

# The myth of aikido practice and off-the-mat behavior change

Research Note

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It is a commonly held belief that the practice of aikido has an automatic and profoundly beneficial effect on our behavior off the mat. This belief holds that as we practice aikido on the mat, experiencing in our bodies the feeling and dynamics of blending effortlessly with another toward a mutually beneficial (or at least safe) outcome, we are programming ourselves to act more effectively and collaboratively in other areas of our daily lives. The belief is that this programming is an automatic consequence of our aikido practice.

I am going to take the position that there is not any systematically collected and presented evidence that this belief is accurate. Actually, I'll take a stronger stance and declare that this belief is mythical and largely false in the absence of any research-established causal link from aikido practice to the robust, consistent production of new, more collaborative ways of being, speaking, and listening in challenging off-the-mat situations.

Certainly there are anecdotal accounts of the transference of skill from aikido practice to every day life. In *An Unused Intelligence* co-author Dawna Markova writes of her own experience:

I found myself in old situations, such as confrontational meetings, where I was about to rigidly defend my point of view, and suddenly an Aikido move would flash across the screen of my mind, and I would respond in a much more flexible and centered way. <sup>1</sup>

Accepting Markova's implied claim at face value doesn't entail that the new moves she is able to make are the result of Aikido training. As an organizational consultant, she has spent many years building her capacity to act effectively and to help others do so too. Her ability to recognize when and how to apply Aikido principles in life situations could be as much the result of her training as an organizational behaviorist, sensitive to how underlying values and principles may be drawn on as a bridge to new behavior.

I believe that a key factor leading to the myth that aikido practice makes us better, more collaborative actors off the mat is a misplaced confidence in the power of concepts, as spoken principles (such as respect alternate points of view), to "pull" us by their very reasonability into producing new behavior. One organizational guru, Stephen Covey, has loudly proclaimed the power of principles to guide people to act more effectively. The Total Quality Management movement during the 1980s and 1990s in the US provided tool-based training and restructured work relationships aiming by these programs to "pull" workers into new attitudes and actions that reflected a greater empowerment and

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<sup>1</sup> Dawna Markova & Andy Bryner, *An Unused Intelligence*, Conari Press, New York: 1996, P. 15.

leverage in the service of fulfilling customer needs. For instance, Shoji Shiba, in his popular book *A New American TQM*, writes that the acceleration of organizational learning (leading to new actions) that Quality requires can be achieved in part by establishing "pulls" such as articulating "noble goals" (loyalty, self-development) as guiding principles.<sup>2</sup>

The belief underlying these strategies is that once a person has achieved an intellectual, conceptual understanding of the goodness of a principle, s/he will naturally find new ways to act in congruence with that principle. I hold this is a false belief. It uncritically assumes that what we call "understanding"—a purely cognitive phenomenon—enables us to invent and produce new ways of speaking, listening, and being in the world. In short: intellectually understanding concepts is all it takes to embody those concepts in action.

The shakiness of this assumption can be revealed by a simple analogy: Imagine an Aikido instructor gives his students Saito Shihan's 5-volume series depicting and explaining the execution of various techniques. The instructor then tells his students that "when you read and understand these techniques (perhaps by memorizing sequences of hand/arm manipulations and foot positions) you will be able to perform them. Every Aikido student will recognize immediately how ridiculous this statement is. One must do the practice of coordinating mind and body in endless repetitions to achieve progress in performing aikido techniques. Why would this not also be true for learning new techniques of speaking and listening off the mat?

Over the past 40 years a few new approaches have arisen in the field of Organizational Behavior that are not based on the assumption that intellectual understanding is sufficient for the invention of robust new behavior. In fact these theories, dubbed "Action Research" or "Theory of Action Perspective", specifically deny that mere cognitive understanding is sufficient to produce any new behavior at all.<sup>3</sup> Instead, these approaches have in common the method of first identifying a principle to emulate, then spending long practice sessions designing and acting out new behaviors aimed at embodying the principle. Inevitably, the first long period of learning (about the same time that it takes to get to 3<sup>rd</sup> Kyu) is characterized by mostly failure to behave in new ways despite the best intentions and most sincere practice. This failure is on a par with the persistence by which Aikido students continue to train in ways that rely on force and strength, even though they espouse the principle that they should not and will not do so.

