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Aikido Defenses Against Real-World Attacks

by Roy Y. Suenaka and Chad Taylor, M.S.



Abstract

Aikido is frequently accused of being just a spiritual art, rather than an effective form of self-defense. Indeed, many aikido schools have justified that accusation by ignoring the self-defense aspect *in lieu* of tradition and philosophy. While not meritless, this biased concentration weakens aikido's effectiveness in the street. This article addresses this concern by exploring how the principles of aikido are used in real-world encounters and recommending training methods to better prepare students of aikido for effective self-defense.

Foundation of Traditional Aikido

Traditional aikido has only a few "orthodox" attacks for which one practices defense. Of these, there are just three strikes: *yokomen uchi*, *shomen uchi*, and *mune tsuki*. These terms describe a knife-hand strike to the side of the head, a vertical knife-hand strike, and a thrusting punch to the midsection, respectively. The delivery of these strikes during practice can at times seem laughable, as they are usually performed in an entirely unrealistic manner for the benefit of one's partner. Coupling this with the unlikelihood of encountering such attacks in the real world, one is left questioning why such attacks are considered orthodox in aikido at all.

To answer this question, one has to understand aikido's major influences. Most aikido practitioners will correctly cite Daito-ryu Aiki-Jiujutsu as the predecessor of aikido, but neglect to mention the profound influence of sword and spear-fighting arts, which founder Ueshiba Morihei mostly learned prior to his training in Daito-ryu. It is within these arts that the origin of traditional aikido strikes can be found, corresponding directly with the sword techniques of similar mechanics.

In addition to this historical tradition, these attacks persist because they represent a wider variety of attacks. *Mune tsuki* is practiced in place of any thrusting-type punch. *Shomen uchi* is used for any vertical overhead strike. *Yokomen uchi* represents any lateral, circular attack. In these loose definitions, one can indeed see where some real-world attacks are located, but is this an optimal way to train? Do these attacks, and the ways they are performed, truly embody the attacks people are likely to encounter in the real world? In most cases, no.

Aikido in the Modern World

The representation argument above is no more than an excuse to follow tradition, and this loyalty to the founding techniques should be applauded. However, one has to wonder what attacks Ueshiba would have stressed if the culture in which aikido was developed had been influenced by today's standards. Boxing, MMA, wrestling, and the like were simply not an integral part of the early and mid-1900s Japanese culture, and were not likely to influence the developing art, or an attack on the street. So the question should be, if Ueshiba were alive to witness the kinds of attacks that are prevalent now, would he optimize aikido training to defend against them?

Although Ueshiba wanted aikido to embody love, peace, and harmony, he did not intend for that goal to be at the expense of self-defense. Aikido, as Ueshiba taught it, should be maximally effective on the street, and with respect to this goal, he likely would have incorporated defenses against attacks not directly represented by the three orthodox strikes currently used in aikido. In essence, he would want his aikido to address every aspect of self-defense, and not just the traditional ones.

Many practitioners, wanting to accentuate principles they themselves deemed most important from Ueshiba's teachings, filtered out other aspects. In many cases, what was filtered was this self-defense mind-set. They speak of Ueshiba's later years, claiming he had evolved into a softer, more spiritual practitioner. While he unquestionably did become more spiritually motivated, "soft" is a vastly misleading term. The "soft" aspect, that is frequently referenced refers to blending and avoidance of force-against-force techniques that are ineffective against larger assailants. For those serving as *uke* (the attacker), Ueshiba's techniques were anything but soft, at times bordering on excruciating.

There are those who claim adding elements to aikido is bastardizing the art. But adopting this view is a fallacy that in itself is contrary to the principles of aikido. Ueshiba once said,

Even though our path is completely different from the warrior arts of the past, it is not necessary to abandon totally the old ways. Absorb venerable traditions into this Art by clothing them with fresh garments, and build on the classic styles to create better forms. — Stevens, J., 1992:49

"[C]lothing them with fresh garments..." That bears repeating. Ueshiba saw the need to adapt to the changing times, to the changing culture, while still holding true to the principles on which the techniques were based.

This sentiment was echoed to Roy Y. Suenaka at a private dinner, and later to others, when Ueshiba told him, "I am but a student of aikido. Take what I teach and improve upon it." That is a daunting task for a master to bestow on his students. It is a responsibility, not just to one, but to all practitioners. As Ueshiba understood while developing aikido, the task he bequeathed to his students was to allow aikido to evolve and grow while maintaining its principles. If this is indeed Ueshiba's will, then maintaining a static, inflexible aikido is in fact crippling it.

