

Is <your> Aikido Effective..?

Is aikido effective in a street fight..? Answer: Maybe. It all depends on what you mean by *effective*. Most people have an image from the movies, Steven Seagal style, where you MUST absolutely DESTROY the bad guys. Well, you could do that if you wanted to..

But, here's the thing. Do you really want to..? If you think about it, the consequences wouldn't be good. You break an arm, you break a wrist, you dislocate a shoulder, or you throw the guy onto his head. Knock Out.

But let's take the worst that could happen and work our way backwards. The worst you can do is kill the guy, right? You go to jail and come out worse than when you went in..

Or, you put the fellow in a coma.

OK, how will you feel about that..? Better..? I doubt it. Break an arm. Hmm, that might be going too far, especially, if it turned out he just wanted \$20 to feed his starving family..

You break his arm in a split-second, but it might cost him a few thousand dollars and a few months to fix it. Aren't you, then, robbing him, instead..? After all, there's all that downtime, while he recovers in hospital. He probably wouldn't be working for a few months. So, you've managed to make someone feel miserable, not only for a few hours or a day, which might have been a fair exchange (or poetic justice), but for months on end..

And, you've prevented him from working or seeking a job during that whole time. So, let me ask you: how much do *you* make in a few months, and how many mouths could you feed in that time..? Weigh this on the balance.. consider what he's losing and what you're gaining from using excessive force.. If it comes out uneven, is what you did 'right'..?

OK, so let's suppose you break a wrist. It doesn't show. It heals quicker. And, we know some people can work, even when they have only one functioning arm..

I gave you the above thought experiment just to get you to start thinking of what you might do in an attack. You'd have to be prepared to scale down to what's right, or appropriate, for the nature of the crime and the person you have in front of you. Self-defense is not easy, but requires you to think quickly about what you're going to do and the results you want. You need to be prepared in advance..

But, it isn't just the physical effects you have to worry about.. There's the psychological ones too.

I mean, not many people know this, but, for example, if you use a gun to defend yourself (legal in some states), then you will risk killing someone. Police officers who find out that they've been the cause of a fatal shooting, usually have a visceral reaction to the event.

In short, they *throw up*..

Yep, they get nausea, headaches, vertigo, and can't think or talk straight... The police force and the judges know about this physiological reaction and usually give the guy a couple days off duty, so he can return when the worst of it has cooled down. The officer can attend to his court hearing when he's ready but not immediately after the tragic event, because he will, most likely, say or report the wrong thing out of his distraught state. The moral here that is that whether you intend to kill or not, the act of killing does produce very unhappy mind states, that it would be very useful to develop a calm mind..

But, let's say, you didn't have a gun yourself but had to defend yourself against someone who did.. Or, alternatively, we can imagine someone with a knife. Even an unarmed person whose large, mean and nasty appearance made you think he was interested in smashing your face in.. Would aikido be effective, then..?

Again, it depends on your ability and what you were taught.

Schools vary.

Teachers vary in their abilities.

Teachers also vary in their capacity to teach.

Students also vary in their ability to learn.

Sometimes, there's too much information.

Sometimes, there's too little.

Sometimes, the student is motivated to learn but doesn't have a good memory.

She forgets too easily.

So, I would change the question..

Do you really want to learn self-defense..? Then, yeah, aikido would be great for you. In our black belt course, for example, you'll learn a lot about the different ways people typically attack others. You'll learn some cool responses to those attacks. And, you'll learn concepts like *context, timing, safe distances, angles, how to use your body most efficiently* and so on. You'll even learn how to defend against knives, sticks, and multiple attackers, all within a safe and supportive cooperative environment.

If you go to any aikido dojo, you'll most likely be met by a good guide, someone who's generous enough to show you his favorite moves and who'll take an interest in your development. Having training partners who are helpful, gentle and kind is a big bonus.

If you're unlucky, though, you might get a hopeless teacher, or an aggressive one, and going to the *dojo* (the aikido school) could become a form of torture... I, personally, wouldn't want to keep going to a class like that where I got hurt regularly. I mean, that's just *crazy*...

