

“You didn’t sign up, did you?” My wife asked when I came home after visiting an Aikido dojo (training hall) to watch a class.

My grin told her ‘yes’ and she shook her head in not quite disbelief (she’s known me long enough to not be too surprised by my bright ideas and impulsiveness). I had not planned to sign up, at least not that night, but watching one class was all I needed.

My martial arts history reflects the pattern of much of my life – quick, passionate starts that fizzle out from boredom and my unwillingness (inability?) to put in enough effort. Beginning at age nine, I’ve started and quit Tang Soo Do, Karate (twice), and Jujitsu; never getting past green belt (less than half way to black belt). But writing this book two and a half years after watching that first Aikido class, I hold the rank of brown belt and will test for my black belt in nine months. My days as a quitter (and as a green belt!) are behind me, and I cannot overstate the importance of Aikido training in my development, not just as a martial artist, but also as a human being.

Aikido first appealed to me as a really cool looking way to whup a Bad Guy’s ass, but the more (and more deeply) I study it, the more I understand myself, other people and the Ways of the world. With less than three years of study, I know I am very much a beginner and I make no claims of expertise, but even at this early stage of my training, I see many ways how what I learn in the dojo applies to my life outside the dojo.

Aikido is a ‘close-in’ martial art utilizing throws, pins, and joint locks rather than the kicks and punches of styles such as Karate and Tae Kwon Do. Aikido differs from most martial arts in two significant ways: First, rather than meeting force with force, Aikido teaches how to blend with an opponent’s attack and use his own energy to control him. Second, Aikido techniques allow the practitioner to subdue an attacker without harming him. (The founder of Aikido, Morihei Ueshiba, taught “to injure an opponent is to injure oneself.”)

The lessons of Aikido offer meaningful insights into the “art” of leadership; and even if you have no background or interest in martial arts, Aikido techniques offer powerful metaphors and lessons for effective leadership skills.

## **Part I Get Ready!**

I first heard the word Aikido in 1988 in connection with the release of Steven Seagal’s first film, *Above the Law*. The movie opens with Seagal narrating over still photographs of Aikido’s creator, Morihei Ueshiba, known as O’Sensei (Great Teacher). Seagal’s character says, “*When I was a little boy, my father took me to a baseball game. They had a martial arts demonstration after the game and I saw this little old Japanese man doing things that I thought were magical...*” At its advanced levels, Aikido is spectacular to watch – grace and power are combined in an almost magical way. The path to developing that grace and power is decidedly less glamorous than the end result.

Like other athletic endeavors, martial expertise is developed step by step through practice and much repetition. Sure, some may have more of a ‘knack’ for the Art than others, but ultimately what you get out of it is in direct proportion to the effort you put in.

So too, great leaders are developed, not born. Undoubtedly, some people seem blessed with a natural charisma that attracts followers, but the day-to-day skills of leadership come only through practice and understanding.

## 1

### Teachers

Understanding comes most directly and efficiently through good teachers. This is true not only in martial arts, but for life in general. Teachers are all around us and come in two types: formal and informal.

#### Formal Teachers

Formal teachers include martial arts instructors, pastors, professors, parents or anyone who has the specific role of providing instruction and guidance. Some formal teachers you choose and some you don't. Regardless, a good leader's path begins with becoming a good follower.

One danger budding leaders face is the tendency to undervalue teachers – especially if they did not choose the teacher. I look back over my path and realize I let a lot of potential wisdom and development slip away because of my know-it-all attitude. I was so anxious to get to the next step of my Life's Mission that I was blind to how much I still needed to learn, as well as to the wisdom carried by various teachers in my life (especially those I did not choose or particularly care for).

As a developing leader you need to take full advantage of the teachers in your life – believe it or not, your parents have wisdom you don't, simply by virtue of having been alive so much longer than you; that boring professor may not be the best lecturer, but if you make the effort to focus and listen more closely, you will find knowledge.

#### Student–Teacher Relationships

Student–teacher relationships may be as casual as those of professors and students who never even meet, to as intimate as guru–disciple relationships; with most being somewhere in between.

