

Interview

Bill Leicht and Bertram Wohak -- International Aiki Peace Webinar

[Disclosures: This interview was conducted via email during the week of June 1 -- 5, 2015. Questions were submitted and responded to. The content has been edited to add some stylistic consistency and reading flow. R. Robertson, interviewing, is currently serving as a Steering Group member in Peace Dojos International, and has helped organize a number of International Aiki Peace Week events in Austin, Texas, as well as serving for a time as Chair of the Aiki Extensions Pedagogy Focus Area.]

RR: We have an exciting event coming up: Can you say a few words about what this is and how it came to be?

Bill: Yes. The Free "[International Aiki Peace Webinar](#)" on Sunday, 14 June (10 PDT, 11 MDT, 12 CDT and 1 EDT) [Editor's note: GMT/UTC 18:00] will be an experiment in extending aiki principles to an online dialog. We will highlight the International Aiki Peace Week in September and the role of Peace Dojos throughout the year. In this free webinar, Bertram Wohak will tell the story of how IAPW has developed as a peace celebration in dojos and clubs world-wide and has its roots in the amazing Training Across Borders seminar of 2005 on the Green Line in Cyprus. I will tell the story of Peace Dojos International: how it formed and works around our Earth. IAPW and PDI are also the many stories of individual dojos in the Philippines, Ethiopia, Columbia, England, Germany and across North America showing their communities how their martial arts prepare human beings as peace warriors. We bring you this Webinar to encourage you and your dojo or club to lead a peace event in your community and to demonstrate your readiness to support peace-building there throughout the year.

Bertram: I think the original idea for a special webinar in preparation for "International Aiki Peace Week 2015" came from Miles Kessler sensei, dojo cho of the Integral dojo in Tel Aviv. Miles had already hosted a series of Aikido related webinars earlier this year under the general title "A Way to reconcile the World", which were moderated by Quentin Cook sensei, who was also a long term member of the IAPW committee and had published a book with Aikido stories from everyday life under this title.

So the idea seemed to be obvious to have a special webinar in connection with this year's Aiki Peace Week. The date in June was chosen well ahead of the event in September, to promote participation of as many dojos as possible. Joining this free webinar, participants can learn how to promote peace building through Aikido or other martial arts. Together with a community of "*martial art peacemakers*", they will participate in peacemaking exercises, discussions, and a Q&A on peace-building. For more information about this September's International Aiki Peace Week event and how to participate go to: [International Aiki Peace Week-2015](#).

RR: At this point I should say that, for the majority of our readers who find this interview after the event has taken place, there should be an archived version that may be accessed.
Now, please give us a brief history of IAPW and PDI. How can people get involved year-round?

Bertram: Aiki Peace Week emerged from a conversation I had with my friend Paul Linden around New Year 2010. We've known each other since about 2000 and besides being aikidoka and dojo chos we both are professionals in the somatic field. Paul brought me into contact with Aiki Extensions and from 2009 I was a member of its Board of Directors. In our talk we were wondering how to get more dojos involved in Aiki Extensions and applying Aikido off the mat.

Paul suggested having a group project involving the application of Aiki in conflict resolution and peacemaking. I suggested a project that could have the power to transcend the political and stylistic divisions in the world of aikido by referring to O'Sensei's vision of Aikido as an art of peace and bringing this into broader public awareness. We both spent some time discussing the idea, and we fleshed it out together. When we presented our idea to the Board of Directors of Aiki-Extensions, they were enthusiastic, and many other people have been so as well.

A lot of practical help came from Aiki-Extensions President Rob Kent, who had done a lot to create a google map for participating dojos in the first year, I contacted many dojos in Germany and other European countries and Quentin Cooke from England became also very active. So International Aiki Peace Week went off the ground in September 2010. In the following year Christian Vanhenten from Belgium joined our committee and created a more suitable website. And many more people helped as well.

