

The great mystery of Aikido.

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The first time I heard of Aikido I was living in Palmerston North, working in a start-up computer company and the director happened to do Aikido. I had no concept of what it was but he seemed so passionate about it and yet he didn't want to beat any one up or be in any kind of fight. He never would throw a sucker punch or brag about how hard he could hit or kick someone or show any kind of domineering force at all and yet he was doing a martial art. This just left me with no idea about what Aikido was about. It sounded like it had some physical force in it but it somehow wasn't you doing it or something strange like that. It was easier to ignore and make jokes about his white pyjamas or fun of its name. But it made me curious, especially the passion that he seemed to have for it.

Now call it coincidence if there was such a thing, but when I moved to Wellington I ended up living within five minutes walk of an Aikido club. This I might have been able to ignore but in the house in which I was staying there was another person doing Aikido at this particular club. I asked him about it and he told me the same sort of things. He mentioned there was some sort of spiritual fulfilment and it was all about flowing with someone's force and about how important it was to him in his life. Again he didn't mention smacking some around the head with a big stick or how well the club had been doing in a tournament and yet he was quite addiment this was a martial art.

Maybe it was my curiosity that actually made me start or maybe being in a new city where I no longer felt as safe. I know I managed to get into at least one situation where knowing some sort of self-defence would have been great advantage. Each person may have their own reason for starting that first time. Most people who start seem to have seen it demonstrated in some way and just decide they want to do it, or heard about it in some sort of deep philosophical or cultural book and became intrigued, or they just meet someone like I did. Maybe some will read this and become interested and decide to give it a go.

The great mystery of Aikido for me is why people continue to do it. Why some people seem to turn up every single lesson, 2 or 3 times a week for their entire lives. Why instructors don't give up after ten years or twenty years and some have being doing it for all their lives and at age 70 plus are still doing it. Well now I will attempt to shed some light on the topic for those who wonder why people do Aikido. This is not just for those who don't do Aikido, it is also for those who do Aikido week after week and are uncertain of why every Monday night they find themselves back at the club putting mats out and preparing to train.

Now I don't claim these are the definitive answers but after completing a small survey with the people who do Aikido from our club, several themes seemed to emerge, which I was able to put into the following seven categories.

1. The Physical benefits:

Many people said they did it for Fitness, Flexibility and improved co-ordination. Aikido is great for your body as it stimulates blood flow through out the whole body. It stretches your muscles and rotates your joints, which allows your body to be freer flowing. It also can be used for self-defence and some like it as it can help them in other martial arts. It is exercise, which you can set to your own fitness level and is not an injury prone activity. In the five years I have been going to Aikido I have only been injured once. Compared to my indoor soccer, which is supposed to be a non-contact sport, I seem to get an injury every second game.

2. The mental benefits

Many people said that Aikido was good for their self-confidence, self-awareness and helped them to face other challenges in life. Some also said that it improved their ability to deal with conflict and generally made them more understanding of other people. They found Aikido was a mechanism for improving one self and a way of continually learning more about themselves and others. Most seemed to be generally interested in self-improvement rather than being able to gain an advantage over someone else. While training a relaxed mental state can easily be achieved in which all other stresses of life just seem to disappear.

3. The People

So many people said they enjoyed the friendly people that they have met. Here are bits of what people said they loved about Aikido:

“Awesome people with similar philosophy”
“Great to have a friendly and relatively informal club”
“Enjoy the Company of Aikidoka”
“Helpful, Non competitive people.”
“Learning in a cooperative way as Uke and Nage “
“Enjoy meeting new people through Aikido”
And just “The people”

4. The Spiritual Side (this means something different to each person).

People said they found it calming or relaxing but yet stimulating. Others enjoy feeling the energy flows, the movements, the blending of forces. Some feel a much deeper sense of spiritual harmony, spiritual peace and others see it as moving form of Zen and like the philosophies and the Japanese culture which goes with it. Most people saw beauty in it when done well. A beauty to watch it and a beauty to have it done to you, it just looks and is beautiful.

5. The On-going Journey

There is great depth to the art and the movements. There are so many subtle aspects to the movements that there is so much to learn even in the simplest technique, and as each person you train with is of different size and stature, so there is always more to learn. The learning never ends and there is always more to know. The other fact is that it is a growing art as people are always discovering more about themselves and discovering new variations in each technique and are willing to share their new knowledge with others. Aikido is an on-going journey, which never ends.

6. The Breakfalls

Big Breakfalls. Flying through the air and not getting hurt. There is such a great feeling in flying through the air.

7. The Wide Variety of People Who Can Do It

Anyone can do it. Age, gender, size or strength aren't factors. There is no limit to how long one can do Aikido and we cater classes for children and could create classes for senior citizens. There will always be something in Aikido that we can teach to someone.

Again Aikido is not based on your size and strength. The founder of Aikido was only about 5 feet tall.

Now I'm not saying everyone has all these reasons for doing Aikido. Everyone is different and their reasons may be different to the ones above or they will place a greater emphasis on certain reasons and less to none on others.

One of the best answers I had from many people and also from a child who said to me, "It was about having fun". So why do we do it? Because we enjoy it. Why do we enjoy it? Because we can gain all or a combination of the above benefits while having fun and this is why I believe many become hooked on Aikido. We are like kids learning to walk for the first time and once we know how to walk we want to learn how to run and then sprint and then possibly fly. We gain a great sense of achievement when we do a particular technique well or fly through the air and land so softly that we can't remember touching the mat. We may be waiting for that one in thousand techniques where it seems absolutely perfect and feels like something truly magical has happened and when it does, we want to try do it again. Aikido becomes a true passion for many people. For some it is an inspirational journey to spiritual wisdom and to others it may just be an activity that keeps them in good mental and physical health.

So one quick note to anyone thinking of doing Aikido. We welcome you. We will enjoy sharing our knowledge with you, and in turn we see each new person as a new experience in Aikido for ourselves.