

# Power vs Neutrality: How To Move Your Body Like an Aikido Master

by Keni Lynch

The question is the body. How we inhabit it. How it inhabits us. How we move in life and how life, in turn, moves through us. Self-expression, efficiency, scientific, cultural and natural, all at the same time. The body keeps time, a regular heart beat, a cadence, a gait. We recognize personalities by the way their bodies move, how they walk, how they breath, bounded by their muscles or flowing through them..

We should examine the power and the role of the cultural body, its accommodation to the demands of the physical body moving through space and time. Power vs nature. Habit vs Freedom. Taoist, Confucian, Christian, soldierly, martial, masculine, and the secular body. The moving body as an embodiment of cultural transfer or the lack of it. A product of learning and unlearning. Learning to inhabit a habit-pattern we might call self-care, or coordination, self-management even or the efficiency we ascribe to the competent and skilled self. The mastery of the skilled craftsman, the martial artist as travelling body, even as an embodiment of nature, and thus, signifying reality at different levels. The reality of the neutral, the neutered, & mute, then. The radically ungendered and empty body.. for it is disappearing, scattering, and homeless... Yet, we must go on speaking as though it could speak, and that it lived somewhere, for that is how it seems when we fix it in our minds, like when we go through the motions of pacing out a space, finding a place appear in the imagination through the measuring.

Let us begin this vision then. The body as it moves has its geometric coordinates, its diagonal lines, its planar dimensions and links between them, transversals throughout. We inhabit degrees of motion, mobility, freedom, flexibility. In aikido, we coordinate rigid parts. Yet, we ascribe an organic unity to the whole intra-networked arrangement. . And reaching out from there into collaboration, inter-connectivity with the outside. We also speak of solidarity, loyalty, tradition, but these may be only outmoded manners of speaking. We feel the interlacing of form and function, reasoning and desire in the training, as our capacity grows with each new skill of reaching and grasping, and the psychological one of coordination: the scattering, gathering, and letting go of our mind's desire for control... To say aikido deals with the *fight-or-flight response* does little justice to this complex and largely unconscious learning process.

Yet, stillness does exists in the midst of all such activity, and in our micro-movements, in how we arrange ourselves to prepare to move.. This is the idea of minimal movement inside stillness. In short, we can call this 'the invisible'.

We say, we 'see ourselves', for instance. As if, we were capable of self-awareness. Or, that we needed no qualifications for it, no experiences to pass through on the way to acquiring self-knowledge. But the eye cannot see itself, and only distorts itself in the trying. We only see distortions in the mirror (I see myself in the second person as 'you'), and see distantiations on video, producing the illusion of myself in the third person (I can see myself as 'he'). In memories, ditto.

So who sees whom.. when we say to ourselves or to others "I am aware of myself.."? Which self speaks to which and why are they divided.. how many selves do I carry within me, in the idea of 'me'..? On top of this confusion of meaning, when we say 'I see', we usually mean "knowing".

Thus, vision, or a particular sensory organ, is commonly used to denote the functioning of the mind, when the mind does not have eyes, any more than it has ears or a nose. But, if we define the mind as an organ that produces meaning, and is an extra-sensorial way of understanding the world we live in, we should ask, at the very least, what it means to *see without sight*. And, if the only answer is the tautology of “knowing we 'know' because we know”, then we should rightly question *how* we come to know anything at all..

'I know myself', I tell myself. But do I really..? How do I know that I know..? And how do you suppose you can tell me if I'm not as masterful as you at this game of *self-knowing*..? Indeed, self-knowledge may be nothing of the sort but a language game we inherit from a particular group of people well versed in exchanging meaningless words. Ueshiba's words like 'universe', 'ki', 'enlightenment', etc, might all be parts of an elaborate hoax. When was the last time you really grasped the meaning of any of these words. On a scale of 1 to 10, how *true* are they to you..? Kind of like how theologians talk of God.. without being able to produce any material evidence of His existence.

