

Mind, Body, Spirit

Janet Baldwin interview with

Christopher Curtis – Chief Instructor - Hawaii Ki Federation

2008

Janet Baldwin: I'm really excited about our show today. We're going to be talking about Aikido, and we have our guest here, Chris Curtis Sensei, Head Instructor of Maui Ki-Aikido and Chief Instructor of the Hawaii Ki Federation. Hello Sensei.

Chris Curtis: Hello.

JB: I know that a lot of people don't know exactly what Aikido is. So can you let us know what is Aikido?

CC: Well, first of all Janet, thank you for giving me the opportunity to talk about Aikido a little bit today.

What is Aikido? That's a good question. You know, at seminars I often ask this question of people that have been training Aikido for 20 to 30 years, and they don't necessarily have a ready answer.

JB: *That's a loaded question, isn't it?*

CC: Well, it is a big question. Let me just say, in every day language, that Aikido is learning to live every moment of our life completely. That's what we are practicing. What that really means and how we go about that is a little bit more elaborate.

And before I go into that can I just say something about how Aikido came to Hawaii and what it's about here?

JB: Yeah, that would be great.

CC: My teacher here on Maui is Shinichi Suzuki Sensei. He is 91 one years old, healthy and strong, and still going. He is retired from teaching now, but we like to think of him as still being the guiding light of Maui Ki-Aikido, our group here on Maui.

Hawaii is a kind of Mecca of Aikido in the world outside of Japan. To understand why, we have to go back a few years. Of course, Aikido began in Japan, but the first place where my teacher from Japan, Master Koichi Tohei, came to spread Aikido to the west was in Hawaii, and that was way back in 1953. When Master Tohei first came here to Maui, Suzuki Sensei was a police officer here, and he was assigned by his chief to take care of Master Tohei while he was visiting. At the time, Suzuki Sensei didn't know anything about Aikido. He was a Judo player. But as soon as he saw Master Tohei moving, he asked him if he could be his student. And immediately Master Tohei said, "Yes, today I make you Chief Instructor of Maui." So Suzuki Sensei was the first Chief Instructor of Aikido outside of Japan, and that was, again, over 55 years ago. Then, I

met Suzuki Sensei in 1974, soon after I came to live on Maui, and I have been training with him ever since. So that kind of gives you an idea of the history here, and I wanted you to see the picture of Aikido on Maui and how it got started.

Maybe I should say a little more about that. You mentioned that I am the Chief Instructor of the Hawaii Ki Federation, and that's the Aikido group here in Hawaii. There is also the Northwest Ki Federation, centered in Portland, Oregon, the Midland Ki Federation in the middle U.S. states, and the Eastern Ki Federation which is centered on the East Coast. Of course, Aikido has spread to many other places in the world. I am currently the Ki Society Advisor for Japan Headquarters in Holland and Germany as well, so there are big groups there, also in Russia, and other parts of the World.

But Hawaii is still considered, as I said, the center of Aikido in the world outside of Japan. And that's not just because it began here in 1953, but because of my teacher Suzuki Sensei. He is highest ranking Aikido practitioner in the world outside of Japan. He is 9th dan.

JB: That is just amazing that we are so fortunate to have Suzuki Sensei on our little island out here in the middle of the ocean.

So, is Aikido a form of martial arts, or do you not like to be categorized in that sense?

CC: Yes, technically Aikido is one of the many forms of martial art. But it is unique in the sense that most martial arts have some sort of competition. They are designed to learn to overcome an attacker, to overcome another person. In Aikido we are not at all focusing on overcoming someone else, even though there are very elaborate techniques which certainly look like we are overcoming others. But in order to perform those techniques, you have to learn to overcome your own weaknesses, so that is the focus of, and true value of, this training. The whole point of training in Aikido is that that the results of the training must translate into everyday life, in our work, our relationships, in our character. What is the point in being a champion on the mat, if this does not make you a better human being in daily life?

You know the full name of our Aikido school is Shinshin Toitsu Aikido. In English that means Mind/Body Unified Aikido. What does this point to? One of the responses I often get when I ask students to express to me their understanding of mind/body unification is that this is a goal of theirs. They are saying that mind/body unification is something they are striving for, like it is something they don't have now and they need to acquire sometime in the future.

