

Aikido in Australia

Aiki Kai Australia National Newsletter
Volume 5 Number 3



The voices of children

A unique perspective on Aikido from children around Australia

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Aikido in Australia — is the official journal of Aiki Kai (Australia):

National Aikido Association Inc. ABN 18 611 543 976.

Website: <http://www.aikido.org.au/>

Print Post Publication number: PP424022/00903.

Address for official documents: GPO Box 2783. Melbourne, Victoria, 3001.

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All members are advised that Aiki Kai (Australia) is a signatory to the anti-doping policy developed by the Australian
Coaching Council and consequently all students are bound by the rules of the policy. A copy of this policy is available
on Coaching Council website.

NEW EQUAL OPPORTUNITY POLICY

*Aiki Kai Australia has had an equal opportunity policy drawn up. The policy contains
procedures to be followed should, for example, any person feel that they have been
victimised or sexually harassed. This policy is posted on the website. Should anyone
experience or have a matter of concern, they should contact Andrew Dziedzic to find
out the appropriate officer to speak to. All enquiries will be handled with the strictest
confidence and should discussion be needed Andrew will phone back at Aiki Kai Aus-
tralia's expense.*



Editor's note:

*I would like to thank to all those young enthusi-
astic Aikidoka who have expressed their thoughts and
feelings about Aikido in words and in drawings for
this special edition of the newsletter.*

*I would also like to thank Tristan Derham for his
help in organizing the various dojos and the children
and their instructors, encouraging them to express
themselves so eloquently... (see page 8).*

*And finally a word of thanks to Tony Smibert
Shihan and Andrew Dziedzic Sensei for their proof
reading skills and the fine tuning of the content of
this issue.*

**This year we are privileged to have Mutsuko
Minegishi Shihan, 7th Dan, as a guest instructor.
Minegishi Sensei is the highest graded female Ai-
kidoka in the Aikikai world-wide and although
now living on the island of Guam has had experi-
ence living and teaching around the world.**

HAPPY TRAVELS:

**2018 promises to be a year of wonderful oppor-
tunities for those with a love of combining Aikido,
friendship and travel!**

April: Australians are invited to attend Philip
Lee Shihan's 30th Anniversary in April 2018. Lee
Sensei has been our special guest on a number of
occasions and we look forward to celebrating with
him at the biggest international seminar in this
part of the world for 2018.

**For all details and enquiries, please go to:
aikidoshinjukai.com**

August: Jikou Sugano Sensei will be leading a
group to attend the GIAS (Global Inner Aikido
School) started by Sugano Shihan in Belgium and
still held annually at the Maredsous Monastery of
in the beautiful Ardennes region.

**We thoroughly recommend this to anyone inter-
ested in possibly combining a visit to Europe with
a chance to enjoy close study with Seiichi Sugano
Shihan's closest students in Europe. For all details
please contact Jikou directly on 0438 929365.**

Aikido For Children
Derek Grimm 3rd Dan
West Australia

Is Aikido a martial art? A framework for personal development? A philosophical foundation for interpersonal relationships and conflict resolution? A transformative spiritual practice? Japanese partnered Yoga? An effective means of self-defense? For each person who steps onto the mats regularly it is one or more of these and more than likely many other things as well, but they all fit easily into Sugano Sensei's 'circle'.

Being relatively recently exposed to Sugano Sensei's approach to Aikido, I have been doing a fair amount of reading to get 'up to speed'. I am very attracted to his allusion to Aikido as a circle: if you place your finger in the circle at any point, you cannot say that this is Aikido: it is only a very small part of the circle- the entirety of what Aikido is, and can be.

Perhaps if we have to give the entirety that the circle represents a name, we can take our lead from the culture in which Aikido is founded and call it a Way. Aikido is a way that can fundamentally touch and inform so many foundational building blocks of who we are, from the personal level to the level of international relations and beyond. It is a way of thinking, a way of dealing with conflict, a way of living, a way of being.

I came to Aikido in 1990 during my university days when much of those fundamental building blocks that inform how I perceive and react with the world were becoming entrenched. To this day, I often wonder how much easier my journey into Aikido would have been if I hadn't needed to spend 'all that time' unlearning and reshaping these ways of looking at and reacting to the world, and this wonder is the source of my interest in sharing Aikido with children.

The beauty of sharing Aikido with children is that they have considerably less to unlearn than those of us who began Aikido as adults. Among the chief benefits to training children in Aikido, I would offer the following:

Learning how to fall. I'll bet I could fill a book with stories of how learning ukemi has saved countless people from serious injury. I feel enormously grateful for this skill, especially when I recall how useful it was when learning to snowboard in the days before helmets.

Another added benefit of taking ukemi in class is physically practicing the idea of falling down and then getting right back up- over and over again. How's that for building strong character!

Confidence. There are stacks of books already written about confidence associated with practicing a martial art. It's not unique to Aikido, but here's a thought; how many young teenagers are working through the stage of being 'uncomfortable in their own bodies'? Their rapid growth can cause a great deal of awkwardness, and learning to move gracefully and confidently can help them overcome this feeling of awkwardness. Aikido body movement and techniques can be very complex, but as they learn and improve, this complexity provides students with

a growing confidence in their physical ability to move purposefully without stumbling or losing their balance.

Learning how to deal with unexpected, stressful situations while maintaining their composure; not losing their centre/balance both physically and emotionally. This is a confidence point as well, but it is so important that it needs to stand alone. As an instructor I feel a great responsibility to encourage students to think about how what we do physically on the mat can be translated into dealing with situations that happen everyday all around us as we interact with others. In an argument with a friend (or a bully), or at a meeting, we can help our students start looking at how they can lead or direct these encounters towards mutually beneficial conclusions even if the benefit is as small as 'we agreed to disagree'.

Learning to think outside the box. There are often varied solutions to a problem or conflict. By learning to maintain our centre in the face of stress and conflict, we become free to lead the situation and find that better solution. We are training our minds and bodies to be relaxed in conflict, and a relaxed mind is a creative one. Here, we are talking about the advanced practice of oyo henka. On the mat if we are practicing shihonage for example, and we have a difficult partner who thinks it's fun to block our technique, what do we do? Do we try to force through and complete our shihonage because our mind is set on it, or can we be mentally relaxed enough to find another solution, in this case allowing our technique to flow into something else? This is incredible stuff! Imagine children learning to think this way.

All of this culminates in the fact that Aikido is fundamentally leadership training. We practice this physically on the mat every time we receive and blend with our partner's attack as we take charge and lead that combined energy into a less violent, perhaps more constructive direction. This is just as effective off the mat at the verbal and emotional level, and many prominent Aikidoists such as Terry Dobson and Thomas Crum have done some great work in this area. In teaching Aikido to our children, we are giving them the skills to become leaders. The earlier we can give them these skills the easier it will be to integrate them into their emerging character.

