in-breath should be about 7-10 seconds long. The out-breath should be a little longer and should leave most of the air still inside. Let your body hang off your shoulders like a coat on a coat-hanger.

The purpose is not a physical one. You're not cycling air mechanically through your lungs. The purpose is to purify the mind and the spirit. It's to feel the universal life force that is called in aikido "ki".

Another thing you can do for stress is to use mental images that allow a feeling of expanded awareness. You can send your awareness outwards, for example, in the form of an expanding

sphere of light with yourself at the centre. Or you can extend your physical strength in a powerful stream in any direction you like. When you stop extending your physical strength your mind will relax too. Your conscious mind will let go as a reflex response. This is the same effect, by the way, as that achieved by massage techniques that dispel deep muscle tension to relieve deep mental tension.

You can even use mental reasoning by turning the brain back on itself. You can remind yourself, for example, in the most intellectual and rational way, that you can't ever know what's in your own best interests. This intellectual insight, rigorously applied, will quickly make clear that no matter how hard you plan, no matter how much you try to fore-guess the future, you simply can't do it.

Let's say you're faced with a problem, a dilemma, or a conflict. How will you cope? You think of three different options. Let's call them Life A, Life B, or Life C. Which will you choose? You think the options through and you decide on Life C. But by choosing this option you've made sure that Life A and Life B never happen. They will only ever exist in your imagination. You won't ever know what they actually were. You can't live all three lives and then go back to the original choice-point and say: "I think I'll have Life B now. That's the one I liked best. That dealt with the problem best".

The fact that you can't ever know what's in your own best interests takes some of the pressure off you to "get it right". The course of action you didn't choose (but maybe thought later you should have) might have had you falling under a train or contracting a deadly disease. You can't know. You can't check the alternatives later to see which of them was right. You can't ever know which of them was wrong, including (and this is the key point) the one you did choose.

This doesn't mean you should act at random. Nor does it mean you ought to throw dice whenever you have to make a decision. Nor does it mean playing an endless Pollyanna glad-game (making the best of the conditions you live under just because you seem to be stuck with them). Nor does it mean you should become a fatalist, deciding you can't do anything because you can't know what best to do.

It simply means seeing how complex life is and how you are not always to blame for something that's gone wrong. This in turn can give you options you never thought of, options that thinking alone could never have given you. It can give you a much deeper insight into the nature of right and wrong so that when you do act, you do so naturally and effectively.

The simplest thing you can do to manage stress, however, is not to think of breathing out, not to think of letting go of the desire to get it right, but to trust. That is, to give over to intuition the choice to be made about how to respond, and to feel for some more universal flow and simply to go with that.

Again, this doesn't mean being passive or fatalistic or doing bad things because you feel like doing them. If you go with the deepest flow then you will act, but you will act with a clearer and more caring sense of purpose - caring of both yourself and of others. You will act more freely, with greater energy and efficiency, and you will act more compassionately. You will do more with less. And what you do will be good.

To quote my colleague once again: "My training has given me the feeling that life would best be lived without fear, embracing life and death as one, without a sense of conflict and where all kinds of relationships are felt as a greater whole within universal change and movement. Living like this one's mind (spirit) expands and constantly changes without attachment to the past or future. Everything becomes love".

THREE DIMENSIONS IN ONE

I've described the physical, mental and spiritual dimensions of aikido. People starting the art usually feel a bit clumsy because for them the physical aspect of it is the most important one. The mental dimension is comparatively obscure, while the practice of the spiritual dimension can seem even more so.

Later on students become more confident. The techniques become more familiar. The physical part of the art is easier to do. They find themselves developing the mental aspects more, while the spiritual dimension becomes easier to understand as well.

Later still the balance shifts completely. The physical dimension is then the least dominant one. The mental dimension becomes a rich field for research. And the art opens out into a spiritual realm that has no limits at all.

These three dimensions are practised together from the start. The balance between them may change, as I've just described, but in aikido, they are practised together from the very beginning.

Trying to make any particular balance between body, mind and spirit defeats the chance of finding that balance. The intention, the "trying", stops you finding the dynamic equilibrium you want. You end up learning only part of what there is to know.

