

## Featured Dojo-cho, June 2009



**Larry Bardach**

Kokoro Dojo, Grover Beach, California  
Division 1

I first became aware of the art of Aikido when I was thirteen years old, as part of my fascination with martial arts. I had wanted to start studying karate, and even at that age I had daydreamed of someday going to Japan and becoming a blackbelt. I learned of Aikido, and being a rather puny kid who had been bullied I was fascinated with the idea that Aikido had this mysterious “magical power” that wouldn’t depend upon brute strength to defend myself.

My first experience with aikido was in college in 1975 and although I’m still not aware of what tradition the instructor was from I suspect it must have been Ki Society; all we did in class for the entire year was sit in seiza, meditate and do rolls – no traditional techniques. That was my entire experience of aikido.

After college I moved out to Santa Cruz, California, where I studied under my first teacher, Greg Brodsky. I saw a notice advertising aikido saying “Learn To Fly!” with a picture of a Greg in his hakama throwing somebody high through the air. I went to the class and was shocked when he started showing all these various moves; I had no idea that this was

what aikido was about. Greg was a longtime student of Yoshimitsu Yamada Sensei and Nakazono Sensei. He emphasized the spiritual aspects of the art as well as its martial aspects. He polished my ukemi and influenced my deep reverence towards training. While I lived in Santa Cruz I was influenced by other teachers such as Linda Holiday and Glen Kimoto.

I've moved around a lot, and over the years trained in California, New York and Japan under many superb teachers. In Monterey I trained under Danielle Molles Smith and Dennis Evans. Over the years I was fortunate to have also had the occasions to learn from other superb senseis involved in the Northern California Bay area scene: Robert Nadeau, Frank Doran, Bill Witt and Bruce Klickstein. I trained for 5 years in New York City under Yamada Sensei. I eventually returned to California and trained intensely under Pat Hendricks Sensei. Currently I consider my teachers to be Hendricks Sensei and Louis Jumonville Sensei. I also continue to feel influenced by many of the current California Aikido Association senseis as well as Hiroshi Ikeda Sensei.

In 1981 as a brown-belt I went to live as an uchi-deshi in Iwama, Japan to study under Morihiro Saito Shihan. That was probably the greatest training I've ever had the good fortune to experience. Saito Sensei was always very kind and patient with me. I was told later that when I arrived as a skinny awkward 26 year old, after watching me train the first night in the dojo, he turned to one of the sempai and said (in Japanese): "Think he'll last?"

Presently I live on the Central California Coast and teach at my own dojo, Kokoro Dojo by the ocean in Grover Beach. I have been open about a year and a half, and the dojo is growing. I run children's classes twice a week and adult classes three times a week. I teach Aikido out of love for the art and what it can bring to others as envisioned by O Sensei. At Kokoro Dojo we train earnestly with a sense of vitality, enthusiasm, humor and joy. I train with everyone with the same respect and attention I would give to any sensei. Teaching Aikido is a part-time profession for me; during the day I run my own private practice as a pediatric occupational therapist (at Playpath Therapy) working with children who have learning disabilities and/or on the autism spectrum. The dojo is part of the same space that I use for

the pediatric occupational therapy. Presently I have eight people in my adult class, including a yondan, a sandan and a shodan sempai. I have eight kids in my children's aikido class, three of which have special needs (diagnosed with autism / ADHD/ ADD). I'm fortunate enough to be able to bring my skill as a therapist as well as an aikido instructor to those with special needs as well as to the general population. I have been training now for almost 35 years and I am filled with gratitude for what Aikido continues to bring to my life.

### ***My most Memorable Aikido Experience***

My most memorable Aikido experiences were with Saito Sensei. In the year I trained under him I never heard him talk about the esoteric stuff, but I'm led to believe he definitely was able to control ki and was much more tuned into the unseen power than he led on. When he threw me I literally felt levitated; there was never any forceful discomfort. I trusted him completely.

I feel Aikido has positively contributed to my life through many learning experiences, but two stand out the most for me from my time in Iwama. First, although I loved the training there, there was never a moment I wasn't scared and felt I could be seriously hurt. Many of the sempai were big, very tough, and lacked Saito Sensei's skill and finesse. Inside I was always worried about getting injured. One night as we bowed in I faced training with one sempai who was always rough and a bit reckless. The fear came up in me as I realized this was going to be my partner for the entire class. On the very first throw (morote dori kokyu ho) he threw me down so hard on the tatami that when I got up my ears were red! I realized at that moment that I would have to go deeper into myself than ever before and access some part of me if I was going to survive. I took a deep breath, shook off the pain and fear and focused on some deep part of me in my gut. I threw myself into training with him with gusto, and trained harder than I had ever trained before. I realized that to survive I was going to have to go for it all, without hesitation, without fear and with total focus. I made it through safely and connected with something inside I hadn't known existed inside me. At times in life I've had to call upon that memory to re-access that part of me and help me get me through some tough experiences.

The second memorable experience was of a humbling nature. I had been training in the dojo with several other

uchi-deshi who began the same time as me. Towards the end of my initial six month stay, one night Saito Sensei said to several of them that they were to take their shodan exams in a few months. He pointedly excluded me. I was heart-broken; my dream had been to go to Japan and get my blackbelt, and now I felt crushed. Later that night I was lamenting my poor fate. One of the uchi-deshi pointed out to me that even though I might not have gotten my wish, I should think about how much I had gotten while being there, and just appreciate what I could still get before I had to leave. I decided to adopt that attitude.

The very next night on the mat, I was more attentive to Sensei than I ever had been before. I quietly watched and tuned in to him totally. I had no expectations; I had no hidden agenda to get my blackbelt; I just wanted to learn. I was totally open to him. During class he glanced over at me several times. He must have discerned a change in me; at the end of class right before bowing out he suddenly turned and said: “Rari-san, you take your blackbelt test in February”. Hearing that at the moment I wasn’t elated; I didn’t feel Yes! I did it! Instead I felt deeply humbled and grateful. I learned that night what it is to be totally open to a teacher and the teachings.