Pursuit of something that does not offer instant rewards or gratification. In a society that even awards just participating, it is important for children to learn that in life the reward is directly related to the effort expended. As an example, we invest 4 years of time and effort in tertiary education and are rewarded by that effort with a degree, but the effort required for rewards in Aikido is better measured in decades than it is in years. Aikido is something that we can never ultimately master because there is always another, deeper level of refinement, improvement, and study. It is a practice; a way. Those years and



Derek shares teaching duties in the Aikido WA children's program with Ben Dowd and Janice Marsh.

decades are required for the thinking and approach of Aikido to seep in and mould us into something better. We are learning that the journey is just as, if not more, important than the destination. This is one of the things that I truly love about traditional Japanese culture; be it Aikido, Kendo, Kado, Sado, or Shodo- the image of unending practice, improvement, and refinement painted on a background of decades is one of Japan's most priceless gifts to the world.

These are the things I want for my son who has recently started his training in our children's classes. I am grateful to be in a position where I can be a part of his training as he takes his first steps on the path of Aikido. This special experience is something myself and the other instructors of the children's program hope more parents will be able to experience, and so we have transformed the children's classes into oyako classes where parents are welcome (and encouraged) to join the class and train with their children.

We are encouraged to note that there has been significant interest in these newly branded classes and look forward to welcoming many new students- parents and children alike.

Hobart



Hobart



Gold Coast



Darwin



Hobart



Darwin

HOBART DOJO

Darcy Willis

I like the sense of achievement as I go up through the Kyu's. I like the philosophy of Aikido of respecting those around you and keeping your training partners safe. I also like Aikido because it is simple to start and anyone can learn how to start doing Aikido and it gets more intricate as you go along but you're still using the simple moves you started with.

Lucy Willis

I started doing Aikido because I wanted to learn how to protect myself. I find that the people at Aikido are friendly and I enjoy learning new techniques and getting them right. I like my instructors because they are kind and helpful when I am learning. I also like how the people in the class respect each other.

Alain Mackay, (15) Hobart dojo

Why are you training aikido ?

I started aikido not only as an interesting form of self defence. I also started it because it has made me focus and assess my problems rather than going head first. It has given me a pacifistic look on things.

What have you learned ?

I have learnt that blending and anticipating your partners movements can be crucial to learning Aikido, even something as simple as iriminage, a technique that is in all gradings, but still has been known as 'the 30 year technique'. I have also noticed that every dojo has its own teaching style and that adapting to their practicing style can be somewhat interesting.

Why do you enjoy it ?

I not only enjoy aikido for its very fluid movements but the community is very warming as well. Even going as far as having a Christmas dinner every year. I also enjoy Aikido for its very graceful movements. Even ukemi is graceful, slowly feathering towards the ground is probably the best way of explaining it. And that is why I enjoy Aikido.

Nate Nettlefield (11) Hobart dojo

I personally enjoy Aikido because I get to meet new people and train with friends and instructors; and learn new techniques to Grade.

Tilly Huys (12) and Edward Huys (9) Hobart dojo

I started Aikido at five years old, a few years later my brother, who started at four. At first we didn't always want to go to training but slowly, over time, we grew to love it more and more. Today we only miss class when mum can't get us there.

One of the best things about Aikido is that no matter how much you think you know there is always room for improvement. It takes a while to fully understand the flow of the techniques but it is satisfying when you finally manage to feel it in your body. Ed loves the process of learning the technique.

The highlight of the Aikido year is when Frank drives a few of us to Launceston for a day of training. Training with the adults is really worthwhile because having experienced partners improves our techniques. Frank's music and lollies make the trips a blast.

Milena Mackay (9) Hobart dojo

Why am I doing Aikido? Because I love Japanese martial arts. I wanted to do a martial art that is good, peaceful, mindful and strong.

What have I learned? Doing my training I have learnt the Japanese language and respect and quite a few techniques such as Ikkyo, Tenchinage and Shomenuchi.

What do I like about Aikido? I like Aikido because I get to meet new people and play dodgeball at the end of class.



DARWIN DOJO

My Aikido Adventures

By Jacek Olchowik

Hi my name is Jacki, I am eleven years old and my little brother is Kash, he is nine. My brother Kash and I started Aikido training when my parents did, as they chose Aikido so that we could all train together. We train at the Darwin Dojo with Sensei Ferenz, and he is a blood doctor from Romania, that is sooo cool. We were going to training a lot and one day Sensei did a jo class, Mum and I love jo, we go nuts. We learnt some basic moves and before I knew it I had the first kata.

Every Easter holidays we go down to Alice Springs to train with Sensei's Marie and Mike, we also have a bit of a holiday as well. Every time we go back we learn something new and make new friends. Our whole family is looking forward to going to our first summer school next year.

Last weekend Sensei Marie came up to Darwin for a TTC, which is a pretty big deal because we train for three days straight.

It was Saturday morning and I was pretty tired because we had already trained Friday night, then after we had done the first morning session we still had three hours to go... 3 HOURS!

We normally train for an hour and a half! After the crazy 3 hours training Mum was getting pretty annoyed with us and wanted to take us home for a rest but we had to go to our piano lesson. After piano Big Jacek (Dad) told us there was a grading and there was no way we were going to miss that, so we rushed back for the grading. Kash and I ended up doing a demonstration, I had Ronnie and Kash had Red hair Mark it was awesome.

At the end Sensei Marie gave Kash his 10th Kyu and I got my 9th Kyu, it was such a great day. Sasha, Ronnie, Narnie (Mum) and Big Jacek all graded, Little Sasha and Col didn't grade because they have just started. Sensei Ferenz and Brown hair Mark were really pleased.

The next morning we woke up at 5.30am for sunrise meditation and beach training. Meditation was fun, Russell helped by keeping the hermit crabs from crawling up our feet! After that we did some weapons training. I like the weapons training, the bokken is good but pretty heavy, Kash likes the tanto - no one really knows why.

WARRANTYTE DOJO

Finn and Senna, Warrantyte Dojo

"We like aikido because the lessons are really fun and it's a nice and safe martial art. It has a great community feel and we love that dad helps out with our training.

Miranda, Warrantyte Dojo

"Aikido is there for you when need it. When someone is hurting you, you know what to do and you can get them to let go. It is done to try and make sure you that you don't have to do it"

Phoebe, Warrantyte Dojo

"When I started Aikido, I immediately liked it and always planned on continuing. I think Aikido is very fun and exciting and I really enjoy doing it. The 'Forest Game' is definitely my favorite warm-up because it's super fun. I've learned a lot in Aikido and am looking forward to my next grading!"



GOLD COAST DOJO

Sasha Hanford

I love all kinds of martial arts, but this one (Aikido) I like even more. Especially when I get to use the sword.

Unlike most martial arts Aikido doesn't really teach you to punch, kick or block. It teaches you to get out of the way and get the person you're fighting into a position that they can't hurt you so you can get away. Don't face the problem, just get out of the way. Simple right?

