

Aikidosphere

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20th Century Samurai - Part 2

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Editor's Note: This article was published in the magazine "Australasian Fighting Arts" around 1974. Mike Yates is currently proprietor of Zen Imports in Sydney Australia. We received invaluable assistance from Mike Clarke, founder of the Shinseidokan Dojo in Tasmania, Australia and author of Budo Masters and Roaring Silence (available at www.Ryukyu.com) Thanks also to John Litchen, John Watson and Andrew Dziedzic of Aiki-kai Australia for their help.



Part 2

What is the basic principle of Aikido?

The basic principle relates to its literal translation -- "the way of harmony with spirits or universe" or just "harmony".

What is Ki?

Ki is a force, a life force, using your body and mind together e.g. when you extend your arm you are extending your Ki. You are trying to use your mental strength.

How can Ki be demonstrated?

There are three main methods of demonstration which were developed by Mr. Tohei to try and demonstrate Ki. These are:

- (1) Resisting body lifting - body control.
- (2) Unbendable arm - mind and body control.
- (3) Stopping a walking person - mind control.

I don't think all instructors use the same methods of demonstration. These demonstrations are not actually showing Ki; they only try to help a person to understand the principles involved.

Talking of Aikido demonstrations - you always see the person who is defending being attacked by people rushing in rather than just standing there executing some type of technique. Is this realistic?

Any demonstration, according to Mr. Ueshiba, is a fake because after throwing someone they should not be able to get up. But to show what we do in Aikido training, we try to demonstrate what we do in class, i.e. with a person on constant attack. We do this to create movement but in reality one would in fact create the movement oneself by moving in on an attacker rather than standing static. There



are three ways of training in any martial art. One is form practice. Two: free-style, where either party can initiate an attack. Three: one defends and the other keeps up a non-stop, continuous attack.

What emphasis is placed on breath control and breathing?

We don't take that much notice. It is more or less natural. We do use a breathing method during meditation training which is used as a concentration method. We also don't have anything much like a kiai. Kiai is not used very much in Aikido unless it is created naturally. It is not brought on specifically as in karate. When you kiai you are usually concentrating your body at a particular instant. Aikido movements are not expressed in one instant but take more time. For example, a strong fighting dog does not bark when it attacks, it just uses its own natural breathing, e.g. growling.

What type of special training did you do to become an instructor of Aikido?

The main thing was that your whole life and training was Aikido, with no outside diversions.

We did no actual weight training, but we practiced with items like the Bokken (wooden sword) and Suburi which in fact gave a similar result. Also we did a bit of running and from time to time we even had a makiwara (punching board) on which we practiced atemi (striking) techniques. Mr. Ueshiba never suggested that we do these things but we were young and experimented with some of these methods. We even practiced with the throwing knife or shuriken and various other things. Also we used to watch other martial arts demonstrations to gain a wider knowledge of the arts. We used to do training at the university dojos, which generally had much harder training. Also, we participated in 10-day summer camps which started off early in the day with running, push-ups and jumping as extra training apart from the normal Aikido techniques.

Your wife has a 1st Dan in Aikido and is an Australian. How did you meet her?

She just came along to training. She was at the headquarters in Japan. Apart from the class for overseas students she used to come along to the regular classes. Originally she came over to practice Kodokan judo.

When did you decide to come to Australia?

We were married in 1964 and came to Australia the following year. This was for a couple of reasons: My wife's family was in Australia and at that stage there was no Aikido here at all.

Where was your first class in Australia?

The first class was held in part of a gymnasium at West Ryde in Sydney. The class was made up of about 20 students and half of these had come from a yoga class. At this stage there are two students still training from those very early days.

How is Aikido progressing in Australia now?

Slowly but now we have schools in most states. Although we do not have as big a number of students as some of the other martial arts, we certainly have the quality.

Have the Kung-Fu movies made any difference to your enrolments in recent days?

No I don't think so. Quite often we have telephone enquiries wanting to know if we teach karate and Kung Fu because a lot of people do not know

what Aikido is.

Do you teach full time?

No, not yet, although I will be very shortly. I will be leaving my present job in the next few days to go to Darwin for two weeks of teaching and then off to Japan.

In Darwin they have a Northern Territories Martial Arts Association which includes an Aikido club, run by one of my old brown belt students. They have been wanting me to come up for about the last year but I have been unable to do so due to prior commitments. Previously they had a judo instructor up from Sydney to teach them.

