

AIKIDO Art and Spirit

I've never been exposed directly to any form of martial art, before now, that is! My experience of this art has been through Japanese cartoons, watching the Bruce Lee, Jackie Chan and Steven Seagal (an actual Aikido master) kind of films and a TV series, called *Kung Fu*.

Movement in sport can most certainly be artistic. Athletes move to a musical rhythm and beat or simply 'dance' around their opponents. The artist Martin Creed, winner of the prestigious Turner Prize in 2001, has recently put up a new installation - Work No 850 - which consists of a runner sprinting the length of Tate Britain's neo-classical sculpture galleries. The term 'art' in the far eastern disciplines has another connotation – the flowing movements have a spiritual nature. Movement as a form of prayer.



Aikido is a Japanese discipline developed in the early 1920s. Like many of the other grappling arts, it has its roots in samurai practices dating hundreds of years. If we break down the name of Aikido we get *ai* for harmony, *ki* for spirit and *do* for the path or the way. *Ai-ki-do* loosely translates into 'the way of harmony'. Developed by Morihei Ueshiba, his vision was to create an art that not only focused on the physical aspect but also emphasized the philosophy of peace and reconciliation.

As I walked into the Aikido *dojo* or training hall in Hamrun, the first thing that struck me was indeed this overwhelming feeling of peace and calm. A sense of tranquility reigned as rays of sun streamed into the hall, flooding it with a golden light. Across from me, a portrait of Ueshiba, the Japanese inscription for Aikido and a wooden sword (representing the art of swordsmanship from which this discipline derives its technical structure). Aikido is non-competitive and thus is not recognised as a sport per se, but it's a discipline.

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The Aikidoka's or students of Aikido, all wearing their white *Aikidogi* or uniform, had just started going through a series of stretching exercises and flexibility routines. In front of them was Sensei Kevin Bonanno. Over his Aikidogi he had a black pair of *hakama* or wide-hemmed trousers, indicating rank. Kevin spoke in a soft, gentle tone, occasionally using Japanese phrases. The air was still and quiet. Here I felt I was sheltered from all the noise out there.

Unlike the straight and hard movements of other martial art disciplines, aikido tends to be circular and 'soft'. In its classic form, it is entirely defensive, meaning that all moves are responses to attacks.

In other words, if two aikido masters were to engage in combat they would stare at each other, waiting for somebody to do something! As a martial art, it is based on conflict resolution rather than confrontation. It gives importance to blending with your opponent, learning to flow with the energy of the attacker, turning the attack against themselves.

It was somehow refreshing to see how disciplined the students were during the class. The sense of respect towards each other and towards their teacher is something we ought to see more of in other settings too. Aikido teaches its practitioners to focus on the centre of their body as the centre of energy. Grounding oneself and one's inner strength and focusing on the moment. This is where the meditative aspect of this martial art emerges. The way becomes more important than the destination, thereby enriching your daily life. The physical aspects of Aikido - the falls, the bending, the rolls - work together with the contemplative nature to de-stress the body and the mind.

As the session proceeded, *Aikidokas* paired up to practice the movements, with Sensei Kevin stepping in to show them the proper technique. I watched in silence. I questioned whether, beyond the exercise and spiritual values Aikido offers to its practitioners, this martial art would be truly effective in fending off an aggressive ogre? Not that I wish anyone to find themselves in a situation in which they are attacked! We needed a practical demonstration. I volunteered. I was to be the one doing the attacking and one of the Aikidokas would do their thing! I suddenly thought, "why am doing this"? I grabbed John, that was his name, firmly from his uniform with my left hand and pushed him backwards. My right fist was flying in to hit him in the face. A simple, yet powerful defensive move, involving a grab, a turn and a twist had me on the floor in no time, crashing down to the ground with a thud. Pain ran down my arm. I was locked into submission. You win, the ogre concedes!

Beaten but not crushed, I got onto my feet. My question had been answered. An Aikido admonition is to take the hit as a gift. Looking back, I wonder what I was thinking. Actually, I wasn't thinking at all! Maybe I'm a glutton for punishment! Please don't go repeating this at home or trying it on your loved ones. Instead, I suggest you go for a session in Hamrun and see for yourselves.

For more info check out www.aikidomalta.net or call 9989 9733.

Sayonara...I'm going to stick to cartoons.

Pierre Ellul

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