

Featured Teacher, May 2020



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Aikido West, Redwood City, California

I began my Aikido training in 1982 in Japan, where I had just arrived as an exchange student. My first teachers were Yasuo Kobayashi Sensei and Kazuo Igarashi Sensei. Despite the fact that I had barely any language ability, no Aikido skills, and no formal introduction, I was welcomed and cared for generously, and soon became part of the Kobayashi Aikido family. I owe them a debt of gratitude for their respect and kindness, and for sharing their inspiring and wonderful Aikido with me. I experienced many life changing insights and events in Japan, some joyful, some sad, and for the kindness and support of Igarashi Sensei and his family, especially, I am eternally grateful.

Upon returning to the U.S. as a newly minted shodan in 1988, and established an Aikido dojo in my hometown of Ft. Wayne, Indiana. There I began training with Saotome Sensei and Ikeda Sensei, and soon after affiliated with ASU. Our group traveled often to seminars with Saotome Sensei and Ikeda Sensei and different ASU senior instructors. This was a very intense time of training for me. It was like I was stepping out of the strong supportive 'first family' to become

an adult in the larger Aikido community, wrestling with the question of what it meant to be practicing a martial art.

In 1996, I moved to the San Francisco Bay Area and began training with Frank Doran Sensei. Doran Sensei has been a generous and abiding guide and inspiration to me for many years. He has given me the opportunity to deepen my Aikido training, leading by example and giving me opportunities to teach. It's hard to believe I've been training at Aikido West for almost 25 years!

On a visit to Japan in 1997, I met Yoshinobu Takeda Sensei. Takeda Sensei showed me yet another facet of Aikido, one filled with joy and expansion. He showed me places where my mind and body were stiff and how to loosen and expand myself in ways that I hadn't felt before.

Through my years of training, I know that were it not for the women in Aikido, I may have never stayed in the art. Starting with Barbara Yates in Japan, together with Wendy Whited, Patty Saotome, Wendy Palmer, Linda Holiday and others, in the US, these teachers have dedicated their lives to Aikido and continue to be an inspiration to me. I am grateful for all my training partners who have influenced and shaped my understanding of Aikido in very significant ways — the day in day out, falling down, getting up, experience of Aikido. Without them, I have nothing. With them, everything seems possible.

I am writing this article at the time of the COVID-19 quarantine. Dojos are closed all over the world, and we are not able to physically meet and train as we usually do. However, many dojos are continuing to connect and reach out to members through online classes. I find the online format quite challenging, but we continue to make connections and keep our training alive. I don't know what Aikido will look like a year from now, but I hope we can all be training together soon.

My Most Memorable Aikido Experience

One early memory I have is of my 2nd kyu test with Kobayashi Sensei. All the Kobayashi dojos did their testing together at Hombu Dojo 3 times a year in front of Kobayashi Sensei and a board of senior instructors. We filled the Aikikai for the day with more than 100 people testing. Because of the numbers, the lower ranks tested en masse, so when it was time to do the 31 jo kata, I was in a large group of 3rd kyus all doing it together. At some point during the kata, like a murmuration of starlings, someone in the front made a wrong move and everyone followed! The wave of motion was too strong for me to overcome so I made the same wrong move too. Eventually we all got back on track, and I did manage to pass the test, but afterwards at the celebration dinner (for all 100+ of us who tested!) Kobayashi Sensei himself came up to me and with a twinkle in his eye and a chuckle in his voice he said, "You messed up on your jo kata." Then he gave me a pat on the back and said, "Keep training hard and keep to the right path regardless of what those around you are doing!" I was surprised and honored that he was even watching me and that he took the time to talk to me about it.