

# Reflections on Aikido and Dance: Understanding a Centre Between Ground and Sky

Colleen Snell, Postgraduate Student, London  
Contemporary Dance School

## Article Abstract

*This article is an account of personal transformation relative to the author's study of the defensive martial art, Aikido, beginning at the Tetsushinkan Dojo in September of 2010. It follows the author's discovery of a functional body, energetic and integrated; both separate from and intrinsic to her concept of self as a 'dancer'. Concrete examples of this transformation are provided in discussions of the author's experience of Aikido centering, dance technique class, contact improvisation and creative practice. The intention is to underscore the relevance of Aubrey's concept of a new 'warrior', and to explore the potential of Aikido to act as a gateway to somatic embodiment and a way of experiencing a larger Gestalt.*

## Keywords

*Aikido  
body and mind  
centering  
embodiment  
dance*

## Reflections on Aikido and Dance: Understanding a Centre Between Ground and Sky.

Clean calm blue, quiet. Clean, calm blue.

We were given white clothes told left over right, knotted them fumbling

Vulnerable, wide-eyed small among tall people with wide feet, deep roots.

Waiting for the class to happen to me, waiting for me to

Happen to it.

Fresh, un-skinned.

We clapped warmed up breathing moving together.

We took practice swords; I introduced my hands to mine, then together

Falling folding

Elbows knees and limbs.

Transparent,

Being wrapped in being.

Finishing we cleaned

Cleansing, closing,

Feeling warm and resonant, digesting

Deeply calm, clean, blue.

*22 September 2010 written following my first aikido lesson.*

Before my first aikido class began, I sat in seiza, my lower legs bent beneath me. I felt vulnerable and uncertain. I felt vaguely as if I were trespassing, bearing witness to a powerful and enigmatic ritual. Dressed in a white practice keikogi, I was ready to fall, to stand, to focus. I was ready to look like a complete fool. It was a wonderful feeling. I was starting a journey into the unknown, and it had been a long time since something completely unexpected happened to me in physical practice. I have been dancing since the age of four. To say dance has influenced my life would be a considerable understatement. Over the years, my physical responses have become trained, even outside of the dance studio. I have been taught to see my body as a dance body: a flexing, stretching, balancing coil of neurons and muscle. Sometimes it is anatomical, a mechanical device that can be objectively assessed for strengths and weaknesses; sometimes it is the song of Whitman's body electric, seen from within and illuminated by the vibrancy of proprioception. Even at rest, my body is a dance body. Paradoxically, I have been dancing for so long I sometimes forget how to think of it as anything else. As I continue to study dance, to embody dance, I have begun to see the limits of this perspective, and to respond by seeking out physical training in new contexts.

My first class at the Tetsushinkan Dojo left me with enduring afterimages, both tangible and ineffable. Above all, I felt possibility stirring...the possibility of moving from a functional body, not a dance body. As I continued training, I began to challenge my very identity, my concept of self, and my understanding of my own capabilities. The learning process continued to inspire me as I returned to class week after week. I finally felt I was receiving the tools I needed to pragmatically respond to 'dance problems' I had been pondering. This in turn transformed my experience of technique class, contact improvisation, my focus and creative practice. It has dynamically influenced how I see my 'self' as a dance artist and as a martial artist, indeed, how I see myself in the world at large. In learning aikido, I have begun to construct a new, if ephemeral, Aikido 'body', more than a trained body; more than just a set of complementary trained physical responses, this new construction is a holistic way of being embodied, a new way of relating to others.

Aikido embodiment is a state of being: a somatic sense of moving from the centre, or tanden. The tanden is the body's centre of gravity, and is included within the hara, or lower abdominal centre, an area Roubicek calls a 'focal point for breathing' (Roubicek 2009: 255-262). When we inhale, the diaphragm descends and compresses our organs, which move outwards. Long exhalation provokes the reflex to inhale. In Aikido, breathing in contains a powerful generative force linked closely with the will to survive, and it is this force of spirit, anchored in the body, which is the root of movement. The tanden is what moves us. It is an expression of ki energy, 'inseparable from breath-power' (Ueshiba 1984: 15). It is often described as the head of a needle, through which the uke (the partner who is thrown in Aikido practice) is threaded. This is Aikido embodiment at its most basic, and it is this understanding of the root of movement that has triggered my change in physical understanding.