I have to say this is not only a big mistake, but reflects one of our greatest weaknesses, and that is the idea we hold that there is a separation within us, between our mind and our body, and so likewise in the world (be it physical or spiritual) between self and other. Mind and body are originally one. They are not separate. But because of the way we view the world, our mind and our body, we think and act as if they are separate. So in a sense, even though our mind and our body have been in complete unity since we were born, we may not be aware of that, and so imagine this as a kind of

goal to be achieved. It is not a matter of acquiring something that we don't have, but learning to be aware of something that we already do have.

JB: And so this is done through the actual arts, or is there more to it than that?

CC: There are other forms of practice in which you might be studying mind/body unification, like Zen meditation for instance. Zen Buddhism certainly can be said to be a kind of mind/body unification oriented form of study. In fact, Aikido came originally out of the Zen Buddhist tradition, though utilizing other traditional studies as well. However, the wonderful and unique thing about Aikido is that, since we have attacks like punching, grabbing, one hand or two hand, kicking and so forth, it's very difficult to hide from your self. When someone attacks you, your automatic reaction rises to the surface immediately, and you get to see yourself for what you really are. If you have a tendency to be nervous, when someone is speaking directly to you, or to be defensive when someone is criticizing you, or even to get angry or maybe even violent in reaction to someone challenging you, that will come up immediately. Of course this kind of reaction is a great limitation in any situation, because when we are angry or even defensive, this causes tension in our mind/body which severely limits our ability to see and move freely. Again, when you are just sitting in meditation, and everything is going along nicely, you might think you are very calm and very competent and very advanced. But as soon as you get on the mat and someone takes a swing at you, you get to see for yourself right away just how advanced you really are, or not. This is where a defensive posture, that view of your self and others being inherently separate, does you in.

JB: So there isn't any competition in Aikido, per se, but there are different rankings and different belt gradations, is that correct?

CC: Yes, everyone begins as a white belt, like in any martial art. And then there are a series of tests that you take. Now, our school of Aikido has physical tests, in other words technique tests where you handle a number of different kind of attacks during your test. In these tests we are testing to see how competent you are, how calm you can remain in that challenging situation. But uniquely we also have what we call Ki Tests. A Ki Test is directly testing the state of your mind. I said before, mind and body are originally one. So we can test the state of our mind through the body.

JB: So then how do you test somebody for their Ki?

CC: Well we might say, "Ki is gathered strongly in a particular person." What that really means is that their awareness (there's that word again) of Ki is very strong. So in the present moment, if I come to press lightly on your chest, and are doubtful about your ability to be stable, and perhaps even slightly worried about that, how stable will you be?

JB: I would probably just fall backwards.

CC: Yes. But if you are completely aware that Ki fills your whole body, that in fact your body is made up of this Ki, then you will have a feeling of great confidence, feeling

very full, stable, calm, and powerful, and as a result you don't have to do anything at all to resist me. When I push on you, you simply won't move. When we are calmly confident in this way, there is very little that is able to disturb us.

You can transfer this in to anything you do, your work, driving a car, eating dinner, or having a conversation with someone. No matter what you are engaged in you are always in some relative state of more or less stability depending upon your level of awareness of your original unified condition. And the state of our mind is always reflected in the state of our body.

For instance, if you are sad, how does your body feel? Your body feels lethargic and achy. If you are over excited, how does your body feel? Your body feels tense, if feels nervous, it feels agitated and very shaky.

Now, if you are sad, by the way, you are sad about something that happened in the past. And if you are excited, you are excited about something that is going to happen in the future. So in either of those cases, excited or sad, you are not having awareness in the moment. You are somewhere else, imagining something from the past or the future. So even though mind/body unification is always naturally present, you are not aware of it, because you are not attentive to the present moment, where it exists. You can only be truly aware of what's going on in your mind and body now. And that's the key to doing Aikido, or anything else, successfully.

JB: So Aikido, if I can understand this correctly, is really bringing awareness, what, to your awareness?

