

Notes
on the
Aikido of
Social Activism

Yondan Paper

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This paper explores the use of aikido principles to engage in active social change. The timeliness of this paper is no accident, as it is written within a society that is in the grip of deep polarization. Many take to the streets to protest their dissent. But protest alone has limited effectiveness in enacting lasting change. Can aikido be used as an aid to help resolve these polarizing conflicts?

Activism and Martial Strategy

Martin Luther King, Jr instituted a system of social activism that employed a model of positively resolved conflict that is similar to aikido's approach. He was keenly aware of the necessity for strategic and tactical planning to winning a campaign in social activism and was planning an extended sit-in in Washington to wage peace, before his assassination cut short his plans (Paul Chappell, *The Art of Waging Peace*).

"You may well ask: "Why direct action? Why sit ins, marches and so forth? Isn't negotiation a better path?" You are quite right in calling for negotiation. Indeed, this is the very purpose of direct action. Nonviolent direct action seeks to create such a crisis and foster such a tension that a community which has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue...But I must confess that I am not afraid of the word "tension." I have earnestly opposed violent tension, but there is a type of constructive, nonviolent tension which is necessary for growth...The purpose of our direct action program is to create a situation so crisis packed that it will inevitably open the door to negotiation. I therefore concur with you in your call for negotiation. Too long has our beloved Southland been bogged down in a tragic effort to live in monologue rather than dialogue."

--**Martin Luther King, Jr.** *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*

A comparison of activist strategies and thought also bear remarkable similarities to the teachings of many aikido Sensei, right on up to the words and actions of the Founder, Morihei Ueshiba. In his youth he briefly allied with Japan's first environmentalist: Kumakasa Minakata, to protest the Shrine Consolidation Policy of Tanabe Prefecture, which would have sold off

“excess” environmentally sensitive shrine property seized by the government for development (John Stevens, *Abundant Peace*).

Aikido emphasizes a relaxed, yet focused relationship to conflict. Over the years this principle has been applied to other disciplines such as education and therapeutic modalities, but (with the exception of a few of Aiki Extension’s peacekeeping and peace dojo efforts) little work has been done on actively using aikido principles to advance positive social change.

“People constantly fight with each other, arguing “My side is right!” It’s strange, isn’t it? That intelligent people in powerful leadership positions think like that and lead us to war. Even the teachings of aikido: depending on how they are interpreted, could potentially lead to war. So we need to get a firm grasp of the true principles of aikido, and then dedicate ourselves, through our practice of aikido, to pray for world peace.”

--**Motomichi Anno Sensei**, *Journey to the Heart of Aikido*

Most societal conflicts take place within the most dominant form of contemporary media.

Many Presidents (Trump, included) managed to attain power by successfully using this emerging technology to convey their messages (Roosevelt, with the radio; Kennedy and Reagan, the TV; Obama, the internet; Trump, via twitter). But the key element of “winning” is perception (or “optics”).

Integrity

An activist “loses” this battle with violent acts (which is also a loss within one’s own moral framework. Raise a fist or throw a rock; and this is the lesson taught, on how power is expressed). Resorting to violence only empowers the opposition.

Sometimes it is the “violent activist” who appears as an ally, but really IS the opposition.

Richard Aoki, a fiercely militant Bay Area leader of the Black Panthers, who gave them their first firearms lessons and actively encouraged shootouts with police, was an FBI informant since his graduation from Berkeley High School (Seth Rosenfeld, “Activist Richard Aoki Named as Informant,” *San Francisco Chronicle*).

Trust is a vitally important quality when considering a circle (as in a “circle of trust”) in relation to social activism: and it takes a while to build. Many people stand up for different reasons.

Some activists join groups for personal motives that run counter to the core activist principles of the group.

“6. The purpose of aikido is to train mind and body and to produce sincere, earnest people. Since all the techniques are to be transmitted person-to-person, do not randomly reveal them to others, for this might lead to their being used by hoodlums.”

--O Sensei's Rules for Training Aikido #6

A consistent focus on core principles is as important to an activist, as is the shape of the triangle in maintaining hanmi-- especially if the action is extended or met with great resistance.

Paradoxically, it helps to keep sight of one's political goals, by having a discussion with someone who does share the same political perspectives.

Unfortunately the current state of social media tends to encourage divisiveness and confirmation biases. “Fake news” with deliberately reported falsehoods is beginning to supplant the more reputable syndicated journalism, rendering online debate increasingly meaningless as even the objective truth becomes a matter for contention.

The Importance of Training

“The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice.”