People can get involved by going to the [IAPW website](#), signing in with their dojo and possibly with a special event they are planning for Aiki Peace Week. With the awareness that other dojos around the world at the same time are focusing on teaching peace through Aikido, their event becomes much more meaningful and public.

Bill: Peace Dojos International, or PDI, grew from aikido and the Alternatives to Violence Project, known as "AVP," between 1985 and 1995 in New York City. In it, ten aikidoists and AVP facilitators created an intensive physical conflict resolution workshop that mirrored the AVP Basic Workshop in form and principle. AVP accepted this "Aiki-AVP" in 1995. My experiment was to create the Bronx Peace Dojo in an evangelical mission in a frightfully devastated neighborhood of the old South Bronx. After a decade, Don Levine, Founder of Aiki Extensions, asked me to work with two other AE members plus Danny Hakim of Budo for Peace to establish PDI. This gave dojos doing similarly motivated work in various crisis areas a means of sharing experience, expertise, support and various models for preparing their members as Peace Warriors serving their communities year-round. The organization has grown as individual dojos and clubs have learned about it and asked for membership.

RR: What can ordinary people, working independently, do to help create a more peaceful society?

Bill : Most simply, approach each conflict as an opportunities to develop relationships, solve problems with loving-kindness. Like aikido, that means learning how body and mind together can exercise formidable power and love. On the negative side it means noticing the contraction or resistance that interferes with receiving a challenge accurately, quickly, repeatedly and with minimum fatigue -- that is, effective relaxation and efficient response. Those words all refer to feeling, knowledge and awareness as both body and mind simultaneously. Simple to say, easy to begin, endless in life.

Bertram: Thich Nhat Hanh says: There is no way to peace, peace is the way. Cultivating a peaceful mind in oneself is the basis. That means developing awareness of one's own un-peacefulness and aggressiveness, especially in reaction to conflicts and how we are creating suffering by this attitude for ourselves and others. Then we should accept that others just want to be happy like ourselves. Without this deep-rooted change in the attitudes of as many people as possible a more peaceful society will stay just a nice idea.

RR: What do martial arts in general, and aikido in particular, have to do with fostering peace? Is studying the Way of War in order to understand the Way of Peace a contradiction in terms?

Bertram: I don't think that martial arts in general and even aikido in its normal way of practice are fostering peace. In many aikido dojos I know in keiko most attention is put on waza. Sure, we should do our best to master the wazas, but our keiko should not become restricted to this level. This is what we can learn from O Sensei. After mastering all known martial arts of his time and being aware of the catastrophes of the Second World War, O Sensei started to develop "a new kind of budo", one devoted explicitly to promoting world peace. He emphasized that the methods of this new budo would not rely on pain or physical force, but would welcome the energy of an attack, neutralize its aggressive direction, and care for the attacker. The structure of combat was fundamentally transformed into a harmonious exchange which didn't lead to a winner and a loser. From then on O Sensei called his art "The Art of Peace".

I'm convinced by this revolutionary shift O Sensei made a priceless gift to humankind. Peaceful behavior has to prove itself in situations of conflict with involvement of deep rooted physical reactions of anger and fear. Peaceful behavior has to become "embodied" to become really effective, and that's all about aikido training as an art of peace. So what seems to be a contradiction in terms, in reality is the real power of training in martial arts to foster peace. And that's the real meaning of "International Aiki Peace Week".

Bill: Martial arts are yoga applied to the relationship of conflict. While developed from the stark extremes of war and survival, their principles of least force and relationship apply to all aspects of society, from being a family to growing a sustainable world economy.

The essence is summed up by the tiny Bantu word *ubuntu*, an ethical term sometimes translated as "we are because you are, and since you are, definitely I am." It is an equivalent to the English "loving-kindness." However, it refers to our very existence, not something we can just do, but something that we are. In this sense I believe it may be very close to O Sensei's use of *iku-musubi* as the ultimate level of connection in aikido.

