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# AikiSoma

## Restoring the Dignity of the Body

**Bertram Wohak**



*AikiSoma is the body which has come to full life and which is consciously inhabited. It is the body that has gained back its dignity. As Aikisoma, the body is no longer an object but a state.*

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In the Western societies of today, cults of the body are spreading out where the body is manipulated, exhibited, used, disregarded, or turned into a machine. In this more and more dominating current, the body is forced to function, and if it refuses to do so, it is repaired by „experts“ with frequently dubious success, often geared to top performance. If it is unable to perform in the desired way, a supermarket for pharmaceutical preparations exists. If the body is not liked anymore, there is plastic surgery, body design, or the Botox injection.

We understand the language of our body less and less; it has to scream with pain to be able to penetrate our deafness with the only result to be brought back to silence again by means of pain killers. Thus, the body literally becomes the Brother Donkey of Franciscus of Assisi, on which our

ego rides with its phantasies of performance, beauty, and eternal youth. This state of unrelatedness and alienation is the basis for many lengthy and chronic complaints; it reinforces and prolongs them. This common lack of relationship with the body causes a high degree of social costs and personal suffering; it lessens our quality of life and robs us of our dignity as embodied beings. In order to really come alive, it is necessary to wake up our senses again and to connect us as intensively as possible with this unfathomable, wonderful, pain-creating, pleasure-giving, ageing, and surely mortal temporary home which we call body. Then it could teach us something which goes far beyond this.

Every person embodying himself/herself more and more essentially contributes towards his/her own happiness in life and at the same time changes the situation in society. If body-awareness increases in our society and reaches a threshold, a critical mass, so to speak, then it will not only change the structures of our health-care system but also those at work, in education, leisure time, traffic, and probably also in a multitude of other domains. Environmental awareness has required about thirty years and a series of catastrophes to get out of its niche existence, to penetrate all sections of life, to reach the level of ministries, and to become an increasingly important subject of global politics. A similar kind of attention as we are meanwhile summoning in our dealings with the outward nature is what our relationship with our body, our true inner nature, deserves.

## Auricular Acupuncture in the Treatment of Tinnitus Aurum

The Japanese term is  
formed from two kanji:

合氣

ai – joining & ki–spirit

### AikiSoma – being at home in one's own body

The alternative draft to the prevailing state of body estrangement is the state of perfectly alive, inwardly perceptible, and consciously inhabited body which I refer to as *AikiSoma*. In *AikiSoma*, the body is not an object anymore but a state in which the body has gained back its dignity.

*Soma* comes from the Greek (σώμα) and describes the living, self-regulating and sensuously perceiving body. *Aiki* is an old Japanese term chosen by Morihei Ueshiba<sup>1</sup>, the founder of the martial art, Aikido, as central component of the name of his art. According to Master Ueshiba, Aiki is the universal principle that keeps all things together. It became apparent to him as the harmony of nature, as the union of body and spirit, of the Self and of others, of the individual and of the universe.

This way of thinking is also not completely new to the people of the West; after all, the Greek root word of "harmony" means "to join something together" in the sense that it is the opposing forces which are compelled to form the unity and to support it"<sup>2</sup> Harmony thus certainly does not mean a pale and weak state but rather the unification of opposing forces as a state of greatest strength.<sup>3</sup>

*AikiSoma* is a concrete vision of humans as beings who have "come back to their senses", respecting and observing their "being embodied" as the nature which is theirs and who use this awareness to get into a relationship with themselves, with their fellow human beings, and with the natural environment. *Aiki-Somatics* is a

path to the state of *AikiSoma* and offers the opportunity to walk this path in collaboration with others.

With *Aiki-Somatics*, a bridge is built between Eastern and Western views and approaches. According to Thomas Hanna, an American philosopher, former pupil of Moshé Feldenkrais and creator of the body therapy of *Hanna Somatics*, *Somatics* is the field in which the body is experienced from the inside by the perception of itself using postures and movements.<sup>4</sup> Thomas Hanna described this as the "First Person Viewpoint" and clearly differentiated it from the "Third Person Viewpoint", which is prevailing in our society and in which one regards oneself as from the outside and then becomes aware of a body. This view from the outside is usually marked by a lack of self-awareness. In this case, body is then something which might *belong* to us, but it is not something we are. In a certain sense, the German language also knows this considerable difference because it has words "Körper" as well as "Leib".

