
CHAPTER 1

Difficult People and the Art of Aikidō

Morihei Ueshiba, the founder of Aikidō, on a trip to Inner Mongolia in 1924 had a near fatal experience. His group was surrounded and attacked by Chinese Nationalist soldiers and bandits that plundered throughout the mountain passes. The master prepared for death but instead a strange calmness overtook him and without moving from his position he avoided oncoming bullets by slightly shifting his body. The more he concentrated, the calmer he became and the clearer his mind grew. Like the quiet center of a spinning top, he twisted and turned his body to repeatedly avoid pebbles of white light that flashed just before oncoming bullets.

A similar incident happened a year later when a swordsman attacked him while he was barehanded. He perceived the slightest movement resulting from his opponent's hostile thoughts and saw white light where the sword would follow. He simply avoided the streams of white light.

—Ueshiba (1984)

Ueshiba was already a master of other martial arts and had his own training center for them. In those defining moments while facing a real enemy, he discovered *ki* (the joining of the mind and body echoing the harmony of the universe). *Aikidō* means “the way of

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joining or becoming one with energy of the life force.” As opposed to other martial arts that emphasize throws, kicks, or strikes, aikidō emphasizes *ai* (to join) *ki* (the energy) *do* (way).

More specifically, in pure martial arts, a person learns to absorb an opponent’s force and strength. The soft controls the hard; the flexible conquers the rigid. If pushed, pull back; when pulled, push forward. Aikidō adds twists and turns. This creates a stable axis that disturbs an opponent. Like a spinning top, a person is stationary in the center. No matter how strong people are, once they extend beyond their circle, they have no power and can be held down with a little finger (Ueshiba, 1984). Instead of using an opponent’s force to throw, as in judo, his force is used to contain.

MARTIAL ARTS—EAST DOES NOT MEET WEST

The movements employed in martial arts are very different from Western fighting maneuvers. Usually, when under attack, most people either exchange blows or retreat based on the animal instincts of fight or flight. The martial arts first appeared in China as early as 1500 BCE. One of its parent thought system, Taoism, teaches that harmony and balance can be created through interaction with opposing forces (shown in the *yin yang* symbol). The world is a teacher, not an illusion, and is governed by the laws of nature, not men. When we work *with* what is, life becomes effortless. This is the Taoist principle of effortless effort. Life is about survival, not becoming enlightened and overcoming illusion.

Legend has it that a Taoist hermit priest sought a perfect boxing form when he saw a crane (*yang* energy) and a snake (*yin* energy) fighting. Ultimately, a form of combat evolved in which a person joins with an opponent and uses his or her strength to unbalance, disarm, or contain. Instead of an instinctive act of self-protection,

natural movements emerge from the rhythm of the universe bringing the energy of *ki*.

Systematic ways of moving were developed to lose the Self and destroy combat itself. Aikidō adheres so strongly to this goal that it rejects all forms of contests, tournaments, and ranking. Only public demonstrations are offered to show how to contain and redirect negative energy to bring fourth harmony.

VERBAL ARTS

If movement can be used to unbalance physical force, can language be similarly employed to absorb hostile words and render them harmless? Would the purpose be to fend off attacks of verbal abuse that can be just as damaging as blows to the body or to find Master Ueshiba's harmony of mind and body—*ai*? Neophytes often begin their study in Eastern forms of self-defense for practical purposes or to improve their physical prowess. As they advance in skill, the philosophy of "joining with one's opponent" and "promoting balance" naturally emerges. Power *over* will be replaced by power *with*. This is equally true with the verbal arts. People begin their training in advanced communication skills for self-protection and even to manipulate others. But as they discover the impact of a well-placed phrase to defuse a tense situation, the pull to promote harmony becomes irresistible.

Most people have enough familiarity with the martial arts to distinguish flawless movements that unbalance, disarm, or contain an adversary's strength from typical oppositional jabs and jolts. Rarely are they witnesses to linguistic feats that create connection with or confusion in those who attempt to batter with words. The following anecdote is used to illuminate the difference between typical repartee and verbal artistry.

Case Story: Helene

Helene dreaded contact with her husband's suffocating family. Gatherings were forced affairs in which she felt she was held hostage to the dictates that everyone *must* attend. Consequently, she made excuses whenever possible. Despite all her encouragement to "go without me," her husband refused, saying they should be together. Rumor had it that Helene was not only a recluse but that she was trying to keep her husband from his family. One day, her sister-in-law casually commented, "Helene, you're an evil, heartless person." What had been mere avoidance ended up assuming proportions of in-law phobia.

