



FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

About Aikido, Centering, Conflict and Communication

The following are questions from clients, workshop participants, and newsletter subscribers. I hope you find them useful. If you find your interest piqued and want to go further, register for one of our public workshops by visiting: <http://www.judyringer.com>

Please submit questions of your own by emailing judy@judyringer.com

On Aikido and Conflict

Question: How does the martial art Aikido apply in everyday conflict situations?

Answer: The basic premise of Aikido is that an attack is energy that can be utilized and redirected for mutual safety. Instead of blocking and punching, the aikidoist blends with the attack in order to control it. Resistance is replaced with engagement. Aikido students train themselves to capture the opponent's action and redirect it with techniques of martial efficiency and power. At the same time, they become aware of the tendency to overreact to opposition, and learn to remain centered under all conditions. These are skills, principles, and ways of seeing the world that can be used off the mat – in the workplace, and in everyday life.

Here are two examples of off-the-mat Aikido in action, thanks to workshop participants who have sent me their true-life experiences:

- ◆ During a phone conversation with a dissatisfied client a few days after the workshop, I slipped directly into typical conquest mode. I felt myself tensing up for a fight. I was determined to prove to this woman her complaint was unwarranted. When I realized our discussion was going nowhere fast, I remembered the wisdom of embracing the opponent's energy, took a deep centering breath and listened until my dialogue partner was ready to listen to me. When she was finished I clearly stated I couldn't accommodate her exact request to remedy the problem, but that I could make other changes in response to her call. I believe she ended up feeling heard. Letting go of ego and blending with the client's energy actually helped improve our service.

- ◆ A few days before my first presentation in front of a group, I felt my anxiety and fear grow. It was all consuming. I had to do something. I thought of Aikido and how one blends with the opponent's energy instead of fighting it. I embraced my fear, accepting that it was all right to be nervous under these conditions. This thought process changed my whole attitude, and I was able to begin visualizing myself giving a successful talk instead of being controlled by fear.

On Centering

Question: In your workshops and writing, you use the word "center" a lot. What is center? How do you choose to be centered and how can you stay there?

When I refer to center or the centered state, I'm talking about a state of being that includes mind, body and spirit and affects the way we interact with our environment. It's a way of being in the world, of experiencing the way life comes at you. Some people might say it's an attitude toward life. When we're centered, we're in control of how we receive the life energy that others extend toward us. We're in control of us. We aren't in control of anything else. But we are in control of how we engage with the "anything else."

When we're centered we're in the present moment. And it's a condition we can cultivate. The effects of centering are numerous; vitality increases, the senses are sharpened, and one is less affected by everyday irritations. The tendency to overreact is minimized and perspective is broadened. This state is referred to in Japan as having *hara* or strong *ki*, the inner quality that aids the student of Aikido to develop to his or her fullest potential in every area of life.

Throughout his books on *The Magic of Conflict* and *Journey to Center*, Thomas Crum writes about the centered state, how he and others experience it, and the difference that centering makes in living a purposeful life.

Question: I'm compelled to ask how one establishes a center. I don't have one picture or version of "center." Is it just a matter of bringing yourself fully into the moment

where you are here and now? And if the latter is true, how do you do that in an environment that is not calm?

Answer: First, center is different for each of us. For me it is (as you say) "bringing yourself fully into the moment." Especially if the environment is not calm, it's really great to be able to find that quiet stillness at your core.

Center is a state of physical and emotional stability. It's a feeling that says, "I'm ready. I can handle this." It's also a question I ask myself: "Where's the gift here?" Or "Where's the learning?" or "What am I resisting?" When I center I can observe and communicate with myself. This ability to "meta-communicate" yields awareness and choice over my actions.

Personally, I recognize the centered state by an "in-the-body" kinesthetic sense and by this ability to meta-communicate. The best way to find your center is to keep practicing and experimenting. Eventually you'll find your own answers to this great question!

Question: Is centering the same as confidence or self-esteem?

Answer: Not exactly, though confidence and self-esteem are enhanced by the practice of centering. Center is a quality that includes confidence. When you center, you feel in control of yourself and your actions. You feel balanced, and you experience an increase in confidence and self-esteem. When you're centered, you feel good about yourself. You need no one else's stamp of approval, since you already have your own. There are no attachments to past or future worries, because you dwell in the present. You're flexible, focused and connected to everything and everyone around you. You have the power and ability to make good choices, and are in a place of continuous discovery and learning. When you choose center, you become more you.

Question: Can you "practice" centering?

Answer: Centering can be practiced anytime, anywhere. On my morning walk I practice moving from center. It changes my posture, stride and attitude. Sitting at my desk I center and notice it's time for a break. Before picking up the telephone handset I take a breath and center, and I feel better about the way I connect with the person at the other end of the line. Before sending that e-mail – center. Before an interview or presentation, as I enter the room I think: "Center." Any exercise or sporting activity is a great way to practice centering.

Your breathing is one of the best gauges of center. When you stop breathing (which is likely to happen under stress), you become uncentered. Hold your breath now and you'll see how off-balance you feel. One great way to practice moving in and out of the centered state is to begin to notice your breath. If you've stopped breathing, open your throat and

let your breath and spirit flow. You'll come back to center pretty quickly. I carry a little card in my wallet that stares at me every time I open it, and it says: *Keep Breathing*. Try it.

