

A Hippie with Ethical Conduct

An interview with Steve Kanney-sensei, dojo-cho of Scarsdale Aikido Monday, July, 14th 2014

Please tell us who you are and how you got involved in Aikido

My name is Steve Kanney and I am still trying to figure out who I am. I started Aikido in 1978. I had been wrestling for about five years, and when all the other guys were focusing on wrestling a lot of them were always trying to overpower each other using a lot of force. My coach was very interested in that and I was not. I used a lot of speed and timing and breathing. The thought occurred to me that one day when I get older I wasn't going to be able to wrestle anymore and I don't necessarily mean a lot older. I guess it was a pretty grueling sport. Somebody handed me a book on Aikido and I was reading through it and they were talking about timing and breathing and all the other stuff that I was interested in and the thought hit me that all the stuff that I was trying to make up myself, somebody else figured it all out before I did and they could show me the quick way in. I thought this is fantastic. And as it turned out, a dojo just opened up near where I lived which in 1978 was pretty rare – I was in high school at the time. There were only three schools in Florida, one of them was a couple of miles from where I lived. So I thought: "Let me go start," and I did. That's how I started.

Did you train continuously or have there been breaks?

I tried to quit a few times. When I first moved to NY, I didn't want to train in the NY aikikai.

Had you been teaching at the time you came to NY?

I had taught a few classes here and there, in my dojo in Miami I taught a little bit more regularly although I didn't live there regularly. In Atlanta I was going to school I didn't really teach there very much. Only a few classes. When I moved up to NY I didn't want to train at the NY aikikai so I quit and picked up Judo and that lasted for about two weeks. I didn't like the instructor there either and I had nowhere else to go. So I went to a side-dojō in Brooklyn for a while. I taught a little bit and was there for a couple of month, but it was too much of a commute, because I lived in Manhattan. So I started practicing again at the NY aikikai.

Who promoted you to Shodan?

It was Nelson Andujar, he was one of Yamada-sensei's students. He taught me

when I first started in Miami.

You told us that you started in the Aikikai system and then you moved to the Iwama system. What was your motivation for that.

The Iwama system is still the Aikikai system. We're still part of the Aikikai. I've always been part of the Aikikai. Saito-sensei never left the Aikikai. We are now affiliated with Hoa-sensei. I trained in the city with Seiichi Sugano-sensei and that was at the NY aikikai. He understood, I understood, pretty much everybody understood, I wasn't really a good fit. I couldn't really study under Yamada-sensei. That wasn't a good fit for me, so when Sugano-sensei started to become ill, and he wasn't as active teaching anymore, he kind of gave me a little shove, and said I should find some other avenue, some other way because this isn't necessarily a good fit for me. And I went searching around and ultimately before he passed away he gave me a little nudge, I mean I was free to choose whatever I wanted to do, but I had a lot of respect for Morihiro Saito-sensei ever since I met him in 1979 or 1980 in a USAF summer camp, I had a lot of respect for him and he kind of nudged me to go look up some of his students and reconnect and we found a great group out in California. They are excellent people. Sugano-sensei was great, I have tremendous respect for him, but I think Saito-sensei's system is probably a little bit more comprehensive – and the weapons system came more from O-sensei than Sugano sensei's. I think he (Sugano) mixed some Kendo in there with it. (I like Kendo, it's very interesting, it's very educational) I think it's not what O-sensei really wanted when he was designing Aikido. So I feel more comfortable focusing on the founders actual system of weapons.

When you changed your focus away from the Aikikai way, did you find it hard to change the way how the techniques are performed

the Iwama way?

For me it was a little bit different. I wasn't a student of Saito-sensei, I never moved to Japan, but every time I found out about him coming to the US when I could I would go take the seminars. I had a lot of respect for him. I would try to incorporate that in what I was studying. For me a lot of that was just refreshing my memory. and then there was adding on new layers to it. But there was a number of things that I had learned already, it was like when you hit the refresh-button on a computer (laughs). We already did some Iwama techniques but it was really more core basics, it wasn't wider than that. So getting the guys in the dojo to shift was actually a lot of work; it was very hard.

