

Aikido as Transformative and Embodied Pedagogy

Michael A. Gordon

Aikido
as Transformative
and Embodied
Pedagogy

Teacher as Healer

palgrave
macmillan

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ISBN 978-3-030-23952-7 ISBN 978-3-030-23953-4 (eBook)
<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-23953-4>

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FOREWORD

How do we align with those deep currents that flow within and between us? How, in an age of such stunning threat and conflict, do we hold the spirit of mutual protection and preservation?

We are steeped in a worldview of distinct subject and object, a materialist, positivist quest for absolute truth and control over the other: plant, planet, and sometimes person. As both product of and perpetuator of that worldview education centers on acquisition of external and largely abstract knowledge and instrumental skills. These are worthwhile expectations of schooling. The trouble—it is not hard to recognize—is that this worldview (and this knowledge), for all its might and value, leaves us distant from the earth, one another, and ourselves. From this detached stance, the world is disenchanted, to use Max Weber’s term. And we end up doing quite stunning violence to each of these realms.

Five hundred years ago, Leonardo da Vinci anticipated the consequence of this, at the time, emerging view. He named it an *abbreviators* approach. He saw that in missing the embeddedness, embodiment, and interconnectedness of the thing we observe in favor of some abstract, abbreviated representation of it or merely its immediate utility, we miss the fullness and even enchantment of the thing itself. He made explicit that taking this shell, thinking we have the nut, leaves us doing injury to *knowledge* and to *love*.

Though we can now acknowledge the domination of this abbreviators approach, we can also recognize a great shift in worldview that is well

underway, a shift toward a more interdependent, integrated, systemic, and holistic view. This invites a profound recalibration of knower, knowing, and known.

This new and improved worldview may update the dominant one and provide a more accurate and judicious guide to actions and ethics. However, a worldview, in the end, is itself an abstraction. It is necessary, but alone it is not sufficient to undo the damage to knowledge and to love.

Our great ability to objectify and abstract has left us outside the world and our bodies, searching for a way back in. Today we are not simply looking for a description of life; we are hungry for an experience of being alive. That experience comes from being embodied in the world here and now. The question becomes how do we move toward not only an upgraded worldview, but also to a *world presence*—a way of being and knowing more congruent and integrated with this new view.

There is a long tradition from Plato to Augustine to Descartes and beyond, of thinking ourselves as detached from the body, the body of nature, and from one another. Our physical body has been perceived as a container of suffering—the prison house of the soul for Plato; the throbbing source of moral failure as Augustine understood; and for Descartes, a machine on which the head rides around. Though we have fascination with some bodies, the body as source of knowing has largely been dismissed as illogical, subjectivity reserved for the artist, senses viewed as untrustworthy, feeling seen as merely a byproduct of thought.

Although we are not even close to having it all mapped out, we have been putting our parts back together. That is, mind and body, gut and brain, hand and head, thought and feeling, self and world exist not separate from one another, not even as connected as early mind-body medicine understood, but as a complex, interactive unity within and between us.

What Michael Gordon does in this fascinating book is to describe a practice of dynamic presence—a *do*, a way—that brings us back into the world and our self in a profound way.

His approach, framed with rich scholarship both East and West, and colored with his own vibrant lived experience, recognizes our knowing as *enacted*—we call the other into being and are likewise called by the field around us. As such, deep knowing is an *emergent* property of our meeting the world. From research on empathy, interpersonal neurobiology, and cross-cultural perspective, he maps our knowing as *extended*, beyond our individual brain and mind. Further, this knowing is embedded in the

world, touched by currents seen and unseen. Foremost, it is *embodied*, full of all the felt sense, movement, feeling, images, thoughts, and spontaneous wise action that come from deeply inhabiting this form of ours.

Drawing especially from experience of Aikido, Shodo—the way of calligraphy, psychotherapy, education, and motorcycling, Michael Gordon uncovers the underlying contemplative practice of skillful embodiment and somatic-energetic attunement. This expanded, integrated way of knowing sets that stage for an ethic and a telos that helps balance principles and practice, worldview and world presence. In so doing, this moves past subject-object distinction toward intersubjectivity and then, the step further, into an ecological perspective whose ethic emerges organically as a commitment to collective well-being, to love.

This work is profoundly relevant for education and for life—for how we meet the world. Beyond the conventional knowledge and skills of education, it is the practice of self-cultivation toward psychospiritual development that is the heart of this work and the potent offering for a way of being.

