

AIKIDO

and the pursuit of intra-psychic harmony

Alaric Everett finds a metaphor for resolving intra-psychic conflict in the Japanese martial art of Aikido

One way of thinking about our clients' difficulties is that they are fighting against aspects of themselves that they do not want. Repeated experience with clients and supervisees has made me question whether this is something we can subtly and unwittingly get drawn into. Despite our best intentions, can we end up reinforcing the paradigm of 'fighting against' that is, perhaps, the fundamental source of our clients' disease? It's difficult not to. The dominant medical model, when applied to mental health, would have us treat depression as we would a virus - something to be got rid of. Look at how we commonly talk about resolving emotional difficulties: 'beating the blues', 'overcoming your troubles', 'defeating depression', even 'waging war on worry'!

I see the attitude of 'against' manifesting most obviously in clients' statements like 'I don't want it', 'It shouldn't be there', 'It never goes away', 'I would be OK if it weren't for it'. So there's an 'it', a problem, a blemish that, if eradicated, would make everything OK. If we're lucky, this is the way it turns up in the counselling room; the client has articulated 'it', it's out in the open and there is now the possibility of exploring a different means of approaching the problem.

This 'it' (that they don't want) can take many forms. This article is aimed primarily at counsellors working with clients who have at least some sense of what they think the

problematic 'it' is, because this serves better to illustrate my argument that a knowledge of some of the principles of Aikido can throw new light on working with such internal conflict.

I would like to propose that Aikido offers a different approach to working with aspects of our self that we find difficult to live with. The parallels apply in many ways that are relevant to therapists, but here I will focus on just two specific strands - curiosity and dealing with attacks - and discuss how they relate to the world of intra-dynamics - the relationships that exist within the person, between our 'internal objects' or, in focusing language, our parts.²

The single line that I come back to again and again in my work with clients is one often attributed to Jung: 'What you resist, persists'. My teacher speaks of Aikido as a 'manifest philosophy', meaning that it is not just a set of ideas but ideas that we actually bring into reality and make manifest. Curiosity is not just an idea; it is a directly bodily experience.

'Or as Gendlin puts it: "To find out how the soup smells, you don't have to stick your head in it"'

This article's exploration and fleshing out of that feeling, in combination with the metaphor of dealing with an attacker, will hopefully bring even more life to the truth in Jung's words.

The art of peace

Aikido is a Japanese martial art founded by Ōsensei Morihei Ueshiba. Ai-ki-do can be translated as 'The Way of Harmonising with Universal Energy', or simply 'The Art of Peace'. To this end, Ōsensei said: 'To smash, injure, or destroy is the worst thing a human being can do. The real Way of a Warrior is to prevent such slaughter - it is the Art of Peace, the power of love.'³ This sentiment is very different from the zeitgeist expressed in the recent headline on the front of my newspaper's *Weekend* magazine: 'Slay your demons'.⁴

Fundamental to this process is the Aikido principle of *Ikkyo* (which literally translates as 'First Teaching' and is in every movement of Aikido). *Ikkyo* is a feeling of extendedness and relaxed outwardness, without hardness or force. In my school of Aikido, called Isshinkai, the core principles have a partner value. The value that marries with *Ikkyo* is that of curiosity, as in an infant's spontaneous curiosity, which has a natural dynamic strength to it without a sense of tension. Have you ever tried wrestling something off a one-year-old when she doesn't want to let go? Good luck! And this is precisely because she's not relying on muscularity for her strength. So here I will use 'curiosity' as shorthand to describe the feeling of extended



but relaxed mind manifesting in the body that *Ikkyo* points to.⁵

This feeling of *Ikkyo* or curiosity helps form the platform from which to find a middle way between the extremes into which it is easy to fall into when clients present with difficult parts - the extremes of collapsing or fighting. That extended but non-tense feeling allows one to hold a boundary without actively pushing against any force outside it. There is a sense of outwardness of mind without any application of physical strength; the integrity of one's space is maintained without your going against anything outside it. Outward-directed curiosity is like a radiating force.

Indulging and ignoring

I talk about this with clients in terms of two ways in which avoidance manifests - indulging and ignoring. I think of the extreme of collapsing in terms of indulging. To collapse under something

is to lose our shape and to passively allow it to have undue influence over us - such as humouring someone who is disrespectfully chewing our ear off without consideration for where we are or what we might need. Clients for whom there are issues with indulging certain parts (such as a persistent worry) need to create some distance so that they are able to stop merging with that part.

That merging is like being too close to something, and means they are actually unable to hear what that part really has to say. Or, as Gendlin puts it: 'To find out how the soup smells, you don't have to stick your head in it.'⁶ Having a boundary with something means we can have perspective on it and gives us a platform for a kind of engagement that is based in a feeling of core stability or strength. That then makes it more possible that we can bear certain feelings that we have previously responded to by collapsing.

