

AiShinKai

## Interview – Samurai-Sword-Shop.Com

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Question responses by Dr. Jonathan Bannister, Ph.D./Ma.D.Sc., *Headmaster*



1. Who is the dojo's founder and what prompted him/her to build the school? Is there any rich history behind its making?

AiShinKai “Harmonious Heart Association” is an independent martial and cultural arts school located in Edmonds, WA in the United States. We offer extensive training in AiShinRyu Aikido, Aiki-Weapons, and Iaido. Additional coursework is available in *Ki* Meditation and Breathing disciplines, *Kiatsu-Ryoho* Massage, *Shodo* brush calligraphy, *Ikebana* flower arranging, and *Bonsai* tree potting. The dojo has more than 75 black belt graduates and is a founding member of the Pacific Northwest Budo Association, a federal nonprofit organization dedicated to fostering appreciation for Japanese martial arts and traditional culture through the administration of grants and scholarships to artists and educational organizations.

Our chief instructor, Jonathan Bannister Sensei, is the founder of AiShinRyu Aikido and has more than 30 years experience. He is the current president of the Pacific Northwest Budo Association and is ranked 4<sup>th</sup>-degree black belt in All Japan Kendo Federation (ZNKR) Iaido. An avid horseman during his childhood, he is a dedicated scholar of western and Asian philosophies and art. In high school and college (he earned a BFA in Fine and Applied Art from the Rochester Institute of Technology in 1987) he was introduced to Zen and Shingon Buddhism. He began Aikido training in 1979 with Hiroshi Ikeda Sensei of the Aikido Schools of Ueshiba. Joining Kokikai-Ryu Aikido in 1982, he soon became a senior instructor under that organization's founder and president, Maruyama Shuji. Devoted to the study of Aikido basics and Aiki-weapons practice, Bannister Sensei began training in Iaido in 1982, later adding Shodo, Ikebana, Bonsai, and *Kyudo* to his personal practice. From 1994-2006 Bannister Sensei served as Northwest U.S. Regional Coordinator for Kokikai Aikido International, founding a regional headquarter dojo in Seattle, WA and overseeing branch programs throughout Washington, California, and British Columbia (Canada). In 1999, he was appointed U.S. representative of Tsubomi Seishin Kan Iaido Kai of Tokyo, Japan. He is a bronze medal winner of the Hachioji Iaido Taikai (Tokyo 2007), winner of the Kantosho prize at the

All US Kendo Federation Iaido Taikai in 2010, and two-time 1<sup>st</sup> place winner of the Pacific Northwest Kendo Federation Iaido Taikai (Bellevue, WA, 2008 & 2010).

In 2006, after 30 years of daily effort to pierce the heart of Budo, Bannister Sensei experienced a tremendous epiphany in his practice: new levels of calmness and relaxation enabled him to throw even the strongest attackers. Bannister Sensei founded AiShinRyu Aikido to give expression to a new and unique method of training and to share profound insights into the nature of conflict and the essence of humanity. With full support from his teachers in Japan, Bannister Sensei established a broad and deep curriculum – coordinating the study of Ki Development, Aikido, Aiki-Weapons and Iaido in a comprehensive program designed to provide students with all the tools necessary to achieve self-mastery through Budo. Bannister maintains a daily training regimen of personal study in Ki Development, Aiki-Weapons, and Iaido. In addition, he leads classes at AiShinKai programs in Edmonds, WA and Shoreline, WA, overseeing all branch programs, and provides volunteer programs to schools, businesses, and community groups. A man on a mission, Bannister Sensei wants the world to experience the value of self-discipline, self-mastery, and the active means for peaceful reconciliation between people and nations as modeled by Budo martial arts. He maintains strong friendships with martial arts instructors and organizations throughout the United States, Canada, and Japan. He currently serves on the Board of Directors for the Japan-America Society of the State of Washington, the Seattle Kobe Sister City Association, and the Pacific Northwest Kendo Federation.

