

## **Musings on Aikido and Self-Defense**

In our dojo, and probably many others as well, a favorite and perennial subject is how effective Aikido would be if attacked in some dark corner. Our Sensei, Michael McVey, always has interesting, although sometimes unexpected answers, but I'll get to those later. I will attempt to go about this in a somewhat organized manner by addressing (ever so superficially) a series of questions:

### **What are the chances that we will be attacked?**

Greg O'Connor, in his *Aikido Student Handbook* states that, "... the odds that we may be physically attacked are rather small. We may never have to face that situation." As for my own experience, I have never been attacked by anyone more intent on harming me than a high-pressure sales man (I attribute my good fortune in this respect to good karma and my superior conflict resolution skills but more likely it is the result of good luck and the fact that I lead an entirely un-exciting [except for Aikido] life). Nevertheless, crime happens every day, there are victims out there and the same could happen to us.

### **What can we do to minimize our chances of being attacked?**

Of course we can't just wander around a war zone and not expect anything to happen to us. Mr. O'Connor continues, "If we are not so lucky, maybe we will encounter it once or twice in a lifetime. If you find yourself facing trouble more often, it may be wise to take a good look at your environment, your attitude, and/or your lifestyle and change them." Lavinia Soo-warr, in her book *Self-Defence for Women* advocates her A.P.A.P system, which stands for Awareness, Psychology, Avoidance and Physical. Just like your sensei drills into you to be aware of your surroundings, she recommends to be relaxed but to always be aware and to be "aware what your own body is telling you." She further recommends to be aware of public buildings you could enter, and to be aware what you are carrying, because anything you carry has defensive potential. Under the heading of Psychology she discusses the importance of acting confident even if you are not, we would call that to be centered and grounded. Just like your sensei tells you to "own the mat", act like you "own the street" or that proverbial dark corner.

We make many choices during the day and while we certainly don't want to hide from the world, considering caution in our decisions is not the worst thing we can do. There are times when the night-time shortcut through that dark park with a history of criminal incidents may not be the wisest choice.

### **Should Aikido be used for self-defense?**

Well, we have been careful, we have been aware and done all the right things, but it is not our day, we are faced with a potential attacker - is it time to use all that Aikido we worked so hard to learn? Not so fast, grasshopper, there are a few things to talk about. For one, have you noticed that Aikido ends in "do" versus some other martial arts that end in "jutsu". Those "jutsu" arts are where you learn to fight and break people's bones (forgive me, jutsuists), whereas us "do" people are all about self-improvement, and us Aikidoists (and Aikidoka) in particular are all about

peace, love, and harmony, or supposed to be, so don't forget that! Mike Sensai tells the children in the kids' classes that they are not to use Aikido on their friends or in school. Likewise, if someone asks him what the best technique is when attacked in the street, his response is always "Nike wasa", meaning to get away, if at all possible. He also tells us that there is nothing in our wallets or purses that is worth our lives (priorities, priorities). Sensei further tells interested people that if they are in need of self-defense skills in the short term, they should take a self defense class rather than start Aikido because it takes a while before one becomes be proficient enough in Aikido (and don't we know it). While our Sensei is a wise man, he is not the only one who feels that way. His "un-warrior-like" attitude seems to be shared by many, starting at the top, with the Big Guy - Terry Dobson, in his ever popular essay *A Kind Word Turneth Away Wrath* tells about O'Sensei that "We were strictly enjoined from using Aikido techniques in public, unless absolute necessity demanded the protection of other people." These "spoil-sports" are like the generals and admirals who are always more reluctant to go to war than the politicians, because they know what it takes, that it is not nearly as glamorous as it looks in the movies, and lives and treasure are at stake, where it is best to make sure there is a good plan in place and preferably it is not an even match. Don't forget, he who upsets the balance of the universe by attacking is at a disadvantage, so don't plan on any pre-emptive strike. Perhaps further investigation is in order. Is that really a gun in that guys hand or just his cell phone? Perhaps the mean looking dude's GPS is on the blink and he just wants to ask you for directions. Ms. Soo-warr, under the topic of Avoidance, relates that when we become aware that something is not right, we have to decide whether to avoid or confront. She suggests that one way of avoidance is to simply talk "... to the attacker in a quiet and calm but positive way..." the same way the old man in Mr. Dobson's story deals with the troublemaker. I suspect calling for help, attracting the attention of passers-by, and being a general nuisance may dissuade some attacker (some of us are very blessed in the nuisance department). If all else fails, handing over the wallet, or a lesser token, may get us out of that bind.