Did everybody in your dojo follow this move or did some people quit?

The dojo voted to do the switch, it was their choice. There were a couple of people, who wanted to go with Shiohiro-sensei. And I have a lot of respect for him. And I like him very much. But most of the dojo didn't want to do that. But most of the dojo wanted to go with the Iwama system. They liked it.

Do you have an Aikido philosophy? Or do think that's too much spirituality? Do you try to value and cultivate the philosophical aspects of it?

Do you mean that I just look at the physical technique or do I look at it that there's a mental aspect to it.

Well, you can do aikido without the mental aspect. Is it something that you try to teach and verbalize, or is this private to you and everybody else has to find their own way?

Well, yes and no. I verbalize things in response to questions. I don't impose it on other people, but when somebody has a question I'll address it. And then in terms of people finding their own way. Absolutely they should. I don't have my agenda or my own philosophy that I try to imprint on other



people. I find that in martial arts you try to do things in the most efficient possible way and if you are doing that there's a lot of – its hard to explain—there's a lot of different philosophies that wind up doing something in the most efficient possible way. You don't have to have my philosophy to do that.

But you have a philosophy...

I don't have my own personal philosophy. I didn't make one up. I have studied meditation and other things and what I focus on is the elements of my background which are consistent with many of the different philosophies that are out there. So everybody can come together and communicate on the same level. We don't sit there and fight about the differences; we talk about the things that are the same. And then people there from that sort of central point they can go find their specific ideas. That's no problem. But we can all get along, train together without an agenda like you have to believe this or you have to believe that or whatever. And everybody can find what suits their disposition the best and what works best for them.

Have you also observed in your dojo or in your career that many people start in aikido and after a few years they give up, and if yes, have you been frustrated with that? I mean, because obviously you and I believe that aikido is so great why would you quit?

I try to focus and work with and help people that are here that are asking for help. So if somebody quits I don't see that as cause for frustration. I just focus on the person that

walks in the door that needs help.

But you have given them something, you have spent time and effort and they don't want it.

There was a guy who was training here, he spent like, two or three years and he decided he absolutely hated aikido. He went to a BJJ school and it was like the best thing in the world. And he ran around badmouthing aikido all over the place. Next thing, somebody from our dojo started in that BJJ school and also my son went there and had a couple of classes, too. So, I am sitting there in their dojo and the guy walks up to me and he is a little bit more humble and he says I wanted to thank you for the time that he spent in our dojo. He wasn't negative about it. He said, I just think that BJJ is the greatest thing in the world. And your dojo helped me get to that place. And I said "That's wonderful." I was really glad that was able to do that. its a great place. That's a good fit for you and you should do that. Why should I be upset about that? If its useful for him. All martial arts are good. It doesn't have to be aikido. If somebody takes some value out of BJJ and I help them find that then I did my job.

If somebody walked up to you and said that aikido is not "a real martial art," what would you tell them? How would you respond?

That depends upon the person. There are some people who say that, who don't really want to hear anything else. They want to hear themselves talk. So when they are doing that I let them speak and then I move on.

You mean these people are so preoccupied

with their own opinion that it's futile to argue.

I learned a little bit about debate, I forgot even more. One thing about it that is sort of interesting is that if the other person is not really interested in listening it's wrong to engage them. You don't. If they are not going to listen to you, then don't talk. It's pretty simple.

I find it striking that most of the time when you hear or read this opinion it's from people who have only seen aikido. I always use the joke that people sometimes say that aikido doesn't work, but they never say it on the mat.

There are people who have come to aikido schools and have tested it out a little bit and they tested it out against someone who wasn't particularly strong, and then they decided that all of aikido is terrible – but its not really a cogent analysis or review of the situation. I think the people in aikido are excellent martial artists, there are probably good people in judo too or other martial arts. I tend to be respectful of all of them. In many martial arts they want to build peoples confidence. They don't really want to badmouth other martial arts, but they leave the feeling that their martial art is so great and so wonderful that it leaves everybody else in the dust. And for somebody who buys that argument they are studying that martial arts they become confident in themselves because they are studying "the best martial art." And by that way it starts to really work for them. That's not a bad thing. It's a good tool if it helps people becoming more effective at defending themselves. There's nothing really wrong with that.

