

Aikido and the Pursuit of a Better Life

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Introduction

When I first stepped onto the Aikido mat in 2010, I was an intensely cognitive person with an abundance of conceptual structure around how to live a ‘better’ life. I had already built a couple of successful businesses in telecommunications and had employed learnings from across a broad spectrum of human development to handle myriad challenges. I had set up my Coaching company Brighter Lives in 2008 as a vehicle for focusing on my ongoing personal development whilst also holding myself accountable both to a professional standard and to the clients I would help along the way. I was however, becoming profoundly aware that issues from my early life, a plethora of setbacks ranging from poverty to being fatherless and subject to intensive bullying until I was 16, were clearly restricting my potential.

I had always had a vision of a better life, and a powerful sense of the possible, driven by curiosity and a passion for connecting to others. I would invariably find that however much ground

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I would gain in the pursuit of my goals and dreams there would come a time when the spectre of my early life would throw a spanner in the works. Since arriving in London in 1998 I had spent around 12 years studying various meditative processes and embodied practices from meditating with Sufis to becoming a pupil of the Alexander Technique. I eventually realised that the core problem was that my body was riddled with fear and fearful patterns. These patterns were obscuring my search for a better understanding of how to live a fuller and more enlightened life, turning me into a walking contradiction at times; quite frankly I was getting sick of myself. Between 2013 and 2015 I would pursue these patterns further during my Master Degree in Applied Coaching by looking at how fear impacts our ability to process information, and how this knowledge could be utilised to help people develop towards self-authorship and beyond; assisting the cycle of moving from the implicit to the explicit, from subject to object.

As I looked around the Aikido dojo, on that first occasion, I could see adults of various ages doing things with their bodies that seemed wonderous and scary. It stimulated in me contradictory feelings of needing to leave immediately whilst also wanting to throw myself ‘head-first’ into it. As my curiosity began to fire up, I found myself being inducted into a supremely counter-intuitive life-long learning experience; failing forwards as way of being a better human being. For me Aikido was the catalyst that enabled me to transform years of cognitive understanding and deep internal conflict into a much more fluid sense of being and doing in the world. Every lesson was an opportunity to be challenged down to my atoms and rebuilt again in the application of principles I was quick to grasp but slow to embody. I was in the process of becoming increasingly aligned with my deepest values and grounded in the bodily knowledge that, at my core, I had the capacity to be ‘ok’ regardless of what life throws at me (particularly when I was literally being thrown on the mat).

I was beginning to see that the more I could become ‘ok’ in my body, and reduce the ways in which I would go into a fight or flight state, the better my ability would be to honour my deeper core values and ways of being in the world with others. Essentially, my body was enabling my mind to be as fully intelligent as it dreamed of being. I still experience intense moments of confusion and frustration, but these are now fused with an awareness of the illumination that will follow if I am prepared to be courageous in the face of the unknowable moment. In this essay I will explore how the qualities of Aikido as a lifelong physical, emotional, mental and spiritual (PEMS) practice, can support us in facing the challenge of developing our potential regardless of the obstacles we face in day to day life.

An Embodied Approach to the Theory of Mind

The most fundamental thing that I have come to understand about Aikido is that it operates on the basic principle that all human conflict arises out of a confusion of compound illusions, where both parties believe their own separate piece of reality to the exclusion of the others. Aikido works at a deep level in the body to create a grounded emotional intelligence that is indispensable in every area of our lives. The insights from practicing Aikido can help shed some light on a variety of areas most of us struggle with at some point. Simplifying a broad spectrum of dynamics that influence our emotional reactivity, Aikido has the potential to show that at the root of all conflict is our quest for safety. The way that it reveals this is by taking us on a journey towards developing an embodied knowledge that what we think we are right now is only a partial truth.