In that spirit, practicing one's techniques against real-world attacks in the practice hall, rather than assuming the necessary adaptation will occur in the street, is paramount in optimizing one's training. "You respond as you've trained," is often heard in the practice hall, describing the close relationship between learned instincts and repetitious training. Certainly, adaptability is vital in addressing the infinite variation of subtleties in a street encounter, but the more closely represented those variations are and the more well-rounded one's training, the better prepared a practitioner will be when faced with a real-world attack. Necessity may breed creativity, but experience breeds skill.

Influencing an Attack

Before exploring the types of attacks one is likely to encounter, it is important to understand what can be done to influence an attack before it even begins. With respect to this, traditional aikido works best with committed attacks that possess sufficient momentum to be controlled and redirected. Therefore, assuming one cannot avoid the assault altogether, the goal is to entice the attacker to commit.

Of all the elements inherent in a proper technique, only one directly affects an attack prior to its launch: *ma-ai*. Proper *ma-ai* can best be described as the distance between oneself and the attacker such that the attacker is required to move in order to make contact. Simply put, one should stay out of range. This is often measured in the practice hall by having the attacker and defender extend their arms toward one another and just barely touch fingertips.

This required movement to close the gap forces employment of the attacker's hips, which in turn generates momentum and thus increases the commitment of the attack. This gives an aikido player time and energy with which to work. This also makes the attacker readable. An aware defender can observe the attacker's hip movement and weight shifts to deduce the initial attack and respond to it. As attacks in the street happen too quickly to consciously think through them, this deduction and response should occur on a subconscious,

instinctual level through repetitious and closely representative training.

The other factor to consider is one's stance. An obviously trained, ready-for-action stance will elicit caution from an attacker, which in turn makes the attacker less committed. While it is ill-advised to keep oneself open and indefensible, if one maintains proper distance, one's stance can be subtle and inviting of a committed attack. Generally this means being ready and balanced, but with hands lowered and slightly in front. The effect is to appear unthreatening while tempting an attacker to use a committed attack into one's disguised readiness. If one has maintained proper distance, then there will be ample time to bring one's hands up in defense or application of technique.

Rarely does an attack occur for the pure joy of the encounter. There is a motive behind it, whether anger, desperation, or financial gain. The attacker is not looking for a long, drawn-out fight, but rather wants to end it quickly. The means to this end is usually understood to be more powerful, committed attacks. Therefore, if presented with the opportunity to use such an attack and end the encounter quickly, the attacker will generally take it. It is this rationale that makes the stance above useful in luring an attacker to commit for the benefit of one's technique.

Atemi: The Use of Strikes

Atemi refers to striking techniques, usually performed to distract an attacker, create or close openings, or dissuade a continuous assault. *Atemi* should be an integral part of aikido techniques, although many practitioners have reduced or eliminated their usage, claiming Ueshiba removed strikes from aikido to emphasize its spiritual side. This is a misguided claim based largely on demonstrations performed by Ueshiba later in his life.

While it is true that Ueshiba lessened his usage of strikes in his later years, that is not to say he devalued striking, nor wished for its usage to cease. Rather, Ueshiba wished the prevailing strength of aikido, i.e., harmonizing, to be focused upon during his demonstrations. This was especially true for videos publicized to non-aikido practitioners who could misinterpret striking as part of a violent art.

However, Suenaka vividly recalls frequent conversations during that same time in which Ueshiba stressed the use of strikes when applying aikido in self-defense. So while Ueshiba used physical techniques as embodiments of the spiritual principles he wished to relay in his demonstrations, his advocacy of strikes in effective street aikido had never diminished.

In aikido, strikes are used to distract an attacker and create openings for one's techniques. Without such, many aikido techniques would fall prey to

resistance or counters. This is especially true when an attacker maintains a strong stance and provides insufficient momentum to reliably control the attack. By employing strikes, the aikido practitioner weakens the attacker's resolve, directs the attention away from the defense, and reduces the possibility of subsequent counters. Those who do not use strikes are severely limiting their techniques against real attacks.

It should be noted that atemi allow for a broad range of intention in their usage. The primary goal is simply to distract. Therefore, a simple hand motion to the face is sometimes adequate in situations where the attacker should not be harmed. In other times, you may need to apply more severe, debilitating atemi. Although aikido striking is rarely power oriented, its aptitude for disabling an attacker lies in the delivery to vulnerable areas, such as eyes, knees, groin and throat.

Attack Scenarios

It should also be understood that just as one will not always be able to control distance, neither will an attacker always provide ample momentum. Unfortunately, most aikido schools operate under this false assumption. Almost all attacks in the practice hall are committed and launched from proper distance. Ideally, all attacks would conform to this paradigm, but that is not realistic. Therefore, it is important to understand and address scenarios failing to meet these assumptions.