RR: To what extent, if any, must we as individuals secure our own inner peace before we do the work of

changing others? Or is it preferable to embrace violence and, in a way, make peace with the fact of it and then learn to live constructively within a framework of violence?

Bill: If we accept the *musubi* principle of aikido or *ubuntu* more generally, then my inner peace is to some extent that of my human opponent as well. To the extent that I can manifest that peace flexibly as affirmation, attention, trust and transformation in my words and as center, attention, relaxation and connection in my actions, I will be able to meet my supposed opponent in the beautiful field where he or she and I are simply human. An opponent at a very deep level knows and desires that peace, because that is how an infant becomes a human being. Getting from a deep to a practical level is a process. It usually takes time and continual application, but sometimes can be instantaneous. Thus peace is not the absence of conflict, but the presence of *ubuntu* that recognizes the commonality of being human and the divergence of human interests and desires. "There is no way to peace, peace is the way."

Bertram: Here holds most of what I said as an answer to your earlier question. In addition I would say, that waiting for a world without aggression and violence seems to be an illusion -- inside of oneself as well as in the outer world. But our awareness of this fact should lead to less acting out of aggression, simply because we know that it's creating suffering for us and others. In too many societies there still exists a certain kind of a "culture of violence" which should be transformed into a "culture of peace". Contributing to this change is a main objective of Aiki Peace Week.

RR: If people feel motivated to join in this particular work, what is it that you most hope they will bring to the effort? What is it that you have to offer them that will serve and support their work wherever they are?

Bertram: What I'm personally doing for years with my engagement in IAPW is creating a possibility for numerous dojos around the world showcasing the various ways in which aiki can be used to move societies towards peace. Through the shared action and concentration upon the week around United Nation's International Day of Peace, the event becomes much more visible and powerful. From this, participating dojos not only contribute in their special way to the emergence of a culture of peace, but at the same time become better known in their community and may gain new students.

Bill: Bring humanness in its greatness and its humility. What we have to offer is simply knowing that field where we meet in beauty, truth and goodness and some of the maps to find a path there. Knowledge of somatics is a part of it, a sense of the beauty of relationship in the moment of conflict, willingness to be simply human together, which is a solid basis for an ethics from which laws and customs can enhance humanity rather than hemming it in.

RR: Thank you both for your time and your thoughtful replies, and for your commitment to this particular life work.

Biographies:

Bertram Wohak

Body therapist and Aikido sensei 5th Dan Aikikai

Bertram Wohak was born in Prague, studied physics in Munich and was engaged in nuclear research at the university and in computer development for Siemens.

Bertram started with Aikido in 1981 and spent several long stays in Japan, where he trained at the Hombu dojo mainly with the second doshu Kisshomaru Ueshiba Sensei, Hiroshi Tada Sensei, and Nobujuki Watanabe Sensei. From 1986 on Watanabe Sensei became his long term Aikido Sensei and Bertram got all his promotions from him. Bertram now holds a fifth Dan from the Aikikai Hombu Dojo and is technical director of the Aikikan München dojo, which he founded in 1996.

Inspired by the health-emphasizing Aikido style of Watanabe sensei and his own search for a more holistic professional orientation, Bertram undertook a groundbreaking change in his professional life. At the age of fifty he became body therapist and a professional Aikido teacher. He received training in various fields of body therapy, e.g. Isogai Dynamic Therapy, Zen Bodytherapy® with William Leigh and Being in Movement® with Paul Linden and after years of working with hundreds of clients in his office in Munich he created his own system: AikiSoma Bodytherapy and Aiki-Somatics courses.

Through Paul Linden, Bertram came into contact with Aiki Extensions and served as a member on the AE Board of Directors from 2009 to 2014. During this time he and Paul Linden came up in 2010 with the idea for International Aiki Peace Week (IAPW). Bertram is now engaged with Aiki Peace Week for the sixth year. After 2013, Bertram organized with his dojo crew the international AE seminar "Aikido - an embodied Art of Peace" at Rothenfels castle in Germany. In 2015 again he is chair of the IAPW organizing committee.

