

A FIGHTING CHANCE

If you want to feel safer at night, try Aikido, says **Jeanine Cauchi.**

I was never into martial arts, having considered them to be the exclusive domain of macho men. Indeed, before starting Aikido training, the closest I got to martial arts was watching 'Karate Kid' on television. My introduction to Aikido was gradual, and with hindsight, a very fortunate one. It happened from a chance discovery after learning about it from a tutor who had taught me a couple of self defense lessons.

Unlike my experience with other forms of exercise, soon after starting Aikido I quickly felt that this was just the thing for me. Apart from the promise of keeping fit and toned, there is the element of body control and being more aware of one's body and the way it is able to move. The Aikido techniques remind me of ballet dancing, so graceful and gentle but yet with precise, well-timed and powerful movements to make the techniques flow and effective.

For me, Aikido is a way of getting to know one's body and the energy that can be used from within. Through it I have developed an awareness and control over my body in a way that

allows me to defend myself from an aggressor without using any physical strength. This is because of Aikido's specialised defensive and counter-attack techniques. I often compare Aikido to a painting where a red hue rushes towards a blue colour that's twirling and these combine in the twirl to form a purple colour.

Watching myself train on video, I am usually surprised to see myself manage certain rolls and break falls with some ease in a way that I thought impossible when I had started. What is even more surprising is the way the techniques provide a powerful system of defence against attacks. The power of Aikido allows me, seemingly without effort, to 'take down' training partners twice my size.

THE ORIGINS AND NATURE OF AIKIDO

The founder of Aikido, Morihei Ueshiba (known as O'Sensei, Great Master) had his own 'pacifist' philosophy on which the techniques are based. In the book '*Budo*' by his son *Kisshomaru Ueshiba*, he talks of Budo, which is "a spiritual path leading to enlightenment, peace, harmony, truth, goodness, and beauty". O'Sensei also says that "When faced with the realm of life and death in the form of an enemy's sword, one must be firmly settled in mind and body and not at all intimidated;"

In all of Aikido's extensive repertoire of techniques, one is trained not to hide from an opponent but to advance in a way that is safe. An Aikido advance aims to turn the attacker's energy back onto himself and to neutralise the attack, no matter how much stronger and more powerful the attacker is.



WHY BOTHER WITH AIKIDO?

Do you remember those nights when, as a young teenage girl, you had to arrive home on time to avoid being grounded? I used to leave Paceville at about 11.30pm to arrive home in neighbouring Sliema by midnight. A walk that normally took 20 minutes was extended to around 40 minutes when I was wearing heels. On some nights I used to walk back home along—a creepy enough experience on any night, but especially so on cold, dark, windy winter nights with barely a soul in sight.

I used to imagine shadows that weren't there and hear foot steps behind me that may or may not have been imaginary. I'd feel my skin crawl, and my ladylike walk home used to last a little over ten non-ladylike minutes as, heels in hand, my vanity disappeared as fast as my sprint in the cold winter night.

How different it would have been had I been less fearful of looking after myself in the event of a dark shadow transforming itself into a material being with evil intent. I certainly am not advocating having false or misplaced confidence or actively courting trouble. But I would have valued feeling comfortable enough with my ability to anticipate and deal with a threatening situation. Just knowing what to do at the right time may have made those walks less fearful.

It has taken a few more years and only now, as a young woman, have I finally begun to feel the confidence I lacked in my younger days. That's thanks to my having started training in Aikido, a Japanese Martial Art, almost three years ago.



self defence

It gives me great satisfaction knowing that all this potentially lethal fighting practice gives tangible results not just physically but also psychologically. Paradoxically, since starting Aikido I feel less prone to aggression and less likely to 'lash-out' either physically or verbally. It possibly has something to do with the non-violent nature of the art. My self confidence has improved, but not at all in a cocky way. I am kinder towards myself as I know I can be successful even in things that initially seemed impossible, if I work at it consistently.

However, I certainly do have lots more to learn and years of practice ahead to get even the basic techniques right. This is a personal challenge. But even mastery of the physical is merely the beginning of the subtle, powerful art of Aikido whose ultimate manifestation is a spiritual not a physical one.

After just a few years of training in Aikido I realize that this profound philosophy, learned almost imperceptibly, is following me into life well beyond the training mat, insinuating itself into my everyday



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life. Normally, I would shy away from things I feared—such as public speaking—or I would let people take advantage of my reluctance to say 'no'. I realise that, through Aikido training, I am getting to know myself better and I am recognising my abilities and my strengths. Aikido training is helping me to confidently stand up for myself and to speak my mind in a clear and direct but non-confrontational way.

As for my fear of things in the night,

well, I am unlikely to tempt fate and would still make an unladylike 'dash for it'. But now, if I am cornered, I know that I have a fighting chance. □

Jeanine Cauchi is a professional physiotherapist and one of Malta's leading female practitioners of Aikido. She is training towards earning a black belt in the martial art.

Further information on Aikido may be obtained at www.aikidomalta.net and on Facebook: Aikido Malta

