

## Aikido and Conflict Resolution: What's the Connection? By Stephen Kotev

I first came across Aikido quite by accident. During my second week on the job I had attended a "going away" party for another member of my office. At this party I had the pleasure of meeting a State Representative who was discussing the "Physical Dimensions of Conflict." What was that? I had never heard anyone mention anything like this in college. What could this be?

I took the Representative's advice and contacted a local Columbus man named Paul Linden. I found out that Paul Linden was actually Dr. Paul Linden, Ph.D. in Physical Education from Ohio State University, and he has an extensive martial arts background in addition to his scholarly pursuits. He taught something called Aikido and he said that Aikido greatly informed the work that he did on a daily basis. He described himself as a "Somatic Educator." What is Somatic Education? According to Dr. Linden "Somatic Education disciplines view the body as simultaneously a biomechanical and spiritually meaningful process." Somatic Education does not separate the mind from the body nor the body from the mind, but rather views the body and mind as an inseparable unit. In addition to such applications as computer ergonomics and sports performance Paul also works extensively with survivors of trauma and abuse to help them recover and heal from their past experiences.

What is Aikido and what does this have to do with your role as a Somatic educator? "Aikido is a primary influence in my role in Somatic education and a laboratory to test my theories and experiments." How does this apply to Conflict Resolution and Peacemaking? "Body awareness is a key to resolving conflict and creating harmony. By learning how to reduce fight-or-flight physical arousal, you can reduce your body's urge to use force to solve problems and enable yourself to think and communicate in a calmer, clearer fashion." What is Aikido? "Aikido is a path of self-awareness and harmony. Its defense techniques consist of joint locks and throws and are based on going along with the attack to control it. Aikido offers an effective form of self-defense that aims at protecting yourself without hurting another human being. Its smooth, circular, and flowing techniques use body wisdom and inner energy rather than force and speed. Because there are no competitions in Aikido, and because students move and learn at their own pace, Aikido is an effective form of exercise and relaxation that people can enjoy for their whole lives. If you are interested please come give it a try."

I took Paul's invitation to try a class and have been training in Aikido ever since. In addition to traditional Aikido practice, my experiences in Paul's classes often included Somatic education experiments as well as discussions of how body awareness and Aikido training applies to life's issues. As a result of my training with Paul I found some interesting correlations and quandaries that I would like to share.

Blending: Both Aikido and Conflict Resolution stress the need to be able to blend and flow with the current situation. A key principle in Aikido is to not meet the incoming

attack at its most powerful point, i.e. blocking, but going along with the power of the movement, i.e. blending. This same point is illustrated in Interest Based Negotiations, which focus on the interests and not on the positions. Don't continue to spend energy on highly cemented positions; find out what they want and why they want it. Metaphorically, get out of the way physically, that is, get the disputants to "come out from" their defended perspective during a mediation or negotiation.

For Dr. Peter Schettgen, a Professor at the University of Augsburg, Germany and a fellow Aikidoka; "Going off the line" means metaphorically to me: I take my "ego" (my personal desires for self-esteem) off of the line, I don't take an attack (as far as it is not provoked by me) personally - and, therefore, because I don't get my ego involved, I stay neutral and can deal with the whole situation without my prejudices, fears, anger etc.

Relaxing and Openness: A great example comes from an associate of mine Timothy Warneka, a psychotherapist by profession and fellow Aikidoka. "Aikido emphasizes the ability to be open and receptive in the face of an attack. This is very easy to say, and very, very difficult to do. On the Aikido mat, the attacks come in the form of strikes, punches, and grabs, sometimes even with weapons. In life, attacks usually do not come in physical form, but can be just as devastating in the verbal and emotional form. For myself, when I am practicing on the Aikido mat, if someone is coming to punch me, I notice a tightening of my stomach muscles, and a strong desire to hide my head in my arms. When in my psychotherapy office, when an angry parent begins to scream obscenities at me because their teen is court-ordered into treatment, I am also aware of a tensing of my stomach, as well as a desire to hide behind my arms (if not under the desk!). Practicing Aikido teaches me to relax and become open when I am being attacked, a state that paradoxically allows me to better protect myself.

Another example is how your own personal stress can magnify pain without your knowing. Try this experiment: Make a fist, squeeze it tightly closed. Keep the tension in your fist and with your other hand press your thumbnail into the soft tissue between the finger and thumb. Notice the pain you feel from your thumbnail. Now keep the same amount of pressure on your soft tissue and relax your clenched fist. DO NOT let your fist go limp! Keep the form of your fist just relax the tension from your hand.

What do you notice? You will probably feel the amount of pain drop dramatically once you release the tension from your fist. Yet you were still keeping the same amount of pressure from your thumbnail. How does this tie to mediation? Often we focus on the people and not the problem, hence magnifying the problem larger than necessary. The same goes for the body, often we tense up when we feel pain when we really should just relax and let the pain pass by. When you are in mediation you may not notice how tense and nervous you are, but the disputants will; if you are relaxed and open during the mediation you will be more able to focus on the problems not the personal attacks.

Aikido teaches not only blending, relaxation, and openness. In my experience, Paul's classes also stressed mind/body unification, being centered, proper posture, working with incoming intent/energy, effective joint locks and throws and harmonious conflict

resolution. Aikido has been an excellent laboratory to study how the fight-or-flight reflexes affect conflict. Aikido teaches a third alternative to fight-or-flight: centered, relaxed, and open posture and mind. Remain unattached to fear and anger, seeking to allow the attack to be only a strike. Recognize the line of the strike intention/direction, get off that line, and use the attackers' energy against them. Not adding to the anger and violence of the attacker, focus on remaining centered and unaffected by the attackers' fear. My experience in Aikido has allowed me access to a deep and profound art with immense knowledge of the ethical and spiritual dimensions of physical conflict/combat, and I use that knowledge to increase my effectiveness as a conflict manager.

Why is this important? Mediators are starting to realize their body language is often communicating more than they know. A clenched jaw, an exasperated look can say more than you ever intended. Your stress may cause you to say or do something that you later will regret. Wouldn't it be nice to be able to notice where in your body you were feeling stressed and be able to release it? Wouldn't it be nice to be able to show our neutrality in our posture as well as in our words? Knowledge of your physical process will help you be a more effective conflict resolver.

Why is this important to the field? We need to educate ourselves about the "Physical Dimensions of Conflict." As mediators and conflict resolvers our somatic education has been neglected. Aikido is one of a spectrum of choices available to the conflict resolver that will help you understand how the body affects the mind and how the fight-or-flight reflexes affect conflict. Aikido is a wonderful vehicle to gain body knowledge and body awareness as well as an excellent system to examine the physical dimensions of conflict.

If you are interested in the "Physical Dimensions of Conflict" you may wish to investigate other Aikido schools or movement disciplines that focus on this. This article reflects my personal experiences at Aikido of Columbus and may not be typical of all Aikido Dojos. There is an organization of Aikidoka, called Aiki-Extensions, whose members bring their Aikido practice into daily life. Many focus on conflict resolution as well as psychotherapy, law enforcement, business, and education. For more information about Aiki-Extensions visit their website at [www.aiki-extensions.org](http://www.aiki-extensions.org).

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His website includes a number of downloadable articles, one of which is specifically on the topic of conflict resolution.

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