

Aikido of Infinite Compassion
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Aikido by its very nature incorporates compassion as a basic part of the teaching. The very essence of Aikido techniques is to control the attacker without force and without causing harm. O-Sensei removed from other martial arts those elements that required the use of force and which resulted in injury to the attacker. We don't know if compassion was actually O-Sensei's goal or whether it was a wonderful by-product of his creative process, but in any case what we are left with is a martial art which is the very embodiment of compassion. Instead of employing the use of punches, kicks and blocks we simply redirect the attack, dissipating its energy harmlessly. We act as facilitators, guiding the attacker to a place he wasn't expecting, using forces of nature rather than our own strength to accomplish our goal.

The emphasis on compassion is taken even further if we listen to those teachings of O-Sensei that were heavily Buddhist oriented. "Opponents confront us continually, but actually there is no opponent there". This concept of the difference between subject and object being an illusion is a kernel of Buddhist teaching. No attacker, no attacked. Why hurt the attacker if the attacker really doesn't exist? Why hurt the attacker if you and the attacker are actually one, not two?

All this is well and good, but the reality of Aikido and life in the dualistic world is that this is easy to talk about but difficult to understand, and extremely tough to actually put into practice. You are being attacked and you want to end the attack, quickly. As a result, most of us never get the opportunity to fully experience compassion in Aikido training. If we do we should consider ourselves very lucky. This is where my story actually begins.

My twelve year-old son Lawrence is autistic. Autism is a severe, profoundly disabling neurological disorder that lasts a lifetime and for which there is no effective treatment and no cure. The hallmarks of autism are severe communication deficits, a complete lack of social awareness, behavioral rigidity and restricted interests, and a host of other disabling characteristics. Although autism is what is called a "spectrum disorder", meaning it encompasses a wide range of severity of symptoms, there is a commonality of symptoms that includes the three characteristics mentioned above. My son is in the "high functioning" part of the spectrum because he can speak, read and write; most autistic kids never learn to read or write and a significant percentage never develop any meaningful speech. My son has never had a friend and will never form a close relationship with another person. It is extremely unlikely that he will ever live independently as a member of society. The relatively bleak future is unfortunately made even bleaker by the most troubling aspect of Lawrence's disorder; he is prone to violent outbursts that involve self abusive behavior, and, more recently, aggressive physical acts directed outwards. These events come with little or no warning, and can happen anywhere, at any time, for any reason or for no reason at all. He may hit himself in the head violently, or bite his hand until it bleeds. He may break or throw objects. These outbursts have been happening

consistently since he was three years old, but his current size (5 foot two, 130 pounds) gives these behaviors a whole new meaning. Controlling a 7 year old who is kicking, thrashing and freaking out is relatively easy; the same behavior on an individual my son's size is nearly impossible.

The other day I was with my son at home and one of these episodes suddenly occurred. He began smashing himself in the face with his closed fist, and lashing out. He picked up a knife off the kitchen table and began hitting himself in the head with the handle of the knife. Then he bolted from the table and I realized what had to be done. I had to let my training take over. Lawrence came forward, and I transformed his forward motion into a trip to my dining room floor, where I pinned him until the worst of the outburst passed and he was in enough control of himself for me to let him go. In retrospect, the outward manifestation of what transpired was ikkyo. Of greater interest, however, is what was going on in my head and my heart as this unfolded.

This was no ordinary ikkyo; no routine practice in the safety of the dojo. This wasn't my practice partner attacking me. This was my out-of-control son, my flesh, my blood, my DNA, my shattered hopes and dreams, the very mirror of my soul. It was the child I would give my life to "fix".

Here I am confronted with an attacker *that I love*. An attacker who I would willingly give my life for. All the talk about compassion, about concern for your attacker, *I never really understood it until now*. It was all talk, talk, talk. Talk that in one three second Aikido technique was transformed into direct knowledge, direct experience. *I get it now*. Like a koan that, once truly solved, looks silly and useless, all the talk about compassion seemed so odd and unnecessary. *It is so clear now, so obvious, how could I have missed it?*

Lawrence attacked a cloud and felt a grip no tighter than when I first took him from his mom's arms in the hospital. The cloud was circular and the circle guided him, gently taking him to a place of safety. The cloud was a single thing, attacker and attacked, indivisible, a single entity in a gentle cosmic dance.

When it was over, after pinning him on the floor for many minutes, Lawrence calmed down enough that I could let him up without fear for his safety or the safety of others.

Then my attacker hugged me and told me he loved me, and I went away and cried.