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# Aikido

## Path of Compassion

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Photo by Dave Gordon

Fall Canyon narrows in Death Valley National Park

## Aikido

Aikido, the art of peace, is a path of compassion. It is a narrow path, winding with many turns and twists, always changing and ever challenging our concepts of self and the world around us. Not always easy to follow, it is compelling in its unfoldment of compassion for our own selves and for others.

Compassion exists as a dynamic balance between the two extremes of mercy and severity. Being not fully one or the other but a blending of both. Although it may lean at times towards one or the other, it always includes both aspects. This balance is a fine line to walk. We weave and stumble our way along, sometimes forgetting about it altogether, but always returning to it. This is the work, the training, to walk this path. In this way we learn to be centered, grounded, connected, have expanded awareness with an open and loving heart, and all with a sense of trust and gratitude.

“The divine is not something high above us. It is in heaven, it is in earth, it is inside us.”

-Morihei Ueshiba, Founder of Aikido

# Center

O'Sensei said, "The key to good technique is to keep your hands, feet, and hips straight and centered. If you are centered, you can move freely. The physical center is your belly, if your mind is set there as well, you are assured of victory in any endeavor."

The exterior is a mirror for interior planes of consciousness. Being in and moving from a physically aligned and centered posture makes it easier to sense these inner planes and find inner alignment and centering, allowing the free movement of which O'Sensei speaks. Free movement from an inner perspective is empowering. It is a greater integrity of the true self. By standing empowered in the truth of our own being, we serve as a light to others that they also may be inspired to seek out a path of peace.

To center within, we must be in the present moment. Indeed we cannot center at all if we are focusing on the the dreamlike nature of the past or dwelling in fantasies of futures not yet here. (Also you may get hit if your are training.) Centering is here and now. It is being fully present. It is where all techniques in the art of peace arise and where we are "assured of victory in any endeavor."

Victory is oft times defined as power over others. True victory, however, is empowerment to be our true selves. Try reading the quote replacing the word victory with the word empowerment. "...you are assured of <empowerment> in any endeavor." This is free movement of the soul being fully present and centered within.

The trick is remembering to move about in the world in our daily lives from this perspective!

## Grounding

“One does not need buildings, money, power, or status to practice the Art of Peace. Heaven is right where you are standing, and that is the place to train.” -O’Sensei

I think many of us have forgotten what it is to be grounded. In truth, it is right where we are standing. It is not the sort of thing that is dependent on anything from the exterior -” buildings, money, power, or status.” It is an experience within ourself and is innate to our being. Feel your feet touching the ground right now. This is grounding. We simply need to be aware of it.

O’Sensei spoke of being present and aware of our innate connection to not only the earth but also to the heavens. Grounding goes in both directions. Physically, we stand with our feet on the earth and our head in the sky. We are like a column of light connecting heaven and earth. The challenge is walking upon the earth in this way and interacting with others from this place. Just like training on the mat, sometimes we feel great about the techniques we do and other times we don’t. Regardless, we continue training. This is the practice of compassion and it is right where we are standing.

## Connection

“All things, material and spiritual, originate from one source and are related as if they were one family...” -O’Sensei

If all things originate from one source then all things have an innate connection. One thing cannot move without effecting everything else. Any movements we make, no matter how large or small, echo through all realms: material, emotional, mental, and spiritual. Notice how a good mood (or bad mood) is contagious? If one person starts laughing pretty soon others will start laughing too. Sometimes even someone’s presence in a room will uplift and inspire everyone - especially if they are walking from a place of empowerment. We are empowered to be our own true being when we see others walking in this way.

While training in aikido, a small shift in our posture, attention, and focus makes a corresponding shift in our training partner. Likewise, off the mat, our actions, attitudes and emotions effect the world around us. Like tends to draw like. Laughter creates more laughter. Fear, more fear. Compassion asks us to use our connection with all things to bring in positivity to the world through our thoughts, feelings and emotions, words, and deeds. Keeping all this aligned with the Art of Peace can be quite the challenge as it is easy to get caught up in negativity and stress. It is a constant play of forgetting and remembering. Ever endeavoring to remember, as an act of compassion for others that they too might remember, is the daily training.

## Awareness

“As soon as you concern yourself with the “good” and “bad” of your fellows, you create an opening in your heart for maliciousness to enter. Testing, competition with, and criticizing others weaken and defeat you.” -O’Sensei

Awareness is the noticing of the state of our emotions, thoughts, physical body and its surroundings. Our state of mind and our focus create the texture of our experience with the world, both inward and outward. Putting these two concepts together, we can have choice in the quality of our experiences. The key is awareness. O’Sensei speaks of judgment -good and bad. Once we enter a mind set of judgment of others then our world is experienced through the awareness of judgment - inward and outward. We are all familiar with that inner critic! It keeps us from attaining what we truly desire. It weakens and defeats us. So judgment of others becomes self-judgment - or visa versa, and this becomes our experience of the world.

