

The Courage to Lead, the Power to Succeed  
An Exploration of the Admirable Attributes of One of History's Greatest Martial Artists

**Disclaimer.** *This essay is an opinion piece that contains a number of strong and possibly controversial statements. The author makes certain comparative arguments in order to convey a specific point about the art of aikido, but intends no disrespect of any other martial styles.*

Literally meaning “the way of the warrior,” (Clark) bushido was more than just a code of conduct for Samurai, the elite combatants of feudal Japan. Combining the pacifistic beliefs of Buddhism, Zen, Confucianism, and Shintoism, with the alertness and skill needed to survive in a hostile martial environment, bushido was an honorable protocol to which all Japanese men aspired. Above all, defined as a set of values on which the Samurai based their every action, and holding such intangible characteristics as “justice, benevolence, love, sincerity, honesty, and self-control in utmost respect,” (Clark) bushido represented a complete way of life for the warrior class. Sadly, in modern times, it is a way of life that is little understood and technically as extinct as the generations of men who established it. Yet, as recently as the 20th century, one man took bushido so seriously that, in his lifetime, he embodied, refined, and completely redefined it.

Born on December 14, 1883, in the remote Japanese town of Tanabe (Clausen), Morihei Ueshiba rapidly became one of history's greatest martial artists. Despite being sickly as a child, Ueshiba developed into a physically powerful man, and later, an intellectually and spiritually powerful martial artist. As a young adult, and into his middle age, Ueshiba experimented with a variety of martial arts styles. Most notable were his years of training under the fearsome grandmaster of daito-ryu aiki-jutsu, Sokaku Takeda (Stevens, Invincible Warrior 17).

Eventually, inspired by newly discovered spiritual beliefs, and in despair of the multitude of casualties from wars worldwide, Ueshiba altered his beliefs regarding the

necessity of an adversarial mentality as a martial artist. He separated from his previous teachers and mentors and began to develop his own martial style. At first, the techniques used in the new art remained harsh, direct, and none too different from the styles of his teachers. After World War II, however, Ueshiba's style changed again and eventually became the peaceful, gentle, yet powerful art known as aikido. As an art developed individually, in response to a variety of adversarial styles, aikido maintains a rare defensive philosophy that incorporates a desire to protect the attacker, as well as the attacked. This unique aspect of what otherwise might be considered just another sport or combat style, is but one proof of the way in which the admirable characteristics of Morihei Ueshiba shaped aikido as a true way of the warrior.

An examination of modern martial arts verifies, unambiguously, that most are adversarial and have lost any semblance of a defensive or peaceful philosophy. Though most martial arts practiced today are of recent origin, offensive styles in general are the result of a gradual conglomeration of ancient combat techniques. This fact alone explains the absence of distinctive founders among the most well-known martial arts. Furthermore, the lack of an individual leader justifies why the ideals of offensive martial arts are easily corruptible.

Arts such as karate, a refined form of the "Okinawan fighting system of to-de," (Mitchell 10) and taekwondo, which originated in Korea as a combination of the earlier styles of "soo bahk do, kwon bop, and tang soo do," (Park and Seabourne 13) are prime examples of modern adversarial methods. Despite some advocacy for the spiritual and intellectual profundity of these arts, the fact remains that primarily, if not solely, they are merely effective fighting styles. This truth is common knowledge, even among practitioners of the aforementioned disciplines. For example, in the introduction to a book about karate, it is mentioned that "to be capable of inflicting devastating damage on an opponent with one blow of the fist or a single kick has indeed been the objective of this ancient Okinawan martial art" (Nakayama). Convincing though this claim may be, some argue that even adversarial arts provide a variety of benefits. Therefore, before dismissing the validity of such a refutation, let us explore the history of these

offensive styles in order to better understand how their ideals and moralities have been forgotten or debased.

As previously mentioned, karate was developed from an earlier Okinawan art. More correctly, however, modern karate is the Okinawan version of to-de, originally a Chinese fighting style. In turn, to-de “was antedated for several hundred years by a martial art known simply as ti” (Bishop). To-de was introduced on the island of Okinawa around the turn of the 19th century, by a Chinese boxer or grappler known as Kusanku, and though rapidly popularized, did not become known as karate until the early 1900s. Originally considered an elitist tradition, to-de eventually spread throughout the class system (Bishop). This dissemination, along with the emergence of several notable teachers of the art, no doubt played a tremendous role in the transition from to-de to karate, “from self defense to a mental and physical discipline” (Mitchell 11).