Aside from the obvious impartation of the teacher's expertise, student – teacher relationships are lessons in and of themselves. Leaders mentor, and one learns how to mentor by being mentored. My *Aikido* teacher, or *sensei*, uses the analogy of stones in a stream becoming smooth as they rub against each other and rough edges are worn away. This process is not always easy, but it is necessary.

#### Informal Teachers

So now that we know to take (proper) advantage of our formal teachers, who are our informal teachers? Simple – everyone (and everything) else. O'Sensei says, "*Do not overlook the truth that is right before you. Study how water flows in a valley stream, smoothly and freely between the rocks. Also learn from holy books and wise people. Everything – even mountains, rivers, plants and trees – should be your teacher.*"

So many irritations, stresses and hurts of life vanish as we learn to appreciate all people and situations as teachers and opportunities for learning and growth. (O'Sensei reminds

us, “*Life is growth. If we stop growing, technically and spiritually, we are as good as dead.*”)

It is certainly difficult to look at an enemy as a teacher, but doing so can take the sting out of any treachery. Not long ago, the most significant friendship of my adult life ended bitterly. I felt taken advantage of on several levels, including financial. After my former friend and I broke off contact, I would lay awake at night replaying our final argument in my head, thinking of what was said, what I ‘should have’ said, and what I would like to say. The key for me in letting go (a continuing process) was to look at my ‘adversary’ as my teacher. I used him as a mirror and saw that I do some of the very things that make him look so bad in my eyes. I looked for negative similarities that I could begin to remove from my character. Then I looked to his ‘bright side’ to see things worth emulating that would improve my life. I also looked at our history to see where things began to go wrong and found times I should have behaved differently.

Every time bitterness and hurt feelings would creep back into my spirit, I would focus on learning something about myself and relationships in general. My enemy became my teacher and even though he may have meant me ill, he served me as I used him and the situation to better myself.

And this is a secret of life: Everyone, everything and every circumstance, no matter how trying, has something to teach us. That means even the cruelest attacker comes to us offering the gift of wisdom, even if unwittingly. Aikido in everyday life is about transforming the negative into the positive. Leadership is very often the art of turning adversity into opportunity. Mastery of this art comes as we learn from all available teachers – formal and informal.

To do this, we must begin with the proper state of mind.

## 2

### **Kamai – a ready mind**

Two students stand at attention (heels together, hands at sides, backs straight) facing each other about six feet apart. Sensei commands, “*Migi hanmi kamaï*” and each student slides his right foot forward until his feet are shoulder-width apart. At the same time, they extend their right arms from the center of their chests towards each other. Left hands are held just in front of the belly button. Fingers on both hands are open wide and pointing forward. Each practitioner leans a little forward on his front leg. Back leg is straight.

*Kamaï* is the ‘basic stance’ or ‘ready’ position. Everything begins from here. The purpose of this stance is to ‘ready’ both body and mind. The mind commands the body to move to *kamaï* position, and the bodily position of *kamaï* helps the mind stay ready and focused. A calm, focused mind and a ready yet relaxed body is the starting point for successfully responding to an attack.

*Kamaï* mind is the balance between two extremes – over thinking (the mind racing through all possible attacks “right hook, a left jab, a front kick...?” leading to paralysis or overreaction) and under thinking (disregard or distraction to the risk of being caught off guard). Much better to have a calm mind open to all possibilities and a physical posture that leaves you capable of responding to any number of attacks.

So, too, the effective leader greets challenges, conflicts and life in general with a certain calmness of mind regardless of how chaotic (or dangerous) the situation.

Easy enough to say, but how do we develop this mind?

**Awareness** is the first step – the very act of considering our state of mind helps to calm it. Ask yourself, “What emotion is this?” and answer honestly. If your answer is something besides “calm,” begin to calm it by focusing on your mind’s link to your body. Just as the Aikidoist uses physical posture to focus mental activity, we can do the same.

