

MICHAEL VELTRI

THE
MUSHIN WAY
TO
PEAK
PERFORMANCE

THE PATH TO PRODUCTIVITY,
BALANCE, AND
SUCCESS

WILEY

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For Chiara Joy

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INTRODUCTION

THE AIKIDO WAY

The soldier and martial artist Morihei Ueshiba was about to die.

Ueshiba was in Inner Mongolia on a mission of peace, traveling through a remote mountain pass when, suddenly, he and his party were ambushed. Their enemies—Chinese Nationalist soldiers and armed bandits—made a sudden attack, firing weapons as Ueshiba’s party scattered, looking for cover in the bare mountains.

Surrounded, outnumbered, Ueshiba prepared himself for death. He drew on the reserves of mental strength he had built in years of martial arts practice, military service, and Buddhist studies. Despite the ambush, a strange calmness came over him. He later described the moment this way:

“I could not move from where I stood. So when the bullets came flying toward me, I simply twisted my body and moved my head . . . I could see pebbles of white light flashing just before the bullets. I avoided them by twisting and turning my body, and they barely missed me.”¹

Ueshiba had spent years training in the martial art of *aiki-jutsu*, a brutal self-defense system that evolved out of classical Japanese swordsmanship. For the samurai, life and death were determined on the battlefield in milliseconds, with razor-sharp swords. Aiki-jutsu was the samurai’s last line of self-defense; if he lost his sword, he could still fight with his empty hands.

But, in the early twentieth century, after his experience in Inner Mongolia, Ueshiba took the martial tradition of aiki-jutsu and created *aikido* (pronounced “eye-key-doe”), also called the “art of peace,” “meditation in motion,” or “moving Zen.” Over the years, he had come to realize that success in martial arts comes not only from physical discipline but also from a deep calmness similar to what he felt on the mountain pass. Of that moment when time stopped, he said:

“The calmer I became, the clearer my mind became. I could intuitively see the thoughts, including the violent intentions, of the other. The calm mind is like the quiet center of a spinning top; because of the calm center, the top is able to spin smoothly and rapidly. It almost seems to be standing still. This is the clarity of mind and body that I experienced.”²

Out of life-or-death combat came a moment of clarity; out of the art of war came a discipline of peace. Because of this foundation, aikido training emphasizes developing the student’s inner strength, indomitable spirit, and deep awareness—of self and others.

THE MODERN BATTLEFIELD

While most of us today do not have to confront angry groups of armed bandits, we face our own type of combat in the workplace. Our world is rapidly changing, and decisions often have to be made against a background of incomplete information, ambiguity, and competing interests. It is harder and harder for most of us to see clearly through the thickets of conflicting information, to avoid distraction, to understand what the real goals are, and to discern how to achieve them.

Over the course of this book, you will learn how to filter out the noise in your life in order to create the kind of clarity that allowed master Ueshiba, often called “*O-Sensei*,” to literally dodge bullets. Guided by the Japanese concept of *mushin* (pronounced “moo-sheen”), which literally means “no-mind” and can further be defined as “no-fear” or “no-distractions,” you’ll learn to clear your mind to find the certainty and confidence you need to make empowered decisions when the pace is fast, the stakes are high, and the outcome unclear. You will learn to develop and harness your powers of inner strength, indomitable spirit, and deep awareness—of self and others.

When it is time to do battle, in the conference room or in a tense meeting, or when you are making high-risk decisions, you will discover that aikido’s principles can help you do the impossible: turn certain defeat into true victory. What’s more, this book will demonstrate how every conflict, every challenge, is a chance to win a new supporter by seeking harmony and balance. This is what I mean by *The Mushin Way*: it’s an approach to life that’s grounded in the kind of harmony and mindfulness that clears the way for quick, decisive action.

WHAT IS AIKIDO?

The Japanese word *aikido* is made up of three kanji characters: *ai* (合), which means “meeting” or “harmony,” and is also a homonym for the word “love”; *ki* (気), which means “energy”; and *dō* (道), which means “path” or “road.” So aikido means “the path you follow in learning to harmonize your energy”—with your opponent’s, or the world’s.

The discipline of aikido can be challenging for people who are used to traditional Western models of study where the student

moves in a linear fashion from concept to concept. In aikido—as in other Eastern disciplines such as Zen meditation, calligraphy, and the tea ceremony—instead of progressing linearly from Point A to Point B, students circle around the mysteries of the discipline, looking at them from all angles, striving to get closer to the calm center of the spinning top that is the mind. The test is always the same: the one-on-one combat that is a metaphor for the battle the student must do with his or her own mind and ego.

Success in aikido is about learning to absorb or blend with your opponent's energy, rather than trying to land the hardest blow. It can be a very humbling discipline to study, because strength alone will not get you very far. In fact, it is often harder for stronger students to learn proper technique, because they can muscle their way through bouts on strength alone—until they come up against someone stronger than they are.