### **Is Aikido well suited for self-defense?**

So, they took our wallet and still life and limb seem to be at stake, our live is flashing before our eyes - now is it time for Iriminage? If I said yes, this would certainly be a short paragraph, so, no. First some more discouraging words. John J. Donohue, in *Herding the Ox: The Martial Arts as Moral Metaphor*, states, "... I maintain ... that the martial arts cannot be considered fighting arts in the true sense of the word. They are too ritualized, too specialized for that. They take too long to learn. They are of limited use in a world of high explosives and automatic weapons." Well, hopefully there are no high explosives and automatic weapons involve or we better have learned O'Sensei's bullet avoidance technique. Ms. Soo-warr states of the Physical, "This should be avoided if at all possible. ... it is the absolute last resort, and should only be used for the protection of yourself or your family/friends." She recommends to channel our fear into the necessary positive response. She shows a few very simple techniques, some of which, even though she comes from a Chinese martial arts background, look a little "aikidoish" - apparently what works, works in a variety of styles. Like Aikido, I venture that it would take a fair amount of practice to make them work in the majority of circumstances, but practice is never a bad thing. The attacker has the unfortunate advantage of being able to plan the attack and choose, to some extent, the place and time. Just like the Mongol hordes could easily overtake the Great Wall of China by massing at one spot of the wall and overpowering the, of necessity, dispersed guards, so we cannot be super-vigilant every minute of the day. On the other hand, we are not your

average scared chicken. Even with a little bit of training we can at least evaluate the situation and stay calm. We should, however, be wary of over-confidence. An attacker is not like an uke who bears no ill feeling toward you, he is more like an unpredictable malicious beginner. We would want to proceed carefully, because if the attacker gets an inkling that we may attempt some martial arts move, or any move for that matter, we lose what little advantage we had. Our goal should be to just do whatever is necessary to get away, not to rid the neighborhood of all unsavory elements, and as O'Sensei says, use the least amount of force necessary. If you worry whether the attacker, who claims to have a gun to your back is in "correct" hanmi, so you won't have to decide whether you do gokkyu versus kotegaeshi once you turn, maybe that is not the right approach. Perhaps a simple kick to the shin or stomp on the instep might do. Fortunately (or unfortunately) even trained shooters have a bad record of hits once a person has put an amazingly short distance between the gun and him or her, and distance we want to gain. There isn't any simple answer on whether Aikido is suited for self-defense. I don't think I can be more specific than to say it depends on the person, how much training he or she has had, how "automatic" her or his response has become. It certainly never hurts to know how to be centered, to be calm in a stressful situation, and to have some idea of what could be done. We know Aikido is very powerful when applied correctly and most techniques have a built-in backup if you don't quite get it right initially. Certainly, if you fear for your life and feel you have nothing to lose; you need to take some action, and knowing Aikido is sure to give you an advantage.

So, if you still harbor some doubts - physical defense, using Aikido, or otherwise, should be the very last response, after your efforts to avoid trouble spots, to be an uninviting target, to get a way, to reason with an attacker, to let go of some material possessions in the interest of preserving your life and health, have failed and even then it should only be attempted with the utmost care. I hope you never have to worry about it.

The way of a warrior is based on humanity,  
love, and sincerity; the heart of martial valor is true  
bravery, wisdom, love, and friendship. Emphasis  
on the physical aspects of warriorship is futile, for  
the power of the body is always limited.

Every sturdy tree that towers over human beings  
owes its existence to a deeply rooted core.

O'Sensei (translated by John Stevens)