You may have heard the term “centering” in connection with relaxation or stress reduction techniques. This simply means to think about the geometric center of your body, which is an inch or two below your navel. It may be helpful to place your hand there as you sit or stand with your back straight, allowing your shoulders to relax (most of us carry our tension in our shoulders, neck and jaw). Breathe slowly, deliberately and deeply from your center (not from high up in your chest).

Even a few moments of this focused breathing will greatly increase feelings of calm and help you to keep a ready mind even in the most trying circumstances.

### 3

#### The Basics

Before Aikido students stand in *kamae* facing each other to practice techniques, they stand alone to practice basic movements. The style of Aikido I study is called Yoshinkan Aikido and it is very ‘basic movement’ oriented. We have nine basic movements that are the building blocks of all Aikido technique. Before one can send multiple opponents flying through the air, he or she must be proficient in the basic footwork and body positioning. This proficiency only comes through proper instruction (teachers!) and repetition. I have had several Aikido classes consisting of nothing more than repeating the same two-step movement over and over again until my legs felt like jell-o. My Sensei drills the movements into us, knowing they need to become second nature before we can progress.

Gozo Shioda Sensei, the founder of the Yoshinkan style of Aikido wrote, *“However solid a building may appear, it is worthless if its foundations have not been well laid...firm foundations are essential in aikido, for without them it is impossible to develop effective technique.”*

Whether martial arts, sports, business or academics, fundamentals are the key. Before the musician plays a concert, she plays a song; before a song, a chord; and before the chord, a single note.

Whatever your field of endeavor (now or in the future), make the effort to master the fundamentals. Don’t gloss over the basics as you hurry towards the more glamorous final results.

#### Learn deeply and apply broadly

##### *Deep*

Anytime you have the chance to learn the basics of anything, learn deeply. Don’t blow through a “boring” 100 level course because the 300 level course is the interesting one. Instead of yawning your way through basic material, master it! I think back on my

college career and remember those ‘older’ students (probably the age I am now!) who annoyed the class by constantly asking the professor stupid questions about material the rest of us found so boring. I understand now how smart those ‘stupid’ questions were. While the rest of us rolled our eyes and doodled, the questioner took advantage of the opportunity to learn deeply from a formal teacher.

In the business world, don’t gloss over training programs.

About a decade ago, I had a brief (*very* brief) career in restaurant management. Assistant managers-to-be went through an extensive training program where we learned and worked every job in the restaurant from busboy to cook to bartender. Though spending 16 hours washing dishes didn’t particularly thrill me, the experience of learning the fundamentals of all areas of the restaurant was invaluable. I had zero cooking experience before that job, but by learning the step by step basics of cooking during my two weeks of kitchen training, I ended up being able to prepare and cook every item on our extensive menu.

### *Broad*

Though my job only required me to learn to prepare our specific dishes, the basic how-to’s (fundamentals!) of cooking could be applied to any recipe.

I think there is more overlapping of various endeavors, fields and areas of expertise than we often realize at first glance. Truth is truth and certain ‘Ways’ (of thinking, doing and being) are universal. For instance, just as there are certain fundamentals of balance and movement that apply to martial arts as well as to sports or dance, there are certain Ways of dealing with people or conflict or tragedy that apply across a myriad of careers, settings and circumstances.

Since these Ways are mastered step by step in their most basic and rudimentary forms, we serve ourselves well to take advantage of any and all opportunities to learn deeply and apply broadly the fundamentals of any endeavor.

## 4

### **Partnerships**

A student can practice basic aikido movements by himself but needs a partner to learn basic aikido techniques.

When two students face each other to practice a technique, each plays a specific role. One side, called *ste* (pronounced “shtay”) will defend against an attack from the other side, called *uke* (pronounced “oo-kay”). *Ste* will receive *uke*’s attack and ultimately use *uke*’s own energy to control him.

Each side begins with cooperation in mind – after the initial attack, *uke* does not resist *ste*, but allows his body to ‘fit’ and go along with *ste*’s technique. For his part, *ste* controls *uke* in such a way as to protect *uke* from injury. There is an intentionally harmonious relationship from beginning to end.

