

Managing Conflict Through Aikido Principles

On the mat, we take turns giving and receiving physical attacks, falling down and getting up again and again countless times, disarming our uke without harm. We come to the mat for exercise, to study self-defence and to practise resilience, self-control and courage under pressure.

What does aikido teach us?

Aikido's 1st teaching is in the way it frames attack. The aikidoka sees the attack, the conflict, as energy to be used (as a gift).

The beauty of this view is that it changes the use of power from an external to an internal source. We all face unwanted happenings every day. To successfully manage these conflicts, we manage ourselves. When I see conflict as attack, I resist, defend or avoid. When I see conflict as a gift, I am willing to engage, explore and work with it. By changing my view, I change my relationship to the conflict.

Reframing our challenges as energy to be received and redirected into something useful is the first step. But how do we actually make this shift when our emotions are triggered? This is aikido's 2nd teaching.

For example, think about a conflict in which you are currently involved. Imagine the situation in detail. Now pay attention to your body. What do you notice? Do you become tense? Does your breathing or heart rate quicken? What emotions arise?

We all know how we want to be when in conflict. People usually report a wish to be "calm, in control, present-minded, confident." Yet our own automatic and instinctive responses (fight, flee or freeze) get triggered in difficult moments, despite our best intentions. Aikido gives us a way to retrain these habits.

What aikido offers, through movement and repetition, is internal re-formatting, which helps us regain awareness and power over our natural trigger points. By practising the blending and redirecting movements of aikido, we find new ways of being under pressure. We gain access to our calm, centred, reflective self and can call on it anytime.

On the mat, this transformation process is visual and physical. We move off the line of attack, engage the energy and redirect it. Off the mat, the aikidoka employs inquiry and purpose to build relationships and co-create intentional, trusting environments. For example, we engage the energy of conflict whenever we listen and acknowledge without judgment. We redirect when we help someone see another view.

Aikido views the world differently from most common views. Consequently, we begin to understand success differently. Instead of experiencing conflict as an attack (for which we must develop defences), we see a world in which we are a part of the flow and dynamics.

Combining body, mind and spirit, we can make more wise and powerful choices about how we extend our energy and receive the energy of others. Instead of imagining that all other parties are separate, we reinforce physically, metaphorically, and practically that we are one connected, inseparable system, continually inventing itself (Takemusu Aiki).

Here are four very basic ideas that are demonstrated and practised in every aikido technique, but that are also very useful for everyday conflict management.

1. Stay In Your Sphere (Kokyu-ho)

Aikido theory visualizes a ball of energy centred about two inches below the navel, and extending out from there, potentially in every direction. This centre is the point around which movement and breathing are organised. In aikido, we spend a lot of time learning how to move and breathe from this centre, and experiencing what happens when we lose our centres. We discover that centred movement is powerful and graceful and effective. When the connection to the centre is broken or over-reached, we become clumsy, weak and vulnerable.

Given a strong, clear centre, it becomes possible to think of body movement as a rolling sphere of energy (and later as a spiral wave form), projected from a single point. In aikido, we practise to stay centred, project power from the centre, control an opponent's centre, avoid being controlled by his. This sounds very mystical, but it has real implications for conflict management in everyday life (Know who you are and where you are. Never over-reach yourself. Never contend with power on its own terms. Make it come to you and contend with you on yours).

2. Go to Meet the Attack and Get Out of Its Way (Tenkan, Irimi and Irimi Nage)

The critical moment of any real fight is the instant of engagement (the moment when attacker first makes physical contact). Before that moment, they are manoeuvring for position and sizing each other up. By the time they actually engage, it is already decided who has the advantage of the ground, who is afraid of whom, who is attacking and who is being attacked. One of the great strengths of aikido among the martial arts is that it enables us to practise this moment of approach safely and realistically (at full speed and power). Aikido also teaches a characteristic strategy for this early initial stage of combat. You should, of course, anticipate the situation as it builds, and do everything you can to defuse it. But if an attack develops, you should go to meet it and then get out of its way. Aikido footwork is designed to let you meet an attack without becoming aggressive and then, at the last instant, to step out of its path leaving your attacker confused and off balance, and yourself in control of the situation.

3. Join and Lead, Don't Force (Tenkan, Tenchi Nage)

If you hope to influence someone, you have to convince him that you are on his side (that

both of you have common basic concerns). The use of power in aikido is very interesting: We do not aim to destroy or injure an opponent. We aim to control and neutralise him, and we seek to do this much more by subtle influence rather than by brute force. An attack without commitment can be ignored or brushed aside. An attack is dangerous only to the extent that it is committed (that it has a real intention and focus). The first problem is to get out of the way of that intention, not to allow oneself to remain its target. Only then are you in a position to re-direct and steer the intention of the attack by adding your own intentions to it. That is the key: In aikido we never meet and oppose force and try to overcome it. If an opponent has lost his centre, you must become the centre for his movement as well as your own.

4. Let the Process Do the Work (Shiho Nage)

In human affairs, the concept of ripeness is one of the hardest things to understand. It is difficult to be patient. It is difficult to trust a process and wait for it to produce its results in its own good time. In aikido, you do not throw your opponent to the ground. You create a movement (between the two of you) that works to your advantage. It is the movement, not you, that makes the throw.

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