

Sword and Spirit

The eJournal of Itten Dojo

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— Why Budo? —

**Regardless of the times
you live in, or the
circumstances of your life,
success largely depends on
things you actually can
control:**

- **Building strong relationships in a community of achievement.**
- **Forging a disciplined and positive mindset.**
- **Enhancing your physical health and capabilities.**

*These are exactly the
benefits membership in a
dojo provides.*

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Deflecting Strikes

Part Two — Modern Applications; Aikijutsu and Aikido

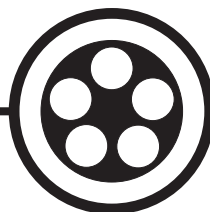
In the August issue of this journal, we discussed applications in traditional aikijutsu of deflecting strikes, starting with a definition of the zone of space that must be defended in a one-on-one combat.

As a reminder and for those that might have missed the August issue: Imagine two opponents facing each other, square-on. If one opponent touches his fingertips together on the centerline at arm's length, that triangular space within (and including) the arms defines the zone that must be defended, because only attacks penetrating the defined boundary have the potential to land.

If the defender is not facing his opponent square-on, the zone is defined by the width of the defender's shoulders with the apex of the triangle at arm's length on the center line between the opponents. It should be apparent that the shape of the triangle can change with the angle at which the defender is standing. It should be noted as well that the zone extends from the ground to above the top of the defender's head.

While modern applications of deflections are based on the same principles utilized in traditional applications, the applications can differ primarily in the sequencing of movement patterns and the position from which techniques will start. The modifications, particularly with regard to the starting position, enhance the utility of the techniques in self-defense situations, if circumstances permit. The principles and techniques are optimized for one-on-one confrontations in an escalating situation, rather than for a completely unprovoked, surprise assault.

Traditional applications are practiced two ways. In fundamental, kata-style training the partners face each other in matching mid-level guards, with feet in sankakudai (the "triangular platform"), their bodies half-turned, and the arms held in gentle curves with the fingers widely spread—this configuration is *ai-hanmi chudan-gamae*. In advanced applications, the "attacker" may assume the same type of mid-level guard, but the "defender" will typically stand in a much more natural, open position, with arms lowered at the sides.





The “Strong Conversation” stance, as developed by Ellis Amdur.

When we practice self-defense applications at Itten Dojo, we adopt principles advocated by Ellis Amdur in Chapter 7 (“Physical Organization in the Face of Aggression”) of his exceptional book, *Words of Power: A Guide for Ordinary People to Calm and De-escalate Aggressive Individuals*. This book covers far more than physical techniques and is very highly recommended—martial arts schools should require its reading as a mandatory component of the “soft skills” of self-defense.

In simplified terms—read the book to absorb the multiple aspects beyond these two, specific factors—Amdur recommends assuming a half-facing posture with the feet in what is essentially sankakudai and the hands held as a “calming fence.”

When facing an aggressive individual, stand with your hands clasped in front of your chest, the back of one hand in the palm of the other, palms inwards. This is the strong conversation stance. When the other person becomes agitated, you rotate your forearms so that the palms are out,

Amdur’s “Calming Fence” stance, employed when facing an aggressive individual.

slightly curved, as if you are intending to catch something. This is the fence.

Rotating the arms in this manner creates what is called *teगतana*, the “hand sword” configuration employed in aikijutsu and aikido, but in a way that does not appear to be a fighting stance. In reality, it’s a position from which multiple deflections and techniques can be applied in the event a physical attack is launched, but the appearance of the position is non-aggressive and clearly aimed at preventing violence.

That last point is a critical consideration nowadays, when almost any confrontation is likely to be filmed and the video later introduced as evidence. The position facilitates defense while supporting the contention in the aftermath of violence that the actions taken were, in fact, legitimately defensive. As Amdur emphasizes, “Were the individual to then come close enough that his or her body or hands touch yours, there is not doubt that they are intruding on your personal space.”



Solo Exercise

Starting from the “calming fence” position, the deflection adapted for self-defense can be first practiced as a solo exercise. The student assumes a half-facing stance.