Over time, as we continue to practice being in a body that flinches less and opens up more in the spaces we inhabit, the idea of a fixed sense of self gets increasingly left behind. It is this shift, coupled with the fact that it is facilitated in partnership with others, that enables us to transcend the urge to project our fears onto others. It is precisely in the moments where two parties project their fears onto the other, believing their own versions of the truth to the exclusion of the other, that they fight. At an abstract level it is a fight to prevent their truth from being obliterated or consumed by the others. At a more physical level it is a fight provoked by a sense of scarcity of one kind or another; in the modern age we are fortunate not to have to face real scarcity of resources that often, therefore most examples of conflict arise from a scarcity of feeling safe in the body; de-oxygenation from breathing shallowly in a state of fright is a literal example of scarcity in the body and it has direct implications for how we make sense of things both emotionally and mentally. Our decision-making capabilities are either enhanced or degraded by the state of our wellbeing; stress has a direct impact on our ability to gauge the consequences of our actions and often leads to actions that limit our possibilities for living a better life.

These moments of conflict are at their most threateningly real when both sides are at the stage of their development where they have invested more in their sense of identity than they have in their strategies for how to live a better life with others. However, it is precisely these moments of conflict that are the exact moments when we are closest to a reconciliation of differences, towards a greater whole. If we can find a way to have open hearts, with the intent to make space for the other, in a dance of movement and mindful partnership, then we are provided with an opportunity to ‘get over ourselves.’ Training together in Aikido the practitioner, or Aikidoka, can gain an appreciation of the harmony of all things that awaits our calm attention. When in the deep flow of a training session our bodies experience living reality as an ongoing process, flowing change into fusion and fusion into change as we become more aware of the interconnected nature of all things. But therein lies the core problem of the human condition: We are profoundly unaware of the inherently interconnected nature of things. This is, and has always been, a very special kind of ‘hidden’ knowledge, known as esoteric, sapiential or ‘initiated’ knowledge; only available to those who are fearless enough to surrender themselves to a greater truth. Aikido has the potential to offer access to this ‘hidden’ knowledge through a lifetime of practice in a community of practitioners who all go through similar stages of confronting others in practice to realise they were only ever confronting themselves.

Throughout the course of our lives we will go through phases or stages where our world seems to be coming apart at the seams, which can be particularly surprising at times when we felt we were ‘doing well’ or ‘really getting somewhere.’ The truth of this phenomenon of human experience is that it is developmental, and the parts of our lives where we are really developing generally feel confusing. Ken Wilber (2000) discusses the concept of fulcrums in *Integral Psychology* as axial points along our developmental journey. His description is also a useful one for the journey one undertakes in Aikido; from an embodied point of view Aikido was seen as very supportive of ‘vertical literacy’ both by Tony Buzan the chief exponent of mind maps, and George Leonard, one of the early developers of integral transformative practice.

Each time the self (the proximate self) encounters a new level in the Great Nest, it first *identifies* with it and consolidates it; then disidentifies with it (*transcends* it, de-embeds from

it); and then includes and *integrates* it from the next higher level. (Wilber, 2000, p. 35. Italics in the original)

This is how learning, or most forms of growth occur, i.e. it is the tears in our consciousness that allow more information to get in, and when it does it starts the process of integration towards a greater whole. From this perspective we can see what at least three of the things are that Aikido is trying to tell us:

One, conflict is neither bad nor good, it simply is; two, conflict is absolutely necessary to almost every life process; three, people need training in how to respond effectively and appropriately to conflict situations. (Dobson & Miller, 1992, p. xii)

Creating Space for Change

Another core element within Aikido is the concept of Ukemi (see Figure 1), which is the process of taking a controlled fall, known as a break-fall, so that we are able to ‘survive’ attacks that we have not been able to fully avoid. The key to Ukemi in the deeper conception of Aikido is that it enables us to keep the space open for further understanding, as we do not dig in and engage in a game of attrition. Rather we bend and move with the energy and use the space around us to safely fall out of the way, quickly regaining our balance and finding a safe distance again.



