American Journal of Clinical Hypnosis
Volume 34, Number 4, April 1992

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 Uyeshiba (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.

Received June 9, 1987; revised September 14, 1991; accepted for publication January 27, 1992.

> 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 nonjudgmentally 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*.

Meeting a physical attack with a relaxed attitude involves a major cognitive restructuring of how a person ordinarily responds to the stress of danger or aggression. Selye (1976), describing the General Adaptation Syndrome, indicates that when faced with stress, individuals exhibit an alarm reaction: the activation of the sympathetic nervous system, which stimulates the release of epinephrine and norepinephrine from the adrenal medullae. This leads to a heightened startle reflex, rapid breathing, and an elevated pulse. In Aikido training, this alarm reaction is depotentiated through keeping attention in the hara, with automatic "relaxation response" developed by breathing, movement, and visualization exercises such as *Misogi*.

Another aspect of the *centered* state involves the Aikidoist's vision. Aikido utilizes "soft" eyes: perceiving the world without focusing on any one subject intensely, they gently take in all of the surroundings. The Aikidoist is as aware of his peripheral vision as of what is right in front of him. This allows the Aikidoist to observe everything while being preoccupied with nothing and allows him to respond to subtle changes in his visual field of which he might otherwise be unaware.

Time distortion is also a facet of the *centered* state. During rapid attacks, practitioners have reported that it appeared as if their opponents were moving in slow motion, giving them an abundance of time in which to respond. Conversely, when practitioners lose their *centered* state and become overwhelmed with their body's alarm reaction, they report that it is very difficult to respond because the attacks appear to come with such speed, particularly during multiple-man attacks.

The *centered* state is more than a self-involved and self-oriented state; it also serves as a main means to contact others. This expression of *centeredness* is known in Japan as "extending *ki*" and is understood as an outward reaching of one's life energy to interact with others.

"Sensing the now" is an example of training in extending *ki*. Students sit at the side of the mat and attempt to maintain a *centered* state, observing another student who is about to strike. At the moment they sense the intent of the strike (but before any overt physical movement), they call out "now!" Research has demonstrated a gap of about 1/3 second between the thought of an action and the action itself (Hayward, 1984). Thus, exercises such as this may be grounded in more than guesswork. Many subtle, subliminal cues may be contributing, which can be sensed provided the practitioner is *centered*. The Japanese would merely say that one has contacted the *ki* of the other.

One last attribute of the *centered* state, extending *ki*, also can refer to a focused and concentrated extension. Used in this way, the arm or other part of the body of an Aikidoist can become rigid and unbendable, as in the phenomenon of arm catalepsy.

To obtain this focus, Aikidoists often practice an exercise called "unbendable arm." The practitioner relaxes, breathes deeply into the *hara*, and stands in a balanced manner. He visualizes his arm as though it were a fire hose with *ki* as the water pouring through it. He discovers that if he remains relaxed and continues his visualization his arm cannot be bent at the elbow. In fact, it feels as if nothing is happening, even when a stronger person is straining to bend it. The Aikidoist can wiggle his fingers, carry on a conversation, or hum a tune. However, if he abandons his visualization and resists, using conscious muscle power, he finds his arm

able to be bent easily. In Aikido, the unbendable arm takes on great practical significance: It is used to slip by an attacker, or to protect the head and body while falling. After practice, the arm can become unbendable in any position, functioning much as a well-implanted posthypnotic suggestion.

Erickson, Therapist Trance, and *Centering*

In observing Erickson at work, often many of his physiological responses were synchronous with those of his patients. Erickson's body, voice, and breathing would change as hypnotic induction progressed. His eyes could appear trance-like and unfocused during teaching sessions as well. Students described the sensation that he was looking through them. Like the Aikido master, Erickson used specific states of mind and body to become tuned into the subtleties of perception. Erickson, discussing the therapist trance with Rossi, recollects:

> In doing experimental hypnotic work with a subject in the laboratory, I would notice that we were all alone. The only thing present was the subject, the physical apparatus I was using to graph their behavior, and myself . . . . I discovered I was in a trance with my subject . . . . At the present time, if I have any doubts about my capacity to see the important things, I go into trance. When there is a crucial issue with a patient and I don't want to miss any of the clues, I go into trance. (Erickson & Rossi, 1977, p. 42)

Stephen Gilligan (1987) outlines a procedure for the development of shared or therapist trance. He includes a section on eye contact that is similar to the Aikidoist's soft eyes, speaks of the need to breathe regularly and without constriction, covers the need to release internal tension, and, in general, covers many aspects of the Aikido *centered* state.

Other therapists, such as Rogers (1961), Freud (1915), and Deikman (1982), have occasionally addressed the issue of the therapist's internal state, sometimes in ways that have similarity to the *centered* state and sometimes in ways that sound quite different. However, the state-specific mental or physical attributes of the therapist have not been a major focus of study or concern.

Essential Components of Aikido: *Blending*

Blending has been described briefly as the flowing together of the Aikidoist's energy (*ki*) with that of the attacker. *Blending* in Aikido is very similar to utilization in trance induction or therapy.

