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THE MARTIAL ARTS AND MENTAL HEALTH: THE CHALLENGE OF MANAGING ENERGY[1]

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Summary.—The effective management of energy is an important dimension in the martial arts as well as the mental health professions. The Oriental concept of *Ki* is described, noting its Indian, Chinese, and Japanese development. *Ki* and the transfer of energy is studied through the martial encounter, using concepts borrowed from Japanese swordsmanship. *Ki* is also discussed from a developmental context as youngsters progress in Tae Kwon Do training. In examining the disciplines of Aikido, Tae Kwon Do, and Karate, it becomes clear that more is involved than kicking, punching, and throwing bodies on the floor. These martial arts have some important statements to make in the area of mental health, particularly in terms of energy—within our bodies, psyches, interpersonal relationships, and the universe.

What can Karate chops, Tae Kwon Do kicks and Aikido throws contribute to mental health issues such as relationship encounters, conflict resolution, motivation and personal energy, and the study of psychotherapy? Put another way, what can the martial artist offer the psychotherapist? One interface between the martial arts and mental health unfolds at the nucleus of each discipline: the effective management of energy. Both disciplines focus on energy—intrapsychic energy, interpersonal energy, the energy of being and existing. In transporting us into a closer contact with energy, the martial art schools of Aikido, Tae Kwon Do, and Karate focus directly on the energy involved in dealing with our own emotions, perceptions of trust and fear, and conceptions of reality. Also, these martial arts require us directly to examine the energy and demands in relating with another human being.

Aikido, one of the more spiritual and sophisticated of the martial arts, studies through the physical principles of entering, turning, and securing the energy within us, our partner, and the world about us. The word "Aikido" incorporates several elements related to energy: (1) "Ai," the concept of coordination, accord, harmony or blending; (2) "Ki," a rather complex principle, embodying psychological energy or spirit; *Ki* has many unique shades of meaning in Japanese and has proven difficult for Americans sometimes to understand. *Ki* can refer to the force behind all things, the universal force, a concept explored later in this paper. (3) "Do," a word denoting a way of life or philosophy of living. In psychological terms "Do" might refer to one's

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philosophy and style of life, embracing the very personal and intimate principles and mores which guide thoughts and actions. In the above definition of Aikido, perhaps the most significant component is the "Do," one's way of life which can express the energy within each individual, across societies, and throughout the universe.

In considering the interaction of energy within ourselves, within relationships, and within our world, concepts descriptive of a martial confrontation seem to have some application to relationships as examined through the perspective of Western psychology. At the risk of oversimplification, it should be noted that in the West, we as a culture seem to be primarily concerned with object reality—things we can put our hands on or see, stimuli that elicit sensations. We tend to see the spiritual through the physical. In the East, the opposite seems to hold. Reality is not what we can put our hands on but rather what we cannot touch. Reality is the relationship between objects. When we become aware of such an approach, we may discover a new if not clearer perspective.

Olson (1989) discusses two concepts useful in studying a martial arts encounter and the transfer of energy in such an interaction. These concepts, which he borrows from Japanese swordsmanship are *Hyoshi*, an interval in time and *Ma-ai*, an interval in space. In describing these, Olson identifies the graduated levels of interactions possible between an attacker and defender. *Hyoshi*, or intervals in time, progress from simply appraising an opponent's position and exploiting that position (*Sen*), to seeing an opening while already executing a technique (*Sen No Sen*), to a type of body intuition which perceives an opening when the technique is already applied (*Sen Sen No Sen*).

Applying this concept of interval in time or timing in Western psychotherapy is an essential ingredient within the therapeutic process. The idea of *Sen* is illustrated in behavioral conditioning strategies: the interval between conditioned and unconditioned stimuli or the interval between behavioral response and its contingent reinforcers are critical factors in establishing learned behavior (Kimble, 1961). More sophisticated timing, similar to what is described as *Sen No Sen*, is involved in an intuitive interpretation of a patient's remark. The effectively timed interpretation is not unlike that of the martial artist offering his wrist to an attacker who has not yet focused his energy but who is in the process of attacking. Using an example from another physical discipline, a well-timed interpretation in psychotherapy is like a quarterback passing a football to a spot his receiver has not yet reached, relying on "intuition" and practice in executing a completion.

Interval in space (*Ma-ai*) can be considered on several levels also, ranging from representing the physical distance between two people to the psychological distance which can be used as a mechanism to destroy the

intent, spirit, and technique of the opponent. The concept of physical and/or psychological distance and the respective characterization attendant to such closeness/distance is dealt with in considerable detail in group therapy and in research on body language. E. T. Hall, as cited by Vederber and Vederber (1986), comments on the variability in personal space, intimate distance, personal distance, social distance, and public distance. Levels of vulnerability and intimacy increase as the physical and psychological areas of interaction grow closer, and strategies for coping with such encounters change correspondingly. Physical distance often shapes the character of one's personal/psychological response.

Just as a description of a martial art encounter can enrich the perspective of what mental health professionals consider a relationship encounter, so too can the Oriental ideas of *Ki* enrich some of Western mental health professionals' awareness and appreciation of the "power within" each of us. For centuries Eastern philosophies and religions have cultivated concepts involving the "power within." Moving from India, such concepts arrived on Chinese soil where the Oriental philosophers labeled them as *Chi* (Jou, 1981).

In the Chinese schools of thought, *Chi* developed as a metaphysical notion referring to such concepts as the essential principle of harmony, the source of creativity, the vital fullness of life, the courage rising from moral righteousness, and the divine force that permeates all things. With such variability of meanings, *Chi* is a term of mystery, a term never precisely defined. By the philosopher, Lao-Tzu, *Chi* describes the void, the nothingness of the universe, and another philosopher, Chang-Tzu, describes the formative energy of everything (Jou, 1981). But both of these concepts refer to the same thing!