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<sup>2</sup> Shoji Shiba, *A New American TQM*, Center for Quality of Management, Cambridge: 1993, p. 548.

<sup>3</sup> Spawned during the late 1940's by Kurt Lewin, Action Research has become a more mainstream methodology following its widely noticed success in the hands of researchers Chris Argyris and Donald Schon. Their 1974 book, *Theory in Practice*, was the first clear outline of the theory that states: despite the intention to act in congruence with an honorable principle, people in fact act in congruence with other principles already in place. Such a principle is: "unilaterally own and control the field of action." See Chris Argyris and Donald Schon, *Theory in Practice*, Jossey Bass, San Francisco: 1974.

Explaining some of the gaps in the old theory of learning that he and his colleagues encountered, Argyris writes:

. . .we soon learned that the model (of behavioral change that we applied) was useful primarily at an abstract level of discourse. . . When we attempted to help individuals (undo old counterproductive behaviors) we found that there were several crucial gaps in the model.

The first gap was that the old model (of behavior change) assumed that individuals had the skills to learn the new behavior, or at least the skills to learn the new skills. It now appears that this is not necessarily the case. . .

(The second gap was) the pervasiveness with which individuals are unaware that they do not have the skills that they may value.<sup>4</sup>

Critics may argue that the physical practice of aikido body movements such as Tai No Henko and Irimi Nage, provide people with more than just an intellectual concept of "see things from your opponent's point of view." They will claim that doing the mental and physical practice of these movements will lead to the ability to source new ways of being off the mat. I do not categorically deny this possibility. Yet, I feel the prospects for significant and robust production of new behavior based on these movements are gloomier than many Aikido-based practitioners suggest.

Without actually practicing, in long frustrating sessions, new ways of speaking and listening, and then getting feedback from skilled facilitators and peers alike, we are not likely to progress far in creating new more effective ways of acting in difficult situations. My reason for holding this gloomy picture is that in my experience I have not seen people, even after long aikido practice and exposure to its lofty principles, become consistently able to transfer physical learning on the mat (such as Tai No Henko), to other fields. One such field is organizational meeting facilitation, in which the articulation of the point of view of others despite one's own strong counter feelings is a key skill. Meeting facilitation is a skill that can be built in sessions of moving into action as a meeting facilitator, under skilled guidance. Helpful would be more research into the limits of skill-transference from one domain to another (such as from on the mat to off the mat) if such limits exist as I conjecture they do.

I am not saying that Aikido practice is therefore of no consequence in helping us be more effective humans. Aikido practice can help us build in increasingly reflexive habits of breathing, centering, and grounding that we can learn to apply in difficult off the mat situations. This is no small progress, to stay calmer and more attentive to the world around us even as situations become more tense. Such practices may eventually lead one to remain in command of more and better choices from among existing behavioral capabilities. But to claim that Aikido practice can, by its very nature, inform new off-the-mat behaviors in us is, I think, a way too optimistic claim.

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<sup>4</sup> Chris Argyris, *On Organizational Learning*, Blackwell, Oxford: 1992, pp. 10 - 11.

What is needed now, in addition to new research into the limits of skill transferability between domains, is somatic awareness and paired movement programming such as is currently available from Aikido-based consultants, augmented with competently facilitated behavioral skill-building in everyday speaking and listening. Specifically, these would be speaking and listening skills that mirror the principles and values of preserving dignity and respect that lie at the core of Aikido. This latter part of the formula is only rarely available, but is indispensable to putting the values of Aikido into action more readily and reliably in our daily lives.