You can't, in other words, concentrate on only one dimension and hope to reach for the others through that. Means like these will defeat all but the narrowest of ends.

What do I mean by narrow ends? Aikido that is solely intent upon mastering a number of physical movements, for example, is a very limited and rather narrow kind of aikido. It's not aikido at all, really. It's aiki-jutsu, which is an old form of jujitsu. It teaches clever locks and throws that have very little inner meaning. These can be used for pinning or throwing opponents, but that's all.

This may be fine for students who just want a hobby or those who just want a healthy work-out. But what about those who want more?

Aikido that concentrates on mastering a number of mental concepts or images, such as "ki" extension or the "hara", is very intellectual. This, too, is a narrow end. Students who approach the art this way have to think so much about what they're doing that they find it difficult to move. They become very self-conscious and their physical movements become very inhibited. They can't just "do" it. This makes the mental skills they want to master very hard to get. Indeed, all their mental activity stops them finding the still point within themselves that alone will give them the knowledge and the spiritual awareness they seek.

Then again aikido that concentrates on the spiritual aspects of the art can become too esoteric. A lot gets said but there is little real training. Physical practice becomes highly attenuated and of very little relevance. Students bathe in the warm glow of aikido's spiritual ideals but they don't

move their bodies. This is also an indulgence. It substitutes ideas and imagination for experience. It is, in a way, the narrowest end of all.

The three dimensions of aikido, practiced together, enhance awareness. They foster each other to make a meditation in movement. Aikido players use their bodies, their minds and their souls. They learn to move physically in ways that calm the brain and enlarge the spirit. They practice feelings that facilitate harmonious movement and a sense of spiritual meaning. They surrender to a process of spiritual growth that fosters mental calm and physical ease. And always there is the cutting edge of attack/defense to keep them honest, to keep them from becoming complacent.

The greatest teachers often say very little about spiritual matters. The spiritual meaning of aikido is obvious nonetheless in their physical movements and mental poise. It is evident in how they relate to other people and in how they live their lives.

They move in very simple ways. These ways are so simple, in fact, that other people, watching them train, say: "That's beautiful. That looks really easy. Let me try it. I can do that".

Teachers like this relate to others very simply too. They give without seeming to. They don't seek disciples or set themselves up as authorities or gurus, pretending to possess knowledge that they may well not have. They are learners first. Their teaching is a side-effect of their own practice and study.

Teachers like this just move. They train. They research. Their minds and bodies live, like those of other people, in the present and the past, in anticipation of the future. But they themselves are something else. They are simply there. And this makes them very unassuming people, extraordinary in their ordinariness, inspiring no envy, inspiring only respect.

They are not attached. They are not detached. They are present in a comprehensive way that is very hard to describe but instantly recognisable. Their paradise is now, moment to moment. And without effort or the desire for profit they offer this paradise as a goal in life to all they meet. They dream Uyeshiba's dream and their dreaming awakens in others an awareness of what it is to become fully human.

When I first met one of these great teachers he was still taking lessons from his own instructor. Though the man I'd met already had a very high grade in aikido he still went once a week to study with another teacher, a man who had been one of Uyeshiba's most famous pupils.

Some years later he stopped attending these classes and I asked him why. He said, without any hint of presumption or vanity, that he had found the teacher inside himself.

Some years later I asked this same man if he still had anything to learn from the aikido practitioner who had once taught him so much. He said "yes" and I was very surprised. "How can you say that?" I said. "You told me years ago that you'd stopped going to his classes? You said you'd found the teacher inside yourself?"

He paused. Then he replied: "What I learn is that it's all right to change".

It's all right to change.

A simple enough statement, deceptively simple. He was not just talking about aikido, though. He was talking about life.

Going for a walk in the world,
feeling the fall of it in your stride,
the firm ball of it
and the wide circle of
gravity's swing.

How little it is,
how large a thing.

Going for a walk in the world.

