

EMBODIED PEACEMAKING

Version 3

Body Awareness Education for Reducing Violence and Systemic Injustice¹

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I suspect that there are very few programs that focus on reducing violence and systemic injustice that start with a foundation grounded in the body. By focusing on words, feelings, and ideas, most people miss the opportunity to include the powerful level of body awareness in peace work.

What do I mean by that? Love and power are normally perceived to be separate from each other and perhaps incompatible or even antagonistic. However, love and kindness without power are helpless and ineffective. Power without love is brutal, self-destructive and ultimately weak. Power and love are fundamentally the same in the body. That is the foundation for how we become more aware of and care more about other people. Any attempt to heal past trauma and prevent future injustice must take account of this for full success.

Powerlessness is the inability to control our body and our environment to meet our needs, including the needs for safety and comfort. When we don't have the resources to respond effectively to pain and danger, we feel helpless, and deep survival reflexes come up as responses. Fear, anger and numbness are basic human strategies for gaining control over difficult situations. Turn your energy toward escape, or turn your energy toward attack, or turn your attention away and don't feel the pain. If it looks different from you, it could be dangerous. Run or kill or shut down.

I imagine all that would have had survival value at one point in our history, but today it endangers our survival. Of course, this is not a new observation. But I suspect that even with that understanding, in some way inside us, it feels wrong to give up our old survival strategies. However, our survival strategies produce harsh and aggressive actions.

Harsh feelings are natural as part of the survival strategies for human beings, but they imbalance the body and interfere with clear thinking. Responding to people from the harsh body state creates a vicious circle. People's thinking, feeling and acting arise from fear and anger and create more fear and anger. In that state, people feel numb and alienated from themselves and from others. When people see the world through fear and anger, they tend to view other people—especially people who are different from them—as dangers and not fully human. In their numbness, they hurt

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others without realizing that the other people will react the same way to them. Similarly, numb people also unfeelingly hurt the other beings with whom we share the planet without noticing that when we destroy the web of life that we are part of, we will all die too. I think this process of fear/anger/numbness is the core of racism, sexism, family and international violence, political and religious violence, and ecological violence.

My understanding of the oneness of power and love and the weakness of fear and anger is an outgrowth of experiences which came to me as I worked at understanding my body in my aikido practice.

Aikido is a non-violent Japanese martial art, which I have been practicing for 51 years. Much of my body awareness education method is derived from my experience in aikido. Aikido defense techniques are based on joining with the attack and going along with the movement to control it. Underlying the practice is the philosophy that it is best to receive the attacker in a spirit of awareness, compassion, and power — and protect the attacker as well as yourself to the extent possible. It is demonstrable that this way of executing the fighting techniques is physically far more efficient and effective than basing your movements on feelings of fear, anger, dissociation, or revenge. And this attitude is a basis for resolving conflicts peacefully and will often prevent fights.

Many people find it hard to relate to the idea of combat as a way of teaching peace and healing. The logic is very simple. If you want to learn how to get along with enemies, you must have a bunch of enemies kind enough to practice with you for the 5 or 10 years or whatever it takes to master the necessary skills. A martial art is just the thing. It not only provides the necessary enemies, but it also gives very clear and concrete physical feedback about how well you're doing.

It usually takes a lot of practice to overcome our natural tendencies to respond with anger and fear to life's problems. Many people simply do not have the time or the energy to put into long and difficult training.

Such training is not always necessary. I have deliberately structured my teaching to stand on five simple exercises that are sufficient to serve as a foundation for healing trauma and injustice. I have found methods of teaching the core of aikido much more rapidly than is usually done. In addition, I have found ways of breaking the material free from the martial context in order to apply it in daily life. I call the system I have developed Being In Movement® mindbody education.

BIM is an educational process which uses a challenge/response model to explore the underlying links between structural/functional efficiency, emotional/personal growth, and social change. BIM examines how breathing, posture, and movement simultaneously shape and are shaped by thoughts, feelings, and intentions. BIM uses an experimental/educational approach. Instead of teaching the student to accept the teacher's ideas, BIM teaches the student how to examine body-actions and ideas, test them, and choose actions that work better.

I can summarize very briefly the core of what I want to teach people: You can choose your intentions and actions. Power without love is brutality. Love without power is ineffective. The unification of power and love allows us to function in a life-affirming manner. And it's all in the body.

I can help people learn in hours what took me years to learn. Then they have to practice! The core of what I have learned and teach is expressed in the five exercises detailed in this paper. However, there are a few preparatory experiences that will help.

