

Featured Senior Instructor, January 2009



Michael Smith

Aikido of Monterey, Monterey, CA
Division 2

In the fall of 1986 I found myself needing to 'get away' for a few days, so I drove down to Esalen, intending to sign up for whatever weekend workshop was still open. I ended up in a workshop conducted by Prof. Charles Tart (UC Davis) on the topic of "Waking Up" to life in the present moment. On the final day of the workshop, as the workshop participants gathered in the meeting room, I noticed that some blue mats had been placed on the floor. Moments later Prof. Tart entered the room wearing a very distinctive martial arts outfit. He told us that he had recently attained his 1st degree black belt in Aikido and introduced us to a bit of the philosophy and principles of Aikido. He then used some of the basic blending exercises as a tie-in with some of the concepts we'd been working with earlier in the workshop.

I was very impressed with the uniform.

Upon returning to Monterey, I opened the phone book and discovered that there was an Aikido dojo just a few blocks away from where I lived. The dojo answering machine had a recorded message indicating that a new beginners' class would be starting that very week. And so it was that I came to meet my first, most important and still most inspiring Aikido teacher, Danielle Smith Sensei.

During the next few years my employment situation often required my commuting between Monterey and Mountain View and I finally bought

a townhouse in San Jose to minimize the driving. On any given week I would train at Aikido of San Jose, Aikido West, and Aikido of Santa Cruz, in addition to classes at Aikido of Monterey. My circle of teachers expanded to include Frank Doran Sensei, from whom I've learned to appreciate how, for any given technique, certain key elements of extension, posture, and movement reveal a simplified pathway to achieving greater understanding and refinement; Cyndy Hayashi Sensei who's most treasured early advice was that if I really wanted to learn Aikido I should focus on improving my ukemi; Bill McGouirk Sensei who as uchi-deshi at Aikido West inspired me with his example of ukemi and demonstrated the importance of that role; Frank McGouirk Sensei who continues to reveal my own limitations in thinking and awareness so that I might break free of them; Dennis Evans Sensei who has a unique capability to challenge ones comfort zone in order that they find a way to make this practice a reality; Anno Sensei for how he embodies the 'Heart' of Aikido and thus illuminates a higher purpose to my practice; Mary Heiny Sensei for defying believability even as I'm being thrown, and Tom Read Sensei for introducing me to the awesome power, beauty, and dynamics of the jo. My training over the years has included travel to seminars and dojos throughout the U.S. as well as Ireland, England, Switzerland, Austria, Japan, and Australia. It has been my experience that the great 'openness' of the Aikido community worldwide – the feeling of being welcomed at whatever dojo, in whatever country, that I happen to appear – is Aikido's greatest developing contribution to mankind's future.

I currently teach three classes a week at Aikido of Monterey, one of which is devoted to practice with the jo. As webmaster for the California Aikido Association, I created and continue to maintain the website, www.ai-ki-do.org, which is dedicated to promoting a greater connection between our membership through the sharing of news, information, and experiences

My most Memorable Aikido Experience

As many have said, it is very hard to single out just one of so many memorable experiences. Yet, this one almost always comes to my mind first. It was the last class of the annual Memorial Day Retreat at Mt. Baldy in 2000. Only a few hours earlier, I had asked Danielle if she would marry me there at the Zen Center, with our friend and guide, Zen master Ji Bong, conducting the ceremony. I was thinking about our wedding, which was to take place in the dojo immediately following the class, when the teacher, Frank McGouirk Sensei, called me up as uke. The next thing I remember is hitting the mat VERY hard! And thinking. Now what was that all about? Hey, I'm getting married pretty soon! So, this should be an easy, gentle experience – shouldn't it? And then the next technique I hit the mat even HARDER! And then I got it -

it was time to “Wake Up” and be in this moment.

