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Three Meditations on the Psychology of Aikido

I. Vulnerability

The psychology of Aiki emerges from applying the subtle principles of Aikido philosophy to personal consciousness and conduct in various life situations. These principles converge on the notion that one can intuit a sense of the unfolding direction of a situation, blend with that flow, and lead it to a positive conclusion in a conscious and empowered way. What can the discipline of psychology add to our understanding of that notion?

One line of understanding derives from a concept psychologists use to explain people's reactions to aggressive or threatening situations – a concept widely known as the “fight or flight” response. This refers to the unconscious reaction patterns, instinctual and learned, that we fall into when we perceive some behavior as an attack or a threat. Simply put, we seek either to attack back or to get away in an attempt to make things “safe.”

There are many things in life that we perceive, consciously or unconsciously, as threatening. This creates conflict, for it invokes the fight-or-flight response. In times of conflict, we naturally establish a negative bonding pattern with the person who initiates threatening behavior towards us – a bonding pattern between our vulnerability, which is the part of us that is open and therefore may be hurt, and the other person's “power,” as defined by their behavior. The important aspect of the process at the psychological level is that, when we feel threatened, the natural thing for us to do is to identify ourselves with that part of us with which we learned to protect ourselves when we were young, and then to react accordingly.

Let's back up a minute. As we grow up in this relatively unsafe world, we quickly find out that we need to learn how to protect ourselves on both a physical and emotional level. There is a mechanism in the psyche that seeks to avoid pain and protect us. If our feelings get hurt or we fear for our safety, we find some other part of ourselves to focus on or to “be” at that moment; that way we don't have to feel the pain, we don't have to be vulnerable, we don't have to stay in an uncomfortable, disempowered, and often self-critical position. We take on many different “ways of being” in the service of our own protection. We can become extroverted, introverted, confrontive, avoiding, whatever our unconscious correctly or incorrectly feels will allow us to be safe.

We perpetuate these patterns in life, because in a relative sense they work for us. They keep us safer than if we were wide open. These ways of being become dominant parts of our personality. As we get older, even if we no longer need to be identified with some of these patterns, they grow so big in our psyche – that is, we become so used to them – that they become an integral part of who we consider ourselves to be, how we react in life, and how we deal with things. The downside of this process is that not only are we not reacting in the present moment, but, also, our identification with these parts distances us from our vulnerability, and, therefore, from our essence and real feelings. A certain amount of our behavior in life comes from compensatory reactions to feeling vulnerable.

When we get into relationships that call for us to be open and vulnerable, we find ourselves faced with a reflection of our own consciousness. To the extent that we continue to identify with those parts of us that compensate for our vulnerability, we cannot be intimate and vulnerable with other people and with ourselves. We stay defended and, in fact, may not be responding to the immediate situation at all, just to our own unconscious, threatened interpretation of it. When we respond in this manner, we don't learn anything, we don't grow, we don't get closer to people. We simply perpetuate our own unconsciousness. Without vulnerability, there is no intimacy.

How does this relate to Aikido? When someone grabs our wrist or attacks us in Aikido practice (or in life for that matter), they are setting up a negative bonding pattern with us. They are threatening our vulnerability. We, in turn, ordinarily react with the energy of whatever part of us we learned to protect ourselves with: fighter, victim, pleaser, child, avoider, caretaker, etc. When this happens, we get caught up in, and react to, the "area of conflict," rather than relating consciously to the real source of that conflict: vulnerability. What Aikido teaches us about this system is that we can get in touch with and understand the archaic patterns that we unconsciously repeat in order to protect ourselves, both physically and emotionally. Aikido shows us that there is an alternative to this behavior – conscious response and choice. We don't have to be trapped in negative bonding patterns, our own limited self-concepts, or the conflict itself. By being aware and accepting of our own vulnerability, and by being aware of our own power, our own center, and our own Ki, we become more conscious and start to let go of our identification with the negative process. When, further, we become aware of the other person's intent and vulnerability and learn to blend with that, we begin to enter into the experience of Aiki. Rather than fear and unconsciousness, we find a balance of vulnerability, power, and freedom of choice. This doesn't mean that we will always be totally loving and completely embracing of another's aggressive behavior; it means that we will have a chance to deal with it consciously.

