

Benevolent Fantasies

One of the common criticisms of Aikido is that it “isn’t martial” or “isn’t effective”.

Let’s talk straight: Lots of people think Aikido is bullshido for tree-hugging liberal wimps with fantasies of magical defensive protections that involve no harm to any creature, ever.

That perception is fostered, in part, by ki-magic talk, and “training” that looks more like a combination of ballet and meditation than a “cage match” or a parking-lot brawl or a Steven Seagal movie. The former are what my late instructor Tom Walker called “blue smoke and mirrors Aikido”.

It’s fostered by quotes from the founder that are, in my heretical opinion, taken out of context. Some of the often-un-contexted quotes were at the time of their making, in my unholy opinion, subterfuge on the part of the founder to prevent his dojo being shut-down by the American occupiers of Japan in the wake of the war. After all, martial arts as a whole have a long tradition as a subversive activity...

The (mis)perception of Aikido is further fostered by lots of talk about Aikido being “only for defense”; “defending only with gentleness”, etc. - and by black-belts who never hit anyone - partly because of the fantasy that one may actually fight without getting the hands dirty or the clothes wrinkled. It’s fostered by practicing techniques in a passive, or defensive way.

The bottom line is that the word “benevolent” implies abstaining, intentionally, from harming someone - which implies an ability to inflict harm in the first place: Without ability, abstinence loses meaning - or only means talking smack is all you’ve got.

Newer students have often asked me about “spirituality” in Aikido, and I confess that I think it can be a spiritual path. However, I think that “spiritual” in a martial art isn’t attained through prayer or meditation: Those paths lie elsewhere. I think it’s cultivated through pursuit of martial integrity and the consistent development of an increasing ability to abstain from violence by choice.

Aikido principle extends WAY beyond fighting – just as Musashi wrote that “the value of sword-fencing technique extends beyond sword-fencing”. But, he also killed lots of folks. He had GAME in the event he needed to get it on. Even after he switched from steel to wood he was still caving-in noggins for a long time.

That dude knew the meaning of the term Benevolent, because if he didn’t slay someone you know it was truly because he CHOSE not to. Choice is the measure of benevolence. Talk and luck and fantasy don’t qualify a person for the “benevolence” award. That one is earned by truly being in the position to take the other guy’s head – and choosing a hand instead - or perhaps walking, or even running away. And, you don’t get there by just meditating on it. You’ve got to actually hit someone - and to actually get hit yourself in pursuit of it.

“Higher consciousness through harder contact” the Dog Brothers say, not that that I believe they necessarily correlate just so: I think everyone should choose their own “level of stimulation”, and I think they should be honest with themselves at least about the methods they use and the actual results they get. There’s nothing wrong at all with being the trickiest guy on the block - learning to become invisible or to dematerialize so you can always escape. Just don’t apply for the “benevolent” merit badge until you’ve done the homework of creating and utilizing the condition of choice.

I’m not putting down the pursuit of spirituality or peace. I’m only opining that the path of self-delusion is no more “spiritual” than the path of wanton violence. Honesty should be a component of any spiritual path - including Aikido.