Question: It's fairly easy for me to center when I know a difficult situation, meeting or conversation is coming up. But what do you do when you're suddenly in a conflict that you hadn't planned on – a surprise attack?!

Answer: As soon as you have the awareness that you're off center, that's the time to re-center. Breathe, smile, and reconnect with your sense of stability. Expand your energy and connect with your surroundings. Acknowledge your opponent by listening. If he's emotional, let him vent. Listening gives you space and time to breathe and calm yourself. As you center, you'll find that you have more options and can begin to use them.

Question: Would you suggest some ways to start the day “centered?”

Answer: First, notice how you begin your day now. Do you begin with noise? -- the radio, CD player, TV, hair dryer, coffee grinder? We don't often give ourselves time to settle in, to appreciate the beginning of a new day. Try one or more of the following:

- ◆ At the beginning of each day, set aside some time for you. Give yourself a gift of quiet reflection, meditation, prayer, or inspirational reading.
- ◆ Let your first waking thought be of someone or something that you're grateful for in your life.
- ◆ Sit alone for 10 to 20 minutes, quietly collecting your thoughts and your energy for the day ahead.
- ◆ Start a breathing practice. There are many books and online resources that will help you find the right one for you. All are meant to help clean out the debris that piles up everyday in our bodies and minds. A simple but effective one that I use everyday is: breathe in slowly through your nose to the count of 4. Let the breath settle into your center to the count of 2. Using a whispered *Haaaaaa* sound, exhale from center through the mouth to the count of 6.

Whatever practice(s) you choose, make a commitment to continue for at least 30 days. It will become easier after that. And you'll notice that it makes a big difference in your life.

Conflict at Work

Question: I work with a service rep. in another department who is very difficult. I leave every exchange feeling as if I'd been in a battle.

Answer: I had a similar conflict some years ago. The person had a strong affect on me, and I would lose my center every time. Then I thought about using the conflict as a centering practice. Whenever we met, I'd practice centering. I'd lose it quickly at first, I'd

re-center, lose it again, re-center. I gradually grew more centered and, oddly enough, began to look forward to our meetings so that I could practice. We're good friends today.

There are always going to be difficult people. The question is, can you transform these situations into opportunities to increase your ability to respond with awareness? When do you "lose it?" Is it when you see the person or is it just thinking about it? Is it their tone of voice, a look, an inconsistency in words or behavior? Ask yourself, is it their action, or the way you receive it? Consider that you have a choice in the way you respond, and you'll begin to take your power back.

Question: I'm frustrated with my new assistant's inability to complete assignments to my standards. She just doesn't get it.

Answer: Start with yourself, knowing that you have the right to want things the way you want them. When giving direction, be specific about details, and don't assume that your assistant understands. Ask her to repeat what she thinks you've said.

If work is not done correctly, find something that you appreciate first, and then be clear about what needs to be done differently. Notice my use of words – not "wrong," but "different."

For example, "Susan, thank you for scheduling the director's appointments while I was gone. I appreciate that he got to all his meetings on time. However, after you used my calendar, I found I could not locate some important appointments that I know were there. Can you show me what you did when you were handling the calendar?" (Watch, listen, and see what she did.) Then, "next time, I'd like you to do it this way . . ."

By being detailed, specific and patient in your instruction, you may find that you can give your assistant more responsibility, leaving you more time for the tasks only you can do.

Question: I keep having run-ins with my coworker. I ask him for something and get resistance. Sometimes it's nonverbal. Sometimes he has reasons why he can't do things when I need them. I can be a perfectionist, but my way usually gets the job done well.

Answer: It's no fun to work so closely with someone with whom every interaction seems like a test. And it's okay to want things done a certain way. However, it's also important to get to the source of your coworker's resistance, because if you're feeling resistance he probably is too.

You might start by asking him for suggestions about how to complete a project before you start. Where does he think you'll each be most useful? You may find more cooperation and enthusiasm for the project. If that fails, talk to him about the difficulty as you see it and ask what things look like from his side. Leave lots of room for him to share his point of view. Stay curious and look for solutions.

Family Conflict

Question: Is there an easy way to remember how to deal with highly charged conflict? I love my family, but it always seems like I have the hardest time with conflict at home.

Answer: Whenever I think about home and family conflict, I remember what a good friend once said to me: "Our family really knows how to push our buttons – because they installed them." It's more difficult to deal with family conflicts, because the patterns we've created with each other are so entrenched.

Here is an easy acronym I learned from Thomas Crum, author of *The Magic of Conflict* and *Journey to Center*. He uses it with kids, but it works great at any age – the BLT.

