

Tell us about your start in Aikido:

I was born in New York City. When I was a teen, my stepfather studied Tai Chi with Professor Chen Man Ching. I just could not get excited about doing tai chi. In 1975, I did a six week intro Aikido class in Westchester that was taught by one of his Tai Chi training partners, Khalil Sayed Sensei who was then a nidan training under Yamada Sensei. I was instantly hooked. The philosophy of non-resistance and non-domination felt right. The give and take between uke and nage was dynamic and more intriguing to me than the tai chi solo form.

After the intro class, I trained at the New York Aikikai but the one hour subway commute from our home in suburban Yonkers eventually overwhelmed my teenage interest to Aikido. Since then, I moved around a bit. At Cornell University, I studied some judo with the college club but Aikido had not yet been firmly established there. In 1980-81 I was working as a Vista Volunteer in Blytheville, Arkansas and was fortunate to find an Aikido class at the local YMCA. It was taught by Reg Willich Sensei, a Seikikai nidan, from whom I received my first kyu ranks. At graduate school in Syracuse I trained at the Central New York Aikikai with Yousef Mehter Sensei and his senior students that taught at the college club until an injury sidelined me.

Living in Reno, Nevada in 1986 I came across an “Iwama-style” Aikido class at the YWCA that was taught by Peter Slote Sensei at the time. I didn’t know what Iwama was then, I was just happy to be back practicing Aikido. The class at the Y was just once a week and when it grew over the next several months, I suggested to Peter Sensei that we add another session or open a small dojo. He thought that was a great idea and encouraged me to talk to the “real instructor” who was coming back from Iwama next week. I thought Peter Sensei was the “real instructor”! But I was pleased when Wolfgang Baumgartner Sensei returned and eventually took my suggestion to expand training opportunities in Reno. I have trained Iwama-style Aikido consistently since then with Wolfgang Sensei being my primary instructor. Starting in 1987, I have trained at least annually under Saito Shihan and now his son Saito Hitohiro Sensei either in Iwama or in the US.

In 2001, with the intention of focusing my time on teaching and practicing Aikido, I moved from Reno to Virginia at the invitation of the Fredericksburg Aikido Club to assume the role of chief instructor. In 2002, I semi-retired so that I could focus on teaching Aikido and growing the Aikido community. I am working on

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applying my business background to foster the dojo, Aikido in our region, and support our Aikido association.

Tell us about your dojo:

We are in the process of transforming the Fredericksburg Aikido Club, which was set up as a social club by Dwight Petersen in 1993. Accordingly, we have founded Aikido in Fredericksburg (www.aikidoinn.com) for which we are applying for IRS 501(c)3 status as a non-profit educational corporation.

The Club has a great history including unwavering support for Aikido training from a dedicated core group of students with support from Senseis from ASU and Ki Society. When I arrived in Fredericksburg in 2001, there were four core students in the club. They were subleasing from a jujitsu club that had subleased from a karate school. As the class grew I began to look around for alternative space and the moving decision was accelerated by an eviction of the jujitsu club! We trained for a while at a gymnastics school until we leased our own 48-mat space in 2002 where we now have 12 classes per week and also host a traditional Japanese sword class weekly. At our traditional New Years Day training in 2002, I was pleased to be able to award Dwight Sensei his nidan.

We are now in the process of permitting and designing our own dojo building that we hope to build on a twenty-acre parcel of land. Many have commented that the “feel” of the land is similar to the feel at the Iwama Dojo in Japan. The plants in the landscape and garden are indeed similar. I am hopeful that one year from now we will have twice daily classes, a traditional uchideshi program, and be able to host large seminars at a 100-mat “shin dojo”. The program there will be modeled after that at the Iwama Dojo under Saito Morihiro Shihan.

How does your style of Aikido differ from others?

Iwama-Style Aikido is the result of Saito Shihan’s years of study with O’Sensei at the Iwama Dojo. Saito Shihan was very good at organizing and presenting O’Sensei’s waza. Saito Shihan focused on teaching, not just demonstrating. Many of his students have adopted this teaching style, which I found to be effective for learning. I am a slow physical learner and the precise technique and teaching methods definitely helped me learn Aikido basics.

Iwama-style Aikido includes the riai – combined practice of taijutsu and bukiwaza (aiki weapons). Saito Shihan learned aiki-

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ken and aiki-jo directly from the Founder and preserved these teachings.

As was taught by O'Sensei, Iwama-style practice actively uses kiai and atemi as tools in the waza. Iwama-style Aikido starts with a study of kihonwaza (static technique) – this can teach you how to move around your partners' strength. Kinonagare (flowing movement) technique is introduced after the kihonwaza. The training is technique oriented – things like “feeling” and “ki development” are personal outgrowths of practice, not focal points. Ultimately, the goal is to develop takemusu aiki – the spontaneous expression of creative energy.

