



Sensei Brady and Aikido in the UK.

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MI: Thank you for taking the time to speak to MI Magazine. Sensei Brady can I begin by asking your rank?



My rank is 6th Dan - So - Hombu, conferred by Doshu Moriteru Ueshiba. I am a Shidojin of the United Kingdom Aikikai and a senior coach of the British Aikido Board, which is the governing body for the dissemination of Aikido in the UK.

MI: What got you interested in Aikido?

Sensei Brady: Since I was a child I have always had an interest in martial arts and when I was at college in 1969 I was introduced to a student there who was an orange belt (4th Kyu) who taught a class at the college. I went along to watch and was fascinated by the circular motions and the grace of the movements. I started the following week and within two weeks I became good friends with my new teacher and he took me to where he had his instruction, a small bespectacled Irish guy, one Martin Ryan, who was Shodan, (A god in those days) a teacher there. He was so fast and powerful, I was mesmerised. A few weeks later I was introduced to the Chief Instructor, Ralph Reynolds, who was the pioneer of Aikido in the Midlands. I stayed with that group for three years, although in 1971 I also joined the local branch of the national organisation headed by Chiba Sensei.



MI: You have been involved in Aikido for a long time, is there anyone in particular that has been a real influence in your life within the world of Aikido?



Sensei Brady: There have been several really. I am grateful to the aforementioned guys for introducing me to Aikido. Also to Mr. William Smith Shihan for taking me into his organisation in 1971, and to being, in effect, an Aikido 'father' to me. I have been very fortunate in that during the seventies several uchideshi of the founder were invited to teach in England, Tamura Sensei, Yamada Sensei, Yamaguchi Sensei, Saito Sensei to name but a few.

I took quite a bit from all of these guys but the one who has had the greatest influence on my Aikido was the man who invited these other teachers whilst he was the Technical Director for the Aikikai of Great Britain and the official representative for O'sensei to Britain, Kazuo Chiba Shihan. He is now the Technical Director of the USAF western region, based in San Diego California. I still get to see him when he visits the UK once or twice a year, even though we are in different organisations now.

MI: Why do you think Aikido so difficult to learn?

Sensei Brady: Aikido can be difficult to learn. It depends on your perspective. To the casual observer, the vast myriad of techniques that are available to learn can be mind blowing. Closer scrutiny however, reveals that many of the techniques are the same in terms of body movement. For example: Take Gyaku hanmi Katatedori Ikkyo. If you look at how the body moves when deflecting your partners energy sideward you will observe that it is the same movement, in essence, to Sode dori Ikkyo, Kata dori Ikkyo, Chudan tsuki Ikkyo and Yokomenuchi Ikkyo. So from that, if you practice Gyaku hanmi as the basic form you are automatically practicing the other forms too, the only thing that is different in each case is the attack itself and how you harmonise with it.





Also Aikido has more variations than most other martial arts. When you consider that O'Sensei said that 'Aikido is for the world, I have only scratched the surface' and that eminent Sensei such as the late Saito Shihan said 'If you have ten people you have ten different Aikido's' then it really does explain why there are so many variations on a theme. I personally think this is a good thing as it allows one to express one's personality through their technique. Problems arise when beginners go to a dojo, other than their own, and conclude 'Well that instructor does it different to my instructor so who is right? The simple fact is that there is no right or wrong they're simply different. As long as what is being taught is within the framework of Aikido philosophy and principles and makes sense, then it's ok. This is one reason why, as a teacher myself; I say to my students if they would like to train with someone else, that I don't have a problem with it. As long as the student recognises that they adhere to my basics and regard what they will see elsewhere as an addition to those, and not in place of.



I am an avid fan of aiki weapon work and always have been ever since Chiba Sensei introduced it in the early seventies. I think to practice Aikido without weapons is to practice only half the art, and yet many aiki instructors have never touched a weapon and still successfully teach Aikido. From this, one could argue that weapon training adds more complication to the art. I, however think it adds another dimension.



In summary, you must learn the core principles upon which the techniques are based, and then with time, you will see where all the variations come from. It will then be up to you whether to stick with one basic movement or create hundreds more.

MI: What have you noticed change in Aikido in the last 20 years?



Sensei Brady: I can only speak for traditional Aikido. I think it is the destiny of Aikido to change, or perhaps evolve is a more apt word. By its very nature, the art can be interpreted in so many ways. This is borne out by the fact that the uchideshi of O'sensei, who were sent out all over the world in the mid sixties to establish the link with Hombu, were different. It is interesting to note that these men all sat around the feet of the master and yet through differences in build, outlook and temperament, came away with slightly different interpretations of Aikido.



