energy [Latin energia, fr. Gk energeia activity, fr. energos active, en in + ergon work – more work] 1: the capacity of acting or being active (intellectual energy) 2: natural power vigorously exerted (work with energy) 3: the capacity for doing work.

In contemporary culture, when we think of "energy," we usually think of some known kind of physical energy, like moving wind or flowing water, gravity, electricity, chemical reactions, or radioactivity. Carl Jung once pointed out that the idea of energy is actually a psychological one, a basic archetypal idea, arising from the human experience of feeling energetic. As a purely psychological idea, it is obviously a real aspect of our experience, but also one that it is not generally easy to get very specific about once we finish saying things like "I'm more energetic today than yesterday."

When the physical sciences began to evolve several hundred years ago, they were exceptionally successful at being specific about energy. They could describe a mechanical device as producing energy of 35 horsepower, or an electrical current as being 10 amperes of current at 50 volts of pressure, thus manifesting exactly 500 watts of power. With this increasing precision in describing physical energy came enormous progress in applying it to useful ends.

This kind of success in science in general has led us to thinking about energy almost exclusively in physical terms. Nevertheless psychological and/or psychic energies are useful concepts in understanding the mind, and on occasion they have some aspects of reality in the ordinary physical world. Here, we will look at the practical application of psychological (and perhaps psychic) energies in one of the newest of the Oriental martial arts, Aikido.

Aikido

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From an early age Uyeshiba was interested in the spiritual life, particularly as it was expressed through traditional Shinto beliefs and in phenomena we would call An Attitude of Peacefulness Built on a Foundation of Skill.
Aikido

Harmony, Self-Defense, and Subtle Energies

By CHARLES T. TART

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From an early age Uyeshiba was interested in the spiritual life, particularly as it was expressed through traditional Shinto beliefs and in phenomena we would call

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spiritualistic or psychic in Western terms. Throughout his life he was dedicated to searchings for enlightenment and spiritual understanding. At the same time, an experience in his youth of seeing the thugs of the village landlord beat up his father for having some progressive social ideas impressed on him both the reality of physical power and the need for social justice. Thus he spent his youth and early life doing two things which we find a strange combination by Western standards. He spent enormous amounts of time meditating and studying spiritual matters, and he mastered many traditional martial arts: he became a master at injuring and killing, while becoming more and more spiritual. Consequently he sought the true meaning of budo, the inner essence of the martial arts.

In mid life he was sitting under a persimmon tree one day when he had a profound mystical experience. As he describes it in his book Aikido (Tokyo: Hozansha, 1969),

"I felt that the universe suddenly quaked, and that a golden spirit sprang up from the ground, veiled my body, and changed my body into one of gold."

"At the same time my mind and body became light. I was able to understand the whispering of the birds, and was clearly aware of the mind of God, the Creator of this universe. At that moment I was enlightened: the source of budo is God's love—the spirit of loving protection for all beings. Tears of joy streamed down my cheeks."

"Since that time I have grown to feel that the whole earth is my house and the sun, the moon and the stars are all my own things. I had become free from all desire, not only for position, fame and property, but also to be strong. I understood: Budo is not telling the opponent by our force; nor is it a tool to lead the world into destruction with arms. True budo is to accept the spirit of the universe, keep the peace of the world, correctly produce, protect and cultivate all beings in Nature. I understood: The training of budo is to take God's love, which correctly produces, protects and cultivates all things in Nature, and assimilate and utilize it in our own mind and body."

These kinds of mystical insights are wonderful, of course, yet there is real and violent disharmony in the world we live in, man against man, nation against nation. How could you deal with disharmony in a spirit of love and harmony? Out of his mystical experience and his mastery of the martial arts, Uyeshiba created a new martial art, Aikido. It is simultaneously an effective method of self-defense and an expression of love and harmony. The word Aikido is often translated as the way (Do) of harmony (Ai) with the spirit of the universe (Ki). Ki is "spirit" or "energy," the flow of love and life energy, the manifestation of harmony.

