

*Crystal clear, sharp and bright,
the sacred sword allows no opening for evil to roost.*

- Morihei Ueshiba, The Art of Peace

In the Art of Peace, a single cut of the sword summons up the wondrous powers of the universe.

- Morihei Ueshiba, The Art of Peace

Sword as Teacher

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(Yondan paper)

For Mary Tesoro Sensei— who appeared in my life just at the right time...offered life skills for the head, heart, and hands...inspired a vision and practice of nonviolence.

Sword as Teacher

Aikido is an opportunity to get closer to fear—not avoid it. Buddhist teacher, Pema Chodron, told a story in *When Things Fall Apart* about her teacher: He was traveling with his students to a monastery. As they neared the gates, he saw a large guard dog with huge teeth and big eyes. This dog was growling ferociously and struggling to get free from its chain. It seemed desperate to attack to guard its home. As the teacher got closer, he could see its bluish tongue and spittle spraying from its mouth. They walked past the dog, kept their distance, and entered the gate. Suddenly the chain broke and the dog rushed at them. The students screamed and froze in terror. The teacher turned and ran as fast as he could—straight at the dog. The dog was so surprised that he put his tail between his legs and ran away.

The truth is we live in a violent world and we have a choice. O'Sensei made clear the distinction between *Satsujinken*, the sword which takes life and *Katsujinken*, the sword which gives life. The sword is the same, the person wielding the sword determines how it is used. One could consider *Satsujinken*, a sword of violence, and *Katsujinken*, a sword of nonviolence. Aikido, the practice of misogi, offers the opportunity to transform the sword of violence into the sword of nonviolence.

To injure an opponent is to injure yourself. To control aggression without inflicting injury is Aikido.

- The Art of Peace, Morihei Ueshiba

The irony is that at the moments when I feel most powerless and overwhelmed, I attempt to reclaim a sense of power in ways that ensure that I will become less effective in my world. I may lash out with my words. I may withdraw from others in silence. I may withdraw from myself. I see all this as violence. I define violence as any thought or action which harms or diminishes life; nonviolence any thought or action which respects or nurtures life.



Violence was a way of life growing up. I concluded by the age of 5 that life was not that fun. During the day, I put my toys away and pretended to be grown up. During the night I hid under the covers. I avoided adults as much as possible. They seemed strange and unpredictable. It was impossible to fight or runaway...so I froze. My strategy for survival was mental and emotional hibernation.

When I was 15 a discovered I had more choices. So I left. I ran away from home. I left the people that acted out their own powerlessness in tragic ways. Ironically, I wanted safety, yet found myself in many unsafe situations. So I kept running. I found solace in being alone. I trusted no one.

By 25, I hit bottom. The armor got heavy. I got tired. I was lost. I floundered. This was a year of transition between leaning into my fear and trying to escape it. By 26, I learned how to protect myself through intensive self-defense workshops which I continued to study for many years.

During this time, I also found aikido. I learned that my body belonged to me. I was introduced to a way of being without the use of violence as a means of self-protection. I feel tremendous gratitude to Mary Tesoro Sensei, Tom Elliott, and the teachers that came before them in my choice to live life more fully.

Like a lot of people I know, the adults in my world when I was young were survivors of family violence, poverty, ethnic segregation, class conflict, and international war. In light of human history—a history tainted with mass dehumanization, including genocide and torture, they were motivated by fear as a means to find some form of safety, protection, and power. In the study of power and how it is wielded, it becomes clear in my mind that the *Satsujinken* and *Katsujinken* are two sides of the same coin—both pathways for self-protection. The question is how does one choose one path over another?

Lean into the sharp points and fully experience them.
-When Things Fall Apart, Pema Chodron



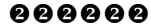
Violence is as traumatic as it is common. Powerlessness stands at the heart of traumatic experience. In turn, one of our responses when powerless – when it is subjectively impossible to fight or run – is to freeze. There is a growing body of research that has demonstrated that when a person is completely powerless, and any form of resistance is futile, they tend to shutdown—escaping or dissociating from their lived reality. Freezing, an adaptive biological response, occurs as a last option when the fight-or-flight response has been thwarted. As it constricts, the energy that would have been discharged by the fight-or-flight response is magnified and tied up in the body. The frustrated fight response erupts into rage; the frustrated flight response gives way to powerlessness. In my view, rage is the flip side of powerlessness expressed in a tragic and destructive way.

The experience of fear and powerlessness creates a strong tendency to engage in desperate efforts at self-protection driven by fear and retaliation. How do I use my experience of violence so that I don't act from a sense of powerlessness and end up recreating what I don't like? The paradox is that in order to remain human, I believe we have to find a way to humanize those who have dehumanized us. It is our recognition of the humanity of those who are violent that preserves our own humanity.

Violence in any form is a tragic expression of our unmet needs.
- Marshall Rosenberg, founder Center for Nonviolent Communication (CNVC)

Everything we do is in service of our needs. When this one concept is applied to our view of others, we'll see that we have no real enemies, that what others do to us is the best possible thing they know to do to get their needs met.

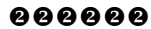
- Marshall Rosenberg, founder CNVC



Now I work with children and adolescents who live out the fight-flight-freeze response through their own violence. They have either been removed or have runaway from home. They have nowhere to go. They are sometimes considered a threat to the community. These kids' capacity to trust safe adults has been blunted. They use rage and retaliation to protect themselves - only to find themselves on the street, on probation, or institutionalized. These kids are labeled. Sometimes medicated. Their fear-based explosiveness towards authority figures, their escape from hypervigilance through drugs, often results in a coercive use of force by the justice system. When the force is punitive, the kids either submit or rebel. The violence continues.

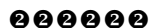
Never give anyone the power to make you submit or rebel.
- Marshall Rosenberg, founder CNVC

You can't make your kids do anything. All you can do is make them wish they had. And then, they will make you wish you hadn't made them wish they had.
- Marshall Rosenberg, founder CNVC



Once I develop a basic trust with these children, which can take a while, I hear their story. Their story comes through their words and actions. But it most often through their silence...what is not spoken. They show me how their biological needs for protection and nurturing were not met. Fortunate to have survived, these children were helpless as they grew up in an environment of neglect and abuse. They had no escape. Their caregivers were either not aware of their needs or lacked skills in how to meet them. Being fully immiserated, these kids learned how to dehumanize others. Therein lies one of the core roots of violence.

I often utilize the principles and practice of aikido to connect with these kids. Under safe conditions, they come alive with curiosity, innocence, and a natural compassion for others. The armor comes off. My genuine desire as an adult to connect with and see the humanity in these kids is rewarded in kind. Aikido is effective because it doesn't require words and it creates a place to discharge stored fear, change the brain, and learn new life skills. The basic movements hold the seeds of new and concrete possibility of what it means to be powerful and safe—without being violent.



The practice of aikido has taught me to lean into fear, confusion, grief, anger—whatever is present—and look at it directly in the eye. By entering into these difficult places, stepping into unknown territory, I have learned to transcend a limited view of myself and

others. I believe that in the process of treating others as less than human, we violate something essential about our own humanity. The fundamental principle of nonviolence means dignity and integrity of each human being is nonnegotiable. This is the sharp cut—the teaching of my sword.

In the Art of Peace, a single cut of the sword summons up the wondrous powers of the universe. That one sword links up the past, present, and future; it absorbs the universe. Time and space disappear. All of creation, from the distant past to the present moment, lives in this sword. All human existence flourishes right here in the sword you hold in your own hands. You are now prepared for anything that may arise.

- *The Art of Peace, Morihei Ueshiba*

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