

Samurai Sprouts and Greening the Martial Arts

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Michelle Keip, a blackbelt in Aikido, is the founder of Samurai Sprouts, the creative director of Wellspring Aikido Arts, and an instructor with Kidpower International. She's offered her essay, *Samurai Sprouts, and Greening the Martial Arts* to us. Thank you Michelle.

**“All of humanity depends upon our aspiration.”
His Holiness, the Dalai Lama**

My aspirations for peace compel me to cultivate Samurai Sprouts, a holistic, nature-based curriculum for young children inspired by Aikido, the martial art of peace. Later I'll share how our simple rituals and playful improvisations arouse a child's aspiration for peace. But first, let's go back to the roots in Aikido.

Could there be a less likely venue to espouse Love and Peace than in the warrior's training hall? Yet there was a warrior who took that stand. His vision has mobilized hundreds of thousands of people all over the planet in the last few decades. He was an avatar, someone who by their example adds new possibilities to what it is to be human. His name was Morihei Ueshiba, the founder of Aikido.

Morihei Ueshiba, who we refer to as O'Sensei or “great teacher” in Aikido, manifested his legacy of radical non-violence in the most violent of fields, the martial arts. Martial means war-like and war makes winners and losers. In mid-life, as the undefeated martial arts champion of Japan, Ueshiba was regularly challenged to duels by practitioners of all styles. One day after a vigorous encounter he experienced a rapturous enlightenment. He realized that “Budo is Love.” Budo means martial way or literally, “to stop the spear.” After this O'Sensei prohibited competitions in Aikido.

Until his death at age 86, O'Sensei remained invincible and true to the core vow of Aikido to do no harm. Today his art continues to reveal that it is possible to protect life by opening up, rather than defending. Love, the greatest power, is what makes this possible.

Peace and love are at the core of all spiritual teachings. Yet when it comes down to the heat of conflict, we readily abandon our principles and grab on to our reptilian modes of fight, flight or freeze.

Without recurrent practices of non-violence trained into our awareness and our bodies, we automatically rally our favored defenses. Our fear pulls the cork out of our open posture and we shut down to protect. We forget love and we decline peace. We defend our reactive behavior as common sense. Of course, without training in alternatives, we all simply do the best we can to stay safe.

O'Sensei wrote,

“In my Aikido there are no opponents, no enemies. I do not want to overwhelm everyone with brute strength, nor do I want to smash every challenger to the ground. In true budo we seek to be one with all things, to return to the very heart of creation. The purpose of Aikido training is not to make you simply stronger or tougher than others: it is to make you a warrior for world peace. This is our mission in Aikido.”

This restoration of the warrior role to being a stand for the creation and the protection of life is what I call “greening” the martial arts. Turning our attention from personal gain to collective benefit is required of all who want to grow peace on earth. This centering in the greater good takes courage, commitment and cooperation, virtues of the warrior that we all possess as human beings.

In the U.S. we market the Hollywood glamour of warrior stardom to our youth by inviting them to become “An Army of One.” We’ve largely forgotten that the warrior sacrifices her separateness in order to foster and protect the whole.

In war this sacrifice may mean giving one’s own precious life. In daily life this means giving up one’s identification with being an autonomous individual and renewing our connection with what Native Americans call “all our relations”. As Albert Einstein wrote in describing his revolutionary discovery, $e=mc^2$,

“The universe is one, indivisible dynamic whole in which energy and matter are so deeply entangled it is impossible to consider them as separate elements.”

We martial artists are a practical sort. We hold the high standard that what we say and what we do are congruent. And what we do must be effective, because in the heat of emergency we must move with immediate confidence. Perhaps this deportment is part of what is attracting thousands of people worldwide to Aikido. Many aren’t allured by the role of the warrior, but most want the embodied conviction to make a difference, now.

How can we renew our children’s birthright: the expectation of a welcoming world? My vision is that one day it will be common sense for everyone to accept that love is the greatest power. Peace in ourselves and in the world will be the manifestation of our love.

Our perceptions of common sense begin to solidify in the socialization years of age 4 to 7. Appreciating the power of timing, I’ve concentrated my passion for O’Sensei’s vision of world peace in Samurai Sprouts. Rather than downsize adult Aikido training, I’ve developed an approach which meets children where they love to be: in the world of games, imagination and exploration with the senses. I stay true to O’Sensei’s explanation of Aikido’s purpose: “In Aikido we learn about ourselves, we learn to link

ourselves to the life force, and we learn how to discern the principles of nature. Step by step we make our path one of brightness and peace.”

O’Sensei was a Shinto priest as well as a martial artist, and Samurai Sprouts springs from Aikido’s spiritual roots. In Shinto, nature is considered to be the purest expression of Spirit, so humans naturally aspire to be in harmony with nature.

An expression that describes the Shinto way of seeing, Mono no aware, means, “seeing with the heart into the natural beauty and goodness of things”.



