



# Aikido<sub>journal</sub>

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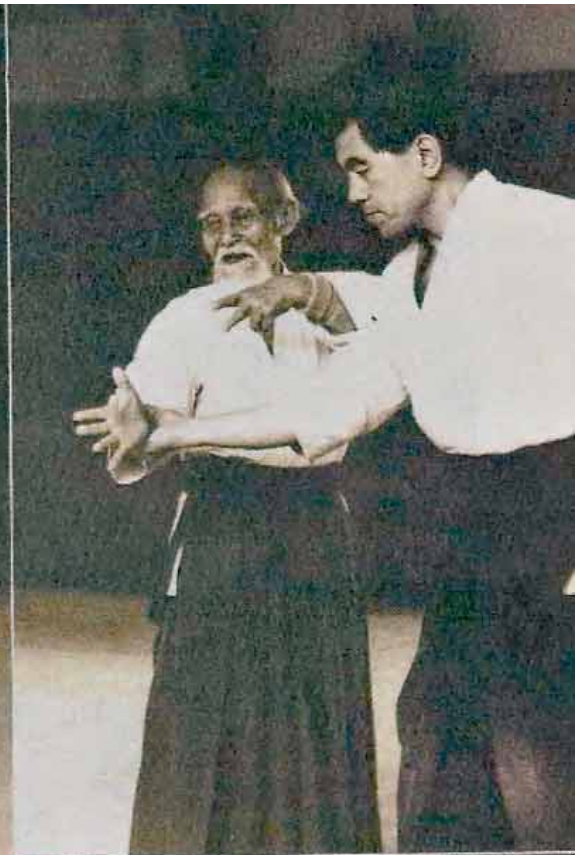
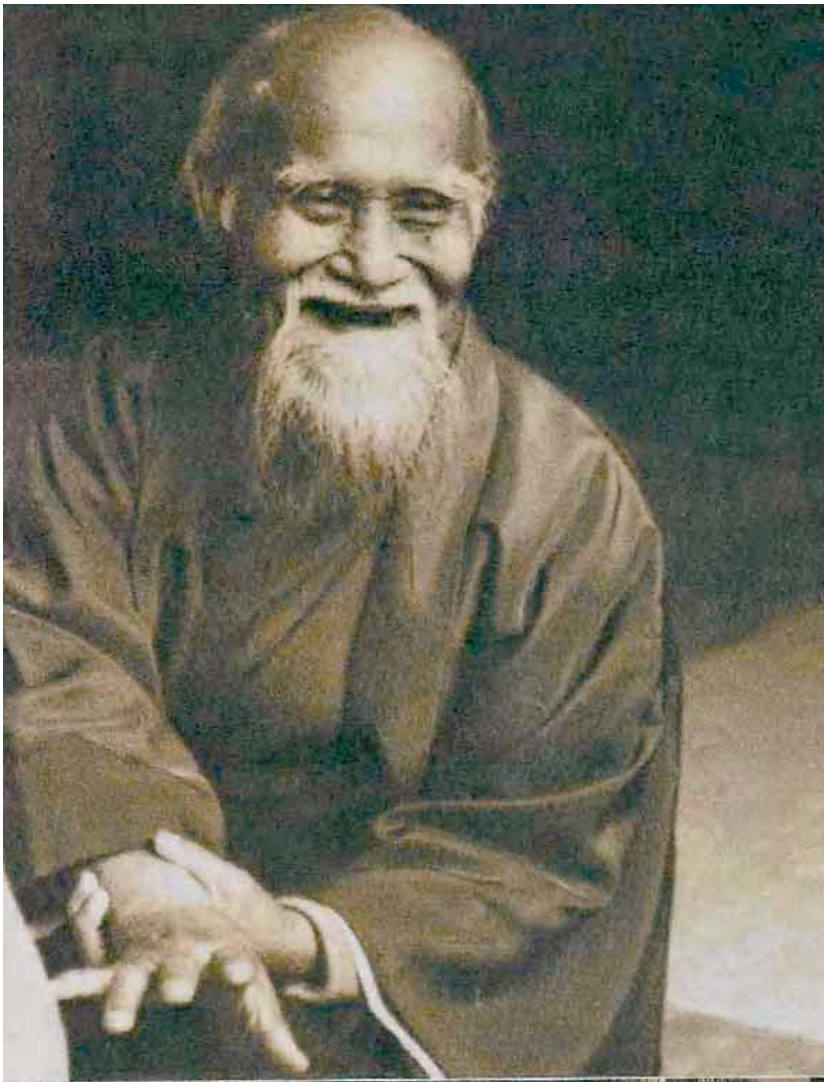
**AIKIDO**  
striking & pressure points