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PREFACE

ON JOYFUL IMMERSION

One of my earliest memories as a young boy is of learning to fly a kite. Standing out on the windswept muddy flats of Vancouver's Locarno Beach, the tide exposing a seemingly unending expanse of wet sand out into the harbor. Or perhaps it was the long grassy knoll rising above the rocks leading up toward the cliffs around the University of British Columbia and neighboring Wreck Beach. I felt the wind push and knock me about as I struggled to keep my feet planted, my tiny hands wrapped around the plastic spool of nylon string, the other end of which was connected to a brightly colored diamond-shaped kite, flapping in the wind like a restless bird set to take flight. Perhaps, an adult or parent was holding the string along with me, arms wrapped around, coaching me through the steps, or maybe holding the kite slightly aloft for takeoff. 'Run!' they said, releasing the kite. 'Run, run, run! Let the string out now!' I felt the whoosh of air as ran headlong into the air current, the kite struggling and pulling against the string, trying to tug it away from my grip. And then suddenly, a feeling of ease, of lightness and giddy joy: The kite was soaring upward, darting through the gusts of wind but stabilizing and pulling skyward as I let out the string. It was exhilarating to feel connected to that magical object, as if I too was flying toward the sun like a bird, feeling the pulse through the string of the kite as it danced above me, guiding and joining with it through the choreography of my hand movement.

Sense memories like this come flooding through as I let my body and imagination revisit these early experiences. As a young child growing up on the west coast of British Columbia, our family and that of my parents' close friends co-rented a house in the summers on the Sunshine Coast, a forested and rocky peninsula jutting northward a short ferry ride away from the city, and which overlooked the Salish Sea toward Vancouver Island. Now that I have bought a house on the same coast, I reflect back on the countless hours I spent here mesmerized with the marine life teeming in the tide pools along the rocky beaches. Countless more were spent exploring the thick coastal forests with their majestic trees and woodland creatures, tiny and large. The real and imagined world I moved through intermingled through stories, drawings, and future nature trips and, as a teenager, a developing passion for capturing this sensuous beauty through photography.

Looking back, I can make a clear connection between my earliest physical and emotional sensations connected to discovering my own body sensations and movement, and that of the natural landscape and life around me. This curiosity and intrigue would carry forward through a plethora of physical activity: Skiing, racquet sports, soccer, hockey, and baseball were part of my sporting and physical life, some of which carry through to this day. Competitive team sports and their attendant machismo tendencies, however, never really took root, despite the usual boyhood fantasies about wartime heroism, battle courage, and myriad other 'combative' or revenge scenarios. As I reflect back on these more meaningful and authentic early kinesthetic experiences, two elements stand out prominently. Firstly, that, as I just mentioned, *competition* was a social or performative dynamic that did not ultimately resonate deeply. It was the *doing* of the activity, the joyful immersion and call of natural curiosity and skill-enhancement that carried me through. Second is that the mirroring of the rhythmic movement and energy of natural life around me that *did* move me (i.e. observing, being in nature; solo, non-competitive activities like swimming, cycling, climbing) have led to the most lasting, meaningful, and ongoing interactive passions in my life. These enduring activities fall into three broad autobiographical categories: music, Aikido, and motorcycling. This book explores the latter two—Aikido and motorcycling—as core practices in my life. I have deliberately left music, acting and other creative pursuits aside in this study, as they would likely comprise an entire other exploration. In place of the professional career and life path, I have pursued through singing, playing guitar

and piano, songwriting, and playing in musical groups since the age of 13, I have explored the kinesthetic, aesthetic, and rhythmic body movement of music performance (i.e.) through the taking up—for the purposes of this book—of another creative practice: Japanese calligraphy or shodo. In essence, I wanted to ‘port’ my other lifelong practices (Aikido, music, sports, photography) into something new, and specifically as an exploration in the context of this study about *self-cultivation*—of practice as a mirror of one’s spiritual development.

I bring up these early life memories to draw a line from my early psycho-emotional and kinesthetic inclinations through to the present as a way of getting at what Henry writes of as ‘life phenomenology’ (Henry 2008, 2015). Henry refers to the ‘auto-affectivity’ that inhabits and informs our senses and connects us to the vital energy that suffuses life all around us—in nature, and in our bodily, emotional and psychological registers as we move through our world of experiences. Rather than forming a phenomenological study per se, however, this book examines the ways in which this universal and vital life energy (*ki* in Japanese) infuses, animates, informs, and gives rise to self-cultivation and increased relational awareness through conscious and concerted reflexive practice. Overall, the various life experiences that form the ‘ground’ of this book are drawn out across all aspects of living, with a particular emphasis on *interdependence* and a specific emphasis on the practices of motorcycling, Aikido, and shodo (Japanese calligraphy). While not everyone may take up the practice of Aikido, shodo, or motorcycling, the virtue-ethic and embodied approach to these practices as *way* is put forward here as an orientation that offers more generalizable insights into teaching and learning relationships that may become more fully conscious, humanized, and attuned aspirationally toward harmonious relationship-making.