Figure 1. Ukemi illustration: backwards break-fall.

Ukemi is a form of surrender which enables the space between self and other to be respected and maintained without the corruption of violent damage. On our lifelong journey towards a more connected relationship to all things we experience what could be described as ‘mini deaths.’ This is where our old selves die a little bit in order to integrate new truths (see Figure 2). In ‘Tobi Ukemi’ the Aikidoka must literally get over themselves in a high flip to avoid a potentially broken wrist (at the minimum if it were a real conflict). The experience of learning to do this is like coming to the edge of a cliff and experiencing the very end of everything we know as we take a leap into nothing. The edge or end of what we know can feel like the edge or end of all things, and that end includes the end of ourselves. In Aikido we regularly go over that edge, into a space that is beyond who we were before.

The more that we practice literal and metaphorical Ukemi, the more we realise that we can ‘survive’ further encounters with new truths; we become both more than what we were, and the truth that we integrate within our being. Both ourselves and the world have changed in the process of integrating new feelings and insights. One cannot help but draw a relationship here to what it is like to actively pursue ‘the good the beautiful and the true’ in a world filled with so much miscommunication and confusion, wherein fear is the natural reaction to ‘the unknown;’ or the merely ‘poorly understood.’ The stages of being on our developmental journey are marked out by moments of surrender, so that we can access the greater space and truth that awaits us just beyond our current moment.

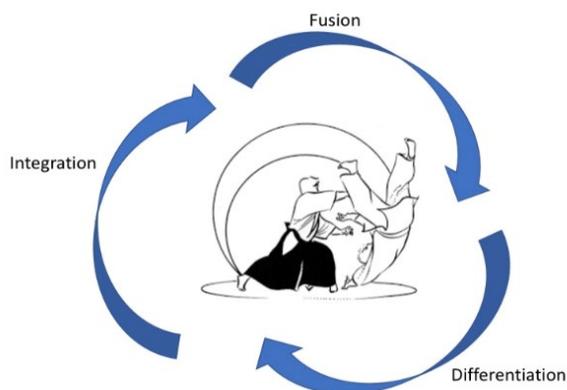


Figure 2. Tobi Ukemi (high breakfall) and overlay of developmental cycle.

Aikido has, at its core, a deep relationship to space and the moment before any action, a moment in which there are myriad possibilities. It is precisely this space that is essential for anything to express its energy in the moment. If we give something the space it needs in order to be seen and understood we can better appreciate its nature; increasing our chances of placing it in a broader, more complete context. One could argue that for an integral vision to emerge, there must be enough space in mind for myriad truths to find their place in a more holistic model of the world. In Aikido these concepts are brought to life within the body, both in motion and in stillness through years of methodical practice.

This practice begins (and ends) with a short meditation called Mokuso which has the purpose of helping us to access a state of awareness where we allow our attention to more fully inhabit our space, known as Mushin Mugamae; a state of pure bright awareness with no intent in any direction; neither towards nor, away from anything. We begin our movement from a state of readiness which has emerged from the state of no intention, known as Shizentai; this state has us ready to move in any direction but not yet committed to any direction.

With a still heart one can access the wonders of nature and by suppressing action one can still the gods of change. (Tomiki, 1958, in Allbright, p. 41)

A vital aspect of our journey in Aikido is to become increasingly aware of the gestalt of the room in which we train; this is tested during practice and furthermore when we are graded at a senior level. With this awareness we then move, in partnership with our fellow Aikidoka; deeply respecting our relationship to our partner and the many others around us. Even when training to respond to attacks we are constantly judging, feeling, sensing the distance between us and the other and then moving to a different vantage point at the moment of attack. This is known as Tai Sabaki

(see Figure 3) and can be translated as body avoidance/movement. Rather than opposing the incoming ‘communication’ we move off the line to an angle (or vector); primarily so we are not harmed but also so that we can respond with the least harm possible to the attacker. The problem with most conflict is that people stay on the line, in front of the other, in effect ‘opposing’ the other; taking up the position of opposition immediately brings with it predictable counter-productive outcomes; this is why Aikido is less about competition to win against others, and more about co-development so that we can win together.