SAFETY

Studying trauma and injustice can be uncomfortable and scary, so a safety contract is needed. The exercises will bring you into contact with your own body and your own responses. On the one hand, coming home to your body is very empowering. On the other hand, increasing your awareness of your body could bring awareness of unhealed traumas.

The safety contract is that you are the one in charge. Neither a teacher nor a partner in an exercise should force you (in any usual situation). If you wish to stop an exercise, by all means do so. If you wish to slow it down, then do so. No explanations needed. You can simply let your partner know what you need, and they should help if they can.

MOVEMENT RIDDLES

As a preparation for the five exercises, I often use some movement riddles to grab people's attention and get across some key concepts.

- **1** Stand up and imagine that on the floor, 2 or 3 yards (or meters) in front of you is a magic pen. With that pen, anything you write would come true. Wouldn't you like to go get it? Don't actually go get it or stiffen up to prevent any movement. Also, don't think in an abstract pictorial way about getting the pen. Simply relax, and desire the pen. Most people can create this feeling when they focus on it, though many need some guidance to home in on it. Once they establish this feeling, most people will feel themselves "involuntarily" tipping toward the pen. Why does this happen?

For the next step, stand up comfortably, and let your arms hang softly by your side. Now raise one arm out to the side up to shoulder height, and put it back down. Raise the arm up again, this time raising only half as far, and then put it back down. Raise it up a number of times more, each time raising it up only half as far as the last. At some point, the sensation of raising the arm will be clear inside, but the movements will be so small they will be invisible on the outside. At that point leave your arm down by your side, and raise the sensation up to shoulder height. Put your arm down again. And then at the same time raise both the feeling inside and the physical arm up to shoulder height.

What is happening here? This exercise is a way of feeling how intention operates to structure your body and movement. More fundamentally, it is a way of feeling how the mind and the body are really the same thing. What you want and choose automatically readies the muscles for action. Most people experience that in this last movement the arm feels lighter and moves more smoothly and more quickly. Clear intention makes movements more precise and more efficient. When people focus on the experience of intention, the almost silent beginnings of movement, they can perceive and control their movement better.

• **2** I have a student stand in a strong forward-stride stance, and I explain that I want him to resist me when I push on his shoulders. I ask whether the person has any physical or psychological issues which would make that unsafe. I ask him to lean into me a bit and make it very hard for me to move him. The demonstration is much more startling when I work with somebody much bigger and stronger than I. Then I ask the student to raise his eyebrows, and immediately I can easily push him toward his rear. Why? The answer is very simple. Raising the eyebrows is part of the fear/startle reflex, and another part is leaning back to get away from the object of fear. When one part of the startle response is done in the body, the rest of the response fires off too – even though there's nothing to be afraid of.



• **3** The student stands in the same stance as before, resisting my push on her/his shoulders. This time I have the person say something friendly to me and note what happens in her body. Usually there is no effect. Then I have her say something unfriendly and insulting. Almost always the immediate effect of saying something negative is that I can push her back fairly easily. Why? The body responds to unfriendliness and unkindness by contracting, and that interferes with fluid use of the body to achieve effective balance and deliver effective movement.

• **4** Many people use anger as a source of power. Push on the student's shoulders as in the second riddle. But this time have the student think of something that makes him angry. See whether that creates more stability and strength or less. Most people will experience less balance and less strength when they are angry as compared to when they are calm and kind. People often think of such emotions as anger or arrogance as being large and strong. In anger, muscles are tightened, breathing is more forceful, and all of that is actually a contraction. Anger is weaker compared to unimpeded action. There is no question about anger being a focused energy which can be very effective, for better or for worse. But it is not a healthy way to live and especially in the extreme is clearly self-destructive. Anger is really like driving with a parking brake on. Much of the strength you feel is actually effort wasted within your own musculoskeletal system. This is immediately clear when you drop below the abstract level of language and cultural assumptions and more directly experience what you are doing in your body when you do anger.

