



# FINDING BALANCE: WHAT AIKIDO CAN TEACH US ABOUT CONFLICT

BY JUDY RINGER



*“Harmony doesn’t mean just getting along with people at any cost just to avoid a confrontation. Harmony as used in aikido does not involve compromising at all. Rather aikido’s harmony brings different, even opposing elements together, and intensifies them in a way that drives everything toward a higher level.”*

—Mitsunari Kanai, *Technical Aikido*

Conflict stories are our most interesting stories. When you see two people deeply engaged in conversation, chances are that one of them is telling a conflict story. They’re fascinating. And we have such strong opinions about them, especially when they are *our* stories. We live them again and again as we revisit the events, the feelings, the thoughts about what we should have said, and how perfect things could be if only our adversaries would change.

The moment of conflict holds such promise—the opportunity to approach life creatively, make a different choice, visit another planet—opportunities we would not otherwise be offered if it weren’t for the conflict. Conflict is one way in which we come to know the world and understand each other. Conflict offers an opening to our most powerful selves. It also offers the opposite. Like two roads diverging, one leads toward connection, the other toward separation. Our habitual patterns of reaction leave us thinking we have no choice but to do what we’ve always done. Then, when the conflict is over, we look back, asking “*why did I do that, what was I thinking?*” having once again missed the opportunity to take a different path.

## Making Choices

Conflict too often provides the bricks and mortar for walls that keep out the world and those we love. Constructed of fear, judgment, defensiveness, and misunderstanding, our walls are meant to keep us safe and maintain the rightness of our opinions. The problem is that walls work two ways. Our carefully assembled grudges, justifications, and attitudes are, at the same time,

barriers to what we desire most—connection to our wisdom, to our humanity, and to the source of universal intelligence that supports us all. Our real safety lies in connection, but because we are more practiced at building walls, we create a prison for ourselves, keeping out the very things we hoped the walls would enclose.

What walls have you constructed that no longer serve a useful purpose? Do reactive habits keep you from finding a new path? In what ways are you resisting connection? What is conflict and how can you safely change yourself in order to change your situation?

## A New Way to Manage Conflict

Luckily, I’ve discovered a tool that helps me remember that I have alternatives even in the most difficult situations. A couple of decades ago, I fell in love with a martial art called aikido and began to see the world through its lens. From the beginning, aikido’s fluid, spiraling, and powerful movements seemed to suggest possibility—a new way to manage physical conflict. I found aikido’s principles of centered response, utilization of energy, and non-resistant leading to be equally applicable in non-physical conflict—what we might call life’s “attacks”—such as arguments, everyday hassles, and the more serious problems we all face at some point in our lives.

When you watch aikidoists practicing, you don’t see a typical adversarial battle between aggressor and defender. You see what looks like a physical exchange between two people giving and receiving energy, more like a powerful dance than combat.

As an attack comes toward her, a receiver does not strike back or otherwise block the force of the attack. Instead, she moves toward the incoming energy (shifting slightly off the line of attack) and

### TEAM TIP

In a group, talk about how you might apply the metaphor of aikido to your work together.



physically unites with the attacker's power. Once she makes this connection, she controls the direction and momentum of the attack by pinning or throwing her opponent. This is the most basic principle of aikido: do not resist an attack. Instead, the aikidoist learns to blend, control, and redirect.

### Utilization of Energy

*Life could be a lot easier than I make it*, was my first thought upon seeing the art of aikido. Having lived the life of a perfectionist for so many years, I was accustomed to struggling with life events, putting pressure on myself at every turn. But as an aikidoist I asked, *How might I use what comes at me instead of fighting or wishing it away?* It made so much sense, and I loved the inclusive view it offered. I guessed correctly that it would take some undoing of old, ingrained habits of resistance before I could acquire this new way of being, and I began to look with new eyes at what I had previously thought of as negative events in my life. *What does it mean to use energy?*

I began to teach the aikido metaphor as a way of transforming conflict and to share the view the aikido lens offers, both to demonstrate for others and to clarify for myself how life, work, and relationships might benefit from this model. At the same time I began practicing the martial art, reasoning that integrating aikido “on the mat” would help me teach and apply its concepts “off the mat.” Every moment on the mat reinforces my belief.