Ironically, it was a schoolteacher, Funakoshi Gichin, who “was responsible for much of the initial promotion of karate [...] and is thereby legitimately considered the founder of the art as we know it today” (Mitchell 10). Founder though he was, Gichin’s contribution to the art in no way fostered the advancement of bushido, or the development of karate as a form thereof. If anything his “promotion of karate” was a driving force behind its institution as a modern sport. As related by Mark Bishop, two other occurrences contributed to the ultimate degradation of karate’s once honorable values:

During the Vietnam War, Okinawa became an important US military supply base and karate became all the more popular among the servicemen, some of whom introduced their styles to the United States and elsewhere. Later, the popularity of Okinawan karate increased worldwide as Okinawans themselves went overseas to teach.

Essentially, it was the worldwide dispersion of the art of karate, without the continued oversight of a dedicated founder and his legacy, that crushed its potential as a form of bushido.

The Korean art of taekwondo differs from karate in that it has long been a part of several East Asian national militant curricula (Mitchell 8). This emphasis on aggression

suggests that taekwondo is an inaccurate representation of bushido, which by current definition promotes nonviolence as the ultimate objective (Clark). Statements such as, “most practitioners sleep well [and] have lean bodies,” (Park and Seabourne vii) highlight taekwondo’s prioritization of physical potential. Nevertheless, given the broad claim, by taekwondo practitioners Yeon Hwan Park and Tom Seabourne, that “people practice taekwondo as an Olympic sport, a [martial] art, or a lifestyle,” (vii) it becomes necessary to demystify the development of the style in order to assess where it diverged from the true way of the warrior.

A defining constituent of taekwondo is the recency of its inception. Although martial arts were introduced in Korea thousands of years ago, it was not until 1965 that the name taekwondo was chosen to officially represent the method of combat that had developed (Hornsey). Naturally, given its timeline of development, taekwondo incorporates a diverse hodgepodge of techniques from other contemporary martial arts. In other words, comprising a coalescence of various styles – including karate, which I have already proven adversarial, and judo, which I will discuss in detail – taekwondo may be unique, but is certainly not collectively original. As with karate, the establishment of taekwondo was followed by rapid and widespread propagation. In fact, by 1973, the art’s popularity required the institution of a worldwide competition (Park and Seabourne 13). In 1988, taekwondo became an Olympic sport (Hornsey), confirming the indisputable allegation in that it can be performed as such. Conclusively, then, less than a decade after its accredited formation, the art had become merely a form of physical recreation and competition: a hitherto respectable martial doctrine had yet again been dishonored and corrupted.

Although claims can be made to endorse the widely varying benefits of taekwondo, these assertions hinge on the interpretation of various aspects of modern martial arts. For example, it is logically supportable that taekwondo can be exercised as a lifestyle, assuming that this refers to the art’s cultivation of a fit and healthy body. Furthermore, as suggested by Park and Seabourne, taekwondo can be practiced as a martial art. This, however, only maintains rationality given the qualifier that, commonly, martial arts and sports are deemed equivalent. Despite its apparent embodiment of an

all-encompassing martial art, taekwondo is fundamentally misrepresentative of bushido. The way of the warrior is martial in that it indoctrinates the value of self-defense, but in no way does it promote combat for entertainment or sport. It is considered a lifestyle because it is represented by a continual attempt at spiritual perfection, with physical prowess as but a secondary objective. Essentially and primarily, bushido is the art of peace, and as such, taekwondo is not a form thereof.

As certain adversarial martial arts homogenized a variety of ancient offensive styles, defensive arts emerged to guard against these hostile combative techniques. Even originally defensive arts have often acquired adversarial characteristics, due to modern popularization. Moreover, in many cases, the universalization of such styles occurred within the founder's lifetime, suggesting either a decreased commitment, on the part of the founder and his pupils, to refining and perfecting the art, an alteration of the founder's values that instigated a modification of the art's philosophy, or a lack of respect for the founder's principles, by practitioners of the art, causing a divergence of styles.