In confined areas, the luxury of proper distance may be unachievable. These situations require decisiveness. If one believes an attack is eminent, then one should not wait for such an attack. Rather, the first physical move should be from the defender upon acknowledging the inevitable attack. This is still a defensive philosophy, although offensive physically, since the attack has been initiated by intent. To wait in close proximity for an attack is to invite defeat.

By initiating the first physical move, there is no momentum with which to work, and the attacker is generally well balanced. Therefore, the energy behind the technique is entirely generated by the defender, and utilizing strikes is important to stop a potential counter. There is a similar effect when confronting an uncommitted attack, except the attacker has already engaged an offensive mentality, so striking and timing are even more important.

Furthermore, in the street one is rarely guaranteed a strictly one-on-one fight, so training must address multiple attack scenarios. Aikido does practice *randori*, or free-style defense against multiple attackers, but usually in succession, so the defender only need be concerned with one attacker at a time. This



is effective in creating responsive techniques, but does not adequately address awareness of simultaneous attacks which can potentially overrun even the most skilled one-on-one practitioner. This fault is not attributable to the practice hall itself, which for safety reasons, should keep throws away from walls or non-matted areas. However, instructors should encourage more realistic movements, even if safety does not always allow full application of techniques.

When faced with multiple attackers, the first rule on the street is to stay out of the center, such that the defender can face all adversaries and not expose one's back to unseen assaults. The second rule is to keep moving; a static target is an easy victim to a coordinated attack. Finally, one needs to take the attackers out quickly, which generally means moving aggressively, straight into a technique (*irimi*), and avoiding longer indirect entering techniques (*tenkan*) with multiple blends and redirections.

The ability to evade attackers and subsequently disable them quickly is a strength of aikido not found in most arts. Although strikes should be intimately integrated into one's defense, a pure striking strategy would be insufficient in such scenarios, as it effectively requires overpowering all foes or uses a level of precision hard to maintain in such dynamic circumstances. Likewise, a purely throwing mentality may not allow a defender sufficient time or openings to apply one's techniques. For truly efficient defense against multiple attackers, one needs to supplement throwing techniques with strikes and vice versa.

Attacks

It are to one's benefit to practice defenses from a wide array of feasible attacks, both traditional and modern. This is an area in which many aikido schools need improvement. Perhaps they focus too much on the defense that they neglect to learn how to properly attack. Whatever the reason, this shortcoming should be addressed if practitioners are to prepare themselves for the street. This includes learning to deliver the orthodox strikes as well as strikes most commonly encountered in the street.

What are most commonly seen in aikido schools are strikes that are effec-

tively presented for the defender to use, but not realistically delivered. Frequently, the midsection punch (*mune tsuki*) finds its full extension well before its target and is subsequently run into the defender. The downward knife-hand attack (*shomen uchi*) is delivered with its loading stage moving close to the defender without following through with the strike itself. The strike to the side of the head (*yokomen uchi*) is blatantly telegraphed and follows a wide arc. Essentially, the attacker focuses not on the attack, but rather on the opponent's defense. Contrary to popular belief, this is not being a good attacker (*uke*), as the attacker's job is to prepare the defender by offering a realistic attack.

Although there are as many stylistic philosophies behind proper striking techniques as there are methods of defense, two simple facts reign in almost all styles: striking power comes from the hips, and the apex of the strike should penetrate several inches into the target. If one analyzes the methods employed by many schools, one finds they conform to neither requirement. Since aikido is primarily a throwing art, some argue this weakness is expected and acceptable, but how do students learn defense against real strikes if they're never attacked with such in the practice hall? Therefore, it is recommended that practitioners acquire a well-rounded understanding of attack mechanics to further their defensive skills and those of their practice partners. Likewise, practitioners should understand the limitations of the three orthodox strikes, what they represent, and how variations therein affect their techniques.

The midsection punch (*mune tsuki*) purposes to cover all thrusting-type strikes. However, no singular strike can adequately cover such a wide range of attacks and their inherent complexities. One who is trained only against a midlevel punch may discover too late his unpreparedness to circumvent a higher-level strike, such as one to the face or an overhand strike that may impose both a lateral and downward element. Jabs are frequently encountered, especially at short range, and their quickness and lack of commitment will foil many techniques aimed at the wrist or arm.

The strike to the side of the head (*yokomen uchi*) represents any circular or lateral strike, and does a fair job simulating one of the most common attacks: the haymaker. This telegraphed, overcommitted, looping-style punch is anything but proper form, but it's used by more untrained attackers than just about any other attack. It's reasonably easy to defense against, because it's highly telegraphed, but its inherent power makes it formidable if contact is made with the intended target or a block. Not as easily translated from *yokomen uchi* is a hook punch, a very common strike for anyone exposed to basic boxing techniques.