### What is Aiki-Somatics Training Like?

*Aiki-Somatics* improves the mobility, deepens respiration, normalizes the muscle tone without one-sidedness, and helps to restore an upright and symmetrical body. This way, the body can freely move around a consciously sensed centre. *Aiki-Somatics* weakens counterproductive reflexes e.g., ducking down and holding of breath in case of fear and threat, and it initiates new reaction patterns, e.g., in the case of loss of balance and dropping down; and it creates new trust in

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the body. This way, the participants of the training get back to more natural movements and increasingly experience their bodies from the inside. In this manner, the mental and physical preconditions are created in order to cope with the challenges of everyday life in a creative and mobile way.

For this, six main subjects are focused on. Even though the individual exercises are primarily assigned to only one of these subjects, the training frequently takes place in such a way that several or all of these subjects get touched upon.

## 1. Development of Body Awareness

It is elementary that we learn to start feeling as intensively as possible in all our postures and movements. *Feeling* means to be in connection with the processes of the body, with its warmth, its tension, its extent and orientation within space, with all forms of pain, pressure, lightness, etc. To experience oneself means to bring the stream of information that uninterruptedly enters into the brain from the inside of the body via the sensoric nerve tracts into awareness and which usually remains unconscious. In feeling, life becomes aware of itself.<sup>5</sup>

Normally, the terms for feeling and feelings are used synonymously; however, there is a considerable difference. As opposed to feeling, terms for feelings like joy, annoyance, fear, or fright already contain evaluations of the feeling. Here, however, feeling should be all about immediate sensoric experiences. These experiences are to be perceived without evaluation.

We are only able to feel what is *now*. Feeling transports into the presence; feelings, however, always hold a proportion of memories of former experiences.

Thus, Aiki-Somatics trains the ability to reconnect with the body in a direct and an immediately sensible way. We enter into a new kind of relationship with our body. We re-learn its language: its vocabulary is the feeling of body awareness. For most people, the language of the body is limited to a few sentences like "this feels good", "this is pleasant", "this hurts", or "this is unpleasant" – thus, in terms and idioms that are already connected with evaluations. It is rather a question of developing the richness and complexity of sensoric perceptions and to use descriptions which are free of judgement and are almost physical terms like "warm", "broad", "long", "supported", "stretched", "pulsating", etc. This way, we add to our outward perception a refined self-awareness and begin the real habitation of our body. We are returning home. Only within the framework of this renewed and deepened relationship with ourselves can further methods in the training of Aiki-Somatics develop their full effectiveness. In the beginning there is the attentive self-observation in tranquillity and movement. During its further course, the self-awareness is then further deepened in situations of interaction with others.

## 2. Finding your Centre

In a culture of permanently increasing distractions and diversions, we exist everywhere but not where we are right at the moment. The new media

creates a suction of desensualization and body loss, and you only have to go on a trip using public transportation or walk through the pedestrians' zone in a large city to convince yourself of this. Spirit and body are split; one does not feel real in what one is doing but rather lives in a world of ideas and is not completely present. Basis for contentment and success, however, is a state of presence, and for this, physical and spiritual centring is decisive.

*Physical centring* is connected with a state of relaxation, a medium muscular tone between slackness and tension. For this, an aligned and integrated body structure is necessary which allows the practicing of postures and movements efficiently with lowest possible strain. Whether we sit, stand, walk or lie down, our spinal column should be aligned, our respiration should flow freely and naturally, and we should feel our body from the inside. Structurally observed, in a well-organized and upright positioned body, the main segments of head, shoulders, chest, pelvis and legs are arranged vertically above each other. This body structure requires only minimal muscular tension to keep upright in the gravitational field and therefore enables the best possible freedom of movement.<sup>6</sup> Ida Rolf, creator of *Strukturelle Integration*, took the view that a body with such aligned structure even becomes energized by gravitation. He stated, "A symmetrical, balanced pattern in the array of the material body segments of a person allows its smaller field of energy to become reinforced by the larger field of the earth".<sup>7</sup> Physical centring

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thus gets us into the right relationship with the cosmic principle of gravitation in which we live as physical beings like fish in water - even though we are not aware of this most of the time.

Physical centring is made difficult because of a scheme which is much spread in the West: we live in a "culture of doers", whereby mainly the shoulders and arms are used in physical activities, while the rest of the body is forgotten. We are "body-oriented", so to speak. Our physical centre, however, rests in the pelvis, and the strongest muscles are connected with it. It requires a lot of training and body awareness to establish the centre of activities 'one floor below' and to use the complete body together with the pelvis during movements. The energy which is then released, with apparent ease, is often bewildering for untrained persons.

