

Hypnosis, Ericksonian Hypnotherapy, and Aikido

Rod Windle
Eugene, Oregon
and
Michael Samko
Carlsbad, California

Several key Ericksonian concepts find cross-cultural validation and practical application in the Japanese martial art of Aikido. The Aikido psychophysiological state of *centering* shares several important attributes with the trance state, particularly in the relational aspects of shared trance. In Aikido methodology for dealing with others, *blending* is an almost exact parallel to Ericksonian utilization. The Aikido view of resistance offers an increased understanding of strategic/Ericksonian approaches. Therapist training may be enhanced by combining Aikido principles with traditional methods.

The genius of Milton Erickson and his contributions to hypnosis and psychotherapy have been validated in many ways and from many diverse sources. From a childhood marred by illness and disability, Erickson pursued a medical career and used his limited mobility to develop an extraordinarily keen sense of observation. Drawing on his observed knowledge, he developed the utilization approach. He expanded treatment methods with pattern-

interruption techniques and by his creative application of both client and therapist trance within the therapeutic interaction. These methods of resolving intrapsychic conflicts have close parallels with methods of an entirely unrelated system of solving conflicts: the martial art of Aikido.

The creator of Aikido, Morihei Ueshiba (1883-1968), also had a weak and sickly childhood. He recovered to spend over half a century studying the ways of the warrior in Japan. The fruits of his labors he distilled into a new martial art: Aikido, (*AI* = harmony; *KI* = life energy; *DO* = path), or way of training (literally, the way of harmony with universal life energy), a powerful, effective, and nonviolent method of self-defense and resolution of conflict.

For reprints write to Rod Windle, Department of Counseling and Educational Psychology, University of Oregon, Eugene, OR 97403.

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The defender takes his stand on the mat. He is relaxed yet alert. His hands are by his sides. He offers none of the exotic defense poses popularized by the movie and television action thrillers. An attacker rushes at him, but he remains calm and still until the last instant. There follows a split second of unexpected intimacy in which the two figures, attacker and attacked, seem to merge. The attacker is sucked into a whirlpool of motion, then flung through the air with little or no effort on the part of the defender, who ends the maneuver in the same relaxed posture. (Leonard, 1973, p. 17)

Aikido possesses an effectiveness that can appear to border on the magical. Attackers are often not even aware of how they have been thrown until they find themselves, stunned, on the ground. During Uyeshiba's lifetime many martial artists from both the East and the West challenged him, seeking to put this diminutive master to the test. By and large, they found they could not touch him unless he allowed it. One Judo expert recounted, "His body was soft as silk when I first held it, and then with a short Kiai (shout), he moved ever so slightly and I flew off" (Takahashi, 1947, p. 7).

On first view, the active and physically vigorous martial arts would seem worlds removed from the generally quieting activities of hypnosis and psychotherapy. However, Aikido shares essential similarities with Ericksonian hypnosis and therapy, when the two arts operate using variants of the same general principles. An understanding of one art complements and enhances knowledge and application of the other. The two systems developed in complete isolation from each other, in radically different cultures and on opposite sides of the world. This parallel development suggests a universality of certain key Ericksonian concepts that is neither culture- nor application-bound.

Presented in Ericksonian terms, the core concepts that have direct parallels in Aikido are utilization of patient response, therapist trance or shared trance, and varieties of pattern interruption. Utilization is a core of Ericksonian therapy. It involves a sensitivity to, and cooperation with, a patient's cognitive, emotional, and behavioral patterns. Therapist trance is an interpersonal phenomena in which both patient and therapist are mutually affecting a trance state in the other, though the therapist retains control over his own trance state. Pattern interruption is the interruption or shifting of a patient's predictable, automatic patterns of behavior or response. Gilligan (1987) explores each of these concepts in considerable detail.

The value of exploring Aikido's application of these core principles lies in two main areas. First, Aikido's training techniques are substantially different from those techniques used to train Western therapists, and there may be value in understanding how Aikido systematically goes about training practitioners. Second, Aikido provides a visual and kinesthetic metaphor for utilization of resistance and pattern interruption. It is one thing to work with these methods in the mental realm, and quite another to watch them unfold physically.

Overview of Aikido

Aikido is a martial art with a stated purpose: to resolve conflicts and to help unify humanity (Uyeshiba, 1974). An attacker, by virtue of his aggressive frame of mind, is seen as being out of balance or harmony with his surroundings, in a state of distress (much as the patient who comes to the therapist for assistance). The skilled Aikidoist has the option of whether any injury or death occurs by how he ap-

plies his art; thus, an ethical component is an important aspect of Aikido.

Aikido makes total use of the attacker's incoming energy and uses that energy to facilitate a throw, pin, and resolution of the discordant situation. In Aikido, size, age, or sex is not a factor in success, since it is not a match of strength against strength, nor of speed, cunning or guile.

