



The author receives an "ushiro" attack (from behind) and redirects the energy into a "koshi nage" or hip throw.

EXPLORING THE SPACE OF INHIBITION

by Cathy Pollock

*"Do you have the patience to wait
til your mud settles and the water is clear?"*

Can you remain unmoving til the right action arises by itself?"

Lao Tzu

Meditation, movement, and reading are three avenues that help me to gain insight and wisdom. In this article, I share some insights I have had on the commonalities between the martial art, Aikido and the AT, more specifically the study of inhibition, the space between stimulus and response.

The Japanese martial art, Aikido, was founded by Morihei Ueshiba, respectfully referred to as O'Sensei—the great teacher, around 1942. Ueshiba was a deeply spiritual man with a strong social conscience and almost superhuman martial skills. Troubled by the state of world relationships prevailing during WWII, Ueshiba began a period of intense martial training and

meditation. O'Sensei had an enlightenment experience in which he grasped the essence of the universe and realised that "to follow true Budo ("Martial Way", the way of Budo, preventing or avoiding violence so far as possible.)¹ is to accept the spirit of the universe, keep the peace of the world, and correctly produce, protect, and cultivate all beings in nature."² Aikido was the culmination of O'Sensei's own personal development and he dedicated the rest of his life to spreading the Budo. Translated, Ai means harmony. Ki is spirit, mind, or universal energy and Do is Way. "The way of harmonising energies", or "accommodation to circumstances."³ I prefer the former meaning, as it more



The dynamic, blending nature of Aikido where nage receives a frontal attack, turns, blends and allows uke to roll onward without a clashing of energies.

closely follows O'Sensei's original desire for Aikido to be a practice that would reconcile mankind's differences.

Aikido is practiced with a partner in an atmosphere of respect and cooperation. Often referred to as the art of peace, Aikido's philosophy is based on conflict resolution. The energy of the attack, (physical or verbal) is blended with, understood to some degree, and brought to a conclusion, where ideally, no one is harmed. Misused, of course, it can be a brutal and even fatal form of self-defense. But this is not the true realisation of Aikido. In its highest form, the conflict never reaches the physical level; disputes are settled with understanding, and perhaps even compassion.

Attacks in the form of a grab, punch, or strike come from uke ("oo-kay": one who takes the fall). Nage ("na-gay": one who receives the attack) blends with uke's energy, the direction and force of the attack. O'Sensei said: "When a strike comes, you cannot collapse with it, you cannot fight with it, you must receive it." Uke is drawn in, or led outward spiralling, and flung out to roll, slide, or fall. Nage is the calm at the center of the storm—uke is in the dynamic sphere of activity surrounding the eye of the storm. The effect is that of an ocean wave gathering, cresting, and finally breaking, the energy dissipating. If you like swing dancing or amusement park rides, you will love Aikido. Aikido can be very dance-like and gymnastic, full of power and grace.

The spectrum of muscular effort required for Aikido is as varied as the Eskimo names for snow. Connection to your partner is the key. A light touch allows sensitivity and information to come through. Excessive tension is "noise" that interferes with sensitivity. By "listening" in this way, you can put off-balance someone twice your weight and size; strength is not necessary (O'Sensei was only 4'11"). "The harder they come the harder they fall." These words by singer Jimmy Cliff express the phenomenon of an attacker literally throwing herself; when nage doesn't meet the aggression with aggression, uke's energy is used against herself. There is no one there to fight. The original conflict may not be resolved, but the energy of the physical conflict is dissipated, which may indirectly affect the nature of the original conflict.

In our dojo, the frog is our mascot—a symbol of patience, exhibiting the highest level of *takemusu*: spontaneous, intuitive, infinite responses. "The right thing, at the right time." The frog sits quietly on his lily pad, motionless, waiting for the moment when success is certain and the fly is his. Though instinctive for the frog, the Alexandrian concept of inhibition—of pausing, suspending response temporarily—seems to be unnatural for most human beings. We have to practice it consciously, unless this quality was imparted to us in our upbringing. Inhibition in Aikido is essential. For the right thing to happen on the mat, Aikidoists have to stop getting in their own way (i.e., stop using excessive muscular effort). We all want to muscle our way through a technique and make it happen. Inhibition says, "No." This allows us to turn off the power, listen, respond with lightness, speed, agility and intelligence. The beauty of the art in its highest form is that it is entirely non-doing, the techniques are allowed to happen. Less is more. Nage simply embraces the attack and redirects its energy elsewhere, without a fight.

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For many, Aikido is the training ground for personal development—emotional, spiritual, and physical. It coordinates mind and body (hands and feet are hard enough!). Aikido refines one's kinaesthetic sense. One learns to use the right kind and amount of tension in the right place for the right length of time. Inhibition is the means whereby to "right response". The space of inhibition may seem like a void with the underpinnings of impatience lurking there, pushing you into action. But the void is full of awareness, consciousness, breath, the registering of cues, emotional and physical, whose sum effect is tallied, measured, and finally acted on. Pregnant with expectation, nage waits, calm, alert, available, "organising" for the right

response, which changes constantly in response to ever-changing conditions.

