

# When fitness becomes and art

Loosely translated as the ‘way of harmony’, Aikido is a philosophy, art, self-defense system and exercise regimen all rolled into one.

Sunflowers and willows blowing in the wind are not the first things that spring to mind when watching Steven Seagal on the big screen performing his floor-wiping routine with criminals, gangsters and warlords.

Upon discovering however that Seagal is a world-renowned and well respected Aikido master, I just had to find out more about this fascinating martial art. When I got the opportunity to see Sensei Kevin Bonanno and his aikidokas (students) train at their training hall in Hamrun, I jumped at the chance.



Calm, patient and accommodating, and sporting not a single ounce of body fat, Kevin struck me as a spiritual man with a deep passion for his chosen art. I quickly realized I wasn't going to see any egotism and butt-kicking this afternoon. Men, women and youngsters of all ages, shapes and sizes rolled around on mats, stretched, and practiced a series of self defense techniques which at times looked more like a dance than anything else.

In their white outfits, it seemed I was watching an entertaining reenactment of the plastic-bag scene on a grand scale. Their movements appeared graceful and effortless, combining skill, balance and endurance. Silence and discipline prevailed, yet everyone seemed to be having fun in a friendly and calm atmosphere distinctly lacking in aggression. Tucked away in a small training hall in a quiet school on a Saturday afternoon, I felt calmed by the special celebration of art, movement and mental focus unraveling before my eyes.

The aikidokas partner up for most of the exercises to practice movements which are both simple and efficient. The Sensei frequently steps in to make corrections and adjustments, delivering explanations peppered with references to nature against a backdrop of two large windows overlooking thriving lush greenery outside. Returning to nature is a central theme in Aikido.

Opening “like a flower” might not be first on your agenda when attempting to fend off an attacker, but serves to reinforce one of the central themes of Aikido. Your opponent is not your rival. As a self-defense system, Aikido protects not only the defender, but also the attacker.

“If you see a car heading straight for you, what do you do?” Having just seen Kevin hurl another black belt ten feet across the room I figured I had gotten off lightly with a trick question. “Do you try to confront it, head on, or do you move out of the way?” In confronting the car, both parties stand only to lose whether it's paintwork, a bumper, or several limbs. In Aikido the aim is not to confront or overpower, it's all about deflection and redirection.

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When your opponent pushes, you turn. If your opponent pulls, you push. Using this simple approach in conjunction with clever footwork, aikidokas are able to neutralize an attack with virtually no apparent physical effort, leaving attackers off balance and sometimes hurling through the air as a result of their very own momentum. Aikidokas never confront force with force. It is an art of non-confrontation.

Whether at work, on the road, or even at home, opportunities for confrontation crop up all the time in our everyday lives. Meeting anger with anger causes stalemate, depletes both parties of energy, and leaves us all with little to gain.

**What if non-confrontational deflection, redirection and mental focus could be applied to all facets of our lives?**

“This sounds a bit like Christianity to me”, I remarked, to which Kevin immediately responded, “Isn’t peace the basis of *all* religions?” Good call. In Kevin I saw how martial arts can transcend mere physical practice and become more than just self-defense or exercise, but a way of life.

The fitness industry has shown us so many ways to get fit and improve our health and wellbeing, but I have to admit this martial art offers a package that’s hard to beat. Apart from improved cardiovascular fitness, quicker reaction time and leaner, more flexible muscles, Aikido offers self defense skills and the development of calmer, more focused mind for virtually negligible financial cost. The ability to neutralize an attack without the need for strength also makes Aikido an ideal choice for women. Indeed, roughly half of Aikido practitioners in Japan are female. If you can handle an eight-kilogram weight, whatever your age or physical condition, you are fit enough to take up Aikido.

This relatively modern Japanese martial art is no sport and involves no competition whatsoever. These days many children’s sports are moving towards an increasingly ‘non-competitive’ state in the hope of harvesting more important values and ideals. Aikido has been this way for years. The only fight is with yourself. Self-confidence, presence and peace of mind are the main reasons aikidokas keep coming back for more. There is no doubt about it, this is a fun and engaging way to get in shape, and you are guaranteed to take away far more than what you signed up.

For more information call/sms on 9989 9733 or visit [www.aikidomalta.net](http://www.aikidomalta.net)

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