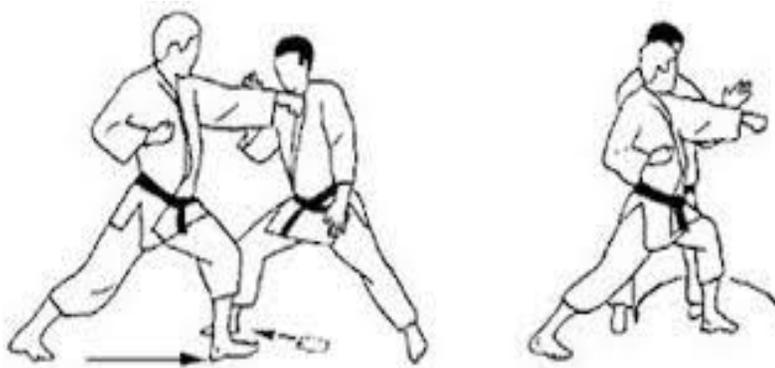


Figure 3. Tai Sabaki: coming off the line (left) and using a circular motion for redirection (right)

It is very common in Aikido to allow the force of a blow to come past us and then redirect it in a circular motion to allow the energy to play itself out. This gives the communicator the chance to play out their message without the worst kinds of conflict emerging i.e. where one or both parties are seriously harmed. This kind of mindful movement is very much like when we ask questions with the intent to understand rather than needing first to be understood. We keep asking questions until the thing that has created the energy in the moment has been exhausted, and we find ourselves at the end of a process of learning; one of many cycles of fusion, and then exploration that leads to further differentiation and integration. In Japanese they have a phrase you will often hear when training which is *Mou Ikkai*, which translates simply as ‘and again’ or ‘repeat’ but the difference is that it comes completely without judgement and with the expectation that anything that is worth doing is worth doing many many times in order to achieve competency. If you fail the answer is *mou ikkai*, and if you succeed? *Mou ikkai!*

The Body is Our Deepest Frame of Reference

All of this is very intellectual, and as Aikido is primarily an embodied practice it is also important to take up an embodied viewpoint here. We mostly learn Aikido without talking; some dojos (training studios) are quite rigid about this for a variety of reasons. One very good reason is that the new information we are trying to learn cannot immediately be processed until we have first learned the frame of reference that we need in order to relate to it: to become it. The frame of reference we first acquire is within our bodies, and it implants a deeper sense of balance and its vital importance within our psyche.

Aikido, from an embodied perspective, could be seen as a practice of stealing the balance of others, known as *Kuzushi*, whilst also being totally prepared to have yours stolen. Interestingly, another definition of *Kuzushi* is ‘mind-steal,’ wherein an opponent has a piece of their mind or attention stolen, to the advantage of the one who can leverage the opportunity that it creates. The problem that faces almost all new beginners of Aikido is that they arrive on the training mat already

off balance in their bodies. This basic state of being off balance in their bodies makes the initial learning process a steep one, with very little in terms of ‘takeaways’ to show for it. The application in the everyday world from this ongoing adaptation to becoming more balanced in the body and mind, is commensurate with becoming increasingly ok with having this balance temporarily stolen in the body without it putting you mentally off balance.

