

## Essay for CAA

### **AIKIDO AS A STUDY IN COMMUNICATION**

Aikido has many layers - there is far more than meets the eye.

On the outside is the physical appearance of a martial art.

Look deeper and there is the true martial art.

Exploring further is the idea of a philosophy of blending and conflict resolution.

The further you go past the layers the more there is.

The physical aspect of Aikido, although the most apparent, is only the beginning of what can be discovered. Of course, one can - and many do - stay tied to the physical aspect – the martial art. If not explored further, the movements and study remain an art, technique, and is to be valued for its own sake as, in effect, Aiki **jujitsu**.

As some readers of this essay may not be aware of **do** vs **jitsu**, a brief explanation is appropriate.

- **Jitsu**, as in **Jujitsu**, or **AikiJuJitsu**, relates to study of technique as an art form – studying the basics, principles, etc. in order to improve technique.
- **Do**, as in **JuDo**, **KarateDo** or **AikiDo** implies study of something as a way of understanding philosophical principles.

Every Aikidoka has their own concept of what Aikido means to them. My personal experience is that this concept is fluid and changes over time. Around the time I was Sandan I started wondering why I still trained. My body ached, my wrists hurt, and the spiritual aspects of Aikido are not really unique to Aikido, they are everywhere...so why this path. After considerable thought, I came to realize that I trained in Aikido for the same reason people play golf, play racquetball, or ride a bicycle. I enjoy Aikido. This seemingly minor observation had a profound effect on my perspective towards training. It was no longer important to manipulate uke, or even to be successful in a technique. What became important was enjoying the details, the movement, the connection, from moment to moment.

Physical training is where the path starts – study of the physical aspects of something, such as studying Aikido with self-defense in mind.. Exploring how to take the principles of Aikido off of the mat and into our lives is where the **jitsu** becomes a **do**, from a study of technique to a concurrent path or philosophy. When starting the study of Aikido, students, although aware of the do, typically focus on the physical movement. Through diligent practice (sugyo), paying

increasing attention to the mind-body relationship, and experience on the mat and in life, one can find far more.

Bypassing the martial art aspect of Aikido is, I suggest, entirely incorrect. “Butterfly Aikido” where uke and nage always blend, seems to be missing the point. Practicing the physical aspects of Aikido when uke always blends with nage is helpful at the beginning, although it presents an illusory calmness. It is easy to be calm and peaceful when living in an ashram or monastery, although when one leaves the isolated environment and goes into the “outside” world, calmness is perhaps a challenge. Uke’s attack should simulate a real attack, with the energy level allowing for the level of the aikidokas. The moment that an attack is completed is the time that uke should blend.

This is also manifested in our study of Aikido. There is a time for strong energy and a time for gentle energy. In Tai-no-henko, consider that by not worrying about the wrist connection and moving somewhere with another part of yourself and in another direction, you will find a way to turn, and change uke’s posture & balance, that is much easier for you and doesn’t give uke any cause for concern – adjusting your energy as needed. My favorite demonstrations of this idea is with morote dori and ushiro tekubi dori. With enough strength nage can certainly do something, but will encounter 2 problems: (1) uke may decide to abandon the grip and do something else, and (2) there is always someone stronger and/or better. There is, though, a place where uke can be guided without feeling forced to move. An interweaving of Yin and Yang.

My personal transition from **jitsu** to **do** started about midway through my ongoing Aikido journey, when I realized that the end result – people falling down – was not really what Aikido is about. Until then, I knew the words but didn’t really feel/understand them. After this mini-satori (or aha!) enjoying the moment-to-moment exploration led me to investigate the connection between uke and nage, and from there Aikido as a do seems to have slowly entered my life outside of the dojo. I started going back to piano pieces I had played most of my life and worked on re-learning them without the mistakes. Moment-to-moment became important. I was communicating better with myself.

Aikido is indeed a great deal like dancing - Terry Dobson even wrote a book with the title “It’s a lot like dancing.” My wife and I are Argentine Tango dancers and as a leader I must be able to non-verbally guide my partner where I am leading in a way invites her to a movement and in a way that she can understand and follow. Hence “leaders” and “followers” to describe dance partners. Beginning “leaders” in dancing tend to haul their “follower” around – an unpleasant experience for both the leader and the follower. Better leaders open up and move in ways that invite the follower to move in a certain direction. An example of non-verbal communication.