How, then, can I separate genuine feedback about myself from cultural self-delusions..? On top of all the linguistic confusion, how will I learn to recognize the enlightened mind, and distinguish it from the feeble claims of my ego, driven by a thousand distractions to run hither and thither in search of the next spicy pleasure encouraged by our frantic post-modern consumerist culture's steady diet of instant satisfaction guaranteed..? Both foci converge on the same problem, the personal and therefore incommunicable dimension of our lives. One is too superficial and animalistic for words, the other is too profound and etherial for words. Thus, we have two equally mute self-knowings. Both seemingly numb and dumb to the senses. Two paths diverge on the aikido road..

The body at rest. The breathing body. The mind paying attention to the regulation of the breathing, its ratio, and default setting: “I am still alive”. Modernity, I think, was about taking a conscious stance against gravity. Our post-modern situation is probably less sure. We might at least balance out the gravity-defying feats of the Space Shuttle missions to the moon with more mundane but perhaps more benign aspects of the post-modern condition, such as the return to giving greater freeplay to the lessons of levity, the way the fascial system in the body works, for instance. Alongside the recent discovery of the role of the fascia as true cause of the beauty of the graceful leaps of the gazelle, the spring-like functioning of this aspect of the human anatomy has prompted a movement in bodywork circles to re-align our own human movements to get closer to nature, as befits beings who belong on terra firma. To learn to sit, stand, and walk well, then, and to chart the transitions in-between these has gleaned a level of intellectual respectability, unforeseen even five years ago, which promises to engage the mind as much as the body in devising entertaining 3-D models of ideal movement patterns not available in the no-longer-sexy one-dimensional gym or weight-lifting environment.

Some of us have gathered renewed pleasure in our bodies without renewing our subscription to the local gym. Indeed, the simple joy of learning to navigate our bodies anew, as if we'd just been given a kool toy, with souped-up features to play with, has been more than enough of a buzz for the last 3 years now, at least for me. It's also really amazing, when you think of it, how by merely changing the description of what the body can do, we can immediately transform our internal compass, our

inner GPS, so to speak, and begin to strive for new levels of performance that were lying dormant, as it were. Is this new trend going to give us as a species a new lease on life, guaranteed..? Who knows, but just when life in almost every external way politically, economically, philosophically, environmentally etc, was about to get as dry as a bottle of whiskey the day after, someone comes up with a winning formula.

So, I suppose we can begin by noticing how, in spite of the different physical spaces we move through, we continue to breath and move relatively unconsciously, without even so much as feeling the need to think of taking control of any of these actions, unless we were in some way injured and had to take especial care to move differently, around a point of pain. Most of the time, though, movement is a no-brainer. As automatic functions of the human machine, accounted for, and settled by our increasing gains in bio-mechanics, we don't give much thought as to how we move in daily life, unless something goes horribly wrong.. So, to ask the question: how many of you are *experientially* aware of the daily miracles your body performs each minute..? would probably only draw blank stares.. But, we should at least ask something dear to the philosophical heart of aikido.. The query then, is this: apart from paying close attention to these activities taking place in the present moment, what else is there that the term 'self-awareness' could cover..? I mean, isn't the term 'self-awareness', in practice really a verb rather than a noun? A journey rather than an intellectual destination..? If we were to suddenly get enlightened, will we stop paying attention to ourselves or the world around us.. or is *satori* the awakening to the always already *awake* part of us? Imagine a sloth on amphetamines, for example, eyes wide open.. like Eckhart Tolle..

Alright, jokes aside, I really wonder how much time or attention we give our hands, our eyes, or our arms, and how often we realize the important roles they play in connecting us to one other? To their involvement in leading our bodies through our lived environments, the media of space and time? I don't think we can even imagine a world without perceptual organs..