Chiba Sensei with his large, dynamic and gracefully powerful movements would sweep you away like a hurricane whereas Tamura Sensei with his short, sharp Irimi type movement penetrated straight through you like a train.

The first time I met Sugano Sensei I took ukemi for him in London in 1980 at the IAF congress demonstration, and I remember, for the first time ever, being able to count the tatami as I hurtled across them.



I also remember attacking him with shomen uchi and not touching the tatami for about three minutes I think. If you imagine balls and juggling you will get the idea.

The late Yamaguchi Shihan's movements again were so different. He was so relaxed and yet grabbing his wrist as he moved felt like grabbing the back of a bus as it pulled away. He hardly ever looked as if he was doing anything and yet kept you controlled on the tatami, effortlessly switching from one technique to another, almost toying with you. With such diversity in interpretation and consequently teaching from the top of Aikido society, it stands



to sense that the next level of instructors down, trained by these masters, will be slightly different in their interpretations and teaching, and so it will go on.

By the same token, if there is a change of the top Sensei in an organisation it won't be long before that organisation starts to go in another direction. My own experience reflects this. Chiba Sensei arrived in England in 1966 and established the Aikikai of Great Britain in 1968. In 1976 he went back to Japan leaving his successor, Kanetsuka Sensei in charge. Within a year the organisation changed name to the British Aikido Federation. Within two years the organisation changed its teaching rationale from its more martial leanings as a result of Chiba Sensei's teachings, to more of body conditioning in terms of flexibility and exercise, a path that it still follows very successfully. In 1986 some senior students got together and decided they preferred the old ways and requested Chiba Sensei's help again. The group that split from the BAF became known as the UKA. A group later broke away from the UKA in 1995 through political differences and became known as the British Aikikai. All these organisations have gone on to become successful in their own right, which goes to show that change is sometimes necessary to allow groups to pursue their own destiny.



MI: Are you happy with the direction Aikido is taking?

Sensei Brady: Regarding direction, I would have to say I am generally happy with the way things are going. The BAF and British Aikikai are still blossoming and there are one or two organisations formed recently by Aikidoka with flawless pedigree, going on in their respective ways. Occasionally I meet up with some of the older practitioners in these groups and we swap stories of times when we were all together.



I do have some concerns about the way things are progressing outside these official organisations, most notably the watering down and sometimes erosion of the quality of instruction. There are now so many people doing all kinds of weird and wonderful Aikido, sometimes it's not even Aikido! But some amalgamation of several others arts, constructed in the name of offering an alternative to the 'traditional ways' no doubt conceived with the idea of making a quick buck on the back of unsuspecting punters. I am not against progress, but it needs to be pointed out that there is enough to study within the framework of traditional Aikido without having to create new 'composite forms'.



As any true traditionalist will know, you spend your whole life climbing the mountain that is Aikido; you never get to the top. No one can ever say that he or she is at the top and can now teach everyone else; all that can be said is '-I am a little further up the mountain than you are'. In my opinion, as you become more senior in the art, you have to decide whether you wish to continue to refine and polish, that which you already know or to become more progressive in creating yourself.



The late Saito Sensei always used to say that he never practiced or taught anything other than what the founder taught him. Chiba Sensei still practices the traditional ways but has also amalgamated laido concepts into his body art and has gone on to create an entire new weapons system too.

Even If you spend the rest of your life trying, you will never be able to do what these guys can do. Whichever direction you choose to take, as long as it is with the traditional art you can't go wrong.



MI: What was the training like when you first started?

Sensei Brady: When I first started Aikido a little over 35 years ago it was hardly known at all. You would travel the length and breadth of the country to train with a Shodan! My first teacher was very good and I enjoyed what he did, but I was into reading every book on Aikido I could get my hands on and I couldn't understand why I wasn't hearing anything in Japanese during the class. These books were explaining all the techniques and body movements with Japanese terminology and I wasn't getting it! The reason I think was because my teacher had only a limited exposure to Japanese teachers (One of them being Abbe Kenshiro, who in the mid fifties introduced aikido to England). Another reason was that; by his own admission, he wasn't really enamored with Japanese teachers and in reality, was quite happy to do his own thing. I however wanted to see the Japanese as soon as I could.