If somebody walks up in the dojo and wants to study aikido or asks "why should I study aikido?", what would you tell them? Or why is aikido better than something else?

I would first ask them why they are interested in it and what they want. If somebody wants competition, I would tell them not to study aikido. Ultimately all martial arts are the same. But there's the stylistic approach. And in aikido the focus is on developing a sense of peace early on. while as other martial arts might start out with teaching destructive technique to build self-confidence. They might do a number of things to build self-confidence. If somebody is not confident they can't learn to defend themselves. They cannot learn a martial art if they are not confident. So they go there first. In aikido we don't take that step. We go straight to developing a sense of peace. In other martial arts after the person becomes confident they teach how to minimize harm to other people and to become more peaceful. O-sensei wrote a book called the art of peace not the art of war. Stylistically he attracted people trying to be more peaceful and if you're trying to do that fast then aikido is more suitable for you. That doesn't mean that karate will not do the same thing for you. They are all going to do the same thing.

I know that you think that training with



weapons is valuable. Please tell me why.

For me the more advanced aspect of martial arts training comes through weapons. You get extension, the ability to project out ... more infinitely than in your empty-handed technique through doing sword cuts. It increases the danger. There's more intensity to the practice. So you have to relax more in dangerous situations. The foundation for the movements are all the same. You build out the foundation of your basics from the weapons and then it will be incredibly helpful to you to infuse your empty handed technique with that. From what I understand Saito-sensei used to say: when you are doing weapons you should be thinking about doing empty handed techniques. When you are doing empty handed techniques, you should be thinking about doing weapons. I started training with weapons pretty early on because I injured my wrists and I needed the weapons to rebuild them. For me it was always an integral part of it. For me, doing aikido without weapons would be weird.

Do you feel restricted by the fact that we focus on bokken and jo? There's almost an infinite number of weapons, but O-sensei chose to restrict his training to jo and bokken (Note: This is not strictly true; he also used the naginata, the yari and the bayonet.)

I favor Uzis (laughs). I wouldn't say that I feel restricted by that. I find it challenging enough to just learn those two. It's pretty hard to just focus on that.

When we do the suburi, I am always surprised how many different things you can do with something as simple as the jo.

Yes, the jo is pretty complicated.

What defines a good aikido teacher? If you have two teachers, how do you distinguish between a good one and a bad one. Or to ask the question differently: Why are you a good teacher, but somebody else is not?

I never said I was a good teacher.

But you must believe that, otherwise you wouldn't be teaching, right?

I was asked to start a dojo. I kind of fell into it that way.

You are so humble, it's hard to bear.

I do my best, that's what's important. Whether I am good or not is not so important. I am trying. I find teaching very challenging and very hard. And everybody who having difficulties doing it I feel for them. It's hard. I don't tend to separate the world in good and bad teachers. I don't think that helps.

Ok, then let me tweak the question a little bit: What are the qualities of a good teacher?

Better question! We spoke earlier about somebody who was trying to find their way. Ethical conduct is critical. When you try to be a better human being. Part of that is, you can't be a dirt bag and a better human being at the same time. If you are not practiced at being a better human being yourself, then you can't really help other people figure out how to do it. So when I see a teacher and their conduct is not thoroughly ethical, I go the other way. because I can't learn what I want to learn. Ideally you would want

somebody to have some sort of real genuine experience in the art and understand it not in as dualistic a fashion.

You mean a whole person that lives the way, represents these values not only in daily life but also in his techniques.

Right. If you can't find somebody like that, somebody who is working on it and trying to walk in that direction and knows more than you do. If that's the best you have the option for, that's ok.

What is your opinion of the ranking system that we have in aikido and that we inherited from judo and which is in some parts not very highly regarded, because it's some kind of competition, right?

