

Harmonizing Energy

One PT reveals the connection between Aikido and therapy

By Beth Puliti

LESLIE RUSSEK, DPT, PHD, PT, OCS, WAS JUST 11 YEARS OLD WHEN she developed a passion that would shape the rest of her life—Judo.

A refinement of the ancient martial art of Jujutsu, Judo—or “gentle way”—teaches the principles of cooperation (*jita kyoei*) and maximum efficiency (*seiryoku zenyo*). Students work for mutual welfare and benefit while using the least amount of effort to achieve the greatest results.¹

Though the Connecticut native received her shodan (first-degree black belt) and placed in national and international competitions, she stopped competing in Judo when she started college. Then, during graduate school,

she revisited the martial arts again, this time learning Aikido.

Twenty-two years later, she is still training in Aikido, has a yondan (fourth-degree black belt) and has been teaching in her own dojo (formal training place) in upstate New York for 10 years.

Dr. Russek believes the philosophy of Aikido guides the way she practices physical therapy due to their many similarities.

A Brief History

“The name ‘Ai-ki-do’ means ‘the way of harmonizing energy.’ The goal is to learn how to harmonize my energy with that of the world and people around me,” said Dr. Russek, associate professor at Clarkson University and part-time PT at Canton-Potsdam Hospital.

The martial art takes destructive energy (an attack) and redirects that energy so that it is no longer destructive. One tries to redirect the energy so that it becomes constructive. Aikido is about being able to unilaterally choose peace through having the wisdom, skill and strength to ‘impose’ peace—it’s not about being passive or weak, but active and gentle.

Many wonder whether Aikido is an offensive or defensive martial art, but it is actually neither. One must protect himself and the others around him while not injuring the attacker if possible.

“A person attacks and my instinct is to resist and fight back; however, this response only escalates the conflict. I need to train both body and mind to remain calm and relaxed, even if three people are attacking me,” she said.

“Aikido pushes us to our limits—carefully, in a safe, controlled environment—so that we can extend our limits. We try to overcome ego and our desire to ‘win’ by practicing responding to an attack and learning that, while the other person might fall down in the end, it is not my goal to make that person fall down.”

Rather than trying to correct others, Aikido teaches students to correct their own posture, tension and attitude. Dr. Russek describes the physical movement of Aikido as very fluid, dynamic and circular. While Aikido does not emphasize attacks, such as the punches and kicks demonstrated in Karate, energy may move back and forth several times between an uke (the attacker) and a nage (the one doing the technique).