After one or more repetitions, the students exchange roles (the original *ste* now becomes the attacker and is controlled by the previous *uke*). They continue to alternate back and forth every few turns. This cycle shows us our first lesson drawn from the *ste-uke* relationship.

### *Give and Take*

There are no full-time *ste* or *uke* positions. Though the more aggressive among us may prefer *ste*, and others are more comfortable as *uke*, no one gets to be one or the other all the time. Just as good teachers are first good students, effective leaders have to understand the dynamics of both leading and following.

As with everything else in life, awareness is the key. Pay attention to the proper role of the moment and act accordingly – the CEO of a billion dollar corporation may be *ste* all day long at work, but when he's pulled over by a police officer on the way home, he had better know how to be *uke*. Middle managers by definition have to flow back and forth between *uke*, as they interact with senior management, and *ste*, when managing others.

We all alternate between these two roles. Instead of fighting against the flow, we should embrace and totally commit to the proper role of the moment. When life places you as *ste*, lead confidently, yet gently; and when you are *uke*, serve fully and fearlessly.

Tips for *Ste*: The more advanced an Aikido practitioner, the more effortless and gentle his technique becomes. As you develop your leadership skills and techniques there will be less fighting with *uke*. The more skillful the leader, the less he has to prod. If you have to force your way, something is wrong with your technique. Aikido is the difference between a mother offering her hand to gently and effortlessly guide her child out of the store and another mother snatching her child by the arm and dragging him away.

Tips for *Uke*: There is no ego in *uke*. Your job is to fit your partner and follow the technique. Period. At those times where it is proper or necessary for you to be *uke*, flow with it. Dragging your feet only prolongs the experience. Consider the different outcomes between cooperating with a police officer during a traffic stop and resisting. A good *uke* may or may not get out of a speeding ticket, but a bad *uke* goes to jail.

## **PART II**

### **Action!**

*(Though we all must properly fulfill the roles of both *ste* and *uke*, for the sake of leadership training, the rest of this book is written primarily towards the viewpoint of *ste*).*

### **1**

#### **Initiation**

*Ste* and *uke* face each other. *Uke* does not 'attack' until *ste* signals for it. This is called the Initiation. Depending on the type of Aikido training and the experience level of the partners, *ste* may indicate how *uke* should attack (for instance, *ste* may lean his shoulder into *uke* to signal a "shoulder grasp"). More advanced students practice *randori*, where *uke* attacks repeatedly any way he wishes, but even this only begins when *ste* gives the signal.

Before we can control the action of a given moment, we must own the responsibility for it. Everything begins with *ste*. Once *ste* signals ‘attack,’ he alone is responsible for his self-protection. *Uke* is never ‘blamed’ for the successful attack that *ste* fails to control. *Uke* is simply doing what *uke* does. *Ste* ‘owns’ the success or failure of everything that follows the initiation.

If we expand the Aikido metaphor a bit and let *uke* represent not just a difficult person or moment of conflict but Life in general, we see that a key to victory is the willingness to accept responsibility for the successes and failures accumulated as we deal with what Life offers us. Like *uke*, Life does what Life does. Too many of us waste too much time blaming and bemoaning when we should be countering and responding. Aikido teaches us a three-step system of ‘handling’ Life.

## 2 Enter

“Aikido is a forward art!” I have heard my Sensei say (yell) more times than I know. O’Sensei said, “When an opponent comes forward, move in and greet him; if he wants to pull back, send him on his way.” Aikido’s basic stance (*kamai*) leans forward more prominently than other martial arts’, as if to jump start forward momentum. Aikido teaches us to actually *enter* into attacks rather than stay put or shrink back.

It may seem counterintuitive to move towards (rather than away from) an attack, but picture someone swinging a big round punch towards your head. Obviously staying put is not a good option, but even if you back up and cause your attacker to miss, he can simply move closer and swing again. However, if you move into him and inside the arc of the punch, with proper timing and technique you can render the strike harmless.