Unlike traditional dance training, Aikido work has challenged my way of being – both within and outside of studio practice. During traditional dance technique classes I would struggle with technique and corrections – sometimes leaving the studio exalted by my achievement or discouraged by what

I perceived to be a lack of progress. The impact of the class on my sense of self would be that of either inflating or deflating my self worth. During my Aikido lessons I began to realize class was not only training my body. Certainly there was the concept of self-defense that was new to me, but there was more. I began to learn bushido, a way of being a non-violent warrior, a 'way of stopping the use of arms' (Aubrey 1985: 53) without being passive. Thus, I began to understand the body of a warrior whose 'primary purpose was no longer combat' (Aubrey 1985: 59). Bob Aubrey states the purpose of Aikido training is to work towards the 'victory of peace' (Aubrey 1985: 53). This peace is internal harmony, it is responding to stress and emergency with calm confidence. Thus my understanding of embodiment, although it began in Aikido practice, became obvious to me as I considered my sense of self between classes. This was a larger self – not a variation of how I held my self in esteem. It was a new way of considering my physical body and indeed a new way of being my self rather than a new way of looking at myself.

Clearly this way of being has relevance in the context of artistic performance and creation, particularly in situations of great stress where emotional resilience is required. After an evening Aikido class, I feel the residual traces of my practice when I dance the next day. As this term I have been training in technique more often than I have been performing, I have most clearly experienced the influence of my 'warrior self' when taking class. Typically in any given class I meet variations on the same corrections - corrections I have received so many times I have come to think of them as prosaic dilemmas of contemporary technique. These hackneyed phrases include 'move from your pelvis', 'feel grounded' and 'pay attention to your breathing'. There is a reason these phrases are repeated – but it is has been difficult to respond to them as I have been ill equipped. Aikido has begun to give me the tools to take action, to build my own centre and understand how to move from it. I now understand my centre as a 'physical' place, that is, how it relates to physics as a centre of gravity, not just how it relates to anatomy as a muscular area. As a dance body I have been distracted by abdominal contraction, seeking to engage the transverse abdominis and rectus abdominis and to fortify the internal and external obliques. Prior to Aikido practice I knew what was required, but I did not know how to accomplish it. The choice of the word accomplish is deliberate, as this is a further example of my transition away from looking at myself and working toward being myself.

The example of centering further illustrates this change, and delineates how through Aikido practice I now experience centering, rather than attempting to control or manipulate the process. Centering in Aikido builds the tanden as an organic place, heavy and powerful. It is a massive region to be expanded, not only contracted. It is also a poetic place as it frames the way I interface with space. In technique I now have the choice to contract or expand my centre, meaning my body is available to mutate in the moment, to modulate the quality of the energy I expend as I dance. This engagement of my centre has opened me to the possibility of malleability, and to the importance of dynamism and nuance in movement. It has begun to release inefficient holding patterns in my upper body as my source of stability moves from my sternum to the space below my navel. I have learned I can absorb with my centre, not only 'contract and hold' my abdominals, or simply 'drop' the weight of my pelvis. I can eat space as I press outward. This kind of engagement is much deeper than I had ever considered. It has enabled me to see a whole world of possibility. I now have freedom to open or close my centre - to throw it through space, to lift it out of my hips, to release it or rebound it through the balls of my feet into the floor. Thus, I have discovered I can dynamically engage with my centre, intuitively. This sense

of choice in movement has begun to build itself from a non-verbal place within me, layer upon layer. It animates codified movement phrases vibrantly in the moment as I navigate through them, dynamically choosing from a repertoire of available responses.