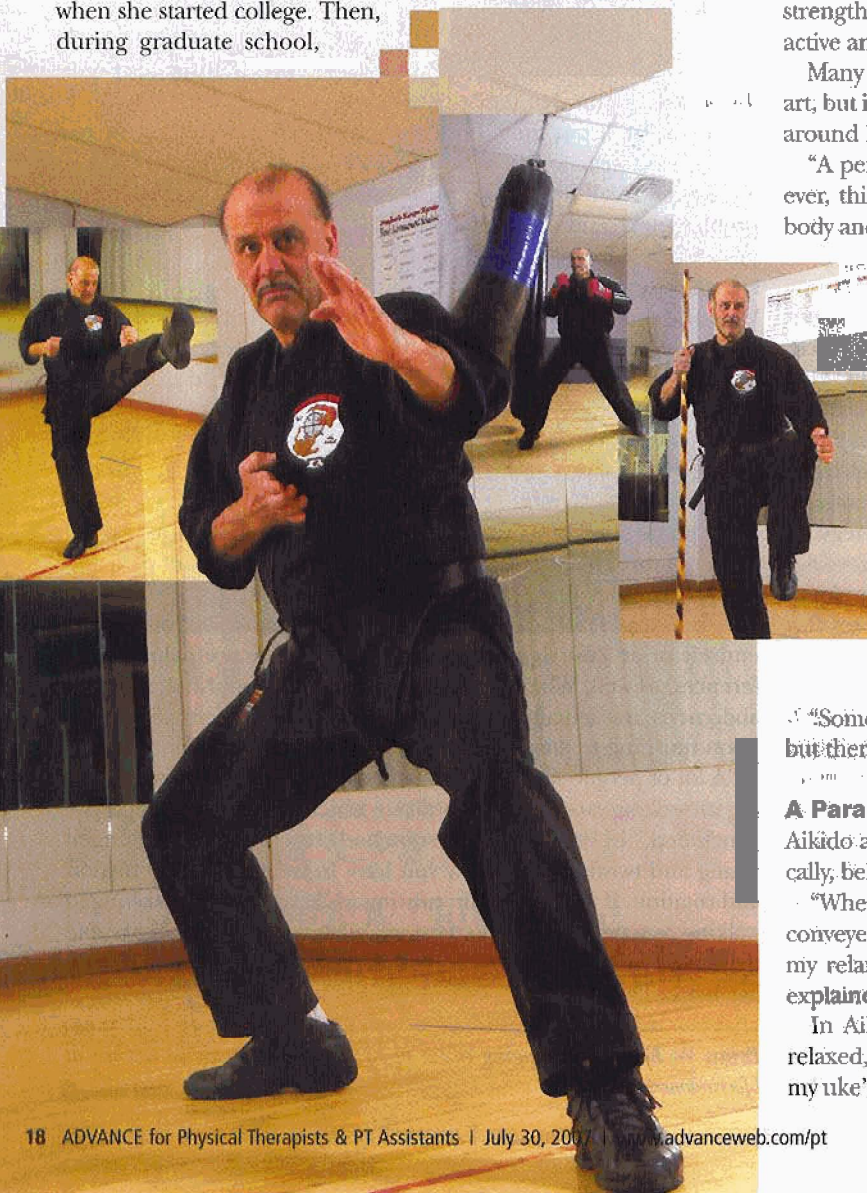
“Some Aikido movements are explosive and may look very direct, but there is always a spiral, even if that spiral is not visible,” she said.

A Parallel Relationship

Aikido and physical therapy overlap both physically and philosophically, believes Dr. Russek.

“When I touch a patient, I have to be relaxed or my tension will be conveyed to my patient and she will become tense. If I am relaxed, my relaxation and calm can also be conveyed to my patient,” she explained.

In Aikido, when Dr. Russek touches an uke, she must also be relaxed, otherwise he will resist. “If I am relaxed and soft, I can melt my uke’s tension so that there is no longer a struggle between us.”



She teaches her Aikido students to relax, just as she teaches her patients to relax. "Part of my teaching is by example, both through what they see me do and how they feel my touch," she said.

All martial arts teach about the center or 'hara'—a spot just below the bellybutton where energy comes from. In Aikido, Dr. Russek connects her center to her uke's center to redirect his energy. In physical therapy, manual therapy techniques such as joint mobilizations, massage and myofascial release require that she connect her center to her patient.

"If I try to do PT techniques from my hands or shoulders, I will be stiff and weak; if the movement comes from my center, my arms and shoulders can remain relaxed. The techniques (both Aikido and PT) are more effective and require less energy from me," she stated.

Posture is another critical element in both PT and Aikido. For PT, Dr. Russek said she must adapt good posture, otherwise she may fatigue or injure herself. She teaches her patients good posture so they can use their bodies correctly and place less strain on muscles, joints and fascia.

"I teach my Aikido students to use good posture as well so they can remain relaxed, so their movement can flow and they can be aware of their surroundings," she said.

"Some days I give the exact same instructions to both patients and Aikido students: 'Stand up straight. Pull your shoulder blades back. Open your chest. Lengthen your spine so that your head extends up and your tailbone sinks down. Breathe. Relax.' When people do these things, their bodies are lighter and movement more fluid—it doesn't matter if they are trying to do an Aikido throw or vacuum their floor."