At my Aikido dojo I can see the adults training so kids can learn how to do fancy moves. Then you can grade faster. But you can only see them on Saturdays.



Playing a game at the end of the class.

HEIDELBERG DOJO

The children's class at Heidelberg had already been running for more than 10 years when I started there last year, so with the help of parents of students in the group, running classes has (so far) been relatively trouble free.

We have young primary to older secondary students, with a majority having a sibling in the class as well, with a quirk being that most of the older girls have a younger brother in the class. When you see these siblings training together through Aikido as a "way of peace" is more of an enforced subjugation.

Sibling rivalry aside, it is encouraging to see the more experienced and older students helping the younger ones of their own accord, especially when they step in to welcome and get on track a new student on the verge of running amok.

Witnessing the students develop and progress is one of the enjoyable things about being involved with a children's class. Students who initially were overly forceful with their technique have become more aware of their partner's ability and size, while those who were quiet and reluctant to train with others have become more vocal and interested in participating.

Rolling is one of those skills that can take time to be comfortable with. Some new students after a few months are dive rolling to the centre of the mat when called to demonstrate a technique, while for some, after years of training, have developed a particular skill of turning every rolling opportunity into a backwards one. We'll hopefully see some more smooth forward rolls eventually.

Guest instructors or visitors are welcome. After one class Shravan and Wilson were demonstrating some dynamic ukemi, inspiring one student to start rolling practice at home before bed each night according to their parents.

Anthony Chui
Heidelberg Dojo, Children's Class Instructor.



An Investment in the Future
some words from Tristan Derham

relating to people that was a happy contrast to the schoolyard mentality. Outside of the dojo, I knew when I was acting in line with the Aikido ethic and when I was being selfish. The principles were sinking in and I have had the pleasure and privilege to study them ever since.

Assisting in the compiling of this edition of the newsletter has been a lot of fun and I am particularly indebted to Rodrigo Castellanos, Geoff Dugan and Lance Wilson for their efforts in pulling it together.

Of course, I had the attention span of a goldfish, I wanted to play games all morning and I probably annoyed the hell out of people who would have rather trained with adults - but I was learning. I can only express my gratitude to those people who trained with me as a child - Vivienne and Ruedi Etter Senseis, Andrew Card Sensei, my father, and many more. That gratitude extends to those who are teaching children's classes around Australia today.

Sometimes I wonder whether the concepts and movements in Aikido are beyond the ability of kids. Perhaps we should teach them only the basic physical movements with some fun games thrown in to keep their interest, waiting until they're in their ready for the 'big concepts'... but that would not be giving kids, nor teachers, enough credit.

We're all aware that teaching children Aikido is an investment in the future of our art form but it is also more than that. Those of us teaching children's classes are setting a personal example in a unique way. We're helping kids navigate a difficult world and giving them the opportunity to cultivate themselves.

In the 1980s there were only adult classes in Perth but my father wanted his sons to train so we joined those classes: I loved whizzing about the mat and being thrown around. I also remember being impressed by the spiritual potential of Aikido. Here was a way to deal with the threat of physical conflict, a way to cope with challenging emotions, a way of

Gambatte!





*Including the cover,
these wonderful drawings
and sketches are by
Aria Van Mourik (10 years)
and
Zina Van Mourik (12 Years)
from
LORINNA DOJO ,
Sheffield, Tasmania.
Media:
ink + bamboo pen, and
charcoal.*



Photos by Geoff Dugan



Children's Aikido by Tony Smibert



Photo by Robert Castiglioni of 15 year old Tully Ulbrich enthusiastically training with Smibert Shihan.

Any parent whose child enjoys Aikido will know why it's worth taking them. I'm sure the reason my kids enjoyed Aikido, was partly because I love it so much. They grew up in an 'Aikido home' which was often full of Aikido friends, including the Sugano family, and their school friends attended the dojo. Their Aikido teacher (Bodhi Bratzel) was a close family friend and the Mum of their school friends who trained.

In our small town Aikido was a part of their social network so they were in and out of the dojo socially as well. Kids make noise, so we declared Deloraine Dojo "kid-friendly" and let them to be there during adult classes - playing off the mat, then on it after class. This meant that adults could train with their children in tow and supervise them out of the corner of an eye even if occasionally distracting.

Did this lessen the parents focus as trainees? We didn't think so.

Was our training any the less serious? Definitely not.

My youngest daughter, Grace, was really small when I first noticed her mimicking Aikido movements from the side of the mat in the kid-friendly area. Bodhi started a kids' class and soon both of my daughters were training, and I was enjoying how much they enjoyed it. I also remember watching Grace at netball straight after Aikido where, along with others who'd just come from the dojo - like Bodhi's daughter Maeve - you could clearly see how much Aikido movement was contributing to their skills at netball. I particularly noticed a greater capacity to dodge, weave and follow (the ball) in key moments of play.

Training with kids is great, and with your own is even better. I think most parents find that children love throwing Mum or Dad to the floor!

A best part for me was the 'connection' when you're actually working out together so that I loved training with them as well - although as the chief instructor in the dojo I was mindful to let them have their own experience and very often didn't attend children's class for that reason. Bodhi was a terrific teacher, so when I did join in it was not as a teacher, just as their dad, within the class.

On one occasion I arrived to collect Grace after class, only to find that Bodhi had had to send Grace and Maeve off the mat for replacing the 'eh...hom' of funakogi with a very loud "pi...zza, pi...zza!" despite a warning. Overall I loved it when Liv and Grace were training and it gave me confidence to know that each could easily move out of the way of a larger attacker. Neither continued training as other things became more important in their lives -and rightly so.

Yet some years ago, when I mentioned to Grace (who had also re-engaged with Aikido at Drama School in WA) that I would have loved it had she continued she gave me a special insight into the part that Aikido had played in her life as my child:

"I trained for five years Dad, and the last two... were for you."

What I had thought I was giving to my kids was something they were also giving to me!

I also dare to think that Aikido has contributed the wonderful way that they think and their innate respect for other people - even within their careers. Recognising, as they do, the importance of Aikido in Dad's life they have profoundly supported me in my own involvement. (Aikido has taken me away from home so often.) Perhaps it even gave them insight into the odd thinking of their dad, and for that I am incredibly grateful

