

Working for Peace!

Burwell Aikido Club has just become a member of Peace Dojos International, (PDI), and as the lead teacher in this club, I applied for this status, because I wanted to make a clear statement to my students and to anyone interested in my club about what aikido is all about for me. Nevertheless, when I look at some of the work being carried out by fellow members of PDI I am somewhat in awe. So it was a surprise when Bill Leicht asked me to write an article explaining how I as the chief instructor in my dojo go about making this world a little more harmonious.

On reflection, I think that I am writing for those of you, who live what I might term pretty regular lives. You may well be married and have kids and you and your partner have everyday jobs. Aikido or whatever martial art you may practice, forms an important part of your life, but your time on the mat is not the be all and end all.

Anyway, that describes me pretty well. I am married, (25th wedding anniversary today as I start this article), and I have two sons aged 16 and 11. We are in the heat of school exams and my younger son is about to make the next big leap to senior school. I have my own business offering financial planning services and I live in a bustling rural village just outside of the historic town of Cambridge in the UK. My dojo is attached to my house, but worth stating that whilst it's my passion, it isn't my wife's. I have long since learnt that if I wanted a happy life, my time on the mat was always going to be curtailed. With that sort of background, I hardly stand out from the crowd in terms of doing anything obvious to change the world for the better. To put it bluntly though, there are few who do. However, my tale is maybe here to inspire everyone else leading more regular lives.

To make sense of all of this, I think I need to tell you, what I think aikido is all about, because that is the key. What I liked about aikido from the very start was that it offered a strong philosophy of being positive, being respectful, being persistent and doing the best you can, to name just some of the core constructs. This was very much in line with my own beliefs and here was a way to work on that. My own background is in Ki Aikido and Tohei Sensei's teachings provide a solid framework on which we can build. He offered 5 basic constructs for practising aikido and I learnt them as follows:

1. Extending your mind.
2. Knowing your partner's mind.
3. Respect your partner's ki.
4. Put yourself in your partner's place.
5. Perform with confidence

It sounds so simple, but the ideas are more complex than they seem at first sight, but fundamentally, the principles worked and if I was able to do all of these things when performing a technique, then it went very well and it still does. Time moved on and in the end I became a teacher of my own club and in latter years have helped found an Association called Aikido for Daily Life, which might give you a clue as to where we are coming from.

To start your own Association is a pretty big step, but in doing so, you are forced to think about what is really important to you and how you want to differentiate from other groups. There are two fundamental ideas that I agreed with my brother, who was the co-founder and these were:

1. It was important to teach within the cultural frame of reference in which you live. The inheritance from Japan of a strict hierarchy and only one voice counting, just isn't the norm in democratic Britain, so our group, is democratic and everyone can offer an opinion on anything and if the majority of members want something done, then that is what happens.

2. We wanted people to immediately see that aikido was not so much about what you might do on the mat as about how you might find it useful in your everyday dealings.

I am pleased to say that our Association is growing but more importantly so has my own conviction in these ideas and so it is not surprising that the ideas have been developed and when I teach I am constantly looking for ways to refine what I have learnt and to express ideas in a way that my students can immediately understand. As an example, I took those 5 principles above and have given them a frame of reference in everyday life

1. Be Positive at all times.
2. Try to understand exactly where those you deal with are coming from.
3. Respect their views and actions even if you disagree with them.
4. Ask yourself how you might feel if you were in their shoes, before acting.
5. Then do what you think is right with confidence. Ultimately all anyone can ask is that you do the best you can.

I firmly believe that true aikido can be practised in every aspect of life and what we do on the mat is simply giving us the tools and rules to live a better life. The above is an example and I try to use these ideas in my everyday dealings, (*I hasten to add that I do not always succeed, but I keep on practising, just as I do on the mat*). So that still leaves the big question, 'What has all this to do with world peace?' It's really mundane, but here's how I think I do my bit:

1. I run an aikido club and I teach my students the values espoused above and in so doing, I hope to make their lives more positive and as a result everyone around them.
2. I chair the Aikido for Daily Life association and I do what I can to influence the group as a whole to share these ideas and ideals.
3. I actively work with teachers from a number of other Aikido Associations, building bridges and helping to bring people together.
4. I am a board member of Aiki Extensions, an International charity based organization in the USA, which brings people like me together and which seeks to use the message of aikido to improve communities throughout the world.
5. As part of their work, I am on the International Aiki Peace Week committee, an event that celebrates peace, links dojos around the world and which will hopefully also raise money for some very worthy aiki related causes.

On an even more mundane level:

1. I have two children and I hope as a dad, I set them a good example and that as a result they will enter the world as strong and valuable members of society and will in their turn, find ways of bringing a little light to the world.
2. I work strongly for my local community. For the past 12 years I have been a governor of the local school, which means that I have worked closely with it, to give our children a great foundation that will give them a firm foundation for the rest of their days.
3. I get involved with my youngest son's soccer team and referee his games. It's nothing really, but someone has to do it and it means that the boys get to have fun and learn the value of playing as a team, of fair play and seeing that nothing happens without a lot of effort from a lot of people.
4. I work as a financial planner, (*a profession not exactly held in high esteem for its great moral values*), but I try to bring honesty and integrity and the same aikido values in all my dealing with customers and providers alike. I need to make a living, but if someone

walks through my door and requires advice, I will do my best to help them and don't worry about the financial reward.

Frankly the difference I make is not easy to measure but a barrel of water is filled by many drops of rain and if the world is really to be the place that we would like it to be, we will need a few Mahatma Gandhis and Martin Luther Kings, but we will also need millions of people like me, who want to make a positive difference to those that they touch in life. The whole point of this article is not to suggest that I am any more worthy than anybody else, (*I frankly feel a little embarrassed to write it*), it is really to highlight that we all can make a difference and if we light just one candle, that candle may light many thousands more.