The Japanese art of judo is the most classic example of an originally defensive art gone awry. The art was developed by martial arts master Jigoro Kano, who "tied together the ideals of the samurai and the gentler side of jujutsu and called the result 'judo,' from ju-, meaning 'the gentle way,' and do-, which identifies the system as an art and a way of life, as well as a sport" (Putin, Shestakov, and Levitsky). Kano was introduced to jujutsu in 1878, at the age of 18, and by 1882 he had begun teaching his own modified style. "He decided to use the term judo rather than the word jujutsu for philosophical reasons, emphasizing the doctrine of gentleness as a way of living rather than only the principle of yielding as a fighting concept" (Pedro 12).

The global circulation and popularization of judo was less rapid than that of other contemporary martial arts. By 1909, however, the art had become an Olympic sport, an event to which Kano himself was a witness (Pedro 13). For some time, Kano expertly directed the philosophy of the art, maintaining the importance of defensive and peaceful values. In later life, though, he chose to pursue personal enlightenment, and less strictly dictated the peaceful mentality of his students. Naturally, it was Kano's students

who eventually assumed leadership of the art, and since those who embody a peaceful doctrine without guidance are few and far between, many defensive principles of judo were abandoned following his demise.

Throughout his life, Jigoro Kano expressed a variety of harmonious sentiments, which prove that “Kano revealed himself as a follower of the Eastern philosophical and religious teachings, which are closely connected with the practice of martial arts” (Putin, Shestakov, and Levitsky). Unfortunately, however, Kano’s legacy did not perpetuate the attitude of the founder, and nowadays, the peaceful intention of the art:

[...] Is merely proclaimed, existing as it were beyond the bounds of competitive activity that modern judo has come to represent. What do we see today? Judo technique? Yes, without a doubt, but the spirit of judo as Jigoro Kano understood it is lacking now. Is this good or bad? There is no clear-cut answer to this question. That’s how it turned out. Such is the influence of time. (Putin, Shestakov, and Levitsky)

Consequently, although the name judo literally means “the gentle way,” as a grappling style and the most popular Olympic martial sport, the art can hardly be classified as defensive.

A truly defensive art is defined by its philosophy of compassion; a philosophy that is perhaps not inherently a value of the founder, but that is cultivated through a lifetime of dedication to refining the style. A nonviolent mentality was never a tenet of some of the more composite modern martial arts and, among the most well-known styles, a peaceful philosophy is either unheard of, misinterpreted, or ignored. Today, aikido constitutes a unique exception to the implicit reality that martial arts are predominantly adversarial.

The orthodox view of modern martial arts has contributed to their divergence from the way of the warrior, since popular styles are viewed exclusively as sports or effective combat methods and are promoted as such. This common conception is not necessarily fallacious, as it accurately defines arts such as karate, taekwondo, and even judo. It fails, however, to acknowledge the existence of styles that remain martial, but that can be pursued as inspirational paths to individual and interpersonal peace. Both in

theory and in practice, aikido remains deeply rooted in the essence of bushido, as, according to the founder, it is based on “four great virtues: bravery, wisdom, love, and friendship” (Stevens, Art of Peace 38).

Although there is no way to distinguish the relative inferiority or superiority of various martial arts, purely defensive styles such as aikido are more encompassing of ideals that benefit all of mankind and therefore can be practiced, not as a sport, but as a way of life. Aikido’s founder, Morihei Ueshiba – or “O Sensei” (Clausen; Matrasko) as he is known to practitioners worldwide – possessed certain inherent qualities that allowed him to inspire and foster a genuinely unique martial art. In addition to the natural focus and determination that he brought to his practice, Ueshiba demonstrated unique insight into seldom considered aspects of martial training. Perhaps most remarkably, O Sensei believed that peace is the true essence of martial arts, a concept that, outside of aikido, is seldom considered in a combative setting. The founder frequently emphasized that “the state of mind of the aikidoist must be peaceful and totally non-violent” (“Interview”). Supplementarily, he reasoned: “this [mentality] is the true spirit of Japanese martial arts. We have been given this earth to transform into a heaven on earth. War-like activity is totally out of place” (“Interview”).

