

Live Radio Interview with Chris Curtis Sensei
By Cindy Paulos KAOI Radio
August 3, 2010

Aloha, I am Cindy Paulos, and I am happy to be here today with a wonderful teacher, Chris Curtis Sensei, who has written a new book called Letting Go. I was honored to do a TV interview with him recently. It's actually the second book that Sensei has written. He has a beautiful dojo, which was completely re-built about ten years ago, I believe. He's the eighth dan (8th degree black belt) Chief Instructor of the Hawaii Ki Federation. He also teaches in Germany, Holland, Spain, and this fall for the first time in Russia. I am really happy to have Chris Curtis Sensei here with us today. Aloha to you.

Curtis: Aloha. Thank you for having me, Cindy. I appreciate it.

Paulos: You gave me both of your books and I read Letting Go, the newest one you just released, and it's absolutely inspiring, beautiful, and it's something that everyone can get and learn from as far as every moment, every day, making your life better. I did have some expectations. I kind of thought it would be about doing form, and how the principles work in that. You beautifully describe the principles of Ki-Aikido, but you put it in a way where every single person can relate to those principles in their own life. So I want to say "thank you" because it's a beautiful book.

Curtis: Thank you. You know, that book came about really because of the response to my first book, which is called *Ki-Aikido on Maui*. It's literally a training manual. It's what you expected to read when you read *Letting Go*. That first book sort of came about because when I began training with my teacher, Shinichi Suzuki Sensei, back in 1974, there were so many things to memorize. You know there are all of these different forms, each having two or three Japanese names, there's all the etiquette, and there's all the sub-structure of Aikido. Things like Ki Meditation, Ki Breathing, Kiatsu, Water Misogi, swinging the Bokken, using the staff, all the different practices that we do. And I was constantly asking people questions like, "How do you do this? What's the name of that? When am I supposed to bow? Who do I call 'Sensei' and who do I not call 'Sensei'?"

Paulos: And does "Sensei" come before the name or after the name? I still get confused about that one.

Curtis: Yes. So I asked Suzuki Sensei about this, and he said, "Oh, why don't you write it down, if you can't remember it?" So I began writing it down, wondering why no one else had ever done it before. And of course, five years later I realized why no one had ever done it before. It was a huge task. So that book came out originally in 1985, and is now in its third printing, and has grown each time we re-printed it. But it is still limited to actual dojo practice. It wouldn't be of any particular interest to anybody who is not training Aikido.

And then, through the years, as I have traveled and taught more and more around the world in various countries, throughout the U.S., and so forth, many people asked me if I couldn't write something that has more to do with the meaning behind why we do Aikido, and how it relates to daily life. You could call it a philosophy book, but it's much more of a sort of experiential accounting. It's very much related to what I have discovered through my own training. It includes many stories about students and what they have discovered through their training, and how the principles work in daily life. These principles are not necessarily limited to Aikido. These are the principles of living in relationship with other people in the world. And so, it doesn't matter if you are a Buddhist or a Christian or a Muslim, or any other martial art, whatever you may do, even if you have no interest whatsoever in this kind of thing, still the value is there, I think. That's the fun of the book, and yes, the value.

Paulos: Well, it's really interesting because when people have a preconception about martial arts or Aikido, they may look at it from the outside as simply a skill that you have to acquire. But when you look at the integration that is important, and actually using all of the principles that make it really work, it is beyond....it's actually almost infinite. There's no limitation to the level of how deep you can go with it, and how much you can learn through this. I would imagine you get more and more proficient to the point where your body starts to kind of go out, although your teacher was going until 93 years old. And he was

teaching and actually doing Aikido until he was almost 88?

Curtis: Yeah, he was teaching on the mat until he was 88, and then of course he continued to teach me until the day he passed on.

Paulos: But at some point, I guess, you really have learned and learned well from him, that it is not just form, it's everything that is involved in being truly a good teacher, and a good student, a good practitioner.