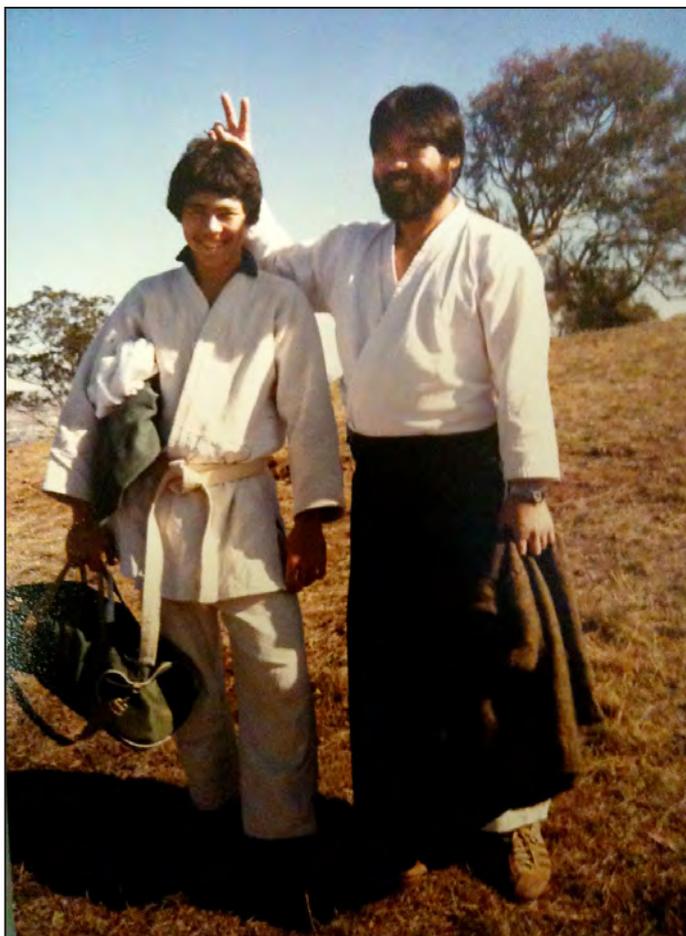


Smibert Sensei as a young black belt with a youthful Sugano Sensei and fellow student Keith Townsend.. Photo T Smibert

Looking back to my own childhood, I'm now acutely aware of how important Aikido was to it.

I started Judo at around 12 or 13 then Aikido at 15. Everyone else at both seemed to be stronger and fitter than I was. I was not a sportsman (still am not) and so many of my peers were natural sportsmen (Dave Brown Shihan, for example, who was amazing in his sporting skills and achievements). But Aikido gave me my own focus and level of self-discipline.

It also gave me mentors to believe in; first of all Arthur Morsehead Sensei, and then Sugano Sensei (for around 45 years). He was an enigma and clearly the sort of person I could aspire to emulate. Sensei was kind, firm, immensely



— Everyone has to start somewhere —
Father and Son... Sugano Shihan with a very young Jikou.
Photo T Smibert

powerful, skilled and gentle. I met him when I was 16 and can still feel his first handshake.

Growing up as a process can be more than unsettling, and many kids are troubled by inconsistencies in their home lives, schooling and friendships. When you're not good at sports, and don't feel attracted to competitive sports, much of school life may be wasted on you; and at my boys school, sports were very important and I felt alienated. But in the dojo, I felt I belonged. I was thrilled by the movement, philosophy, culture, community and fellowship of Aikido. Strong adults like the late John van Roessel Sensei and many others were invariably kind to a floundering teenager, and yet always challenged and assisted me to better myself physically and attain levels of skill that I might previously have considered out of my reach. Sugano Sensei, my many friends and training companions became an integral part of my life; and so I grew into Aikido.

The years have passed in a wonderful blur and now, as I rapidly approach a milestone age of 70 —less than 2 years to go— I feel just as engaged, thrilled and interested in Aikido as ever before.

I can't believe how lucky I was to have encountered Aikido while still a child and to have been helped by so many people to keep training and to benefit from the giving and receiving that is always an integral part of Aikido. The support of parents was critical to my feelings as a teenager that

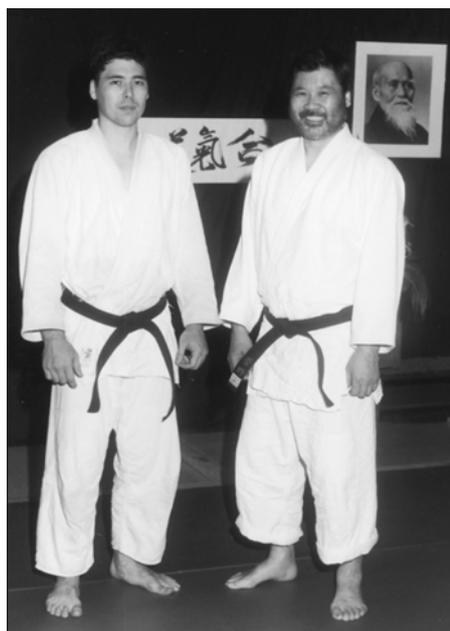
what I was doing was worthwhile and I could write an essay about their work for Aiki-Kai Australia (which led to Kiss-homaru Doshu awarding my Dad with an honorary shodan around 1981, both for his assistance to Sugano Sensei and consequent contribution to Aikido in Australia).

Nothing pleases most parents more than knowing that their child are doing something worthwhile, and in the care of high calibre people. Those now leading and contributing to the rapid growth of children's classes are doing us all a great favour. Their efforts ensure not only that not only a great number of children benefit from Aikido, but also that those who really need it have access to teaching of the highest quality. I was one of those kids with Aikido providing information, instruction and inspiration gleaned from the training, friendship and guidance of great teachers and great companions.

Not everyone has the chance to start training as a child, not every child will want to experience Aikido and not every instructor will feel motivated to do so. Of course, people can start and benefit at any age, bringing to their training all of the maturity gleaned from countless other worthwhile activities. But in my own case, and for many of my oldest friends, a youthful interest has become a life-journey.

Visiting Belgium twice yearly each year now and teaching with Louis Van Thieghem Shihan at the Global Inner Aikido School and Flemish Aikido Summer School, I often notice how many relatively young and fit 5th and 6th dans there are there — all of them, like we are here, Sugano Sensei's students. It turns out that most of those young seniors, began before they were ten years of age and many as Louis' own students.

Putting time and effort into teaching kids and teenagers is something like building a foundation for the future — possibly one of our most worthwhile activities.



Father and son again... some years later on the Gold Coast circa 2001 photo JL

The Honesty of Children by Rodrigo Castellanos National Children's Programme Representative

Young aikido student: "...because one day I want to be even better than you!"

Rodrigo: "and you SURELY will!"

Ah, the plain, direct, blunt honesty of children...

That first line was the answer of a 10-year-old girl at the end of one of our Sunday morning classes when I asked her why she kept practicing so much ukemi even when we had already finished the class. Voila! Her answer was very simple and encouraging to me!

I invite you to imagine an Aikido class with a 50-50 gender balance, with an enviable average young age, with an open attitude and a willingness to give all new techniques a go without preconceived ideas of what a "martial art" should or should not be, and with a healthy number of students per class that attend rigorously every week.

Welcome to an Aikido Children's class!

In his book, the *Spirit of Aikido*, the late Doshu, Kisshomaru Ueshiba, explains children's classes as follows:

"The question of starting a children's class at the Hombu Dojo first arose almost twenty years ago. The reason for debating the feasibility of such a move was that aikido stresses not only physical movement, but sooner or later requires understanding the philosophy behind it. Sportslike or gamelike elements that would hold the interest of young children are minimal, and we had to seriously deliberate our decision. To our great surprise and satisfaction, the majority of students have continued aikido practice down through the years. In the end, one could not help being impressed by the sincerity and earnestness shown in practice by young people. These are most assuredly essential qualities for any aikido student, beginner or advanced. This is a point we must never forget."