Ueshiba’s legacy is entirely focused on a defensive mentality; his personal transition to a pacifistic style, however, was a process that lasted several decades. Like other great martial artists, Ueshiba began his training by experimenting with a variety of combat styles. He claims to have begun his martial training:

At about the age of 14 or 15. First I learned Tenshinyo-ryu Jujitsu from Tokusaburo Tozawa Sensei, then Kito-ryu, Yagyu-ryu, Aioi-ryu, Shinkage-ryu, all of them jujutsu forms. However, I thought there might be a true form of budo elsewhere. I tried Hozoin-ryu sojitsu and kendo. But all of these arts are concerned with one-to-one combat forms and they could not satisfy me. (“Interview”)

Ueshiba expanded his martial arts experience in 1903, during his first tour of duty as a member of the Japanese military, when he “enrolled in the dojo of Masakatsu Nakai in Sakai, a suburb of Osaka, [and] learned [...] sword and spear fighting” (Stevens,

Invincible Warrior 10). Following the Russo-Japanese War, Ueshiba briefly practiced judo, in addition to continuing his former martial studies. Ueshiba's most significant martial training occurred after 1915, when he witnessed a demonstration by the founder of daito-ryu aiki-jutsu, Sokaku Takeda (Strozzi-Heckler). Immediately following Takeda's impressive exhibition of martial skill, O Sensei built a dojo, or training hall, on his property, where he invited the master to live and teach (Stevens, Invincible Warrior 22; "Morihei Ueshiba"). Into his thirties, Ueshiba was greatly influenced by this eccentric man, of whom he became a devout pupil.

Several notable events inspired O Sensei's departure from martial arts as a life-depriving mechanism, which in turn, led to his espousal of peaceful training. The transition was occasioned, in part, by an encounter with Onisaburo Deguchi, the founder and master of the Japanese religion Omoto Kyo. In 1919, hearing that his father was gravely ill, Ueshiba headed for his hometown of Tanabe. Along the way, "Morihei impulsively stopped at Ayabe, headquarters of the new Omoto-kyo religion he had recently heard so much about, to request a prayer service for the recovery of his father's health" (Stevens, Aikido 7). At this time, Ueshiba was introduced to Deguchi, who assured him that his father was beyond recovery. Upon reaching his home, O Sensei was horrified to find that his father had indeed passed away prior to his arrival (Stevens, Invincible Warrior 32). Disconsolately, he returned to Ayabe, seeking peace in the "other-worldly atmosphere" (Stevens, Aikido 7). Ueshiba became firmly attached to Deguchi, acting as his bodyguard until Omoto Kyo was forcibly disbanded by Japanese government and military officials in 1935 (Stevens, Invincible Warrior 57). From then on, Ueshiba emphasized the spiritual aspects of martial training and rapidly incorporated them into the form of aiki budo that he began to develop.

Ueshiba's approach to martial arts in later life can also be attributed to his desire to single-handedly atone for the homicidal horrors of World War II. This attitude starkly contrasts Ueshiba's approach to the Russo-Japanese War, of which he was a willing participant. In fact, at the age of twenty, Ueshiba's eagerness to join the Japanese military was so great, that upon failing to meet the minimum height requirement of five feet two inches, he "spent the next several months training alone in the mountains,



hanging from branches with weights on his legs, and performing other stretching exercises to expend his spine the necessary half inch” (Strozzi-Heckler). By the 1940s, however, O Sensei firmly opposed the barbarity that he saw directed both towards, and by, Japanese soldiers, and vowed that the art of aikido would discourage violence and promote conflict-avoidance (Stevens, Invincible Warrior 65). Today, due to a continued perfection of the founder’s ideals, aikido maintains a pure philosophy that stresses a defensive mentality, translating into valuable personal development for those who practice it with dedication.

In addition to the obviously revolutionary interpretation of bushido that he brought to modern martial arts practice, O Sensei provided chronologists with a life’s story abounding in both practical and mystical appeal. Despite the relative recency of his contributions to the martial arts community and the world, Ueshiba is respected with legendary acclaim. During later life, O Sensei was frequently confronted by a variety of challengers, ranging from sword masters to professional boxers and wrestlers. Though he was never physically beaten, when asked if he had always been undefeated, Ueshiba’s stated that, in fact he had “experienced failure many times due to inattention and improper attitude” (qtd. in Stevens, Invincible Warrior 64). The simple profundity of his reply highlighted the extent of his enlightenment as a follower of bushido:

One time I was traveling with my former teacher Sokaku Takeda, running along carrying his baggage, and I nearly collided with an old woman who suddenly crossed my path. I just managed to avoid running into her, but from the standpoint of Budo that was a defeat, since I was not paying sufficient attention to my surroundings. (qtd. in Stevens, Invincible Warrior 64)

Ueshiba furthermore asserted that all of his failures resulted in the refinement and improvement of the art he developed (Stevens, Invincible Warrior 64).

