

Oct 11, 2011

When in Doubt—Plan

About a month ago, while returning from a visit in Los Angeles, I was passing a big rig on the freeway. I was just even with the cab, when it began to move into my lane. I honked and immediately moved to the left shoulder of the road as the dirt flew. The driver took corrective action, and I was able to get back to the inside lane without further incident.

What was remarkable about this situation was the fact that I really was not surprised by the unexpected movement of the truck. I do not think my pulse rate even went up. When the incident passed, I did not hold onto it and question the driver's heritage. I usually try to anticipate sudden movements into my lane when I drive. Planning an evasion route while driving has become second nature to me now, and I do not really think about it anymore. While I have been driving for a long time now—and experience counts—I also claim a good part of my personal survival on California roads to aikido practice.

We spend time in the dojo practicing various techniques and build up about 150 common, different scenarios of how to respond when we are attacked. By practicing over and over again we are planning what to do in a specific situation until it becomes our personal disaster plan stored in our body. When the time comes, hopefully, we deal with the situation calmly and resolutely.

It is through the discipline of aikido practice that the concept of planning for possible situations and how to deal with them provides us with a mechanism to deal with stressful times. Of course just planning for physical attacks where we use our specialized training is limited in today's world. One of my friends in Japan reminded me the other day that aikido is a path of self-realization. The aikido discipline we learn in the dojo must make a transition to our daily lives, if we are to make progress on this path.

I was reading an article the other day about survival during calamities. The author, a firefighter, noted that survivors usually kept calm, made an assessment and developed a plan for overcoming the situation. The plan is not necessarily practiced beforehand and may have to be developed in an instant. After all, who can train for all possible stressful situations? The key, apparently, is first to keep calm. That is the difficult part. Our aikido training teaches us that. Through our training, testing procedures and randori, developing a calm attitude when facing adversity is an acquired talent we all can use throughout our lives.

There are many situations in our lives that are not necessarily life threatening which still require a calm attitude. I can recall several instances in my former professional life as a mechanical engineer, for instance, where a manager would assemble the team in a near panic and want a solution to the problem—NOW. It was usually difficult to propose any kind of rational solution while the person was in such an unbalanced state. Usually business or technical situations can be resolved when given a reasonable time interval

where everybody calms down. This is unlike the immediate response necessary when caught in an emergency situation like a fire or physical attack, for example.

The ability to keep a cool head, while everyone else responds emotionally, is a unique gift from O-Sensei and should be recognized and treasured as a valued gift.