Awareness of vulnerability is important for two reasons. First, it gets us in touch with what lies behind our own feelings and responses. Second, when we know our own vulnerability, we are aware of another person's as well. Knowing what it would feel like to have our own feelings "violated," we do not go out and violate someone else's. We can also be aware that most people act aggressively or defensively because they are responding unconsciously to their own vulnerable feelings. When we understand Aiki at this level, we can make other choices as to how we treat that kind of situation; we can come from a more tolerant and empowered place, because we feel protected in a more conscious way and because we understand what's going on at a much deeper level. I believe that this understanding reflects O-Sensei's view that Aikido is loving protection for all living things, including ourselves, and including someone who attacks us.

So, in Aikido, rather than block and punch or hurt and maim, we blend with the energy/intention/movement of the aggressive act out of respect for the underlying vulnerability on both sides, redirecting it to a more beneficial conclusion. Being centered, extending Ki, blending, and leading – these are basic to Aikido. Aikido movements are designed so that we actually move from a different place, from Center with Ki, and we can, therefore, address the larger truth of the situation, the nature of the interaction, rather than getting completely caught up in the attack itself. This is fundamental to the philosophy and actuality of Aikido.

At a psychological level, we can also “move from a different place” and respond more appropriately to the vulnerable and spiritual essence of a relationship, instead of just the negative aspects that arise in life, instead of just “the attacks.” In this way, our view of interpersonal relationships becomes more compassionate and open to a “win-win” experience. When someone “grabs our wrist,” at the emotional level, we need not be at the mercy of our own past or our unconscious patterns of behavior. We don’t have to “fight” or “flee.” We can stay present and make clearer choices about our behavior in accord with our sense of the true needs of all involved. The duality that the unconscious defense of vulnerability creates falls away when the situation is approached consciously, and the experience of Aiki that the Founder held paramount emerges.

How is this really done? I recall a quote from O’Sensei, who said, “Aikido is an act of faith based on the desire to achieve total awakening.” He didn’t say that it is a series of techniques that bring “enlightenment,” or an austere training method, or the following of a particular religion, but an act of faith. To me, at a fundamental level, that means the faith to let go and to trust the vulnerability and power of the consciousness of Aiki; the awareness and experience of the joining of the Hara, or Center, with the feeling and extension of Ki, of energy itself. This allows one to be both consciously empowered and harmoniously extended, fully dancing the dance of life. Balanced in one’s own awareness of vulnerability and sense of empowerment, this dynamic consciousness naturally finds its own harmony, its own flow, its own understanding and truth.

Aikido, then, becomes a form through which the practitioner can come to know and experience the harmony and true nature of all things big and small, personal and spiritual, and apply that knowledge and experience to anything in life, be it self-defense, music, work, walking, or talking. Aikido practice truly becomes a transformational process – from unconsciousness to a conscious state of dynamic being, of harmony and balance, of self-protection and conscious choice, and of the co-existence of vulnerability and power which is the foundation and meaning of consciousness, the hallmark of the new age, and the essence of the new, conscious warrior.

II. Aiki Psychology: A Zen Perspective

There is a powerful and real connection between the goals of Zen and Aikido practice. In fact, I sometimes refer to Aikido as “Zen on wheels,” because Aikido, to a large extent, can be seen as dynamic Zen practice. Aikido’s goal is to be in the state of Aiki, in flowing harmony with Universal Energy as it manifests life and reality, and to be completely conscious at the time, applying that consciousness to all levels of life. The goal of Zen is to be aware of and participate fully in the continual, unfolding flow of the moment without anticipation, need, desire, and attachment, all of which serve to take us away from full participation in “the unfolding now.”