It's funny. I studied tai-chi in the city and once I asked my teacher, how come he doesn't have any rank and he said: "Ah, no, I don't want those problems." I think ranking is very good as a tool to help people focus and really dig in on techniques. "People get ranked and then they think that they actually know something," that's what my tai-chi teacher said. I think he has a legitimate point. If somebody says: "I am a X degree black belt, and that's why I know this or that or another thing," you have a problem. I think it's good as a tool to help people learn. But beyond that I don't think its particularly useful. For kids it helps build their confidence. But I am not a big fan of rank in general.

If you teach classes or teach a seminar, do you make a plan in advance. Or do you make something up ad-hoc?

Both, I might have some ideas for some of the people that I believe might be there. For a class in the dojo I don't know who is going to come in, but if we are having a seminar and I know what the system of training the people have had in general or what their emphasis is, I might think of things that might be useful for them. In general I know what the emphasis is. and then I go in and then I see that we have to do something different today (laughs). I don't really have anything that's set in stone, xyz, period, end of story. But if I see people needing different things, I'll shift it. A lot of it is adhoc. But sometimes I will give some thought to a particular situation. and then come in with certain ideas.

Do you mean, like, you come in and you know "today we'll do shiho-nage, because I know that this person can't do it very well," or is it more like "I need to teach this person about center. how to unbalance the partner..."

I'll give you an example. I had to teach at a place where they had some strange ideas about ukemi during freestyle. Not very respectful of what nage is capable of doing and they would just go full throttle like crazy people and the general idea was that nage would have to accept that. And from what I understand they did have people going to the hospital every now and again. We were asked at the end of the seminar to give a demonstration on freestyle and I showed them freestyle and I explained when the

freestyle people come after you, you use strikes. and I used very powerful strikes and I didn't actually hit anybody, but I scared the know what out of a few people that were taking ukemi. I made it very very clear that people coming after me crazy ... it wasn't going to work very well. Then I explained that it is very important that you respect what nage is capable of doing. I knew that the people there needed to see that and maybe some of that would get through. That's an example of something I did where I knew that there was a specific issue on the table.

It happens that you have new people and at the beginning they advance very fast because when you train regularly you pick up what aikido is about. But then typically after some time you reach a plateau where you have the feeling that you do not advance. At some point you will get better again, but then you will plateau again. If people have this phase, where they feel that they are not making any progress. What would you tell them to keep up and to continue.

The point of practice is not to get better. That's actually an obstruction to getting better. The point of practice is to practice. And if you just train you will suddenly wake up and you will have improved. But if you sit there wondering why you are not getting better. That's why you are not getting any better. That's an obstacle for you. So I would say: forget it; just practice. The practice should make you a better human being, a happier human being, a more effective human being. Just train and it will take care of itself don't worry about that stuff. *MPTYLINE* You told me once that you have attended a seminar with Wolfgang Baumgaertner. Have you been exposed to any other European teachers?

Well, Tamura-sensei obviously.

He doesn't count as European.

He is also no longer living. He was great. I've been to a seminar with Paolo Corallini. He was good.

He is a high ranking student of Saito-sensei, right?

Right, but I haven't met any other teachers from Europe. I have seen more teachers come from Japan to the US than from Europe, advanced instructors.

The spotlight is on the Japanese teachers because they typically have a more direct lineage to the Founder.

In the Iwama system it seems to be a little bit more open. The high ranking students are (his son learned a lot from him) spread around the world. There are senior guys in Europe, some senior guys in the US.

The fact that they were gladly accepting uchi-deshi from all over the world that are now spreading Iwama system is definitely beneficial.

Yes, it seems to be more open in the Iwama system.

This concludes my interesting questions.

Don't you have any boring ones?

One of the boring ones would be: what do you think about martial arts movies?

Some of them are quite good. I am not a martial arts movie aficionado. I don't go to them very much. I have seen a few Chinese movies with Jet Lee, Jackie Chan, they are good martial artists. They do some good stuff. My teacher in zen once interviewed Jet Lee. I never read it. Steven Seagal is a very good martial artist. Movies are an art form and it can be helpful.

