

AIKIDO, LIFE AND THE UNIVERSE

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I'd just turned 18 when I was called-up for the "Nashos" - compulsory National Service. I was angry because full-time military internment would totally disrupt my judo and ju-jitsu training, and very frustrated when told my five years in the military cadets didn't count toward exemption.

So I was not in the best of moods when, standing in line for lunch on my first day at Holsworthy military barracks, a big young bully strode down the queue with a get-out-of-my-way swagger and shoved in front of the smallest guy near the front. Obviously a would-be gangster wanting to be seen as a tough guy - the sort who would quickly attract a group of hoodlums and then make life a misery for everyone. So I decided to apply a little ju-jitsu!

Walking quietly up behind him I grabbed the back of his collar, pivoted under my arm and threw him down backward across my outstretched leg, being careful to land him on the concrete hard enough to knock the wind out without breaking any bones. As he staggered to his feet I ordered him back to the end of the line. He was too stunned to argue and stumbled away to the grins of the people in the queue who had been watching with great interest.

Next afternoon I'd pretty much forgotten this incident when the bombardier - it was an artillery regiment - finished the day's training in the bush, dismissed the platoon and left us to find our own way back to the barracks. As I turned to go I suddenly found myself confronted by the queue-jumping bully with two scowling supporters.

"Yeah, right!" I thought, "you've only been here one day and you're already getting your gang together!"

I flicked stiffened fingers at his face, hoping to frighten him enough to make him back off. I was merely aiming to awe him with the speed of the strike and then give him a verbal warning, which I hoped would be enough to scare him off. But the tip of one finger grazed his jaw and he fell unconscious at my feet!

It was so completely unexpected that mentally I just gaped at his fallen body. But I'm a good actor, so hid my feelings and ordered his friends to carry him away before I did the same to them! They were nearly wetting themselves and hastened to obey! As they staggered away I strolled nonchalantly off as if I did this sort of thing every day, but in fact I was totally astonished. I'd knocked people out before, but never with just one finger!

Boxing, kick-boxing, judo and jujitsu, pounding away at a makiwara and breaking boards had been part of my daily life for years, but I'd never even heard of anyone knocked out that way! My finger had barely touched him! It was not until I began learning Aikido years later that I began to understand.

Sugano Sensei was a brilliant uchi-deshi under one of history's greatest martial artists, Aikido's Founder O'Sensei Morehei Ueshiba. I was his first Australian student in 1965, and later, in 1968, established what's now Australia's oldest Aikido club at the Australian National University. By then I'd learnt a lot about ki, so wasn't very surprised when I saw another similar knockout.

I'd arranged for Sensei to conduct a weekend course in Canberra, and had informed the local TV station. The film director rang back later, inquiring what Aikido was, and I mentioned that one of its features is self-defense against armed opponents.

"Armed with what kind of weapons?" he asked.

"Mostly we train against knives, staffs and swords," I replied, "although I've also trained with firearms, hatchets and axes."

"You're not trying to tell me that an unarmed man can beat a swordsman!" he scoffed.

"Well, yes!" I replied. "That's exactly what we train for!"

"Oh! What nonsense!" he sneered.

I was used to people's ignorance about martial art, especially Aikido, so politely tried to explain that far from being nonsense, various Japanese arts specialise in unarmed defense against armed attackers, and have been doing so for centuries. But he would have none of it.

"OK!" he contemptuously interrupted. "I'll tell you what - *I'll* attack this Japanese fellow with a sword and see how he gets on!"

This alarmed me, for Sugano Sensei had been trained in an era when so many people were being killed in martial art challenges in Japan that the government introduced legislation banning them, though of course they still went on. Anyone attacking him seriously would likely be injured or killed - not the kind of publicity I wanted for Aikido!

The fencing champion (as I later discovered him to be) misinterpreted my concern, however, assuming I was frightened he would show "this Japanese fellow" up. The more I attempted to explain, the more convinced he became of this, so in the end I thought "to hell with you - you might as well learn the hard way." And so it proved.

When he arrived with his camera crew a few days later I saw him stop and stare as he entered the dojo. We were training with weapons in the power-filled techniques of old time *genuine* Aikido - not the dainty dance so often called Aikido these days. Clearly what he was seeing was nothing like he'd imagined.