Aikido differs in many works from other martial arts. For one thing, there is no competition. There are no tournaments, no contests, no pitting of one person against another to make one the winner and the other the loser. Yet you do practice attack-

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ing your partner and defending against your partner's attacks, and the more skilled you get at Aikido, the more intense these attacks are. But the spirit is of working with your partner, not of grappling or fighting with an opponent.

The goal of Aikido practice is to manifest love and harmony in all actions, not just in self-defense, and so help make this world a better place to live. It is also intended to be effective in defending yourself if you are physically attacked. A philosophy of non-aggression may be completely empty if not backed up with the actual skill to defend yourself. Psychologically, such a surface philosophy may be a cover for deep fears of being attacked or desires to attack others, and the surface attitude may crumble completely under stress, so that in defending yourself you become just as aggressive and out of harmony with the ki of the universe as the attacker. Long training in Aikido produces an attitude of peacefulness that is built on a foundation of skill that makes it effective.

Handling an Attack: Level One

If you were a practitioner of Aikido, how would you react to a personal attack in this imperfect world? In an idealized scheme, we can distinguish three levels of self-defense.

At the highest level of Aikido skill, you would have developed a great sensitivity to subtle cues from others. Among other things, Aikido is a kind of mindfulness meditation (Buddhist vipassana) in action. Thus, you would probably sense that the other person was getting upset and might get physically aggressive, so you would leave before the potential attacker's feelings reached an overt level! Not being there when someone gets angry is a marvelous effective kind of self-defense, and you certainly don't need to get angry or aggressive yourself in practicing this.

If you were not skilled enough to sense the imminence of the attack before your attacker felt angry, you would still be skilled enough to know how to stay centered and peaceful under the developing tension that proceeds an attack. Remaining calm, present, and centered is an excellent form of self-defense. (Note the importance of being present as well as calm and centered here. You may be calm because you are so lost in your own fantasy world that you don't know what's happening around you, but that is quite different from being calm and present.)

The highest level of defense in Aikido, then, is to either leave before an attacker becomes really angry and/or remain both peacefully and alertly present as the potential attacker's aggressive feelings are triggered. You neither give out victim signals nor attack signals. The typical result is that the potential attacker never actually attacks, he calms down and you have a chance to peacefully work through whatever source of dispute exists.

This kind of self-defense is applicable in many areas of life. It's main limitation is that sometimes the potential attacker may be so out of touch with reality that he does not notice your reactions or lack of them; he's running on purely internal drives and distorted perceptions. Then he may continue his attack in spite of lack of reinforcement from victim signals or counterattack signals.

Level Two

If you were neither skilled enough in Aikido to leave before the attacker got angry enough to think about attacking, nor skilled enough to stay so calmly and solidly present that his anger quickly died away without manifesting in actual physical attack, you would have to defend yourself against actual attack.

It is still important to stay as calm and present as possible, not allowing either anger or fear to develop, and to remember your commitment to love and harmony. Then you can use physical Aikido self-defense techniques in such a way that the attacker doesn't feel that you are attacking or running, giving out attack or victim signals. Instead he seems to keep getting in his own
way, striking wildly and missing, or tripping himself, and this gives him a little time to calm down. He's expressed his anger, and he hasn't found any victim or attack signals to further enrage him.

Level Three

If either of the above levels of self-defense is not adequate, or you don't have enough skill to use them successfully, you drop to the lowest level of self-defense and actually restrain, throw, or hurt the attacker. Again, it must be done without becoming an attacker yourself; you must try to stay as calm, centered, and harmonious as possible.

The Aikido skills learned in handling physical attacks can also generalize to situations in everyday life. I was not too aware of this until someone who had attended several lectures I had given on parapsychology told me he admired the calm and effective way I handled hostile questions in these lecture. He admired my "technique." I was puzzled: what technique? On reflection, I realized I used basic Aikido techniques to handle these kinds of attacks. To explain this, we must first look at basic principles underlying almost every Aikido technique.

