



Christopher Curtis Sensei (8th Dan, Okuden)

Christopher Curtis is the head instructor of Maui Ki Aikido as well as the Chief Instructor of the Hawaii Ki Federation.

1. How did you come to practice Ki-Aikido?

As long as I can remember, I have had an underlying desire to understand what makes human beings act the way they do. So I decided to study theatre arts in university in hopes of understanding the essence of humanity. I chose acting and play writing as a way to find access to this mystery, and at the same time get all of my selfish emotional needs met, fame, fortune, etc. It was while working with the Open Theatre in New York City after graduation that I first encountered Koichi Tohei Sensei's teaching, through a meeting with his then-student, Yoshimitsu Yamada Sensei. I was struck by the insight and depth offered in this teaching. A few short years later, after attending a three year meditation retreat, I moved to Maui, met Shinichi Suzuki Sensei, and the rest is history.

2. had you practiced any other styles of Budo before that?

No.

3. What was it that appealed to you in Ki-Aikido?

With so many sports, including martial arts, it seemed like progress was based upon who could win a competition by besting another opponent, and so often I was told that strength and quickness were the key to this victory. But the original founder of Aikido and my teacher's teacher, Morihei Uyeshiba Sensei (O'Sensei), took as his personal motto, "Masakatsu agatsu kachihayabi," which means just the opposite: "True victory is victory over the self, and transcends time and space." O'Sensei said of this, "If all you think about is winning, you will in fact lose everything." In the practice of Aikido, I finally discovered that it was not others that I needed to understand and overcome, by merely my own self.

4. Who were your teachers?

My teacher on Maui was Shinichi Suzuki Sensei, who passed away several years ago at 9th Dan and was the senior student of Tohei Sensei outside of Japan. Of course, my teacher in Japan was always Koichi Tohei Sensei the Chief Instructor of the original Aikikai Aikido school in Tokyo, and then later the original founder of Mind Body Unified Aikido, or Ki Society. I also spend considerable time training with Iwao Tamura Sensei (9th Dan) the senior student of Tohei Sensei in Japan.

5. Who are your source of inspiration (past or present)? Why are these people your source of inspiration?

The greatest source of inspiration for me has always been my two main teachers, Koichi Tohei Sensei and Shinichi Suzuki Sensei. Suzuki Sensei was kind enough to allow me to act as his "otomo" (humble assistant) for over 25 years, travelling with him and assisting him as he taught throughout the world. Being with him on and day by day basis like this was sometimes hard, as he was a very strict task master and always expected the very highest level of attention from me, but I will always be inspired and grateful for his example to me of how to be generous hearted and compassionate with others, not matter how they treat you.

6. What, according to you, is the most important goal of practicing Ki-Aikido?

The most important goal of practicing Ki-Aikido is to wake up to the non-separation of all things. As Koichi Tohei Sensei always said, "The purpose of our practice is to be one with the Universe."

7. What is the most important thing you yourself have learned from practicing Ki-Aikido?

In the beginning years, I had many conflicting goals in my life, and so was always deliberating and choosing my next move very consciously and cautiously. Through 40 years of this practice, I now can honestly say that I am relieved to discover that paying attention to what is being presented in each moment always provides for the appropriate response. Practice is choiceless.

8. How would you explain Ki-Aikido to a layman?

I generally encourage a lawperson to simple observe a class or two, and then, if this inspires them, to begin practicing. Since Ki-Aikido practice is entirely experience-based, any intellectualization of the process, particularly prior to a person experiencing it for themselves, can be misleading at best, and damaging at worst.

9. What relationship is there between Ki-Aikido and violence/selfdefence?

Violent aggression, from hence arises the notion of "self-defence," only happens when one allows an opening for such to occur. The Japanese say "tsuki ganai shisei" which means "a posture of no opening". Some Westerners take this to mean how one stands, but "shisei" is not the same as "kamae" (stance or position). Shisei here refers to our attitude or state of mind. This is why Tohei Sensei states that the purpose of our practice is to be one with the universe, and how O'Sensei can say that if you try to win you lose everything. Our practice is to be in the experience of "non-dissension" or a mind of "non-fighting," leaving no opening for an attack to begin with. This is the ultimate "self-defence" in which we win before fighting.

10. The literal translation of the Japanese characters often mean something else in comparison with the meaning how they are used in the world of Budo. I.e. the characters for "Zanshin" mean something like "stand firmly".

We would appreciate if you would be so kind to share some more of these kind of terms with us.

I seem to have done some of this in the last question. However, since you mention the word "zanshin" I should say that this is one of the most commonly misunderstood by Westerners. When we use this word zanshin, we see the correct translation as "standing firm," as you

mention. However, to us here in the West, when we say "stand firm" we are often understanding this to mean some kind of stubborn or fixed state of mind. Whereas a truly firm stance is one that is quite flexible, a position that sees the "whole" or "big" picture, not one side or the other of an issue.

11. Unfortunately for most of us our knowledge of the Japanese language is too limited to accomplish a firm understanding of the nuances of these terms.
Would you please be so kind to advise us how to improve our knowledge of these terms besides much training? i.e. is there a book which explains these terms?

I have never seen such a book, and would love to have one! However, such a book would, in a way, still be misleading, since we cannot really understand a term like Zanshin, for instance, without practicing enough to actually experience it. As usual, a mere intellectual understanding is generally misleading, and often dangerously misguided.

12. Has your perception of Aikido changed throughout the many years you're practicing Aikido?

Certainly. In the beginning, I thought it was about movement of body. Then I saw it as movement of mind. Now I cannot discover a difference.

13. Would you please be so kind to share your thoughts on the future of Aikido?

When I was just a beginning Aikido student, I was fortunate enough to attend a party for Koichi Tohei Sensei on Oahu. During the party, somehow I managed to sit down next to Tohei Sensei during the evening. When I did, he turned and looked at me and said, "Young man, the future of Aikido is in the West!" I had no idea what he meant, or why he happened to say that to me. But now that I travel to teach so much in the West, the U.S. Mainland and Europe, I think I see what he meant. I am particularly impressed by the enthusiasm and commitment to Ki-Aikido that I have experienced in the Netherlands, Germany, Spain, and Russia.

I think that Tohei Sensei's methods of teaching Aikido, in particular, bode very well for a future in this Western world, because of the way it exposes in and to each one of us our hidden propensity for aggression and self-satisfaction at any cost. In such a world, this kind of teaching cannot help but be useful.

Thank you so much for this opportunity,

Aloha from Maui,

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to Netherlands, Germany, and Spain