A variety of historical references confirm the impressive extent to which Ueshiba refined his own practice. Even while still alive, O Sensei was surrounded by a fabled aura, and numerous eyewitness accounts of his “superhuman” feats support the mythological claims that litter the wake of his passing. As related by John Stevens, the premier aikido historian and himself a dedicated practitioner, “there are dozens of

amazing tales told about Morihei, during the prewar period” (Invincible Warrior 59).

After detailing several accounts of minimal consequence, Stevens continues:

Some of the tales are simply incredible. In his memoirs, Gozo Shioda [one of Ueshiba’s top students] has provided detailed, eyewitness accounts of several such miraculous events. Once, when Shioda was traveling with Morihei they were walking up the steps to a train platform when a man at the top of the stairs tripped and tumbled toward them. Morihei shouted and the man “unfell,” somehow landing back on his feet at the top of the stairs. (Invincible Warrior 61)

Stevens further describes how, when fired upon by a group of marksmen, Ueshiba momentarily incapacitated his attackers and emerged, unscathed, behind them (Invincible Warrior 62).

Throughout his life, O Sensei did possess tremendous physical strength, but he never relied on this as the source of his power. Being frail, as a child, Ueshiba practiced a variety of techniques to build physical strength and stamina. Ueshiba’s training included such harsh procedures as “dousing himself daily with water and [...] asking his friends to pelt him with prickly chestnuts” (Stevens, Invincible Warrior 5). Though he continued to stoke his physical potential, Ueshiba eventually learned that the ability to avoid conflict is the mark of a true warrior, and that it is mental and spiritual strength, as opposed to physical, which is required to meet this end.

Among O Sensei’s notable attributes was an understanding of the universal flow of energy, which, he found, could be manipulated expertly to apply martial principles with minimal physical contact. Learning to blend and harmonize with energy, primarily that of an attacker, is an underlying principle of aikido that is fully expressed in the literal translation of the name, which means “the way of harmony” (Stevens, Aikido 12). As Ueshiba honed his understanding of this intangible skill, which allowed him to disarm and immobilize any number of attackers seemingly without touching them (Stevens, Invincible Warrior 57), aikido evolved away from the direct, forceful style that represented his early training.

O Sensei’s admirable traits were certainly characteristic of his natural personality, as well as being reflective of many complex encounters; his leadership and confidence,

however, were skills that required great diligence to perfect. Thus, it was Ueshiba's lifelong dedication to pursuing the way of the warrior that caused him to become one of history's greatest and most powerful martial artists. There is a misconception that, when related to martial arts, power refers to physical strength. Ueshiba's power, however – and the power which all aikido practitioners can gain through a lifetime of training – reflects a skillful manipulation of energy to subdue an attack.

When questioned regarding the mysticism of his skills, O Sensei stressed that the art “only seems to be mystical” and further explained: “In aikido we utilize the power of the opponent completely. So the more power the opponent uses, the easier it is for you” (“Interview”). Because skill is required, instead of strength, aging in no way negatively impacts the abilities of a dedicated aikidoist. As the founder, Ueshiba completely understood this reality of aikido training, and even though in later years his practice became almost exclusively spiritual and meditative, his skill, and therefore his power as a martial artist, continued to increase due to his ongoing dedication.

As a martial artist, Morihei Ueshiba was unequivocally powerful throughout his lifetime; as a human, he gained an unrivaled understanding of the concepts that form the basis of the way of the warrior. There is no dictate that demands acceptance, or even acknowledgement, of a specific martial arts doctrine. An art can be used adversarially or peacefully, and practiced as a sport, a pastime, or a lifestyle. In the end, these are personal choices, but history can help guide our decisions, as in the words of O Sensei: “the world will continue to change dramatically, but fighting and war will destroy us utterly. What we need now are techniques of harmony, not of contention. The Art of Peace is required, not the Art of War” (qtd. in Stevens, Art of Peace 9).

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