

# TITLE      KI, LIFE AND THE UNIVERSE

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I'd just turned 18 when I received my call-up for the "Nashos" - compulsory National Service. I was very annoyed because full-time military internment would completely disrupt my judo and ju-jitsu training schedule. I was also very frustrated when told that my five years in the military cadets didn't count toward an exemption.

So I was not in the best of moods when, while standing in line for lunch on my first day at Holsworthy military barracks, a big, tough-looking young guy with a get-out-of-my-way swagger strode along the queue and pushed in front of the smallest youth near the front. I knew the type all too well, a would-be hard case wanting to be seen as a really tough guy, the sort who would quickly gather a group of similarly-minded thugs around him and then make life hell for everyone. So I decided to apply a little ju-jitsu!

Walking quietly up behind him I grabbed the back of his collar, pivoted under my own arm and slammed him down backward across my outstretched leg, being careful to land him on the concrete hard enough to knock the wind out but without breaking any bones. As he staggered to his feet I ordered him back to the end of the line. He was too stunned to argue and stumbled away to the relieved smiles of everyone there.

Next afternoon I'd pretty much forgotten this incident when the Bombadier in charge- (it was an artillery regiment)- finished the day's training in the bush, dismissed the platoon and left us to make own way back to the barracks. As I turned to leave I suddenly found myself confronted by the queue-jumping bully flanked by two scowling supporters.

" Yeah, right!" I thought, "you've only been here one day and you're already getting your gang around you!"

I flicked stiffened fingers into his face, hoping to frighten him enough to make him back off.. I could have destroyed his eyes but was merely aiming to scare him with the breeze of the strike and then give him a verbal lashing, which I hoped would be enough to scare him off. But the tip of my middle finger grazed his jaw. and to my amazement he tumbled down, completely unconscious, at my feet!

It was so completely unexpected that mentally I just gaped at him. But I'm a good actor, so hid my feelings and ordered his friends to carry him away before I did the same to them! They were nearly wetting themselves with fright and hastened to obey! As they staggered away I strolled nonchalantly off as if I did this sort of thing every day, but in fact I was absolutely astonished. I'd knocked people out before, but never with just the tip of one finger!!

Boxing, kick-boxing, judo and jujitsu, pounding away at a makiwara and breaking boards had been part of my daily life for years, but I'd never even heard of anyone knocked out



that way! My finger had barely touched him! It was not until I began learning Aikido years later that I began to understand.

Sugano Sensei was a brilliant uchi-deshi (full time student) under one of history's greatest martial artists, Aikido's Founder O'Sensei Morehei Ueshiba. I became his first Australian student in early 1965, and later, in 1968, established what's now Australia's oldest Aikido Centre at the Australian National University. By then I'd learnt a lot about ki, so wasn't so surprised at what happened when I watched another similar knockout.

I'd arranged for Sugano Sensei to conduct a weekend Aikido course in Canberra, and had informed the local TV station. The filming director rang back later, inquiring what Aikido was, and I

mentioned that one of its features is self-defense against armed opponents.

"Armed with what kind of weapons?" he asked. In a doubting tone.

"Mostly we train against knives, staves and swords," I replied, "although I've also trained with firearms, hatchets and axes."

"You're not trying to tell me that an unarmed man can beat a swordsman!" he scoffed.

"Well, yes!" I replied in surprise. "That's exactly what we train for!"

"Oh! What nonsense!" he sneered.

I was used to people's ignorance about martial art, especially loud Aikido, so politely tried to explain that far from being nonsense, various Japanese arts specialise in unarmed defence against armed attackers, and have been doing so for centuries. But he would have none of it.

"OK!" he contemptuously interrupted. "I'll tell you what - *I'll* attack this Japanese fellow with a sword and see how he gets on!"

This alarmed me, for Sugano Sensei had been trained in an era when so many people were being killed in martial art challenges in Japan that the government introduced legislation banning such duels, though they still took place occasionally. Anyone seriously attacking him full-on could quite possibly be injured or killed - not the kind of publicity I wanted for Aikido!

The fencing champion (as I later discovered him to be) misinterpreted my concern, however, assuming I was frightened he would show "this Japanese fellow" up. The more I attempted to explain, the more convinced he became of this, so In the end I thought "to hell with you - you might as well learn the hard way." And so it proved.