In addition to these deep and true remarks from the late Doshu, children's classes are a perfect place to explore the most basic but most important aspects of our Aikido technique. Several years ago, John Rockstrom Sensei wrote an article about an advanced class that Sugano Shihan ran for black belts only; a Master Class, where Sugano Shihan explained the most basic of the basic elements of our art to the Yudansha. Well, an Aikido's children class allows you to explore and understand exactly that at the same time as having a considerable amount of fun with the ideas, comments and questions of the children. In his article, Rockstrom Sensei concluded that we must "train even harder to truly understand the basic movements, those that were shown in your first weeks joining aikido – that's where the advanced techniques live".

If all this was not enough encouragement, today the international Aikido community is strongly supporting the development of young Aikidoka around the world. Specially

the International Aikido Federation (IAF) is constantly promoting, organising and posting in social media events related to young people. This year alone, there have been dozens of seminars, internationally promoting friendship and training amongst junior students.

With all of this in mind, Aikikai Australia has been working in developing a solid and consistent Aikido program for children since 2010. The results of such a program are evident now with already the first cohort of young students becoming teenagers and not only seamlessly but also proficiently, joining the adult classes. We are starting to see 5th kyu gradings from young Aikidoka that show the result of several years of prior training in the junior system and the results are inspiring.

While all of this is very encouraging, Aikido is transmitted from one person to another via direct teaching. The most important challenge we have today in consolidating and expanding the children's program is not the lack of support from the organisation (TTC and Shihankai have appointed relevant Senior Instructors in supporting these efforts and a teaching junior's module is part of the Instructor Course run during National Schools) nor the lack of demand from the community (in metropolitan areas it is not uncommon to hear of children's classes with over 25 students per session). The most serious challenge is the lack of availability of instructors willing to run children sessions. This can be for different factors including: lack of experience teaching children (or teaching Aikido at all), lack of clarity of the expectations of the role of an instructor, fear of long term commitment in the role or even the unavoidable complicated time of the day when children's classes can be effectively run.

We would love to hear your feedback on this issue to determine how we can encourage more people to starting or supporting an existing a kid's class.

If you would like to give us your opinion, please don't hesitate in contacting me directly to my email:

rodrigoecv@hotmail.com



Ideas and Suggestions on exercises for Aikido Children Classes

Daruma Rolls

Aikido Movement involved: Ukemi and general body awareness

From the Japanese “daruma dolls” that have a round bottom and can be knocked any side and will always return to their upright position.

Step 1. Ask Children to sit with while holding the bottom of their feet together.

Step 2. Instruct the children to try to roll to their side and continue the roll (following the circle) until they are able to go into the starting position

Step 3. Remember to do it both sides, one time left and one time right.



Most kids will try to “shortcut” the circle and get stuck on their way up. Or they will try to get up by creating “momentum” (fast roll). The ideal roll is controlled and aware of the body and will follow the outer circle of the roll. It should look more like a ball rolling than a dice bumping!

Most of the times kids need only to be guided the right direction (not pulled or pushed) and their body will automatically follow the correct circle and be able to get back to the starting position.



Photos by Rodrigo Castellanos



Side to Side Rolls (Alone, in pairs and in groups)

Aikido Movement involved: Ukemi and general body awareness
Follow up from daruma rolls but this time with legs opened and spread apart (instead of holding feet together).

Step 1. Ask children to sit with their legs open and spread apart and do a sideways roll so they “wobble” back into the sitting position.

Step 2. Ask 2 children to sit back to back and, in coordination, attempt the same side ways roll. Both children should be rolling towards the same side (e.g. to their left) which means both will be able to “wobble” back to the sit up position and be back to back.

Step 3. Add progressively one more child to the group!



This game requires coordination and teamwork between the students, encourages core muscle strength by performing it slowly and with control of their legs.

Animal Walk into Rolls: E.g. Bear walks (teenagers, alligator walk)

Aikido Movement involved: Ukemi and core strengthening

Normally kids begin learning to do front rolls from their knees. This game is a good intermediate step before they stand up to attempt the roll.

Step 1. Ask students to be on their “four legs” (hands and feet on the floor) and do a “bear walk” from side to side to the dojo.

Step 2. Once they are comfortable with the bear walk ask them to progressively find a way to do a front roll as they walk like bears. They can do this in their own time. Remind them to do both, left and right sides.

Step 3. Ask them to do a bear walk from side to side of the dojo and when you clap they have to do a front roll

For teenager, who sometimes need more physical challenge, the bear walk can change into an alligator walk (requires more core strength but is a sometimes a good challenge for teenagers).

Play with different type of animals (e.g. frogs, rabbits, etc.) to give the kids extra exercise in core muscles while having fun and practicing their rolls! “Crab” walk is great for backwards rolls for example.



Noodle Dodge (duck + jump + irimi or tenkan)

Aikido Movement involved: Tai sabaki and reflexes

You need a short pool noodle or foam sword for this game (you could use a bokken but need to be VERY careful when handling it).

Step 1. While you are holding the pool noodle, the kid will be standing in front of you and you will ask her/him to perform the following 3 actions:

- i) to duck while you swing the noodle to her/his head,
- ii) jump while you swing the noodle to her/his feet and
- iii) step off line when you do a shomenuchi type cut.

This teaches basic reflexes and also how to remain calm under a bit of pressure.

Step 2. Same format (duck, jump, offline) but this time the offline movement can become an irimi movement or a tenkan movement.

Step 3. You can make the 3 movements now in a random order (e.g. jump, offline, duck!, etc.)

When ducking, encourage kids to do a type of a squat (jigotai) to keep their eyes on you rather than bend forward an lose eye contact. There are as many variants of this game as you can imagine!

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THE GRADING SYSTEM

Many people are uncertain about how the grading system works, so we took the opportunity to ask **Smibert Shiban - Chair of the Dan Grading Panel** - a few questions. Tony himself was one of the first home-grown students to sit for the dan test, and then assisted Sugano Sensei during national gradings from 1970 onwards. When Sensei died, Tony became Chair of Aiki-Kai Australia's Dan Examination Committee – the panel authorised by Hombu to conduct dan tests and make recommendation for high rank.

AKA: Where does Aiki Kai Australia's grading authority come from?

TS: All Aikikai dan gradings come from Doshu. The system is administered by Hombu and they authorise the people who give the tests. When Sugano Sensei arrived in 1965 he was, at first, the sole grading authority for Australia. That meant he personally tested everyone and made recommendations to O Sensei when he was alive and then to the second Doshu (Kisshomaru Ueshiba Sensei). When we formed Aiki Kai Australia and established its grading panel, Sensei was Chair of the Panel and, from our point of view, his personal authority and assessment was the one that counted.