Just as aikido techniques work more fluidly and effectively if our awareness is on our own center and not our partner, so off the mat we will be more successful if our awareness comes from within and we move from there. Awareness focused within allows for greater perception of the external from a centered place. Everything seems to fall into place when we do. This is not to say that we should focus on our egotistical selves for that too is wrapped up in judgment of self or others and leads down the same path. Inner focus is on the true self - that which lies in and behind all of the personality display and surface consciousness and is the outer layer of self. Without this awareness we get reactionary, moving from patterns or habits. With awareness we have the power to choose our actions.

Being aware happens when we are open, paying attention, and centered within in the present moment. We don’t notice anything during training if we are thinking about what’s for dinner after class! Awareness demands your presence in the now. Experiencing the world through judgment takes you out of awareness in the present moment where the art of peace resides. Then it all feels like a struggle and out of the flow. Centered within, we move with awareness in the art of peace.

# Open Heart

“The Art of Peace is a form of prayer that generates light and heat. Forget about your little self, detach yourself from objects, and you will radiate light and warmth. Light is wisdom; warmth is compassion.” -O’Sensei

An open loving heart combined with awareness is a doorway to compassion. It is challenging to maintain an open heart when we grasp tightly onto ideas of what is important. O’Sensei speaks about detaching ourselves from objects. We can experience detachment by holding onto ideas and objects in a loose gentle manner that allows movement. Things will move and change anyways - it is the way of nature. In this way, flowing with change can happen more easily.

Detachment can also facilitate a bigger view, a view beyond the “little self” that takes everything personally. We hold so tightly onto our concepts of our own selves that we can cause dis-ease in the spirit and body. These concepts, especially about self, need to be held with openness and gentleness for we too are prone to change and things will go better if we do.

Detachment doesn’t need to mean not caring. We can care greatly and still hold with gentleness - it is just a matter of being in the moment and not attaching to this or that future possibility. When we are centered in this present moment then the heart of compassion will open and act naturally and spontaneously. True compassionate action cannot be forced, it will flow naturally out of the moment.

## Trust and Gratitude

“One should be prepared to receive ninety-nine percent of an enemy’s attack and stare death right in the face in order to illumine the Path.” -O’Sensei

Trust is a tricky path to walk. It is walking willingly into the unknown with an open and loving heart. It is not easy “to receive ninety-nine percent of an enemy’s attack and stare death right in the face”. We can’t stare death in the face if we have a lack of trust. Our “little self” that takes everything so personally and grasps so tightly onto itself has a hard time letting go to trust. To face such a thing and receive it we must stand in our larger true selves - centered, grounded and aware. This is the self that can trust and walk into the unknown (death/change) and stare it in the face.

O’Sensei wrote, “The penetrating brilliance of swords wielded by followers of the Way strikes at the evil enemy lurking deep within their own souls and bodies.” The attack we are prepared to receive ninety-nine percent of is not coming from the anything outside of us. It comes from within. The enemy’s attack is an inner misdirected force. To receive this attack we must first acknowledge it and then bring it into alignment. Take jealousy, for example, being the desire to have the portion of another for ourselves. We could look at it as admiration of the beauty or advantageous life flow of another misdirected by the delusion of lack in our own life. To bring this back into alignment, gratitude comes into play. If we feel gratitude for our own portion in life, the delusion of lack dissolves and is filled by an awareness of fullness and joy.

“Always practice the Art of Peace in a vibrant and joyful manner,” said O’Sensei. Train with gratitude for all lessons received (letting go of any judgment we might put on them) and we will feel joy. Joy brings us to the present moment where all techniques in the art of peace reside and where compassion flows.

May we walk with trust, compassion, and gratitude. May we walk a path of peace

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“Each and every master, regardless of the era or place, heard the call and attained harmony with heaven and earth. There are many paths leading to the top of Mount Fuji, but there is only one summit - love.”  
-O’Sensei



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As it turns out, just as it takes a village to raise a child, it also takes a community to bring about a belt rank.

Domo Arigato Gozaimashita

All quotes used are from “The Art of Peace” translated by John Stevens from collective talks, poems, calligraphy, and oral tradition of Morihei Ueshiba - O’Sensei.