Haley (1967) defined Erickson's concept of utilization as an initial acceptance and ready cooperation with the patient's presenting behavior, no matter how adverse the behavior might appear. Therapy thus becomes a process of accepting the patient's way of functioning (though not necessarily agreeing with it) and simultaneously helping the patient forge a new direction. An apt metaphor that describes this process is diverting a river or stream so the river's own force is used to cut a new channel. Haley quotes from Erickson's "A Hypnotic Technique for Resistant Patients":

> There are many types of difficult patients who seek psychotherapy and yet are openly hostile, antagonistic, resistant, defensive and present every appearance of being unwilling to accept the therapy they have come to seek . . . such resistance should be openly accepted, in fact, graciously accepted, since it is a vitally important communication of a part of their problems and often can be used as an opening into their defenses. This

> is something which the patient does not realize; rather, he may be distressed emotionally since he often interprets his behavior as uncontrollable, unpleasant, and uncooperative rather than as an informative exposition of his important needs. The therapist who is aware of this, particularly if well skilled in hypnotherapy, can easily and often quickly transform these often seemingly uncooperative forms of behavior into good rapport, a feeling of being understood, and an attitude of hopeful expectancy of successfully achieving the goals being sought. (Haley, 1967, p. 536)

In Aikido *blending*, the energy of an opponent's attack is never resisted or rejected. The Aikidoist takes the mental position of welcoming the attack, both as an opportunity to restore harmony and as a chance to practice the art. An important reframing takes place in the mind of the Aikidoist: The usual notion of an attack being frightening or dangerous is replaced by an acceptance and appreciation, like that described in the preceding quotation. In both cases, the practitioner views resistance not as a problem one wishes would go away, but rather as essential "raw energy" that can lead to ultimate solutions.

This acceptance of resistance means that one must remain flexible to adapt to what is occurring. Rigidity in an Aikidoist's *blending* process only serves to limit the range of response. Incomplete *blending* in Aikido will result in flawed technique, because it does not completely utilize the attacker's energy in the throw. An induction or therapeutic intervention may likewise be flawed if it does not involve utilization of the patient's own inner abilities and needs; the intervention may turn into a clash of goals at some point in therapy. Similarly, Ericksonian practitioners hold that production of hypnotic trance is most efficient if the mental processes, images, and timings of the patient are utilized, rather than having images described or being told what to do.

Training of *Blending* Skills in Aikido

Training of *blending* skills, as with *centering* skills, takes place on both mental and physical levels. In the "turning exercise," two Aikidoists stand facing each other; in three turning steps, they pass face-to-face, almost touching. They end facing each other, having merely changed sides. After multiple repetitions, the two begin to function almost as opposite halves of one organism, operating in perfect synchronicity, "a magnet shifting polarity" (Leonard, 1973, p. 18).

At a more advanced level of training, there is a group of techniques known as *kokyu-nage* (literally, breath throws). In these, the Aikidoist moves in response to the opponent's *ki*, entering it in such a way that the attacker's body is drawn off-center and made to fall without any physical contact. Techniques such as these demonstrate the refined, applied use of blending and leading resistant energy.

Blending in Aikido is the single most effective way of gaining control over an opponent's energy and physical body; similarly, utilization is an effective tool for inducing trance in hypnosis and producing change in therapy. Aikido is able to offer a conceptual framework that helps to understand why *blending* and utilization are effective. The principle can be stated simply: *Force seeks force*. This means that an untrained individual will immediately offer resistance when force is applied to him. If his wrist is grabbed, he will try to pull his wrist away. If his lapels are grabbed, he will push or pull with his chest or will attempt to twist his chest out of the grip. The individual's mind is naturally drawn to the point of contact,

and from this point of contact, resistance springs. Selye's alarm reaction again serves as a useful model to describe physiological response. However, this way of responding to force will only result in a tug-of-war, relying on physical strength. Likewise, a therapist who confronts resistance directly or responds to it without utilizing it may find himself engaged in a contest of wills.

Aikido is a process of not being drawn into a tug-of-war or a conflict. The Aikido solution to *force-seeks-force* may be stated as: Never put power at the point of contact. If an attacker grabs the wrist of an Aikidoist, the Aikidoist "gives" the wrist to the attacker. This causes the attacker to feel in control. He feels no force resisting him and so he does not experience a heightening of tension and conflict. His sense of power is not threatened. Yet, subtly, the Aikidoist is moving other parts of his body, radiating out smoothly from his *hara*. The result is that the attacker usually feels totally in control until, quite suddenly, all balance is inexplicably lost, and he tumbles to the ground.

Aikido works, in part, because the attacker can find nothing to push back or resist against. There is no way to fight with an Aikidoist or resist his technique because the Aikidoist is not there at the point of contact. He generates his power from another place, a place the attacker cannot push back against. By not directly confronting the attack (resistance), by not activating a *force-seeks-force* response, an Aikidoist gains the ability to control the other's movement and balance. The Aikidoist's motion, when it occurs, also initially takes place in a manner that *blends* completely with the other's energy. When a change in direction does occur, it is accomplished so that the attacker feels no force or change until it is too late. He has already been guided to a condition of imbalance where resistance is no longer possible.

Blending, Resistance, and Pattern Interruption

There is a very close parallel between how an Aikidoist deals with an attack and the most effective methods of utilizing resistance in trance production and in psychotherapy. Resistance may be very simply viewed as nothing more complex than a patient's pushing back mentally against a force or direction he perceives as coming from a therapist. The context of the patient's experience is somehow at odds with the therapist's ideas, and so the patient very naturally resists this change of direction that he perceives as a force affecting him. Thus, the principle *force seeks force* is in action, with the resultant psychological correlates. The therapist who understands this principle can guide a patient to success without resistance.

To utilize this principle, the therapist must operate in a manner that will not activate a *force-seeks-force* reaction from his patients. This means, in general, that he must move from a point other than the point of contact. In therapeutic terms, this means that he proceeds indirectly, or that he must have depotentiated resistance before he moves directly. If a patient cannot sense change as force coming from the therapist, he is less likely to resist it. Thus, if the change is suggested symbolically or metaphorically, if it is presented in an imbedded manner or in a way that confuses or weakens the *force-seeks-force* response, then the change or suggestion will be more readily accepted by the patient.

Erickson made frequent use of confusion in trance and therapy to disrupt the patient's usual patterns of processing their