“Move like a beam of light, fly like lightning, strike like thunder, and whirl in circles around a stable center.” We take these, O’Sensei instructions, quite literally in Samurai Sprouts. At age 4 to 7 it’s typically easy to jump into another identity, such as “shine like a star”. Occasionally there is a child who is already afraid to let go of their personhood into the freedom of imagination. Yet if they find the courage to stay a while, inevitably they get swept into the tide of improvisational joy.

SAMURAI SPROUTS

Samurai Sprouts: children readily take to this transformational vision for themselves. They’re eager to see themselves in the heroic image of the Samurai. They naturally respond to other small beings who reflect back their own innocence and vitality. When I bring planted bright green sprouts to class, their delight is exhilarating. The tenderness of other young creatures evokes a child’s own protective nature, and so the strong and the vulnerable aspects of a child come together.

Aikido itself is very young. We’ve just begun to invent approaches tailored to the developmental needs of children.

O’Sensei advised against children practicing the art for fear of their injury. Just now in the 2nd and 3rd generations of Aikido teachers (Ueshiba died in 1969) are we discovering many creative ways to offer the awesome power of Aikido to children.

O’Sensei wrote, “Aikido is becoming established all over, but it will have a different expression in each place it takes root. Continually adapt the teachings and create a beautiful, pure land.”

His words assure me that he would be glad Aikido is now available to children.

In Aikido we bow... a lot. I tell my Samurai Sprouts that bowing is a way to show respect with our bodies. When we bow we empty ourselves of our heady pre-occupation with the personal. Lowering our torso, we let go into the gratitude of connection.

A mother, Christine, wrote about the benefits of Samurai Sprouts for her son, who is often restless and wanting to do things his way no matter what. "I have seen him being considerate to smaller children and having the patience to sit down and teach them games."

At the beginning of every Samurai Sprouts class, the students sit on the "learning line". First we bow to the altar with this invocation: "I bow to all our ancestors and to all the Protectors of the Peace who have come before us." Then we turn and bow to each other. "I bow to all of us, the Protectors of the Peace of RIGHT NOW."

If you've stayed with my discourse to this point, I imagine you, too, are a Protector of the Peace.

Take a moment, if you will, and bow. What will you bow to? All things deserve our respect.

Thich Nhat Hanh, a Vietnamese Buddhist monk and international peace activist writes,

"We humans think we are smart, but an orchid, for example, knows how to produce noble, symmetrical flowers and a snail knows how to make a beautiful, well-proportioned shell... We should bow deeply before the orchid and the snail. The feeling of respect for all species will help us to recognize the noblest nature in ourselves." (from *The Sun in My Heart*)

Bowing produces dignity and pleasure for my young students. Bowing gives them regular practice in the ritual intensity of their eagerly awaited belt promotion. And how they love to bow! Standing bows, sitting bows, so many bows. I've never heard a child complain about bowing.

Martial arts in the U.S. mark a student's progress with the awarding of colored belts. Whereas in competitive styles this progress can be skewed to highlight mainstream values of display, acquisition and dominance, the non-competitive foundation of Aikido insists we have other motives. I like the definition of promotion as "the act of furthering the growth or development of something." Rather than focusing on each child's performance, we hold a collective promotion for Samurai Sprouts. This group demonstration grows their experience of cooperative development.

As is essential in all rites of passage, the sacred promotion ritual transpires in the context of attentive, caring community. Family and friends gather to witness and celebrate their loved ones. In the closing ritual, the children bow to their beloved community as well.

The Dalai Lama says the next Buddha will not come as a person but as a community. I have faith that my students belong to the blessed community that is already restoring peace on earth. Samurai Sprouts are part of the emerging “green” culture.

Daniel’s parents brought him to Samurai Sprouts because he hadn’t yet found an activity where he felt a sense of belonging. On the day of his white belt promotion he walked up to me, took the shape of “protect like a tree” and declared, “I love being a Protector of the Peace!” Now, more than a year later, Daniel is still an enthusiastic Samurai Sprout.

The Samurai Sprouts white belt promotion is a child’s initiation into being a Protector of the Peace. I know the power of initiation to take root in the core of human beings. Even if that seed stays dormant for many years, when it is planted in a sacred way it will find the path to the surface eventually. Love is the greatest power.

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This fall Michelle is teaching [Heart of Courage: Aikido Practices of Love in Action](#) Sept 9 - 14. The workshop is an introduction to Aikido for women at Omega Institute, the largest retreat center for Holistic Studies in the US.

From the course description: “Aikido is a non-competitive martial art, which cultivates harmony of body, mind, and spirit. In this retreat we’ll grow our capacity to “walk our talk,” access unconditional self-acceptance, and shift conditioned patterns of reactivity into joyful expressions of response. We’ll explore themes central to Aikido: centering, connecting with others, being instruments of love in action, shifting from a culture of “power over” to one of “power with” and becoming fully present.”