*Mental centring* requires a relaxed non-undistractedness. It is the middle stage between the extremes of strained concentration and careless relaxation. Being centred refers to the mind in a wide awake and simultaneously relaxed state with regard to outward objects of perception, to the body, or to one's own mental processes. We do not allow the mind to stray and to occupy itself with things that have nothing to do with the Now. We are mentally present. This leads to a state of presence that allows free and direct answers to the events we are confronted with. This way, we step into the right relationship with ourselves, a state where we can experience an inner peace and in which we can live up to maximal creativity and effectivity.

A vital means to centring oneself again is breathing. Breathing is the outstanding body process which can be unconsciously, vegetatively controlled by the body and can also be consciously and arbitrarily controlled by the mind. Breathing is at the same time physical and mental, material and immaterial, unconscious and conscious process. The development of breathing awareness is an essential part of Aiki-Somatics training. There are a multitude of breathing exercises and breathing techniques. In Aiki-Somatics I teach a way of breathing that, apart from Budo arts, is practised in the traditional Japanese Noh theatre. Its principle lies in the technique of keeping one's breath inside the lower abdomen at the right moment and - with the feeling of a firmly filled energy sphere in the area of the body's centre of gravity - to carry out actions in a powerful way without breathing out. "One of the secret techniques of the Noh theatre lies in the knowledge of when you have to stop breathing. If for example you change from a sitting to a standing position, you breathe in while you are still sitting, then stop breathing, and get up without breathing out." <sup>8</sup> According to the Eastern paths of the body, this work with body and mind has at all times been a natural and indispensable part of their practice.

### 3. Establishing Contact

Self-centring and a positive self-awareness are fundamental for successful contact. In contact, the "First Person Viewpoint" experiences its extension by the "Second Person Viewpoint". We move about in the border

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areas between "I" and "You" in order to have the experience of a mutual being-together. Therefore, in Aiki-Somatics this exchange is the interesting part. Here, the exercise does not lie in a technique and the mastering thereof, but in the "air" between the practising parts. The "intermediate space" is focused upon in terms of space and time. Everything important happens in these intermediate spaces – as in Aikido, the "right distance" and "right timing" for the effectivity of the applied techniques. Is it not true that frequently the most interesting incidents of life take place in intermediate spaces?

In Aiki-Somatics training, special attention is paid to the establishment of contacts. In the sense of touch, perception of others connects with self-awareness. "With the other senses, this is not the case. If I see, hear, smell or taste something else, I do not at the same time have a corresponding awareness of myself. But I cannot put my hand on something other and sense it without sensing myself in the encounter with the other."<sup>9</sup> And much less am I able to touch another person, e.g., his/her hand or arm, without feeling myself in this contact. We cannot touch something else without touching ourselves.

This type of experience has disappeared from the life in Western culture to such an extent that it can "touch" us deeply inside once we get involved in this experience again. The sense of touch is therefore particularly suited for making new experiences in the intermediate space between self and others. If we really remain with ourselves here, physically and mental-

ly present, and in connection with our own centre, then this will give us the security to observe persons or events in an open and anxiety-free way in contact with external forces. Thus, the issue here is to find the "right relationship" in the sense of Aiki.

#### 4. Accept, Continue and Conclude

"Accepting what IS" means respecting the "suchness" of any situation or person one has come in contact with. This might possibly be the most difficult thing for us, for we all live under the dictatorship of unconscious suppositions, preconceived opinions, and judgements. In order to accept in this sense, we will first of all have to let go of these handicaps. A person centring in herself/himself, a person without contact avoidance, will have fewer difficulties in achieving this.

Aiki-Somatics practises accepting persons and situations as they are now. One could then be able to observe even an attack as a "gift of energy"; the perceiving reaction spectre will increase tremendously. We take up the impulse that is directed to us and connect ourselves with it without losing our centre. For example, we do not put up any resistance against an attack; we do not start a fight,<sup>10</sup> but rather connect ourselves with the attacking energy and protect ourselves by establishing the right physical and mental relationship with the other person. In the case of a verbal dispute, accepting could mean to inquire, to have something explained, and to allow the position of the other person to retain his/her view, without having to take it upon ourselves.

From the point of centring, contact and acceptance, now – as a *continuation* – starts a "dance of togetherness". In case of a physical attack, we protect ourselves in Aiki by not blocking the attack but by following its own logic of movement. If this is successful, one can use the energy of the attack and can simultaneously let a possibly underlying destructive intention drain away without taking effect. In case of a verbal dispute, continuation could, for example, mean to introduce arguments into the process now in order to influence it in one's own sense.

