

What is Aikido?

Aikido is a Japanese Art Form that was created by a noble man: Morihei Ueshiba. Morihei Ueshiba had a dream; any body could learn his style of martial arts. He was a spiritual man, but his art form was not based on religion. Morihei Ueshiba believed that this martial art was more than a means of self-defense; it was a way to change the world and make it a better place.

This is my belief as well and this concept is expressed through my teaching style. I have been studying Aikido for almost 18 years. As a teacher I find that most of my learning experiences actually come from my students. I think that my students are in fact a reflection of what I'm trying to teach. Through the years I have learned to take this conviction quite seriously. Through teaching I strive to blend in the concepts of honesty and integrity. This style of teaching is at times a bit difficult since I have to live my life in a way that reflects what I teach on the mat.

I feel Aikido has the potential to help change your lifestyle into a very healthy one. However, in order for this to happen, the student needs to direct their Aikido style in a way that it promotes good health.

Throughout my years of training, I have seen many people who do not use this approach. I've noticed that many people I respect, who have great Aikido style don't seem all that healthy and are always hurting in some way. I used to be one of those people and yes I was always in pain. I remember one day walking in to the dojo and seeing my Sensei lying on a bench and complaining about how much his back and shoulders hurt. He was ten years older than me and I thought that this just what something that happens as you age. But, one day something hit me like a ton of bricks. I remember not being able to turn my neck because it hurt so much and my shoulder use to pop out just by lifting it. Thank goodness I could at least roll and tie my shoes.

That was the day I began my new journey. I have a belief that if you give the body time to heal it will. I will ask students to leave the mat if I feel they are too hurt to train. I have confidence that if you give the body time to heal it will. I love to throw hard on the mat. However, I don't like to leave a student feeling like they were just beaten up.

This made me take a hard look at my falling technique and that of my students. This is one of the biggest challenges I have had in Aikido: to fall or not to fall. Aikido is about bringing your opponent down with the least amount of harm possible. This has been my biggest yet most rewarding struggle.

When I first started teaching children I couldn't throw them without saying 'if you don't fall you might get hurt'. That was when I discovered the beauty of Aikido. I changed my whole Aikido and found that I could throw without hurting. This is the way I teach. I realized that Aikido really does make you a better person, and that the heart of Aikido is being able to throw without injuring anyone.

The strange thing is the way I discovered how not to injure someone. I realized that if I showed my students the force and potential damage of each technique, just the right twist or turn that could break bones, they would know precisely what not to do when doing a technique. Many dojos use red tape to indicate an injury site. Needless to say at my dojo we don't have many accidents and red tape is only used as a respect stripe for the children.

I take The Do in Aikido very seriously. We have stripes for all the great qualities of Aikido from white for teamwork, to gray for focus at school. With adults I talk about the same principles (they just don't get the stripes).

I absolutely believe Aikido is about making the world a better place. But in order to do that, we first have to make ourselves better people.

- Bill Gray