A full-blooded Aikido session for an active participant will see a person doing hundreds of break-falls until being on the floor is just as valid a part of the learning experience as being upright. An experienced Aikidoka knows that whether they are giving or receiving techniques the best lessons are the ones that challenge us. As a receiver of a technique we are the one who surrenders and takes a fall. This role has less to remember but it is more physically demanding. As the giver we carry the responsibility for remembering and performing a technique both accurately and safely; either can be highly challenging at different stages of development. Aikido is an embodied artform wherein this learning cycle of giving and receiving, of surrender and agency mirrors a variety of patterns of experience that we struggle with in everyday life. Where Aikido really excels at getting to the root of what blocks the learning cycle is its ability to teach us through our bodies how to escape the myriad double binds that stop us in our tracks, often leading to entrenchment and resistance to new information., For example, we are hard wired to stand upright and to avoid falling and yet failure and making mistakes are fundamental to a healthy and productive learning cycle. We are geared to move forwards, rather like an automatic car left in drive mode, and therefore we don’t handle going backwards well as it feels counterproductive to our core sense of purpose and direction. Ukemi acts like a somatic antidote to this dilemma, quelling the all too human aversion to falling over and the more general fear of failure, particularly when either are witnessed by others.

Breath, Vision and Our Dynamic Potential

Another confounding factor for the beginner in Aikido is that most of us live primarily in our heads, breathe shallowly in our chests and have very little natural peripheral awareness. We’re also scared stiff of falling over, which is a metaphor that proves quite costly when we do fall as our bodies suffer more from being rigid than if they were relaxed. All of these bodily impediments are vitally important in the context of our greater developmental journey as they relate to our ability to be vulnerable to all of the new information that we will need to process on the route to becoming our increasingly inclusive and integrative selves. As we develop the ability to breathe more fully throughout all of our movements, and in advanced stages to enhance our movements, we find

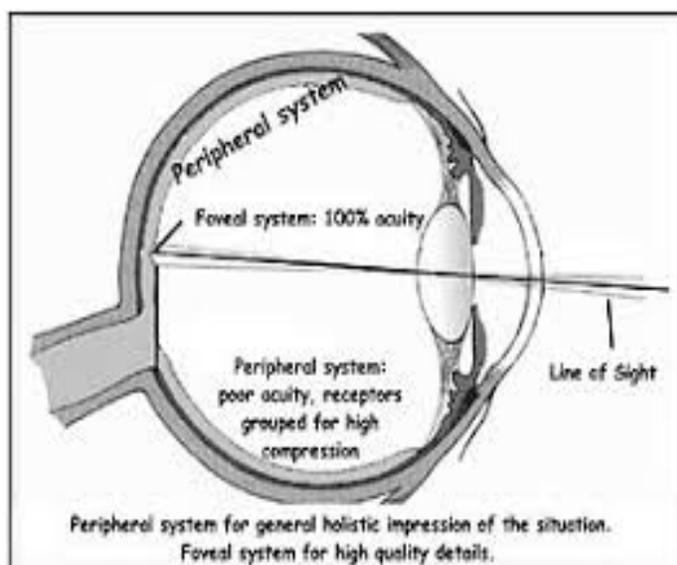


Figure 4. Peripheral vision system highlights how ‘sight received’ information flows into the brain either in a narrow stream (foveal) or a broad stream (peripheral).

ourselves more able to handle obstacles outside of the training space. Access to more information and a wider array of options become available to us as our peripheral awareness (see Figure 4) becomes an integral facility supporting how we process our reality; leading to more information being processed from within a broader context.

Frame of Reference Equals Frame of Relevance

It is precisely this increased capacity, to process more information from an increasingly broader context, that underpins both continuous adult development and the inoculation against the need for violent conflict. The counterpoint that Aikido works against is the ‘tunnel’ vision effect that arises from entering a fight or flight state. Tunnel vision is similar to foveal vision, which is at the acute end of our ability focus our eyesight and is ideal for focusing on what is immediately in front of us, however it is often to the cost of broader context or new information. Coupled with being in an unresourceful state this is a potent recipe for various levels of conflict. We all have blind-spots, areas we overlook, or ‘things that are missing from our frame of reference, therefore they are not in our frame of relevance.’

Aikido is just one way of supporting our capacity to expose these blind spots to increased awareness, however as an embodied methodology it is a valuable factor in a broader integrated approach alongside more cognitive practices.