Curtis: The name of the book is, of course, *Letting Go*. And that came really from my teacher, Suzuki Sensei, who was constantly encouraging me to let go. Let go of what? And that is the subject of the book, let go of what. Of course my students have heard this story a few times. For years I came to the dojo at 5:00 in the afternoon to practice cutting the *bokken*. This is a wooden sword. We weren't cutting anything with it. He wanted me to be able to do one simple cut, just one cut. And for fifteen years I came in every afternoon at 5:00 pm and we stood in front of a full-length mirror together. He would cut, and then I would cut. And every time I would cut he would say, "No. Let go." He said "No" for fifteen years.

Paulos: Wow! Most people would have given up by then.

Curtis: Yeah, well I was a bit stubborn. So after fifteen years, one day I just cut, and he said, "That's it. Do it again."

Paulos: And did you do it the next time?

Curtis: Yes, I did it again and he said...

Paulos: So, you got it.

Curtis: He said, "No, no, that's not it."

Paulos: Isn't that like a koan, kind of?

Curtis: Well, sure, it's exactly like a koan. In other words...I don't know if your listeners know what a koan is, but it is a Zen phrase, or collection of phrases, that has no logical, cognitive answer to it. And the harder you try to come up with an answer, intellectually, the more you tie yourself in knots. In order to grasp, or capture the meaning of a koan, you have to let go of your efforting, in that sense. You have to stop trying so hard. I mean, isn't that what we have to learn to do in everything that we do in life?

So that was the purpose of this cutting. And it was another five years before he finally said, "OK, you understand now. Now you can teach this."

Paulos: You know, it's amazing to me how these practices, which have been born in the east, and with all the books that have been written about Buddhism and Zen, but how what happens in the translation of these teachings coming to the west. Because we are kind of a goal oriented, achievement based, society. And you are talking about spending fifteen years doing one move properly. And I know from the years I spent doing Zen, people would ask, "When do I get to be a teacher?" or "Who gets anything here" etc. But you know in this kind of practice you have no promises. You can't say, "OK, if you take this class for six months, you are going to get to some specific level." In Karate you can get a black belt, and you got some black belts. But it is based on more that just doing the moves properly, right?

Curtis: Well, of course. In one half hour here we can't really cover the entire depth the practice and how it evolves. Of course we do give various colored belts, and finally black belt, and different levels of black belt. And there are other kinds of rewards that students get, as well. Because if you don't do that with the students, they won't stay. It takes too many years to wake up to the real meaning of what you are doing. If you don't do all of that practice, you'll never get it. And when you haven't gotten it yet, you've got to have a goal to aim at. That's what we do.

However the problem is, that right there is the very difficulty. I mean, at some point you have to let go of, or give up, any expectation of any kind. Because when you have an expectation, without even meaning to, you guide and control and limit your own future. Because as long as you believe that there is this goal of black belt that you want, then you have a structural concept of that goal, of what that black belt really is. But black belt is nothing like what you imagine it to be. There is no way you could possibly know. It's like waking up. Well, if you knew what that was, you'd be awake already! So any expectation towards that is a big mistake. And moreover, by having an expectation, as I said, you tend to guide and control the steps that you take towards it. And therefore you miss it completely.

So the teacher's job is to help you let go of that goal.

Paulos: Well, teachers in this particular field are very precious and you happened to be there in a time when you had a very special teacher who was here on Maui. I just saw this great movie entitled "Why Did Bodhidharma go to the East?" And the koan in his life became how he dealt with his teacher's death. And you were given the task of building a dojo, and then carrying on the tradition from your teacher. He had built a beautiful base, but then also now there is this huge expansion of your Aikido practice in the world. How much money did you have to come up with to build this new dojo here in Wailuku?

Curtis: It doesn't sound like much today. It was I think around \$680,000 or \$700,000, but if you go look at the building now, it couldn't be built today for less than two million, prices being what they are. We began raising money in 1995. Our old dojo, which we cherished because of its tradition, had been blessed by the founder of Aikido, Morihei Uyeshiba, in 1961. It was a huge deal to tear down that dojo. It was hard for us to do.