AKA: So, as a Recognised Organisation, AKA has capacity to conduct tests for Doshu and Hombu, is that correct?

Yes, and it's worth noting that all gradings in all recognized organizations are issued under Hombu's authority and have to accord with the guidelines published on their website. That means they trust us to maintain a high standard.

AKA: Could you explain a little more?

Broadly speaking, there are 4 ways you can receive a grading. First, is within a recognized organization like ours, by assessment of its official panel and once you have met all the prerequisites and either passed the test or been recommended without examination. The second is if a shihan from Hombu conducts the test or recommends you. The third is when Hombu gives a one-off authority on a specific occasion to a specific person, normally someone high ranked and after a request of a local organization. Beyond this, there is a unique, fourth level, whereby the most senior of Hombu's early shihans - those dispatched by O Sensei himself - like Sugano Shihan and Yamada Shihan, can conduct a test anywhere, anytime, and Hombu will accept those. (Actually, you could probably count the remaining people with such authority on one hand!)

AKA: So it's a big responsibility?

Yes, but there is an equal responsibility for anyone making the recommendation that leads to the test for someone to be graded at any level, including for a kyu test. We all have enormous responsibility to make sure the applicant has addressed the prerequisite criteria – and at dan level, Hombu is very ready to ask for details if there is any element of doubt. Trust is a vital part of the grading system at all levels.

AKA: What about the different levels of grading? Obviously there are differences in the system and scrutiny for kyu and dan ranks.

In Australia, kyu tests are conducted for the national body but at a state level, and dan rankings, are conducted for Hombu at a national level. Hombu is not concerned with kyu rankings and leaves them entirely to us, but they are then very specific about dan rankings. And of course there are 2 strata of dan ranking. The first is from shodan to yondan, normally by examination - a test where the applicant demonstrates in front of everybody. But the higher level of ranking, 5th dan and above, involves no test. It is, however, subject to specific criteria. At high rank your ongoing study, contribution, maturity, training and achievements are all considered.

AKA: Could you explain that a little more?

Some things are spelled out and others reflect unspoken criteria. First of all, at all levels you have to train regularly and often. For first to fourth dan you have to be able to demonstrate the required techniques and pass the examination. We can also recommend without examination, but the time requirement is greater and there must be a very good reason why the person can't take the test. For example, age or disability may be taken into account.

The test for shodan is based on the syllabus to 1st kyu, but at a higher standard. Then for 2nd, 3rd and 4th dan, the person's study and training has matured their performance in various ways! That's what we're looking for. And at 2nd, 3rd and 4th dan there are also complex applications, more multiple attacks and new weapons and jiyu waza parts. Also, by the time they get to 3rd dan, we want the applicant to understand the relationships between techniques. (A classic example would be between morote dori ikkyo, kata menuchi ikkyo, and ikkyo/ikkyo kaeshi waza.)

AKA: What about 4th dan?

That's much harder to define but, according to Sugano Sensei, by 4th dan, we refer to people with this grade as 'Sensei' and should see a degree of completeness in each applicant. I think he was saying that they have become an Aikido person. Actually you could write a thesis on this and still wouldn't cover the points! After 4th dan the requirements involve a whole range of qualities and a much greater number of years of training. The criteria we work to come from Hombu and from Sugano Sensei. In recent years, Hombu has more clearly notified us of what is expected, including that the Grading Panel, and particularly the Chair, must be sure that the person recommended for high rank is actually training very regularly. This may challenge people who have the idea that if you train occasionally but over many years, you will necessarily get ranked. That doesn't happen. As a result of new Hombu guidelines the chairs of all grading committees now have to sign on behalf of the panel guaranteeing the standard and training-record of people at even sixth dan!

AKA: That's new?

Yes, it is, because in years past Sugano Sensei could make his own assessment and that was sufficient. He wasn't specific about days of training required at a high level. He knew each of his original students – in the same way that a parent might know his or her children and made his assessment as a master. Although things have changed, we do still have to make a similar assessment. We want to grade people, but have to ask all applicants and those who recommend them to make that possible. We're saying: "Please meet the criteria, document it properly, and pass the test."

AKA: In your opinion, what is the purpose of grading?

TS: Traditionally grading was concrete recognition by your teacher that you have reached a certain level. It's wonderful and symbolic of your achievement, but not the only purpose of it. My own view is that gradings are kind of a building block for the community of trainees: every level you achieve strengthens the school and assists everyone else – your achievement is their achievement. I have seen lots of people get graded, including some who found Aikido no challenge, and many who had to work very hard. Of the two groups, those who have had to struggle most have often made the biggest contribution because they are taking Aikido very, very seriously. Anyone who has watched a grading will have seen how wonderful it is when someone achieves a personal best. Good or bad technique that's what we all want to see. It's moving and inspiring - and we all benefit.

AKA: Any other thoughts?

TS: Sometimes people talk about going for 'my' grading, "I'm going for my 2nd dan" for example, which leads to a misapprehension that we have a rank waiting for us. Our tradition under Sensei began at a time when none of us expected to achieve high rank – and then over the years it just happened and was, every time, a surprise. It worries me that some students now look at the grading system as a kind of ladder they're in a hurry to climb. Occasionally people would directly ask Sugano Sensei about grading, and he then often said, "Well, if that's all you want, I can give you that now." It was quite surprising how quickly this changed people's perspective. What I guess he really wanted, and it's the same for us today, was to assist the person to be worthy of the rank.

Editor's note:

Marie Petery Sensei rediscovered the following article from a much earlier newsletter (1993 — nearly 25 years ago!) within which Smibert Shihan gave a rather more private perspective. We think it complements the current article, so with his permission, here it is again:

Gradings a personal view

By Tony Smibert Shihan (1993)



Gradings give instructors a golden opportunity to see themselves reflected in the mirror of their student's presentation. Instructors see the results of their efforts to teach, clearly revealed in the form of each individual who presents.

And the applicants? While everyone tries hard at the test, those who have not tried hard in the months leading up to it are often those for whom the experience is most self-revealing.

At gradings I personally look for movement, precision, focus, extension and 'involvement'.

Movement is essential. Not just any movement, but 'aliveness'. Correct *tai-sabaki* is only a beginning. The applicant must be alive to the occasion and to each requirement of the test.

Precision is required. The appropriate stance at the beginning and end of each technique should be demonstrated: proper *ma-ai* and *hanmi* reveal the trainee's understanding of technique. Specific hand positions are critical to many techniques and are expected in a test.

Instructors will remember that the NCAS Aikido Level One course dissects *waza* into posture, attack, movement and completion, as one possible approach to ensuring that instructors identify the details and not just the dynamics for their students.

Gradings require focus of mind and body. And this means to be right here, now... which is basic Aikido. Focus is not limited to the *Jiyu waza* section (when many people miraculously 'come alive' after yawning their way through the basics.) Focus on the moment, on each technique and on what is happening, is called for throughout the test.