INSTINCTUAL REACTIONS

In-laws, spouses, bosses, and acquaintances who make such blatant verbal attacks are apt to repeat them. Therefore, they offer splendid opportunities to mentally rehearse new responses. Before displaying verbal arts, consider eight typical reactions:

Remark: "You're an evil, heartless person."

1. *Attacking*: "You're not exactly a saint yourself."
2. *Lecturing*: "If you weren't always in my business, I might come to these things."
3. *Defending*: "I really am a busy person, and I just can't seem to convince your brother to come to these events by himself."
4. *Reassuring*: "I'll try to do better in the future."
5. *Apologizing*: "I'm really sorry; we've been so busy."
6. *Withdrawing*: Not saying anything and vowing never to come again.

7. *Distracting*: Thinking of someone to complain to about this witchy sister-in-law.
8. *Asserting*: "I feel hurt when you talk to me like that, and I would like you to stop."

The first seven reactions are attack-defend-withdraw—instinctual tendencies that we share with the rest of the animal kingdom. Even reassuring and apologizing are forms of verbal combat because they are defensive attempts to change the other person's opinion. Withdrawing might seem like a good strategy because it does not reinforce unwanted comments, but absence usually does not make bullies' hearts grow fonder. It is a rare person who is truly unfazed by unbridled verbiage. Remaining quiet can make a painful remark more cutting. Adversaries will take silence as a sign of weakness and strike again at the next opportunity.

Number eight is not instinctual. It is often taught by counselors and might work in ongoing relationships where both people are committed to improving their bond. However, when the ties that bind are tenuous or devotion is on the decline, those who use word weapons may not care about anyone else's feelings. When Eastern monks developed the martial arts, their purpose was to make weapons or resistance unnecessary in combat. Even statements like "I feel hurt when you talk to me like that, and I would like you to stop" can be provocative.

TURNING THE SPOTLIGHT

More important, notice where the focus is in most of the responses in the list: "I might come to these things," "I really am busy," "I promise," "I'm sorry," "I feel hurt when . . .". Bullies put the spotlight on their targets, and many people oblige them by keeping it there. The trick is to turn the attention back on offenders to

illuminate the forces at play, much as an aikidō master uses an opponent's strength to unbalance, disarm, or contain. With this simple instruction in mind, the original remark will be revisited and the basic techniques of the verbal arts displayed:

Remark: "You're an evil, heartless person."

1. *Acting as if the remark is good*: "You say that like it's a bad thing."
2. *Asking questions*: "Are you trying to change me by upsetting me? . . . Interesting!"
3. *Active listening*: "You sound quite disgusted with me."
4. *Humor*: "You're so forceful when you put people in their place. Do you know the name of a good exorcist to root out evil?"

The acronym AAAH (*Acting as if, Asking questions, Active listening, and Humor*) captures the movement of the verbal arts (see Appendix A: Verbal Arts Terms). All fall under the rubric of hypnotic language replete with narrations, validations, suggestions, predictions, generalizations, false choices, and paradoxes that are used to encourage any acceptable or desired change.

RESPONSE VERSUS REACTION

AAAH is also the language of the reasoning brain when it is not beset by a cauldron of emotions bubbling up from mental structures that are ensuring survival. Although connections from the emotional brain to the thinking system are stronger than those from the cognitive center to the feeling system, it is possible to switch on your "knower" and *act as if* rude remarks are harmless by focusing on the big picture. Using logic to ponder the underlying nonsense of random rude remarks makes *asking questions* come naturally. Newly discovered, "mirror neurons" respond to another person's

experience as if it were your own (Gore, 2007). Thus, we are wired for empathy and compassion to *actively listen* to melt resistance. Finally, your wise mind finds *humor* in the drama that impels bullies to deliver crude comments. Comedic comebacks roll off of the tongue when complex linguistic centers are used to make absurd connections.

Like the martial arts, when the verbal arts are practiced and mastered, people begin to replace reactivity with responsibility or the ability to respond. This is empowering! Snide remarks are heard as cries for help that warrant full concentration on the wounded wretch who is attempting to inflict bothersome blather. Verbal artists neither flee from, nor fight with, tormentors. Contact is made, but the touch may be fleeting—just enough to imply, *I can be present with you in this moment however you are*. The goal is to absorb hostile words and render them harmless, not necessarily to make changes in relationships. Each method for meeting adversaries will be thoroughly examined with theory and examples to intrigue both the meek and the mighty regarding the value of this new currency in the marketplace of verbal exchange.