Paulos: Well, that's letting go right there.

Curtis: Yes. We had to let go of the old, termite eaten one, and then raise the money to build the new one. It took us about five years to raise the money, and it came from all over the world. People sent money from everywhere to us, because people train with us from all over the world. Because Aikido began in 1953 here in Hawaii, and because Suzuki Sensei was so well known throughout the world...this is sort of the Mecca of Aikido, outside of Japan. So many people sent money to help re-build the dojo. It's very beautiful and I am very grateful to all of those people for helping out.

Then, by 2001 the new dojo was completed and people came from all over the world and we had a big grand opening and Suzuki Sensei was very happy. So now we have a beautiful and unique dojo. Our club here on Maui is, I suppose, the biggest dojo in the world. Of course there may be some that I don't know about, but in our school I pretty much know where all the dojo are and all the teachers, etc. Here we have almost 100 children, and 50 or 60 adults, so it's a big group. Most dojo are twelve, fifteen, twenty five people. It's not usually such a big group.

Of course, this is because of that legacy that you mentioned, from Suzuki Sensei, and that ground work that he laid, but also because it's Maui, and people on Maui seem to be unusually interested in spiritual work. And this is a very unique kind of spiritual work. I mean, it is a martial art, in the sense that we do attack each other. We grab, hit, kick, etc., and of course you have to learn all of the techniques of how to blend or join with the attacker and help them release that energy and fall to the ground. That's what the techniques are all about. But it's much more than that. Most martial arts are involved with how to overcome another person. In Aikido, we are completely focused on how to overcome our own inadequacies, our own shortcomings. Which is why it involves lots of sitting, every morning, lots of Ki Breathing, lots of Ki Meditation, and lots of reflection on the principles. Because you know you can sit and believe that you are very accomplished, very calm, very centered. But when someone takes a swing at you, you discover right away just how calm you really are.

Paulos: Well, life is kind of like that isn't it?

Curtis: That's exactly right. And so, that's what I love about Aikido. It's not just the internal, spiritual work. But there's a constant proving of where you are at, by how you operate under stress, under

pressure, under challenge. And so it works perfectly to prepare us for daily life. And again, that's what the book, *Letting Go*, is about. How do we translate that into our work, into our family relations, into our personal relationships, school, employers/employees...I mean all of our challenges come from all those different areas.

Paulos: You describe beautifully, in the beginning of the book, about the meaning of each of the three parts of that wonderful word, Ai-ki-do. And there is, I guess, enough to make that alone the subject for a life-long study, with just the three parts to that wonderful word.

Curtis: You know, I said a little while ago that we have all of these ranks because people would quit if we didn't. Well, in the same way, we also have all of these different aspects of the practice, including the word Aikido, to help inspire people to continue to train. Literally, the word *Ai-ki-do*, means "the way to harmony or union with the ki of the universe." So *Ai* means "harmony or union, non-separation" and *ki*, of course, is the ki of the universe, the life force. This is not just the energy but the actual makeup of the universe itself. We call this "ki." And *do* is the way. Like "dojo" is "the place where we practice the way."

Paulos: You know I never put those two words together. Years of sitting Zen and going to dojo, I never knew that do was actually that in the word dojo. What's jo mean?

Curtis: "The place." The place where the way is addressed."

Paulos: Ah, I learned something new today. So now you have a world student base, you spend quite a bit of time traveling. You have students even in Russia. I mean that's a long way away to go. How did you develop the European/Russian base?

Curtis: Well, I first went to Europe with my teacher, Suzuki Sensei, back in 1992. Then they invited by back in the year 2000. At that time I taught in Sweden, Denmark, and Holland. And when I was in Sweden, the Russians came to train with me. So I got to know them a bit, and then my teacher in Japan later assigned me to be in charge of the groups in Holland, Germany, and Spain. So those Russians still come to my seminars in Germany and Holland, and this year, for the first time they have invited me to teach in St. Petersburg, Russia.

