

Reflections on aikido and dance

Dr. Kerry Chappell

Exeter University

Thinking about aikido is no replacement for doing aikido, but while I've been away from practice for a while the following thoughts have risen to the surface.....

Joining the dots....centring and finding my tanden allowed me to 'join the dots', if you like, as a dancer. When I left full time contemporary training fourteen years ago I was aware that physically or technically everything was developing well but something at the centre hadn't yet come together. At the time what this might mean physically still escaped me - obviously it would, as I hadn't found it. But, after starting aikido practice five years after leaving college and being at a point where I'd stopped trying to find 'it' so much, I realised that I was now more 'joined up'. At college, I'd been focusing on trying to get 'into the ground' as, having had a lot of previous ballet training, my centre felt like it was somewhere in my chest. In an effort to rectify this, I'd gone to the other extreme, trying to drop everything down to my feet (if nothing else I suppose this was an interesting exercise in exploring how my ankles worked)....perhaps the time was right too, but in working on centring in aikido, rather than just dropping weight into the ground I was, and am, able to understand what it means to hold my energy in an alive way from the middle and then to connect the extremities inwards and outwards from my core. I'd always had lots of problems with not being able to 'hold the line' in my arms. But now the 'line' in my arms isn't the point as the energy from my centre is what goes through the joints, in and out, making the movement, rather than thinking in a disjointed way about not having kinked arms.

Playing with energy dynamics...There's also something about the kind of delicate strength (and yes that is a contradiction in terms) of the core that you get from aikido that I think is different to other somatic practices. It seems to me more condensed and potentially powerful – you can play with how you let energy in and out of that very condensed centre in an unusual way – and the ensuing qualities you can therefore get from it are more varied. For example, I remember a very powerful moment after doing furitama (watch Sasha's video <http://www.movingeast.co.uk/video.html> and part way through see her students do a standing version of this practice of shaking the hands in front of the tanden), where I had the most potent and concentrated feeling in my centre while my torso and arms were floating as light as feathers in space. Since then I've understood that there are other combinations of dynamic and quality that you can find in movement from the knowledge of energy that you get from aikido. I can't imagine where else you might get this from.

Leg stamina – as I haven't been practicing aikido for two years, I've become very aware what an 'added extra' the leg stamina was. And I miss it as I don't have it at the moment. Particularly as someone who is tall, I always feel like I need to work to be better connected to the ground. Spending what felt like hours on the dojo mat, with burning thighs, finding the 'bottom' of techniques without letting go of the whole flow of the energy by just resting your knees on the ground - this was very valuable for giving me what felt like a whole new plane in which to work. It's certainly a place I feel I've lost access to while I'm not practicing – being able to skim around near the floor like that whilst simultaneously knowing that you could pop up in the air at any given moment – you don't know what you've got til it's gone.



Kerry practicing Aikido at Tetsushinkan Dojo, Movingeast

Spirit Along with all of this, and intrinsically intertwined within it comes spirit. And this is the main thing for me that works outside of dance too. Particularly as a woman – it gives you a kind of quiet but deep rooted assurance in yourself (I remember that gelling in me as I watched Andrew, my uke (or opponent) for my Sho-Dan grading, fly across the room away from me – thinking - 'oh, I did that.....oh I see.....I CAN do that'). But it's not about being dominating. When you can do that, it's about knowing your own bodymind, and also knowing when you don't know. There's something tangled up there about being strong in knowing yourself and what you're capable of but also knowing that you always have a huge amount to learn and being humble about it. I think when you've been practicing long enough that strength of spirit, doesn't go away, it shrinks slightly but when you need it you find it's still there.

The best example I have of drawing on that strength of spirit is my experience of giving birth. We had a homebirth and there were a couple of times where the midwives suggested it might be time to go to hospital, but I just said no it's ok, I'll keep going. Almost without realising I was doing it, I was managing the pain and the length of the experience physically and mentally by breathing in and out of my tanden in a controlled way, and using two alternating image experiences in my head. One image

was doing ritzuzen (a standing meditation technique) in a circle in the dojo and the second standing on a hill in Wales working with my sword, both with burning, shaking arms and legs. Both involved thinking 'I don't know when this will end and I just have to keep going'. I knew the birth would finish at some point but I didn't know when. While all the medical signs were good, which they were, and I had great support around me, there was no reason why I couldn't give birth to my daughter at home my way.....so I did. In order to work through it, I automatically drew on my strength and stamina of spirit from aikido. And interestingly, on reflection, those experiences in themselves had lasted nowhere near as long as the birth but I was able to transfer the principle.



Kerry demonstrating Kashima Shinryu sword form at Stoke Newington Festival in 2007.

Being with people – lastly, I think aikido has also informed how I am with people – whether teaching or just being with people – I think it comes from being humble about what you don't know. I think and hope that I'm able to be much more patient and open to others and to possibilities because of it.

Aikido isn't perfect; it's not a magic solution to all our problems, but if you figure out how to use what you learn from it intelligently and integrate it with the way you are, it can play a potent part in developing who you can be as a dancer and as a person.

Kerry Chappell

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