Curiosity also helps with dealing with the other extreme - ignoring, which is a form of fighting or denial. If someone is trying to get my attention and I am actively ignoring them, that exclusion is a form of violence. I often find just such an active disengagement in intra-psychic feuds. Having the feeling of reaching out yet boundaryed curiosity allows for the practice of non-violence towards aspects of internal experience that previously we have tried to reject, cut off or ignore. Through my modelling this curiosity towards the client's internal perpetrator(s), the client usually, at some point, makes a tentative attempt to take this different approach themselves. And experimenting with this produces the radical realisation that, by taking a different approach towards that which attacks us (boundaryed openness as opposed to defensiveness), how we experience that attack also changes. ►

Between ignoring and indulging is what I like to think of as 'acknowledging': the unwanted 'it' is there, and I can recognise and notice that it is there, even if there is also a dislike of it. Many clients find this a much easier route into being curious than acceptance, which may have many connotations for them, some negative. It is amazing the change that can occur from simple acknowledgement of what is happening in direct experience.

Attacks as energy

In Aikido, an attack is regarded as a gift of energy. The question we drill into ourselves is 'Where does the attacker want to go?' and we then follow that intent. There's a blending with, instead of a going against. In this way, I create something greater than the sum of our two parts. If someone tries to punch me and I try to block this, we will both be hurt. Similarly, clients are often fighting back against parts such as critical voices - and this hurts them both.

When, in Aikido, I relate to the attacker not as an enemy but as a source of energy, it allows for curiosity about the metaphorical fist that may be coming in my direction. That curiosity is absolutely vital, because the parts that are attacking are often simply desperately attempting to communicate with us; our failure to listen has forced them to take more extreme measures to get our attention. When there is a movement that acknowledges that attacking energy (and shame, depression, inadequacy, panic, sadness, guilt and numbness can feel like attacks), the potential violence of the attack is neutralised. This idea of becoming aware of and experimentally suspending judgment about what seems to be an 'attack' on them is now one of the fundamentals of my therapeutic work.

The power of non-resistance

To attempt to push away an attacking emotion is to give it more power. As Denis Burke Sensei says: 'Aikido works because it is non-resistant, ŌSensei was very clear on this point.'⁷ Aikido offers a different mindset and a different way of 'engaging with' that alter that power for the better. I have seen this happen with extremely challenging, so-called toxic and even psychotic feelings. In my own therapy, my therapist knew I practised Aikido and often asked me: 'If what you are experiencing now was an attacker on the Aikido mat, how would you respond? How would your posture be different?' I found this extremely useful in switching my focus towards

how I was relating to the content of experience rather than fixating on the content (and seeing that content as the problem). That 'attitude-towards-experience' is the part of the equation over which I have control, and this is where the change can happen.

You could label this as 'mindfulness' and say it is hardly new in the psychotherapeutic world, but what really excites me is the fundamental power of the metaphor of an attacker being neutralised in a way that doesn't hurt either perpetrator or potential victim. If you regard symbolism as the language of the unconscious, then a good metaphor is worth a thousand words. My teacher says Aikido is the kind of martial art that you could use on a drunk uncle who is upsetting people at a wedding - that is, you could use it to neutralise his behaviour without anything getting broken and no hard feelings the next day. So often, once we get past the bluster and down to the vulnerability, it is the pitiful reality of parts similar to the 'drunk uncle' that we are actually dealing with in intra-dynamics.

I would not want to be trained in such a way that, when someone grabs my arm, my instinct is to cause them serious harm. What if they had taken hold of me to tell me that I'd dropped my wallet? Curiosity about the attack allows us to discover what might be motivating parts of ourselves to 'help' in distorted ways - ways that can seem like attacks.

Jo and the sergeant major

I'll try to make this a bit more tangible by presenting here a composite case study of a client I'll call Jo. Jo came to me wanting to work on self-esteem issues and explore questions about her identity. She hoped that therapy might help with all these things and perhaps speak to the nebulous, evanescent sense

that she could be living more authentically. A woman in her early 40s, she had struggled with mental health issues since her teens. She brought a history of intergenerational trauma and periodic engagement with therapy to try to limit the anxiety and depression she felt and quell the threatening figures that visited her in nightmares.

We worked together for some three years. We're joining the process just over halfway through that time. The 'it', the problem she didn't want, had appeared initially as a hollowness, then morphed into a sandstone wall, then a rippling ball in her chest, then red-hot lava. Then it became a furious sergeant major who dominated her life, screaming furiously and critically at her about all the things she missed or got wrong. The therapy process had been strange and uncomfortable, but she was able to go along with it as there was an odd emotional logic to the narrative and there had been moments of relief and lightness.