The vertical knife-hand strike (*shomen uchi*) has limited usefulness, especially given its typical execution. Running toward someone with one's hand raising in the air in belated preparation is no kind of an attack at all. Likewise, even a proper preparatory move, that allows for forceful delivery, does not prepare one for an attacker loading up from the side or behind. These variations will greatly complicate or completely circumvent typical entering (*irimi*), defenses against the vertical knife-hand strike (*shomen uchi*). Furthermore, most downward strikes tend to be rare, weapon-oriented attacks that present further complications that should be addressed more directly.

Of even greater concern to aikido practitioners are strikes that are completely dissimilar to the orthodox three. Uppercuts, jabs, hooks, overhands, and flurried strikes are increasingly common, but generally unaddressed in most schools. The same principles are applied to these attacks—blending, redirection, and slipping—but significant modification of techniques is required to adequately control them. While a textual description of defenses against these attacks would prove uninformative, a pictorial representation of the more common attacks and a select defense is included for a more practical explanation.

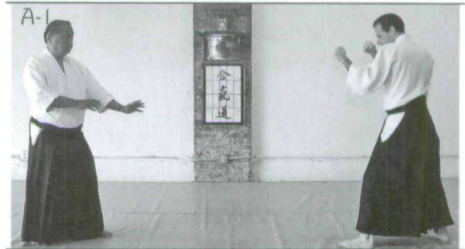
Kicks are not as common, but still a concern that is often overlooked. Defenses against kicks fall into two categories: application of techniques directly to the attacking leg, similar to ones applied to an arm, or deflecting the kick and moving in for a throw. While most kicks are reasonably easy to avoid, it should be noted that some kicks, in particular a quick roundhouse kick to the defender's leg, is very difficult to avoid completely. In fact, trying to move away from the kick will usually shift the defender's weight onto the attacked leg, which forces full acceptance of the blow. Aikido has no defense against such kicks. Therefore, it is necessary to borrow techniques from other arts, such as karate or Muay Thai, and learn to accept the blow with the minimal amount of dispersive damage. In doing so, one can in effect nullify the attack or leave the attacker off balance in the process.

Aikido is very adept at defenses against grabs, but there are a few that fall to the wayside. For one, men rarely get attacked with just a grab, unless the intent is simply to intimidate; normally grabs are succeeded by strikes, unless the defender moves quickly enough to remove the potential. Conversely, women will be grabbed much more frequently than struck. Finally, one of the most common grabbing attacks is a football tackle, where the attacker rushes in to jam or take the defender to the ground. Movement is the greatest tool against such an attack, as shown in the pictorial section.



Technical Section

A Roy Suenaka faces an attacker (Chad Taylor), but assumes an open, non-threatening posture, which encourages commitment with an attack (A-1). At close range with reduced reaction time, Suenaka raises his guard (A-2).



