

# Aikido and Conflict Resolution

by Judith Warner

Conflict. It surrounds us and is as natural as sunrise and sunset. Yet many of us react to its presence with aggression, denial, or resistance. These are the knee-jerk responses that we learned watching our parents, who watched their parents, or by watching our buddies in the school yard, or even watching Rambo and John Wayne movies. None of these responses really work. Have you ever truly solved a problem by yelling at someone? Think of the last time you got frustrated with your spouse over the monthly credit card statement. And did it ever work as a teenager when you and your parents stuck to your positions on the use of family car rather than discussing each other's needs? Yet, we repeat these same knee-jerk responses, day-after-day, year-after-year.

Over the past ten years, I have been involved in countless conflict resolution programs, helping people to deal with their dysfunctional problem-solving ways. In all of these programs, Aikido has provided a base that helps people to examine and change their ways of dealing with stress and conflict. Without my Aikido training, my work in conflict resolution would be ineffective. This article explains how my company uses Aikido in its programs. I hope that it will give you some insights into how you can apply Aikido principles in your own life.

## Basics of Conflict Resolution

The reasons why we react to conflict so often with aggression, denial, or resistance is because we see conflict as negative and a contest. These are myths. Conflict is not negative, it simply is a natural fact of living in an increasingly complex society where we are all running about trying to get our jobs done and live out our lives. What we do with conflict as it happens, how we respond, can be negative. You can probably think of hundreds of images of negative responses to conflict – fist fights, massacres, verbal retorts. However, there are also many positive responses – the women's peace movement in Northern Ireland, a community garden at the site of a riot – where the adversarial, or contest, aspect of conflict is missing. There is no winner and no loser. When we do not view conflict as a win/lose contest, we can create win/win solutions.

For this to happen, three basic conditions have to exist: acknowledgment, acceptance and adaptability – the "3 A's" of conflict resolution. Parties to a conflict must acknowledge its existence – rather than trying to avoid or deny it, accept their involvement, appreciate the feelings and viewpoints of all parties to the problem – without making judgments, and be open to new ideas that might lead to solutions.

## Aikido's Potential Contribution to Conflict Resolution

These "3 A's" are readily seen and experienced in the art of Aikido. Every time Aikidoka get on the mat, we are reminded that resistance, tension and aggression are not the most powerful, nor the most effective, responses to conflict. It is only when we are relax and move fluidly from center that we are most successful in our technique. The heart of Aikido is about acknowledging, accepting, and working with an uke's energy, being willing to adapt and change as necessary.

This is readily seen in an Aikido demonstration. The visual portrayal of harmony and control without harm in a demonstration helps on-lookers to visualize how they might handle their own conflicts, as parents, spouses, or team members. Traditionally, Westerners have had a tendency to articulate too much, to be too digital-auditory, to be too much in the brain, in the mind, in the intellect. When we do more than just lecture on how to resolve conflict, more people get the message.

The power of Aikido in teaching conflict resolution increases even more with participant involvement. In my company's corporate programs, we often hear comments during a demo like, "It seems so effortless, are you really doing anything? He (the uke) must be letting you throw him." So, if someone from the audience volunteers, we have the person try a shoulder grab and experience the power of a nikyo hold. His or her affirmation of the power of the seemingly effortless technique intrigues and opens others in the audience to examine some new paradigms. We also have everyone get involved in partnering exercises on concepts such as one-point, the mind/body state that allows the Aikidoka to remain calm, aware, and execute technique under pressure of attack.

## The Value of One-Point

It is easy in the conflict resolution field to focus on communication techniques and conflict resolution strategies. These pieces are essential but teaching them without addressing the mind/body aspect of conflict resolution limits their effectiveness. For example, are you more likely to draw upon your training in communication methods if you are uncentered, tense, and agitated, or centered, calm and relaxed?

The principle of one-point, or center, in Aikido is a direct, simple way to introduce the optimal mind/body state for conflict resolution – relaxed, aware, able to focus. Everyone experiences this state at certain times in their lives – during a peak performance, or at a special moment, such as a wedding, giving birth, or graduating from school. The learning is that it is our choice everyday, every moment to be centered. The challenge is choosing this state of being under stress. If we do so, we are better able to handle conflict.

## The Use of Basic Aikido Movements

Learning some of Aikido's natural responses helps people absorb conflict resolution principles at a physical level, in the body. They can then apply the principles to non-physical situations. For example, in South Africa, a colleague has been doing programs in the gold mines with management and labor. When his clients experienced the distinction between confrontation and working with an opponent at a physical level, the metaphoric light bulbs began to go on. Their willingness to consider new ways of working together on issues increased.

Aikido is rich in movements that can be used for this purpose, for example, a simple shoulder grab. If you grab someone on the shoulder, his tendency is to react, to hold his ground, and perhaps to grab at your hand. This, of course, makes him less stable and more vulnerable to additional attacks from you for his focus is on the grab, not on the rest of you. Our workshop participants work with a partner on this simple move, imagining the grab as a non-physical attack in their lives – perhaps a retort from a child or a fellow worker. They notice their internal response as they are grabbed – increased tension, rapid breathing or maybe holding their breath, etc. Next they play with the simple alternative of stepping aside, drawing their shoulder just out of reach of the attacker, so their partner loses balance in grabbing for them. The participants receive the immediate physiological and mental feedback that by stepping off line of an attack, tension dissipates, they are still in balance, and their attacker is no longer in a position to continue attacking. They are able to make a distinction between stepping aside with awareness of the source of the attack and running away or ducking the attacker's punch or grab. They experience the power of acknowledging the attacker (one of the "3 A's") at a very simple, but profound, level.

The use of Aikido in teaching of conflict resolution whets people's appetites to experiment with new ways of handling their problems. Once they have discovered that there is a way for them to be powerful and nurturing at the same time, they want to learn. Some begin training in Aikido. Others pursue mind/body disciplines such as T'ai Chi, or begin to meditate, giving themselves daily training in centering. Whatever their choice, they walk away with the knowledge that they have more options to consider in handling their conflicts than they realized they had before.

Of course, the same off-the-mat applications hold true for practicing Aikidoka. If an Aikidoist catches one point before beginning to discuss a problem with a child, boss, or parent, the likelihood is that the discussion will go better. What is wonderful for Aikidoka is that the opportunity to develop these conflict resolution skills is present at every practice. Every technique on the mat is a chance to develop one-point, to play with a metaphor for a personal issue. As long as we stay challenged and aware in our practice, we are growing in our ability to deal with stress and conflict off the mat. I wonder – how many of us appreciate this aspect of our practice? It never ceases to amaze me how true the adage is that we never fully appreciate something sitting in our own backyard. There is so much questing these days for stress management, personal growth, relationship building. For Aikidoka, the basics for enhancing these aspects of life are there on the mat in our daily practice. The gift is simply there for the taking.

(Adapted from an article in *Aikido Today*. Judith Warner is an instructor for Aikido Kokikai Rochester and has been involved in the field of conflict resolution for the past ten years. She works with Thomas Crum, author of *The Magic of Conflict*, and co-authored *Your Conflict Cookbook* with Mr. Crum. Their company, [Aiki Works, Inc.](http://www.aikiworks.com), uses principles and movements from the martial arts of Aikido and Tai Chi Chuan to teach conflict resolution.)