If your *Jiyu waza* wakes everyone up you should be asking yourself why they were all asleep.

Finally, I look for extension; and above all the extension of *ki*. For *ki* extension gives birth to *ma-ai*, the harmony of distance, which underlies everything. Beyond that though, at

an Aikido Grading we expect to see people extending themselves in a broader sense — trying to better their own previous best, reaching a higher level and extending their experience of life.

Whether we pass or fail, by giving our best at a grading we play a special role in the maintenance and continuation of Aikido. I always feel that this is how we reward and thank all who have helped us for the gift of their efforts.

And of course these sorts of qualities should be apparent in the display of both uke and nage.

What about people who seem to fall to bits during their grading? Paradoxically the resulting tests are sometimes the best. In confronting their nervousness, a mental block or shyness, they very often display the most important quality — which is to sincerely give of their best. In such gradings you will sometimes see the total focus, instantaneous movement, and real effort which is so often missing from other people's measured displays of 'correct technique'.

Correct technique, essential to the transmission of Aikido from generation to generation, is not the sole purpose of training. In gradings we expect to see high quality demonstrations; but these only reflect the focus, aliveness, extension and precision of each applicant.

What counts, and is always revealed in gradings, is the quality of day to day training in the dojo. Let's call this "*Aikido-bio-feedback*" we all participate in each person's exam... all of us.

Look around on grading day. Is everyone sombre and thoughtful while they watch? Go on; when it's your turn, wake them up! You don't have to pound your uke into the mat — far from it — just commit that part of your life to doing the best Aikido you can! If you can do that you've passed the test that counts — whether you go up a grade or not!

A personal view by Tony Smibert. (1993)

A Late report from Mike Seward of Aiki Kai Tasmania Inc

Rob Castiglione's documentary '**Remembering Sensei**' was featured at Tasmania's annual **Breath of Fresh Air** (BOFA) film festival this year (2016), held in Launceston each spring.

As luck would have it, the showing on 12th November coincided with the visit to Australia of Osawa Shihan as part of the Budokan Tour and his Sydney seminar on that date. Nonetheless a group of 15 from all over the State made it along to the morning session at the Inveresk Railyards Precinct (close by Aurora Stadium for those Hawk's fans out there).

"**Remembering Sensei**" captures many reminiscences of Sensei's time with us, providing memories and inspiration. Footage of the earliest days when Sensei visited Launceston for dojo seminars to mountain training in the Blue Mountain also featured. Rob says he set out to capture some of the feeling those early days, of what so enthralled the group of students that now form the senior ranks rather than focus on technique or even Sensei's thoughts on technique. One of the difficulties Rob faced was to 'give life' to a documentary form, to somehow explain the man inside the hakama, to articulate Sensei's heart and soul commitment to Aikido.

One segment with Smibert Shihan particularly resonated with me. It concerned the day he picked up Sensei from Sydney Airport to take him up to the Winter School at the Collaroy Centre in July 2003. This was just a couple of months after Sensei had tragically lost his leg. Smibert Sensei commented to Sensei as they walked back to the car about how he had such an even gait. Sensei just laughed it off effectively saying well if I limp it just throws everything out.... The next day I made it to my first national school, age 50 and about a 4th or 5th kyu, a late comer to Aikido and very much in at the deep end. I had never even seen Sensei before but was very much aware of his recent illness and its consequence. As we knelt, lined up facing the kamiza, through the dojo side door I watched Sensei come uphill along a sloping path, surrounded by the senior group obviously adjusting to this new reality, hovering close with protective concern ... but not too close as to annoy him, I imagine.



He then came onto the mat, walked to his usual position and the class began. Things progressed in the usual way, he would demonstrate, we would try to absorb the lesson, he would notice that we were missing certain things, demonstrate again and so on. At one stage we were doing a bokken exercise, a shomen attack which nage counters by stabbing down at uke's foot then coming back (very quickly) to defensive position. Of course enough of us were making a mess of it, exploring all the ways of stuffing it up so he stopped us and demonstrated it again several times clearly and effortlessly. Then it hit me... which leg was it? I could not tell. Someone told me recently which leg he lost but I am trying to forget because it is just not important.

Anyway, that was my little glimpse of just who and what he was and Smibert Sensei's recollection of the day before just added another dimension to that.

To all who have not seen Rob's film I urge you to do so if the opportunity arises. It does Sensei's legacy some very due and considerable justice and hopefully inspires others to help keep his fire alive, to maintain that body and soul commitment to training, that sense of 'kokoro' as I understand he expressed it.

After lunch we 'retired' to the Uni Gym at UT as Launceston (site of the 2016 Summer School) for a wonderful training lead by John Karas Shihan with 14 or so on the mat and several watchers. There were senior yudansha and kyu grades from around the State so it was effectively a State training. It had that sense of lightness and joy that is there in some of that very earliest footage of Sensei taken here in Launceston and which we had seen that morning and by that means it seems we were set free.

Ideas and Suggestions on exercises for Aikido Children Classes

...continued from page 15.

Photos and text by
Rodrigo Castellanos
National Children's
Programme Representative



Mystery Tag

Aikido Movement involved: Shikko

Step 1. Ask students to sit down in seiza in a circle with their eyes closed facing the inside of the circle.

Step 2. You will walk around the outer side of the circle and will “tap” students on their back. Students who have been “tapped” will be “IT” and will have to tag other students.



Step 3. Students can open their eyes and go and find a place to sit in seiza anywhere on the mat. Only the students who were tapped on their back by you know they are “IT”. No one else knows.

Step 4. When you give the instruction to START the game, all students will commence to walk in shikko around the mat and the ones who are IT will tag the other students.

Step 5. If a student gets tagged, she/he will stand up in hanmi position (legs opened) and freeze in their place.

Step 6. Other students can unfreeze the student by crawling under their legs while they are standing in hanmi. If that happens, students then will go back to shikko walking.

Game finishes when all students are tagged. Just remind students to be careful with possible head-butts in case 2 students attempt to go under the same pair of legs of a frozen student from two opposite directions at the same time! This has happened only once in 10 years but still!

You can find more information on these games if you are an instructor and join the AKA Children Instructor Facebook Page!





Winter School Promotions

Winter School 2017

- Selcuk Cakir Shodan NSW
- Tom Mason Shodan Vic
- Chris Brain Nidan Vic
- Mike Seward Nidan Tas

In the Dojo
Reflections and visions from Tenchi Farm
by Martin Bratzel 5th Dan

Spending time in the Dojo is a wonderful thing even when I don't practice because I am nursing a swollen knee. I love sitting in the space between the pictures of the Old Masters, the Aikido Ancestors. There is O'Sensei on the Tokonoma and Sugano Sensei at the entrance. It is a peaceful place and there seems to be a limitless depth to it. The emptiness of the space suggests and allows inwardness and extension, a focus on breath, an awareness of light and natural sounds. Meditative reflectiveness seems to gently dance through the space bouncing between two giant energetic pillars, the Old Masters reminding me of two big trees in the forest and me in the space in between.