After that I will be going to Japan for three or four weeks but before going to Japan I will be spending two weeks in India. There I will be staying mostly in the temples in the Himalayas, primarily to improve my knowledge of and devote time to meditation.

What personal influence have you introduced into your teaching?

I think the main point is that I try to explain and show Aikido in a manner that is more adaptable to Western students.

Do you have any women training?

Yes we do, although we have fewer training now than we used to. But they are starting to show more interest in this art now.

Do women make as good students as men? Do they work as hard?

I think movement is nicer by women because in Aikido you don't use much physical strength. Sometimes they work very hard. Just the same as some men work very hard if they take their art seriously.

How does Aikido differ from Judo, e.g. in the break falls?

We just roll, whereas in judo they use their arm to stop their fall. In Aikido we don't really break our fall; we do more tumbling and rolling to come back on our feet. Also, in judo someone usually has to obtain a hold on the opponent in order to use leverage to throw him, whereas in Aikido one aims to redirect the opponent's movement so as to stop his attack.

Do you do kata?

No. Although we do have some sword and stick techniques that we practice in a pre-arranged fashion, but still not kata in the accepted sense.

If someone came in to learn and was skinny or exceptionally weak would you recommend that he does some weight training?

No, we feel that training is the best method in which to improve in this area. What weapons do Aikido students practice with? As we mentioned before they are the Bokken (wooden sword) and the Jo (short staff). The weapons that we teach are ones that, if you are caught without or lose your weapon, the movements that the Aikido person does are exactly the same whether armed or unarmed. The students are able to learn these at any grade level whenever the instructor teaches these weapons. One does not have to be a black belt or senior grade before you start to practice with these weapons.

Why teach weapons in this day and age?

It is one way of keeping more interest among the students. The main thing in it is to realize the importance and similarity between the method of moving and executing techniques with weapons as compared to without weapons. Sometimes when executing just hand techniques, you are unable to see the full meaning behind the hand positioning. But when executing the same techniques with these weapons, you are able to more fully understand the applications.

The weapons style that we practice involves a more flowing circular movement with more follow through with each technique than in some other systems.

Is there any point in going to Japan to train in Aikido?

The only people who would gain a benefit from going to Japan are those people who are very serious about their training and who would wish to train all day, every day. This facility is not yet available in Australia. For the casual trainee it would be preferable to stay at home as the quality of training is just as good and in some aspects better. For example, there is no language problem and one is more likely to obtain answers to any problem that the student has.

Do you teach any katsu or resuscitation?

No. We don't use it, although we do practice finger pressure techniques which are related.

What weaknesses are there in Aikido in relation to self-defense?

Probably the training is not hard enough that they would be able to use it to its fullest effect if a self-defense situation arose. This is because most students do not take Aikido as professional, full-time fighting.

Have you ever used Aikido in self-defense?

No. Not in the street. But in the early days we used to have matches against students of some other arts. e.g. Nippon Kempo. Although they use some techniques similar to Aikido, most of their training is based on striking techniques. They wore full contact head and chest guards etc. but at very close quarters more throws were employed

What sort of training program do you have for yourself?

Due to my time limitations, up to now I did not have much spare time interest for extra training. I make the most of the classes by actually trying to participate as much as I can in the class. About two or three times a year we have mountain training but this concentrates more on meditation and practice with the use of the Jo and the sword.

Do you teach the students how to meditate?

It is very difficult to teach meditation. First of all the student should try to experience meditation by doing it rather than just talking about what is meditation and how does it work. Actual participation brings much more worthwhile results. This is one of the main reasons for the mountain training.

Do you think the martial arts have reached a peak?

They are still growing. With Aikido we seem to cater to a different type of person, mostly those who are more interested in the mental side.

Would you like to see Aikido reach other martial arts have experienced the same boom proportions that the during different periods?

Only if the quality of instruction and the quality of the students could be maintained at the present level. But I don't think it will reach these proportions, mostly because of the type of student we attract. Also, Aikido does not have competition, therefore this limits the amount of publicity and interest in it.

What are your plans for the future?

I very much want to widen the established Aikido organization here. I don't necessarily wish to have many students but would like to spread the art more, while keeping a very high standard amongst them.