But a screaming sergeant major? What possible good could that serve? What possible value could that add to her life? She told me I was talking nonsense when I suggested that perhaps this wrathful figure might be motivated by something that, at root, was connected to wanting the best for her. She wanted rid of the sergeant major, or at least to put the lid back on the box that she wished she had never opened. But the more she hated and resisted his demands and injunctions, the louder he bellowed. Over the course of many weeks, it became clear that this side of her personality wasn't going to go away and that she was going to have to take a different approach, because she was exhausted and demoralised by the fight.

With Jo, there was an oscillation between the extremes of collapsing (and so indulging the sergeant major) and trying to block out what he was saying (ignoring him). Over the weeks before she came to consider a more neutral engagement with him, I had been sowing the seeds of curiosity. I unobtrusively kept bringing her back to her physical posture when she was in a passive state of resignation about the endless torrent of her attacker's abuse. Her shoulders were bowed over, her head was down, she seemed shrunken. Eventually she began to see that her posture reflected her attitude - one was an expression of the other. It made her think of expressive dancers and the way they spoke so much and told so many stories just through the wordless twirl of their

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bodies. She saw that her attitude was one of unhappy, unwilling 'tolerance' because, as much as she wanted him to shut up, she was in a way one with him - she didn't know where he ended and she began.

We explored curiosity through the metaphor of distance. When she was collapsed, it was like she was one centimetre away from him - so her head was firmly in the soup! When she was actively fighting him, it was like she was 10 metres away, and she was trying to get even further away if she possibly could. We experimented with imaginatively varying the distance between him and her to see both how she felt and how he responded differently. At just over a metre away, she found that she could start to take a proper look at him, and that, as soon as she started to do this, his voice got quieter. She had that extendedness of mind, that sense of her own boundary, and she felt less overwhelmed. And, crucially, she was now able to start to wonder about this man. Who was he? What was motivating him to keep shouting, week after week, even though he would sometimes go blue in the cheeks? She saw that he was scared.

Going with the energy

And that was the beginning of his end. That first real look at her attacker, that not going against the energy of his 'attack', signalled a change in their relationship. Before long, the sergeant major was replaced by an intense boiling sensation in her belly, like a pot boiling over on the hob. That shifted to a bucking rodeo bull, then a Gollum-like 'demon' and eventually into a strong, joyful child.

When you are not in a dynamic of against, your experience of an attack changes. By this logic, Aikido is something that you do with someone, not to them. Over our period of working together, Jo started to embody this, to fall much more naturally into a habit of going-with. At the peak of her battle with the sergeant major, she had wanted to cut him out of herself, kill him if she could. They were not collaborating; there was no real connection. She wanted to use therapy to dislodge or at least silence him. But her attitude of 'against' never recovered from that moment of connection when she perceived directly how afraid he was. Once you see that relaxed, extended curiosity is more effective than tension and fighting, there is no going back - even if it takes years to become more integrated.

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Jo's attitude of inclusion allowed her not to get stuck in wasteful unnecessary impasse. She was able to allow the wave of an 'attacking' feeling to pass through - for example, to feel the flush of 'I-can't-cope' but bear the unpleasant sensations because she no longer felt defined by them. She was separate from them, larger than them, and thus a container for them. She had her one-metre distance.

Win-win-win

I think of the self as like a community: if one part of the community wins but another part loses as a result, overall the community is not going to thrive. When clients come to see me, they are often in a 'win-lose-lose' situation: they are suppressing a part they don't want, so it is losing and, consequently, so too is the person in their community of Self. At the height of her resistance to the sergeant major, Jo was in what felt more like a 'lose-lose-lose' situation: no one felt victorious. Even at the beginning, when the intra-psycho battle was numb and controlled under the mantle of a hollow, empty feeling, she knew that the victory was pyrrhic. Her fear and anger were quelled, but so too was her strength. And in that quelling there was so much tension, discordance and dissipation of energy.

Aikido aims for 'win-win-win' and, in that moment of understanding and appreciation of the fear of the sergeant major, Jo had a taste of that. The sergeant major had a win: he felt seen. Once Jo realised his intent, she felt relief and no longer under attack, so she had a win. All the energy that was being dissipated in the friction of resistance was freed up, and in her overall being she felt lighter - a transpersonal win. Her community of Self had that unmistakable feeling of flow and synthesis, an unleashing of the power of growth latent in us all: win-win-win. ■



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About the author

Alaric is an accredited therapist and supervisor based in Exeter. His approach is inspired by Gendlin's experiential Focusing, attachment theory, Jung's emphasis on the symbolic and Zen meditation/philosophy. He is a black-belt and qualified teacher of Aikido with Isshinkai, founded by Denis Burke Sensei in Andover. His first taste of the life-changing potential of the different energies of mind and body being in harmony was with Keitenshin Kan Aikido in Manchester in 2005. He attempts to capture therapy moments in Haiku form on Twitter @Open_Therapy. Comments and contact are welcome to alaric.everett@open-therapy.co.uk

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