

Lancashire Aikikai Newsletter 47 September 2024

Editor's Introduction – John Brooke (Trafford).

This is a special edition of the Newsletter dedicated to the memory and teaching of our Principal Bob Spence who sadly passed away this July. Bob touched the hearts of many people in many ways and on the web pages of the Lancashire Aikikai pages there is a special section of Bob Spence Appreciation pages with Appreciations, Recollections and History of Bob's life in Aikido over 56 years

<https://www.lancashireaikikai.org/spence/index5.html>

This Newsletter does not attempt to duplicate this material but to supplement it and to provide guidance about how to find the material that describes Bob's Aikido career and philosophy. To do this we have three major contributions:

1. A very moving account of Bob's funeral by Christine Shepherd.
2. A guide to accessing all the wealth of material put onto the LA web site and available from previous Newsletters.
3. A reproduction of the article "Aikido and Hombu" written in 2015 in which Bob reflects on the past history of the LA and his decision to invite Sensei Atsushi Mimuro to become the LA Technical Director.

Within the LA there will be members with many levels of association with Bob, some going back many years, others who have joined the LA more recently. I have tried to present the material so as to involve all these different levels of experience but I would particularly recommend to members who are not familiar with this history to study it carefully and to meditate on it since the experience of Bob's life in Aikido provides a rich source of starting points for deepening our understanding of the soul of the art we are all engaged in learning.

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2 The funeral of Bob Spence Sensei

A personal reflection - Christine Shepherd (Marple Aikido)

This sad occasion managed to be, at the same time, an interesting and rewarding celebration of a very full life.

Outside the crematorium

Most people arrived in plenty of time and, since we followed the instruction to dress in bright colours, the various overlapping groups of friends, relatives and Aikidoka had more the look of a wedding party than a funeral. Although it was a solemn occasion and conversations were in hushed tones, there was definitely pleasure in reconnecting with people - some of whom had practised Aikido with Bob in the past but hadn't been seen for decades. The clubs of Lancashire Aikikai were well represented.

As we waited in an informal line to enter the chapel we caught the sound of bagpipes and the hearse came slowly into view preceded by a piper in full regalia giving a fitting rendition of "Scotland the Brave". Once we filed in, the little chapel was filled to overflowing leaving people to stand at the back. A TV monitor showed Bob in his Aikido gi.

The service

There was no religious element to what came next, instead the celebrant gave an account of Bob's life - in equal parts surprising, touching and amusing.

Some of us might have known that he was a swimming coach but were surprised to find that this included Aquafit, which is a form of aerobics based water exercise. Then there was the incident in which an intruder broke into his house and Bob chased the villain down the street at midnight waving his katana before realising that, as he was stark naked, it was probably better not to continue the pursuit.

The celebrant spoke of his love of his family (even though he sometimes told them "You English don't understand"), the loss of his wife Enid, his care for his garden, particularly his dahlias, and, featuring very strongly, his devotion to Aikido.

Photographs

Between the stories the monitor showed a sequence of photographs. We saw Bob through the years in Aikido in various gis and various degrees of hairiness. But there was also a very charming one of him as a baby as well as the astonishing sight of Bob in a sparkly evening gown and blonde wig for a charity event.

The photos were accompanied by a recording of "Here Comes the Sun" by the Beatles (Bob was a big fan) and anyone who remembers him returning onto the mat

mahogany brown after his holidays will appreciate the appropriateness.

The choice of photographs and music matched the intention behind the service. While you might be sad, you could not feel depressed but rather uplifted and appreciative, as you left the chapel to the sound of the piper playing a lament.

After

At the pub afterwards we were able to share recollections. Touchingly, Bob's daughter told me that for cremation they thought the most appropriate attire for Bob was his Aikido gi. This gave me the chance to say to her, in all sincerity, that just as Bob was irreplaceable in her family he is irreplaceable within Lancashire Aikikai.

Domo arigato gozaimashita Spence Sensei.

Editor's note: The photographs referred to by Christine can be viewed from the web pages

<https://robertspence.muchloved.com/>

3 Bob Spence: life, teaching and legacy

John Brooke (Trafford Aikido) – disclaimer, this is my attempt to draw your attention to the wealth of material on the Bob Spence Appreciation Pages on the LA web site.