With the discovery of mirror neurons, we're just beginning to acknowledge how important mimicry is to human development, including language acquisition, the transfer of emotional intelligence from mothers to baby and so on. In other words, sensory perception is key to human development, physical, mental and emotional. The brain learn through copying other people, and this copying skill of the mirror neuron forms the basis of most, if not all, our social skills. From the moment our mother looks at us when we were born to the skin contact she makes, whether it is the smile or the grimace, or the feeling tone in the fascia, all is recorded. So now, we can explain such diverse gestures as hugging, touching, and the syncope of self-and-other dissolution in rhythmic movement as learned cultural behaviors certainly but which have strong neural correlates, which indicates that there's a strong biological and embodied component to doing these things.

Contrast these benign gestures though with the strike, the slap, and the struggle for the same geometric or territorial spaces in a street fight. Violent individuals must also have learned through mimicry, perhaps through the misfortune of being raised by ignorant parents. All the same, the idea of mirror neurons gives us much food for thought.

Having said that, neither the nurturing nor competitive family environments fully account for the spiritual teachings of the martial arts masters, or the ancient teachings of the saints, sages, and gurus of the Far East. Where do we find the silent space of *ki-ai* (energy-union), for instance? Yet, in

each of the dynamic movements of aikido as demonstrated by many masters, we can detect intimations of the wisdom of effortlessness, the sage's equanimous mind. There is feeling of tranquillity that remains through all the exchanges we have on the mat, whether they come easy or tough. The harmonizing principle of aiki is really about cultivating this equanimous mind which is able to remain calm even through the harshest storms of inner conflict, and that can also prevent itself from chasing ephemeral pleasures. Our salvation, I think, lies in keeping an even keel..

We realize the principle of aiki already, at least in part, I think, when we begin to see our socially designated roles as links in the chain of social understanding and the generation of culture. Aikido instructors, in particular, whether they realize it or not, are responsible for helping shape new generations of aikidoka with the values of spiritual enlightenment, with the teachings we deem worthy of passing on, that explain the meaning of the whole shebang. We shouldn't underestimate the responsibility this entails.

We have a duty I think in helping contour the sensibilities of future aikidoka, who will in turn, go out into the world and interact with others in ways that will reflect the quality of human relationships we've been able to cultivate and realize in the dojo. But, a purely behavioristic approach to aikido as a physical form of cultural transmission is just that, it seems to me, and leaves out this depth dimension we've been talking about, which is a pity because arguably the greatest contribution aikido can make in an increasingly distracted, selfish and conflict-ridden world is to offer real inner peace. James Bond's phrase "shaken, but not stirred", referring to how he preferred his Martini prepared, can be usefully re-applied to the cultivation of harmony.

As the science of mindfulness is increasingly making clear, we can teach our minds to activate the pre-frontal cortex, which the neurosciences have shown are associated with emotional self-regulation and executive decision-making. By simply directing our minds to pay more attention to the way our senses work, we can fundamentally change the way we live. Changing our focus from the content of our learning, from our purely technically oriented curriculum, let's say, to looking at the way we habitually pay attention, is perhaps the greatest lesson we can learn from these new sciences of the mind.

In other words, the changes we want to see in the world can be seen best, not merely 'outwardly' as it were, through associating aikido with stimulus-response type behavioral changes, or through purely 'hard' physical rote training (what instructor hasn't tried barking commands at hapless students..), but through encouraging the intelligent awakening to the profound psychological changes that can come from shifting our attentional focus. Aikido teachers need to be the first to lead the way.. This is the meaning of *sensei*, which is normally translated as 'teacher' but literally means 'life ahead', referring to someone who has gone before you.. someone who is slightly ahead of the others in learning whatever there is to learn, who, by virtue of their learning, can share it with others for their benefit.

If we could bring harmony to the workings of our overworked and distracted monkey-minds, in a fast-paced culture that, on the whole, discourages individual self-inquiry, we'll be able to achieve changes in consciousness that will serve us a life-time. And, this individual awakening of one-mind at-a-time, and one-mind-moment-at-a-time, is no mean feat. Indeed, if you had recommended people to try 'meditation' even just a generation ago, most people would have laughed in your face.