Life is dynamic, not static. It is constantly moving and changing, and so are we all. ‘Staying put’ is not really an option, especially in times of conflict or other challenge. And obviously running away doesn’t work, so our only option is to Enter.

We Enter as we lean into Life and greet it and its many challenges. Entering is buckling down and taking up the challenge of the tough college course rather than dropping it because of its difficulty. Entering is going directly to that person spreading rumors about you instead of spitefully spreading rumors of your own. We Enter each time we refuse to duck and run from challenges, difficulties and uncomfortable situations of all kinds.

Aikido at its advanced levels appears almost dance-like. Aikido masters seem able to effortlessly shake off, avoid and neutralize attacks from multiple opponents with a dancer’s grace. I’m sure this ability comes largely from their commitment to Enter deeply into each attack before the full threat of it develops. Life, in its own form of *randori*, is constantly coming at us. Those who cower or run usually end up getting beat down anyway. Why not enter in and learn to dance?

### Timing

Aikidoists learn the rhythms of physical combat. Great leaders pay attention to the rhythms of Life and develop appropriate timing. They know some issues must be dealt with immediately before they develop like a cancer, while other situations are best attended to once the heat of the moment has past.

Jumping-in too soon is just as dangerous as not moving quickly enough. So how do we know? The answer is the same as it is with most of the subjects in this book – awareness and repetition. When you see a contest of Life emerging, ask yourself, “Am about to execute the right response, in the right way, *at the right time?*” The very act of asking the question will very often lead to the right answer; and though it may seem awkward at first, the more we practice jumping in at the right moment, the more natural it will become.

### **Intention**

When it is time to enter, do so with clear *intention*. What is the outcome you seek? Or as Stephen Covey exhorts in the *7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, “Begin with the end in mind.”

Just as Aikidoists seek to transform conflict into cooperation without injuring their opponent, great leaders pursue win-win situations. When you see it is time to Enter, determine to do the right thing even when it is not the easy thing. Pursue the greatest good as you consistently move towards a peaceful resolution. Always begin with (and constantly reaffirm) the intention to create positive outcomes for all involved.

Yes, results may matter more than good intentions, but conscious intent is an important key to achieving good results.

## **3**

### **Blend**

It is the *blending* action of Aikido that makes the art so distinctive. Instead of fighting against the energy of an attack or overpowering an opponent, the Aikido practitioner learns to blend with, and then redirect his opponent’s energy. For instance, if someone grabs you by the lapels and pulls you into him, instead of pulling back, Blend with his energy by moving with the pull to step deeply into him (enter!), and knock him off balance using his own force. Or if he shoves you in the chest, slightly turning your body (rather than pushing back) will cause him to slip right past you, stumbling forward as if barreling through a door that suddenly swings open.

Because of the circular movement utilized in Aikido, there is a moment in almost every technique where *uke* and *ste* face the same direction. From this we draw our first leadership “blending” lesson: *Successful leaders learn to see from others’ point of view*. This does not mean that they give in or give up, but they do seek to understand. We blend when we ask, “Where is my ‘opponent’ really coming from on this issue? How do *they* see the situation? Why is this so important to them? What resolutions could they find acceptable?” Asking and answering these questions will help you to see from the broadest perspective possible.

Blending also means matching the incoming energy and not over-reacting or under-reacting. Once you make the effort to understand their point of view, you will have a better sense of how much energy, passion and effort is required in your response.

When leading a group of people, Blending relates to ability to move with and channel their energy. For instance, a teacher might find more success leading an energetic, unruly group of students through a ‘hands-on’ activity than he would trying to force them into silence for a lecture.

## Control (finish)

*“Forward, Forward, Forward! Finish! Finish! Finish!”* my sensei yells, hoping to override my mental block as I get stuck halfway through a technique. You can enter well and blend perfectly, but what good is it if you don’t finish the technique?

The third stage of Aikido technique (after Enter and Blend) is to Control. Physically this means neutralizing the in-coming attack using a throw, pin, or joint-lock. Metaphorically, it means successfully achieving a desired outcome while honoring peaceful intentions. The metaphor applies in two realms – tasks and relationships.