Please look there to read the original words of those who have far more knowledge of Sensei Spence's contributions to the LA and the force and charm of his personality.

Background

Those starting to learn Aikido nowadays have the benefit of a wealth of resources, a variety of clubs within the Lancashire Aikikai, frequent courses, access to a pool of experienced teachers and administrative support around insurance, safeguarding, and the assurance that their teachers have coaching qualifications backed by a national organisation, the BAB. To understand the background in which Bob Spence learnt Aikido, we have to imagine a scene where none of these benefits were available. Bob was a direct student of the founder of the LA, Sensei Marion Mucha, and Marion had to gain Aikido knowledge from the very small number of teachers available in the UK at the time, several of whom were sent by the Hombu from Japan and these teachers had to struggle with an unfamiliar language and an unfamiliar culture.

On the LA pages celebrating Bob Spence, the History section has the history of Mr Mucha. The History pages available to LA members on the Member's Pages section also has a section on "Founder of the Lancashire Aikikai" which is a reproduction of an interview of Mr Mucha by John Cox and Hephzibah Yohannan originally published in Terry O'Neill's "Fighting Arts" magazine 1993. As well as history, the interview contains Mr Mucha's insights into the inner nature of Budo and the importance of understanding Ki. Mr Mucha was a direct student of Sensei T. K. Chiba who was O'Sensei's last *uchi-deshi* student and who was sent by O'Sensei in 1966 to develop Aikido in the UK. From Sensei Chiba and from his own experience, Mr Mucha developed his emphasis that Aikido is not just a form of movement for health but a martial art with deep roots in the Japanese tradition. He stresses the importance of Zazen mediation and of understanding the nature of Ki.

Bob was a direct and very dedicated student of Sensei Mucha and also of Sensei T. K. Chiba. In the Bob Spence Appreciation pages there is a link to the section on History that has an article based on an interview with Bob by Hephzi Yohannan and Algy Cole that illustrates in a moving way how much Bob felt he received from his teachers and how he was passionate about passing on what he felt was the true tradition of Aikido, not as a handbook of techniques but as a philosophy of living. The article shows how much courage and determination Bob needed to gain this knowledge, very much in the Japanese tradition that the student who wishes to learn must place complete trust and faith in his/her Sensei and how demanding this could be.

Times change, and as Bob notes in this interview, we live in a very different ethos and in a complicated society where it is now understood that Aikido practice must be

sensitive to cultural and legal constraints that were not present in traditional Japan. In terms of the support background noted at the start of this article, Bob was a huge driving force in achieving this, notably in his development of the coaching syllabus for the BAB. All of us practising as coaches will understand how important this support is.

Teaching

Reading the Bob Spence Recollection page

<https://www.lancashireaikikai.org/spence/recollections.html>

it seems that learning Aikido from Bob didn't just happen on the mat. It happened all the time people were around him. His methods appear to have been a mixture of "shock and awe" and a rather wicked sense of humour but he could also be very kind when the occasion and/or the student required it. On courses he emphasised the importance of students taking care of each other and ended sessions with shiatsu based massage procedures to relax and heal after what was usually a very hard session. This was the double edged side of his knowledge for developing power and also for developing healing.

This can remind us that the concept of Budo goes well beyond combat and within the Japanese context had links with the arts of healing and developing spiritual practice. However, you were not allowed to get away with sloppiness or lack of effort. While Bob could be very patient with beginners he definitely expected those making progress through the grades to be their best and their sharpest when practising. He seemed to realise that a sense of theatre is important in raising the consciousness of those practising. This can be seen in the comments about the buzz of anticipation before he started teaching, merely the news that he would be taking the training on a particular night clearly had a powerful effect.

As described above, we owe a great debt to Bob for his input into developing a coaching syllabus. His previous experience as a swimming instructor helped here. Having such procedures were very important in getting the national sports organisation (at that time the Sports Council) to give accreditation to British Aikido Board coaching. They also provide a unifying framework for the different schools of Aikido within the BAB to have a common approach to student welfare and development, despite differences in their methods. The framework provided by the BAB makes the practice of Aikido much safer than it was in the days before such oversight and the amount of effort put in by people such as Bob, all of which was unpaid, is something for which we should be grateful.

