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I found out about Aikido from the large volume of martial arts books and articles that I read as a young man after my interest in the martial arts was awakened by watching "Enter the Dragon".

To be honest I took up Aikido because the style of Kung Fu that I had been studying in England since 1974 was not available in South Africa and Aikido was the martial art that seemed to be the closest thing to it. The style of Kung Fu that I studied was called Feng Shou (hand of the wind) it involved circular blending movements, use of Chi and included locks and pins. My reading led me to believe that Aikido might provide many of the same qualities that I enjoyed in Feng Shou.

Once I had seen my first class I was hooked. The grace, beauty and power of what I saw really appealed to me. The obvious thing that stood out for me as being something completely new was the ukemi which seemed to be too graceful to be a real movement and yet no matter how the uke was thrown he always came back up ready to continue with apparently effortless ease.

I started Aikido in South Africa after I moved there in 1976. In reality my Kung Fu training gave me an enormous head start already

being proficient in using circular motion, application of locks and pins many of which are the same as in Aikido and the use of energy other than physical strength to drive my movements. Also I had the added advantage of knowing how to punch and kick which allowed me quickly to become an effective Uke.

My first teacher was Garth Jury, a shodan who had trained under Jean Claude de Geldre (my spelling may not be correct), who was a 4th or 5th dan in the Ki Society. I didn't actually realise that I had been training under a Ki society style until I moved to New Zealand and someone recognized Jean Claude's name as being a fairly well known member of the Ki Society.

Our club in Ponsonby, Auckland has just over 20 active members. Auckland is a city where there is a constant turnover of people and retention of members is always a challenge. We are fortunate that we have RIAI clubs in Wellington, Hamilton and Christchurch so that when members move or travel there is the possibility of training at our other clubs. With great regret we recently decided to stop providing a children's class for 7 to 12 year olds as we felt that none of us was in a position to continue putting in the time and effort that is required to support and run such a class. However we also hold a youth class which provides the transition between the children's and adult's classes and this class continues to grow and prosper, with the numbers currently being about 8 who train once a week on a regular basis. This is a new development and has only been running for a few months.

The name RIAI that we call ourselves may be of interest to some. Johann Buiter a 4th Dan actually founded RIAI Aikido more than 25 years ago. I had always understood the meaning of the word as being "combined way" although more recently I have read in one of Saito's books that the meaning is "harmony of principles" which seems to me a very appropriate name for our group.

My most Memorable Aikido Experience

It is hard to pick a single experience since there have been many wonderful ones. I am particularly grateful for the one on one time that I have spent with my teacher Sensei Robert Nadeau on his visits to New Zealand where I have learned as much if not more from him off the mat than on it. However there was an experience that was outside of my normal training and was a very challenging personal growth episode. In 1986 The Montessori Society held an International Conference "To Educate the Human Potential" in South Africa. The keynote speaker had been a practitioner of Aikido in England and believed that it had much to contribute to the conference. He asked Stan Schmidt an extremely well known

Shotokan Karate teacher to suggest someone local to come and present a paper on applying the philosophy and principles of Aikido to helping children achieve their potential.

At that time I was training in Stan Schmidt's early morning black belt's class at his invitation. This in itself was a very special experience. I got to train with senior karate students and at the end of the class I was invited to take them through a few minutes aikido training (they had a permanent mat area laid down in one corner of the dojo) to help round out and expand their martial arts training. As a result Stan Schmidt suggested that they ask me to present a paper to the Conference.

I was both extremely flattered to be asked and also somewhat nervous of the prospect of having to present a paper to a live audience. The preparation of the paper was a very challenging task. Clearly the idea was not to show parents how to control their children by applying physical Aikido techniques. Therefore I had to explore how the underlying principles could be used to provide an alternative way to handle conflict resolution with children and encourage the development of their confidence, composure and attitude.

When I re-read what I wrote back then I am both pleased and critical. However I think overall I did a pretty reasonable job and my talk was well received by an audience of some 150 to 200 parents and teachers. I had to use my Aikido training in terms of centering and connecting with the audience and to help me overcome my fear of public speaking. It was a very memorable experience that caused me to look well outside the 'square' in terms of what Aikido can offer people. I came to realise what a potent vehicle for change and growth Aikido can be. Beyond the martial art there is a great capability to heal, connect, energise and help people grow and reach their full potential.