I went over and again tried to persuade him to drop the challenge, but he was determined. So I left him with his crew setting the camera up and went to ask Sugano to try to not damage him too much, but was mentally prepared for the worst.

Looking annoyed Sugano stopped the class and directed the students to sit down. Then he and the fencer faced each other, Sugano poised like a leopard waiting to pounce, the fencer well balanced and very determined, but not so contemptuous now! Brave man, I thought, but misled by years of sport training where - as in most sports - there's no experience of the reality of death.

His attack was a brilliant, lightning fast lunge that covered the space between them in an instant. It was easy to see how he'd won fencing competitions. But in that same instant Sugano Sensei entered his shika-ku - and down he crashed, out like a light with a broken globe!

Sensei's ki-filled hands had flashed toward his face and might easily have broken his neck, but to my great relief he withheld the strike. Perhaps one hand brushed his cheek, the way my finger had brushed the bully's face, but I didn't think so. Either way, there was the attacker on the floor!

I hurried over to see if an ambulance was needed, but after a while he climbed groggily to his feet. Like the television professional he was he immediately staggered over to the cameraman and asked, "Did you get it?"

"No!" the disconcerted cameraman replied. "You said to start shooting on the wide-angle and then zoom in on the Jap to film you hitting him, which I did - but then he vanished! When I looked up you were on the floor!"

They had a quick chat about what to do while I looked on with raised eyebrows!

Finally - and I had to admire his courage - the director walked back to Sugano and very politely asked if they could please do it again because the cameraman had missed the shot. He agreed, and this time used a different technique, sliding past the sword to take the director's head and tumble him gently onto his back without hurting him.

Compared to the deadly earnestness of the first exchange, this was done with such good humor that it broke the ice and everyone laughed. Even the embarrassed fencer managed a self-conscious smile as he climbed to his feet and thanked the master.

And that's what the public saw on the TV news that night. The director's commentary started: "Silly me. This afternoon I made the mistake of challenging an Aikido master and this is what happened!" It was excellent publicity for Aikido after all.

So what is this apparently magical technique that renders people unconscious with the touch of a finger? There's no magic about it, but not everyone can learn it, so let's start at the beginning.

When O'Sensei's original Aikido was introduced to Australia in 1965 by Sugano Sensei, he had come straight from O'Sensei. People wanting to learn genuine Aikido today should remember that all the basics originally revolved around *ki* training and incorporated *atemi*. Many Westerners now know the term *atemi*, but few know it the Aikido way. I had done lots of striking practice before discovering Aikido, but Sugano Sensei gave me a completely new slant on it.

"When delivering *atemi*," he said, "you must pour in so much *Ki* that they blow up inside!"



At that time, early in my Aikido career, I still knew little about *Ki* even though I'd had all those years of striking practice. All my training had been aimed at disabling opponents by the impact of the blows - what other way was there? Jujitsu had taught me the major *atemi* points and some *Kuatsu*, but O'Sensei's Aikido was different. I cannot remember a class when Sensei did not emphasise the use of *KI*. None of us understood what he talking about, a problem exacerbated by our ignorance of

Japanese and his lack of English, but I finally realised that *ki* power explained the Holsworthy incident. Especially since I had also experienced similar surges of enormous power on other occasions.

I had for instance experienced it twice when nearly drowned as a child, then again in an avalanche when skiing and several times during fights. In each case there had been an incredible surge of energy after which I couldn't remember much except emerging unscathed. Sugano Sensei's teaching and explosively dynamic demonstrations showed me that this amazing power, which he called *ki*, can be cultivated to an extraordinary level, and his training was opening a whole new world for me!

At its core, ***Aikido training is ki training.*** It begins with the unbendable arm exercise, where a strong person is asked to test the strength of an instructor's arm while he resists it being bent, and then again when he stops resisting and focusses *Ki*. The difference is enormous. Students are then taught the mental process which makes this possible, and then form pairs to practice. Usually about 95% of any group can dramatically increase their arm strength at their first attempt.

