

Training in Physical Nonviolence for Peace Teams

An ex-prisoner friend, T. Haywood, once stated that he is “anti-violent,” not nonviolent. He said he meant that he could not guarantee that he would accept a violent attack peacefully, but also I believe he implied that transforming violence requires an activism belied by the term “nonviolence.” From my work with street youth in New York City, and in Aikido, a noncompetitive martial art, I believe that he is on to something: nonviolence in a sense is a “peace warrior’s” path. The peace warrior affirms life as the traditional warrior affirms death. Life is Love and Love links aikido, street work and verbal conflict resolution as paths for peace warriors.

Most of us accept that we “have to be carefully taught to hate.” But have we accepted its corollary: love too requires careful and correct teaching? A good deal of this instruction must be physical. We learn to love first through our body, not our intellect. Mother nurtures us: we know love through physical oneness with her. As we mature, intellectual culture, education and language conspire to split mind from body rather than to unify them in being. We think, educate and speak in objects and categories. Even art and religion become categories rather than starting points and summations of human experience. If this schism is real, then we need to reintegrate mind and body in awareness of being, ourselves “interbeing” with others—that is, consciously to affirm love.

It is this reintegration of experience, unification of mind and body, that best describes both conflict transformation, as exemplified by the Alternatives to Violence Project (AVP), and aikido as training and action paths. From a spiritual point of view they are practical ways to carry out the commandment to be one with your neighbor. Violence is separation (“sin”) and separation is violence. Community building, which is the particular genius of AVP, reintegrates a

group of people and prepares them for transformative experience together. Their evaluations later usually reveal that they have experienced a surprising love in the process. This same transforming power in aikido is called *musubi*, a Japanese word for intimate connection. In its training attention or perception develops far enough that the aikidoist also experiences the unity of the “attacker” and the self and feels love and gratitude for a good attack. Both AVP and aikido have taught me and many others much about how to love.

Already in the 1920s, Gandhi tried to counter the notion that his nonviolent methods were passive by insisting on “*satyagraha*” (or “holding to the truth”) as a better name for his methods, based on “*ahimsa*,” action that does no harm. Gandhi was acutely aware of holding to the intention to do no harm while engaging in right action and modeled such an attitude and behavior—his *satyagrahi* emulated him.

Friends Peace Teams, Peace Brigades International and other groups carry this tradition of activism into the twenty first century. Most Friends do see these methods as right *and sacred* action. That sacredness is closely connected with the witness as a physical person, not just as a verbal communicator, who is also aware of the oppressor as suffering the separation of mind and body: that is, of violence.

ANTI-VIOLENCE AND THE BODY

When we are “holding to the truth,” we may discern that conflict and violence are physical and perceptible, always, as they are also mental (symbolic and emotional) and spiritual (affecting being itself). Nevertheless, treating them as essentially symbolic, emotional or moral can seem inexplicably detached to those undergoing or emerging from the trauma of oppression or terror. However, most conflict literature and

training explore exactly such symbolic, social and emotional factors, while few consider the somatic level beyond employing “body language” for negotiation. In fact, even verbal violence has direct and observable physical effects. For example, in the first moments of a tongue-lashing an aggressor leans forward, then the intended victim leans away. Further hormonal, postural and behavioral changes may follow and signal a changing dominance relationship.

Bodily responses to conflict are “soft-wired” in our nervous system, not “hard-wired” as sometimes maintained. They are malleable with proper training! Surely before the Indian Salt March *Satyagrahi* intensively prepared for the suffering to come. I presume that yoga was a part of their discipline and that it included breathing, relaxation and concentration. In fact, the “fight, approach, flight” responses use the same breath, muscle tone and attention that yoga affects.

If then, we define “anti-violence” as *satyagraha* and *ahimsa*: actively holding to the truth and doing no harm, we may define anti-violence training as preparing the body, mind and spirit to take charge of the “fight, approach, flight” responses, rather than be subject to them. What would such training be like physically?

ASSERTION: TO CENTER, JOIN, APPROACH (IRIMI), AND TURN

Assertion (as well as avoidance and aggression) has a physical expression. It is “approach behavior” (or *irimi*, a term we will clarify). Avoidance, appears physically as “flight” or