AFTERWORD

The book above was written fifteen years ago. It was written by mistake, at the behest of my teacher, Yoshinobu Takeda, because I misunderstood a request he made to write about the approach that his teacher - Seigo Yamaguchi - took to aikido. I thought Takeda-sensei wanted me to write about his own approach. No wonder he seemed a bit puzzled when, after six months work, I showed him what I had written! Once I discovered my mistake, I did what he initially requested, and wrote a separate essay on Yamaguchi-sensei's aikido. The text of this essay is available, along with others, at www.theaikiacademy.com. Meanwhile, my account of Going for a Walk in the World went on to have a life of its own. It may have been an inadvertent life, but it was a life nevertheless.

After this little book was written I continued to practice and to research aikido, and to ask myself what the art means. I recently re-read the text I originally wrote and was surprised to find that I was able to stand by all that I had to say then. However, I now think I did not go far enough. I want to add a brief "Afterword", therefore, to show how I think the story needs to be taken a step further.

It is time to put what I wrote originally in the larger context I see aikido in now. I did not appreciate this context when I wrote this book first, but I do now. I still think that what I wrote remains valid. It really only scratches the surface, though. Aikido research is truly educative. It leads out. It reveals new realms of understanding the further one goes. At least, this has been the case for me. I would therefore like to add a brief account of where my research went to after I compiled the above.

Going for a Walk in the World is built around the idea that there are three different dimensions to aikido. The art is one art, but its practitioners give it a physical, a mental and a spiritual facet. Different students of the founder of aikido highlight different aspects of what they think O-sensei was doing. Their students do the same, and as a consequence, many styles of aikido develop. There is nothing odd about this. It is as it should be, since all teachers of the art develop their own understanding of what they do, and as they train they develop their own ways of doing so. Meanwhile, we await the next grand synthesizer, that is, the next O-sensei, to come along and give us the next new art, just as Morihei Uyeshiba gave us aikido based on his idea of what his teachers had showed him. Meanwhile, however, we have aikido in three main dimensions.

The three dimensions to aikido are only the beginning, however. They constitute a continuum, but the principles they represent, and the ways these principles are practised, have all at some point to be thrown away.

As we train, we find our minds becoming more pure, and our awareness becoming more clear. We begin to resonate with a higher reality. We begin to understand that the four dimensions to our work-a-day world (up, down, across, depth, and duration) are really the boundary conditions of a five dimensional world that we know about - in scientific terms - as quantum mechanics, but that we can also know - in experiential terms - as aikido.

Purified awareness results in what Takeda-sensei calls “one exact conscious flow”, or one “big movement”, that opens or embraces. In the past he called this one flow nobino-sen. This translates literally as “extended line”, though metaphorically it means being taken to the centre of the cosmos (both inner and outer), and connecting there to its multiple dimensions. He now refers to this “big movement” as sumi-kiri, though. Nobino-sen, he says, is too physical a concept to do justice to what he now sees more and more, with regard to space, time and energy awareness, in fifth dimensional terms. Sumi means pure and transparent, he says, like the blue sky. Kiri means not sticking, or completely free.

O-sensei called this ameno ukihasini tatu, says Takeda-sensei To open like this was to realize, he said, a “love that creates everything”.

Takeda-sensei once drew a picture of the energy flow that being taken to the neutral point at the centre of the cosmos makes possible. At the same time he wrote two numbers, 5 and 2. When I asked him later what these numbers meant, he wrote the following: “5 means space (deepness), time (past, present, and future), and the movement that incorporates these phenomena (and manifests them in due course as chemical complexity). 2 is the physical way (the three dimensions), and the mental/spiritual way (that on earth also manifests physically), that we use as intellectual tools or to mediate between ourselves and the cosmos. Unfortunately, we humans are always trying to fix (catch) things. This is the source of our chaos or confusion because everything is moving all the time. The old masters said, very simply: ‘Do not be attached to anything’. It is easier to understand what they meant if we notice how the concept of human ‘being’ means ‘to exist (be) there’. We use physical means to fly towards that fact (and to fix ourselves there). A more conscious awareness of waza or technique helps us understand what this means, and how our ‘commonsense’ is too familiar for us.”

He also said: “I do not know where I now stand in this regard in relation to Yamaguchi Sensei [his own aikido teacher] or other teachers, but I do know that what I observe comes from my own consciousness. It is my own way, absolutely. This consciousness is like a feather in the air.”