### The Way of Harmony

Developed in the twentieth century, aikido is the invention of a highly skilled and spiritual Japanese warrior, Morihei Ueshiba (1883–1969). Those of us who practice aikido call him *O Sensei* (“Great Teacher”). A master of sword and open-hand combat, O Sensei held that the true martial art was one of harmony. Making subtle changes in the combative arts he had mastered, he conceived a martial art that could disarm an attack without doing harm in the process. He called it aikido—the art of peace. Translated as “the way of blending or harmonizing with universal energy,” the aim of aikido is not merely self-defense, but a new way to reconcile differences.

The power and art of aikido are in the joining—in moving toward an attack and becoming one with the attacker. It takes presence of mind and a strong center of gravity not to be swept up in the energy of an attack but instead to enter into its chaos, understand its core, and direct it toward resolution. Since she flows *with* the river instead of pushing *against* it, the aikidoist's movements are quick and power-

ful. Before an attack can do harm, the attacker is engaged and guided to a place where the energy can play out safely.

In life, the aikido metaphor is realized when you transform challenges into opportunities and adapt to new circumstances with ease, moving *with* life's flow, instead of struggling *against* it. You are practicing aikido whenever you listen with curiosity to an opposing view or search for mutual understanding, respect, and purpose.

Aikido happens any time you stop, take a breath, and choose a more felicitous state of being. No matter how you approach it, whether physically or conceptually, aikido offers a unique blend of power and grace.

**How might I use what comes at me instead of fighting or wishing it away?**

### Aikido and Conflict—The Metaphor

There are six facets of the aikido-conflict metaphor as it has evolved and crystallized for me:

- **Resistance.** My initial reaction to adversity is to resist it. In a physical assault, I want to keep the attacker away from me. Similarly, I would rather not have to deal with a workplace conflict, a difficult person, or a frightening illness.
- **Connection.** At some point, however, I must connect with the conflict if there is any hope of resolving it. In aikido, I connect by moving toward the attacker and joining my energy with his. In life, I connect when I accept that the problem exists. Connection is the first step toward resolution.
- **Practice.** As I acknowledge the conflict, I begin to take action. At first my action is unskilled. I make mistakes, and I practice and refine my approach. Aikido practitioners refer to this refinement process as “getting on the mat.” The mat is the place where we meet to learn and hone our technique and practice confidence and presence.
- **Discovery.** Through steady practice, I gradually find myself in new territory, where the realization of how little I know catapults me into a land of discovery. Whether on the aikido mat or on the mat of life, I become a learner. As I move from resistance to curiosity and wonder, my practice becomes fun.
- **Power.** Discovery brings a new kind of power because it is aligned with energy. I learn that power does not equal force or coercion. Rather, this new power increases in direct relationship to flexibility and empathy.
- **Teachers.** Finally, I notice that conflict has become my teacher. My difficult relationships have



taught me flexibility and assertiveness. Through adversity, I have discovered new perspectives and insights. In aikido we say, “The attack is a gift of energy.” I bow with gratitude.

## Centered Response

Underlying and connecting the six facets of the aikido-conflict metaphor is my ability to direct my life energy in a conscious and purposeful way. Call it what you will—self-control, emotion management—my awareness of and ability to manage *me* is where each story begins. On the aikido mat, when the attack comes, we learn to “center and extend ki.” To be “centered” in this sense means to be balanced, calm, and connected to an inner source of power. In life as in aikido, when you’re centered, you are more effective, capable, and in control.

*Ki* (pronounced “key”) is Japanese for energy or universal life force. It is the *ch’i* in *tai ch’i* or *qi* in *qi gong*. When you center and extend *ki*, you increase your ability to influence your environment and your relationships.

## Keeping Conflict in Perspective

Here’s an example of the power of regaining balance in the face of an unexpected conflict. A friend told me about a conflict she was having with her next-door neighbor. Because of a misunderstanding, the neighbor was pretty upset, so much so that when they passed on the street and my friend said hello and reached out to shake hands, he withdrew his. He avoided eye contact, muttered a monotone “hi,” and quickly walked past her.