*“The pursuit of technique alone is in itself a technical dead end. True Budo martial arts should express a spirit of loving protection for all beings. AiShinRyu Aikido offers a new paradigm in conflict resolution, one in which personal empowerment need never come at another’s expense. We wholly repudiate the notion that violence is ever a legitimate means to resolve conflict. First master yourself, then express your highest ideals by working to save others from the self-destructive consequences of aggression.”*

- Dr. Jonathan Bannister Sensei, *Founder, AiShinKai*



*Mon* (crest) of the **AiShinKai**. A lotus flower surrounds the kanji character for *Ki*, translated as internal spiritual power.

**AiShinKai** means “Harmonious Heart Association.” The character ‘Ai” comes from the profoundly non-violent art of Aikido, while “shin” can be interpreted as heart, mind, new, good, truth, or even God.



AiShinKai  
**Basic Principles for Life**

Create a Calm Center  
Be Comfortably Relaxed  
Practice Dependable Posture  
Unify Body, Mind and Spirit

Strive for Excellence  
Be Loyal, Brave and Sincere  
Seek the Simplest Solution  
Smile and Be Natural

2. What forms of Japanese martial arts do you teach in your school? Can you please share with us the history behind them?



## Aikido: A Gentle Art of Defense

In old Japan, travel was very difficult, so clans lived in villages where everyone was related to everyone else. Resort to weapons and violence to resolve conflicts was very undesirable: doing so caused blood-feuds within families. A need arose for a kind of technique that would minimize bloodshed, and restore harmony between enemies. Aikido, the most modern martial art of Japan, was developed by Morihei Ueshiba in 1927 to give modern expression to a profound philosophy of non-violence. His new art represented a radical departure from the killing arts of old, as he believed that the deepest level of martial arts should express a spirit of loving protection for all beings. Ueshiba redesigned older grappling techniques, developing an entirely new art that compromises an opponent's posture and balance without causing injury. His fondest wish was that this art be used to create bridges of friendship between all peoples and all nations. Aikido recognizes our common humanity, and breaks down simplistic barriers that alienate one person - or one nation - from another.

Aikido practice begins with the careful examinations of the simple movements at the core of self-defense techniques. By testing one another in cooperative practice of exercises and techniques, we develop mind-body coordination and a calm self-confidence born of real martial arts ability. Emphasizing natural rhythm and relaxation to harness our full potential, Aikido techniques rely on dependable posture, redirection, and elegant timing to harmlessly render opponents incapable of further attacks. Physical strength is not needed in Aikido training, and the practice is suited to all people regardless of size, age, or gender. Practices are gently aerobic, gradually ratcheting up to our ultimate self-defense goal: effective, non-violent response to simultaneous, multiple attackers. Aikido's tools for self-mastery polish the mind, tune the body, and offer a new paradigm for personal and social harmony so needed in modern times.



## Iaido: Japanese Swordsmanship

Release your inner Samurai! Modern Iaido sword arts combine non-combative forms practice with rigorous physical and intellectual discipline. The extraordinary technical requirements of the art foster calmness, self-discipline, and profound insights into the nature of violent conflict. Iaido traces its roots back to the 1600's when quick-draw swordsmanship was truly a matter of life and death. Today the art's beautiful movements

are turned towards the larger purpose of character transformation and the creation of better world citizens.

Iaido techniques are generally practiced solo, and the modern art comprises a non-combative martial discipline. Each *waza* consists minimally of four main components: the defining movement *nukitsuke* combines drawing and cutting in one smooth motion, while *kiriotoshi* is a final overhead cutting action. *Zanshin*, or continuous mind, is practiced through the technique's conclusion. Consisting of *chiburi*, a blood-shaking motion, and *noto*, or re-sheathing, the entire performance is intent on cultivating *ki-ken-tai-ichi*: spirit, sword, and body becoming one. When Iai is performed correctly, the practitioners complete character is revealed as raw material to be polished in the cultivation of our humanity. Nakakura Sensei brushed a piece of calligraphy that hangs in our dojo that reads *Ken-Shin-Ichi-Jyo*, "Sword and Heart are One." This correctly and beautifully expresses our goal.