Getting  
Maximum  
Efficiency  
From the  
Gentle Art

**MORIHEI UYESHIBA**  
created *aikido* in the early and mid-1900s after studying various combat arts and spiritual disciplines. He was influenced by several old styles of *jujutsu*, particularly *daito-ryu*, and the movements and footwork of *kenjutsu* (sword fighting) and *sojutsu* (spear fighting). His philosophical perspective was shaped by Buddhism, Shintoism and the Omoto-kyo religion. Consequently, he was left with a profound

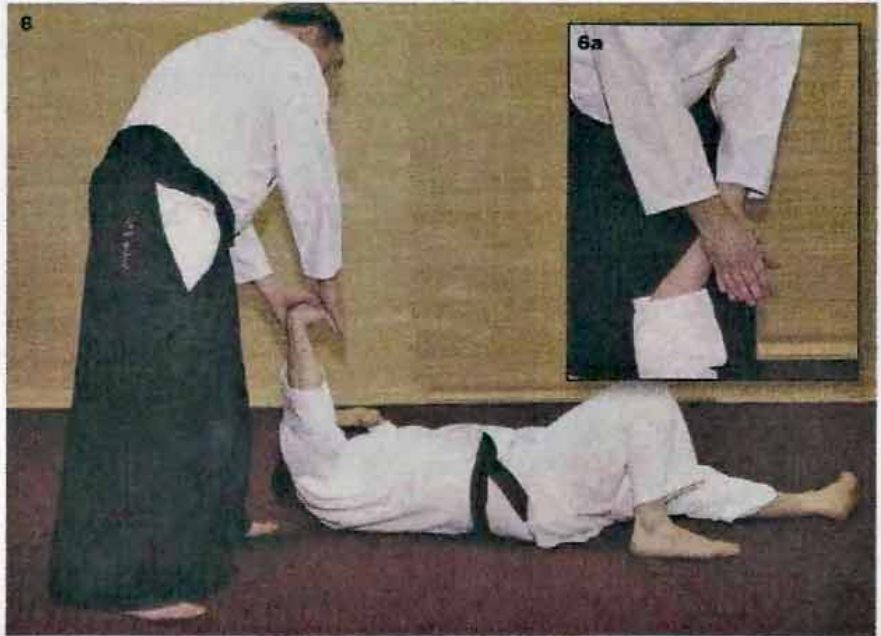
by Dr. John H. Riggs III

# Aikido Journal





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belief in the need for a high-level martial art dedicated to the preservation of life.

Great controversy exists over the martial effectiveness of aikido. Its soft flowing and blending techniques have caused other martial artists to question its combat effectiveness, even to the point of wondering whether it's a true martial art. Aikido's dancelike movements often give the impression of martial ineffectiveness. For example, one daito-ryu Web site notes: "When you practice a technique and your partner smiles, it is modern aikido. If he screams, it is daito-ryu."<sup>1</sup> The site further claims that in daito-ryu, a knowledge of pressure points is necessary and strikes are used frequently; whereas in aikido, strikes

are taught to some degree but are discouraged. Uyeshiba developed aikido as a martial art reflecting his vision of the *budo*: the preservation of life and restoration of harmony as a way for the world to live.

However, Uyeshiba's son, Kisshomaru, pointed out that many devastating techniques for disarming and subduing the enemy are contained in the art, in spite of its soft appearance.<sup>2</sup>

This article will discuss the historical roots of those often-overlooked and potentially devastating techniques Kisshomaru Uyeshiba alluded to. For the sake of simplicity, the terms *kyusho jitsu*, *kyusho*, pressure points, vital points and *atemi* will be used interchangeably to

refer to strikes to acupuncture points or weak anatomical points for the purpose of applying aikido techniques.