One day I heard that Chiba Sensei was teaching soon in Leicester, which is about 50 miles from where I live. I made my way there and was introduced to William Smith Sensei who was the Chief Instructor of the West Midlands Aikikai, which was the local branch of the Aikikai of Great Britain, Chiba Sensei's organisation. Here I witnessed the Japanese terms for everything and also a power and dynamism that I had not seen before and I was won over completely, this style suited me a lot more. Chiba Sensei's training was very martial with much Suwari waza, something I had only ever touched on before and it took some getting used to. The training in the seventies was marvelous. When we weren't seeing Chiba Sensei he bought over many of his uchideshi peers for weekend courses. I seemed to go from one extreme to the other and positively wallowed in it.



Chiba Sensei also introduced Aiki weapon training and also laido. He told us that to learn to handle a real sword and understand its characteristics would help us to understand better how to cut and thrust with a Bokken. I developed an interest in laido, which has stayed with me to this day.



During this period we were introduced to the formal structure of Aiki weaponry, regarding sword work, Suburi, Uchikomi, Awase, Kumitachi and Tachidori and the corresponding sections of Jo work. Much of the instruction I give today refers back to this (for me) 'golden period' of Aikido.

MI: What do you say when you hear/read people say that Aikido is not a practical self-defence?

Sensei Brady: Self defense and Aikido seems to be a hot potato these days that has been responsible for much debate in the world of martial arts. When you tell people that 90% of Aikido is conditioning training where one trains with a cooperative partner, it is hardly surprising that they draw the conclusion that the art is impractical. In truth, anyone thinking that even 30 years of slow motion training in wrist grabbing techniques will prepare you for someone coming at you with everything he's got in the street is asking for trouble. You have to train for situations that you want to deal with. I believe that Aikido is as good, if not better than most martial arts for self defense, but you have to change the criteria for training to be successful.



Techniques against a punch for instance have to be modified, as there was no concept of this in olden times. The attack we know today as Chudan Tsuki, was originally an upward stabbing movement with a knife called 'Furizuki,'so we have to take account of this and modify where necessary. We have to ask ourselves if we are ever going to be assaulted with a sword, spear or halberd. Unless you are extremely unfortunate, the answer will be no. A street fighter will have no understanding of harmony, musubi, contact or ukemi. He will try to resist anything you attempt and will not necessarily make a 'committed attack', preferring instead to adjust his balance as and when, much like a boxer would.



Cross training with other martial arts is a must if self-defense is a priority. If you want to defend yourself against a boxer using Aikido then train with a boxer you know! If you want to defend yourself against a street attack, train with a street fighter. This may seem like



simplistic advice, but you have to become familiar with the situation that you are training for, and the only way to do that is to experience that situation beforehand with someone you know, who will point out the pitfalls of your defense strategy. In this scenario I believe that aikido is sufficiently resilient to contain any situation. It is reasonable to assume that any quality martial art will give an exponent the advantage over an untrained attacker, with physical fitness, mental and spiritual training, stamina, coordination and timing training giving the edge.



Public perception of martial arts is a major contributory factor in their credibility. Over the years, Hollywood films and the media in general have not done real martial arts any favors at all. The notion of one man taking on 100 armed men has done much to fill the coiffeurs of the movie men but precious little to the local dojo instructor trying to recruit members, as much of the public think that its only the lunatic fringe who want to spend their time learning to fight people fleeing through the treetops.



MI: Is Randori in Aikido a good thing or bad?

Sensei Brady: Randori or freestyle Aikido I have mixed views on. On one hand, the idea of any form of competition flies in the face of traditional Aikido as taught by O'sensei, who was firmly opposed to contests of any description. On the other, if one looks at some of my answer to the previous question and, at the same time, considers practicing with a rubber knife to score points, it is plain that in the realms of self-defense, this might not be a bad thing. Anything that enhances the speed of the reflexes has got to be good for self-defense. Tomiki Sensei obviously saw some mileage in it.



As I understand it, O'sensei was against competition because he felt that, by its nature, it would pit people against one another to engage in a contest to see who is the best. This, in itself, would create a winner and a loser and all the problems with ego that ensued. The Aikido founder had created an art that sought to avoid conflict in the first place, not to train in it. Additionally, some of the training could be lethal especially if weapons like the bokken were used, where a mistimed shomen uchi could result in someone being poleaxed. Because every attack was made with full commitment, it is easy to see why competition was not condoned. There is such a lot to be gleaned from the practice of traditional Aikido, as it is, why change it?



To summaries, I would say that the concept of testing each other as in a randori situation is ok if you are prioritising self-defense as your reason for practicing Aikido. If you allow it to become too big a part of your Aikido, then you are in danger of transforming it into something else and not the art that O'Sensei propagated.



MI: We have read in certain books of superhuman efforts by O'sensei, in dodging bullets and dropping sumo wrestlers to the floor with a slight touch and other such stories, do you think these do Aikido any good?