Paulos: So how many students do you have?

Curtis: You know I never....

Paulos: You never counted your students?

Curtis: Well, I suppose there's a lot. But understand, I go to teach in many places where they are not really my students, in that sense. I mean I know their teachers, and they invite me to come and teach. Then I get to know the students, they may email me with questions, they look at my website, read the things that I have written, and so we somehow establish a relationship. I am directly in charge of Holland, Germany, and Spain, and then Hawaii also, so there's a few thousand I suppose. And then I do teach around the United States, and now Russia and other countries.

There are varying levels of students, you know. The core of students who train here with me are really into training. I mean they are very serious people.

Paulos: Once a week, or what?

Curtis: Oh no. We have classes every single day. The dojo is active every day. Monday is children's class, Tuesday is children's class and then adult class, Wednesday is Ki class and Aikido class, Thursday is beginning Ki and Aikido class, Friday is Ki Meditation/Ki Breathing and then Aikido class, Saturday morning is children's class, Saturday afternoon is open training, and then Sunday morning is misogi and weapons training. So if you want to train, you can come pretty much every day. I mean, as an adult, maybe that's five days a week you can train.

So the people that come here to train, have a very close relationship with me, as their teacher. And then the further they are away, the less they get to see me. I do go to Europe to teach every spring and every fall, so I teach seminars twice a year there. In the mean time, they're on their own.

Paulos: Well, I have to say, Sensei, that this is really good for selling books. I mean if you were a marketer, you would think, "Wow, he has students, he gives talks, he goes around the world." This is exactly what people who are publishers look for in order to sell books. But did you self publish your books?

Curtis: Yes we did, and my poor students carry these books when they travel with me. We call this "otomo", or the humble assistant, the one who travels with the Sensei. I did this for years with Suzuki Sensei. And they often have to carry a bag of books, because when we have a seminar we want to sell the books. And books are heavy.

But we do have a person in Germany who sells them for us. It 's been translated into German and Russian, so in those countries they sell those versions.

Palous: How many books do you figure you've sold?

Curtis: I have no idea. Probably a few thousand. You know, it 's not like I'm Jay McInerney. I don't sell books in the millions.

Palous: And you have a very good website so I imagine you have a web master.

Curtis: Yes, I do, and that helps a lot. We sell a lot of books through the web site and we made that because it's so hard for all the students around the world to stay in touch with what we are doing, what the teaching is here. It is changing and developing all the time, and they can stay in tune with that by paying attention to the website.

Paulos: And your website is?

Curtis: It's called curtissensei.com. And there is another website mauiaikido.com which we have just re-built and that has other products, like the DVD on how to use bokken, etc. Or you can just come to the dojo to buy a book.

Paulos: What's the best time to come to the dojo.

Curtis: Well, classes are in the evening. None of us take any money personally for teaching, so we all have to have jobs during the day.

Paulos: So you have another job on top of all of this.

Curtis: Yeah, I have a business.

Paulos: Wow. I don't know how you do it all. So you do your day job, you've written your books, you do your night job, and then you have to travel? And you obviously have to leave your business behind while you are traveling to do the teachings.

Curtis: AND, I am still married. Which means I have a really cool wife, who is willing to support me in all of this.

Paulos: Well, a gasho to your wife and kudos to her. Because it's a tough job, but someone's got to do it. I think that and the President of the United States are really tough jobs, but someone's got to do it, you know?

People don't realize what a challenging job, what a responsibility being a teacher is, and I don't think you ever know until you get in that position. I think sometimes people wish to be a teacher, but when you get in the position of a teacher that is spiritual and physical, with all of this deeper level, there is really something else that goes on that is way beyond that. And people can get the idea of all this by getting a hold of the book, Letting Go.

It's a beautiful book and you did a very good job with it. It totally changed my impression of Aikido, totally opened me up to what it is really all about.

Curtis: Thank you. I appreciate you having me on your program.