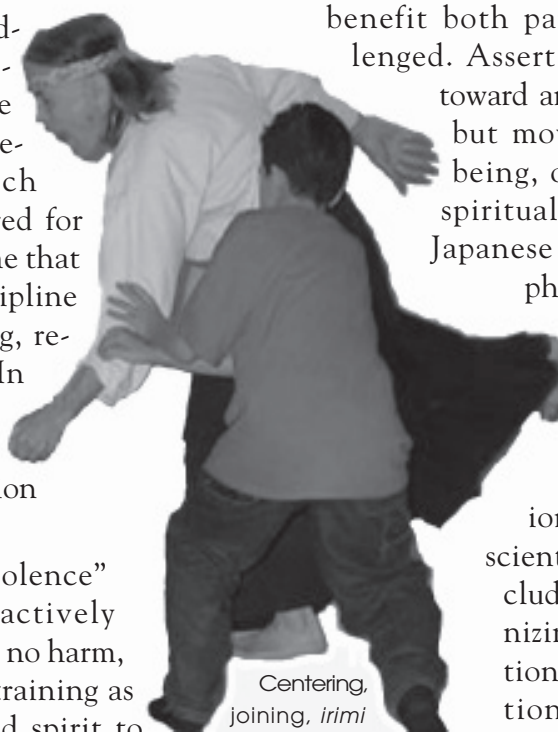
“freeze” behavior. Aggression appears as “fight” behavior. Assertion is more complex than the other two, which may explain why approach requires skillful means whereas avoidance and aggression seem to come naturally. The difference arises from the distinction between subject and object. Both aggression and avoidance treat another organism as an object. That is, the purpose of each behavior for the organism is to use the other for its benefit (or safety): eat or be not-eaten. The purpose of approach is to benefit both parties, challenger and challenged. Assertion is not simply movement

toward an object (as English implies), but movement toward a subject, a being, on the physical, mental and spiritual levels simultaneously. The Japanese term *irimi* better describes

physical assertion than “moving in,” because it includes the idea of joining, of being-to-being recognition.

Irimi also is more accurate to express “approach behavior,” because it does not imply scientific objectivity and does include spiritual interaction, recognizing being, as integral to execution. One skillful means of assertion as anti-violence, then, is *irimi*. Significantly, many aikidoists also use *irimi* to mean verbal, social or strategic assertion, not just the principle of moving in physically, but also that of “moving in” psychologically.

Reproduction and play are the most basic of all joining behaviors. At the symbolic and physical levels, subject and object join in one dynamic field, communication. Since in assertion



Centering, joining, *irimi* and turning allow this child to transform an attack.

See next page. . .

From previous page. . .

we recognize an opponent as a being, this mode of behavior lies at a more complex, “spiritual” level than aggression or avoidance. Treating even an aggressor as a being—as subject rather than object—recognizes a unity of self and other. It is joining, transformation of opposition to relationship; aikido terms it *musubi*.

A second skillful means in assertion is “centering.” Fortunately, in English centering does include physical, mental and spiritual dimensions. For a physical model of centering we have M. C. Richards’ *Centering*: the image of clay spinning before a potter and eloquently related to spirituality. Her imagery aptly reflects the sensation of a person staying “on center” in response to a challenge. On the mental level we have the ideas of intellectual and emotional balance. Finally, we find “centering” used to describe the process of deep concentration in worship (Quaker, Buddhist, Christian, Muslim—all use it). The anti-violent person must know how to center.

The skillful means in centering, like *irimi*, is not obvious. The experience itself is of letting concentration settle out of the head, leaving behind thought and emotion, and attending instead to nonverbal awareness (perceived deep in the belly) that does not distinguish “physical” from “mental” or “spiritual.” It is correct breathing that enables centering. When we breathe from deep in the belly (diaphragmatically), we calm the nervous system and reduce panic and aggression while enhancing concentration and physical power as well.

Developing the skills of *irimi* and centering is a major task of Aikido. Learning and internalizing them also is reversing “internalized oppression,” the neuromuscular traces, including those in the brain and central neurohormonal system, which cause most violence, aggression, subordination and victimization.

When we actually join another being in a conflict (by recognizing that being, not the aggression) using *irimi* to approach “on center,” we

have created most of the conditions for love to flow. The problem is, we still may “get hit.” Sometimes suffering may be a necessary step toward love. Dr. M. L. King, Jr. and Mahatma Gandhi both stressed the redemptive value of suffering (which has deep roots in most religions). However, sometimes it is unnecessary, even counterproductive—as in most individual violence. Then nonviolence and Love are served best when the aggressor cannot injure the object of aggression.

What skillful means can help? Turning. It allows aggression to pass harmlessly, creating a momentary pause during which love can change the relationship. Amazingly, an upright posture makes turning easy and leads toward love. Of course, such a movement, like *irimi*, is not turning-away, nor turning-into, aggression, but rather turning-with the aggressor. Such turning, after sufficient, correct training, seamlessly follows centering, joining and *irimi*. It preserves the intended victim from harm and harms not the intended aggressor. It completes physical nonviolence creating the conditions for reconciliation.

PHYSICAL-MORAL EDUCATION AND RE-TRAINING

The principles of Aikido and of physical nonviolence or anti-violence, then, are joining, *irimi*, centering, and turning. They help to transform conflict into love through nonviolence. Practicing appropriate exercises and movements correctly can replace old habits of avoidance and aggression with those of approach. This is moral education through physical retraining. Words can hint at the experience of hope and faith developed in such training, but love escapes the words. Those who have experienced that training affirm its power to transform lives. Through physical training, members of peace teams can find themselves becoming better nonviolent actionists and coping more effectively—physically, spiritually and emotionally—with a violent culture. ■