

James O'Donoghue

### **How Aikido Changed My Life**

In 1998 I was attending San Diego State University studying speech communication. I was not enjoying my classes and going to school was a chore. I was living in an apartment in La Mesa that I did not like. I did not share the same values with the people I was spending time with and my Job was not giving me any satisfaction. Things were not going to well for me. After the semester was over I decided to re-evaluate my life. I bought a book, I think it was the Idiots Guide to Being Happy, and set out to make myself happy. I soon realized that I was living my life the way I thought I was supposed to instead of the way I wanted to.

About two years earlier I had started learning aikido at Sunset Cliffs. Karl Grignon signed me up. I remember it like it was yesterday. Aikido was a guilty pleasure because I really did not have the time or the money. I went to class sporadically, a month or two of training and a month or two off. During my off months I wished I was training and during the months I was training I wished I could spend more time at the dojo. So I decided to make a new goal for my life: Aikido.

The first thing I did was to ask Sensei if I could become an Uchi-Deshi. She looked shocked but said yes. Then I gave my roommate a month notice and threw away my class request forms for the next semester. At this point I was the happiest I had been in about ten years. Sensei said I would probably sleep on the mat and keep my things in a small cabinet in the living room. I'm not sure if she was testing my resolve or if she was actually going to have me sleep on the mat but that sounded great to me. When I showed up on my arranged move in date all of the Uchi-Deshies were there waiting for me. It felt

great and I will never forget how welcome they made me feel. It turns out they all thought I was going through a divorce. On that first day I found out that I would get a room and my roommate would be Jake. We immediately became friends and to this day he remains my best friend. The other Uchi-Deshies were: Dylan, Tim, Benson, Keo, Gabe, and Mike. Within a few months I felt like I was part of a family. All of the Uchi-Deshies were my sempai and all of them helped me improve. At any given time mini-training sessions would break out, usually initiated by Tim. Standing on line at the Soup Plantation we would start doing techniques to one another. We went out one night to walk on the O.B. pier and wound up training for a half hour. We could not even watch a movie in the living room without someone having to get up to try a technique they were thinking about. Having the single focus of Aikido helped put life in perspective. I wanted to do Aikido, it made me happy, and I wasn't going to throw away any more of my time doing things that did not make me happy.

After living in the dojo for about a year Lisa moved in. When I realized that she made me happy I asked her to go out with me. When it came time for me to move out of the dojo we moved in together. Had it not been for the dojo I never would have met her and had it not been for the clarity that studying Aikido gave me I never would have asked her to go out with me. Around this time I decided to finish school. Studying Aikido was never a chore because I enjoy it, so this time I decided to study something that I enjoy. Armed with the lessons I learned studying Aikido, I finished my degree in two years and enjoyed every class.

While I was finishing school Lisa and I decided to get married, I asked her the night after she took her Nidan exam. My Biological family lives in New Jersey so only a

few of them could make it to the wedding. Fortunately I am blessed with a large Aikido family and we invited them all. Jake, my best friend and roommate from the dojo, flew in from Colorado to be the best man. Karl, the person who signed me up at the dojo, flew in from northern California. Most of the people at our wedding we met at the dojo and became friends with through Aikido. When I think back to my life before I signed up at the dojo I am struck by how Aikido has changed my life and how much happier I have become.