Did Aikido teach me about inhibiting or did the AT? No matter. These two disciplines feed each other and help me to clarify this most challenging process of stopping, of expanding time. We often think of patience in relation to another or a situation. Patience with oneself is easier to forego as we only have ourselves to answer to. Truly a virtue and a delight, patience allows deep inner peace, richness, and joy in the moment. Yes, delicious is a good word for this. Savouring, staying with, smelling the roses, lingering a little longer. Why wouldn't we want this in our daily lives?

I replay the video of my black belt demonstration and see when I am not in synch with uke and the times when I am. Each time I execute a technique too quickly, I see myself end-gaining. When I slow down and I am in synch with uke's energy, a wonderful feeling of ease and harmony results. Inhibition allows the fullness of the technique to play out, to ripen.

Our movements include components that are organised at several different levels: reflex, requested, and voluntary. A given movement typically contains all these components. Both reflex and requested movements are automatic.

Reflexive movements take between 30 and 50 milliseconds; the same response is always elicited with reflex movements (i.e. the knee-jerk reaction). Requested or habitual components are automatic but learned. They take between 80 and 120 milliseconds, may be more complex, dependant on situation, and automatically integrate many aspects of a situation. These are a step up from reflexes, take place below the level of consciousness, but are heavily influenced by our conscious and unconscious expectations and our intentions. Voluntary components of an action take approximately 200 milliseconds and are carried out with conscious control.⁴

Good Aikidoists moderate control of their higher level automatic ("requested") movement components to fit a given situation. This requires learning intentions and expectations that influence automatic reactions, (i.e., withdrawing the head in response to a strike to the face) and movement strategies in general (specific techniques), and also requires an accurate understanding of how the body moves. Walking and balance, in general, have many "requested" components of movement based on our expectations. Great Aikidoists use inhibition, which in particular allows them to prevent automatic habitual actions that are undesired, such as overtensing in response to a strike. This enables them to better use their expectations and knowledge to optimally influence the automatic components of their movement as well as better voluntary control of their tactics. The perfect Aikidoist is the one who can experience mushin, the freest state of awareness and action. Mushin, meaning free mind, allows spontaneous, intuitive, and correct response. Mushin can also be thought of as "no mind", no thought. Years of training are stored in every aspect of the self and are called on without thought. An

exceptional Aikidoist will be able to respond correctly to any uke, regardless of the size, or strength, or attack.

The study of kata-form is similar to learning the alphabet, as it is comprised of learned movements and techniques that in time become automatic. A higher level of practice includes randori—"flowing practice"; now the alphabet can be used to compose beautiful prose. Randori involves the use of requested and voluntary movement strategies in fast and challenging sparring situations.

An Aikidoist can react well with lightening quickness, but only out of an organised and resilient state. We operate beautifully from an "organised self" where the coordination of mind and body is optimal. Alexander teachers can help someone experience this psychophysical coordination, but the greater challenge lies with the student being able to access this themselves.

"How do I keep 'it'?" is a comment often heard from the Alexander student. You don't keep "it". You find "it", you lose "it", and you find "it" again. O'Sensei was asked if he ever lost his center, and he replied, "Oh, yes, but I quickly regain it."⁵ This is the dynamic nature of the AT and Aikido. There is no holding on to a stance, or a technique, or a feeling. Aikido teaches me about this state of flux which includes inhibition, the opportunity to choose and change, the space between stimulus and response. It demands of me freedom, resilience and a willingness to venture into the unknown. And in return, I am rewarded with the joy that comes with being in the perfect flow of things, existing in the moment. ■

ENDNOTES

1. Aikiweb www.aikiweb.com (1997).
2. Mitsugi Saotome *Aikido and the Harmony of Nature* Shambhala Publications Inc (1986,1993), pp 10-12.
3. Aikiweb <http://www.aikiweb.com> (1997).
4. Cacciatore, Tim Ph.d. "Perspectives of a non-reflex model to describe the Alexander Technique" *AmSAT Annual General Meeting, Lecture: Oakland, California* (2000).
5. Crum Thomas "Magic of Conflict Facilitator Training" *Lecture: Aspen, Colorado* (1988).

ABOUT THE WRITER

Cathy Pollock completed her certification by the American Society for the AT from the Pacific Institute of the AT in Chico, California. She has had a full-time private practice since 1994. Cathy currently has a private practice in Salt Lake City and also teaches theatre students in the Actor Training Program at the University of Utah. Cathy's formal education includes a B.S. in Environmental Studies, and courses in anatomy, physiology, physics, and kinesiology. Cathy holds a black belt in Aikido and draws from her interest in the martial arts, Yoga, mountain biking, climbing, and skiing to create a teaching atmosphere that is both fun and practical. Cathy is devoted to empowering her students towards self-care through the experiential education the AT affords.



1410 So. Blair St. Salt Lake City, Utah 84115 USA

Tel: (801) 230.7661

Email: cpollock@xmission.com

Web: <http://www.AlexanderTechniqueUtah.com>