The next stage is learning how to stand correctly (*hanmi* and *kamae*) followed by how to move (*tai sabaki*) so one's *ki* aligns with an attacker's. This leads into exercises where the attacker (*uke*) seizes one of the defender's (*tori*'s) wrists, and *tori* aligns his *ki* with him so he is rendered harmless. A series of increasingly powerful techniques are then built onto this practice.

Students also begin practicing the energy-enhancing exercises called ***kokyu-ho***. Regular training in these basics - extending *ki*, correct stance, *tai sabaki* and *kokyu-ho* - lead to more advanced training where *ki* is focussed so powerfully that it cannot be resisted. People skilled in "ai-ki" may safely ride such techniques out, but can no more resist them than they can resist a sword cut or shotgun blast. This is one of the reasons Aikido is called "the art of non-resistance" - resist it at your peril!

Progressing from muscle-powered techniques to *ki*-based ones is the first big step in Aikido. It requires dedication and practice, just as learning to play a musical instrument does. The next important goal is activating the "energy centres" so *ki* can be consciously directed around the body's major pathways, known as the microcosmic and macrocosmic

orbits. Ki is life-energy, so this is not only beneficial but also pleasant and rewarding, though requiring considerable effort at first.

The most important centre is the “one point” or “*tanden*”, called the “*tan tien*” in Mandarin. It’s a point at the body’s centre-of-gravity where ki focusses most powerfully, and it’s also the harmonising centre for the body’s energy network. All ki exercises should begin and end with it, otherwise energy imbalances can occur which can harm one’s health.



Another important part of Aikido is “*zanshin*”. This is usually translated as “awareness”, but refers not merely to perceiving one’s surroundings with one’s physical senses in the usual way, but to an intuitive perceptiveness of the natural forces in the environment, including the inner states - moods and intentions - of animals and people. This is an important step toward what Zen calls *Satori*, a state embodying sensations of being “in harmony with nature” and “at-one with the universe”.

Such things can only be learnt through what Zen describes as “direct transmission without words”. They cannot be gained academically. Intellectualising about them inevitably leads to self-delusion because words are merely symbols for reality, not reality itself. As an old Zen warning goes, “the reflection of the moon on water is not the moon itself!”

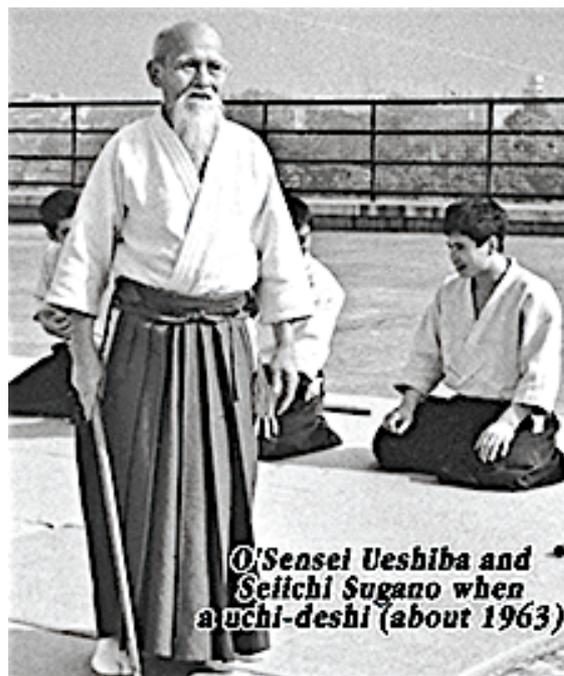
This is the reason there must be practical, physical testing in Aikido to ensure the student can really do the things he should be learning to do. Many students cannot stand this because it makes them confront their inner weaknesses and pretenses. It’s a tragedy when such people “buy” grades and begin teaching, as happens so often these days. Only genuinely dedicated students accept it as a necessary if painful way toward true progress. This is the reason really proficient teachers are always humble and tolerant.

One of the old Zen stories tells of a master who, whenever confronted with a student deluding himself into thinking he had achieved greatness, would send him into the village to get something from an old woman.