- ◆ **B – Breathe and Be Centered.** Stop, take a deep breath, and center yourself. Don't do or say anything until you've calmed down, composed yourself and reconnected to what's really important in the relationship.
- ◆ **L – Learn.** Before telling your partner, child, sibling or loved one just exactly how life would improve if they lived it according to your advice, first listen to them and learn what's important from their point of view. Stand or sit beside them instead of confronting them face to face. Be quiet and use your imagination to put yourself in their shoes. This is a great gift, by the way. Think of the last time somebody really listened to you. How did it feel?
- ◆ **T – Talk.** When your conflict partner feels listened to (maybe for the first time in the relationship), they can relax. You heard them. Now they're ready to hear your side. Don't just rebut what they said. Confirm it by repeating it in your own words and checking for accuracy. This is a very important step. Then, speaking from center, say what's important to you. Keep your center, and help them stay centered, by using language that confides rather than blames. (Hint: use the word "I" a lot and "You" as little as possible.)

We all want to understand and be understood. The dance of family conflict changes with a single step in a new direction.

Engaging Others in Problem-Solving

Question: What if you are the only one interested in resolving the conflict?

Answer: It only takes one person to begin the resolution of a conflict. The belief that all people involved have to agree to resolve the conflict often stops anyone from beginning the process. Perhaps you think you're the only one interested because you have a specific outcome in mind. You may need to give up your view of what "should" be and focus on what is. When you begin to look at the situation from a more discovering place, you will

become curious about your partner's needs, hopes, and frustrations. You'll be more flexible and less judgmental. And you'll move from feeling like a victim to being proactive in searching for solutions that work for all parties. Change your focus from trying to change them, and change yourself instead. Can you do this? It takes true power and a strong center. But you will find that when you change, everything changes.

Managing Emotions

Question: What do you do with emotions in the middle of a conflict? Sometimes I feel so full of rage I can't talk.

Answer: Emotions are what make conflict challenging. And there is no quick-fix answer. But you can begin to acknowledge your emotional energy and retrain your reactive state to be more responsive.

- ◆ When you become emotional, take several deep breaths down into your belly and exhale fully and slowly. In other words, center yourself. In the moment, this will take a strong commitment on your part to change. But do it! This is the first step. You may not have any choice over the emotions that show up, but you do have choice about how you express them.
- ◆ Listen before you speak. Become curious about the situation, your conflict partner, and anything else you can be curious about. Make yourself be quiet and attentive.
- ◆ State your thoughts, hopes, and feelings in a way that reduces defensiveness. As you address the differences between your expectations and what actually occurred, re-center periodically.
- ◆ Search for common ground. Whatever the emotion, it's a good idea to acknowledge and appreciate them – yours and theirs. Don't suppress your emotions but don't act them out either. Use their energy in a conscious, volitional way.
- ◆ Get additional practice in centering and communication skills through training or private coaching or counseling. Eventually you will gain the patience to honor your emotions and express them in good listening and talking behavior.

Question: “Limbo” is one of my biggest challenges and it unbalances me unbelievably. Embarking on change is no sweat next to not having any particular direction in which to focus. Can you speak to coping with uncertainty?

Answer: When things are uncertain, I try to visualize as many possible outcomes as I can, then choose the one I like best at this moment (even if I'm not sure it will happen). Or I choose pieces of the outcome that I'm pretty sure I want (where I'm living, what I'm earning, whether I'm working alone or with others), and I gradually begin to work towards it. Sometimes the "working towards it" is nothing more than going about my daily routine as best I can and continuing to send energy toward the vision, or the parts that I can see. I do my best and let the rest go.

If it's relationship "limbo" and I can't control what action the other person will take, I envision "the best possible outcome" for each of us, even though I'm not sure what that looks like. I leave it to a power greater than myself to decide.

When you're in "limbo" – whatever kind it is – do what you can to take care of yourself. Take yourself out to lunch, sit in the park, go on a hike, or walk with a friend. Gradually you'll find your direction.

On Powerful Presentations

Question: Next week I'm speaking to a group that has chewed up and spit out other presenters. Reportedly they think that no one is as smart, talented, or competent as they. How do I frame this so that I won't be scared to death and immediately fulfill their expectations of incompetence?

Answer: Utilize the energy of "expert" audiences by deferring to their knowledge whenever possible. Acknowledge their expertise without disclaiming or belittling yourself or your message. Coming from your own power, invite their contributions. Arrogance comes naturally from a place of wanting to prove what they know, to "show off" a bit perhaps. So let them, wherever it seems appropriate. Similarly, have confidence in your own knowledge and passion about your topic, knowing you are there for a good reason. Your perspective, idea, or niche is unique and they will be grateful to add it to their base. Make the audience your ally and the presentation an adventure in co-creation.

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About the Author: Judy Ringer is the author of *Turn Enemies Into Allies: The Art of Peace in the Workplace*. She provides conflict and communication skills training based on mind/body principles from the martial art aikido, in which she holds a third-degree black belt. Employing best practice communication models, Judy brings to life key concepts such as self-management under pressure and appreciation of other viewpoints.

Judy is also the author of *Unlikely Teachers: Finding the Hidden Gifts in Daily Conflict*, and three CDs: *Managing Conflict in the Workplace*, *Simple Gifts: Making the Most of Life's Ki Moments*, and *This Little Light: The Gift of Christmas*, all of which can be found on her website [www. JudyRinger.com](http://www.JudyRinger.com), or Amazon.com.

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