Being movement, rather than consciously trying to manipulate it, has also had a tremendous impact on my decision-making process in dance, especially within the context of contact improvisation (CI). It is within this framework that the concepts taught in Aikido made manifest their applicability to dance, not just in terms of pragmatic technique, but also poetically. Perhaps this should have been self evident given CI founder Steve Paxton developed his technique from Aikido techniques (Pallant 2006: 13). Improvisation results when the process is the product. This phrase is wonderfully similar to my discovery of experiencing rather than manipulating, or working within my self rather than looking at myself. It is the process that is - not the product that dictates the outcome of any creative endeavor, indeed of any life-affirming activity. Thus my work in improvisation has shifted from improving my execution of future repertoire, to a focus on my decision-making in the moment, much like responding to a situation in Aikido. Much of my understanding of centre was discovered in this context.

As I began to build my understanding of tanden, I became more capable of sensing my partners' centres as well, and grew better at engaging with them while maintaining the integrity of my own intent. Many of my partners remarked I was 'strong', but this was not bristling muscular force, it was increased efficiency and focus. With my Aikido embodiment I could decide to use my centre to support or resist oncoming force, as in lifts, or to soften into someone and feel my centre of gravity abandon control as it left the floor. Increased choice and the power of centering has given me a heightened sense of self-assurance, which now enables me to take risks more confidently, trusting myself to respond safely if I hit the floor. There is new freshness to my dialogue with others. During improvisation class, I felt more in contact with the 'essence' of others' being; I was more capable of listening to their intentions. As Maupin states, '[h]earing, too, is a vital entrance into embodied reality. Like kinaesthesia, it bypasses vision with its all-too-dominant relationships with thinking. The entire body can 'hear,' and hearing is a different experience from seeing' (Maupin 1998: para. 7). I predict my relationship with my dance partners will continue to evolve as I study Aikido. I have yet to fully comprehend how to assume only responsibility for my own movement outcomes – versus trying to 'make something happen' to the other person. Although my short study of Aikido practice has enabled me understand how to move more intuitively and to no longer look at myself in movement, I believe working to realize this same transition regarding a partner remains a rich area to explore.

Aikido continues to fascinate me with its ability to transmit knowledge of being an integrated whole. Aikido techniques are at once functional and transformative. They have improved my efficiency while imbuing my movement with meaning. Aikido practice has been not only a gateway to embodiment, but also a way of relating to others as integrated beings, through eye contact, touch and focus. It is not surprising then to realize by synthesizing improvisation, dance technique and Aikido practice I have begun to develop a deeper understanding of the somatic possibilities inherent within my choreography. My practice now stresses how I experience embodiment and how I create a sense of myself to generate movement from within. Again, I am no longer looking at myself. Furthermore, I can now recognize this same shift of understanding is reflected in much larger paradigm shifts in contemporary dance making. I see my transition apparent in how I am drawn to contact improvisation, Fulkerson's release technique and Ohad Naharin's Gaga. All of these examples parallel the meeting of Aikido and dance working

from both literally and figuratively a 'new centre' – that being the individual's subjective experience of movement.

Embracing and working from subjective experience has been a portal to more than Aikido. Legitimizing subjective experience has also had an impact on how I value my learning process. It is important to note at this juncture that it has often been remarked I 'over-analyze' when I dance. At the same time I have heard clear feedback about what is perceived by others to be my lack of focus; feedback that suggests I am not 'paying attention'. I have struggled to reconcile what appeared at first to be incongruous feedback that resulted in contradictory goals: to refrain from cognitive analysis while simultaneously sharpening my attention. Making sense of this feedback has been challenging. My intellectual analysis of this conflict led me to decide that my primary objective in dance technique should be how I 'concentrate'. Aikido practice has provided me with a new way of reconciling this feedback, namely recognizing my tendency to dance as if I were watching myself. The impact of Aikido on my learning ability has again been one of integration beyond the studio. Thus my learning goals of late have been to take risks without self-judgment, to hold my self in esteem for the value of my subjective experience, to be present and simple and wholly in the moment.