'Mumbo-jumbo' they would have cried, if they didn't point to the lack of scientific data on the subject. But, of course, they can't complain of these things now. Meditation is no longer superstitious BS, it's mainstream science. If aikido teachers aren't following this promising news, which validates the whole aikido tradition, then that is their loss, it seems to me.

Still, whatever the near future holds, I would wager that getting a hold of mindfulness principles would be worth far more than any short-term technical fix, when it comes to changing minds and hearts in the direction of global sustainability. Before we can start caring for the planet beyond paying lip-service to the idea, we really need to have people who know what it means to care, and to care deeply, for themselves and others. Going on marches with placards, and waiting for politicians to get enlightened all on their own without any encouragement from us, seems to me a losing proposition. Good people help others, so why don't we encourage each other to be good people..!

At the sub-atomic particle level, movement carries meaning too, shape-shifting as we observe it.. This is movement before speech, like prayer or a visualization or wish we send out into the world before we sleep. My favorite is the Buddhist chant: "May all beings be happy..". But, first we must have the real feeling of happiness before we can wish it upon the world. To wish happiness for others when we only felt miserable in ourselves is a contradiction.

Deep mindful meditation, though, tracks the movement of thought through the diligent observation of the sensations we feel coursing through us from moment to moment. Doing aikido from this deeper level of perception gives us a nuanced awareness of relationship, and eventually results in us developing happiness from within. We change our concept of relationship as something-already-given to something-that-has-to-be-*realized* here and now, built together in each moment, and into the future. As such, aikido becomes a method that effects deep changes in us to the point where we even realize that we are all fundamentally interconnected in an ecological sense, with every passing mind-moment. In the reality of this depth perception, if you like 'the enlightened mind', there really is no place where there is no aikido.

The self-management skill-set then is basic and must be the main factor behind highlighting aikido as the martial way of harmony, or aikido as Budo, the way of non-violence. Aikido, it seems to me, is about grounding ourselves in this experience of mindfulness, so that we can continually re-engage our capacity to be present with whomever we happen to be with. This capacity to attend deeply to what is going on in the present is the basis for world transformation, as I see it. It has little to do with empire-building or a network marketing approach to aikido per se, or the attempt to get the greatest number of people to practice aikido. I tend to think that the *qualitative* change in attention is what we truly need to shoot for and is the only really redeeming aspect of aikido training.

Otherwise, our training will remain, I fear, just another physical martial art on the mass market with little take-home value. Having millions of people practicing an art which does not serve their real need for harmony in daily life can only undermine the credibility of aikido in the long term. Although, aikido is frequently advertised as a martial art of peace, if the understanding of how to generate inner peace is missing, then the core of aikido has been left behind.

Understanding how aikido naturally leads us to greater emotional and social intelligence though, when practiced in the right way, ties our discipline with the profound origin of the art in Ueshiba's

enlightenment experience and beats a proven path to successful social relationships through developing deeper and wider circles of empathy. It also aligns the art with what all the saints and sages of the world have been saying for millenia, but with the added incentive that now we can learn these profound teachings in easily accessible form, and with full scientific backing.

Through taking the mindful approach to aikido, we can also realize that the body is profoundly both self-and-other. We can refine our perceptions of ourselves to that level where compassion for ourselves and others comes naturally, and where we don't need external sources of guidance to keep ourselves in check. To change the metaphor, like the Venn diagram of overlapping circles, activating the pre-frontal cortex enables us to share a physical and mental space in common. At that point, we would no longer be speaking in solely oppositional terms like 'consensus' or 'dissensus', but we would learn to think in cooperative and collaborative ways, always attuned to the needs of others, since we would perceive their needs as one with our own, even if the intensity of our experiences differed. We would learn to live and love within the mutually embodied knowing Ueshiba called *musubi*.

