

Aikido and the Art of Living Well.

"You are what you.... breathe think.... feel.....do... consume!"

This Easter I experienced something that I'd heard about but never believed: an anxiety attack from eating too much chocolate.

The *physical* discomfort of overindulgence is, admittedly, an experience I am rather more familiar with (and I suspect that you are too). The chocolate experience well, that was a rather surprising and stark reminder of the connection between food and *mental* well being.

It was also a rather depressing reminder of the changes that are beginning to happen in my body as I age.

It seems to be a rule of life that with age comes intolerance and inflexibility of both a physical and mental kind. I remember a very successful campaign run by the Australian federal government with the slogan:

"If old age is catching up...walk a little faster"

It appeared to be a great play on words with a very powerful and memorable message: if you want to delay the negative effects of ageing,



you really need to move. And, it seems, it is never too late to start.

I thought of this during my Easter experience and reflected indeed on the success of that slogan and many like it all around the world.

I reflected also on how things have changed here in Malta. In this land of world-leading

photo by Reuben Chircop www.rchircop.com

Diabetic statistics (induced primarily by diet and lifestyle) it is heartening to see how awareness levels of the benefits of keeping fit have skyrocketed. Just look around early on a Saturday or Sunday morning or on a balmy summer evening and you are as likely to see groups of middle aged ladies and gentlemen chatting whilst enjoying a brisk walk, as you are to see lithe young things on a jog or cycle cocooned in their MP3 world.

Some in Malta have also made my *chocolate connection* and, in addition to focusing on the physical aspects of exercise, find ways of improving their mental well being as well. Yoga, meditation and some of the more exotic 'Eastern' methods such as Tai Chi are booming here.

In their search for holistic health regimens a few in Malta have even begun to discover a rather unusual Japanese system. This system is embodied, unsurprisingly, in that quintessentially Eastern discipline: the martial arts.

The system that they have discovered is called Aikido, the way of Harmony.



photo by Reuben Chircop www.rchircop.com

Aikido is unusual both as a martial art and as a fitness regimen. It was created (and continues to evolve) as a devastating fighting technique derived from the ancient Samurai tradition. However its emphasis is on

harmony and, paradoxically, on non-violence and non-aggression (unsurprisingly Aikido is also known as *The Art of Peace*)

Aikido differentiates itself from most other martial arts in that it has not developed a sporting (competitive) element. Aikido practitioners don't spar or compete.

"As soon as you concern yourself with the 'good' and 'bad' of your fellows, you create an opening in your heart for maliciousness to enter. Testing, competing with and criticizing others weaken and defeat you"

The Art of Peace. Morihei Ueshiba.

Competition runs counter to the Aikido emphasis on harmony, compassion, centeredness and integration with life. In Aikido, instead of competition there is co-operation in an environment of mutual respect, courtesy and caring for others. Aikido teaches students how to handle violence both physically and mentally without themselves becoming violent.

Aikido is performed by blending with the motion of the attacker and redirecting the force of the attack rather than opposing it head-on. This requires very little physical energy, as the aikidōka (aikido practitioner) "leads" the attacker's momentum using entering and turning movements. The techniques are completed with various throws or joint locks.

A typical 90 minute Aikido session usually starts with stretching and breathing exercises. Instructors demonstrate techniques with the help of a student, then the class pairs-up to practice. Partners take turn to apply and receive the technique a few times. "Ukeme," or taking falls, is as much a part of the technique as using it. The pace of the exchange can be quite aerobic and depends on a pair's combined skill and energy level. During the practice, instructors make their rounds to offer guidance, usually by applying the technique to various students. Classes often end with further stretching, breathing and meditation exercises.

Aikido was created for fighting so it wasn't primarily intended for fitness. In practice, however, the effect is very similar to a traditional fitness regimen with some important differences. Certain anaerobic fitness activities, such as weight training, emphasize contracting movements. In Aikido, pushing or extending movements are much more common than pulling or contracting movements.

Aikido training does not attempt to isolate specific muscles or muscle groups to improve tone, mass, and power. Aikidoka use every part of the body for integrated movement, not only the arms and legs. Aikido training emphasizes instead the use of coordinated whole-body movement and balance similar to yoga or pilates.

Furthermore, Aikido provides the opportunity to undertake paced Aerobic activity while benefitting from the massaging effects of receiving and giving its grappling, throwing and pinning techniques. Aikido holds, with their emphasis on joint locks, assist in stimulating joints and stretching muscles and ligaments. This not only makes joints stronger but also increases their suppleness and flexibility.

Aikido training tends to emphasis controlled relaxation, flexibility, and endurance rather than strength training. Qualities that are particularly suitable for those who seek a regimen that they can do all their lives.

The mental elements of Aikido are also of great benefit. As with all martial arts the exposure to 'controlled' threat teaches one to remain calm in the face of unexpected happenings in real life. The ability to maintain steady, deep breathing while training this assists in developing focus and composure. The emphasis on balance and, in the particular case of Aikido, on harmony and non-violence, teaches the practitioner to lift his or her spirit beyond the mundane world of competition, aggression and 'beating others'.

Aikido training is truly holistic. It encourages a supple body and a thoughtful mind. Regular aikido training will improve core strength, stability and flexibility as well as balance and posture. Add to that, the learning of effective self-defense techniques and it would truly seem to have it all.

Now if only it had a solution for my chocolate passion. That would indeed make Aikido utterly unique.

Claude Calleja is a reformed chocoholic. He has worked, lived and trained Aikido in the Asia-Pacific. He used to eat chocolate anywhere. When in Malta he trains Aikido at the Aikido Yamato Club at the Maria Assumpta School in Hamrun. Anyone interested in learning more about Aikido can visit the dojo and observe or participate in a class. For further information visit www.aikidomalta.net