Aikido teaches the student that meeting force with force will never work, that the minute you choose to attack, you have lost, because you have gone outside of harmony. But it is not about being passive; it is about putting aside your fear and your self-absorption and acting to protect both yourself and your opponent. In fact, aikido enlarges your worldview to include your opponent's. It is a lesson that businesspeople often spend a lifetime trying without success to learn. After all, if you are unable to see what your competition is seeing, you are eventually going to fail.

This book will show you how to succeed by acting in harmony with your own nature instead of fighting yourself, by leveraging the strength of everyone around you instead of trying to act alone, and by maintaining a sense of balance instead of trying to push your way through a problem with brute force.

Most of us do not face a hail of bullets most days, but we do confront challenges that feel impossible. We do not believe we

have the strength to fight the battles before us. Too often, when we find ourselves at a crossroads, we hesitate. We want to hold off on making the right choice because we are afraid. In this book, I will show you how to gain the clarity to make the right choices, how making those choices is empowering, and how even the most unlikely battles can be won.

MY PATH TO AIKIDO

I first stumbled onto the principles of aikido as a U.S. Marine stationed in California. But in order to understand why this discipline appealed to me so deeply and how I came to make aikido the center of my life, we have to go back further.

I was born in the small town of Erie, Pennsylvania. My parents are wonderful, supportive people, who always taught me that I could be or do anything. But they were happy living the small-town life. I always yearned for something different. And that “something different” came to be symbolized by Japan and the world of martial arts.

It’s a little embarrassing to admit now, but I think it was the TV show *Kung Fu* that first sparked my interest in martial arts. Of course, the idea of a Hollywood show about a Shaolin monk starring a white guy is cringeworthy today—but as a little kid growing up in Pennsylvania, all I knew was that martial arts were supercool, and the idea of the honorable warrior embedded in the show really spoke to me.

I’m not embarrassed at all to say that I grew up dreaming of becoming an honorable warrior in my own way. I took karate lessons for years in part because of that dream. Then, at 17, I decided to enlist in the Marines. I was drawn to the idea of becoming part of an elite team of fighters who lived by a code and

fought together as a team. Plus, I knew I wanted to see the world, and the Marines' major international base is located in Okinawa, Japan. Joining the Marines would be my ticket to the place I still imagined as the birthplace of the samurai. So, right after I graduated from high school, I was off to Marine Corps boot camp in South Carolina.

As crazy as this might sound, I loved boot camp. It was probably the least stressful time in my life. Of course I was exhausted when I fell into my bunk every night, but everything was decided for me. I knew where I had to be and what I had to do to succeed. I loved being part of the team, loved pushing myself as hard as I could, loved having a structure of support around me that guided my energy in one singular direction.

FIRST ENCOUNTERS

After boot camp, I was deployed to a base in California, near San Diego. Suddenly I had some free time, and I decided to look for a martial arts school. That's when I stumbled upon aikido.

From the first moment I saw aikido being practiced, I was hooked. It's a beautiful art to watch. It's very fluid—there's no offensive striking or kicking like there is in karate or many other martial arts disciplines. Aikido is a grappling art, like wrestling, in which the practitioner uses throws, joint locks, and other submissions to control a bigger and stronger attacker. The movements are all based on leverage. Something of that elegance communicated itself to me immediately, and I knew this was something I wanted to pursue.

So while I lived in California I settled into a routine. As soon as my shift was over at 4:30 PM, I was gone. I'd hop on my motorcycle and drive up the coast to the dojo where I was starting

to learn the beautiful discipline of aikido. I was 19 years old, and I was willing to work as hard as I had to in order to learn.

JOURNEY TO JAPAN

After two years in California, I was deployed to the Marine base in Okinawa, Japan. I went looking for an aikido school on the island, and as it happened, there was only one. That school was run by the man who became my teacher, mentor, and lifelong friend, Professor Iwao Yamaguchi.

I was originally stationed on the island for just a year, but I extended my deployment through the end of my enlistment, in 1993. I advanced to become a first-degree black belt in aikido while I was stationed on Okinawa—and I also started to learn my way around Japanese culture.

Of course, I made plenty of mistakes. I remember I visited this beautiful Buddhist temple pretty early on in my time on Okinawa. I was studying Japanese at the time, but I wasn't very good at it yet. I thought I was asking this monk what the name of the temple was—but every time I asked, he kept pointing down the hallway toward the bathrooms. Was this some kind of mysterious Zen nonanswer? Nope. Turns out, what I was actually asking him was not what is the temple called, but “What is the name of your honorable toilet?” The Japanese word for “temple” and “toilet” are very similar, and I was using the wrong word! This very patient monk was just pointing out the bathroom to me, over and over.

