

What's in a Name?

By: Eric Buchanan

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I decided to name my new Aikido dojo in Morris, Minnesota, "Prairie Winds Aikido". Having to come up with a dojo name required me to think about Aikido in general and how I could convey what I thought about it to prospective students. "Prairie Winds" is a somewhat common name here because Morris is situated at the eastern edge of the North American central plains which is a large, mostly flat prairie that extends west to the Rocky Mountains. This results in a lot of wind in Morris, in fact, so much so that the local campus of the University of Minnesota recently constructed a wind turbine that generates half of the electricity it uses. The wind turbine has become an icon for the Morris area and is a constant visual reminder of the prairie winds. So, "Prairie Winds Aikido" is a descriptive name for a dojo in Morris and reflects the nature of the place where we practice, but this is not the only reason I was drawn to this name.

Wind is also evocative of Aikido in that it can be gentle or very powerful without exerting itself. An Aikido throw can leave one with the feeling that something powerful happened, but the source of that power is not felt. The analogy can go further. The most powerful storms are cyclonic like tornados and hurricanes where the wind reaches incredible speeds by whipping around a calm center. The storm does not exert itself to accomplish this, but instead draws the energy from its surroundings. This is a lot like an Aikido throw, especially tenkan movements, in that the energy for the throw comes from the attack and is intensified by being redirected into circular movements while the center remains grounded and calm. But even this doesn't quite capture the full depth of the analogy.

We think of storms as having a calm center or "eye", but the more I think about it the more I think this is not the case. There is really nothing at the center of a storm it is just a concept we use to describe something we think should be there like a hub is at the center of a wheel. At the eye of a storm it is totally calm, not because there is an actual center which is calm, but rather there is nothing moving there – nothing at all! I think this gets close to the true essence of Aikido. If there is more than one center, or ego, interacting there will always be conflict. So, it is in letting go of one's own ego that allows the energy of an attack to be reformulated and rendered harmless, not by trying to do something to the attacker. This is where my

sense of wind and Aikido come together and what I want to try to convey to students at “Prairie Winds Aikido”.

One of my favorite quotes from O-Sensei is: “If you have not linked yourself to true emptiness, you will never understand the Art of Peace.” I think this is getting at the same idea. Of course, this all comes back to practice. It is during practice that one can experience the almost magical aspects of emptiness while under attack. It is also during practice that one’s ego is reinforced by every successful encounter, requiring emptiness to be relearned continually. But then, why should practice on the mat be any different than practice off of it.