The student enters on a 45-degree angle to the inside, circling his rear hand to a position above his lead shoulder.



After returning to a “neutral” position, the student steps again with his lead foot but this time on a 45-degree angle to the outside, and circles his rear hand to position above his rear shoulder.



Although either hand could be used to form the deflection, or both hands in sequence, the optimal choice is often the rear hand because it frees the lead hand to apply a strike or grasp the opponent to assert a connection. The lead foot is used to step, regardless of whether the entry is made to the inside or the outside, because only stepping with the lead foot sufficiently displaces the body (especially the head) to slip the incoming strike.

Paired Practice

One of the most critical combative skills, and typically one of the most difficult things to teach an average student, is the ability to enter against a strike without flinching. This is especially true in aikijutsu and aikido, when the “arm’s length grappling” nature of techniques tends to place the defender in the zone of maximum power of an incoming strike. Training exercises must be designed to permit students to practice entries under controlled conditions that are initially very safe but that can



subsequently be made more closely akin to free fighting. The first step is to take the solo exercise described above, and add an opponent.

The practice partners assume mutual, half-facing stances, at a distance requiring the “attacker” to take two steps to land a strike. The “defender” adopts the “Calming Fence” posture.



Starting with a lead-hand jab, the attacker advances and throws the punch. As the jab extends, the defender steps with his lead foot on a slight angle and circles his rear hand to deflect the punch. Note that at the beginning levels of practice the attacker’s punches are allowed to hang, rather than being snapped immediately back to guard as would be more proper and realistic.



After returning to “neutral” position, the attacker advances again and throws a rear-hand, straight punch. The defender student steps with his lead foot on a slight angle to the outside, and circles his rear hand to accomplish the deflection.

The partners return to starting positions and repeat the sequence as many times as desired.

In this, most fundamental version of the exercise, the objective is to do no more than slip the attacker’s punch, cutting the interval closely enough to displace the defender’s body only so far as necessary to avoid being hit.



Next, the difficulty of the drill is heightened by the attacker retracting his strikes (in a more realistic manner) and the defender practicing “riding” the retracting strike to accomplish his entry.

Partners position themselves as described above.

After deflecting the jab, the defender maintains contact with the palm and fingers of his deflecting hand, hooking into whatever hold he can get, and rides the retracting limb to enter.



Against the rear-hand, straight punch, the defender achieves a contact point with his deflecting hand, ideally hooking into the crook of the attacker’s elbow, and again rides the retraction to enter.



Once the entries are working smoothly, the defender adds a counter-strike with his lead hand.

While the basic forms of the paired exercise are purely linear and practiced at a regulated and regular cadence, more advanced forms of the drills can include combination strikes, maneuvering for position, feints, and variations in timing. For the defender, the critical skills to be practiced are avoiding the incoming strike(s), establishing a physical connection, entering, and counter striking to “fix” the attacker’s posture.

As abilities are developed in these areas, practice moves to applied techniques.



Application: Irimi-nage — “Entering throw”

The attacker can start from an overtly aggressive position or from a relatively neutral posture with the intent to throw a sucker punch, while the defender adopts the “Calming Fence” posture and issues verbal commands to “Stop!” or “Stay back!”



When the attacker throws a lead-hand jab, the defender picks the strike with his rear hand.



The attacker follows immediately with a rear-hand cross, which the defender slips / deflects and then rides the retraction to enter.



At this point, the defender can enter and execute a conventional irimi-nage, leading the attacker around and into a take-down and pin or a potentially lethal neck-break as described in the August issue, or he can abbreviate the entry and execute in a linear fashion.

The defender steps behind the attacker with his right foot and slides his lead hand up from the small of the attacker's back to secure the attacker's head, while maintaining control of the attacker's lead arm.



The defender continues his entry, sliding his trailing arm along the attacker's arm until the defender's upper arm is in secure contact with the attacker's jaw line, thereby facilitating a decision point to break or throw.



