



Poetry in Motion

A Maui dojo honors the traditions and spirituality of aikido

BY ILIMA LOOMIS ■ PHOTOGRAPHS BY RON DAHLQUIST

“Where’s your sensei?”

The voice of one of my dojo’s senior instructors penetrates my thoughts as I stretch my hips after the morning’s workout, my forehead pressed against the cool tatami mat. I look up, and my heart sinks—she’s gone.

Still savoring my status as a newly minted *shodan*, or first-degree black belt, I’d gladly accepted the invitation to serve as *otomo* to one of Maui Ki-Aikido’s female teachers for a seminar.

As *otomo*, it was my duty to help her at all times: arrive at the dojo before her and assist with her bags, offer her water during breaks, fold her clothes after training, and perform tasks as she helped run the seminar, which had drawn more than 40 students from around the state to our dojo. This is considered an important part of a student’s education, an opportunity to practice selfless awareness through service to one’s teacher. And I’d already committed the cardinal sin: I let my mind wander, and I lost her.

Past Knowledge

A relatively modern martial art that is practiced worldwide today, aikido was developed in Japan in the early 20th century and grew in popularity after World War II. Teacher Koichi Tohei introduced aikido to the West on a trip to Hawai‘i in 1953. Maui Ki-Aikido was founded that same year, making it the oldest aikido dojo outside of Japan.

Partially based on jujitsu movement and with a strong Zen Buddhism influence, aikido is for

many practitioners as much philosophical as it is physical: Students learn techniques that allow them to effortlessly move in harmony with, and redirect, a physical attack. The school of Ki-Aikido puts an even greater emphasis on the discipline’s spirituality, teaching aikido as not just self-defense, but also as a symbolic representation of our ability to move in harmony with life.

That’s one reason meditation and movement “are an integral and important part of our practice,” says Christopher Curtis sensei, head instructor of Maui Ki-Aikido. An eighth-degree black belt, Curtis is also chief instructor for the Hawaii Ki Federation and advises dojos in the Netherlands, Germany, and Spain.

Meditation and breathing awareness—serious students are expected to sit for up to an hour each day—give practitioners the calmness and intensity to be fully present and connect with their opponent during an attack, he says. At the same time, practicing aikido locks and throws is a way of applying that spiritual training on the mat.

A student who only meditates might think he’s experiencing true calmness, Curtis points out, “But let somebody cross you, take a swing at you, or try to grab you, and then you’ll find out just how calm you really are.”

With its long history and strong, ongoing connection to its roots—instructors still travel to Japan once a year for training at Ki-Aikido’s world headquarters—Maui Ki-Aikido places a special focus on upholding the rituals and strict etiquette of a traditional Japanese dojo. From pausing to



(From top left) Maui Ki-Aikido head instructor Christopher Curtis sensei leads students through warm-up exercises at a recent class and keeps a watchful eye on the author as she practices techniques with a *bokken*, or wooden sword.



(Clockwise from top left) Christopher Curtis sensei demonstrates the use of a jo, or wooden staff, and the author puts it into practice. Curtis sensei leads warm-up exercises, then his wife, Lynn Curtis sensei (foreground), practices bokken exercises with other Maui Ki-Aikido students. The author waits attentively for instruction from her sensei. Traditional dojo etiquette includes bowing to the teacher at the beginning and end of each class.

bow before entering the dojo or stepping onto the mat, to addressing instructors respectfully as *sensei* at all times, to holding a traditional *omiki* sake ritual at the beginning and end of every year, following custom is about more than honoring the dojo's traditions. It's an extension of aikido practice itself—observing ancient rules of etiquette gives students an opportunity to experience the meaning behind them, Curtis says.

Take bowing, for example. "It's very easy to walk through that door and just dip your head and move on," Curtis says. "But every time you bow, you want to be honoring the deepest level in yourself, and the deepest level in everyone else."

Learning by Doing

Otomo practice is an extension of that training. For centuries, Japanese martial arts masters passed on their knowledge through apprenticeship. An otomo acted as a kind of humble assistant, serving the master to receive not just training, but also intimate access. It was an opportunity to observe and train with him 24 hours a day, to ask any question and to hear every insight.

"(Shinichi) Suzuki sensei (Maui Ki-Aikido's founder) said he learned more from his teacher when they were off the mat than when they were on the mat," says Tracy Reasoner, one of the dojo's senior instructors and a *godan*, or fifth-degree black belt. "You get to see behind the curtain."

While few people today have the ability to leave their lives behind and follow the sensei as a full-time apprentice, Maui Ki-Aikido offers a modified otomo program that lets students experience the practice in smaller doses, such as by assisting teachers during weekend seminars or traveling with Curtis when he teaches at dojos across the state, on the mainland, or abroad.

In addition to passing on knowledge and traditions, Reasoner notes, otomo practice requires the student to focus intensely on the sensei, learn to anticipate his needs even before he does, and set aside selfish impulses.

As with aikido, he says, "Eventually you realize it's not about the physical movement, it's about the connection you have and how you're relating to that person."

A Lesson

With these words in mind, I leap up and frantically search for my missing sensei. I make a quick sweep of the mat, a sea of black and white as students from throughout Hawai'i mingle and stretch, but she's nowhere to be found. Already kicking myself for failing in my first duty as a shodan, I bristle defensively as I catch my instructor's eye as he shakes his head in quiet disapproval.

Eager to find her, I hurry to the edge of the mat—and find 40 pairs of nearly identical black slippers. My frustration rises as I begin the hunt for my own, and I curse silently as I slip on a pair, only to feel that they're not the right size. At the same moment, I look up and see my sensei coming up the walkway carrying a heavy tray of food, with no one to help her or even to open the door. Flustered and angry with myself, I find my slippers at last, and I'm about to step off the mat and rush to her when a sudden thought stops me.

I've forgotten to bow.

The realization cuts through me, and the movement and noise around me seems to quiet. I pause and turn to the *shomen* shrine at the front of the mat—letting myself feel a moment of gratitude and respect for everything it represents—before making a simple bow. Then I turn again and calmly step off the mat, reaching the door just in time to open it for my sensei. ■

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Aikido on Maui

Besides its long history, Maui Ki-Aikido is known for the quality and depth of its teaching, handed down from sensei to sensei in a direct lineage to the founder of aikido itself. In a field where access to high-ranking teachers can be limited, students have moved to Maui from the mainland so that they may train with people like Shinichi Suzuki sensei, the dojo's late founder, and current head instructor Christopher Curtis sensei.

The dojo's regular instructors include three female *rokudan*, or sixth-degree black belts, who are among the highest-ranking aikido women outside Japan. Among them is Curtis's wife, Lynn. A petite surfer with a mischievous smile, Lynn is notorious among students for testing her *otomo* by sneaking off when they're not looking.

TRY IT!

Want to learn more about aikido or get started? On Maui, classes are ongoing, and you can start anytime. Visit Maui Ki-Aikido's Shunshinkan dojo to sign up or observe. Dues are \$200 for six months. (808) 244-5165; mauiaikido.com.

Other dojos in the Hawaii Ki Federation include Hilo and Honoka'a on Hawai'i Island; Kapa'a and Hanapēpē on Kaua'i; and Honolulu (lokahiki.org) and Mililani on O'ahu. Contact information for them is available on Christopher Curtis sensei's website, curtissensei.com.