Now the trick question: What do you think about the influence that martial arts movies have on the public image of martial arts.

If I saw more of the movies I probably would be more suitable to answer that. But I saw the Bruce Lee movies and some of the others. It's been educational for people. I think it had a positive influence in general. But I'm sure there's a lot of low budget bad flicks that people find awful, and that make them feel dirty. But I haven't watched them, so I don't know enough about it.

The problem that I would have is that people watch them and think that they know something about it. And especially with aikido I feel that's impossible to judge aikido from only seeing it. I would have never believed that aikido actually works, if I hadn't started it. I think it's easy to see it and say it doesn't work. It's much harder to say when you studied it.

The thing about it is: there is no martial art that replicates exactly what is going to happen out there on the street. You have to come at it from one angle and the angle that you have to come at it from is one where you survive and you live through the training.

If you tried to replicate what was going on out there on the street in the dojo on day one, nobody would live. You have to make simplifications and changes and alterations so people can learn. They learn principles and then they apply it in new and different situations whatever comes up. So whoever is coming at a martial art thinking that: "ok they gonna show me exactly what is going to work on the street" has got the wrong idea. I think nothing does that. You can only get at it from the standpoint of a system of study where you learn principles and to relax the body so that you can apply the principles. That's really the only way any martial art is going to work.

Do you have an opinion who great teachers are nowadays in the aikido world? Does this question even make sense, because you can have a great teacher only when you have a personal relationship with him or her.

That's a good point. You have to have some sort of connection with an instructor in order to get instruction from them. If there is a guy that you have never seen or never worked with, he can be the greatest teacher in the world, it has nothing to do with you. I think if you look at aikido in the seventies the feeling at that point was, you had the founders family, you had the founders son and on the other side you had Tohei-sensei, and Morihiro Saito-sensei. And it was really branching out from there. I don't know everybody out there so I would probably

upset somebody. I don't really know. The power of the lineage is going through those channels.

Do you think it's necessary to train in Japan? Why would it be?

I think that anybody who starts in a Japanese martial arts dreams about going to Japan and for whoever goes there, the typical reaction is that: Yeah, Japan is a great country and the culture and so on, but the training is not any different from what they saw home.

What is different is the level of accomplishment of the person who is teaching it. And the level of accomplishment can cross cultures. You don't have to be Japanese to achieve a very high level of training and understanding. Somebody in this country (the US) can come to a deep understanding of aikido. and culturally they are American. That's great. And they will build a great American system and a great American school and they will challenge the best of Japan. There is no reason why that can't happen. What's more important is how hard people work and how much they learn, more than their specific location. There might be some emphasis on the benefits of training in Japan. The way some people think about it they have a preference for it. I am just not one of those people. If somebody has that preference, I am ok with that. But for me that's not part of my background.

Do you think that there is any special meaning to the shodan rank/ the black belt?

It's helpful to get your arms around the basics and then you get to third degree black belt working more on technical proficiency and try to study the art more per se. Then you got through the technical material that's the way how it's laid out. ... In terms of focus of training, that's probably true. The sun doesn't always shine, because you have a black belt. you can't always defend yourself, because you have a black belt. It doesn't have an inherent meaning in that sense.

Is there something in your aikido training that you work towards or do you simply focus on enjoying studying the principles and practice.

Obstructions are not helpful in your practice and I wish I had fewer of them.

So you have plans.

Oh yes, definitely.

Like what?

I will feel when I am about to move there is a split second when I am off, and my movement isn't going to be correct.

But that's only a matter of quantity, not of quality, right? Do you think that there is something that you don't get qualitatively that you would still somebody walk up to you and show you how it's done. Or do you think, well, I got the technical side and I only need to perfect it.

Like, are there any cool techniques that I like to learn? Not really.

So you think you have mastered all the techniques?

No, I could work on basics more. I don't need

to learn the next cool thing.

But you worked for 30 years on the basics...