When he arrived with his camera crew a few days later I saw him stop and stare as he entered the dojo. We were training with weapons in the power-filled techniques of old time

**genuine** Aikido in action - not the dainty dance so often called Aikido these days. Clearly what he was seeing was nothing like he'd imagined.



I went over and again tried to persuade him to drop the challenge, but he was determined. So I left him with his crew setting up the camera and went to ask Sugano to please try to not damage him too much, but was mentally prepared for the worst.

Looking annoyed Sugano stopped the class and directed the students to sit down. Then he and the fencer faced each other, Sugano poised like a leopard waiting to pounce, the fencer well balanced and very determined, but not so contemptuous now! Brave man, I

thought, but misled by years of sports training where there's no experience with, or possibility of, the stark reality of sudden, violent death.

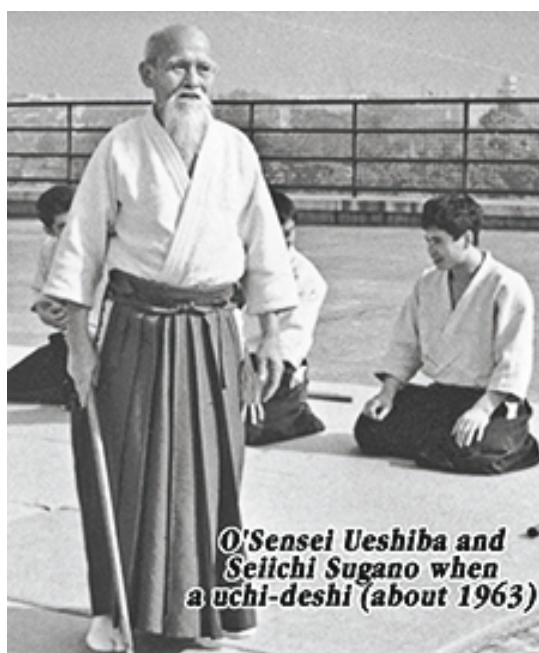
His attack was a brilliant, lightning fast lunge that covered the space between them in an instant. It was easy to see how he'd won fencing competitions. But Sugano Sensei did the impossible and moved even faster. In that same instant he slid past him and into his shika-ku, (the empty space just outside the speeding blade) On the way he also did something to his attacker's head, and down the fencer thudded, out like a light.

Sensei's ki-filled hands had flashed toward his head and might easily have broken his neck, but to my great relief he withheld the strike. Perhaps one hand lightly brushed his cheek, the way my finger had brushed the bully's face that day, but I didn't think so. Either way, there was the attacker lying on the floor as if dead!

I hurried over to see if an ambulance was required, but after a while he regained consciousness and climbed groggily to his feet. Like the television professional he was, he immediately staggered over to the cameraman and gasped out, "Did you get it?"

"No!" the astonished cameraman replied. "You told me to start shooting with the camera on wide-angle and then zoom in on the Jap and film your weapon striking him, and that's what I did. But then he vanished from the viewfinder! When I looked up from the camera you were out cold on the floor!"

They had a quick discussion about what to do while I looked on with raised eyebrows!





Finally -and I had to admire his courage - the director stumbled back to Sugano Sensei and very quietly and politely asked if they could please do that scene again because the cameraman had missed it. Sensei agreed, and this time used a different technique to defeat his attacker, sliding smoothly past the sword with a smile on his face while seizing the director's head in his hands to tumble him gently onto his back without hurting him.

Compared to the deadly earnestness of the first exchange, it was done with such good humour that it broke the ice and everyone laughed. Even the embarrassed fencer managed a self-conscious smile as he climbed back onto his feet again and sincerely thanked the greatest martial arts master he would probably ever meet.

And that's what the public saw on their TV screens that night. The chastened director's commentary started: "Silly me. This afternoon I made the mistake of challenging an Aikido master and this is what happened!". It had turned out to be excellent publicity for Aikido after all.

So what is this apparently magical technique that renders people unconscious with the touch of a finger? There's no magic about it, but not everyone can learn it, so let's start at the beginning.



When O'Sensei's original Aikido was brought to Australia in 1965 by Sugano Sensei, he had come straight from training under O'Sensei. People wanting to learn genuine Aikido today should remember that all the basics originally revolved around *ki* training and incorporated *atemi*. - strikes to vulnerable energy centres. Many Westerners now know this term, but few know it the Aikido way. I had done lots of striking practice before discovering Aikido, but Sugano Sensei gave me a completely new slant on it.