CC: *This practice is always only bringing awareness to your current condition. You may not be in the present, but when you become aware of that fact, you are once again aware of and open to what is going on in the present. So when we do a Ki Test, we are testing the immediate awareness of your condition. And so in order to "pass" the Ki test, we don't have to do anything except simply rest in that present awareness.*

JB: Now I want to just back up for a minute. Because I know this "Ki" word you're saying is really a huge part of the Aikido training and teaching. So there are the arts, and then there is the Ki. So could you just explain where the Ki comes from? What is Ki?

CC: *We have all of these different terms like ki, chi, prana, mana for what in English you might simply call universal energy or life force. And that's not wrong. But Ki is really much more inclusive than that.*

Let's just look at our so-called physical body. Our body is made of organs, organs are made of cells, cells are made of molecules, molecules are made of atoms, and atoms are made up of sub-atomic particles, electrons, neutrons, protons, and so forth. Beyond that we can't really see with our eyes, although we have theories. But we can still see electrons, for instance. And the unique thing that we have discovered about seeing electrons, is that if we look at them one way they appear as matter, and if you look at them another way they appear as energy. Sometimes they are particles, sometimes

waves. So we can't limit the definition of them to either matter or energy. It depends entirely upon you and how you look at them.

If you continue on breaking down units, beyond sub-atomic particles, to quarks, and so-on smaller and smaller, that which we are following, if we could actually see these particles, never becomes zero, or never completely becomes nothing. No matter how many times we divide something into it's component parts, that something never disappears. That infinitely small particle or wave, that is becoming infinitesimally smaller as we divide it, that which never becomes zero, that is what we call Ki. So Ki is not just what makes the universe function in a vital way, as many people think of it, but Ki is literally what the universe is made of.

JB: Well now, is there a certain part of the body that the Ki is more active in, or comes more strongly out of? Or is it just all over your entire body?

CC: *It's all over the entire universe. It's what the universe is made of.*

JB: So it sounds like Aikido is quite a spiritual practice then, because you're talking about Ki, which is a spiritual term to me. So this is a big part of the training. Am I correct in that?

CC: *If we want to put a name to it, we can call it "spiritual" practice. However that word has many different meanings in our society.*

We can say that this practice is both a martial art and a spiritual training. In other words if you are learning to overcome your own inadequacies, what could be more spiritual than that? That is certainly what all spiritual training is engaged in, yes?

Again, what are those inadequacies that are so challenging? As we begin to become more aware of this process we call living, we find that we are always living in the future or past, always trying to make the world fit into some belief system that we hold, or then trying to fit ourselves into a structure demanded by others in our society. All those are weaknesses that hinder our ability to be present and aware in every moment. Not because someone says they are wrong, or that there is something bad about us. It is simply our conditioned habit to do that, and these habits create a sense of tension and nervousness in our mind/body system so we are not very effective in what we do. Instead of responding fully to what life brings us, we react and defend.

JB: So we have the actual arts, and we have Ki, and then we have also weapons. So tell us a little bit about that part.

CC: *The way we use weapons is just a little more elaborate way of attacking someone. We use a wooden sword called a bokken and we also have a wooden staff called a jo, and then we also use a wooden knife called a tanto. All three of these are used to attack with and we learn how to move in such a way that we neutralize that attack and the opponent always ends up on the floor and we have the weapon.*

But we also practice with both the bokken and the jo independently, by ourselves.

The biggest part of our bokken training is learning to do a single cut. Just to stand and hold the bokken calmly, and make one cut correctly.

JB: That sounds easy.

CC: For me, this has been the most challenging of all of our practices. You know, before I began training Aikido I actually used to teach sword use for stage plays on the mainland. So when I met Suzuki Sensei and began training, I had a lot of experience, and even what I considered to be expertise, in the use of weapons. And yet I couldn't come close to satisfying Sensei when he asked me to cut the bokken for him. In the end, I had to throw all of my experience away and just learn to make a simple cut. And it took me many years before he finally said "OK that's it."

Every afternoon I would come to the dojo at 5:00 pm and stand in front of our full-length mirror next to Suzuki Sensei and he would cut, and then I would cut, again and again and again. And every time I cut he would say "No, that's not it". I would cut again and he would say, "No, no. That's not it." I did this practice with him for about 15 years before he finally said "OK, that's it."

