

# IS AIKIDO THE BEST ART AGAINST MULTIPLE ATTACKERS?

Learn how to defeat up to five opponents with the uyeshiba method

by  
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One of the measures of a martial art's effectiveness is how well it works against multiple attackers on the street. Among the Japanese self-defense systems, *aikido* is perhaps best suited for dealing with more than one assailant. The founder of aikido, the late Morihei Uyeshiba, could handle literally dozens of attackers, effortlessly and safely passing through their midst like a cool breeze in summer.

Uyeshiba often said: "When 100 opponents attack me, at that moment I am already standing behind them." He was referring to the mental state one must cultivate when dealing with assailants coming simultaneously from all directions. Rather than meeting multiple opponents head-on, Uyeshiba advocated slipping past them with minimal contact—"stand behind them," if you will.

Aikido stylists refer to this technique as *irimi* or *omote*, whereby the defender moves to the attacker's *shikaku* or blind spot. Once he has moved out of the line of fire and is momentarily free from attack, he is in position to counterattack. Instead of trying to overpower the opponent, the aikido practitioner "blends" with his adversary's movement and uses it to advantage. This is aikido's principle of "harmonizing."

Sun Tzu's famous Chinese classic on military strategy, *The Art of War*, proclaims that superior position is a bigger advantage than a superiority in numbers. That not only refers to geographical position, but also the defender's position in relation to his opponent(s) at the moment of attack.



One of the final requirements for a first-degree black belt in traditional aikido is a successful defense against a simultaneous five-man attack. The object is not to get struck, pinned, or otherwise immobilized by all of the attackers. It is a difficult test for most people, and one can easily get caught.

The Japanese call this type of practice *su nin-gake randori*, or "freestyle against numerous attackers." Although most multiple attack training today is limited to two or three assailants, Uyeshiba was known to face as many as 10, 20 or more opponents simultaneously without any problem. Highly skilled *aikidoka* in Japan sometimes conduct randori against five attackers armed with short swords. Or advanced students might practice defenses against multiple attackers wielding either *bokken* (wooden swords) or six-foot staffs.

When discussing defense against multiple opponents, Uyeshiba told students to "Think of facing 100 swords as facing one. Think of facing one sword as facing 100." The key is to



During randori practice (above), aikido students learn to develop the skill to defend against a multitude of attackers.

be able to move freely and quickly from one opponent to the next, and not get stuck dealing with one attacker. In his well-known letter, the "Record of Immovable Mysterious Wisdom," the Zen priest Takuan warned of *ju-shin*, or the "residing mind," which, he said, stops at each point and cannot move freely from one subject to the other.

To survive a multiple attack, the defender must move freely and naturally from one opponent to the next without hesitation. As Takuan explained, it is like looking at a tree and focusing on just one leaf, or allowing the mind to freely focus on any or all of the leaves. The opposite of the "residing mind," this "non-abiding mind" was the goal of the samurai warrior and swordsman. It is also the mental state aikido practitioners hope to achieve through dedicated practice, allowing them to move freely and naturally from one opponent to the next without a collision.

Following are aikido strategies for dealing with two-, three- and five-man attacks.

### Two-Man Attacks

When dealing with two assailants, you obviously must

**Faced (1) with two assailants—one in front and one to the rear—aikido instructor Kensho Furuya maneuvers himself (2) to deal with the most threatening attacker, throwing (3) the front opponent into (4) the second attacker while moving to a safer position.**







*In this scenario, four attackers have latched onto (1) the aikido stylist's arms. The defender moves to free his right arm, raising it head-high (2-3) as he swings (4) the two opponents around into their partners and throws (5) all four to the floor.*



make sure you are not vulnerable to the second attacker while you are dealing with the first. Aikido stylists therefore use the first opponent as a shield against the second. The defender can either maneuver or throw the first attacker into the path of the second assailant to obstruct his movement.

### Three-Man Attacks

When facing three opponents, consider Uyeshiba's maxim about regarding multiple assailants as one attacker. Don't think in terms of "three against one;" think instead in terms of

## Ten Reasons Why Martial Artists Don't Succeed Against Multiple Attackers

- Staying in one position too long.
- Trying to execute complicated techniques which are too time-consuming and destroy the defender's timing.
- Bad positioning in relation to the attackers.
- A loss of courage or otherwise stiffening up while under attack.
- A weak mental resolve to escape from the assailants.
- The defender not being aware of where the attackers are in relation to himself.
- A lack of training and/or a lack of confidence in one's technique.
- A lack of spiritual energy to meet the demands of the situation.
- Not enough survival instincts.
- A lack of ability to adapt to the changing circumstances of the fight and stay a step ahead of the assailants.



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"two against two," where your odds of survival are at least 50-50. After all, you will be using the first attacker as your "ally" against the other two by placing him in their way.

## Five-Man Attacks

Five against one sounds like insurmountable odds, and it would be unwise to allow this negative outlook to creep into your mind as you prepare to defend yourself. You will lose your courage and energy if you do. Instead, try to maneuver yourself so that your opponents are in each other's way; this allows you to deal with one at a time. Position yourself so that you are always closest to the most imminent attacker and farther away from the assailants you can expect to be fourth and fifth into the fray. This strategy creates a little time for your defenses.

When you throw one opponent to the ground, use the time it takes him to recover to deal with the next two attackers. Keep in mind that you don't want to get caught between the first and last assailant; that could be fatal.

If you can't throw an opponent quickly, move away from him as quickly as possible or you will lose your timing and spacing to deal with the next attacker. Try to throw your opponent into at least one of the other assailants, temporarily blocking their path as you move to an area where there is the least number of attackers. As the Chinese military strategist Sun Tzu pointed out, superior mobility and posi-

*Faced (1) with a trio of attackers—one in front and two to the rear—aikido teacher Kensho Furuya deals first with the most imminent assailant in front, shifting (2) into position to throw (3) the opponent into (4) the other two who are advancing from the opposite direction. This delays their attack and allows the defender to escape or reposition himself.*

tion can overcome a superiority in numbers and strength, not only against an opposing force on the battlefield, but against multiple assailants on the street.

The best way to determine if you are ready for multiple attackers on the street is by conducting freestyle practice against two, three, four or more opponents. In this way, aikido students develop their natural instincts of survival, as well as the mental and physical ability to keep moving against all odds. It is better to discover during training sessions the areas in which you are deficient, rather than finding out the hard way—on the street, alone, late at night, as a horde of salivating assailants descends upon you. ✕

*About the author: Reverend Kensho Furuya is a Zen priest and is the chief instructor at the Aikido Center of Los Angeles. His book, *Kodo Ancient Ways: Lessons in the Spiritual Life of the Warrior/Martial Artist*, is available from Ohara Publications, Inc., a sister company of Black Belt magazine.*