Sensei Brady: There is no doubt at all that O'Sensei was a great martial artist. To some he was probably the greatest exponent of the Twentieth Century. Many stories have been circulated over the years detailing some of his extraordinary feats. One has to decide whether they are real, or merely the fanciful creations of devotees who were clearly in awe of him. There are accounts of him pulling out small trees from the ground, moving large rocks that ten ordinary men could not move, being pinned to the floor by several men and literally shaking them off. The list goes on. What is certain is that he was very strong-minded and trained himself to be physically strong too. It is said that if others would do twice as much as normal men then he would do four times, such was his character. What is also true is that he devoted much of his time to the practice of the 'Kotodama', where the belief is that words chanted in a special way can have physical manifestations. When you





consider that he practiced several forms of Ju jutsu, spear fighting, Kenjutsu and Sumo throughout his long life, it's hardly surprising that he was bordering on superhuman.

I remember an old friend and mentor in Aikido, Ken Cottier Shihan, who was the first Englishman in Britain to be awarded the title of Shihan, telling me some of his experiences with the founder in Hombu. Once in Hombu, Ken was practicing with a large American marine. They were doing Morote Dori technique (Two hands on one wrist) and this marine's hands were so big that you couldn't see any of Ken's arms from his elbow to his fingertips once he had grabbed him. In those days, the dojo office used to be in the dojo itself and O'Sensei had been watching Ken struggle with this giant through the office window. The founder came on to the tatami and of course everybody dropped to their knees in reverence. He went over to Ken and looking at the marine motioned him to grab his arm in morote dori. By this time everyone in the dojo was thinking that this guy was about to go into orbit and waited pensively. O'Sensei did no more than motion a punch to the big guys nose with his free hand, everyone laughed. This was a valuable lesson in common sense, why do something elaborate when something simple will do?



Chiba Sensei once told us in a lecture that there was a large pot that was used to cook rice after a hard days practice. Apparently O'Sensei was the only one who could move it! He also told us that part of uchideshi training was to learn how to sleep without sleeping. If the founder got up during the night to go to a rest room or whatever and one of the uchideshi wasn't there to open the door for him and care for his needs, then there was hell to pay. They had to develop ways of getting a good night sleep but remain alert too. Chiba Sensei, smilingly recollecting, told us that this part of the training was worse than all the practice in the dojo. O'Sensei was a stern taskmaster as well, and expected his trainees to attack him anytime, anyplace. Needless to say, he thwarted their every attempt either by simply moving out of the way or in some cases sensed their intentions, and gave a withering gaze that would take away any desire they had to attack him. Sometimes they would attempt to set a trap for him on a regular route he would take, only to find that he had mysteriously taken another route.



Living and training in this kind of environment must have been punishing to all concerned and it is therefore not surprising that O'Sensei and some of his uchideshi developed a much higher level of physical and mental capabilities than normal. Whether such training could create an individual who can dodge bullets is a matter for conjecture.



Millions of people believe in Christianity but how many really believe that Jesus walked on the water at Galilee? How many believe that he fed thousands of people with just a loaf and fish in a basket? Did Moses really part the red sea? My personal opinion is that you have to have an open mind when considering other peoples accounts of extraordinary feats performed by martial artists. One has to decide whether these testaments are meant to be taken literally, or metaphorically. We are all different; some are natural believers who attest to the power of faith, some incurable cynics and skeptics who will not believe anything until it is put before their eyes. Here we are discussing the founder of Aikido but what about Miyamoto Musashi the founder of the two-sword school of swordsmanship, 'Ni To Ryu', said to be the greatest swordsman ever who was never defeated in hundreds of contests. Do we believe this? Do we also believe that he suffered his only ever defeat at the hands of the Jo, a wooden stick that should have been very easily sliceable by a weapon, a master that could cut through a rifle barrel effortlessly?





If we disregard these historical claims how does this sit with the woman in the Guinness Book of Records who lifted a three-ton truck off her son in a blind fit of hysterical rage after he became trapped underneath it? This lady apparently cracked three vertebrae doing it, but where did that power come from? Or back in the early sixties when those Buddhist monks demonstrating against the Vietnam War doused themselves with petrol before setting themselves on fire and calmly sat there, cross-legged, burning. Where does the power to do that come from? I think we have to firmly accept that there is much that we do not understand before we decide whether we believe or disbelieve.

MI: What was it like going to Aikikai Hombu?