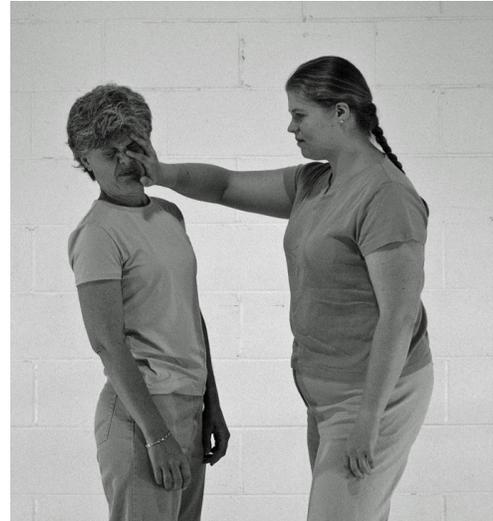
• **5** Stand in front of a student and grasp his/her wrist. Now pull him toward you. The student's task is to not be pulled toward you. Most people brace their posture and resist the pull. That is, of course, one strategy for succeeding at doing what was asked for. However, that strategy, though effective, takes a lot of hard work. I suggest that they simply walk forward. People realize that they interpreted the instruction to mean "Don't move forward." However,

the instruction actually was to not be PULLED forward, and the easiest way to do this is to walk forward — and take over the movement.

I use a number of somatic riddles, and they all hinge on taking a different perspective in some fashion. The point is that the body is where violence can be observed and peace practiced in a clear and concrete way, if you have the tools. These five riddles point to the fact that mind and body are the same thing. And they also point to the fact that the optimal way of functioning is based on the integration of power and love.

DISTRESS RESPONSE

When we encounter any difficulty, challenge, stress, threat, injury or attack, we typically contract or collapse ourselves to handle the situation. That is the distress response. We contract or collapse our posture, breathing, and attention—as the picture of the woman being touched shows. The problems can range from minor irritants up through intolerable pain. And the responses can be anywhere on a scale from very slight up to extreme. The contraction or collapse can take place in many systems of the body — breathing, attention, memory, vision, posture or movement. We experience these responses as fear, anger, dissociation, resignation, blame, distrust and so on. However, the commonality among all responses is the action of becoming smaller in one degree or another. I made up the word “smallify” to signify that what I was talking about was simply the act of getting smaller irrespective of the degree or whether it was tight or limp.



From my perspective, emotions are actions that we do in our body. Though we ordinarily speak of emotions as mental, they are fundamentally physiological events. I use the word “feelings” to refer to what is experienced by the person who is doing an emotion. In our culture, when people try to resolve life issues, working with feelings is more common than going directly to the body to observe the emotion. I find it easier, quicker and more effective to work with the body and to think about the body and to communicate about the body.

The powerful physical distress responses hijack the rational mind and compassionate heart and move our thinking and acting toward oppositional and violent ways of dealing with the challenges we face. Being hurt or hurting someone often leads to dehumanization of the other person and of oneself too, and out of this comes more prejudice and more distress.

FIVE EXERCISES

Just as you cannot dig a hole in the water, you cannot stop doing a particular behavior such as fear/anger. If you cannot stop an action, what can you do? You cannot stop an action in the sense of simply not doing anything. If you stop running, for example, you cannot simply stop running and do

nothing whatever after that. You may walk or lie down or sit or swing from the trees. You have to do a new, hopefully better action to replace an action that you find uncomfortable or unproductive. (Of course, we do say we stop running. But when we say that without specifying a replacement action, it is not that we don't do something afterwards but that we're focusing on speaking about what action we are stopping. So if a child is about to run out into the street and you yell and he stops, you stopped him from running into the street, and that's what you will talk about.)

You have to replace, not stop. After you release a bird from a cage, you're done. But if you try to release a problem, it doesn't fly away. What do you replace some unproductive behavior with? A more useful and incompatible behavior! For example, if you're trying to give up moving east, you could replace that by moving west. What do you want to be able to do instead of what you did in the past? What do you want to do instead of what you learned in the past and have continued to do in the present?

The opposite of and antidote to the physical state of smallness is a state of centered expansiveness. This state of calm alertness and compassionate power moves our thinking and acting toward empathic, assertive and peaceful ways of handling conflicts. And living in the present with compassionate power breaks the chains that bind people to past trauma and injustice—whether as perpetrator or victim.

This psychophysical state is not where most of us live. It is a specific physical state and is brought about by means of specific physical training methods. We are using five exercises here. Many more exercises and how they can be applied in reducing prejudice and violence are described in detail in my books and videos.

RELAXED CORE / BELLY BREATHING Let your tongue hang softly in your mouth. Most people will feel that this relaxes the muscles around the neck and shoulders. Let your shoulders and your armpits hang loose and notice the effect on the rest of your body.

Let your belly plop loose. Let your legs hang on the ground. Soften your hands and your feet. It is a cultural myth that we should suck in our guts. Try that, how does it feel? Most people feel that it makes them tense and uncomfortable.