Isn't this the logic behind the coupling and doubling translations of the self into selves in the plural..? Cohorts, and virtual bodies too.. in variously felt assortments, bubbles of sociality, so to speak? Accretions, developments, of the restlessly moving mind-body adapting to its surroundings. We can graph the movements we make in the abstract as Cartesian nodes on a screen: as networks of movement, or even as the congealed representation of the same idea in the massive ropes that hang in front of many Shinto shrines in Japan, created by a community of like-minds, that expresses the life of communal harmony, symbolized by the tying of a gigantic knot.. and so the story goes of *family* and *friendship* in the best sense of these words as torsion fields, vortices, energetic force-fields, strange attractors, if you like, and which is why the images such as that of girls braiding each other's hair has been such a fitting image for the themes of tranquillity and eternity in old paintings, as an archetype in the same fractal sense, a dispersion of the same idea. An instance of grooming it is, yes, social etiquette too, I would think, but then also a thing of great beauty, expressive for just such socially harmonious reasons.

The process and the goal, then, the journey and the end of the journey, mutually reinforce each other, and the union is a joy to behold, and it has been acknowledged as such by countless wise persons throughout recorded history. Even when these teachings were reduced by social convention into rigid traditions, where the coded origins may have been forgotten, we can recover their true meaning when we align our intentions and our actions with our highest values. The saying "when the student is ready, the teacher appears", is so true, especially when the teacher is discovered to lie within ourselves..

The influence of one mindful body on another as they together make shapes in space can be parsed like a grammar. The traces of which we can all learn to read. Surely, this is more than mere analogy to dance notation. More than a motif, even. And, much more than the tired old *either-or* academic debates between structure vs function, nature vs nurture, love vs power, but more in keeping with the idea of myofascial release.. Here tension that is stored in the body is restored to an equilibrium of distributed forces, harmony and alignment return and destructive memories, lodged as knots of painful tension, are gently let go.. sequestered aggression melts away from the muscles into the open spaces of compassion. Sadness evaporates into sympathetic joy, anxiety disappears

into tranquillity, and, dare we suggest it, even an unspeakable love wells up from within.. for the happiness of others.. we feel all these in our body.. no..we feel these active in each and every cell..!

What a miracle is the human body, with so much intelligence and grace behind it..! And what a worthwhile road it would be to take time to uncover this intelligence for the benefit of humanity, even when knowing this may mean a fork in the road, the road-less-travelled, in aikido institutional terms.

How the body changes, giving back what it can hardly remember it received.. Yet, these musings feel as though they could be part of a new start, a new civilization, conceptual sketches of the new human. We sense the genuine in our inmost being, perceiving it there, just as we see the less favorable outcomes of our day for what they are, even before they manifest as feelings. And, if we do act on wise or unwise impulses before we even thought them, then for our heart's true desire to stay on track, we will to intend, at a bare minimum, *no harm*. Ahimsa.

Let us re-examine, then, how we might raise our arm, for in the extension of the forearm, we know the skin transfers resistance in 200 milliseconds to the other when flesh makes contact with flesh, and then my partner's response rebounds to me 300 milliseconds later. As my mind sinks into the ground listening for the echo of the ground-reaction force, as Newton generously taught us, the central axis transmits and releases *a force without mass* into the limbs.. Ah, the influence all this makes within the body for an effortlessness knowing..

Neither a choreography nor a dance but a movement in which we come to identify ourselves as together, one unity within two, and naturally at rest.

I think out loud to myself: “How can the steady impulse in the foot, with each step, be forced..? No. Of course, not..! But to realize how this *treading lightly* should be a *moral* act.. with each footfall in the dojo, like each footprint on the beach.. who would have thought.. that the secret to progress lay in something so simple.. Then again, where else could morality come from unless it was on the 'way'?” This big universe bounded up into a single simple step. Wow..

“How do you follow it..?”, you ask? Give me a break.. How can you *not* follow it..!?!