After all, more pain, doesn't necessarily mean 'more effective'. It just means the teacher's probably sadistic and likes giving people pain. In fact, my 35 year aikido odyssey tells me, it's way too easy to cause pain, but that isn't really the proper goal of aikido.. "Why not..?", you say..

Well, the word 'aikido' actually means 'the way of harmony'. The whole idea is to resolve conflict in such a way that you walk away free and the attacker isn't hurt.

Remember Bart Simpson's response to his karate master, on his first lesson..? When the Sensei said, "We learn karate.. so we know how *not* to use karate..!". And Bart blurted out, "But, I already *know how not to* use karate..!"

True. But, you do get what the master meant.. right?

It would be better not to destroy the guy, if you could.

It would be better not to break an arm, if you could.

It would be better not to break a wrist, if you could, and..

It would be best if you could just walk away with a calm mind, an unhurt body, and a clear conscience, knowing you did the right thing.

Isn't that the outcome we all want, ideally..?

I mean, in a fight, you're gonna have to be pretty calm, because the chances of you *not getting hit*, at least once, but probably a few times, are very slim. So, first thing is 'stay calm', so you can think of your options for escape or counter-attack, without freezing on the spot.

Second thing, try to read his intention. I know, this is hard, considering we don't have ESP. But, most people attack other people for a reason, right. I mean, it could be because they are desperate for money, like in the above example, or it could be that they're just plain crazy, which would mean you'd need to keep your distance. Who knows what a crazy guy would do, right..?

Groups can also be a bit crazy when they're drunk.. Then again, there are professional thieves who know a few tricks. They'll distract you like a magician, to get you to release your wallet or purse, and run away with your bag.

OK, but that isn't usually what we have in mind when we think of the question 'is aikido effective..?' Usually, we picture to ourselves a scenario where one or

more big bullies are pushing us around, either wanting to beat us up for no obvious reason, *just because they can* or because they to bully just for fun.., or they want to rape us (if we're a girl) or steal our hard-earned wages.. Those are the three big ones, am I right..?

And, if you don't have any boxing skills, or if you lack physical confidence in yourself, then, yeah, it might be a good idea to just hand over the money or run. Call out for help, if you think some people might be nearby, or hide somewhere around the corner a few blocks away and call the police on your mobile.. The alternative is to sign up to the nearest boxing gym for a few months. But, if, even after the training, you were still discontented, and felt you lacked the necessary skills to keep a mob away, then aikido could be for you..

For example, if you were confronted, like.. *real fast*, suddenly surrounded by a small group who meant you *deadly* harm.. Then, yeah, this would be a slight problem for a boxer, who may be used to fighting only one on one.

Once again, we should ask: is aikido effective, in such a case? The short answer is: Yes. The long answer is: It depends on you how far you want to take it. If you go to a *dojo* where the teacher has thought of these scenarios, then yes, you'd be in good hands.

Aikido classes will take you through, from learning how to fall safely (in case, someone trips you up or you lose your balance) to addressing different scenarios, like the ones just mentioned, but they are usually simulated in slow motion, so that you can progress in easy steps. There's not much point in going fast at the outset, if you don't know what you're doing.. that much is the same as the reason we don't let people ride cars on the highway, without some prior training and a license which proves at least a minimum of competence.

You'll also learn how to take weapons off of people too. What you do afterwards, in self-defense, is up to you, of course. But, most *aikidoka* (aikido students) usually follow the ethical philosophy of the art, which is its chief attraction, I think: *the ideal of non-violence*. It just turns out that being

relaxed makes you much more efficient at self-defense, and having a non-aggressive mind will increase your survive rate as well. If you've got nothing against your attacker, but he seems deluded enough to believe that he's got something against you, then, you might even be able to de-escalate the situation by using verbal aikido to talk him out of it. The aikido approach will help you manage the encounter easier.