When you inhale, where is the movement in your body? Up into your chest perhaps? That is fear/startle breathing.

The diaphragm muscle is the mover in the action of breathing. It is a dome-shaped muscle that stretches across the chest, and it functions like a piston. When it pulls down, air is sucked into the lungs, and everything below is displaced outward, primarily to the front where the abdominal muscles can allow movement (but to some extent to the sides and back since the rib cage allows some movement there as well).

Stand up. Now, put your hand on your belly and notice whether you suck in your belly or let it expand when you inhale. Then touch your low back, and touch your chest. Do they expand when you inhale?

Let your belly relax, and keep it relaxed as you inhale. Let the movement fall gently down into your tummy as you breathe in, and let your tummy expand. (Of course the air stays in your lungs, but this image will help you feel the movement all the way down through your body.) Your

belly should be the focal point of your breathing, but it is important to let your chest and back also swell gently as you inhale. Most people find this very calming.

Try walking around as you breathe from your belly. How does that movement feel? Most people feel that their movement is more relaxed, grounded and graceful. By breathing calmly during emergencies, you can actually keep your mind and body relaxed and alert and ready to deal with the problems confronting you.

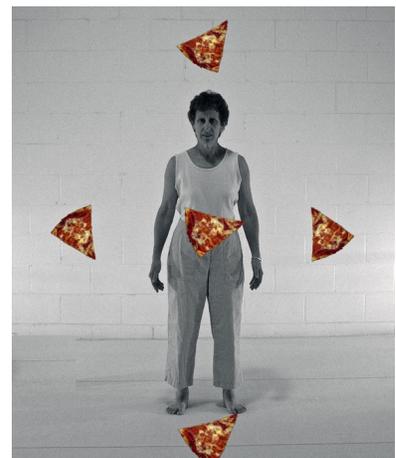
Compressing your belly as you inhale rigidifies your chest and back and creates a lot of tension in your whole body. However, if you have gotten used to sucking in your gut as you inhale, breathing in a more relaxed manner will feel strange. It may be so unfamiliar that it will feel uncomfortable and yet so relaxed that it will also feel comfortable.

SMILING INSIDE Everyone has something or someone that makes them happy inside —perhaps a friend, a child, a flower, a piece of music. Stand with your eyes closed, and spend a moment thinking about whatever it is that makes you smile inside. What happens in your body? Most people experience a softening or warmth in their chest, and a freeing up in their entire body. This is the beginning of learning how to manufacture the feeling of friendliness or compassion.

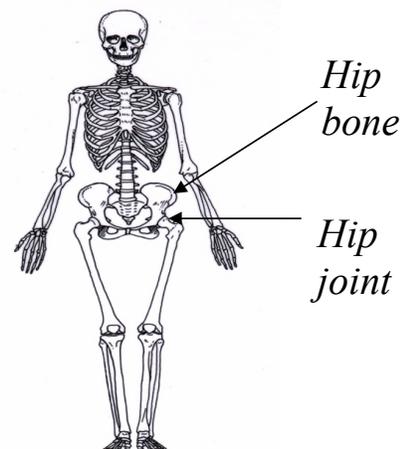
Can you use your image while you are in a conflict to keep your body stabilized in the feeling of compassion? That would alter your relationship to your opponent. Can you stay anchored in this feeling even when thinking about difficulties in your life?

SHINING Imagine that you are a star or a firefly or a light bulb. What do you do? You shine. Feel every inch (or centimeter) of your skin glowing outward, as you shine in every direction—as far out as you wish. How does that feel? Most people experience this as spacious and calm. This is the exact opposite of smallifying.

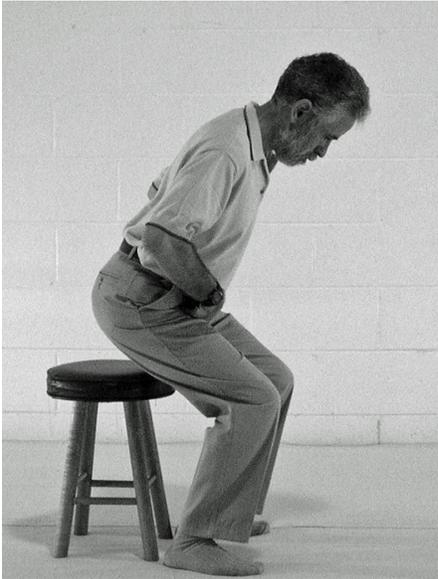
Some people find the idea of glowing or shining too abstract. Many of them feel it easier to reach their awareness toward some solid object which is a normal part of their lives. A popular image is that of reaching toward slices of pizza.