"When delivering atemi," he said, "you must pour in so much Ki that they blow up inside!"

At that time, early in my Aikido career, I still knew very little about Ki even though I'd had all those years of striking practice. All my training had been aimed at disabling opponents by the impact of the blows - what other way is there? Jujitsu had taught me the major atemi points and some Kuatsu, but O'Sensei's Aikido was different. I cannot remember a class when Sensei did not emphasise the use of Ki.



None of us understood what he was talking about then, a problem exacerbated by our ignorance of Japanese and his lack of English, but I finally realised that ki power explained the Holsworthy incident. Especially since I had also experienced similar surges of enormous power on other occasions.

I had for instance experienced it in two incidents when nearly drowning as a child, then again in an avalanche when skiing and several times during severe fights. In each case there had been an incredible surge of energy after which I couldn't remember much except emerging unscathed. Sugano Sensei's teaching and explosively dynamic

demonstrations showed me that this amazing power, which he called ki, can be cultivated to an extraordinary level, and the reality of this was opening a whole new world for me!



At its core, ***Aikido training is ki training.*** It begins with what's for you the unbendable arm exercise, where a strong person is asked to test the strength of an instructor's arm while he resists it being bent, and then again when he stops resisting and focusses Ki. The increase in the arm's power is astonishing.. Students are then taught the mental process which makes this possible, and then form pairs to practice with each other. Usually about 90% of any group can dramatically increase their arm strength at their first attempt.

The next stage is learning how to stand correctly (hanmi and kamae) followed by how to move (tai sabaki) so one's ki aligns with an attacker's.

This leads into exercises where the attacker (uke) seizes one of the defender's (tori's) wrists, and tori aligns his ki with him so he is rendered harmless. A series of increasingly powerful techniques are then built on this practice.

Students also begin learning the energy-enhancing exercises called ***kokyu-ho***. Regular training in these basics - extending ki, correct stance, tai sabaki and kokyu-ho - gradually leads to advanced training where ki is focussed so powerfully that it cannot be resisted. People skilled in "ai-ki" may safely ride such techniques out, but can no more resist them than they can resist a shotgun blast. This is one of the reasons Aikido is called "the art of non-resistance", for it's a case of "resist at your peril!"

Progressing from muscle-powered techniques to ki-based ones is the first big step in discovering the essence of Aikido. It requires intense and dedicated practice, just as learning to play a musical instrument does. The next big step is learning how to activate the human body's so-called "energy centres" so ki can be consciously liberated and directed through the body's major pathways which are called the microcosmic and macrocosmic orbits. Ki is life-energy, so this is not only beneficial, it's also pleasant and rewarding, although initially requiring considerable "inner" effort.

The most important energy centre is the "one point" or "*tanden*". (Tan-tien in mandarin) it's also the harmonising centre for the body's entire energy network. All ki exercises should begin and end with it, otherwise energy imbalances can occur which may harm one's health.

Another important aspect of Aikido is "zanshin". This is usually translated as "awareness", but refers not merely to perceiving what's happening in one's immediate surroundings with one's physical senses, but to an intuitive perceptiveness of the natural forces at play in the environment, including the inner states - moods and intentions - of people. This is an

important step toward what Zen describes as Satori, an inner state which which embodies delightful feelings of being “harmony with nature” and “at-one with the universe.

These things can only be learnt through what Zen describes as “direct transmission without words”. They cannot be acquired by academic study in the Western way.. For intellectualising about them inevitably leads to self-delusion because words are merely symbols for reality, and not reality itself. Regarding which an old Zen saying warns us that “the reflection of the moon on water is not the moon itself!”

This is why there has to be practical, physical testing in Aikido to ensure that students can really do the things they should be learning to do. Many students fear this because it forces them to confront and overcome their weaknesses and pretences. Only genuinely dedicated students accept it as a necessary if painfully challenging way toward true expertises. This is the reason really proficient teachers are humble and tolerant.

One of their old Zen stories tells of a master who, whenever confronted by a student deluding himself into thinking he had achieved perfection, would send him into the village to get something from an old woman.