JB: You cut for 15 years before he ever said you did it right? Wow, that's dedication.

CC: Yes, I was very stubborn in those days.

You know, when you cut the bokken, just like whenever you try really hard to do anything well, you have a tendency to try to put all of your resources into it. And all of those might be all of your strength, your will power, etc. When we do this we are really trying too hard to "do" something, instead of just allowing it to happen naturally. In Japanese they use the word "senshin" which means everything that you are, not just your strengths, but everything; your body, your mind, your spirit. All of that is your senshin. In Aikido we refine and develop this senshin through many years of great effort, and then we are asked to throw it all away. If we cling to senshin, then this becomes weakness instead of strength. The phrase in Japanese is, "Senshin no, chikara o kanzen ni nuku" which means "throw away all of your strengths." And throughout all of those years of trying to cut the bokken truly, my teacher kept telling me "No, let go. Let go." And I kept thinking, "Let go of what? What is there left to let go of?" By this time, I was very relaxed when I cut. Everybody else in the dojo thought I cut beautifully. But if it's not the teacher saying it, then it's not yet the real thing. And then one day after all of those years, I just cut, effortlessly. And he said, "That's it. Now do it again." And of course I proudly cut again and he said, "No, no, that's not it." Over the years then more and more he was saying yes, until finally he said "OK now you understand."

But what did I understand? I let go of everything that I thought I was capable of doing and just allowed it to happen. This is a very difficult thing to try to explain to others, because this is not something you can understand intellectually. You know, Aikido, like everything else worth-while in this life, is experiential.

So if you want to understand Aikido, you have to train. It may help to hear me talking about this, but it's not the same as experiencing it for your self.

JB: Now I know you also have a Sunday morning meditation where you do some kind of chanting and bell ringing.

CC: This is called "misogi" or "Sokushin no Gyo" (breath/mind training). In Japanese the word misogi just refers to any kind of repetitive spiritual practice. The practice of hitting the bell and chanting is really very much the same as what I was going through with Suzuki Sensei in learning to cut with the bokken. You put everything you have into this chanting, and you do this for 15 minutes or so straight, in combination with some special breathing and mediation practices that go along with it. And you do this as a group of 20 or 30 people, so it's not just having your own mind/body awareness there, but it's being aware of everyone's individual effort and unifying with that effort. And in the effort that we make to do that, we tend to let go of our selves. Even though we are putting, as I said, everything into this practice, by unifying with the group we tend to forget our own small efforts.

So this is another one of those practices where at some point suddenly you may find yourself to be completely calm and completely relaxed in the midst of an apparently chaotic situation.

Something good to remember, as my teacher in Japan, Master Koichi Tohei, always says, is that true calmness is not a calmness that you have when you are sitting on your deck having a cocktail, or even when you are sitting in meditation. True calmness is only that which arises in the midst of conflict, or in the midst of intense action. That's true calmness.

Similarly, we always want to do away with war. Of course, I agree that it would be a wonderful thing not to have war. But our motivation for putting an end to war is usually thought of as a means to finding peace. Well, you and I know that most people, even though they are not in the midst of war, don't exactly have peace. On the other hand, peace can be experienced in the midst of war through the right kind of practice. Peace exists as a part of everything that is. Calmness exists all the time, not just when everything is quiet, relaxed, and everything is going in our favor.

So to practice Aikido you really have to learn to be calm and peaceful in the midst of conflict, or challenge, when things are not necessarily going your way.

JB: Can somebody go to just the Sunday practice and not to the other classes, or is it really a combo package.

CC: We have Aikido students of all ages. We even have a few students who are in their late 60's or early 70's. So we have students that may no longer have the physical ability to do all of the falling and throwing arts. So we have Ki Classes where you can come and just study the Ki Principles with me, or we have Ki Meditation/Ki Breathing classes where you can come and sit with me and get a little teisho or a talk about how to do that. And then on Sunday morning you can come and just do the misogi exercise,

or you could skip that part and just do the weapons training. It's really whatever you like, some of it or all of it, although I will say if you start, you're probably going to get hooked and want to take part in as much as possible.