POWER SITTING Power is necessary to allow us to function in a loving and peaceful manner. The development of power starts with postural stability. Stand in front of a chair, and get ready to sit down – but in a new way. With each hand, touch your hip joints. Not the hip bones – which are the top edge of



the pelvis, but the hip joints – which are in the fold where the legs bend. Imagining a line from the hip joints to the tailbone, push your tailbone back and down along that line. This will lean your torso forward, but not too much. It will take you down to a sitting position. This way of sitting down creates a posture that is very strong yet without effort (see the photo). Most people feel calm, alert, and dignified in this posture.



POWER WALKING There is a standing equivalent of the sitting posture. Walk around barefoot, pay attention to how your legs and feet make your body move forward across the floor. Many people swing a leg forward, and the weight of the leg drags their body forward. Some people put a foot on the floor out in front of them and then pull themselves forward with it. Some people feel that when their foot is behind them, they push themselves forward with it.

Stand with your feet together, and jump up in the air. To jump up, you push down. To walk forward most efficiently, you push to the rear with the back leg. A simple way to experience this is to have a partner grasp your belt from behind you. Your partner



should pull back and offer moderate resistance to your walking. You will experience that the only way to move forward is to push backwards with the rear leg. People generally experience that when they walk with this awareness of the down/back thrust of the feet, their walk becomes more erect, clearer and more energetic. It is mechanically more efficient and powerful, and it is also much more psychologically confident and alert.

TISSUE THROWING: A PRACTICE ATTACK

How would you use this body awareness process in managing a challenge or a danger? Identifying the emotions as body actions, you could ask, “Where in my body am I doing something? And what am I doing there?” And once you identify what and where the emotions are, you can manage them and break their hold on you. It will not itself be the solution to the conflict, but it will enable you to think and act more freely and come up with a solution if one is possible.

Some aspects of this practice require other people as outer challenges, and some aspects you can practice by yourself looking inward at your internal challenges. However, in any case, ongoing practice is crucial.

Body-based self-regulation enables people to control their fear and anger and act in peaceful, healthy ways. If the conflict involves a physical attack, though it is counterintuitive, being kind and generous will free your body so that you can fight more effectively – if fighting is the only choice.

In the usual verbal disputes, body-based self-regulation enables people to stay focused on the substance of the dispute and not get distracted by the emotions that are stirred up by the dispute. Beyond that, if you notice that people’s emotions are hijacking the situation and preventing calm, respectful dialoging, you could ask for a 5-minute body awareness and breathing break.

Deliberately widening and opening yourself in the midst of conflict allows a cooperative peace process to begin unfolding. If you stay centered, you will not see the other person as an enemy or feel the urge to hurt him/her. Deliberately opening when you want to contract or collapse weakens the physical habits within you and enables you to live in a centered, strong, civilized manner.

Even though this process often works for people right away, regular long-term practice of somatic centering will make it easier to stay centered when a conflict arises.

How can we get a practical handle on what violence is and what its physical effects are? What we need to begin the investigation is a small piece of violence. If it is safe and small-scale, it will not cause unbearable stress, and it will be safe enough to study. But it must be real enough to arouse a response in you, or it will not be worth studying.

Ask your partner to stand about six or eight feet away (about two meters) from you and throw balled up tissues at you. Most people find that this mostly symbolic gesture does arouse some fear, but since the “attack” is minimal, so is the fear.

Calibration is important. The exercise must be matched to the student. In working with people who don’t feel much, it is often necessary to increase the stimulus intensity so that they get a response large enough for them to notice. I might wet the tissue so it hits with a soggy and palpable thud. Or I might throw pillows instead of tissues.

On the other hand, I often have people tell me that even throwing a tissue at them feels too intrusive and violent. In that case, standing back farther so that the tissue doesn’t reach them, makes the “attack” even more minimal. Or it may be necessary to do just the movement of throwing the tissue without a tissue at all. Perhaps turning around and throwing the tissue in the wrong direction will help. Or just talking about throwing a tissue, but not moving to do so at all.

The point is to adjust the intensity of the “violence” in this exercise so that it is tolerable and safe for you to examine. For most people that means revising the attack downward in intensity.

Once you have chosen your preferred attack, have your partner attack you and notice what happens in response to the attack. What do you feel? What do you do? What do you want to do?

