

Featured Dojo-cho, November 2005



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I was first introduced to aikido as a teenager in 1969. It's a year I couldn't easily forget. Just a very short time after starting aikido at the local youth club in Bletchley, England, the instructor, Mike Smith from Towcester, suggested during class that we observe a minutes silence as we had just received news that the founder of Aikido, Morihei Ueshiba had passed away. I have to admit, with some embarrassment, that at that time I was so new to aikido I did not even know who the founder was, let alone know his name.

A year later, whilst still under age, I had to move with my parents to another part of the country. Aikido had already made its mark on me but the art was relatively unheard of at that time and it was very difficult to find somewhere to learn and train.

I studied and trained in some other martial arts locally for a while, and was able to take advantage of local aikido instruction from yudansha during their temporary 2-4 yearly university and studying stints in the area. When these opportunities presented themselves I studied and trained consistently with them. They came from Burma, Japan and the Midlands. The aikido structure entity was like a club and with no organizational affiliations. Formalized testing for me during this period did not readily present itself, and for at least seven years of aikido practise whilst still kyu rank from my original instructor I was not tested at all. I was just relieved and felt privileged to have the opportunity to learn and practise the art that I had become to love with a passion.

Some say that traditionally you should have one instructor. The norm in martial arts is to have a kind of discipleship arrangement with your instructor, and be connected with an established lineage. In my case, owing to the lack of opportunity of having a well-established local dojo and instructor in those earlier years, my aikido path became somewhat unconventional in this regard. As soon as I was old enough to drive I continued to learn aikido by traveling to seminars across the U.K.. There were a few aikido organizations popping up across the Country at that time as aikido was continuing to grow from its infancy in Britain. Among the things I discovered during this period of adventure was that many people appeared to be identified more with their aikido groups, organization or their style of aikido than they were with the art. I, on the other hand, was interested only in learning what I could about aikido. It was out of necessity that I had become accustomed to jumping at the opportunity to learn wherever, whenever and from whomever I could. I stuck steadfastly to this pattern of learning for a long time and proceeded to study under many renowned instructors regardless of their affiliation. I have since traveled extensively nationally and internationally to attend seminars and summer camps.

In the mid eighties I decided to establish an aikido club in England (Broadland Aikido). I had by now received shodan rank from a renowned instructor in the U.K., Sensei Hayden Foster. He is the head of The Institute of Aikido, a British Aikido Board accredited organization. The Broadland Aikido Club is still an active member of the Institute of Aikido.

Although having a fairly broad and diverse background in Aikido by the mid- eighties, I started having more exposure to the aikido teachings of Morihiro Saito Sensei as a result of Sensei Foster's inviting and sponsoring his visit to England, and Sensei Tony Sargeant in Cambridge inviting and sponsoring Saito Sensei's yudansha such as Sensei Pat Hendricks to instruct at seminars and workshops. I found the techniques, methodology and the effectiveness of Saito Sensei's teachings extremely valuable. To me these techniques and methods would be an important and valuable part of my repertoire as I continued to be an instructor. It was during one of those seminars Hendricks Sensei was teaching in England that I remember saying to myself: "if I ever made the move to America it would be really nice to connect with her if I decided to start teaching there on a consistent basis".

In 1988, I moved to a rural area of Vermont U.S.A. Trying to establish an aikido school or club was very difficult although I did do some teaching locally. I occasionally went to Vermont Aikido dojo while Terry Dobson was alive. Also attended weekend seminars periodically throughout the East Coast and Canada. I was not training or exercising regularly during these few years and the lack of conditioning contributed to my getting injured at

these events more times than I care to remember.

In 1994 I moved to Rhode Island and founded Ocean State Aikido and started teaching and working out regularly again. As of the date of this article, we are celebrating our tenth year. Classes are provided every weekday except Tuesdays, plus Saturday mornings. We teach Adults and Children.

I like the C.A.A. and the people I have met in it. The open-mindedness and acceptance of the different perspectives of aikido within one organization is wonderful and in my opinion commendable.

My most Memorable Aikido Experience

Experiencing Saito Sensei for the first time during his rare visit to the U.K. in the eighties, and being on the receiving end of one of his kokyu-nages.

My first aikido venture to America to attend a summer camp in 1986, and to experience the special guest, the then doshu Kisshomaru Ueshiba in person.

Why I Teach Aikido

I am eternally grateful to those who have shared and continue to share their aikido with me. Aikido has helped me lead a more fuller life by keeping me physically active and providing me with a lot of enjoyment. Aikido can be a wonderful vehicle for personal growth. It is the least I can do as part of the aikido family to play my roll, however small, by helping keep aikido alive and sharing with others what I have learnt. Although aikido is not a spiritual discipline, it can be a spiritually enriching art given the right supportive environment. If the consciousness of a student can be raised, that would truly make teaching all the more worthwhile for me.