On opening the door and seeing another inflated ego she would instantly knock him to the ground and slam the door in disgust. Imagine the loss of face for a young Japanese! The shock would make him realise that if he had *really* achieved enlightenment he could not be ambushed in such a way, and so needed much more training!

Zen is intrinsic to Aikido: it increases our inner comprehension of the essence of things, and here we must remember that Zen and Aikido are concerned with profound realities **for which there are no words!**

Nor is this solely an Eastern problem. There are aspects of nature for which we have no meaningful names. Therefore Western science gives them **meaningless labels**, as with the so-called *black holes* and *dark energy* and *the extra dimensions* which, according to string theory, are curled up inside hypothetical and inaccessible geometric containers called *Calibri-Yau manifolds!*



Such labels, like the Aborigine’s rainbow serpent, can usefully point to unknowns we think **may** exist, yet provide no real understanding. Their danger is that they tend to mislead because they delude us into thinking we comprehend a thing just because we’ve put an “x” label on it.

So it is with *ki* and *yin* and *yang* and *satori*, except that in Aikido we have reached the stage where we can make practical use of these concepts, even though we don't fully understand them yet, any more than we fully understand quantum mechanics, or the Aborigines understood the natural phenomena they called the rainbow serpent.



Yet it's likely that within the functioning of quantum entanglements, where activities at the sub-atomic level harmonise with each other even though widely separated, there is a direct comparison with the way *ki* functions. At its deepest level, *satori* connects us to the entire universe. Which seems to be the explanation for some of the things science still can't understand, such as the following.

I had taken the bus from North Richmond to Richmond one morning, and then the train on to Sydney where I spent the day. Arriving back at Richmond just after dark to catch the last bus home, I felt a sudden terrible apprehension that the Hawkesbury River had flooded and the bus would be swept off North Richmond bridge if it tried to cross.

This was absurd. It hadn't rained for weeks and the bus had crossed the bridge shortly before, so I forced myself aboard. Then the fear hit me so powerfully that I almost leapt off it again. Somehow I forced myself to take a seat, but as we drove off I became more and more worried.

The closer we got to the river the more agitated I became. I was in a window seat, so slid the window open and undid my shoe laces so I could quickly remove my shoes and try to escape through the window if the bus was washed into the river as I was sure it would if we tried to cross the bridge.

In those days the Richmond-Kurrajong road descended a short incline before making a sharp turn onto the bridge. In the middle of this turn the driver suddenly slammed on the brakes. Tyres screeched, the bus skidded sideways and slewed to a stop - right at the edge of a raging torrent!

The Hawkesbury is the biggest river on the east coast of Australia. It has a such a huge catchment that the coastal section can be in drought while flood waters are beginning to roar down mountain tributaries hundreds of kilometres upstream. And that's what had happened. Our bus had crossed the bridge less than an hour before when there was no sign of danger, yet a 150-metre wide torrent was now raging across it. Next day it would peak more than 20 metres above its deck.

The enormous Wallagamba Dam, built years later, now helps control the suddenness and severity of such floods, but that was a very close thing. We were extremely glad of the skill of our driver in making that emergency stop. But the point is this: at *precisely* the time the river began flooding the bridge I experienced an enormous fear of that very thing.

How does one explain such phenomena? One thing this and similar events have taught me is to never again ignore such warnings, and that has saved my life on several occasions. Which doesn't answer the question: how can such things be?

One thing obvious to anyone doing the hard yards of learning genuine Aikido is that *Ki* is a major force that permeates everything. In an adventurous life involving more than 60 years of martial art including 45 years of Aikido, I've witnessed enough *ki* phenomena - some of it bordering on the miraculous! - to be left



without doubt of its universal existence and power. Where ki is concerned we are in much the same situation as people were before this age of science when they saw lightning strike but had no idea of the nature of electricity.

Certainly O'Sensei Ueshiba's breakthrough in harnessing the power of ki and then developing a training method which enables anyone to learn it - provided they have patience, drive, enthusiasm and self honesty - is a great leap forward. Not only does it enable a student to precisely tailor the amount of energy needed to subdue an attacker without necessarily injuring him, but the techniques of ki harmony and enhancement open the way to a deeper understanding of life and the universe.