## Roots of Atemi to Vital Points

The historical roots of vital-point strikes can be traced back to the development of acupuncture by Ksatreya warriors in India and the striking, throwing and wrestling arts they practiced.<sup>3</sup> The art of *vajramukti* had various specialized striking techniques that targeted the body's vital points (tiger striking), as well as an energy-activating technique called *maha suklaia*, which was designed to disrupt the function of the internal organs.





from this marriage of martial arts and acupuncture study. Over time, the number of vital points evolved, and martial arts sets were devised to memorize and practice striking them.

Early Japanese jujutsu manuscripts credit the transfer of vital-point information from India via Tibetan monasteries into China and eventually Japan.<sup>5</sup> Chin-na and vital-point expert Chen Yuanbin reportedly arrived in Nagasaki, Japan, in the 1600s; that appears to be the starting point for jujutsu schools using vital-point strikes.<sup>6</sup> Uyeshiba's daito-ryu instructor, Sogaku Takeda, was likely his source for knowledge in the discipline, as he was reputed to

have used excruciating pressure-point attacks.<sup>7</sup>

## Aikido and Striking Pressure Points

Uyeshiba contended that the preservation of life and restoration of harmony were the true budo. That contradicted the popular perception of the martial arts, which often involved displays of devastating power in which the enemy was destroyed or at least disabled.

How does one bridge the gap to maintain the perspective of Uyeshiba's vision, yet execute effective martial arts techniques? This author contends that



It appears the techniques were initially developed by experimenting on prisoners of war and were later used as a method of first aid by Ksatreya doctors. Obviously, a close historical link between the martial arts, vital points and medicine has existed since antiquity.<sup>4</sup>

The Buddhist art of *kempo* preserved the Ksatreya skills and carried them to Chinese temples, where they were refined and catalogued. Shaolin monks extensively developed the non-lethal seizing and controlling art of *chin-na*, predecessor to all locking and pinning arts, and used presses and strikes to vital points. Studies over 1,000 years revealed various points that cause disease or death. The death touch art of *dim-mak* evolved

**Technique application:** John Riggs (left) faces his opponent (1). When the man executes a punch to the abdomen, Riggs moves off-line, then blocks the man's arm with the knife edge of his hand while delivering a punch to the forehead (2). Riggs pivots clockwise, blending with the attack as he grabs the opponent's hand (3). Applying force to a pressure point and turning the trapped wrist causes the opponent to drop his shoulder and turn his body (4). Riggs then uses the wrist bend to take him to the ground (5), where he maintains pressure on two points and the back of the opponent's hand (6, 6a reverse view). Next, Riggs steps forward with his right foot and activates a point on the inside of the opponent's elbow, causing it to bend (7, 7a reverse view). He then steps around the opponent's head, rolls him over and executes a submission pin (8).





the transition between art and combat effectiveness lies in the frequently underutilized application of *atemi* and *kyusho waza*, or striking and pressure-point techniques. Uyeshiba's early writings emphasized the application of *atemi* as a key element of basic technique.<sup>8</sup> Pictures of him applying techniques generally show the application of a strike to various openings. Clearly, he placed a strong emphasis on *atemi/kyusho waza* during the early days of his career.

Biographical works also refer to Uyeshiba's use of *atemi* in the military to control and knock out bullies and cause powerful Mongol warriors to collapse with a touch to their vital points.<sup>9</sup> He was also known for applying devastating strikes to weak points during the aikido years while his art was evolving.

The application of *atemi/kyusho waza* is controversial even among some of Uyeshiba's direct students. One proponent is Morihiro Saito, one of his most senior disciples and ninth-degree black belt. He asserted that the lack of training in *atemi* strikes is a widespread deficiency, one that could cause techniques to become incomprehensible and meaningless.<sup>10</sup> He considered them an essential element of the art.

Kenji Tomiki, another direct student who set up his own style of aikido, was heavily involved in Uyeshiba's manuscript preparation for *Budo Renshu*, which depicts a strong *atemi* emphasis in its technique photos.<sup>11</sup> Tomiki-style aikido also stresses *atemi waza*. Tomiki believed the minimal-force aspects of *atemi* were lost by subsequent practitioners. Shioda Gozo, another student who set up his own style, pointed out that *atemi* was essential in combat to manifest explosive power and decide the fight's outcome.<sup>12</sup>