The aim is to *conclude* the interaction in such a way that no loser remains on the field. In a serious situation this would mean pointing out clear limits to destructive or aggressive behaviour, while at the same time, respecting an aggressor in such a way that he is neither physically nor emotionally injured. Even if he had not won with regard to his original goal, he would at least have had a chance to gain something with regard to an extended view. Win/win results are more frequently possible than is commonly thought. For this to happen, practice and most of all awareness are required – this is quite obviously what the world needs today on all levels: in our personal sphere, in our working life, and of course, also on the level of politics.

#### 5. Releasing our Ki

The Japanese term of "Ki" stands for universal energy, or referring to living beings, for their vital energy. Energy in the sense of vital energy always has an organizing function. It is the

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vital force that which brings forth organic life from dead matter and thus a higher organized state which from a physical point of view is more improbable than dead matter and which at the expiration of vital energy falls back into it.

Vital energy possesses a shaping intelligence; it creates and maintains the structures of the organism by continuous build up and break down in order to guarantee its functions. If the vital energy is hindered by any reason or if it is partly or totally withdrawn from the organism, then those forces that can weaken it, make it sick, or destroy it will be active.

This universal energy and power of life can be neither trained nor strengthened. It is infinitely larger than us because it has brought forth us. What we are, however, able to do and should do is to connect ourselves with it as far as possible. For this, we have to dispose of the hindrances inside of us which stand in the way of this connection. This removal of obstacles is traditionally aimed for by cleaning the body and the spirit. According to the founder of Aikido, Morihei Ueshiba, serious and devoted training in Aikido already brings about this cleaning. "Practice Aikido seriously, and bad thoughts and deeds will disappear in a very natural manner. Daily Aikido training allows your internal divineness to radiate brighter and brighter. Do not worry about right or wrong with respect to others. Do not be calculating and do not act in an unnatural way. Align your heart with Aikido and do not criticise other teachers and traditions. Aikido embraces everything and cleans everything." <sup>11</sup>

Retreats have proved to be particularly effective for the release of the KI, where one can – free from the usual bustle and habitual distractions – concentrate on special exercises for body (postures and movements), the energy (respiration and voice) and spirit (mindfulness and awareness). During one of these one-week retreats the following poem came into being:

### KI

*We do not have to acquire anything  
that is so fundamental that we  
would not exist without it.  
But let us discover anew  
this fundamentally simple,  
penetrating thing without a beginning  
which we had covered up with  
fear and hope,  
with carelessness and conventions.*

*We can experience it  
when we align and straighten up  
our body again  
with all the vitality and joy  
which has belonged to an upright  
position since our earliest  
childhood.  
We free our feet from the prison  
of careless uses  
and really put our life on both  
our legs again.  
We're standing and walking  
again and again as for the first  
time.*

*Our spinal column swings like an  
arched staff  
and pulsates the tact with each  
step  
of the kinetic melody of our body  
up to the crown and further  
above.  
We have finally stopped having  
a body,  
and begin with our incorporation.*

*It moves towards us  
when we stop  
running after the one thing  
that is as fleeting as clouds in a  
summer sky.  
And when we stop running away  
from the other  
that is as fleeting as the clouds in  
the winter sky.  
When we ease off our gripping,  
born from fear and hope -  
then, breathing, movement and  
awareness can flow together  
in unconstrained presence.  
Then the most simple things pos-  
sess the power  
to open the windows of our soul  
again,  
and we ourselves and the world  
are transformed.*

*We do not have to acquire any-  
thing  
that is so fundamental that we  
would not exist without it.  
But let us discover once again  
this fundamental, simple,  
penetrating thing without a be-  
ginning.*

## **6. Body Experience and Spirituality**

Only when we are perfectly present in our body will we be able to learn something through the body which surpasses the physical. "Religious leaders often speak about the necessity to bring the spirit into tranquillity and to return to God. However, the spiritual aspect should not be over-emphasized. Your body is the temple of the soul and the medium in which your true nature resides. Look after it well." says the founder of Aikido.<sup>12</sup>

Our "true nature" resides in our body. Through it, we existentially experience birth and death, joy and sorrow, delight and pain, health and sickness, and youth and old age. The body is the nature we are. The body can teach us humility for that which is greater than ourselves. The Irish philosopher, John O'Donohue, has described this in a poem :<sup>13</sup>

*Blessed be your body.  
May you realize that your body  
is a beautiful and faithful friend of your soul.  
May you experience peace and joy and  
may you understand  
that your senses are holy thresholds.  
May you learn that holiness is mindful regarding,  
feeling, listening and touching.  
May your senses collect you and lead you home.  
May your senses empower you forever  
to celebrate the universe  
and the secret and the possibilities of your being here.  
May the Eros of the earth bless you.*

## AikiSoma Restoring the Dignity of the Body

Aiki-Somatics is a way of becoming conscious of us again as a part of this universal process for living our life in this awareness.