The Aikidoist takes the energy (attack) offered, *blends* his energy with it, avoids all resistance, and leads the attacker where he has no choice but to fall. Especially, the Aikidoist is adept at first avoiding, and then utilizing, all resistance that might be offered. It is his forte to be able to do this without being caught up, mentally or physically, in a "struggle."

Psychotherapists deal with similar issues of resistance daily, although usually their work is confined to a mental realm. Generally, it is accepted that therapists must remain inwardly calm and focused on their patients to help facilitate change. However, patient resistance can make this very difficult; the therapist can become caught up in his own anger, negativity, or feelings of impotence, and can unconsciously begin to struggle with clients rather than *blend* with them and utilize their energies and presentations.

Aikido offers specific training for creating and maintaining inner calm in the face of violence or threat that goes beyond what traditional therapist training offers. Aikido also has a unique understanding and methodology of dealing with resistance that may help therapists with their own work in this area.

Essential Components of Aikido: *Centering*

Techniques of throwing are taught in Aikido, just as techniques of induction

or therapeutic response are taught in therapist training. However, during training it is made very clear that techniques alone are not sufficient. The most important component of Aikido is not the mechanics of movement, but the psychophysiological state of the Aikidoist. To perform Aikido effectively, one must enter a specific state of mind/body that is *centered*.

This *centered* state includes several aspects that closely parallel hypnotic trance, including deep relaxation, parasympathetic response, arm catalepsy, lack of startle reflex, unfocused gaze, and time distortion. Aikidoists hold that this *centered* state is a prerequisite to sensing another (the attacker) with enough clarity and sensitivity to respond appropriately.

Aikido *centering* as a discrete psychophysiological state fits in well with a schema discussed by Rossi (1986). Rossi contends that many mental and physical phenomena, including hypnosis, amnesia, and placebo or "miraculous" healings, are examples of state-dependent memory, learning, and behavior. Many different states are available to us, and what we know, think, feel, and remember depends on what state we have accessed. Aikido *centering* has those characteristics of a discrete psychophysiological state: Certain functions that are central to Aikido performance are only possible when one is in the *centered* state.

Western writers have been imprecise in describing what the attributes of their mental states are when doing therapy or hypnosis. One advantage of investigating Aikido training in *centering* is that the attributes of the state, or at least the major behavioral correlates, have been clearly defined. These attributes include the following:

1. Physical relaxation, combined with

- a balanced posture (not rigid, not limp).
2. Loose shoulders and a general absence of excess muscle tension.
 3. Loss of startle reflex.
 4. "Soft" eyes (simultaneous use of focus and peripheral vision).
 5. Slow, diaphragmatic breathing into the abdominal section of the body.
 6. Increased awareness of energies flowing into and out of the body.
 7. Perception of self and others non-judgmentally and simultaneously.
 8. Increased ability to detect minimal psychophysiological cues from others.
 9. Slowing or absence of internal dialog.
 10. Spontaneously (i.e., subconsciously/intuitively) generated associations, ideas, or understandings about others.

Training Exercises for Developing the Centered State

Traditional Japanese psychology holds that the mental and physical center of the body exists at a spot a few inches below the navel, an area known as the *hara*. To create a *centered* state, one must first focus and maintain awareness within the *hara*. One's awareness radiates outward from the *hara*, enabling oneself to maintain a calm, relaxed presence while simultaneously expanding awareness outward to interact and encounter the world outside. Paradoxically, finding this anchoring point within oneself allows a deep connection to be established with others. An individual in a *centered* state may report a feeling of connectedness with others while maintaining the integrity of the self through the connection with the *hara*.

The *hara* is also the physical center of

the body, from which the major muscle groups radiate outward. In Aikido, all movement must originate and flow smoothly from the *hara*. Being *centered* in one's *hara* is both a mental and physical experience. Breath is considered a major bridge connecting mind and body. Thus, exercises have been developed that include physical exercise, breathing exercises, and visualizations to help guide the practitioner to a *centered* state.

One major exercise utilized is a breathing technique adapted from Japanese *Misogi* (literally, purification) practices. In this breathing, the practitioner sits or stands with spine erect. Beginning with an exhalation through the mouth, he slowly empties his lungs, visualizing the release of all undesirable energy and tension. This release is visualized as flowing from the *hara* upward along the spine, around the top of the head, and out. At the very end of the exhalation, a slight bend forward at the waist allows the last remaining air to be gently expelled. Straightening again, the practitioner breathes in slowly through the nose. He visualizes *Ki* (literally, life energy) flowing in with the breath, around the top of the head, down the spine, filling the *hara*, and spreading to the rest of the body.

Breathing in this manner allows constant mental and physical *centering* in the *hara* and helps the Aikido technique to be executed with the requisite calm and relaxed attitude. This breathing produces relaxation using the principle of reciprocal inhibition: When the breath is slow and even, the body will, after a time, begin to relax. The *Misogi* breathing serves a dual purpose; it acts as a cue, or anchor, for the *centered* state, and it also helps the practitioner to relax.

As with hypnosis, relaxation is an important component in being *centered*.

