

## A Perspective on Self-defense

*Aikido is often referred to as a self-defense martial art. The term self-defense though, as used popularly, understates the depth of Aikido. In this essay I hope to rectify this situation.*

Many people who drop in the Dojo to observe classes inquire about self-defense. Depending on how they address their questions I give them various answers. To most of these people, who are interested in defense against physical aggression I point them to other martial arts such as jujitsu, karate, tae kwon do, wing-chun, etc., and the model mugging classes offered by BAMB (Bay Area Model Mugging) on Sundays in our Dojo.

To some of these people who show a sincere interest specifically in Aikido I explain to them how Aikido helps them in self-defense. But I never had time to elaborate. This essay is an attempt to further elucidate the connection between Aikido and self-defense.

In the context of this discussion, self-defense is used as a synonym for self-preservation. I define self-defense as any attempt to preserve the self, with the term “self” used in its most comprehensive meaning. In this sense, any action (mental or physical) that is related to the preservation of the physical body, the energetic body, the mental body or the spiritual body is part of self-defense.

Thus, every one of the following situations constitutes an act of self-defense. You get out of an office building late at night and decide to wait for the company of co-workers to walk to the parking garage. During the flu season, you increase your daily intake of vitamin C to boost your immune system to protect against illness. At the end of a long workweek you instinctively seek seclusion to preserve what's left of your energy stock. In the middle of a life crisis, you decide to quit it all and take a vacation to preserve mental sanity. In daily life, you avoid the company of certain profane influences to preserve your spiritual health.

Self-preservation is an instinct of all living creatures. It makes a plant seek and move toward sunlight; it makes a small animal bite you when you get too close to it; it pumps up your adrenaline when you are frightened; it makes people resist change; it makes people avoid the unknown and shun other people who are different.

At the animal level, self-defense is strictly based on the instinct to preserve the physical part of the Self, that is, the physical body. This instinct can be cultivated to a very sophisticated level by training all parts of the Self. This training can be accomplished through a holistic martial art such as Aikido. To understand how this training takes place, we need to elaborate on the definition of Self-defense.

At a holistic level, Self-defense is any movement or tendency of the Self to minimize the effects of anything that tends to reduce its wholeness or impedes its natural growth. To defend itself against these adversarial elements in accordance with Aikido principles, the Self must use a three-part strategy.

In the first part, the Self must become aware of the adversarial elements. That is, it must know of the existence of the elements that threaten its wholeness and identify their potential effects. Here are some examples. To defend herself against cancer, a big-city dweller must be aware that she is

living in a pollutant-filled environment, which may cause cancer if the necessary measures are not taken. A non-informed person may not know about this risk. To defend himself against possible self-annihilation through an automobile accident, a driver must be aware that wet pavement can cause collision. A driver under alcoholic influence may not be aware of such risk.

The possible threats to the Self are numerous, but there are certain types that are prevalent in certain locales and time periods. A few thousand years ago the common threat to mankind was probably wild animals. A few hundred years ago threats to the safety of human beings probably came from other human beings or diseases such as cholera and tuberculosis. Nowadays in industrialized nations, those threats are replaced by such things as risk of car accidents, cancer, heart attacks and AIDS.

Therefore, martial arts that were developed a hundred years ago by men to defend themselves against other men are no longer appropriate for self-defense in their original form and emphasis. The contemporary martial artist should know that the enemies are now different.

In our current environment, we should recognize that our most likely enemies are accidents, untamed virus and stress. The focus of our self-defense must change to address these threats. A highly skilled martial artist who dies from a stress-related disease cannot be regarded as being skilled in self-defense.

A person who is skilled in self-defense constantly evaluates the risk exposures that threaten his safety now and in the future. The sooner those risks are identified, the more effective the self-defense measure. The sooner a smoker understands the correlation between smoking and lung cancer, the better the chance for him to avoid this disease. The sooner a homeowner realizes the risks of living near rivers, on hillside, or near a fault line, the better the chance for her to defend her

home against natural hazards. Awareness of the risks is the first step in self-defense.

In the second part of the self-defense strategy, the Self must acknowledge and learn about the adversarial elements. This does not mean waiting to find out the effects of an attack. Rather, it means that the Self should take the initiative to go forth to meet with the opposition and understand it. I observe that good surfers don't wait for the wave to hit them but they swim toward the wave and meet it; similarly skilled drivers begin lean on the steering wheel before the curve not at the exact time when the road curves around.

For example, you are involved in a disagreement with a teenager child. You can use your adult authority to settle the issue quickly, but that may not address the cause of the conflict. A better tactic may be to ask him about the reasons for his behavior and listen to his views. If his motives are plausible then acknowledge them and use them as a springboard to steer him toward the understanding that you would like him to attain.

Often, during this reconnaissance endeavor, when you understand the opponent's motives, his viewpoint and circumstances, the solution to the conflict becomes obvious. This initial study of the opponent is the essence of the first part of Sun-Tzu's famous phrase in his classic work, *Art of War*: "Know thy enemy, know thyself and the terrain and you will win a thousand battles".

After the surfer has met the wave and aligned himself with it, then the obvious way to go is to ride its momentum. Aligning oneself with the opposition may seem incomprehensible to most people but lies at the heart of Aikido self-defense.

In the third part of a holistic self-defense strategy, the Self must act to neutralize the adversarial elements. It must remove the reason for their existence or transform their nature into

something more harmonious. As I mentioned earlier, when the Self has made the initial effort to align itself with the opposition, the way to restore harmony is obvious. For example, the cure for a disease is sometime obtained from using its causal elements. The principle of vaccination lies in inoculating the patient with the same virus that causes the disease with the expectation that it will stimulate the production of antibodies to fight off future viral attacks.



Similarly, the effective way to fight obesity is not to drastically curtail the food intake. Rather, the obese person should first study his own personality to understand the reasons for overeating. If stress is a causal factor, then take up yoga or similar practice. In the meantime, eat well and appreciate the food. Take time to taste, chew and savor. Then the food is better digested, nutrient absorption is more efficient and food consumption naturally decreases.

Firefighters use this strategy in fire suppression when they encircle the fire zone with a ring of fire that would eliminate the fuel load and isolate the main fire. Another technique would be to create an explosion that would suck out oxygen and deprive the fire of its main causative agent.

At the personal level, one of the most effective techniques for controlling internal outburst of energy such as desires or emotions is not to stifle them or ignore them but ride them then transmute them. Thus, stress and anger can often be managed by spending the energy in a workout that would be more beneficial to our health.

In summary, the three elements of self-defense that we learn and practice in Aikido are: be aware of the potential risks of conflict; connect, understand and align with the conflict agents; and defuse the conflict by addressing its deeper cause.

We practice this principle daily in the dojo. When executing a technique in class, we learn to quickly size up the situation and become aware of our training partner's size, timing, distance and weapons and the surrounding mat space. Next, we connect, align and blend with our training partner. Finally, we redirect his energy to the neutral ground or to a place where it can be dispersed without harm to anyone else. While all martial arts incorporate the element of awareness, the elements of connection, blending and neutralization are specific to Aikido and a handful of other martial arts.

March 2, 1998