–**Martin Luther King, Jr.**

Just as an aikidoist should be fully aware of the rules of etiquette before engaging in active keiko: a social activist also requires preparation and awareness of her rights, especially if engaging in civil disobedience. The nonviolent sit-ins that were so effective towards advancing civil rights in the 60s had two components to their training: philosophical, and tactical. It was one thing to understand the roots of a struggle: but an effective activist will train for potential or expected attacks. Activists in SNCC during the ‘60s had to practice their sit-in’s before they took action.

Of course, “uke” will not wish to play “fair” or even care how it “looks” on media because they may have tight control over the narrative. As in aikido training, the force of the attack/impetus will determine the level of response. The anti-pipeline activists in North Dakota, for example, were out one day merely to plant flags, when they saw bulldozers plowing up land under litigation. Without hesitation they trespassed to try to halt the bulldozing, but their training was such that they did not fight back, even when set upon by dogs (DemocracyNow! 11/24/16).

Contrast that with another, earlier trespass wildcat-members of Occupy Santa Cruz decided to “occupy” an empty building, with the ultimate goal of turning it into a community center.

Without educating the community or any thought of the owners, the wildcatters lasted a month before they slipped away to avoid arrest. They had planned on using protest to achieve

a permanent center but failed because they acted in isolation from the community. In aikido terms they did not address the reality of the situation (attack) and instead tried to “rush” the technique.

A far more effective and pervasive technique used to quell dissent is to work towards erasing memory and the struggles of the past--a form of political and historical aphasia. In one of King’s last speeches (“Beyond Vietnam”) he drew powerful connections between Capitalism and the Vietnam War. And yet this speech is regularly ignored on his commemorative holiday in favor of the less controversial “I have a Dream” speech. Media and educational institutions play a role in softening and re-packaging this image of King, with aid from their sponsors:

“The MLK, Jr Center for Nonviolent Social Change was set up by among others: the Ford Motor Co, General Motors, Mobil, Western Electric, US Steel, Proctor & Gamble, and Monsanto. The Center maintains the King Library and the archives of the Civil Rights movement. Among the many programs the King Center runs have been projects that work closely with the US Dept of Defense, the Armed Forces Chaplains Board, and others. Its co-sponsor is the MLK Lecture Series called, “The Free Enterprise System: an Agent for Nonviolent Social Change.” --**Arundhati Roy, *Capitalism: A Ghost Story***

The practices of social activism are not unique to this period in history. This country has a long, proud, and largely hidden history of peaceful revolt since its founding that is mostly ignored in our schools. Memory only lasts 20 years before the current generation forgets the finer points of past mistakes; as the social and educational systems encourage this forgetting. But our aphasia does not mean that these actions were irrelevant or meaningless.

“When the whole world is silent, even one voice becomes powerful.”

— **Malala Yousafzai, Pakistani Activist and the youngest winner of the Nobel Peace Prize**

Zanshin

As with any given action in social activism, the techniques of aikido do not end in a pin, or a throw. Uke's body may be pinned, but the spirit and mind of nage should still be connected to uke. Once the pin is complete and uke taps out there is a space between releasing the pin and moving into the next technique. That space is zanshin ("remaining mind.")

Many Sensei's (Miles Kessler Sensei, among others) use the metaphor of zanshin as the tone of a bell that resonates long after the ear can perceive it. This resonance and attuned awareness set up the frame for the following technique.

Aikido training teaches students to remain aware. Zanshin is important to discerning and being attuned to uke's next potential attack. In activist terms, this translates to being wary of "false victories," or confusing the battle won, as a victory for the war. There are many historical examples of this, but a recent case in the news is the Standing Rock pipeline struggle where casual observers assumed the problem was solved because President Obama issued "stay" orders until the matter was resolved. Zanshin provides a heightened awareness of the mat. Properly used zanshin gives awareness to potential "blind spots," such as political aphasia.

American society (and by extension, the world) is on the cusp of great change. Properly used, the principles of aikido can provide the much-needed "glue" of connection and inclusivity within any campaign advocating for progressive social change.

"...When I come to the Aikido mat, you are family. You are my practice partner. And it doesn't matter that those [political] things divide us, because our practice connects us. I think this is what we've forgotten -- it's cooperative action that brings people together. Let's plant a garden together. ... The things that unite us are much more important than the things that divide us. And I think Aikido is a little subculture in which you see that all the time."

-- **Susan Dutton**, in the film "Living Aikido Life"

"I am cognizant of the interrelatedness of all communities and states. I cannot sit idly by in Atlanta and not be concerned about what happens in Birmingham. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly."

--**Martin Luther King, Jr**: *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*