Fanciful stories arose in the Orient surrounding the mystical power of *Chi* (Jou, 1981). One such story is told of the founder of Tai Chi, one Chang San-Feng, who would leave no footprints in freshly fallen snow, but who melted such snow as he passed by using the energy of his "inner force" or *Chi*. Founder Chang was described by his followers as able to capture hawks with his bare hands and hold them within his palms. Stories were told of his catching speeding arrows in his teeth. He was described as making the walls around him shake in the presence of his internal energy.

When the metaphysical principle of *Ki* was introduced into Japan in the 7th century, it came infused with Buddhist thought which had come from India through China to Japan. The idea of *Ki*, coupled with the local Japanese view of nature, was described as the force responsible for the changing of seasons, the cycles moving from life to death to life again, and governing the ebb and flow in human relationships. The most dramatic changes in the interpretations and applications of *Ki* took place with the rise of the Samurai

class around the late 11th century. With the development of the martial arts, *Ki* takes on a singular position.

> In all matters related to the arts, including martial arts, superiority is determined through training and practice, but true excellence is dependent on *Ki*. The grandeur of heaven and earth, the brilliance of sun and moon, the changing of the seasons, heat and cold, birth and death, are all due to the alteration of *Yin* and *Yang*. Their subtle working cannot be described by words, but within it all things fulfill life by means of *Ki*. *Ki* is the origin of life, and when *Ki* takes leave of form, death ensues (Ueshiba, 1984, p. 23).

Concepts of *Ki* became more generalized, embellished and fanciful over the centuries. To counter exaggerated concepts, Donn Draeger, in his comprehensive book *The Martial Arts and the Ways of Japan* (1976), underlined more realistic observations of *Ki* and our power within:

> *Ki* is a concept that is both natural and simple. Those who would make of it something mysterious and akin to magical power do a great disservice to what is essentially a common thing. All human beings possess *Ki*. It is only that one must learn to release and utilize *Ki*, wherein lies the difficulty of expressing its nature and functions (Draeger, 1976, p. 143).

Morihei Ueshiba, founder of Aikido, made *Ki* the cornerstone of his "Way." In the words of this Japanese farmer and a master of the martial arts, O Sensei, Morihei Ueshiba, talked of the power within:

> By virtue of the subtle working of *Ki* we harmonize mind and body and the relationship between the individual and the universe. When the subtle working of *Ki* is unhealthy, the world falls into confusion and the universe into chaos. The harmonizing of united *Ki*-mind-body with the activity of the universe is critical for order and peace in the world (Ueshiba, 1984, p. 24).

The above discussion has underlined the original notion of *Ki*, the power within, as in the world-view of the Orient and as intimately woven within the myth of the formation of the world. But how does such a notion fit into a more modern world-view of psychology? In psychology, fact and fiction often make strange bedfellows, frequently blending myth, politics, prejudice, and brass instrument research in a kaleidoscope which reflects reality only dimly. Yet within the technology of modern psychology and our accelerating knowledge of mankind, psychologists occasionally acknowledge that, within our universe, our lives are intimately connected with the universe's order and change. We are parts of the bigger picture. As Carl Sagan (1977) reminds us, our bodies, psyche and spirit pulse with the energy of the heavens. All of us, from the Oriental martial artists to the modern day Western psychologists, may experience being at one with the universe.

The concept of *Ki* can be further clarified by a metaphor first introduced by Locke (1989), who likens the energy within each of us to a two-headed match that emanates energy from both ends. The bottom part is in our "center," the *tanden*, located approximately two inches below the navel. Our center is eternally lit and emanates energy in the form of vibra-

tions. This concept allows us an avenue of awareness of our bodies and gives us the eventual ability to control our physical selves within the confines of our nature. The other end of the match, our mind, is likewise lit and allows us knowledge and wisdom and to become aware of our mental potential and to cultivate these potentialities. In Locke's metaphor, *Ki* can refer, on the one hand, to the physical power within, the intense power emanating from our center, a power controlling our movements. The other end portrays another variation of *Ki*, the power of the mind, the power of consciousness, the piercing power of knowledge which leads to wisdom.

Quam (personal communication, 1989) focuses on *Ki* from a somewhat different perspective, using as his context, the physical development of young children. He notes how, in the martial art of Tae Kwon Do, youngsters' energies first are embodied in mastering the physical techniques and requirements of the martial arts and then, as they mature their energies are focused in a more constructive, interpersonally effective and socially appropriate fashion.

Quam draws additional parallels between the martial arts and mental health, noting how the similarities in their approaches, at least on the surface, toward stress reduction through exercise, such as aerobics, weight lifting, stretching, physical endurance training, etc. However, Quam further points out that martial arts move well beyond such physical activities and sports which are often defined only in terms of competition and so are somewhat strangled and restricted by such narrow definitions. He sees martial arts, such as Tae Kwon Do, capable of moving us much closer than sports to personal self-fulfillment, self-actualization, and increased awareness of the social and spiritual responsibilities we have towards ourselves and society. He sees the physical component of the martial arts to be an important initial step toward evolving an awareness of our inner selves, our sense of psychological identity, our social definition within our family, friends, and culture, and ultimately our place within the universe.

In the preceding discussion of the martial arts and mental health, it becomes clear that what such disciplines as Karate, Tae Kwon Do, and Aikido have to offer transcends the stereotypic notions of punching, kicking, and throwing bodies around rooms. The martial arts have some important things to say in the area of mental health, particularly in terms of energy . . . the energy within our bodies, the energy within our psyches, the energy that embraces interpersonal relationships, and the universal energy which permeates reality.

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