Letting go of these emotional or psychological elements in order to manifest the principles of Aikido is of paramount importance to the true experience that O’Sensei had in mind. The basic principles of Aikido involve perceiving the energy of the moment, harmonizing with that in a centered way, and moving with and leading the flow toward a positive intention rather than a destructive one – thus, also, the self-defense aspect of the art. The elements that Zen deals with are directly applicable to achieving the Aikido experience as well. It is important to learn to let go of or, in a sense, control these

emotional responses. For instance, when you have the need to throw someone, you take yourself out of the flow and away from the ability to follow the flow fully and consciously. You take yourself out of the moment and out of Ki due to the need to defend yourself, or prove something to someone else or to yourself. To the extent that you have those kinds of needs or desires, consciously or unconsciously, your attention, consciousness, and Ki will be elsewhere. When, because of an emotional response, you are attached to the outcome of a throw or you are anticipating what will happen, you cease to be in harmony with the spontaneity and creative manifestation of the moment and are, therefore, limiting yourself to what your concept of the moment is or should be, rather than what it actually is and what it is becoming.

These limitations of consciousness are what Aikido works with, certainly at the higher levels of practice. They are part of the inner work. Self-defense technique is limited to just one dimension of the truth of Aikido. Aikido is about experiencing Aiki, a continual, flowing consciousness (awareness and experience) of dynamic harmony on all levels: physical (external), personal (internal), spiritual (transpersonal/infinite.) This is its connection with Zen. In order to be in full harmony, you have to be in the moment fully without any act of consciousness (or unconsciousness) that will take you significantly away from the moment or “the now.”

The difference between Zen and Aikido is that there is an intention in Aikido, which in and of itself can take you out of Aiki if you attach yourself to it from a place of need or desire. Of course, there is an intention in Zen too, that of achieving a state and understanding of Zen; this is paradoxical because in Zen an intention also takes you out of the process and the experience towards which you are striving. Practically speaking, however, intention is valuable in both arts. The Zen Archer, for instance, uses the consciousness attained to achieve incredible feats of marksmanship. The Aikido practitioner can use the consciousness attained to achieve a unique, non-violent, and even spiritual way of dealing with aggression. But neither art is limited to this. Both can be used to understand what it means to flow with the moments of life as they continually pass and to deal with them in a conscious way.

Two important questions arise when looking at Aikido in a Zen perspective. First, how do we actually stay in “the Now” and experience the flow of “the Now” more fully and immediately? Second, how do we let go of the things that take us away from “the Now” and diminish our Ki: need, desire, attachment and anticipation?

It is important to understand that “the Now” is not a static entity, and “being in the Now” is not something that is done once and then one is always there. “The Now” is a continually unfolding, forward moving process of both creation and being. It is both completely dynamic in its forward movement and static in its absolute beingness in the moment. Therefore, rather than allowing our attention to attach itself to all the other things inside us and around us that we pay attention to instead, we have to be in a dynamic process in order to feel “the Now,” to stay with it (to stay with that which is being created dynamically), and to be conscious of it (the Beingness of it).

This, then, is an important point: our consciousness “resides” wherever we put it, in whatever we are attending to. There are many reasons (psychological, emotional, spiritual) why we get caught up in the need to throw, the desire to “win,” the attachment to playing out a particular scenario of response, and our own anticipation of what will happen and what we want to happen. Such things exert a tremendous pull on us, so they

move to the forefront of our awareness and experience. They then define and limit our Aikido practice and performance, and, perhaps, even how we think, feel, perceive and experience life generally.

We do, however, have a choice, or, at least, we can develop the ability to choose where we place our consciousness and, therefore, what our life experience will be and what our Aikido practice will be about. We do have the ability to expand beyond these self-imposed limitations, to be conscious of and to perform at much higher levels of reality. This happens when we can “be in the Now.” And the answer as to how to stay in “the Now” is by making the choice to attend to the proper thing. In Aikido terms, this means choosing to attend to the continual process of being aware of being centeredly extended. This is the dynamic tool with which we can develop the choice and power of consciousness to experience and be in “the Now.” Simply put, this means attending to your awareness of the feeling of flowing energy, emanating outward from your center. As one pays more attention to this, many things happen. We become increasingly aware of, and experience, our Center, the feeling of Ki extension, and Ki flow. In doing so, our ability to stay with the process grows. We are able to maintain the integrity of our own inner experience and trust the process more and more. We can then practice Aikido properly, executing each technique and experiencing each relationship through its flow in “the unfolding Now,” letting go of the need and desire for a specific outcome that will feed some part of us that has some psychological or emotional need. Through choice, we develop a conscious relationship with the moment that allows Aiki, true harmony, to actually manifest.