Once more, Aikido provided me with the tools I lacked to address my original and somewhat paradoxical dilemma. I feel I concentrate in Aikido in a way I have never before experienced. Somatically integrated, the warrior once more emerges. As a non-verbal awareness, this is difficult to describe. It is focusing with my whole being, physically, emotionally, and cognitively bringing myself together in a central place – the metaphor of my new centre again emerges. Working from the whole experience of movement rather than understanding it as a fragmented external intention puts me dramatically in the moment, standing ready to respond but physically calm. My mind does not turn off; it integrates fully, returning the roots of my consciousness to the present. Focusing, or 'be[ing] at the calm center of violent action is [...] to be in harmony with the universe [...]. But the ancient paradox prevails: To pursue the moment of grace directly is to lose it' (Leonard 1985: 93). I am a spirited perfectionist, and consistently expect more of myself than I can sometimes give. Aikido is relieving. It helps me to concentrate my whole being on what is happening 'now', not on the future. I can move in the moment without fear of my external eye. There is no space to worry about whether or not I am 'improving', as 'the basic teaching of Aikido. . . is simply to flow with daily practice rather than strive for some sort of linear 'progress'. Aikido is a lifelong discipline; it cannot be pushed' (Leonard 1985: 88).

Focus, centering, breathing and dancing... Aikido is permeating everything I do. It has changed how I drink a class of water (dropping my elbow to increase efficiency) and how I stand in the tube (centre dropped low for stability). Small details like these are of great importance. More dramatically, in December I was attacked from behind as I arrived home late one night. A middle-aged man had seen me take money from a cash machine, and in desperation, grabbed my bag. We struggled and he prevailed, running away with my bag. Getting to my feet, I pursued him and he stopped, emptying the contents of my purse on the pavement. He was quite threatening. While the street was deserted, I nevertheless felt calm descend. I spoke to him quietly, telling him where to find my money. He took thirty-five pounds and left me my camera, my wallet and my notebooks. Excepting a scraped knee, I was unharmed. At first as I reflected on this experience, I felt disappointed and afraid. I was disappointed I had not used an Aikido technique to bring the man to the ground. And yet, I have come to see I did use Aikido to respond. In a situation of urgency and stress I acted non-violently,

simultaneously discovering an intense calm and a presence bristling with awareness. I did not stand outside myself; I acted intuitively from a centre I previously had not known.

Aikido is not something to be practiced and then hermetically divided from other experience. Contrariwise, 'the mat is the world' (Leonard 1985: 198). As a 'warrior', an embodied individual, the only way to make sense of this new information is creatively. For several months now I have been working on choreographing as a whole, researching and exploring the somatic qualities of movement around the theme of survival. I have tried to understand the generative force of martial arts through my own story as a Canadian. Ironically, the Canadian identity has also been criticized as lacking in focus. I however gravitate to the distinctiveness captured in Margaret Atwood's quintessential book, *Survival* (Atwood, 1972). Describing Canadian identity, Atwood offers:

Our stories are likely to be tales not of those who made it but of those who made it back, from the awful experience - the North, the snowstorm, the sinking ship - that killed everyone else. The survivor has no triumph or victory but the fact of his survival; he has little after his ordeal that he did not have before, except gratitude for having escaped with his life (Atwood 1972: para. 14).

*Survival* is the essence of the non-violent warrior. As with Aikido practice, there is no goal, no reward other than the continuation of training. To creatively support my exploration of survival, I have employed imagery supported by Aikido. With the integrated support of four wonderful dancers, I have worked on filling and emptying the body with energy and breath, using this force to animate the dancers' relationships and charge the space. I no longer see the dancers as mere physical entities, but integrated somas. Together we are attempting to create visual poetry through imaginative self-experience. Thus, my experience of Aikido has led me to understand the integrated self in a broader context while deepening my personal and cultural identity.