Yes, I am slow (laughs).

I hope you believe that you learned something in the last few years, otherwise it would be pretty depressing, right?

(Laughs) I can't say that I know nothing. But when I am practicing I focus on areas where I am doing things that are wrong. And I am watching myself to try to correct myself. So instead of walking away gleefully about the wonderful things that I know, I stop and look at the mistakes that I am making. I try to be more aware of the mistakes I am making and try to fix them.

But you must also believe that you succeed in that.

Of course (smiles).

There are people that believe that aikido has a very powerful spiritual dimension. Do you agree?

Give me a better idea of what you are asking. *O-sensei has been in the religious sect Omoto-Kyo. And he is always talking about his experiences about gods and all that stuff, although he never imposed that on his students. But some people think, that this is an integral part of aikido and they feel that if you do aikido you are in harmony with the spirits.*

If this is what it is for them, that's great. For them. The omoto-kyo and the other stuff doesn't really bear any real attraction for me. But if somebody else is really interested in all that kind of stuff, that's great and it can be very helpful for them.

What is the difference between aikido and aiki-jutsu?

They are different martial arts. The physical techniques are different. I believe that O-sensei was a better martial artist than Sokaku Takeda by a long shot and I like the fact that for me the peaceful aspect of aikido is coming into play very early on. That was very attractive to me when I started. There's a lot of good things that differentiate it from daito-ryu.

We had the seminar with Roy Goldberg (of Daito-Ryu). Before that I thought that daito-ryu was pretty brutal.

I think he skipped the brutal side. He told me before the seminar that he would go right to the ki flow techniques. I think that they have a little more hardcore stuff that they do earlier on. He is the only strong daito ryu practitioner that I have ever seen in person. I don't really have a good flavor for daito ryu. There are a number of differences, where my circle would be horizontally, his might be vertically. There are technical differences like that all over the place.

What do you think is the goal of aikido, does it have a goal?

I think, people want to be happier, if somebody is attacking you, you want to survive. Aikido plays into both of those. You learn how to survive in the most efficient possible way. And as a result of that you become happier as a human being. And a large part of it as you become a more

constructive and helpful human being by helping society around you at large, because this is how you are going to get there. Of course, if you have a goal that you focus on too much that you want to achieve, this particular goal tends to get in your way. That's why if you just practice, these things will naturally happen, you think the goal is just to practice, but then the nature of the training does that.

You mentioned that you are also working as a financial adviser and that you try to embody the aikido principles in your work. How do you do financial aikido?

It's sort of very interesting, because I don't know in Europe, but in this country the financial industry is really backward. They use mathematical models where their techniques are not designed to accomplish their goals. They are designed to make a lot of money for the people who promote them. And then the people who work with individual investors they have no real training. Money is not a be all and end all. It's a tool to help you accomplish your goals in life and – as I said – at the end of the day you want to be happy. The people who help you manage your money have no idea how to become happy. Since they don't know how to become happy they need to make you happy and then they use tools, an analytical model. They are kind of random in their ability to succeed. At least more random than they need to be. It's kind of a mess.

What kind of advice would an aikido trained adviser give that somebody with no concept of aikido would not give.

From my standpoint you start out and you say: If you look at your financial situation more comprehensively, you don't just only look at your bank account. Well, your adviser is interested in that, but you might be interested in what you do for a living to make money. And making sure that what you are doing for a living suits your character and is beneficial for the world around you. For example the guy who runs Exxon might have a very happy financial planner. To the extent that he has done a bad job on global warming, let's just say his grandchildren will get pissed off at him. Ultimately he's not going to end up being the happiest human being. You want to think about what you are doing everyday all day long. And how what you are doing is consistent with the principles of aikido: you help other people, you do things that are constructive, you help your community, etc. And because you have that sort of spirit in your work.. I have seen some planners that don't quite have the technical skills, but they are really on target. It's really rare. That's worth more money than anything a financial planner can do for anybody. That's very valuable. Another aspect is how you consume. Buying all the chocolate in the world is not going to make you happy. Even if you could afford it's not going to make you happy. And if you go and buy things that destroy the world that's not going to make you happy in the long run either. So through