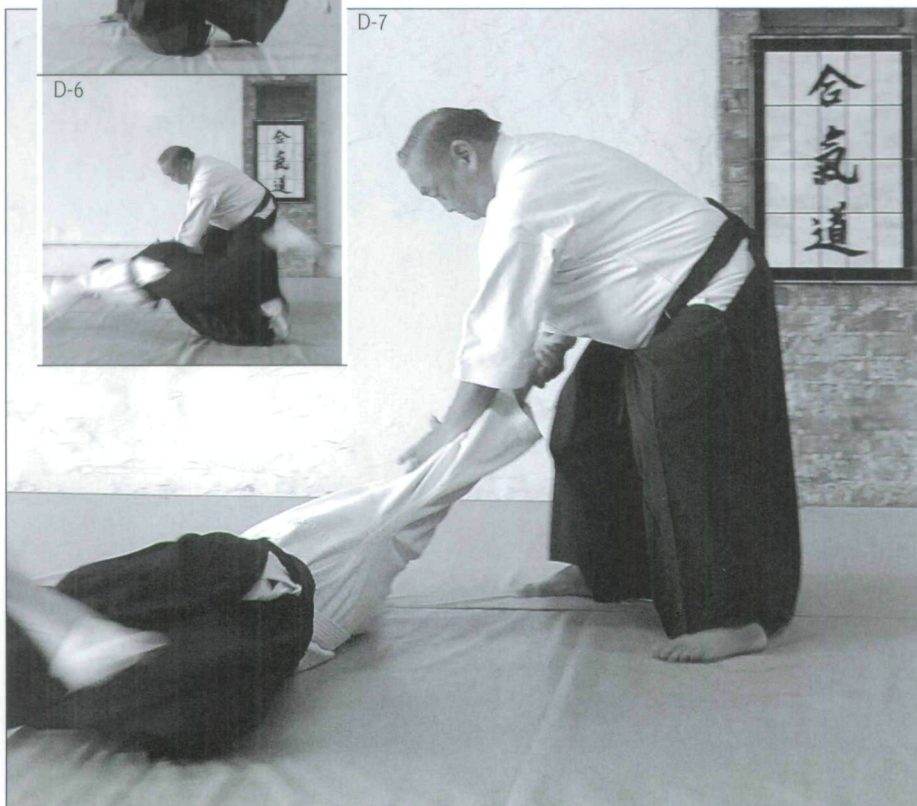
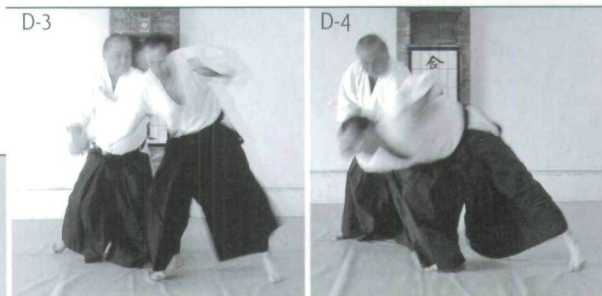
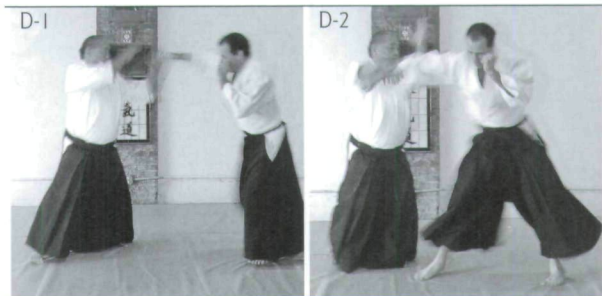
B The attacker threatens Suenaka and tries to move closer (B-1). Suenaka responds by maintaining distance, disallowing the attacker's advance (B-2).



C The attacker again moves closer (C-1), but this time, Suenaka decides an attack is imminent. Suenaka responds by preemptively jamming the attacker's closest arm and strikes with the palm of his hand, disallowing the attack (C-2). Following through with the strike, Suenaka pushes the attacker's chin (C-3) and torques slightly to throw the attacker off-balance (C-4) and to the ground (C-5).



D The attacker throws an overhand right punch (D-1). Suenaka traps the arm (D-2), and applies downward pressure to the radial nerve, just above the elbow (D-3), while allowing the attacker's momentum to continue through and down (D-4 through 7).





E Suenaka evades a right-cross and strikes the attacker's ribs (E-1). Shifting back slightly, Suenaka traps the extended arm (E-2) and applies downward pressure (E-3), driving the attacker to the ground (E-4).

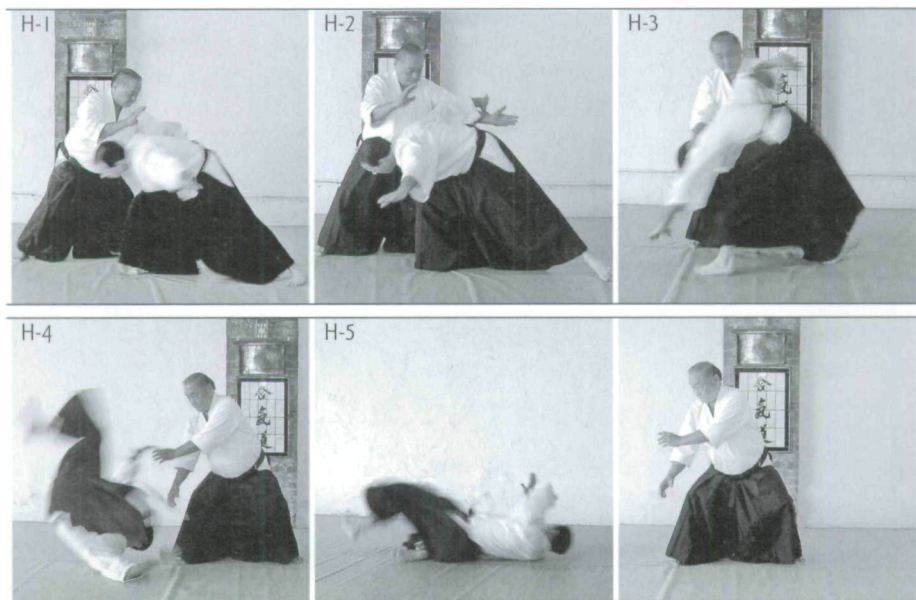


F The attacker moves in for an uppercut (F-1), but Suenaka blends to the outside (F-2) and traps the arm (F-3). Suenaka continues the upward torque, using his elbow to apply painful pressure to the attacker's shoulder (F-4).