On the other hand, Yoshimitsu Yamada, eighth degree, believes *atemi* practice might disrupt the feel of technique continuity.<sup>13</sup> Another senior student, Koichi Tohei, 10th degree, placed more emphasis on the development of *ki* and made little note of *atemi* in his writings.<sup>14</sup> Mitsugi Saotome, eighth degree and former world headquarters chief instructor, notes the importance of *atemi*

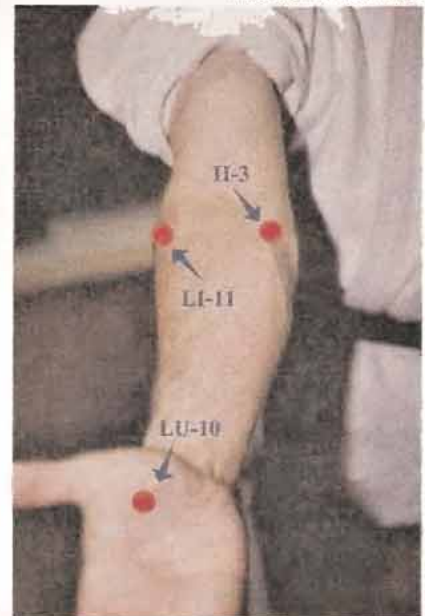
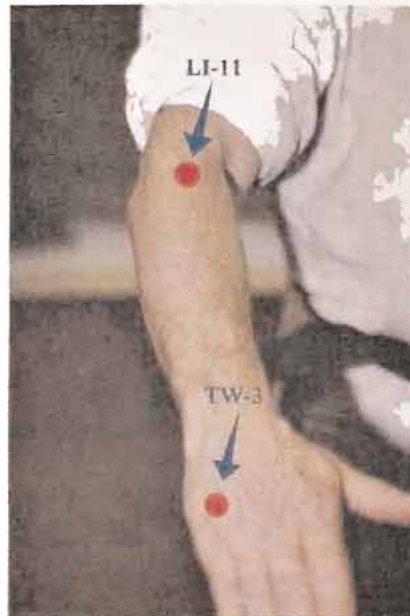
in the perception and awareness of the lethal aspects of aikido but holds that it isn't used often in training.<sup>15</sup>

To obtain a better sampling, this author conducted a survey of 226 aikido practitioners ranked fifth degree or higher via the Internet, by letter and by personal interview. It revealed that considerable controversy continues to exist over the application and definition of *atemi/kyusho waza* by modern *aikidoka*. Definitions proposed in the literature and by survey participants reveal the following insights into the value practitioners attach to it: setup blows for techniques; strikes to vital points for distraction or unbalancing; blows to disturb *ki*; control and balance-taking (*kuzushi*) blows; ter-

*aikidoka* said they believed *atemi* was sadly neglected and necessary for the martial aspects of the art.

Evident from the survey results is that the opinions were based on the style of aikido studied, the respondent's background and his philosophy of aikido. Hiroshi Ikeda and others expressed some concern over the possible misuse of *atemi* because of its devastating potential.<sup>17</sup>

Approximately 77 percent of the respondents received some general form of *atemi* training, and 36 percent received specific instruction on pressure points. A recent survey on AikiWeb (684 respondents) showed a diversity of opinion as to the importance of *atemi*. However, a significant majority (78 percent) of par-



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Locations of the relevant pressure points on the arms and hands: Large Intestine 11, Triple Warmer 3, Heart 3 and Lung 10.

mination of the attacker; a neutralizing force; a blow to end confrontation causing disability, unconsciousness or death; a method to facilitate technique because of pain compliance, energy-shifting or posture alteration; and a method to control the attacker's mind.

Comments by survey participants revealed a variety of opinions on *atemi/kyusho waza*'s role in modern aikido. The continuum ranged from a belief that *atemi* was counter to the philosophy of aikido to an emphatic, "It's about time someone started looking at the issue."<sup>16</sup> On the whole, a significant number of

participants opined that *atemi* was necessary for effective aikido.<sup>18</sup>

So what happened to *atemi*'s role in aikido? The art seemed to evolve as a softer style following World War II, as suggested by Michio Hikitsuchi, 10th degree, when he noted Uyeshiba's focus shifted from prewar killing techniques to a budo of joy and compassion.<sup>19</sup> Also, Kisshomaru Uyeshiba took over leadership and appeared to have a softer style of aikido. His books make little mention