By the time my service in the Marine Corps was finished, I had learned a lot about aikido and about Japanese culture. But I knew I had more to learn. I decided to stay on, and I found a little-known visa that would allow me to stay for another year to

study the culture. So for a year I lived the life of a traditional martial arts apprentice, studying with my teacher, Professor Yamaguchi. I also studied the Japanese language and Zen meditation. By the end of that year, I was approaching fluency in Japanese, and I was a second-degree black belt in aikido.

After that, I finished my college degree, studying part time at the prestigious International Christian University in Tokyo. I stayed on in Japan after I graduated, spending a year researching *keiretsu*, the large Japanese corporate conglomerates that dominate Japan's business landscape. My professional experience in Japan culminated in working for many years at a large international consulting firm helping Western Fortune 500 companies succeed in the Japanese market.

Finally, in 1999, I moved back to the United States, began working in the corporate world, and teaching aikido on the side. And then, in 2003, everything changed.

THE INTERRUPTION

Right after my thirty-fourth birthday, I was diagnosed with testicular cancer—and instantly I was plunged into this whole other world. I went in for surgery less than 48 hours after my first doctor's appointment. The surgery went well. And for a couple of months the news was good. Until it wasn't.

Three months after my surgery, I found out the cancer had spread to my lung and I was going to have to go through chemo—really aggressive chemotherapy, all day, five days a week. My body felt completely destroyed. And yet, even after all that, there was still a spot on my lung in my postchemo scans. So I went in for another surgery. The doctors removed part of my left lung.

Thankfully, I've been cancer free since that surgery. But as you can imagine, my life has never been the same. After fighting cancer, the idea of quitting my stable corporate job to open a full-time aikido academy didn't sound scary at all. After all, what was the worst that could happen? The school could fail. So what? It wouldn't kill me.

I became a full-time business owner in 2006. I built a very successful aikido martial arts academy. Gradually, as I developed my aikido practice and worked with students from all sorts of walks of life, I started to see how the principles of the discipline could help me—and others—become more successful in my business career. I developed a coaching and consulting practice, and these days I speak all over the world, sharing aikido wisdom with groups at conferences, Fortune 500 companies, and elite organizations such as the Central Intelligence Agency.

HOW THE BOOK IS STRUCTURED: APPLYING THE PRINCIPLES OF AIKIDO

In this book, I'll introduce you to 10 key principles that underpin the discipline of aikido. Each chapter will explain one of these core principles and introduce a physical or mental exercise that you can do to start to understand the principle and immediately put it into practice. In addition, each chapter has a final practical exercise that you can use to help improve your business or personal life. Throughout each chapter, I'll also share simple tips that will help you streamline your work and personal lives to attain clarity and peak performance.

The principles discussed in the book are the foundation of the philosophy of the beautiful martial art of aikido. It may sound strange to talk about a philosophy behind a martial art—after all,

most Western sports don't really come with a philosophy. Basketball, baseball, and football all have rules. But martial arts are different, and aikido in particular is a discipline that combines demanding physical regimens with a spiritual side grounded in concepts drawn from Zen Buddhism and other Eastern philosophies.

The 10 principles we'll discuss in this book are:

Chapter 1. 平氣 Heiki: Equanimity

Heiki, pronounced “hey-key,” literally means “calm energy.” The word is often found in Buddhist *sutras*, or chants. It's often translated as “equanimity.” We'll begin with this principle because none of the other work we'll do is possible without finding this kind of calm energy. We'll talk about how essential calm energy is during a crisis—and in daily life—and we'll discuss strategies for maintaining your calm no matter what is happening around you.

Chapter 2. 氣 Ki: Energy

Ki, pronounced “key,” is life force. It's the physical and mental energy that flows through you at every moment of your life, powering everything you do. In aikido, students learn not only to use their *ki* but also to channel it. Aikido teaches us not to rely on pure strength alone. Strength can be seductive—if you rely too heavily on it, you're not learning the techniques properly. You're not learning how to direct your energy through the right channels, and that means you're not being as effective as you could be. In this chapter, we'll talk about how to harness and direct your energies in order to accomplish your goals.

Chapter 3. 結び Musubi: Connection

Literally, *musubi* (moo-sue-bee) means tying a knot. In aikido, the word is used to mean connection—a powerful connection that links you to your deepest self, to your opponent, and to the world around you. In business and in life, *musubi* can help you see the world through the eyes of a customer, a colleague, or a friend or loved one. In this chapter, we'll discuss strategies for building these kinds of connections in order to get the people around you to support your goals.