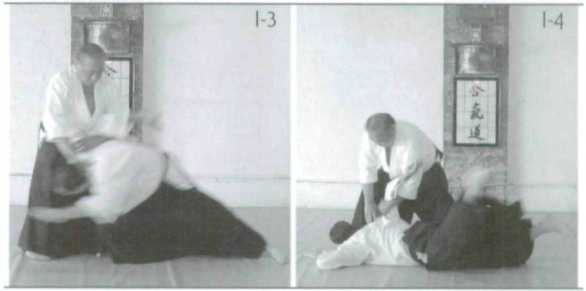
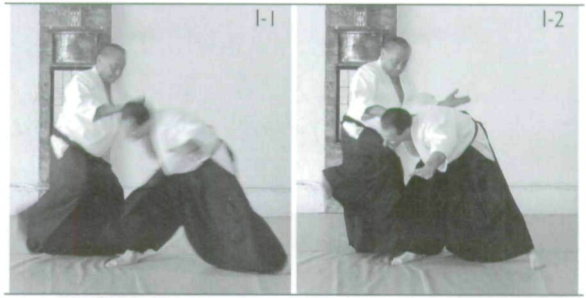
G Again, the attacker attempts an uppercut (G-1), but Suenaka jams the arm down and into the attacker's body (G-2). Suenaka then drives his arm alongside the attacker's jaw (G-3), throwing his head back (G-4) and down (G-5), and directs the attacker to the floor (G-6).



H The attacker rushes Suenaka in a common "football tackle" (H-1), but Suenaka jams the closest arm (H-2) and throws it across the attacker's back while applying downward pressure on the head (H-3). The attacker is forced to tuck and roll to save himself (H-4-5).



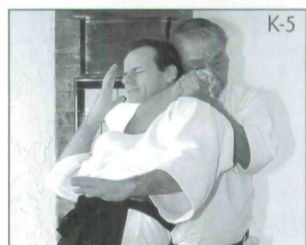
↗ Again, the attacker attempts a football tackle (I-1), but Suenaka jams the closest arm and strikes with his knee (I-2). Suenaka continues the jam by moving the arm behind the attacker's back (I-3), applying pressure to the shoulder (I-4) and locking the arm securing it to the ground (I-5).



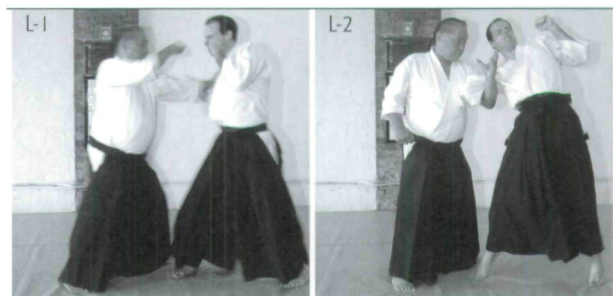
↘ The attacker performs a quick, non-committed roundhouse kick to Suenaka's thigh, who has no choice but to lift his leg and defuse the force along his entire thigh and shin (J-1). As Suenaka steps down, he begins to enter (J-2) and jam the threatening closer hand (J-3). Delivering a palm-heel strike to the attacker's chin (J-4), Suenaka continues through and torques the attacker's head (J-5), redirecting him to the ground (J-6).



K Suenaka is threatened and knows an attack is imminent (K-1). He immediately turns the attacker's body by jamming the closest arm and pushing the opposite shoulder (K-2). Moving behind (K-3), Suenaka positions himself for a choke (K-4) and locks it down by applying pressure along the attacker's carotid artery (K-5).