On opening the door and seeing another inflated ego she would instantly knock him to the ground and slam the door on him in disgust. Imagine the loss of face for a proud young Japanese warrior! The shock would stun him into the realisation that if he could be humiliated so easily it meant that he needed to learn a lot more training, and this is where Zen comes in.

Zen is an intrinsic and invaluable aspect of Aikido: it increases one’s ability to comprehend the inner essence of things, and here we must realise that Zen and Aikido deal with profundities **for which there are no words!**

Which means that there are aspects of nature for which the Western world still has no meaningful names. Our sciences therefore tend to give them **meaningless labels**, such as *black holes*, *dark energy* and *the extra dimensions* which, according to string theory, are curled up inside hypothetical and inaccessible geometric containers called *Calibri-Yau manifolds!*

Such labels, like the Aborigine’s rainbow serpent, can usefully represent unknowns which are thought to exist, but of which we have no real understanding. The danger of this is that it can easily mislead people into believing they comprehend something merely because it has a label on it.

So it would be with **ki** and **yin** and **yang** and **satori**, etc, except that in Aikido we have reached the stage where we can make practical use of these concepts, even though we don’t fully understand them yet, any more than we fully understand quantum mechanics, or the Aborigines understand the natural phenomena they call the rainbow serpent.





Yet it's likely that within the functioning of quantum entanglements, where activities at the sub-atomic level harmonise with each other even though widely separated, there is a direct comparison with the way ki functions. At its deepest level, satori connects us to the entire universe. Which may explain some of the things science still can't fathom, such as the following incident.

I had taken the bus from North Richmond to Richmond one morning, and then caught the train to Sydney where I spent the day. Arriving back at Richmond soon after dark to catch the last bus home, I felt a sudden terrible apprehension that the Hawkesbury River had flooded and the bus would be swept off the North Richmond bridge when it tried to cross it.

That was absolutely absurd! It hadn't rained for weeks and the bus had driven across that bridge only 20 minutes earlier. So I forced myself to board it. And then the fear hit me so powerfully that I almost leapt off it again. Somehow I forced myself to sit down, but as we drove off I became more and more afraid.

The closer we got to the river the more agitated I became. I was sitting in a window seat, and became so afraid of an imminent accident that I slid the window open and undtd my shoe laces so I could slip my shoes off and try to get out through the window safely when the bus was washed off the bridge.

In those days this road descended down a short incline before making a sharp left turn onto the bridge. Just as we reached the middle of this turn the driver suddenly slammed on the brakes. Tyres screeched, the bus skidded sideways and slewed to a stop less than one metre from the edge of a raging torrent pouring cross the bridge!

The Hawkesbury is the biggest river on the east coast of Australia. It has a such a last catchment that this coastal section can be in drought while flood waters are beginning to roar down the mountain gorges hundreds of kilometres upstream. And that's what had happened. When that bus had crossed that bridge earlier there had been no sign of danger, yet a 150-metre wide torrent was now roaring across it. Next day that raging torrent would peak nearly 30 metres above the bridge's deck.

The huge Warragamba Dam, built years later, now helps control the suddenness and severity of such floods, but that was a very close thing. We were extremely glad of the skill of our driver in making that emergency stop.. But the point is this: at **precisely** the time the river began flooding over that bridge I had experienced an enormous fear about that very thing.

How can we understand such phenomena? One thing this and other similar events have taught me is to never ignore such warnings, and that decision has saved my life on several other occasions, for I've



had a very adventurous life. But read still doesn't answer the question of how such things can be?

Anyone who does the hard yards of learning Aikido eventually realises that Ki is a major force of nature which apparently permeates everything. . During nearly 60 years of Aikido, I've witnessed enough ki phenomena - some of it bordering on the miraculous! - to be left in no doubt about its universal existence and extraordinary power.

Where this amazing energy is concerned we are still in much the same situation as people were in distant times when they saw lightning in the sky but had no idea of the nature of electricity.

O'Sensei Ueshiba's breakthrough in harnessing this power and then developing a training method which enables people to use it for self defence-is a great leap forward. Not only does it allow us to precisely tailor the amount of energy needed to subdue attackers without necessarily injuring them, but its principle of ki harmony opens the way to a deeper comprehension of life and the universe than ever before. It can also lead to significant progress in human relationships.

ENDS.