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### Literature

*Morihei Ueshiba*

- 1 Morihei Ueshiba (1883 -1969) was one of the great masters in the history of Japanese martial skills. His special achievement lay in the connection of highly effective martial skills with deep spirituality. With Aikido, he developed an "Art of Peace and a human path of development which until today has spread out over the entire globe and is worldwide practiced by millions of people. (With regard to his biography, see Stevens, John,. Abundant Peace. The Biography of Morihei Ueshiba, Founder of Aikido. 1987)
- 2 Schadewaldt, Wolfgang. Die Anfänge der Philosophie bei den Griechen. 1978, p. 381. [The origin of philosophy]
- 3 "Die schönste Harmonie ist also der Einklang, der auf dem Streit beruht. Der Streit wird somit der Grund und Boden für die höchste Form von Einklang." (Schadewaldt, 1978, S. 382) [The greatest harmony thus is the accord which is based on conflict. Con-

flict thus becomes the base for the highest form of accord.]

- 4 „Somatik bezeichnet das Fachgebiet, welches das Soma erforscht, d.h. den Körper, wie er von innen, durch die Wahrnehmung der ersten Person, erlebt wird.“ (Hanna, Thomas. Beweglich sein – ein Leben lang. 1998, S.142) [Somatics describes the special field which examines the Soma, i.e., the body as it is experienced from the inside, through the perception of the first person]
- 5 "I feel myself! I am!", said the German philosopher, Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803), opposed to the reification of the body in the emerging Cartesian (Meyer-Abich, Klaus Michael. Praktische Naturphilosophie. Erinnerung an einen vergessenen Traum. 1997, p.261)
- 6 "Each posture is right when it is in accordance with the following rule: The bone structure counteracts the pull of gravity, and this releases the muscles for mobility... If the posture is bad, the muscles take over a part of the task of the bones." (Feldenkrais, Moshé. Bewusstheit durch Bewegung. 1978, p.100) [Awareness through Movement]
- 7 According to Rolf, Ida P.: Rolfing. Re-establishing the Natural Alignment and Structural Integration of the Human Body for Vitality and Well-Being. 1989, S. 30 (Translation by the Author)
- 8 Oida, Yoshi, Der unsichtbare Schauspieler, 1998, S.137. [The Invisible Actor]
- 9 Meyer-Abich, 1997, p.359
- 10, „In der Kunst des Friedens gibt es keine Wettkämpfe. Ein wahrer Krieger ist unbesiegbar, weil er gegen nichts kämpft. Siegen bedeutet den streitsüchtigen Geist zu besiegen, den wir



in uns hegen." (Nach Ueshiba, Morihei. The Art of Peace. Teachings of the Founder of Aikido. 1992, S.63. Übersetzung durch den Verfasser)

- 11 Nach Stevens, John. The Essence of Aikido. Spiritual Teachings of Morihei Ueshiba. 1993, S.99 (Übersetzung durch den Verfasser)
- 12 Nach Ueshiba, Morihei. The Heart of Aikido. The Philosophy of Takemusu Aiki, 2010, S. 91 (Übersetzung durch den Verfasser)
- 13 O'Donohue, John. Anam Cara. Das Buch der keltischen Weisheit, 1997, S. 95

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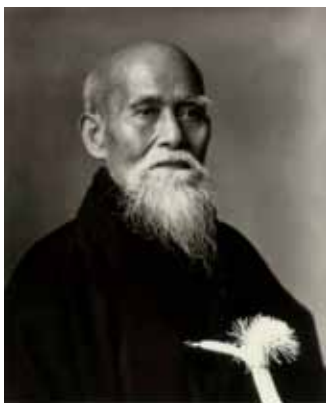
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"Victory at the expense of others is not true victory. Winning means winning over the mind of discord in yourself. Aiki is not a technique to fight with or defeat the enemy. It is the Way to reconcile and make human beings one family."

Morihei Ueshiba (1883–1969)