She felt as if she’d been punched in the stomach. Stunned, she walked back to her house wondering what had just happened. It was even more upsetting because she had communicated with this man about the confusion that had initially caused the conflict, and she thought he understood her point of view. She wanted to find out what went wrong, but he clearly didn’t want to discuss it. We talked about the incident for a while, brainstorming strategies that would help her deal with this unexpected blow, but eventually I left her to think it over on her own.

### *Surprise Attack*

A surprise attack is one of the hardest conflicts to handle. It’s a shock to the system. Often the first reaction (after your heartbeat returns to normal) is to blame the other person or yourself and to get caught in endless internal dialogue about who’s at fault and what to do next.

Regardless of the cause, a troubling conflict may take time to resolve and can disrupt life while it’s going on. In the confusion, we lose our center and often operate on half-power, the other half working non-stop to figure out where to assign

blame and (as much as possible) to justify our actions. It can be so disturbing that we lose focus, have difficulty making even routine decisions, and spend wakeful nights deliberating over the best way to solve the problem. It’s hard to do anything wholeheartedly until the conflict is resolved.

I felt a lot of empathy for my friend with the disgruntled neighbor. I’ve been there, and it’s no fun. One of the ways I tried to help was to listen when she needed to talk. I also suggested she take care of herself while trying to untangle this knotty situation. Conflict is hard on the body, on the mind, and on the spirit, especially when it catches you by surprise. In his book, *Why Zebras Don’t Get Ulcers*, Robert Sapolsky gives clear evidence and many examples of the effects of stress on the cardiovascular, digestive, and immune systems, as well as its connection with depression, personality, and temperament. Activation of the stress response releases numerous hormones that affect our ability to eat, sleep, think, speak, work, rest, and suppress disease.

How can you prepare when you don’t know the conflict is coming? And how can you regain your inner and outer balance?

### *Now What?*

As you go through your daily activities, employ these mental and physical strategies to help restore perspective, reduce your body’s stress response, and move the conflict toward a positive resolution.

- **Breathe and Center.** Often. A conflict can unbalance us with strong emotions and feelings of unworthiness, anger, sadness, and frustration. Don’t avoid your emotions, but treat them as guides. Appreciate and observe them as you might observe a play. There is a lot of power in this emotional energy, and as you breathe, center, and watch, you’ll discover how to use your emotions in a way that is in line with your highest purpose.
- **Take the Long View.** It’s so easy to get caught in the turmoil of the conflict that we forget there will be a tomorrow. Take some quiet moments to close your eyes and see yourself in the future with the conflict resolved. Imagine how you’ll feel with the problem behind you. What would you like the relationship to look like a month from now? A year from now? Meanwhile, eat well, go to bed at regular hours, laugh, and allow yourself to forget the problem occasionally. This may not be easy, but it’s effective. Allow your inner wisdom to work silently while you continue to engage in life.
- **Reframe.** Step outside the conflict momentarily and look at it through a more objective lens. Instead of resisting, ask yourself if there is a gift here—an invitation to look at things differently or to try a



new behavior. Acknowledge the other person by standing in his shoes. Why is he behaving this way? What does he want? How would you feel in his position?

- **Experiment.** Brainstorm all possible responses to this situation and try them on for size. Ask a friend to role-play alternatives you think you'd never choose because they're so unlike your usual persona. Have fun exercising unexplored selves.
- **Practice.** Choose one new behavior that will make a positive difference in your attitude toward life and make a commitment to practice that behavior every day.
- **Count Your Blessings.** Notice the good things in your life. Cultivate gratitude and wonder.

Conflict can cause us to lose sight of the big picture—of what we really want in life, why we're here, and what is important in a particular relationship—or to see it more clearly. Get on the mat and engage the conflict energy. Work with it and move it in a positive, useful direction. Meeting life in this way is the key to finding your true power.

After brainstorming many options, my friend decided to write a letter to her neighbor. She refrained from justifying her own actions. Instead, she acknowledged his feelings and offered to talk with him about the situation. Her letter opened a renewed

conversation and, over time, they came to be good neighbors again. ■

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#### NEXT STEPS

- What happens to you physically and emotionally when you're surprised by conflict?
- How do you usually behave, and how is it different from what you would like to do?
- Recall the last time you experienced this kind of "surprise attack."
- How did you handle it?
- What did you do well?
- What might you have done differently?
- What next steps will you take?