Deciding to be merciful, the defender cuts down strongly, at the junction of the neck and shoulder, to throw.



If control of the attacker's arm is maintained, a pin can be applied—in this instance, an arm-bar across the knee.



If further measures are warranted to ensure the safety of the defender, strikes can be applied.



Application: Kaiten-nage — “Wheel throw”

In its oldest forms, versions of the “wheel-throw” can be seen in sumo, and in jujutsu techniques designed to open the back of the opponent’s neck to a strike or cut. In aikijutsu or aikido the technique can be employed as a throw or the set-up for a pin. This particular application is derived from Taikyoku Aikido, an eclectic style developed by Ellis Amdur.

When the attacker commits to a rear-hand, straight punch, the defender slips / deflects the strike...

...and, maintaining control of the attacking limb, rides the retraction to enter, causing the attacker to become slightly off-balanced to his front-right corner.

As the attacker attempts to regain balance to turn into the defender, the defender sweeps the attacker’s arm with his lead arm and strikes to the attacker’s neck with his rear tegatana or forearm.



Keeping the hand (just used to strike) in contact with the attacker's neck, the defender snakes his hand around to cut into the back of the attacker's head and neck, further again compromising his posture.



As the attacker bends forward, the defender controls the attacker's near arm to impart forward momentum. "Wheeling" the attacker's head and arm, the defender throws the attacker.



If the defender believes himself to be endangered to the degree more drastic measures are justifiable, instead of wheeling into the throw the defender executes a knee strike to face / head of the attacker. Given that the attacker's head is being levered down as the knee comes up, this strike can have very severe consequences, and would be justifiable only when the attacker presents a potentially lethal threat.



Following the strike, the defender maintains positive control by dropping his center vertically and starting the attacker toward the ground.



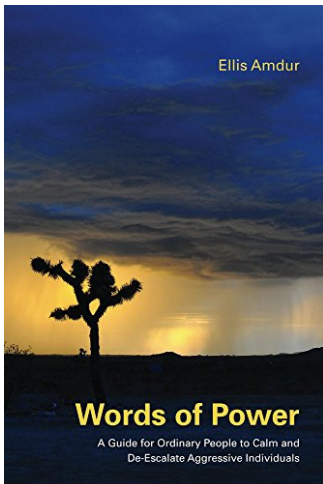
The defender slips his arm around the attacker's near arm, and takes the attacker to the ground.



At this point, the defender can maintain control by means of the rotation applied to the attacker's arm and shoulder.

Conclusion

The sophisticated forms of grappling developed from Daito-ryu aikijujutsu provide inexhaustible avenues for experimentation and, when combined with the "soft skills" of self-defense, practical and effective combative ability for the circumstances we face in the modern world. 🌀



This two-part series has been an updated and expanded version of my portion of "The Parry: An Essential Free-Fighting Tool," an article that Peter Hobart and I originally published in 2008, in Volume 17, Number 3, of the *Journal of Asian Martial Arts*.

The most important update is the inclusion of our adaptation of the verbal techniques and physical postures presented in *Words of Power*, Ellis Amdur's "...guidebook for ordinary people who, while simply living their lives, occasionally encounter aggressive people." The book teaches "recognition of potential aggression, and the verbal de-escalation of such unstable individuals before violent acts occur."

As an adjunct to the "hard skills" (i.e., physical techniques) of self-defense, this book is invaluable and should be required reading at any martial arts school. The book is one of several works by various authors we use to learn avoidance, de-escalation, assessment of threats, and justification for the use of force. *Words of Power* is available from Amazon.com.

Robert Wolfe, chief instructor of Itten Dojo, began martial arts training in 1975 while attending Bucknell University, where he earned a degree in Japanese Studies. Mr. Wolfe has taught since 1985, and founded Itten Dojo in 1992. His articles on martial arts have been featured in publications such as *The Bujin*, *Budo Shinbun*, the *Journal of Asian Martial Arts*, *Bugeisha*, *Aikido Today Magazine*, *Inside Karate*, *Martial Arts Training*, and *Martial Arts Professional*.