Basic Principles of Aikido

The first principle is to get off the line of attack. Any effective attack means the attacker must flow a burst of concentrated energy along a line directed at you. If the attack is a punch to the belly, the attacker's energy, embodied in his fist, moves along a line from his body to your belly. In the first panel of the figure to the right, the attacker dressed all in white, is starting to throw a punch to your belly with his right fist. The dashed lines in the second panel show the line of the attack, the flow of energy, as well as the path of the fist. If it hits, you can be badly hurt. So you get off the line: you move or turn so the energy of that punch doesn't connect with you. As panel two shows, you step toward the attacker, not straight into him but to the outside of his punch.

The second principle is that you blend—harmonize with the attack. You practice Ai. In the above example of being punched, for example, if you had spent months of training strengthening and hardening your abdominal muscles, you could defend yourself by not getting off the line and blending but instead by absorbing your attacker's punch. You are saying, in effect,
"Your punch is nothing, wimp!" This easily becomes a way of meeting attack signals with attack signals, though. The attacker is likely to get angrier. The same reaction would result from actively blocking the attacker's punch with your arms.

To harmonize with the attack, you would not only get off the line, you wouldn't slow the punch down or oppose it in any way. Referring to panel two again, you don't just stand straight in, you rotate 180 degrees. The third panel shows the result of that entering and rotating from the opposite perspective. In fact you might put your hand on the punching arm and add energy to it in the direction it was already going. You have harmonized and blended with the energy of the attack. By projecting your energy in the same direction the attacker projected his, you see, as it were, your attacker's point of view. (Note that I say "his" energy for grammatical convenience, but as many women as men study Aikido.)

The third basic principle is that after you have gotten off the line and harmonized with your attacker's energy, you lead that energy further than it originally intended to go, thus taking control of it, and then you can throw or otherwise control your attacker. The fourth panel shows the attacker's energy being led forward and around, in a big circle, keeping the attacker off balance. In the fifth and sixth panels, you begin to turn the attacker's energy back on him by leading his wrist in a reverse circle. Following this energy, the attacker swivels into his wrist (panel 6) and is compelled to throw himself backwards and take a fall (panel 7) to protect his wrist. The attacker thus provides most of the energy for handling his attack.

Aikido teaches you to be continuously alert. You can't assume an attacker will always follow some fixed form. If the attacker projects even greater energy forward in panel 4, for example, you can slide further forward in the same direction, maintaining your lead of his energy, and throw him forward. If he instead pulls back at that step, giving a new direction to his energy, you can blend with that back-going energy and take it further enough to throw the attacker backward.

You got off the line (entered and turned), you blended (extended your energy along the same line as the attack), you led that attack energy into a throw. And, if you did it right, you stayed calm and peaceful and certainly didn't get angry.

Describing a physical Aikido technique in words like this is similar to describing a mystical insight in words. It may convey something, but at best that something is a poor, hazy reflection of the reality, and at best the words call up associations that produce a definitely misleading impression of the reality. I would not advise anyone to actually try the above technique if all you have is my words about it! Watching an Aikido demonstration or class is much better. Learning it yourself is the only way to fully understand it.

Using Aikido in Ordinary Life

I certainly don't like to be attacked for any reason, even if it's only verbal. I can become afraid, angry, self-righteous, and lose contact with reality as I get absorbed in this pattern. It's not only unpleasant, there is a further frustration: my goal was to communicate useful knowledge. I might seem to "win" an argument, but if I'm angry and self-righteous, I probably have not communicated effectively to my audience, and certainly not to my "opponent."

Before I had studied Aikido, my reaction to an attack in a lecture question was to counter-attack. I would expose logical flaws in my attacker's thinking and/or show he was ignorant of the facts and shower him with high-status scientific facts to show him the error of his ways. I would usually "win" the argument, for I was an expert in the subject matter compared to almost all questioners, and a skilled debater. This also made me popular with most of the audience, who were typically "believers" in psychic and spiritual matters, for I had won a victory over the kind of person who attacked them, too. I fought force with greater force. In retrospect, I doubt that I actually communicated much of anything useful to my "opponent."

After years of studying Aikido (plus extensive growth work of other sorts which was important), I unwittingly began to use the Aikido principles of getting off the line, blending, and leading to deal with hostile questions, in the context of wanting to stay present and genuinely harmonize with my questioner for our mutual benefit. I stress the latter point: I had developed more genuine empathy and respect for the positions these hostile questioners were coming from, not just developed a clever technique for "winning."

