

Liminal Aikido Moments



By Jerry Green

While training in the dojo, when did you shift the bulk of your attention from learning techniques to practicing staying centered, grounded and extended under the pressure of being attacked?

And when being challenged by another person, or by your own unconscious beliefs?

When did you see this shift being expressed in all that you do in your life outside the dojo?



When I found myself applying what I learned from Aikido training for 35+ years to men's consciousness work and swimming, I got involved with Applied Aikido Association, and saw that I was not alone in taking Aikido principles off the mat. For years I was using somatic attunement practices at the piano, and finding my own musical expression that resulted from seeing that I could use a piano as biofeedback with which to transform tension patterns associated with my congenital cerebral palsy. Practicing Aikido took these applications into pressure situations, where I was grabbed, attacked and pushed off balance. Under pressure, my attention went up into my head, where I grappled with my own fearful awkwardness trying to learn the proper techniques.

I was training in Aikido for many years before the bulk of my attention shifted from learning the techniques to practicing staying centered, grounded and extending under the pressure, the first question at the top of this article. I was not aware of the shift at the time it was occurring, and likely didn't even appreciate the question until many years later when I found Aikido principles seeping into my legal and mediation work, soon to be visible in all of my activities because these aiki-basics were in my body, at the core of my being. Looking back on this history, the shift became apparent to me, and it began while I was on the mat, in the dojo, where techniques were taught and practiced, of course along with the lasting principles of center, ground and extension that applied to all the techniques, and of course to all forms of attacks or pressure, where the aiki-responses didn't look like any of the named techniques.

Were the “techniques” taught in order that we might practice the principles? Was I alone when my attention shifted from learning techniques to applying the principles? As I shifted my attention to the principles, my techniques improved; hmmm.... As I matured, the principles became integrated into my development. I think the turning point for me, the “liminal” (threshold) moment, was around the time I decided not to pursue rank testing beyond brown belt, and began to see my brown-belt training partners, many of whom were less experienced than I, start passing their shodan tests. After that, when we practiced together again, though they now “out-ranked” me, they continued to respect my experience and aiki-wisdom, asked me questions, and followed my lead in class. This was a strange experience for me. My teacher George Leonard observed this, and he approached me to explain that the rank of “faded brown-belt” was recognized as higher than black-belt, especially the new shodans. This was certainly true of many who would often require a year or more of maturing out of the “accomplishment” of their rank. The faded brown-belt wasn’t side tracked by this sense of accomplishment that was unsettling to the shodan, who had to recognize and, like the thrill of a honeymoon, learn to live with and outgrow.

This overlap endured for many years, during which I continued to practice techniques, but paid less attention to the form, and more attention to the basics; center, ground and extension under pressure. It was the latter that grew in my body, and my embodied awareness; my somatic sense. This remained with me throughout my days on the mat, and it went with me to work, to play, and into all my relationships. I was “applying Aikido principles” long before I stopped going to dojos. I suspect I’m not alone. Even Senseis who may be reading this are applying the principles to your teaching of “techniques” in your dojos, and in your lives, maybe; some Senseis only do the former.

Then there are the brown-belts and black-belts who don’t become Aikido teachers, but have known these liminal transitions, enabling them to carry what they have embodied, and apply it to all their endeavors. Indeed, save those who may have turned away from what they learned in the dojo, most of us who found this threshold experience can’t help but apply the principles to what we do elsewhere....

Now I apply aiki-principles by considering a recent situation in which I experienced being under pressure, perhaps from a triggered shadow, or a work/relationship encounter. The response felt in my body, one of three somatic responses to pressures (push-back, cave-in, rigidify) can be examined and transformed by centering and grounding so as to support connection by extending my presence from center. I also like to check in using the language of the head (what’s on my mind,) in my heart (feelings) and in my hara, informing my dialogue with the wisdom of not-knowing, imagination, inclination and wonder. This reminds me that I always have three different resources, enabling greater choice when my mind wants one thing and my heart tells me something different.

I recall centering in silence at the dojo before training; aligning vertically in gravity the weight of my head-heart-hara, noticing the shomen and the many windows facing East in front of me, defining what's inside and out, feeling my presence in the midst of what lay before me, my children, my tomorrows, and what lies behind, my teachers and ancestors.

More recently, my Sensei Richard Strozzi speaks of my spinal length extending between heaven and earth, my depth and my breadth, encompassing others in social and environmental dimensions. My teacher Wendy Palmer Sensei expands on the words of our teacher, Mitsugi Saotomi Sensei, calling for our “noble awesome and shiny,” reminding me of my length, my felt presence in time and space, and the radiance we exchange with one another. We inhale towards the sky, exhaling down towards Earth, thinking of what makes me smile.

How do you practice centering throughout your day?

I suspect I'm not alone in having crossed this threshold in my training and practice. You may also have recollection of passing through this liminal experience. How did you discover your own ways to apply aiki-principles in your daily life?

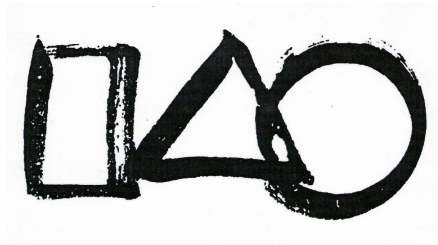


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