JB: This is actually a non-profit organization, is that correct?

CC: Yes. Maui Ki-Aikido is a non-profit corporation recognized by the IRS and Hawaii Ki Federation is the same. None of the teachers take any money. I've never taken a penny for teaching Aikido. Of course people do give me money for teaching, but whatever dues are paid or donations are made, none of that goes into anyone's pocket. Which is why it's so inexpensive compared to other similar activities. Kids pay \$10 per month, adults are \$20 per month, and all of that money goes to pay for dojo upkeep, and more importantly it goes to sending selected young people and adults to special seminars in Japan or elsewhere.

JB: You have quite a large children's program. What's the youngest that a child can begin training.

CC: The kids can start at 6 years old, though sometimes we allow 5 year olds if they are particularly attentive. We have a little over 100 children in our program and around 50 adults. Actually Maui Ki-Aikido is the biggest dojo in the world. We have more members than any single dojo, even in Japan. And that all has to do with Suzuki Sensei establishing such a strong presence here on Maui through the years, and also because Maui just seems to be a place where people want to engage in this kind of exploration. Of course, Maui is known for all kinds of special practices, not just Aikido.

JB: You have two dojo on the island, is that right?

CC: Yes, actually we do. We have a satellite dojo up at the Hannibal Tavares Community Center in Pukalani and they are open on Tuesday evenings from 5:00 to 10:00 pm beginning with children's classes and finishing with adults. These Pukalani classes are all beginning programs so once you reach a certain level then you will come down to Wailuku and start training with the more advanced students. In Wailuku the dojo is open every weekday evening and mornings on Saturday and Sunday. There is a beginning class on Thursday evening at our dojo in Wailuku at 194 South Market Street, if anyone would like to get a taste.

So if you want to train, you can train pretty much all the time.

JB: I do have a question for you. Do women have stronger Ki or do men have stronger Ki? Or is it just the same.

CC: This is not a matter of gender. I will say that we have more highly advanced women than any other dojo in the world. That's important. We have three women that are 6th degree black belt. There very few 6th degree women around. This is very unusual. So yeah, this is definitely a mixed gender organization.

But to answer your question, of course this business of having strong awareness doesn't go with one gender or another. It simply goes with your awareness. In other words you either do the training or not. Nobody is born with full-blown awareness. Everyone must earn it, and neither men nor women have any inherent advantage there.

JB: I think we are born like that and then it goes away.

CC: Well that may or may not be, but look, even the Buddha had to practice for many years before he awoke in full awareness. So we all have to practice. Traditionally, particularly in the martial arts, although really even in most Christian and Buddhist religious organizations, they have been very paternalistic and unreasonably hard on women. When I first began training in Aikido there were very few women and those that were training had a tough time of it. But let me tell you that has completely changed and now we have many wonderfully experienced women that are teachers, so if you come to train with us, you won't just be training with men but also with women. We all practice together.

Along that same line, I probably should say too that the training continues to develop. It's not the same as it was 50 years ago, just like anything else. I mean we don't build motorcars the way we did 50 years ago, so why should Aikido be the same? Nothing is the same as 50 years ago. Certainly the vision of Master Koichi Tohei has not changed, and we are still teaching what he learned from his own training and passed on to us, but the teaching methods have developed greatly. There is a greater open mindedness that has developed in Aikido over the years that is really remarkable. And even though we are known here on Maui as a very traditional and etiquette centered dojo, yet still here we are with many of the high-ranking women in the world training right here.

JB: I know that you meditate for quite a long time every morning. Is this your own personal practice or is it part of the Aikido training.

CC: Oh, it's part of my Aikido training. You've got to have the fuel to cook the rice. I mean, you can't cook a decent pot of rice with only the pilot light. You've got to do something to develop this awareness I keep talking about. Awareness is what drives the engine of Ki. In other words, yeah, Ki is everything that's here already. But if you are not aware of it, it's like money in your pocket you don't know you have. Of course one day you will look in your pocket and find that you are a wealthy person and always have been. And that's what makes you feel really stupid, when you do wake up and see that you have been searching for your very nature.

But it doesn't do you any good for me to tell you that you have this nature. You have to practice to discover this for yourself.