AiShinKai

## Basic Principles for Swordsmanship

Correct Stance

Proper Grip

Sharp Footwork

Correct Motion

Correct Strike Angle

Control Distance and Timing

Understand the Scenario

Correct Technique

Correct Form

Continuous Awareness



Aiki-Ken / Aiki-Jo: Principles of Peace Applied to Sword and Staff  
Every member of AiShinKai is invited and encouraged to learn the powerful and beautiful forms of Aikido's weapons practices. Each rank is associated with a particular sword or staff *kata* that serves to reinforce the lessons provided by the student's other technique studies. Ultimately, the realization dawns that the real enemy is not the attacker, but the myriad forms of violence lurking in our hearts. Only by diligent training can we overcome our aggressive instincts and discover the heart of Aikido, "The Art of Peace."



### Ki Development

AiShinKai programs include *Ki* Meditation & Breathing and *Ki* Development Exercises in order to help students make their strongest natural state a dependable experience. When the mind and body are correctly unified tremendous power results which can be applied to any challenge, whether it be a self-defense situation or simply meeting adversity in daily life. We also provide individual instruction in a rare art called *Kiatsu Ryoho*. Created by martial arts genius Koichi Tohei, this is a kind of *Ki* massage that aids the healing of soft tissue injury. AiShinKai students are encouraged to study the arts of peace in addition to the arts of war!



## Shodo – Ikebana – Bonsai

*“A close observation of Nature is essential to realizing our human potential and our place in the world.”*

Dr. Jonathan Bannister Sensei, *Founder, AiShinKai*

AiShinkai members are invited to discover other samurai arts that are important aspects of Bannister Sensei’s *Budo* practice. In fact, he ascribes his success in the martial arts to lessons discovered through appreciating rhythms in Nature. This “teacher’s teacher” regularly shares the essence of the arts with school children, community groups, and businesses, and is eager to show others how a close connection with the natural world leads us to discovery of our own potential for strength coupled with compassion.

### 3. What are the principles and concepts you uphold and try to instill in your students?

Bannister Sensei often says that he has no special talent for martial arts beyond the fact that he enjoys self-discipline. By trying hard for a long time he has developed a high degree of skill, but he wants his students to discover that real martial arts ability is freely available to anyone who will put in the effort to practice. “There really are no secrets,” he says. “We show you everything right up front and invite you to try. If you like it, stay a long time and become strong like us!” This is the first lesson for new members of the AiShinKai: Bannister says “If I can, so can you.” He encourages students to commit to doing, rather than merely trying. Day by day, step by step, practice will always make us better.

Later lessons become more profound. Bannister Sensei, despite being at times quite ferocious, is in fact an avid pacifist. But his genuine desire for peace in the world is coupled with a practical, martial arts sensibility. “It is both a privilege and an obligation of the strong to be kind.” He teaches how to develop extraordinary self-control, applies it to supremely effective technique, and finally ties all that ability to a profound philosophy of non-violence. Real courage, real integrity, requires *Budo-ka* to develop the utmost ability and then refrain from resorting to violence. “Violence is inherently self-destructive, and an illegitimate means to resolve conflict,” Bannister says. “I want to make my students so strong that they have the ability to establish leadership in even the

most combative situations. Then they can begin to work towards the creation of mutually-beneficial solutions. It's never easy, but I like a good challenge!"

The Gojo  
**Five Virtues of the Samurai**

*Jin* – Benevolence

*Gi* – Righteousness

*Rei* – Propriety

*Chi* – Wisdom

*Shin* – Faithfulness

*I want our students to reflect deeply on these ideals, and form an image of themselves as heroes. Five pleats in the front of the hakama represent these virtues; I think about them every day while dressing for practice.*

*Real practice is like surfing: we ride the wave, fall off, get up again.*

*I am not content to simply admire others' achievements from a distance. I want to become that which I most admire. This motivates my practice, and I want our students to feel the same fire in their bellies.*

Jonathan Bannister Sensei, *Founder, AiShinKai*

4. Why do you think it is important for people to learn martial arts?

What do people think about when they think of Japan? Anime, electronics, pretty decent cars, sushi . . . But we feel that the single most important and influential export of Japan are not its excellent consumer products, but rather the social and civic movement of *Budo* that is currently sweeping the globe. The modern martial arts of Japan advocate a profound philosophy embracing human rights and offer a much-needed, new paradigm of conflict resolution uniquely deserving of our attention. In contrast to the martial arts seen in books and movies, modern Budo are dedicated to principles of character development and non-violence. Thanks to the Japanese government, numerous international arts & cultural organizations, and the efforts of countless individual artists and instructors world-wide, Budo martial arts are now practiced by millions and taught in virtually every nation on Earth. The world can learn much of value from Budo, and it begins with interested individuals dedicating themselves to exploration in this fertile field.