Now, what about aikido vs karate, aikido vs MMA, aikido vs kickboxing, aikido vs judo, aikido vs brazilian jujitsu, or aikido vs Krav Marga. Actually, each one of those will be topics for future articles, but we can say some things in general about how different aikido is from those arts. Well, first off, aikido isn't competitive like them.

Competitions have rules, yes? Like you can't hit certain places. Do I need to mention where..? You can't poke people in the eyes, you can't hit them in the groin, you can't break off their fingers one by one.. (Aw.. shucks..!) :) I'm not saying you CAN do those things in an aikido class, but in principle, aikido does come down from the samurai class. In other words, its origins like in both armed and unarmed combat with swords and sticks.. There weren't any rules back then, on the battlefield, and there aren't any rules now, except one...

Then there's the idea that aikido is a *martial way* (or BU-DO), which just means it's a way of learning martial skills using your self-awareness, or what we call *mindfulness*. These are terms we use to refer to the things we learn about ourselves when we train, our weaknesses, our strengths, in stressful situations, when we'll sometimes need to stand up for ourselves. Through aikido, you can learn a great deal about your stress and distress reflexes so that you can re-program them. You'll be able to work past these from a place that is calm and collected, showing efficiency under duress.

Frequently, though not always, the other martial arts can produce a false sense of confidence. We know what they are trying to do. The logic behind having a competition, for example, is to prepare people by giving them at least a taste of the adrenalin rush that often accompanies a brush with death.

Conducting 'real' fights though, gloves off, kind of defeats the purpose, and would be counter-productive, too dangerous and very costly.

There wouldn't be much point in getting into a no-holds-barred cage-fight, for instance, if what you wanted to learn from the martial arts was precisely how not to get into that situation. I've even heard of one MMA (or mixed martial arts) match where the prize money of \$500 wasn't enough to cover the dentist's bill for the winning fighter, whose front tooth got broken off..! Well, so much for competitions that are supposed to help us take better care of ourselves..!!

The other way of looking at aikido, though, is to consider the psychological reasons why there aren't any competitions. The reason is that outward competitions don't really say much about who we really are as individuals, on the inside, as it were. Winning a competition might say something about how well we were physically prepared in the lead-up to a particular match, but it doesn't say much about how well we are prepared to face our lives long-term, or how well we are managing our daily emotions. Aikido is really about facing up to our worries and concerns, our challenges and choices, so that we can bring out our best self to deal with them in harmonious ways, without losing our cool.

The idea is that, with consistent practice, we'll develop a sufficient strong sense of equanimity, or an inward tranquillity, that, when external conflicts roll around, we would know what to do. A test of one's inner strength, for example, would be to ask ourselves how well we were able to get on with different kinds of people, without getting your feathers ruffled..

The aikido advantage over both the modern martial sport and the traditional combat arts of Japan, then, is aikido's philosophy of *love*.. Why..?

Well, *love works*, right..? Think of a moment when you helped out a friend, when he or she may have been going through a particularly rough or tough time.. It could have been an exam, a relationship break-up, the stress of moving house, a sickness, or someone in the family passing away, whatever it

was, you *showed up*, right.? And you were calm and collected, composed in front of trauma and tragedy. Aikido is kind of like that.

We're in the helping profession, the healing business, and for ourselves, we go to the aikido dojo to purify our minds of various conscious and unconscious forms of ill-will. By watching how our body reacts to stress, and through considering our options for de-stressing, we can learn new ways of meeting our daily challenges at home, at school, and at work with a calm mind, a relaxed body and a joyful spirit.

After all, there's already enough suffering in the world...

Why spend precious time learning how to create only more pain..?

And, let's face it, people who are happy don't attack others.. It's only when we're unhappy that we lash out.. If you think of bullies, they usually come from unhappy homes. And, that doesn't mean 'poor' necessarily. Even rich families can have kids who are neglected. So, they go out to let off some steam..