Aikido and Nature too are big pillars of the Heaven and Earth duality on Tenchi Farm, holding the value of friendship, of learning and growing. So many wonderful people have already been coming here enriching the place with their gifts, their presence, and their warmth. I continue to walk with visitors to the big trees and the fern forest, a true Temple of Nature. What a privilege it is to walk with friends through the timeless presence of an Old Forest. A place to connect with the spirit of nature through the softness of the forest floor, the sound of birds or the wind in the trees, the smell of gum leaves and the musky odour of decaying wood on a moist day; truly a place of peace and contemplation.

Even the leeches lurking in the moist moss or sitting on the leaves of small shrubs are part of it and contribute to the duality of the experience by seeking to make a tangible connection in their own quirky ways. They make sure a forest walk is not just about metaphysics but can easily become a physical experience. For some they are fellow creatures trying to make contact the only way they know in a sacred and spiritual act in union with the Spirit of Nature.

Not everyone sees it this way, but it is certainly good for a laugh, especially for the ones who did not get bitten.

Fun and humour are the natural by-products of friendship, and of time together in the Aikido spirit of peace, love and harmony for any event on Tenchi farm. I love all those great people who come here. Most visits are short and often exciting and inspiring, but I also think enthusiastically of longer retreats of various kind with Aikido, Yoga, Nature, with good food and parties as natural components.

The 9 day retreat with John Rockstrom certainly was a great example of this. In a slow and gradual process people seem to deepen, becoming more present to each other and the surroundings, with a slower rhythm mellowing the thoughts and sharpening the senses. For some, it may be finding new meaning behind words such as accepting, belonging, connection, or harmony. Whatever it is that keeps us guarded, and stops us from feeling safe with each other, often seems to dissolve in a 24-7 situation involving a small group sharing practice, nature, life and good intentions. Such times together have the potential for enrichment, for growing and healing, for quantum leaps in insights and exploration, for fun and celebration.

Every third Saturday Tony Smibert Shihan's regular Saturday morning classes take place up here on Tenchi Farm. I would like to extend these training week-ends to community circles of camping and Dojo sleeping, and have changing themes like Yoga, Sauna, Massage, Music, cooking, dancing, nature meditations, walking and campfires, and whatever else is happening.

I am very excited about regular and ongoing Tenchi events and at the same time slowly realize things happen in their own time and in their own way.

Sitting with the Aikido ancestors helps me to be present in the moment even while dreaming and reflecting. Sometimes I send out a question and let answers find their own way to me. When I asked once why there were not more often people in this amazing Dojo I could almost sense Sugano Sensei himself, responding simply with the suggestion of not to worry about anyone else, but just to be concerned with my own inner peace...

Was it imagination, Sensei's voice or the vibe of the moment? I don't know but it really worked for me. It reminded me and made me aware of often saying to people I show the Dojo that sitting here for a while really makes me feel peaceful.

I realized then that there was another layer of meaning to this inner voice. What was really coming to me was to be more often in the Dojo. So I regularly started to spend more time in the Dojo, and surprise, surprise, I felt more peaceful.

Unfortunately I overdid my suburi practice and ended up with a swollen knee. While it stops me moving for the moment, it gives me the chance of some quiet meditative time, and that way has its own rewards.

It is a bit like warm ups without partner, just me and my connection with the universe.

It is like the feeling between moves where energy changes direction and there is an awareness of distance and extension.

Or in group training while it is not my turn, it is my task to be present in the moment, to be centered in the place between Heaven and Earth while not getting lost in internal or external dialogue.

Sometimes I pretend to be at the end of my life where I am not able to move anymore, not yet being quite dead...

I sense a benign chuckle coming from the ancestors. I chuckle with them, and feel a pleasant ripple through my body. With my ki flowing through limbs and torso producing a very noticeable inner glow, I realize, moving or still, it is good to be alive.



Hanami Geiko

Thoughts from a novice
by Paul Morrow

Many years after fleeing from what I felt was an unsuccessful attempt at secondary school, at 36 years of age, I chose to return to formal education. I started a course in architecture at the University of Tasmania, at the Launceston campus. At the same time, I realised that I had been nurturing a longing to commit to a practice outside of my daily life with no idea what form this practice would take.

The educational journey seemed different this time around because I was the one making the choices. I attended campus early on the first day to ask questions. With time to spare I noted a sign advertising Aikido, I took the contact details and saved the details for a later date. That later date came around quicker than expected and only a few weeks into my first semester I attended my first Aikido class.

I was advised at first entering the dojo that no ten-week courses to black belt were available. All that was available was commitment to training and training and more training. With that limited choice on offer I took what was available and started training.

Unexpectedly, my studies in architecture and Aikido appeared to reflect and inform each other. The thematic appeared on the outside as two opposing disciplines, whilst internally I was witnessing a resonance between the two. This was a journey of parallel learning, or maybe the similarities were embedded in the process of learning to learn.

I continued practising Aikido through my first year of university. With a dynamic family life and the challenges of raising two teenage girls there were just not enough hours in a day! In that year I heard about 'Hanami Geiko' – foreign words to me. Two days of training away from my family, with only four weeks left in the semester. I saw that I was constrained and didn't need to attend.

The next year I was more curious about those foreign words. Once again, it was the sticky end of the semester, I

had family commitments and I had yet to realise how enriching such weekends away could be. I popped in for one of the days of training. On the way home, I stopped at a small stream that crosses the road for a break. I remember reflecting on a sense of connectivity to something far greater than who we are individually. Maybe next year I need to commit just that little bit more, I thought.

The third year of university was more demanding and as the second semester drew to a close and as family life intensified I wondered how I would blend Hanami Geiko into my schedule. I had a full unit's worth of work due on the Monday after the event but I decided to go. Perhaps with a few years of study behind me I was more confident, or perhaps I was beginning to embrace the opportunity to not only develop my own Aikido but to engage in a collective sense of community.

I began to realise that a weekend away for Aikido could actually nurture my commitment to family and renew my energy to engage in other studies. I took the risk and went for the weekend with the sense that the loss would be greater if I missed Hanami Geiko. The gamble paid off and I returned home on Sunday afternoon after two days of vigorous training, two nights sleeping in the dojo, lessons in the art of making sushi rolls and an afternoon sharing sake under the cherry blossoms. One late night and one long day later, I made the deadline for my assignment.

Now, two years after graduating, Hanami Geiko continues to be a beacon for me, a moment in the temporal flow that offers rich experience to inform the whole of my life. It's an opportunity to study Aikido, to embrace old friends and make new ones, to debate pedagogical practices, to sing along with a guitar, to compare sushi rolling techniques and to sweat it out in the sauna. It's a celebration of the cherry blossoms, of Aikido and all that is good.



Photos: Paul Morrow

Aikido in Australia

Aiki Kai Australia National Newsletter

Volume 5 Number 3