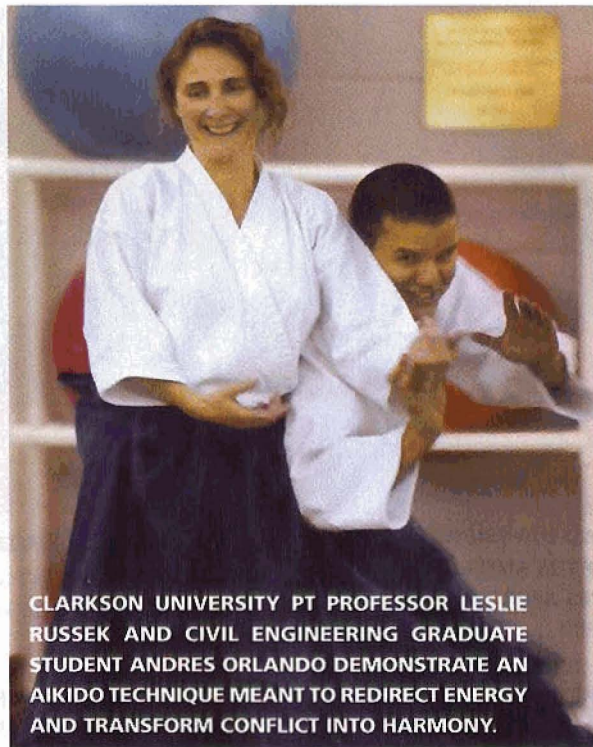
Aikido's Influence

Dr. Russek explained that she does not "fix" her patients so much as she guides them—through education and touch—to heal. And in Aikido, she doesn't "throw" her uke so much as she redirects the energy.

"In both cases, I am redirecting negative, destructive energy into a constructive outcome. I try to help my patients develop more control over their lives and their bodies. Similarly, my uke develops more skill in redirecting his own energy so that he can protect himself," she said.

Listening to the other person is a key component in both Aikido and PT. "In Aikido, I try to sense where my uke is coming from—what is motivating his attack? Is he attacking out of fear, out of anger, out of ego?"

"PT is much the same, especially with patients who have chronic pain. It is fairly easy to find a trigger point or locked facet; however, I need to probe deeper to find out why my patient has this trigger



CLARKSON UNIVERSITY PT PROFESSOR LESLIE RUSSEK AND CIVIL ENGINEERING GRADUATE STUDENT ANDRES ORLANDO DEMONSTRATE AN AIKIDO TECHNIQUE MEANT TO REDIRECT ENERGY AND TRANSFORM CONFLICT INTO HARMONY.

point. If the trigger point is from cervical instability, massaging the muscle makes the instability worse; if I can, instead, give exercises that improve stability, then the trigger point has less reason to be," she said.

In both cases, Dr. Russek "listens"—with her ears, eyes and hands—to find out what is going on under the surface.

Through Aikido, she has also learned the importance of being non-judgmental as a physical therapist. The martial art emphasizes acceptance of an attacker as he is. "Just because he is attacking me doesn't mean he is a bad person; maybe he is defending his child; maybe he feels threatened and doesn't realize I mean no harm; maybe he is really trying to attack someone behind me who wants to hurt me," Dr. Russek rationalized.

A physical therapist must also accept a patient as he is. "His bad habits or anger or tension don't make him a bad person; maybe he is coping with life as best he can; maybe the patient has been abused; maybe he is not taking care of himself because of family demands."

In both cases, Dr. Russek observes, accepts and redirects bad energy in more constructive directions.

The Benefits

When she worked with a more general orthopedic patient population, Dr. Russek developed a martial arts specialty because she understood what martial artists were trying to do with their bodies and how they got hurt.

"Then I would incorporate actual martial arts movements into rehab, because punches, kicks and rolls were 'functional' activities for these patients," she said. "I feel there is a demand for PTs with this perspective and expertise."

She noted she would love to see a Tai Chi class for people with fibromyalgia. The principles of posture, relaxation and breathing are integral to both martial arts and PT, she explained.

"I have had a few patients choose to study Aikido, though I never pressure and seldom even suggest it to anyone," she said.

Aikido can give people confidence and help them learn to trust others, she noted.

"I trust most of my Aikido partners with my life—literally as well as figuratively." ■

Reference

1. Judo Information Site. (2006). *Frequently Asked Questions*. Retrieved from the World Wide Web, <http://www.judoinfo.com/whatis.htm>

Beth Puliti is assistant editor at ADVANCE. She can be reached at epuliti@merion.com

CLARKSON UNIVERSITY