All of us are tempted sometimes to feel angry or sad, bitter or vengeful, but most people manage to keep their emotions in check, and prevent themselves from losing control completely. We all battle with our inner demons. When it comes down to it, criminals are no exception to this basic human psychology.. They've just allowed themselves to cross the line too many times.. that it becomes habit. Some also do stupid things when they get drunk. But, who hasn't been stupid, or said something stupid, when 'under the influence'..?

At times, we can let our frustrations, anger, or irritations get out of hand. The best thing to do, then, would be to treat ourselves with compassion. Our minds are not yet established in equanimity. Changing our habits takes some practice, after all. Yet, to the degree we realize we can calm ourselves down and see that our impatience has a cause in our unconscious habit of reacting to unpleasant sensations, then it wouldn't be long before we realize that everyone is in more or less the same boat. We all suffer the same range of negative sensations, even if intensities vary.

So, my point is that, with the refined understanding of ourselves that comes with aikido practice, we will come to reframe criminal behavior through compassionate eyes. And, know that criminals are human too and can do with a helping hand or a sympathetic ear. People need to know that other people care. They also need to feel whole in themselves.

No one truly likes being off-balance all the time. It's just not natural. No one likes stress, and no one likes getting hurt. Aikido just acts on this enlightened understanding of the human condition. So, the whole art is based on assessing the level of danger first and then smoothing out the situation, so that everyone wins.

Consider though, the opposite scenario. If you were unfortunate enough to encounter a person who liked to nurse vengeful feelings, and you and he lived in the same bad neighborhood. He might even try to get his friends to smash you up later, even if you had successfully broken his arm in self-defense. So, thinking only of hurting an attacker doesn't get rid of the underlying context or set of reasons why people attack each other.

You could, of course, choose not to see that. But, if you defended yourself with the same aggression, or the same intention as your attacker, that is, to do him harm, we should ask ourselves 'how will that improve the world..?' If you were religious, you'd also be acting against what your religion teaches. None of them say: 'Love your neighbor', but, 'only when it's convenient'..!

But, let's say, you weren't terribly religious. You might, at least, have some sense of morality. So, you'd have to think about this. You'd have to make up your mind about what you were comfortable doing. Personally, I've found that I don't feel good when I harm someone, even verbally, or emotionally, so these days, my practice is to meditate on my feelings until they dissolve. Like James Bond's preferred Martini, 'shaken but not stirred', I like to keep my mind composed in the same way.

In other words, I try not to react to negative events in my life, not even to negative mental events. I find that, if I stay equanimous, most problems just

resolve themselves on their own, given some time. In aikido, the idea is to cultivate this same *equanimity* (the capacity we all have "not to react" to the ups and downs of life) by learning to move our bodies smoothly, naturally, and with little, if any extraneous effort, while under the duress of an attack.

This takes some time, and it isn't always easy, but the idea itself is very simple. In practice, it is very fun. You'll learn how to move with good posture, and to do the martial movements as if you were just going for a walk in the park, on a sunny day. The confidence you'll get from doing aikido this way is truly amazing. Because there's *real power* in moving 'naturally'! Of course, the difficult part of training lies in staying calm and focused on your breathing, so that you don't end up panicking or tensing up, which will put you off-balance, either physically or mentally. And, of course, a person whose off-balance has already lost half the battle with himself.

In conclusion, then, when we say 'natural movement is powerful', we mean our freedom from fear, anxiety and anger, through staying calm, releases in us reserves of compassion and tranquillity that we didn't know we had. To move ourselves through life with this sense of inner peace is of greater service to ourselves and our community, and by extension to humanity at large, than if we simply caved in to our lowest common denominator emotions.. and punched the guy in the face.

Keni Lynch is an aikido teacher based in Budapest, Hungary. Son of the aikido pioneers of New Zealand, David and Hisae Lynch, Keni is also an award winning philosopher of Eastern Philosophy. He is the author of the up-coming books Authenticity, Being and Suffering: a meditation on small things and The Aikido Body: The Fight for Love. He runs short courses that helping aikido professionals and aspiring aikido professionals to take their aikido to the next level.