Sensei Brady: My visit to Hombu in 2003 was a wonderful experience. My wife planned it as a surprise for my 50th birthday. When we arrived at the hotel in Tokyo we left our bags in the room and hailed a taxi to make the trip to Hombu so I could familiarise myself with the route and not be panicking the next morning as Doshu's first class was at 6.30am. No one had told us that hardly any taxi drivers in Japan speak English but I didn't think that would be a problem, as everyone must know where the world headquarters of Aikido was...wrong.



I found myself saying to this guy "Aikido'...'Aikido' in my very best Japanese accent and he said 'Aiki wha'??...' Not a clue basically. It was only when I shaped my hand as if I was going to make a karate chop and said...'fighting, martial art' that he said, excitedly 'Ahh Yes... I see ooh, ahh, hii" and motioned some half-baked hand movements at me, that he finally understood.



I had been told the journey would take 10 minute. Half an hour later we arrived (It had been as much an education for him as us on how to get there). The building was not what I expected. I suppose I had envisaged a large temple like structure with curved roofs etc, but it was just an ordinary looking building with a few plaques outside with Japanese writing on.

The following day I arrived in good time and walked into the building paid my dues and headed up the short corridor at the end of which is a magnificent commemorative plaque to O'Sensei. That's when I realised where I was. We were only there for five days so I planned to get the most out of it, to train, but also to see as much as possible. I had to pick and choose the classes to attend as it would not have been right to leave my lady on her own the whole time. I trained with Doshu, Osawa Sensei, Miyamoto Sensei (a wonderful character who took us to a sushi restaurant later in the week and got me blind drunk on sake!) and the late Arikawa Sensei. I was always told that Arikawa Sensei could be a bit cantankerous and not given much to westerners but after his class I rushed after him to the instructor's room to ask for his photograph. Knocked on the door in trepidation, he answered and I motioned to the camera to show my intentions, he looked me in the eye then smiled wryly and motioned me down the corridor where he asked a junior shihan who was just finishing the beginners class to take our picture.



You have to picture this; Here I am with this living legend of Aikido, Arikawa Shihan, a 9th Dan, standing at the world Aikido Headquarters, the place where Aikido was born, in front of the commemorative plaque of the founder, when the battery failed in the camera. I could not believe it! All I wanted was one picture, just one, but no good. Arikawa Sensei sort of looked at me nonplussed by it all and walked away. My wife, who was the other end of the corridor, told me she was sure she'd seen a tear in my eye. Too right she had! Six months later Arikawa Shihan passed away.



There is something magical about training at the Hombu dojo. It's not just the quality of the training but also the diversity of nationalities you see and also the history, of which has practiced in that very room. The mats are very fast, hard and you are quite likely to suffer mat burns if you haven't prepared. I treated my feet with surgical spirit morning and night for two weeks prior to my visit and still managed to get one or two. The classes are concentrated in the morning and then from late afternoon to early evening they give tourists time to have a look around. We went up the Tokyo tower, on the bullet train, visited Hakone and Giza and came away with cut price electrical goods from 'Electric town', all in five days. We used the time well. It was an awesome experience.





MI: Has Aikido changed you as a person?

Sensei Brady: Aikido has had a massive impact on my life. I could not imagine life without it. Not just practicing the art but bringing others up from beginner and watching as they mature into instructors themselves. The constitution of the national organisation I belong to (United Kingdom Aikikai) has a 'House' system which allows students to join a dojo that is under the auspices of a Shido-in of their choice irrespective of geographical location. I am the chief instructor for five independently run clubs up and down the country and offer technical advice to this group by way of courses throughout the year. Then several times a year the whole organisation gets together for national Summer School and weekend courses. This means I am busy doing Aikido for most of the week and wouldn't have it any other way.



Looking at it the other way, because I have spent most of my spare time in the last 35 years doing Aikido I have not had the time to generate an interest in the things that most 'normal guy's do, i.e. Football, Cricket, Rugby, Golf, pool, snooker, darts etc, which makes my conversation in the pub a little one dimensional. I don't know whether that's good or bad. I think your base personality stays with you all of your life, your intrinsic values don't really change, but whilst I don't take it to the extreme, I do from time to time look at situations I'm in and say to myself 'Is this situation best remedied by an Irimi approach or would Tenkan be better?'



My overall outlook is based more or less on a harmonious approach to things, based broadly on the concept of Yin and Yang. Broadly speaking, I follow macrobiotic principles in my attitude to food, which, again is based on the concept of these antagonistic but complementary forces. All of this is the same as Aikido and so if there was no Aikido in my life It would not have turned out this way, consequently the answer to the question "Has Aikido changed me as a person" is an unequivocal Yes.



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