your consumption you can build the world around you. And it has to be done in a way that helps the world, heals the world, makes a better world. So you have your working side, you have your consuming side and your investing side. If you have stock in Exxon, as an example, and they make their money by doing terrible things to global warming, it's not going to make you happy as a human being when you look back and see what you supported. You have to think of the ethical aspect of how you are investing. You have to think of the humanistic aspect. Then you have to turn around and have to look at the mathematical models that we are very familiar with. Which needs to target the achievement of your financial goals as opposed to oblique goals that may or may not help you achieve what you want to achieve. And nobody has thought to fix that. You want to be really efficient and effective and how you are trying to do what you are doing. *Aikido seems to attract a specific sort of type of people...*

We call them hippies. (laughs)

... people in aikido are very conscious about what they do and they seek harmony and try to be good people. Do you think that aikido makes people that way or do you think that this type of people is attracted to aikido?

It's kind of both. It's an art of peace. That's why I think that O-sensei wrote that book, "The Art Of Peace." He is drawing in people that want peace. On the other hand I have seen people that have had violent tendencies and I see the training changed them. That's O-sensei's taking the art of peace and making it actually work for that purpose. So if somebody is coming in with more aggressive characteristics, it's probably going to help them move more in that direction. That's what's its really there for.

Where is aikido going in a broader sense? Do you think it has reached all the people that it can reach? Or does it still have potential. I still meet people that have no concept of aikido. They only know Steven Seagal and do you think we need more promotion?

I don't really have a good answer to that.

... or is it only for a special type of people? In his book "In the Dojo" Dave Lowry points out that a traditional dojo has no seats for visitors, because those who only observe do not help, they are only a distraction. We want only people who are genuinely interested and disciplined. Do we want everybody to try it out or is it really an elite calling?

I wouldn't say it's an elite calling. You can have a dojo where there are certain types of people that are attracted to it. Not necessarily elite people, it could be low people, but it will attract a certain type of people and not the other type of people too much and I think that's ok. But its not only elite people, I don't think that Aikido is trying to do that. There are some systems that are elite, some are not. In one of the books on Aikido, I think it was one of Saito-sensei's he was asked: "What is Aikido?" and the answer was: "That's a

difficult question, I think a better question would be: who is it for?" and then he said: "It's for whoever wants it, whoever is interested in it."

That sounds like a recursive definition.

[What it means is that] people get into contact with it. And then they are attracted to it. And it's for those people.

My frustration is that I have to recognize that aikido is not for everyone. I would love that more people would like it as much as I do.

A friend of mine said it really well. He teaches aiki-jujitsu. He was talking about the same thing. He said: "There no such thing as a best martial art, there is only the best martial art for you." There are 7 billion people on the planet, everybody has different dispositions, you will never get everybody in one room and agree to do one thing one way. It's an unrealistic expectation. The idea is to have a lot of different systems out there, so that people of different types of personality and disposition can find what fits them. And we get a lot more benefit in the world if everybody in the world from all the different systems work together. And appreciate what everybody else has to offer and learn from each other. We are all trying to do the same thing. So when that guy came up to me and he said you were a great stepping stone for me to find BJJ that's the greatest thing in the world, I was happy. Because I know this place is a stepping stone for some people. That's part of the point of it. People who want to train can train. They don't have to be elite. To make the world a better place. If you get what you want, and everybody would do aikido, you would have a lot of miserable people.

I didn't mean that I wanted to force anybody. Its more that I cannot communicate what is so great about it.

It's something for each person to find for themselves. I didn't tell you about the other time I quit. It was in 1998. Or early 1999. I was sick and I couldn't practice for nine month.

Oh, that doesn't count. You didn't do it deliberately. (smiles)

I came back and build myself backup. I was able to get back to the program.

Do you have a favorite technique or is there a technique that you don't like to do?

Not really.

I don't like koshi-nage.

(smiles) I am flexible.