Ultimately, physical, psychological and spiritual mastery are one and the same. The egoless self is open, flexible, supple, fluid, and dynamic on body, mind and spirit. Being egoless, the self identifies with all things and all people, seeing them not from its self-centred perspective but from their own respective centres. In a circle of limitless circumference every point becomes the centre of the universe. (Ueshiba, 1984, p. 9).

As we adapt to living in a body that is comfortable shifting within any permutation of a 360 degree position in space (see Figure 5) we increasingly find ourselves able to take different perspectives and vitally, get out of our own way so that we can see what something is from someone else’s perspective and not just from our own. The net effect is a kind of ‘switching off’ of the smaller (identity) self and an increasing of our fullest potential self (spirit), unrestricted by fears, planning or strategizing. From here there is receptiveness, flexibility, speed and fearless

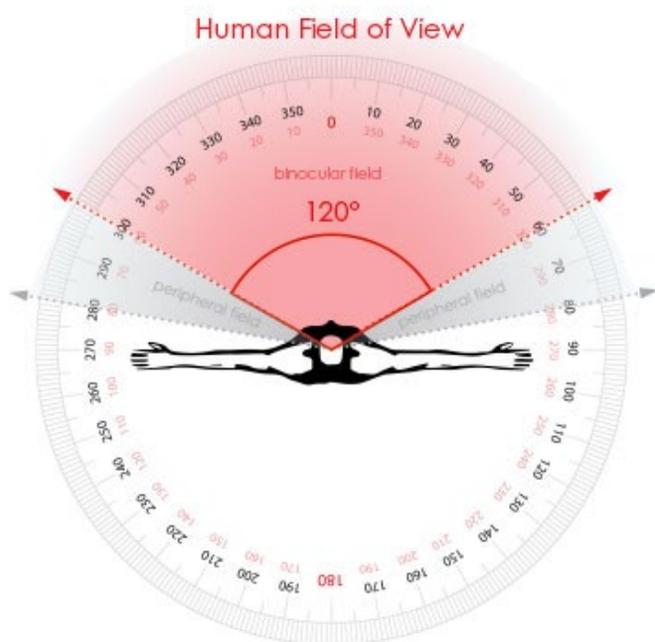


Figure 5. This illustration of the ‘Human field of view’ highlights our true context as beings that live in a 360 degree position in space.

engagement. This quote from Professor Kenji Tomiki beautifully sums up Aikido with Mushin Mugamae at its core:

Non-conscious action stemming from a neutral physical posture (in other words, neither aggressive nor submissive – mu gamae), executed without emotion or prejudgment (mu shin). (Allbright, 2002, p. 41)

A Personal Reflection

Over time, I have been fortunate to experience glimmers of these kinds of realisations. I increasingly experience states of a kind of activated or applied openness where my model of the world is more readily open to being expanded. Even in the face of facts that I would quite often prefer not to be true, the benefits from accepting them continue to outweigh the initial struggle to relate to them and eventually integrating them within a more holistic model of reality. The opportunity to pursue my master's degree was a classic example of this. I was working on having a workshop certified for CPD credits to be delivered as an executive training and had it failed by the supervisor. That same supervisor liked the way that I took the feedback onboard and commented that the work I had put into creating the course said to her that I had what it took to make an application for higher learning for master's course in applied coaching. I took the hit of the rejection as a gift and flowed with the direction of the energy it had to give. The outcome was to change my life by giving me a space in which to pursue my core interests at an advanced academic level. If I had become fixated with the failure to have my course certified I would not only have failed to move forwards, there's a strong possibility that I would have gone backwards, with no profit (learning) to show for it.

The final core concept I would like to share is more generally a Japanese one, but it is quite common to hear it being said in Aikido: Ganbatte. This word means to really go for it, and to do your best. It is said with a passionate energy and it is a core aspect of the Japanese psyche that they really want you give it your all, even if they might have to work harder because of it.

Ganbatte.

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