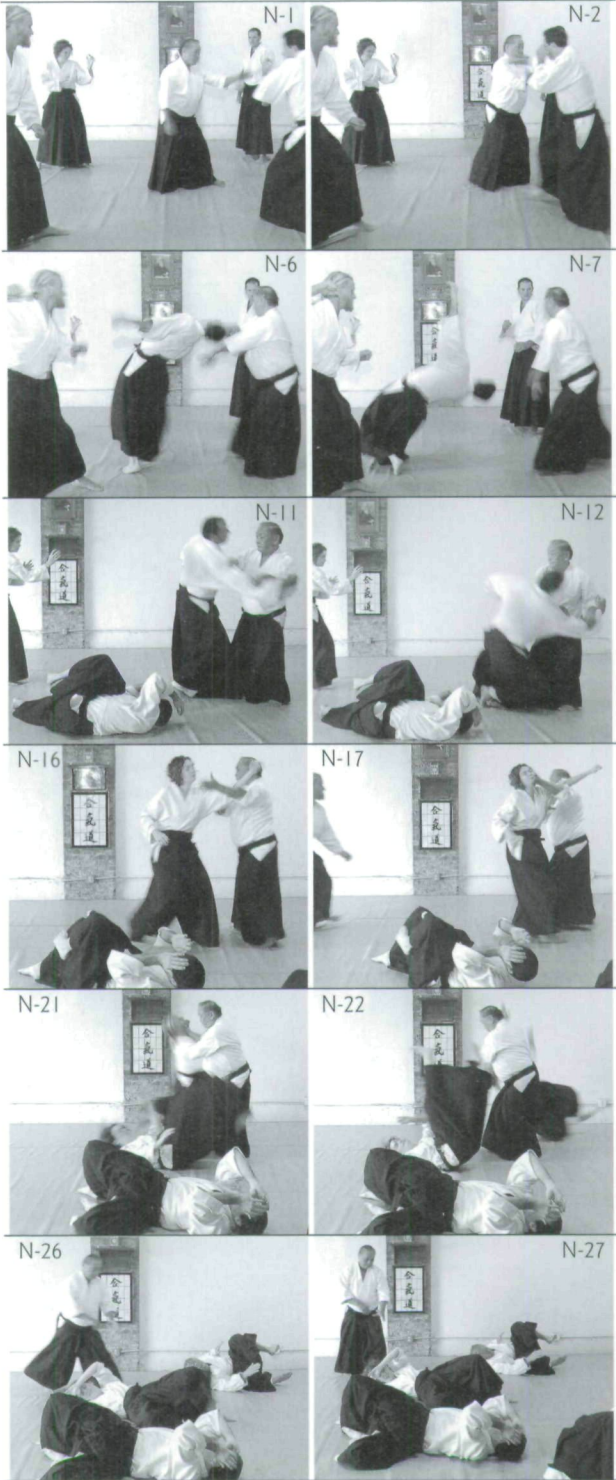
L The attacker attempts a hook punch, only to be met with a quick, entering jam (L-1). Suenaka torques the attacker's arm, so that it locks the shoulder (L-2). Suenaka then pushes the attacker's head back (L-3), and torques it down to the floor (L-4), while maintaining the lock (L-5).