This may sound rather esoteric, but it has practical implications that are clearly manifest in the way Takeda-sensei moves. The feeling of his movement is that of extension, extraction, expansion. It is a stretching feeling, where the technique is not so much technique, as the realization of a transcendent sense.

Takeda-sensei doesn’t like students to think too much. While the attacker should attack, and be serious in his or her intention, the defender should feel for the right place or point without reflection. This place is very small. The opening-out it makes possible is very large, however. There is no pulling or pushing or physical throwing away either. There is only a going-in to the little space between people, where there are many ways to respond, and the defender can move anywhere. There is only a going-in to the centre, where any hold or thrust can be dealt with, and the defender can follow through.

Researching Takeda-sensei’s suggestions led me to a couple of fundamental understandings. These seemed to me the basis of his approach. They also seemed to me the basis of all good aikido.

One understanding was to do with space. Or more accurately, with spacing.

Most aikido practitioners move horizontally. They reduce aiki-movement to a flat disk parallel to the floor. Takeda-sensei, by contrast, uses the full range of vertical movement that is physically possible. When attacker and defender come together, for example, he always drops to one or both knees. When attacker and defender are moving apart he sometimes drops to one or both knees, and sometimes doesn't. Either way, though, he maximizes the verticality of the movement. Combining this verticality with the horizontality that all aiki-movement naturally involves results in the dynamic sphere that most practitioners recommend in principle, but rarely realize in practice.

The other understanding was to do with time. Or more accurately, with timing.

Most movements in aikido are attack-and-response movements. The timing is one/two, in that first there is an attack, and then there is a response. Boom, boom. One/two.

As practitioners become more experienced, however, their timing changes. It becomes one, rather than one/two. The point-of-contact shifts. Contact stops being at the end of the attack and at the beginning of the defense, and starts occurring half-way through a combined attack-and-defense. Attacker and defender then meet each other in the middle, as it were.

As practitioners become even more experienced, their timing changes yet again. The point of contact becomes the moment before the movement begins. Timing like this is no longer one/two, or even one, but rather zero. If one/two represents the physical facet to aikido, then one represents the mental facet, and zero represents the spiritual facet. The physical and the mental were described above. Here the timing becomes zero, however. The defense is over before it begins. The movement then enacts an agenda set before the attack begins.

Achieving this kind of timing requires a very deep and extensive extension. Like a thistle head, it is full of light but potent seeds, that carry the primal ki force of the cosmos in every direction. It requires the ability to incorporate the attacker into the defender's sphere of movement from any distance and at any speed, before the movement even begins.

There is also a fourth timing, however, which is not one/two, not one, not zero, but no-timing at all. Indeed, it involves the letting-go of any idea of timing. It involves being-embraced by the cosmos instead.

This is the most advanced timing conceivable. To begin with it is inconceivable, but with research and training its meaning can and does become clear.

While beginners get this feeling occasionally, the most advanced practitioners, like Takeda-sensei, get it all the time. For them, it is a kind of prayer, though not prayer in the sense of "earnest entreaty". It is prayer as recognition of what the cosmos is, and as an affirmation of its essential potential. The practitioner who prays like this becomes an arrow of god, hurled by the ki force that animates the universe as a whole. He or she moves so completely into the moment that each moment becomes an eternal moment, and each space a chance to transcend finite life.

In conversation with Takeda-sensei I once expressed my reluctance to have my fortune told, because I did not want to know my future. He looked at me rather quizzically. Then he said: “You know what your future is”. Later I realized what he meant. Of course I know what my future is. I am going to die. Meanwhile, however, I have the chance to do aikido. Domo arigato gazaimashta.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

The author currently lives in Melbourne, Australia, where he teaches world politics and aikido. An aikidoka since 1969, he is a sixth dan in aikido. He originally trained for fourteen years in the Aikikai style. More recently he has trained in the style of Yoshinobu Takeda, a leading student of Yamaguchi-sensei (who was an instructor at the Honbu and the proponent of a movement-oriented, collaborationist training method with a deeply spiritual rationale).

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