This book evolved from my doctoral dissertation, titled ‘Practicing Love: Embodied Attunement Through the Lens of Aikido,’ and which was defended at Simon Fraser University in the fall of 2018. As a manuscript thesis it is comprised of essays which are self-contained, have been presented at peer-reviewed conferences, and otherwise appear elsewhere as peer-review publications in specified academic journals and books. Collating these essays here as chapters from which they originally appeared in thesis manuscript form invites a difficulty in linking them thematically, with the disadvantage that each piece cannot refer back to the overall thesis in which they are placed. Thus, this opening piece serves as an expanded and exploratory essay on the themes and concepts that

unfold through the book pieces and form the shape of this book. Overall, the essays here shape the thesis' dominant theme of practice as self-transformation, toward healing or wholeness. This relationship to practice reflects strongly the classical East Asian philosophy, such as Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism, and their view of education as self-cultivation, especially through contemplative practices. From this viewpoint, education is *ontological* in nature, and spiritually speaking, cosmologically situated. One's *beingness*, hence the ontological, is inseparable from one's self-development toward an understanding of their place and practices within-the-whole. Learning as self-cultivation, then, is a circular, cyclical, and holistic integration of practice and self-reflection that both occurs through and results from intersubjective and non-dual awareness.

The book itself is structured, and its constituent essays organized, to model this cyclical and holistic framework of self-cultivation. This learning cycle is grounded with the purpose of virtue ethics as self-cultivation at heart and, as we shall see shortly, is thus *teleological* in nature. The book is organized into three parts that reflect this cyclical or holistic structure. Part I follows this introductory essay and takes 'A Psychospiritual View of Self-Cultivation.' The idea here is that our unique, localized, idiosyncratic conditions form the 'ground' of our being, our immediate outlook, psycho-emotional conditioning, or in Buddhist terminology, our 'dependent origination.' The first chapter examines pedagogy as fostering 'wholeness' or 'healing' by developing a more holistic, 'ecological,' or non-dual viewpoint. Part II moves into practice of this non-dual viewpoint through 'An Intersubjective View of Knowing and Being.' The two essays here look at the phenomenological, psycho-emotional, and relational aspects of Aikido and motorcycling, respectively, and how they inform intersubjective awareness from a practice orientation of mind-body integration, which itself approaches a non-dualistic experience and outlook. Lastly, Part III forms 'A Relational View of Practice' by looking at how the embodied attunement practice of Aikido can inform transformative and self-reflective learning through 'embodied habitus' (Inoue 2006) of non-dual relationality in broader relational and pedagogical settings. The following sections of this introductory essay expand on these themes of self-reflective learning through practice, through autobiographical notes that situate my research, more detailed unfolding of the holistic methodology and conceptual framework, and the thematic and theoretical perspectives in which the book as a whole is framed.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to express my sincere gratitude to my partner Helena for her inexhaustible support, insight, and resolve in helping me through my doctoral degree journey. I would also like to extend my deep appreciation to my senior doctoral supervisor, friend, and colleague Dr. Heesoon Bai, without whom my discovery of my deeper potential on this path would not have been possible. Thank you, Heesoon, for your belief in me and my work from the beginning, and the patience and determination in helping me see my vision through to completion. I would also like to acknowledge my doctoral supervisor Dr. Stephen Smith for his humor, continued commitment, and critical insights into my work as we pushed it along toward being more meaningful, alive, and relevant. I wish to also extend my gratitude to Dr. Avraham Cohen whom as both colleague, friend, and fellow *aikidoka*, saw promise and potential in the rich interweaving of the psychological, spiritual, and phenomenological aspects of the interpersonal practices and values we have in common. I also wish to thank Dr. Mark Fettes and Dr. Vicki Kelly for their personal and academic friendship and guidance along the journey toward this dissertation. I am acknowledging here two pivotal teachers in my life and work: Kazuko Ikegawa Sensei, for guiding me on the path to discovery in Japanese calligraphy; and Sensei Stephen Duffin for his continued support, friendship, and guidance through Aikido both on and off the mat.

My heartfelt appreciation also goes out to Dr. John P. (Jack) Miller and Dr. Jing Lin for their gracious support and guidance, and their unflagging contributions in promoting holistic and contemplative approaches to

education. To Dr. Tobin Hart, I extend my deep gratitude for your mentorship and friendship as a fellow traveler, scholar and human on the path to creating a better world for all beings.

Lastly, to my parents, without whom I wouldn't have come into this world: For the difficult but transformative growth together along this path of life, one which has allowed me to appreciate the best in each of them and the opportunity to continue to discover the person I am.

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