

## Featured Dojo-cho, January 2006



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Division 2

I have never been the most coordinated person. My high school varsity football coach might have said it best when he said “Roberto, you are lightning fast (I used to run 100, 200 sprints and 4x400 relay as well) – if only you could hold onto the ball!”

I had never really paid attention to the martial arts in high school or as an undergraduate at college (UC Davis). Maybe I was more open to different things as I started graduate school in Riverside, California. I recall seeing a poster for aikido, describing it as a way of mind-body coordination. This struck me as something that could help me with two hobbies I had begun around that same time, scuba diving, and rock climbing. Both instilled some fear in me that made it difficult for me to be completely comfortable.

Ace Atkinson was the sensei at the UC Riverside club, which was also a PE credit course at UC Riverside. Riverside was also home to a championship shotokan karate club at that time, and it was interesting to see the contrast between the students sweating as they went through their katas on the hardwood floors of the karate dojo, and those rolling and smiling as they practiced dance-like aikido techniques in the mat room next door. We began learning to roll, and to this day, I still

believe mastering ukemi is one of the most important skills necessary for a lifelong practice of aikido. Atkinson sensei was very low key, and instilled in me a number of martial arts traits I look for in my own students today – humility, openness, and joy in training. When I left the Riverside dojo as a shodan in 1983, it was not affiliated with any larger organization in the aikido community, although I did hear later that Atkinson sensei had received a promotion to 4<sup>th</sup> dan through the old AANC.

I moved to the Bay Area in the fall of 1983 to work in Dublin, California at the ARCO Plant Cell Research Institute, and began asking around my work about anyone who might be studying aikido. As it happened, there was a woman on staff who was training, and she mentioned a young sensei who had just opened a dojo in San Leandro, not too far from my apartment in Hayward. Thus began my association with the AANC (now CAA) and Pat Hendricks sensei. I still tell my students about the first few months training with Hendricks sensei, when she didn't have enough money to pay for electricity (a partner in the space had failed to pay the bills before skipping out, as I recall), and we trained in the evenings with battery-powered lanterns. As each month progressed, the lanterns would get dimmer and dimmer, and taught us all that sight is only one sense necessary in the practice of aikido! Hendricks sensei also reinforced my early impressions about the warm and open aikido community that exists around the world, and the importance of being flexible and open to new and different perspectives that all encompass the diverse spectrum of techniques in the aikido repertoire. I am grateful for the year and a half I was fortunate to train with Hendricks sensei, who helped me to become more confident as a yudansha, and made my ukemi and all my aikido skills much more effective and powerful (if only I had a small fraction of her skill!).

In 1984, I moved back to Davis to start a postdoctoral fellowship, and happened to arrive there while the aikido club on campus was in transition. I sort of fell into the sensei role there, and for the next 4 years, ran the club on campus with help from Mark Bartosh sensei, Ken Gee sensei, and Brian King sensei, all of whom had been training in Sacramento. Hendricks sensei had gone to Japan for an extended stay at Iwama dojo, and Frank Doran shihan was gracious enough to take me and the Davis club under his wing. I feel fortunate to remain connected to the CAA and the aikido community in California (of course now really all over the world) through Doran shihan, and only regret that my career often conflicts with my ability to be a better student. I still gain great joy and reward from training for myself whenever possible, and the rest of the time, exhorting my students to train hard and hoping that my example gives them a solid foundation in

their aikido careers.

I moved to Idaho Falls in 1988, where of course, there was no aikido. Through the martial arts community in Idaho Falls, I connected with some police officers interested in aikido, and we began training at one of the local high schools (those cops later coerced me into serving as a police reserve officer for 4 years in my “spare time,” which really opened my eyes to the application of martial arts on the streets). After a couple of years, we tired of having to rearrange our training with the high school’s extracurricular activities, and moved to the Eastern Idaho Technical College, where we continue to train 2 nights a week. We have continued to need to remain flexible, as finances and changing programs have eliminated or rearranged space (we trained in a real classroom with low ceilings down the hall from a bandroom for a few years – we dreaded the months of practice before their Christmas show, since our training was accompanied by Christmas music!) We are back in the old gym practicing again, but every once in a while, end up relegated to outdoor practice. We still go outdoors every Wednesday to practice our ken strikes, with ice or snow on the ground during the winter months. I think I’ve convinced my students that it develops good concentration and focus on their sword cutting if they can forget about their freezing feet!

### ***My most Memorable Aikido Experience***

This January will mark the 25<sup>th</sup> year that I have been training in aikido. It’s hard for me to identify a single memorable experience, as all my aikido experiences in sum are why I continue to train and hope to grow in my skills as an aikidoka. I will try recount several experiences briefly that I hope will convey some of my feelings about our wonderful art and why I remain committed to learning and growing in aikido:

- First time holding a bokken, and Atkinson sensei looking around the class as we wielded them like bats, saying “you’re not ready...”
- First gasshuku, Aikido West, 1983, where Nadeau shihan threw me in my first ever koshinage (I had no idea how to take a high fall), and Nadeau shihan peering down at me asking “are you alright?!”
- Observing Hendricks sensei’s class for the first time in San Leandro, as a nervous, freshly minted shodan, and her enthusiastic encouragement that I come and train with them
- Welcoming Hendricks sensei for a gasshuku in Davis, and feeling the pride of a former student welcoming his sensei

- “Surprise” nidan test at the Stanford Aikido club in 1988 with Doran shihan just before moving to Idaho
- Gasshukus anywhere in Montana, where even though hundreds of miles separate the dojos, there is a tremendous sense of community
- The joy of training hard whenever Doran shihan or other senseis are in my part of the U.S.
- Training with all the diverse people who make up our aikido community, whether it’s in our own dojos, or sharing training with others, and appreciating our individual perspectives and insights into our martial art

Our paths in aikido are each different, but we are all fortunate when space and time coincide to let us share time together on the mat. Please accept my invitation to join us in Idaho Falls if your travels lead you here.