Our dojo is a member of the Takemusu Aikido Association (www.takemusu.org) which was founded with Saito Sensei's blessing as an international association affiliated with Aikikai Hombu Dojo. The Takemusu Aikido Association is dedicated to the development and dissemination of Aikido based on the highest ideals of the Founder. The Association does this by continuing and promoting the Founder's traditional teaching and training methods as passed on by Saito Shihan.

Who has been influential to you in Aikido?

Since I had trained a bit of Aikido before starting in Reno at the Y, I was one of the sempai in a small group. I was very fortunate to travel to seminars with Wolfgang Sensei and either take ukemi or just train with many senior students and instructors. Wolfgang Sensei was very generous in introducing me to senior instructors from whom I have since learned a lot both on and off the mat. Within the Iwama-style family these include Bill Witt Shihan, Dennis Tatoi Sensei, Hans Goto Sensei, Hoa Newens Sensei, Pat Hendricks Sensei, Bernice Tom Sensei, Kim Peuser Sensei, and of course Saito Shihan and his son Saito Hitohiro Sensei.

Wolfgang Sensei and Saito Hitohiro Sensei both execute Aikido with tremendous precision and power. Grabbing them is like holding a tree trunk, one that blends and then throws you!! It is very inspirational, especially to those of us still working in that direction.

There are other instructors that I haven't trained much with that have been inspirational to me including Miles Kessler Sensei, Patrick Cassidy Sensei, Tristao de Cuna Sensei, Frank Doran Shihan, George Leonard Sensei, and Terry Dobson Sensei. My

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wife and my students are also great motivators. I am constantly moved by their achievements.

What were some memorable times with your Aikido study?

It was really great to go to the Iwama dojo, considered by many to be the birthplace of Aikido, and train under Saito Shihan. I have been there six times since 1987 and to me Iwama is a milepost, like a constant in time – the town hasn't changed all that much and the training is the same. The training at the old dojo was in the same building and possibly on the same mats where O'Sensei taught. What changes over time was me – my relationship to Aikido, to Iwama, to Sensei. The first time I trained there it was very difficult. Not just physically challenging but also mentally and emotionally – and I was just there two weeks that time! Now I'm a little more resilient.

When you go to Japan initially everything has the potential to take you off center – the language, the customs, the food, getting around... I took a group of my students in 1991 and before we even got through the dojo doors, we had committed several major infractions of proper etiquette! Sensei was yelling at us, “da-me, da-me” but at the same time he was smiling and laughing.

I've had the privilege to host Saito Shihan several times in Reno. It's still a bit hard for me to call him Saito Shihan. It's not that he doesn't deserve the title – he definitely was a master instructor (one translation of “Shihan”). It's just that he was a man of the earth and did not care about titles. All the deshi would just call him “Sensei” even though he was 9th Dan. Now, however, I consciously refer to him as Saito Shihan. I do this both to give him the respect that he is due but also so that we can now refer to his son, Hitohiro, as Saito Sensei without too much confusion as to whom we are referring. Anyway, back to the Reno story. Off the mat, Saito Shihan would stay in our home with an otomo and a translator – he was a real gentlemen. Some of those moments were real gems whether he was recounting stories about O'Sensei or we were talking about tomato gardening (my wife is the gardener in the family). I really felt that I was in the presence of a master.

How did you get into teaching Aikido?

I did not set out to become an Aikido teacher. I began teaching in 1989 because my teacher, Wolfgang Sensei, lived 50 miles away from our dojo in Reno and he came down over the Sierra Nevada Mountains twice a week to teach. I wanted to train more so as one

of the sempai in the dojo I offered to lead a class once a week simply so we could have another training opportunity. When Wolfgang Sensei moved to Germany in 1992, we re-organized the dojo using a cooperative model since no one individual was able to step-up and take complete responsibility for the dojo. The co-op model we set-up involved each of the yudansha having the right to buy shares in the corporation and participate in teaching and administrative duties. The co-op worked pretty well for almost ten years and Reno Aikido Co-Op produced 26 yudansha. It also was a model for other aikido clubs in the western US looking for ways to proceed after they had lost their instructor for one reason or another. As the senior instructor, I served as Dojo Cho and president of the corporation. When my wife and I decided to move to someplace greener – literally, we both grew up in the northeast US and had “dried-out” in the desert – again, no one individual wanted to take over so we recruited Vince Salvatore Sensei who was looking to move back to the US from Japan after having trained in Iwama for a number of years.