Chapter 4. 念 Nen: One-Point

Physically, in martial arts, the word *nen* (rhymes with “ten”) refers to a point two inches below your navel: your center of gravity. Metaphysically, *nen* is a sense of cosmic balance. Ultimately, most of us would say we value the same things: family, friends, meaningful work, giving back to our communities. The much harder question is finding, and holding on to, a way to balance all those competing priorities in a way that feels right to you. In this chapter, I will explain how to set and hold on to proper life priorities, in order to find the path that truly works for you.

Chapter 5. 無心 Mushin: No-Mind/No-Distractions/ No-Fear

Mushin (moo-sheen) is one of the most important concepts in aikido, and one of the most difficult to grasp. At the moment when you enter into battle—when you most want to have your wits about you—you are asked to empty your mind. Your conscious mind must let go of your training, your preparation, your thoughts about the contest to come. It must become still water,

calm and clear. In this chapter, we will discuss strategies, including a formal meditation practice, that will help you clear your mind in the midst of day-to-day distractions.

Chapter 6. 入り身 Irimi: To Enter

Aikido requires practitioners to go against their own instincts when faced with a conflict. You have to move toward your opponent at a moment when your instincts will be urging you to flee. Aikido is based on centripetal force. The principle of *irimi* (pronounced like my home town of “Erie” and “me”) refers to the fact that if you want to immobilize a stronger fighter, you have to get close enough to touch them. And if you want to solve a problem, you have to start by moving closer to it, something that takes great courage. In this chapter, we’ll talk about why it’s so important to attack the heart of a problem rather than getting distracted by tangents—and I’ll explain how to tell the one from the other.

Chapter 7. 呼吸 Kokyu: Breath-Power

Every aikido class begins and ends with an exercise called *kokyu-bo* (pronounced, koh-Q-hoe). You grasp a partner’s wrists and hold on to each other while you each try to throw the other off balance, powered by nothing more than an exhaled breath. Students have to learn to relax their bodies—and also their minds. They have to learn not to worry about who looks silly, or who has practiced longer, or who is stronger; they have to stay focused only on their breath to avoid telegraphing their intentions. We all hold back in life because we are afraid of failing, afraid of looking silly, afraid of change. In this chapter, I will discuss how developing your own natural “breath-power” will help you let go of your ego and your fear of losing—and how that will clear the path to success.

Chapter 8. 合気 Aiki: Unity

Aiki (eye-key) means “the harmonious meeting of energies.” Students of aikido are following a time-honored path that involves learning to blend your energy with your opponent’s, instead of trying to overpower them. Adept who exhibits aiki never meet force with force. They assess their own abilities, and their opponent’s, with clear eyes. They face their weaknesses and look for ways to use leverage to turn them into strengths. In this chapter, I’ll show you how to clearly assess your own strengths and weaknesses, and how to look for ways to blend with obstacles, instead of trying to meet force with force.

Chapter 9. 残心 Zanshin: Calm Awareness

Zanshin (zahn-sheen) refers to a preternatural state where you are calmly aware of absolutely everything around you, the way a warrior must be aware of the entire battlefield in order to survive. It builds on *mushin*. It’s crucial not only in a life-or-death situation like a battle, but any time you need to make a decision. In this chapter, I’ll explain how moving into a state of *zanshin* can help you see the true nature of your choice, understand the consequences of the decision you’re about to make, and act decisively.

Chapter 10. 和 Wa: Harmony

Aikido asks practitioners to approach battle with a radically different mind-set than the one most of us have been taught. You are not competing with others; you are striving for harmony, or *wa*. That is the secret to true victory in any situation—but most of us think of battle, and business, as dog-eat-dog and winner-take-all. In this chapter, I will show readers how taking

this countercultural approach can become a differentiating strength. I'll also explain that seeking harmony doesn't mean being passive or putting aside your own needs. In aikido, harmony is achieved when you know how to protect everyone—including yourself.

Conclusion. 澄み切り Sumi-Kiri: Clarity of Mind and Body

Finally, I'll close the book by talking about what it looks like when you combine all of these principles into a total clarity of mind and body. *Sumi-kiri* (sue-me-key-rhee) is a martial arts term that means “cutting through the clutter.” It's the ability to find your calm energy, hold on to your one-point, achieve mushin, and see the essential heart of a problem with zanshin. It is the sum of everything we have talked about in the book: the almost supernatural clarity of mind and body that allowed Master Ueshiba to dodge bullets.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

Achieving this kind of total clarity takes time, of course; however, it's a practice you can begin, and start reaping the benefits of, today—right now. This book will show you how. I'll be using personal stories to help you understand these concepts by showing you the journey I've taken to come to understand them. My goal is to help you see the world the way I see it and understand what I've gone through and how I approach problems so that you can gain the benefits of these wonderful principles. I urge you to read these stories and reflect on how you might apply the lessons in your own life. I'll also be asking you questions and sharing proven tools and techniques to help jump-start your thinking, progress, and success.