Since my first class at the Tetsushinkan Dojo much has changed. I have explored a functional body, energetic and integrated, both separate from and linked to my concept of my self as a 'dancer'. I have enriched my identity and my understanding of my own capabilities. This in turn has transformed my experience of technique class, contact improvisation, my focus and creative choreographic practice. Aikido work has dynamically influenced how I see myself in the world at large, not just as a dance artist, but also as a martial artist. With the ephemeral embodiment of a 'new warrior' I have seen Aikido's potential to act as a gateway to the larger Gestalt, as a whole that is more than the sum of its teaching methods and training. I can now appreciate Aikido as a way of living with ritual and respect. While Aikido certainly has offered me solid strategies to 'improve' my dance, I now understand this 'improvement' is not the intention. I am beginning to appreciate a new centeredness that validates my own experience of my movement – that my esteem must be holistic and internal not exterior to myself. Thus my introduction to Aikido practice has had a profound impact on my 'self', a resonance that has less to do with movement and more to do with a powerful understanding of not what I do, but how I am centered in the space between ground and sky.

## References

- Aubrey, B. (1985), 'Aikido and the new warrior', in H.R. Strozzi, (ed.), *Aikido and the New Warrior*, Berkley, Ca.: North Atlantic Books, pp. 51-65.
- Atwood, M. (1972), 'Survival', <http://www.d.umn.edu/cla/faculty/tbacig/cst1030/1030anth/survival.html>. Accessed 25 April 2011.
- Pallant, C. (2006), *Contact Improvisation an Introduction to a Vitalizing Dance Form*, USA: McFarland and Company Inc.
- Inaba Sensei, M. (2006), *Researching Japanese Budo*, Tokyo: Meiji Jingu.
- Leonard, G. (1985), 'On getting a black belt at age fifty-two', in H.R. Strozzi, (ed.), *Aikido and the New Warrior*, Berkley, Ca.: North Atlantic Books, pp. 78-99.
- Leonard, G. (1985), 'This isn't Richard', in H.R. Strozzi, (ed.), *Aikido and the New Warrior*, Berkley, Ca.: North Atlantic Books, pp 198-206.
- Maupin, E. (1998), 'Somatic Education: its Origins, Ancestors, and Prospects', [http://www.edmaupin.com/Somatic\\_Origins.html](http://www.edmaupin.com/Somatic_Origins.html). Accessed 25 April 2011.
- Roubicek, S. (2009), 'Hara Breathing Applied to Dance Practice', *Journal of Dance and Somatic Practices*, 1, pp. 255-262. doi: 10.1386/jdsp.1.2.255\_1.
- Ueshiba, K. (1984), *The Spirit of Aikido*, New York: Harper and Row.

## Biography

Colleen Snell was born in Canada, where she began dancing at the age of four. She trained at Toronto's Canadian Children's Dance Theatre as a company member touring from 2005 until 2007 while finishing her studies as a Regional Arts dance major at Cawthra Park School for the Arts. Her post-secondary training began at Ladsmmi in Montreal under the direction of Lucie Boissinot. Colleen's teaching and collaborative ventures include work with the Toronto based company Dancemakers as a guest artist for the FastTrack series in 2007, and as faculty in the EDAP program in 2010 where she will return to teach improvisation this summer. Currently Colleen is completing a Postgraduate Diploma in Advanced Dance Studies at the London Contemporary Dance School. She has worked with artists such as Irene Dowd, Risa Steinberg, Maeva Berthelot and Winifred Burnet-Smith of the Hofesh Shechter Company. Colleen is fascinated by the written word, and hopes to pursue an MA thesis in the coming year while continuing trans-disciplinary studies and community arts projects, building a reflective practice rich in possibility.

Contact: [colleen.snell@lcds.ac.uk](mailto:colleen.snell@lcds.ac.uk)