What have you learned so far in instructing Aikido?

I endeavor to teach “client-centered” Aikido. This is different from the Japanese model and so far seems to work well for westerners. Client-centered Aikido can be summarized by something that Bill Witt Shihan once said to me; “Don’t teach what you know, teach what the students need to learn”. I am thrilled that our students take time out of their busy lives to train with us each week – I work to make the training, testing, learning more accessible to them. I have had successes with this approach and it is more pleasant than being a tough, aloof sensei.

Is Aikido "hard" or "soft"?

Yes.

Saito Shihan was expert at demonstrating this. He would instruct you to grab strongly with morotedori and he would offer no resistance and his arm would feel like putty. Then you would instantaneously be in a high fall. The fall would be either “hard” or “soft” depending on your skills – mine were mostly “hard”.

Do you have advice for everyone on good practice habits?

I advise my students to do “active” learning. One step they can take in this regard is to keep an Aikido journal and log techniques,

questions, and insights after class. This eventually becomes a personal training manual that can be quite helpful.

What type of behavior do you disallow in your dojo? What do you do to discourage it?

Thankfully, my experience is that Aikido attracts and retains good people. Those with loud and aggressive spirits don't stay around. We work on practicing in a cooperative manner in the dojo and raising each other's levels. If a sempai constantly stops a kohai from completing a technique with strength, neither of them learns anything from the encounter. In fact, Saito Shihan had posted on the wall in the Iwama Dojo, which used to be called the Aiki Shuren Dojo (shuren can mean "severe"), "Preventing your partner from completing a technique with strength is strictly forbidden".

What do you like to see from your Aikido students?

One of the things that keeps me engaged in Aikido is that people leave the dojo as better people than when they entered. I am always fascinated by the myriads of personal growth success stories from Aikidoists. Iwama-style Aikido is really focused on technique, yet it produces many of the psychological, emotional, and spiritual benefits as other self-improvement methods. We focus on basics like hanmi, awase, and kokyu development.

We teach/practice in the traditional manner with a bit less formality than in Japan. To the Iwama practice methods we add ukemi practice in moderation, a bit more jiyuwaza, and a supportive community orientation. I am hopeful that our students take the aiki-spirit with them into the world, minimize confrontation, and maximize resolution. Many do share stories of how Aikido principles serve them well at work and home.

Where do you see you are right now in Aikido and where do you see yourself in 5 – 15 years?

Our dojo is now at the point where we have some good basic skills among the sempai. This raises everyone's overall level of training and accelerates the learning of the kohai. I can now spend some time in the dojo and in my own practice on more advanced awareness and technique. I look forward to refining my own Aikido – there is a big difference between being a good Aikidoist and a good instructor – I'd like to work towards becoming both. I'm happy to have made Aikido a focal point in my own life. If we can get the Shin Dojo up and running, it could be a tremendous

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resource for Aikido in the U. S. – I’m looking forward to sharing it with sincere students from all walks of life.

Where do you see the current direction in Aikido?

As O’Sensei said, “Aikido can be a medicine for a sick world”. It’s great to see Aikido being taken “off the mat” by groups like Aiki-Extensions and to see Aikido being made more accessible in rural communities and less developed nations.

In our dojo and in our Association we are taking steps to not only teach instruction methods but also provide skills and resources for managing a dojo and making connections in the community. If we desire the number of Aikido practitioners to grow and want to keep quality high, we must expand our communication and business methods.

I find it unfortunate that there continue to be political splits in the Aikido world. One of my Aikido friends who prefers to remain anonymous shared with me his observation that sometimes Aikido is about P-I-E-C-E instead of P-E-A-C-E. I am hopeful that we can continue to develop as individuals and promote communication and cooperation in the Aikido community. The Founder is gone and I think that there is much about Aikido that we can learn from other Aikido styles and senseis. Towards this end, I have taken on organizing a biennial All-Virginia Aikido Friendship Seminar titled “Common Ground”. We held the first one three years ago and for many it was the first time they had trained with Aikidoist from other styles. It was enlightening!

If you could ask O’Sensei just one question, what would it be?

This is an excellent question. I would be interesting in knowing why he taught differently in different locations – this is part of the reason we see so many varying Aikido styles today. Was he trying to seed each shihan’s individual interests to pursue their own Aikido? Did he associate different locations with different spiritual forces that he said guided him? Did he foresee this might lead to factionalization in Aikido and, if so, did he foresee that reconciliation was possible and, if so, how and when....

Gomenasai, you said just one question! Thanks for taking the time to talk with me today.