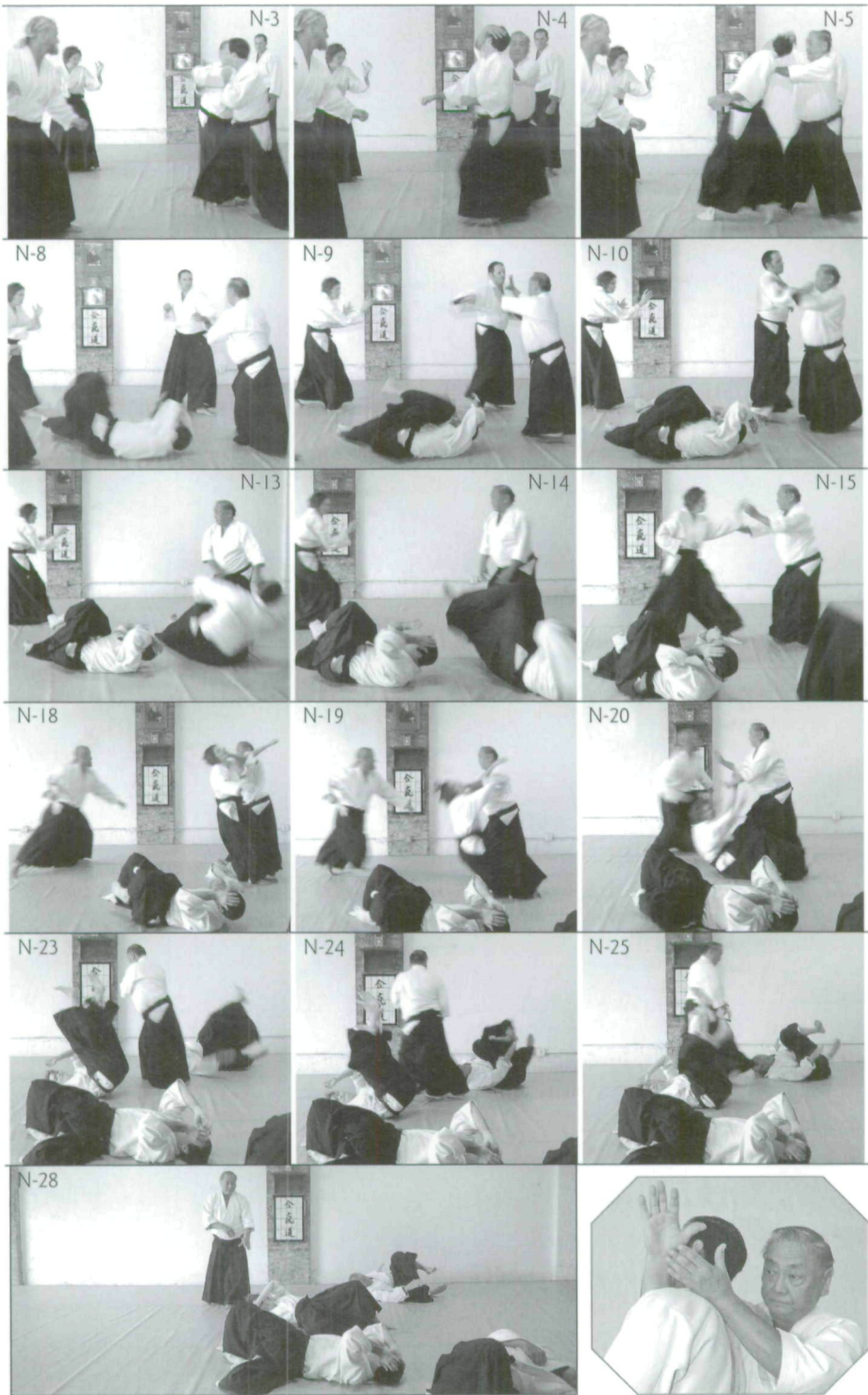




M The aggressor loads up in preparation for an attack, but the distance is too great for an easy jam (M-1). As the attacker launches the haymaker punch, Suenaka begins his blend (M-2) and closes the gap (M-3). Suenaka applies downward and outward pressure on both the arm and shoulder (M-4), throwing the attacker off-balance (M-5) and launching him forward (M-6) to the ground (M-7).

N Four attackers surround Suenaka (N-1), who responds with a quick throw to the closest aggressor (N-2-7), who lands between Suenaka and two of the other attackers, slowing them down and keeping them from attacking simultaneously (N-8). Suenaka responds to the next attack with another quick throw, knowing long, draw-out techniques would give the other attackers time to close the distance (N-9-13). Suenaka stays to the outside of the danger-zone, keeping all attackers in his field of vision (N-14). As Suenaka quickly throws the third attacker (N-15-18), he is immediately attacked by the fourth (N-19-20). Suenaka does not delay as he addresses this final attack (N-21-26). Suenaka maintains his position on the outside of the danger-zone, watching all attackers (N-27-28).





takemusu
aiki
武産合気

“To spontaneously execute the perfect aikido technique in any given situation.”



Conclusion

Takemusu Aiki is a term meaning “to spontaneously execute the perfect aikido technique in any given situation.” A similar interpretation is “infinite creativity,” which describes the adaptability of aikido. Acknowledging that no two attacks are exactly the same, this concept emphasizes the importance of making microadjustments in one’s techniques to compensate for variation. Teach an aikido practitioner one technique, and a thousand should unfold. It is this adaptability in combination with blending that embodies the strength of aikido. Moreover, without the ability to adjust one’s technique to any given situation, one would surely fail, regardless of the art studied.

Likewise, aikido itself should be adaptable and evolve with respect to Ueshiba's teachings. To refuse to address common attacks, simply because they were not in the original repertoire, limits one's defensive capabilities. Aikido is a wonderfully adaptive art, but to maximize one's response efficacy, a broader understanding of attacks and their respective defenses should be achieved. In doing so, one transcends traditional limits applied to modern encounters and allows aikido to achieve maximum effectiveness.



Glossary

| | | |
|---------------------|------|--------------------------------------------|
| <i>aikido</i> | 合気道 | the Way of unifying with life energy |
| <i>atemi</i> | 当て身 | blows to the body |
| <i>Daito-ryu</i> | 大東流 | Great Eastern School |
| <i>irimi</i> | 入り身 | entering straight into a technique |
| <i>jujutsu</i> | 柔術 | gentle or yielding: art/technique |
| <i>ma-ai</i> | 間合い | space between two opponents |
| <i>mune tsuki</i> | 胸突き | middle level punch |
| <i>nage</i> | 投げ | person who executes a technique |
| <i>randori</i> | 乱取り | free-style practice or sparring |
| <i>shomen uchi</i> | 正面打ち | vertical knife-hand strike |
| <i>tenkan</i> | 転換 | "divert"; a 180 degree pivot to one's rear |
| <i>tsuki</i> | 突き | thrust |
| <i>uke</i> | 受け | person who "receives" a technique |
| <i>yokomen uchi</i> | 横面打ち | side-of-the-head strike thrust |

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