A style..? Yes, perhaps, it is a style. Since, each person has a manner and a swagger about them. A manner of walking, yes. And a manner of talking too. Carrying the self around... But what is the essence of unity.. what is the point of it all, if we missed this one thing..? Perhaps it is in a set of habits we might call 'natural', 'native', or even 'naive'.. After all, don't we learn, counter-intuitively, so to speak, only when we *unlearn*? I recall the physicist David Bohm saying how we only needed to look after the six-inch gap between the head and the heart to have world peace. He is right, of course.. And when we do it right, we return to a new childhood. Indeed, we can even play.. And perhaps the mentally handicapped have an advantage over most of us who have lost this ability through an overzealous application of our energy in our mainstream education system which has left us out on a lurch in a world no longer interested in what our degrees conferred. What becomes of security in Bauman's Liquid Modernity when our education, our politics and economics disables us from ever attaining the good life, and the simplicity and innocence of love, unless we take up the mindful path.. and become like the Buddha cautioned 'a light unto ourselves'. It would be a damn

burden if it wasn't for the new sciences of fascia and mindfulness.

The definition of the word 'natural' every culture hoists upon us fails to satisfy too, until sheer practice reveals the futility of grafting a mere concepts onto lived experience. That is not how true experience is gleaned. We learn through habits, yes. We learn through hard training, yes. But, what we learn through these inefficient methods is, at the end of the day, what **not to do** and what causes pain and therefore what needs eschewing. In yoga, I think, they are considered prerequisites toward its proper study: such things as *ni-yama* (what is 'not recommended')...

The only true habit, then, that we can trust must surely consist of this: the *habit of unlearning habit*.. Thus, even as we realize the utility of concepts and arguments for a disciplined approach to the study of aikido, we find each of these has its limits that none can transcend, even when grouped together they only draw out their collective faults. Talk of harmony remains mere talk. Concepts of harmony the same. Training hard only leads to a contradiction, even hypocrisy, if the dual track approach is taken too far into La-la land.. I'd rather take the red pill..

Here, we can simply give in to the discovery of what is real, what is given to us here and now, moment by moment.. Yet, this is also the way of the ancients, as Ueshiba must have also realized. From fact to fact, they said, one mind-moment to another mind-moment, keep moving your consciousness, consistently, persistently, without reacting to what you find, as painful or pleasurable as this process may be at the level of sensations; and, in this way, from one real moment to the next, we gradually descend to subtler levels of reality, so that the mindful path of awakening leads closer and closer to the disclosure of this present moment, where no illusions and no delusions remain to obstruct our clear vision..

The monk mumbled his sacred syllables and his fingers fumbled, tightening in the bitter cold, through his frosted beard and crystal beads.. His voice trailed off into the silence of the early dawn.. into that quiet inhale before the exhale of the day.. his night-long vigil is ending and his chanting is now faint of sound, soon it will become indistinguishable from the songs of the birds taking flight and the music of the fluttering leaf, set in motion by the gentle morning breeze.. I thought I heard his message.. but perhaps I had only overheard him, as his soft breathing ascended with the morning mist .. did I see him with my own eyes, or did I awaken from a dream, for the man is no longer there.. only sharp blades of light piercing and dispersing the rain filled clouds..

Like the rabbit (or Rabbi?), I guess, who must surely think of nothing in her vulnerability, and the cloud's rolling on, while the cat's green eyes widen in the shade of an open tree under an open sky.. Emails are delivered, thoughts of the day don't make a heck of a difference to the butterfly or the bee.. To the flower's unfolding and the sun's welcoming gesture, then, rest assured, our planet still swings fine in the hammock of vast empty space, and our nagging won't make a jot of change worth noticing, but if the conductor's fingers belabored the point, lingering on unfamiliar accents just so.., just so you know, he's not the only one, you know, who thinks he's making it all work.. you, in your own way are contributing too. Be brilliant..the world needs you..

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