

Aikido and the Warrior Path

By Ben Piper

I grew up in a family of people who hardly ever touched each other. The touch I do remember was violent. My mother drank too much and my father developed Multiple Sclerosis. At age 14, as the fattest kid in 9th grade, I watched my Dad crumple into a wheelchair, my Mom move out of our house and me start DanZan Ryu Jujitsu. One of the best choices of my life, deciding to study martial arts turned what would have been an awful year into a decent one. A large part of my motivation to begin training was that as an 8th grader I was bullied by a pair of 9th graders. I knew the next year would take me to the high school and expose me to this abuse again. I did not want that to happen. Little did I know the journey I had begun would carry me into half a dozen martial arts and decades of personal discovery and development as I tread the Warrior Path.

I did not start studying Aikido until 1988 when I was 20 years old. In Petaluma, where I attended college, there was no jujitsu club. I did find an Aikido dojo and knew the two practices had similarities. The teacher, Robert Noha, seemed like a genuinely good person and so I began training at his school. My background in martial arts at that point included extensive jujitsu training and a daily tai chi practice. As a young man, my main conceptions of technique had to do with self-defense applications and a focus on survival. My main shock with the new classes in Aikido was the focus on feeling.

I remember quite clearly training with various partners and listening to Sensei Noha work his way down the mat, assisting each couple in turn. Over and over again he would ask people what they had felt during the art, encourage them to allow that experience more fully, and then to bring that energy/awareness into the next technique. I would ask myself incredulously, “What does feeling have to do with martial arts?” What did it matter what I was feeling. The point was to function, to perform the techniques effectively. And then Sensei Noha would get to my partner and me, and I would get a taste of what feelings had to do with martial arts. More than that, I would observe how martial arts could be useful to explore feelings and states of consciousness. This fact made martial arts extremely more useful than a tool for survival. It elevated the concept of self-mastery inherent in the Warrior Path to one beyond handling fear to one supportive of adult development and potentially alchemical transformation.

Let’s be clear: Considering that in 34 years of martial arts I have never once had the need to physically restrain anyone, it would be reasonable to evaluate those thousands of hours of mat time as a waste of my life. If during that training time the focus had been largely on the possibility of that scenario unfolding, I would whole heartedly agree. However, thanks to the deep insights of Morihei Ueshiba, Robert Nadeau and Robert Noha, that did not come to pass. Instead I have enjoyed a multi-dimensional inquiry into my own existence and martial arts as an intrinsically supportive vehicle for that inquiry.

Stepping into an environment where it’s normal for people to attack you allows for some interesting triggers to get pulled in the nervous system. Many schools use these trigger

responses to train the flight/fight reaction, the adrenaline response, using that burst in stress hormones to foster a higher chance of survival should such an attack occur. Many situations in daily life pull the same triggers, and students in these disciplines can inadvertently condition a response to stress that is outsized and inappropriate. Our lower brains have a tough time distinguishing between “actual threat to our survival” and “coworker yelling at us”. And conditioning a burst in stress hormones to handle all these various daily events damages the body. The stress hormones depress the immune system and encourage inflammation.

Another approach, a favored focus in my own training, uses the mat environment of someone attacking me to foster a different brain response than the standard flight/fight reaction. Via methods of calming the breath, focusing the attention on the feeling of connection, opening to a wider field of awareness and moving creatively in this space, the techniques become more than a chance to dominate my attacker. They become an opportunity to build entirely new neural networks in my nervous system for handling stressful situations. Allowing for greater feeling awareness integrates the natural bonding processes of the brain and heart in the interaction. The hormones coming out of these processes (oxytocin, for one) promote health and well-being.

Aikido has a marvelous step-up process in its attack metaphors that proves useful for this journey. Starting with static grabs and moving on to moving grabs, punches, overhead strikes, knife attacks, weapon attacks, and multiple person attacks, Aikido allows for greater and greater self-mastery of the stress response.

Now, it's not readily apparent that learning to handle multiple attackers on the mat transfers usefully into one's family life or work environment. Indeed the experiential reference points that allow for effective randori may not correlate to a family dinner conversation going sideways. Instead of standing and being able move freely, one is sitting in a chair. Instead of being able to touch people, one is using words. So, it may not be advisable to try and drag the "aikidoist" out into the world so she or he can handle life. It's rather comical even to imagine. It would be as ludicrous as wearing one's gi around in public.

However, the process learned on the mat to reconfigure the stress response is available off the mat. The willingness to open, to breath and settle, and then to pay attention to the feeling dynamic, this is all available. And in various contexts, following this process sincerely will develop the same level of mastery one achieves on the mat. One will develop reference points inside these contexts that make sense, that allow for form and flow, and full, natural presence.

It is my opinion that this is what can distinguish Aikido training from both other martial arts and various meditative disciplines. This combination of working in stressful environments and yet fostering a harmonious response, and using the mat time as a laboratory for mastering real world situations, opens up a journey towards manifesting the fullness of our potential as human beings.

As fascinating as this possibility of transformation is, there are some components and tendencies in conventional Aikido training that work against this organic process of self-

discovery. The Warrior Path is not always a comfortable one. Honoring the truth of one's Self can put one at odds with the environment, the social group, or even at rare times, life itself.

In a world as socially fractured as ours has become, at least in the US, Aikido offers a lot of soothing. It can become a keystone of one's social life. It can provide much needed physical contact on a regular basis. It can prop up one's self esteem by obtaining rank and receiving recognition for such an achievement. It can provide modest levels of physical fitness and thus benefit the overall health. It can provide an outline for a spiritual practice certainly as rich in textures, myth and behaviors as most religions. Each of these alone and all of them together, although potentially important, have very little to do with walking the Warrior Path. In fact, much of what Aikido offers the West could become a blockage on this path.

Founded on courage, motivated by the loving and sober acceptance of the truth at hand, walking the Warrior Path has the potential of bringing individual beings to natural fulfillment and completion. This process, at times, will not offer soothing in the normal sense of the word. For Aikido to remain a viable path, a sincere path, the practitioner must not be obligated to and thus hindered by social pressure to conform and dogmatic thinking accompanied by irritatingly, small minded morality. What has made Aikido attractive to me, and as something worthy of teaching, is the opportunity and support I have had to accept myself and more fully become who I am. The fact that Aikido benefitted me in this way and having midwifed its influence throughout my life, opened me to unlooked for healing, inspiration and finally brought a wide and deep peace.

My son turns fourteen next Spring (2016). He has grown up in a home very different from the one I grew up in. There is no drug addiction. The kids are not being hit. Both parents have great physical and mental health. He does study martial arts, though. That is one thing in common. I do not know if that training will prove to be as transformational for him as it was for me. He will sort that out on his own during his life activity. Aikido contributed to this positive shift forward in the generations. It is my hope it will continue to do so.