When a member of the audience asks a hostile question, what do I now do to try to stay present, centered, and peaceful? This is a kind of overall attitude, but if I had to break it down into components, it would involve reminding myself of things like:  

- I am being attacked, but I can stay present.
- I do not have to take this attack personally.
- My questioner is a real person, like me, with genuine concerns of his own that prompt his attitude and question.
- I am a competent person. I can understand and handle this attack without having to feel threatened or angry.
- I accept myself as who I am, imperfections and all. I may have made an actual mistake, but that does not mean I am a bad person, or that I need to get involved in neurotic worries about myself. I can stay present and be as truthful and effective as possible.
- At the least I can be gentle and not hurt this person who is probably already hurting.
- At best I can say or do something that might be genuinely helpful to this person or to others in the audience, and perhaps to myself.

This attitude helps me to "get off the line," seeing that the attack may be aimed at me personally from the attacker's point of view, but is not really personal from a larger perspective. This, and remembering that my attacker has real concerns of his own, also helps me blend with the energy of his attack. Intellectually and emotionally I will specifically try to understand where he is coming from and see that point of view.

For example, suppose the questioner says, "I've read about that experiment you talked about. Couldn't the subjects in that parapsychology experiment have cheated in such and such a way?" Suppose further that I hear a voice tone or see body movements that tell me that this is a hostile question.

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Within the context of my general attitude, I would get off the line and blend. Instead of a counterattack like, "If you had read all the report instead of depending on summaries by biased people you would remember that this point was taken care of!" I would sympathize: there is a genuine concern here, he doesn't want to be fooled, nobody likes to be fooled or misled, I don't want to be fooled either. Is there a legitimate doubt about that experiment?

I would say something to express my sympathy with and sharing of his concern for not being fooled. If I saw factual basis for his remark about the possible flaw in the experiment, I would say why, but in a way that implicitly or explicitly complimented my questioner for having taken the trouble to read and think about this area. I have gotten off the line—"I'm like you in your concerns, not your enemy." I have blended—"My feelings are like your feelings. We're in this together."

The "lead" and the "throw" come naturally from the blend. If the questioner has sufficiently expressed his feelings, I can try to make some remark which will literally lead us on from there to think about the implications of psychic and spiritual phenomena for our view of ourselves. Leading the energy along to a higher level is sufficient for the attack to dissipate peacefully.

If there is still hostility there, I might lead the questioner out some more to clarify what the problem is and continue to deal with it as above. Or I can say something that makes the feeling quality of the question overt, rather than hidden in an apparently intellectual concern, and see if the questioner wants to deal directly with the feeling level. Often he does not and is silent: the "throw" has taken place, the attack is over. I will not force anyone to continue the feeling level if he does not want to.

Sometimes the questioner still does not want to communicate but simply to continue to use the occasion to be hostile. Then I have to, as it were, use the lower style of Aikido self-defense and make a final "throw" with a barrage of facts and logic that completely undercuts the attack. I go away dissatisfied from this kind of outcome, wishing I were more skilled at creating genuine understanding and harmony.

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It is easy for me to write about Aikido at length: I enjoy it, and practicing it has been vital in giving me some partial balance as a three-brained being something other than a hyper-intellectualized scholar. I recommend it for anyone in reasonable health who wants to develop the natural intelligence of his body as well as to get good exercise and learn effective self-defense.

Note that I have written about Aikido at its best. As an art practiced by human beings, it is subject to change. Some students were attracted to Uyeshiba because he was the toughest martial artist in Japan, and they paid little attention to all his talk about love and harmony, while others found that part central. If you are seriously considering learning Aikido and can find one or more dojos, training centers, near your home, watch a few classes and try to sense the spirit of the teacher and the students before committing yourself.

Charles T. Tart, professor of psychology at the University of California at Davis and a New Realities editorial board member, is a humanist and scientist concerned with personal growth and spiritual questions. This article is adapted from Dr. Tart's article on Aikido that appeared in the Spring 1986 issue of his newsletter, The Open Mind.