Thank you for your time.

It was great having you here. People liked a lot having you here. I appreciate it and I am really sorry that you got injured. *Oh, I don't allow it to depress me.* It shouldn't. There is no reason why it should depress you.

Some people might become frustrated. And there were days when I thought I would never be able to do aikido again.



I was told not to do aikido! More than once. There were times when I was sick, and I thought I would never be able to get out of bed again, I just couldn't move. Its funny. I came into the dojo just to watch the class. It was hard for me to get there. It took me about a week to build up the energy to walk there, I was really down. And Sugano-sensei looked at me. And just seeing from his attitude he was like: "You step back outside. You shake that stuff off, you leave it at the door. You don't come in here with that kind of attitude. You don't be down." and I said ok, and I sat down and I watched and then I went to my teacher in meditation and it was kind of the same experience. He grilled me, he doesn't allow that.

How can a meditation teacher do that?

He yelled at me, it wasn't physical. He said everything in the world is flexible and changing. When you realize that, you look at each moment as a fresh moment. Every moment is a new opportunity to improve he situation. If you are sick, what's the best way

to get better? Right now I need rest. Each moment you look at it in a positive and optimistic way. And then also I had part of my depression was physiological, because my physical condition. brought it about. Physiological based depression. I was told to recognize that it was physiological. Go on be positive and optimistic about it.

But it's not really possible to tell yourself to be optimistic and positive when you are depressed. It doesn't work that way. Does it?

It worked very well for me.

So people who are depressed by their own doing? It's their own fault, because they are not trying hard enough?

(smiles) Oh, we always play the victim. No, just kidding. What I am saying is that the basic question – even if it has a physiological cause – you can overcome it. It was pretty much gone for me, he told me that. And the cause for that was that I had a lot of confidence in my teacher a number of years and he has given me a lot of very good advice. I can do that with confidence,

because I felt comfortable with him and thought it makes absolutely positive sense. So I really went at it and just did it. At each point in time I would stop: What did I need to do? I needed rest. And then I had some energy and what do I do now I do something positive. Now, what do I do. Ok, now I need to step back and need to rest. When a depressing thought comes up, that's physiological, forget about it. Focus on what to do, est, and I just kept doing that. Then you don't have the habit of depression. You kept knocking off the thoughts as they come up. *You made sure that it was not self perpetuating.* Yes, you make sure there is no habit for it and suddenly you get healthier faster. And suddenly there is no physiological depression there either. And then you are in good shape. Sugano-sensei grilled me for it. That had a quite an effect on me. I was in shock. Sometimes you think somebody is depressed and they literally can't get out of bed and don't have the energy to walk three city blocks – the short ones. It was really painful just to go anywhere and people were like "oh, this poor guy" and Sugano-sensei was like: "You jerk, you shake that stuff off outside. I don't want to have anything like that here." And my meditation teacher was the same way. I was really shocked. I didn't expect everybody to say "that poor guy", but I expected at least that they allow me to be depressed (laughs). No way. That is not the path. That was good. You can solve it. You are optimistic and positive about it. If you feel depression, you recognize it and say "that's depression, that makes me sicker" and then you shake it off. The problem is your body becomes softer and doesn't support you any more.

Are there any other memorable events? Something funny?

When I took my shodan test the second time, I did a good test. I must have eaten something bad. And I was supposed to be on the mat the whole time. And I had to go to the bathroom and you know how that is with the gi. Its hard, I barely made it. Had my test, I just bowed out and off to the bathroom. Another one, first class right after my shodan test, when we had bowed in to O-sensei, I was getting up, my toe got caught up in my hakama and instead of stepping back and getting my balance, I smashed on the mat face forward. I did a front break fall with my hands out, BANG. It was a new dojo, I was the first black belt here and everybody was watching. and then everybody was laughing. *That's very typical for you to tell a story where you got humiliated, because you don't take yourself so seriously. That probably one of the reasons why you are such a great teacher.*

My ability to humiliate myself? I'll remember that. (laughs)

Thank you again for having me here.