When a dance follower does not follow the leader, it may be a poor lead, a follower with less experience, or both. When this occurs, the leader becomes the follower until the lead can be elegantly regained. In this manner, the dance remains a pleasant experience for both myself and my dance partner. A conversation.

Similarly, in Aikido, this balance between leading and following a movement is what an advanced uke does, and leads to exploration of other openings for both uke and nage. Rather than forcing uke into a throw, it seems to me that moving in a way that opens up a path for uke to move through, and which not incidentally is the direction that nage wants them to go, is good communication.

Aikido can be a metaphor on life, being in the present, and much more. I doubt there are any real secrets in Aikido, because everything is there in plain sight, if and when one is ready to understand what they are “seeing”. Consider the saying, generally attributed to Siddhartha that “When the student is ready, the teacher will appear”. Those are the “oh, that’s what he/she meant” moments.

By paying attention to the details of how the blending works with serious attacks, constantly looking for openings not only in your partner but in your own movement, and related aspects require that one studies Aikido as a martial art; learning to be centered (in mind, body, and spirit) in the midst of a storm rather than only centered on beautiful days. The following may help to illustrate this concept.

Consider a schoolyard bully situation. Typically, one will have one of 3 general responses.

1. Be defensive, almost always accompanied by rocking backwards onto your heels. The bully is most likely to keep bullying.
2. Be aggressive, almost always accompanied by moving onto the balls of your feet. The bully is less likely to keep bullying.
3. Be centered, paying attention to distance and being mentally ready but being neither defensive nor aggressive. The bully is least likely to keep bullying because there is nothing to fight and it is a situation that he or she probably hasn’t encountered.

During a conversation with differing views, these same 3 responses will be yield similar responses, as in the following example:

1. You can defend your viewpoint. If you are standing, you will probably be rocking back on your heels. You are not really listening to the other person and they are probably not listening to you.
2. You can attack the other person's viewpoint. If you are standing, you will probably be on the balls of your feet. You are still not really listening to the other person and they are probably not listening to you.
3. You can listen to the other person, ask questions, and try to find out the basis of their opinion(s). Physically you remain calm and centered. Moreover, you now have developed a conversation and the other person is more likely to start listening to your opinion(s). In the end, there may not be agreement on issues but there can be an understanding of the each other's point of view. This is one expression of the philosophy inherent in Aikido training.

One communication theory is that there are 4 styles of conversation.

1. A command, such as "STOP" perhaps to prevent someone from injury.
2. Light conversation such as discussing a movie.
3. A heated discussion, as an argument trying to convince someone you are right.
4. Asking questions, exploring the subject, and trying to reach a shared meaning, such as a scientific discussion. This fourth style of conversation is, probably, the most effective communication.

The difference between Style 3 and Style 4 is significant. Considering the above styles of conversation, perhaps a jitsu leans towards a style 3 conversation and a do is working towards a style 4 conversation.

Of course, some communication is necessarily one-way, such as strongly telling a young child "NO!" when they are about to put their hand onto a hot pan on the range. For the most part, though, reaching a shared meaning is a two-way connection. That said, there is certainly a time to be forceful when communicating, and a time to be soft and gentle. Yin & Yang.

As the study of Aikido progresses one can begin communicating with uke. We can learn that trying to throw uke is just an attempt to enforce an opinion. Should uke attack the side of my head (yokomen uchi) I'm thinking that...oh, she is swinging her hand...stopping that would be rude and inconsiderate so maybe I should get out of the way and help her along, and assist uke to lose her balance...maybe this would be a good time to sit on the ground and have a discussion.

Trying to throw someone can be somewhat like traveling on a train and only thinking of getting to the end – missing the scenery along the way. This is not unique to Aikido. Playing a musical instrument is much better when one takes the time to learn each note of the runs and chords, how they mesh together, and exploring the dynamic range (loud and soft). The scope of practice and attention to detail along the way determines the quality and flow of sounds made by the instrument. The same is true for body and ki flow in Aikido. The longer Aikido is studied, the more the art and grace of redirecting energy in a positive way emerges – mentally and physically - on and off the mat.

All in all, the study of Aikido can help define one's approach to life in general – it is a path connecting us, even if sometimes abstractly, to all that is.