III. Aiki Psychology: A Yogic Perspective

In my opinion, ultimate success at Aikido is achieved by integrating the different aspects of human consciousness, from the physical to the spiritual. Often in training, the reality of the more subtle aspects of Aikido, like Ki, compassion, and spirituality, are neglected for the literalness of the physical practice. To me, this is limiting because the fullest expression of O-Sensei's* art comes from realizing the subtle philosophical and spiritual principles behind and beyond the physical manifestation of Aikido.

Aikido is designed around a martial art, so it is important to understand and integrate that level of performance into our training, but the true practice, meaning, and beauty of Aikido only starts there.

Aikido practice provides an arena for constant feedback as to whether or not one is able to function in the experience and awareness (consciousness) of Aiki or whether one is in harmony with Ki/energy. But Ki, and therefore Aiki, can mean different things at different levels of subtlety, perception and of personal and spiritual development. In physical practice, for instance, if one feels a lot of physical reference, that is, pushing, pulling, forcing, resisting, one can assume that at that level one is “out of harmony” with both oneself and one's partner, and, therefore, neither is integrated at that level in terms of Aiki. Because Aiki starts within oneself and then moves outward to include one's partner, a feeling of discord during the performance of a technique indicates that something is working against the manifestation of harmony and is effecting the experience for both participants.

At other levels of experience beyond just the physical, this sense of either discord or harmony that starts within oneself can be used to understand the process of spiritual evolution in Aikido. To explain this, I will use a version of the Chakra system – a system of subtle human energy centers that essentially comes from Yogic practices – as a model for the development of a deeper philosophical and spiritual consciousness in Aikido. This system consists of seven major energy centers running up the spine and emanating outward. Each energy represents the integration of a particular quality of human consciousness.

These seven energy centers in basic terms are:

1. The Root Center, at the base of the torso, embodying the fundamental survival in the world of the individual being, the individual Ego and Personal Self.
2. The Procreative/Sensual Center, in the lower abdomen around the same area of the Hara, embodying the sensual/kinesthetic experience and the external manifestation of action/energy in the world.
3. The Emotional Center, in the area of the solar plexus, embodying the emotions and feelings we have both about ourselves, looking inward, and about the world around us.
4. The Heart Center, in the area of the heart, embodying both personal love and a more compassionate and spiritual love. The Heart Center forms a natural dividing point in human consciousness, because it embraces both personal and transpersonal experience and development.
5. The Creative/Expressive Center, in the throat area, embodying the creative and expressive nature of both the self and spirit.
6. The Mental/Perceptive/Psychic Center, at the area of the “Third Eye” in the center of the forehead, embodying the ability to “know” – that is, perceive reality through different methods of perception – through conceptualization, through imagination, through intuition, and through psychic means.
7. The Crown Center, at the top of the head, embodying the Transpersonal or Higher Self, the soul and spirit beyond the individual and the Ego-oriented entity that is manifested in the first Chakra.

If we look at the opening and integration of each Chakra as progressively representing a deeper manifestation of higher consciousness, we can understand Aikido practice as a reflection at each level of our own spiritual development, or at least, spiritual awareness. I don't presume that spirituality alone is the only goal of human consciousness, but rather a balance of all energies such that one's personal life and concerns are integrated with one's spiritual nature. In this perspective, each of the Chakra levels can be viewed as sites for the realization of specific Aiki principles.

The first three Chakras, taken together, have to do with individual development and safety. Practice at these stages reflects one's sense of Aiki at the physical level.

The Root Center embodies the learning of the physical elements of the art and how they are used to deal with an attack. One's proficiency increases as one becomes more familiar with the actual techniques. Of primary concern is one's own personal safety. This level of Aiki is about being in harmony with the other person's intention and movement. The process involves becoming aware of the unconscious fight-or-flight reaction, and learning about the inherent possibility of choosing to respond consciously.

The Procreative/Sensual Center embodies the addition of the sensual/kinesthetic sense to the application of technique, and through that, the addition of Ki instead of just muscle.