### *Tasks*

Think of your next task (leadership or otherwise) as a martial art technique – It begins with your initiation and decision to Enter. The actual ‘doing’ of the task requires you to exert the proper amount of effort to maintain forward momentum while Blending with, and then redirecting, any negative energy. Control is achieved upon completion of the task.

Many of us have a history of quick starts that fade into unfinished business. This is a tough, but not impossible, pattern to break.

### **Acknowledge and Release**

First, acknowledge the problem – If yours is the story of a quitter, see it for what is. Then, without beating yourself up over past failures, allow yourself to change. It does not matter if you have tried and failed a thousands times. Each failure was merely a necessary step in your journey to ultimate success. Forget the past and move FORWARD, FORWARD, FORWARD!

### **Small Victories**

Too often, those of us with a “quitting tendency” set ourselves up for failure by jumping into giant tasks (career, significant weight loss, marriage...) without ever developing follow-through skills. “Practice makes perfect” is not just a truism, it’s true. To achieve the “big” goals in your, get yourself in the habit of finishing by mastering the “little” stuff. Patterns repeat; and tendency to quit the big stuff is reflected in the small – college dropouts usually have a pattern of rushed and unfinished course assignments (my bachelor’s degree took a mere fifteen years); employees with ‘disaster area’ work desks probably have sloppy apartments.

If this rings true with you, teach yourself a better way by doing little things with a renewed commitment to excellence. Drop the “that’s good enough” attitude with schoolwork, job tasks, or housekeeping and keep moving forward until the job (any and every job!) is done. And even if (when!) you stumble, get up, start again and next time - FINISH! FINISH! FINISH!

### *Relationships*

In the realm of relationships, perhaps “direct” would be a more appropriate term than “control,” as skilled leaders do not rely on manipulation or coercion to achieve their ends.

Instead, leaders move forward towards (and through!) goals using their skills (blending, partnering, etc.) to develop cooperation along the way.

This is only possible when leaders maintain the intention of working towards win-win situations whenever possible. And it is possible more often than we think. Life, even when manifested as conflict, does not have to be “I win, you lose.” Aikido (literally translated, “The way of harmony”) teaches that when we Enter at the right time with peaceful intentions, and seek understanding as we Blend with the energy of our partner, then we will have enough Control (mostly of our self!) to direct the situation to a harmonious finish.

### **One Cut**

From the initiation through the control, Aikido techniques are executed without ever stopping. Momentum is too valuable to give up. Stopping and restarting allows an opponent opportunity to regain his footing and become dangerous again. My sensei likens this continuation to cutting with a *katana*, or Japanese sword – to successfully slice through your target, you have to strike with one continuous motion or “one cut.”

Whether applying the Aikido metaphor to conflict, tasks or relationships, remember the *one cut* principle – Once in motion, stay in motion; stopping dooms the technique. Life may slow you down, just don’t let it stop you.

## **5**

### **Final Word**

Though I wrote this booklet for student leaders, I have not focused on specific leadership skills such as public speaking, negotiating or even “how to motivate others.” Instead my goal (intention!) is to point you, as a current or future leader, towards the path of self-mastery. Constantly developing self-mastery and self-control through awareness and repetition will allow you much greater control over your environment and increased ability to direct the energy of other people.

Aikido was developed directly out of the fighting arts of the Samurai – the warrior class of pre-modern Japan. The word *samurai* literally meant “to serve” and Samurai viewed their combat skills as means of service – to their lord, the emperor and their country. The best leaders today are those who approach leadership positions as opportunities to serve (be it school, employer, community, or country) and develop leadership skills with the intention of offering greater service.

Great leaders humble themselves, learn from great teaches and master the basics of each endeavor. They form partnerships and nurture relationships. They accept responsibility for every aspect of their lives and seek to better the lives of others. Great leaders courageously enter into the moment, blend with what life offers, and see things through to win-win conclusions.

I wish you the best as you travel along the Way of Leadership.