

AIKIDO AND RELATIONSHIPS: Tempering the Sword of Peace

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Aikido has become so much more to me than just a martial art or a form of self-defense.

I feel that the farther I progress in the art of peace, the more relevance it has in my everyday life; the inverse is true as well. I am finding that in studying how to create harmony in relationships as a relationship coach that the lessons of Aikido are often quite analogous. Maybe that is Aikido's higher intention as a martial art - to be applicable in everyday life.

For instance, one of the most important lessons I was confronted with in learning Aikido, especially having been a competitive fencer, was "Getting off the Line." Fencing is very linear and Aikido is very circular, often moving in a spiral. Going head to head is descriptive of conflict, whereas getting off the line creates space for both perspectives to exist simultaneously. So in interpersonal terms, I see getting off the line in the same way as learning one of my oldest and deepest lessons: "Not taking it personally!"

When I can get off the line or, not take it personally, I have so much more freedom to respond to whatever is happening in my world and to choose what actions I will take. If I take it personally, I am often, given my nature, immediately ready to fight back; creating conflict in my life. I am slowly learning to not take it personally, whether it's anger or accusations or just intense energy coming at me; I am much more able to have the capacity to be present with someone else's feelings in a constructive way. Then I have the capacity and opportunity to find out what they are feeling and needing so that more harmony is possible.

I have a strong warrior spirit, though I am not innately a violent person. However, I find that if I am not Tempering the Sword of Peace with the skills to act in a peaceful way, then when confronted, my warrior nature will go to war and create conflict or be more reactive. If we don't cultivate skills to respond to the world in the way we choose, we will react to it in the only way we know how.

So why is getting off the line such a difficult thing to learn both martially and interpersonally? We, as human beings, seem to be hardwired to lead with fear and reaction for survival's sake. We need to reprogram our very nervous systems to create harmony in our world and still be able to live in safety. Feeling safe can come from our mastery over our nature and not from being the most aggressive. It has required a maturation of my skills to learn to make a different choice than reacting from fear. With greater skill comes greater choice.

Obviously, there are many skills we need to learn and cultivate to make this possible. One of the first is to reprogram our fear response. Fight, flight or freeze is what we are hardwired to do when confronted with a threat. It is interesting to me to note that fighting is directly related to fear; even though it often comes out as anger, it is really a fear reaction. We probably all have experienced all three of these fear reactions at some time in our lives and most of us have developed an affinity to a particular one.

Awareness is one of the first lessons in Aikido. We have to be aware of our fear in order to choose a different action. Getting off the line requires awareness of space and timing or "Maai," which is the awareness of the distance to your partner and of how quickly that distance can be closed. It's fairly difficult to avoid a punch in the nose if you are standing nose to nose with someone that is angry at you or more likely, in fight/fear mode. (True anger usually only lasts for a few moments, and if it's held longer it will morph into a fear/fight expression.) As we find in studying Aikido, this awareness of maai is crucial to blending with our partner.

Blending with our partner is crucial for creating harmony in any relationship, whether on or off the mat. As we see from day one in our beginning Aikido classes, stepping off the line and turning (Tenkan) to be facing the same direction as our partner is a basic step in learning to blend with our partner. Blending with our partner can seem counterintuitive at first. Am I giving up what I want to see, to see their perspective? Am I having to give in to their demands? In the beginning, especially if I didn't have enough base (a sense of being grounded in myself, or not easily being pushed off of my center,) I would feel scared or insecure. But if we are solid in our own knowingness and yet fluid and not fixed in our ability to blend with our partners, we find that we can have both - we can stay in our center without having to be rigid, and we can be flexible enough to see what our partner is concerned about without giving up our own concerns. We can find a way to create the space for our partner's needs, as well as our own.

Learning to live in harmony with each other, rather than dominating each other, seems to me to be very important in our lives today, both interpersonally and globally. We must learn to create this harmony interpersonally before we can learn to do it globally. If we cannot learn to do it with the person we love the most, how are we going to live in harmony with people we barely know and cannot relate to because of our differences? Fear of the unknown seems to be one of our biggest fears as human beings.