One's proficiency increases as the techniques begin to emerge more naturally by feeling and following the flow of Ki. This level of Aiki is about going inside oneself and being in harmony with one's own Ki first, then being aware of and blending with the other person's Ki. The process involves learning to consciously let go and use Ki, instead of basing the connection on a reaction to vulnerability and, thereby, giving in to the unconscious inclination to muscle through a technique or go against the flow.

The Emotional Center embodies the addition of the emotional or feeling component into the performance of technique and in one's sense of connection. One's proficiency increases as one's practice is brought to life through including positive emotional expression in the experience. This level of Aiki is about being in harmony with, and accepting of, one's own feelings and choosing how they will be expressed, that is, accepting our vulnerabilities and choosing to deal with our emotions in a positive way. The process involves learning to be emotionally present and empowered, and not giving in to the inclination to react out of fear or just perform the techniques mechanically.

The fourth level is a natural "dividing" point, for it embraces both personal and transpersonal experience and development. This level begins to embrace more than just self-interest and reactive, unconscious, survival-oriented behavior.

The Heart Center embodies the addition of love and compassion beyond pure self-interest and survival. This level of Aiki is about being in harmony with the other person, not as just an attacker, but as a human being who is now "out of harmony" as expressed by their role, consciousness, and energy as aggressor. At this level, the physical well-being of both participants becomes an integral concern. The process involves learning to allow for a deeper feeling of compassion and concern, rather than giving in to the inclination to polarize against the attacker out of anger.

The last three levels embody what would be viewed progressively as "higher consciousness" and spiritual development.

The Creative/Expressive Center embodies the creative aspect of flowing response, where one's practice is about the creative expression of a more loving, artistic, and transcendent experience. This level of Aiki is about embracing the interaction as a source for this creative experience and for creative self-empowerment. The process involves learning to open up to, trust, and have confidence in our own expressive spontaneity and creative flow in the moment, rather than limit ourselves to preconceived or unconscious patterns or ideas.

The Mental/Intuitive/Psychic Center embodies the realm of "knowing" and higher connection with the addition of the ability to perceive energy, intention, feeling, and thought in others. This level of Aiki is about being in harmony with the moment on the mental, intuitive, and psychic planes. The process involves learning to open up to the unfolding, subtle connection through intuitive and psychic perception, rather than limit oneself to purely rational and empirical reality.

The Crown Center embodies and embraces the moment with the addition of the spiritual and transpersonal, where the goal of self-defense is no longer an issue, and one embraces humanity and spirituality at all levels. At this point, the spiritual connection and oneness with the event, the participants, higher purpose, and universal truth come into play, and the spiritual evolution and well-being of both participants emerges as a primary concern. This level of Aiki is about being in harmony with the universal process of the continual circular transformation of Ki from unconsciousness to consciousness, from discord to

harmony, from aggression to acceptance, from negativity to love, from the physical to the spiritual, from Ego to Spirit, from duality to oneness. The process involves learning to open up to Universal Ki and the fullness of “spiritual consciousness, understanding, and action,” rather than limiting ourselves to a purely worldly perspective of material survival and individual ego fulfillment through “winning.”

The highest level of Aikido philosophy views the attacker as someone stepping outside of personal and universal harmony, as manifest in the negative intention to attack another person. At this level of Aikido, the goal is to bring them back into harmony; not by defeating them, but by changing the whole nature of the interaction. Thus, in this context, the result of the interaction depends on the consciousness of the Aikido practitioner.

When looking at either Aikido or everyday life from this perspective, we see a progressive evolution from physical empowerment to spiritual empowerment, from unconsciousness to consciousness, from pure self-concern to ethical thinking and behavior, from self-centeredness to generosity of spirit and heart. O’Sensei said: Aikido is love. You make this great love of the universe your heart, and then you must make your own mission the protection and love of all things.

This expresses a deeply spiritual outlook, and, through the honoring of our needs at all the different levels, points to a way of self-development that brings this outlook into one’s everyday life in a realistic, practical, and balanced way.

*O’Sensei, or Great Teacher, is the name commonly given to the Founder of aikido, Morihei Ueshiba (1883-1969). Quotations of his in this article are sayings transmitted through oral tradition.

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Aiki Thought Papers provides an outlet for reflection and critical analysis regarding the theory and practice of aikido, including its off-the-mat applications in all relevant spheres of human action and concern.

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