Legacy

Despite having such a rich history and pedigree Bob did not neglect to think of the

future of the Lancashire Aikikai. The remarkable document at the end of this Newsletter, "Aikido and Hombu" is a testament to this. Reflecting on his feelings and memories after the death of his teacher Sensei Chiba he made the decision to turn back again to the source and asked those in the Aikikai who had been developing links with Sensei Mimuro to approach him and invite him to be our Technical Director. His reasoning is most clearly and effectively expressed in his own words but I think that those of us who have been practising before and after this decision can attest that this has brought to the LA another important Aikido lineage deriving from the renowned Sensei Seigo Yamaguchi and a sense of vital contact with the centre of Aikido in Japan. Bob was thinking beyond his own immediate influence on the LA and ensuring that it has the chance to develop further as the dynamic art of Aikido will develop.

4 Aikido and Hombu

Article reproduced from 2015 written by Bob Spence LA Principal

I feel I need to give an explanation as to why I decided to join the Lancashire Aikikai in with Hombu Dojo, so I have written a little about my early years in Aikido and connection with Chiba Sensei, Hombu and to the future of the Association.

I started Aikido in late November 1968 as a member of the Chorley Budo Club this was run by Sensei Marian Mucha who was to become my Mentor, Friend and Father Figure, he started to learn Aikido under Sensei Abbe in 1956 in 1967 Chiba Sensei was sent to this country from the Aikido World Headquarters (Hombu Dojo) in Japan by the Founder Morihei Ueshiba (Chiba Sensei was his last live in student) to set up an organisation which was to become the Aikikai of Great Britain which we joined and were then known as the Lancashire Aikikai.

I was awarded my 6th Kyu grade at Chorley by Sensei Chiba in June 1969 and in August 1971 was awarded 1st Dan then achieved 2nd Dan in 1973 right up to 1976. When Chiba Sensei left to go to America leaving Sensei Kanetsuka to run The Aikikai of Great Britain, this caused problems as politics seemed to take over resulting in the Lancashire Aikikai leaving and becoming an Independent Association.

In all this time we had regular general, teacher and weapon courses with Sensei Chiba also an Easter and Summer school each year, as well as travelling all over the country to attend courses with Sensei he also used to bring over high ranking Sensei from Hombu Dojo as guest instructors so we were being continually updated with our Traditional Aikido style as taught by the founder.

Chiba Sensei was not only my Sensei but also a friend, as he used to stop over at Mr Mucha's house on the Saturday evening and we would go over for a chat and a few drinks he also invited my wife and I to his house for a traditional Japanese meal as well as a few times going out for dinner when we were in London, he was always pleased to see me when I went to his club in London he also liked using me as his Uke, though at times it felt like a torture but in those days it was necessary for my progression.

It came as a great shock to me when he passed away in June 2015 and I got to thinking just how much this man has meant to me, all the things he had taught me even changed my attitude to life, then I think of Sensei Mucha and read a statement on the back of our handbook about Aikido being like a stream, which is pure at the source but gets muddied as it travels downstream. I felt there was a need to go back to the original source which is the Aikido World Headquarters to ensure we practice pure Aikido.

I felt that I could achieve this by going through a connection one of the clubs has with Yokohama International Aikido club that is affiliated with the Hombu Dojo so I approached Chris Wallace to see if he could arrange a meeting with Mimuro Sensei about the possibility of Lancashire Aikikai becoming a member with Hombu, this was

done and the outcome is that we can become members registered in Japan through the Yokohama Club with all Kyu grades being recognised as they stand and Shodans after an assessment.

There are a few benefits

- Having an International Standard Recognition
- Helps with our marketing
- Simplifies the grading syllabus
- As it is a Japanese Martial Art we have contact with the original source therefore Pure Aikido
- Having a High Grade Japanese Sensei as the Technical Director to ensure very high standards
- Thinking to the future of Lancashire Aikikai

Bob Spence – Principal of the Lancashire Aikikai