There are a number of common reactions to the attack with the tissue. People being hit often experience surprise or fear. They may feel invaded and invalidated. Frequently they tense themselves to resist the strike and the feelings it produces. Some people giggle uncontrollably or treat the attack as a game. Many people get angry and wish to hit back. People may freeze in panic, and some people go into a state of shock or dissociation.

Most people talk about feelings and mental states. They are surprised, angry, afraid and so on. They want to escape or fight back. However, a very different way of paying attention to yourself is worth practicing.

Notice the details of your muscle tone, breathing, body alignment, and the rhythms and qualities of movement. Where in your body do you feel significant changes? What are you feeling in those locations? Rather than speaking in mental terms—about feelings, thoughts and words—it can be very productive to speak in body-based language. By paying attention to the physical details of your responses, you will begin to see more deeply into the ways you handle conflict. And learning to notice what you do is the first step in changing and improving what you do.

Notice what you do in your throat, belly and pelvis. What happens in your chest and back? Notice what you do in your face and head. Notice what you do with your arms/hands and legs/feet. What happens to your breathing? Is there anything else to pay attention to?

Most people realize that they tighten up when they are attacked. They may clench their shoulders or harden their chests. They most likely tense or stop their breathing. They may lean back or lean forward, but it is a tense movement. Sometimes this tension is fear, and peo-

ple shrink away from the attack. Sometimes this tension is anger, and people lean forward and wish to hit back. Do you do any of these things? Do you also do something else?

Many people find that they get limp as a response to being hit. Their breathing and muscles sag; or they look away and space out, simply waiting for the hitting to be over. They may feel their awareness shrink down to a point or slide away into the distance. Many people find that they experience both rigidity and limpness simultaneously in different areas of the body.

Some people find the role of the attacker far more difficult than the role of the victim. One idea might make the attacker role easier for you. It will help to remember that your attack is a gift to your partner. By being concerned and benevolent enough to attack your partner, you are allowing them the opportunity to develop self-awareness skills. Without your gracious cooperation, they would not be able to learn these skills, and when they faced real challenges in their lives they would be completely unprepared.

BEGINNING

Child abuse, domestic violence, interpersonal violence, prejudice and systemic injustice are all branches on the tree of *fear-anger-numbness*.

The crucial thought and practice advanced here is that in the body state of power and kindness, people are more aware of themselves and others, and that will change for the better how people interact. Individuals who try it find that it works to give more positive outcomes in the relatively small interactions of daily life. And there is no reason to believe it wouldn't work on the larger social and international levels to enable us to set aside feelings of danger and make choices to maximize well-being for all.

The problems that the world faces are large and we cannot afford for fear and anger to direct the debates that need to take place. If we can build a society that is body aware and interested in speaking and acting from a more balanced place, then the decisions we make collectively for the planet we live on are likely to produce much better results and we will be able to live together peacefully. All it will take is education and commitment—starting with the body and building from there.



PAUL LINDEN is a somatic educator, a martial artist, and an author. He is the developer of *Being In Movement*® mindbody education. He has a BA in Philosophy from Reed College and a PhD in Physical Education from the Ohio State University, and he is an authorized instructor of the Feldenkrais Method® of somatic education. He has been practicing and teaching Aikido since 1969 and holds a sixth degree black belt in Aikido as well as a first degree black belt in Karate. His work involves the application of body and movement awareness education to such topics as stress management, conflict resolution, pregnancy, computer ergonomics, music or sports performance, attention deficit issues, and trauma recovery.

Some of Paul Linden's papers, books and videos -- available on his website.

- Feeling Aikido: Body Awareness Training as a Foundation for Aikido Practice (300 pages)
- Confusion: Body Awareness, Intentional Movement & Clear Language as Foundations for Aikido Practice —My 50 Years in Aikido (4 hour video)
- Embodied Peacemaking —Five Easy Exercises, v3. (12 page handout. Free download)
- Reach Out: Body Awareness Training for Peacemaking – Five Easy Lessons (40 pages. Free download)
- Embodied Peacemaking: Body Awareness, Self-Regulation and Conflict Resolution. (164 pages)
- Embodied Peacemaking Video: Five Core BIM Exercises (1.5 hour video)
- Embodying Power and Love: Body Awareness & Self-Regulation (10 hour video)
- Winning is Healing: Body Awareness and Empowerment for Abuse Survivors. (410 pages)
- Talking with the Body: Body Awareness Methods for Professionals. (9 hour video)

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