Bertram regularly teaches national and international workshops and retreats in Aikido, Aiki-Somatics and bodywork.

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Bill Leicht's job as President is to bring I-Key nonviolence facilitation to new organizations. He developed these methods—physical, emotional, verbal and spiritual—as positive responses to conflict. His I-Key Facilitation Manual trains facilitators in physical and verbal conflict resolution.

Bill's background is broad, covering science, art, business and conflict resolution. A New Yorker since 1963, Bill hails from Minnesota country where he developed as a young naturalist. He received an AB in Liberal Arts and SB in Biopsychology from the University of Chicago, then did research in neurochemistry (1957--1966). In 1967 he received an MA in Fine Arts and Fine Arts Education from Teachers College, Columbia University and began a sculpture and teaching career.

From 1968-1974, while an instructor first at Albert Einstein College of Medicine (Dept. of Psychiatry), then at Hunter College (Art Dept.), he worked on the street in the South Bronx. He shared his art and communication skills and learned community organizing with United Bronx Parents, Inc., a parent activist group, and with the Ghetto Brothers, a youth "gang" becoming a community organization. He then worked as a Re-entry Counselor, first at Logos, then Phoenix House therapeutic communities, to help residents to prepare for jobs. Thus he began work to improve nonviolent social action methods.

Six years later art and community action merged when he set up Urban Visions of America, Inc., a CETA training company. It trained visually talented, hardcore unemployed people for 12 weeks as graphic artists after which 95% got and kept full time arts industry jobs.

When CETA funding ran out in 1984, Bill did ergonomic and computer consulting until 1992.

In 1983 Bill began aikido, a nonviolent, Japanese martial art earning a black belt in 1990. From the synthesis of this art and the verbal discipline of Alternatives to Violence Project, Inc. ("AVP") came "I-Key Workshops," a new approach to conflict resolution based on body-centered experiences expanding the set of conflict resolution skills. AVP prison facilitators, parents, children, teachers and other professionals, who took I-Key Workshops all were excited by how these skills and values helped them to transform their own lives and their work. By 1994 I-Key Workshops had become the unique core of a company doing dispute resolution business until 2003, when Urban Visions, Inc. as a non-profit corporation took up the work .

As staff-developer and facilitator-trainer (Educators for Social Responsibility, 1992-94) in NYC public schools, Bill helped entire schools change the way they conducted conflict resolution. The experience confirmed his vision that transformative physical education can help young people to develop the values and skills of responsible adults. In 1998 he created a conflict resolution course for 500 School Safety Officer Cadets and trained their facilitators to integrate school safety and enforcement skills into school's educational mission. Some other projects:

- developed Aiki-AVP Facilitator Training for AVP-NY (1990),
- created a John Jay College course using on-the-mats lab to learn and test conflict theories (1996)

- organized interfaith Bronx Peace Dojo at a Pentecostal mission, Bronx , NY (1997)
- created PS183 Peace Dojo in a Manhattan public school (2003--2006)
- trained and supported Lua Branca Peace Dojo (capoeira), Colombia, S.A. (2004-2010),
- formalized Aiki Corps and created Peace Dojos, Intl. while on Board of Aiki Extensions, Inc.(2005-2010)
- served Aiki Extensions as Interim President during transition to member-based organization (2009)
- developed and tested a restorative justice Peace Dojo Model, Brooklyn, NY (2010)
- instituted "Intl. Aiki Peace Week" in Colombia and Ecuador (2010)
- coordinated creation of a new Bronx Area Council, AVP (2011)

Bill's Quaker Meeting recognized his work as "Quaker Ministry." He still enjoys backpacking and trains regularly at Shobu Aikido of the Berkshires under Satoru Sato, Sensei.

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