Currently, it feels like learning to embrace the unknown, instead of resisting it, is one of my most powerful lessons: letting go into the unknown and embracing change, staying fluid enough to learn rather than getting rigid, and holding onto what I know and what I think I'm good at. I heard someone say once, "How can we become who we are meant to be if we don't let go of who we've been?"

So, practice, practice, practice! That is what Aikido allows me do-practice daily and weekly the elements of blending, getting off the line, being aware of myself and my partner (maai), and flow(nagare), spiritual connection (musubi) and taking balance (kuzushi.)

And, what I find is that it takes time to change my reactive nature and to have compassion for myself. If I can find compassion for myself for not always doing it right, for not getting it quickly enough, for losing my balance once again, for feeling the fear come up and getting lost in it, for feeling like my needs never get met first, then I have a deeper capacity to have compassion for my partner's feelings, and for the intense energy that is coming at me from them. If I have more capacity to step off the line, blend with them, hear their feelings, and respond to them in a harmonious way, then I can stop reacting back and escalating conflict to WWII. Why is it so easy for us to do that when the aftermath is so devastating?!

Choice! Having the capacity to choose seems to me to be the stepping stone. If we don't learn a different way and learn the skills to create that different reality, we will be condemned to repeat the same pattern of death and destruction in our societies that we have throughout time. Choosing to get off the line, choosing to have compassion instead of creating conflict, choosing peace instead of war! Choosing love instead of hate!

But I must have the capacity to choose. There is no choice in reaction. Choice is like developing a muscle; we must use it or lose it. And so I choose to practice Aikido, developing those qualities that help me get off the line, to blend with my partner, to not take it personally, to give my partner energy as Uke (so they may practice in a good way) and to have compassion for a different perspective and needs different from mine.

One of the powerful lessons I have learned both on and off the mat is about blame. Blame is one of those energies that is very destructive to harmony in relationships and is counterproductive to the growth of the relationship. In my marriage we have learned to catch ourselves from blaming our partner and to trade it for appreciating our partner instead. It is amazing how that simple choice (and the capacity to do it) has transformed our relationship and created harmony and stability. It is so much easier to destroy than to create. (Being a builder I have firsthand experience knowing that it can take a year to build a home and a day to burn it down!) Blame and criticism erode the very fabric of a relationship, whereas appreciation builds up a relationship and makes it strong.

I remember when I was a brown belt and we were studying connection (musubi) and flow (nagare); I was training with a petite black belt woman and in my mind I was sure that she was not doing the practice correctly. I was blaming her for not doing it “right”. At first I didn’t even realize that I was blaming her. I felt the practice wasn’t working very well when I was Uke- that she was kind of pulling on my little finger trying to lead me around, and wasn’t really connecting with me very well. Fortunately we trained long enough and Sensei must have said something about connection and Uke- giving energy to the technique as well as Nage. Suddenly it dawned on me, “What if it’s not her fault! What if it’s me- that I’m not giving enough energy to the technique as Uke?” Right then I started giving more energy to the technique and bringing my energy from my center towards my partner’s center, and “Voila” the technique started flowing beautifully. I felt led instead of feeling pulled on and that there was actually connection happening instead of blame!

This is another practice from my relationship training that overlaps so beautifully with Aikido- that of taking 100 % responsibility for my own experience. How does my experience of the world change when I am taking 100% responsibility for my reality instead of blaming the other (whoever that might be!)? Powerful results happen from getting this one!

This is why I love Aikido! Aikido is about learning how to truly love on so many levels. It gives me an opportunity to practice developing my spiritual, mental, emotional and physical growth on a daily basis. It’s not just theoretical. I can practice it and explore it and see if it really works on all of those levels! And, ultimately, it is about creating more love in the world because if I can learn to live in the world with less fear, I will be living in the world with more love! What better way to live, than with love, compassion and connection?!