5. What difficulties and obstacles have you encountered so far with regards to teaching martial arts and how did you overcome them?

Many years ago a martial arts teacher was asked this question and replied "teaching people to tie their belts correctly!" But seriously, I've been actively teaching for 26 years and have pretty much encountered every difficulty imaginable. The easy stuff can be dealt with through further education, like the business of running a martial arts school. Martial artists are qualified in their arts, but not necessarily in business. It took a long



time before I figured out what worked for me. I found it difficult, for instance, to strike a balance between a professional need for income, and my desire to maintain the demanding standards of our arts. I have made a distinction between my personal practice – in which I invite others to participate - and my expectations of students whose lives are complicated by competing demands from family and work. It's important to keep our priorities straight: first family, then work, then dojo. I'm pretty lucky, since all three are combined in my life.

Another interesting aspect of my teaching career is how my body has held up - or not – over 40 years of intense training. I have had many injuries resulting from incorrect training, and have found physical limitations very informative as I develop a more logical and natural training system for our dojo. Some years ago I realized that long-term success in Budo required a new paradigm for practice, one based on intelligence, refined timing, and rhythmical movement suited to the human body.

6. What advice and/or insights can you share with our readers who want to pursue their interest in the Japanese form of martial arts?

Good question! I can offer four pieces of advice:

First, find a good teacher. Everyone must belong to someone, especially in the first 20 years. Judge a teacher not only by his technique, but also by his character, and the quality of the training experience. Observe the community: do the students and teachers treat each other with the respect and care every human beings deserves? Follow your gut: if it feels off to you, don't hesitate. Politely move on and keep looking. Remember that some of the best teachers are not especially advanced, but they have a clear idea of where they are going, and are sincerely willing to help you. Treat your teacher with courtesy and respect, and expect the same in return.

Second, once you've decided on a particular teacher or school, commit to a sincere trial period of doing exactly what the teacher recommends. This means six to twelve months of putting your ego on the back burner. Be patient and diligent. At the conclusion of the trial period, reflect on your progress and direction, and ask if this method is taking you towards your personal vision of a great human being. Don't be afraid to discuss this with your teachers. They have a vested interest in your success, and if they're good, they'll be willing and able to clarify what road will be of greatest help to you.

Third, and most importantly, be yourself and trust yourself. You are an important person, with hopes and dreams and aspirations that are just as valid as the next person. The goal of the martial arts should be to help each person realize their full potential. This does not require you to change your religion, or your race, or turn you into something you're not and may never be. You do not have to become "samurai" or "go native." Appreciate your own culture in all its strengths and weaknesses, borrow what works and leave what doesn't, and discover all that self-mastery can be for you and for your society.

Fourth, don't quit! I don't mean to say that you should perpetually stick to one school, one style, or one teacher. What I mean is that the road to self-mastery is long and challenging, but the rewards are fantastic for those who keep trying. Be diligent and patient, and walk the path daily. Ultimately, the result is up to you. A great teacher can get you pointed in the right direction, but you have to walk. Some day this may mean walking in a direction different from your teacher, but that's actually desirable if you are going to fulfill your destiny as a unique individual and master martial artist.

7. Can you give a short biography of your instructor(s)?

Aikido

Maruyama Shuji, *Shihan* Kokikai-Ryu Aikido. Student of Kiochi Tohei Sensei who eventually became deshi to Ueshiba Morihei Sensei, the founder of Aikido.

Iaido

Eura Kazunori, *Iaido Hachidan Hanshi*, All Japan Kendo Federation, Tokyo-To. *Shihan* of the Tachikawa Iaido Kai.

Yoshimoto Trent, *Kendo Nannadan Kyoshi, Iaido Nannadan Renshi*, All Japan Kendo Federation, Tokyo-To. Former *Kaicho* of the Tsubomi Seishin Kan Iaido Kai, Tokyo, Japan (deceased).

8. Details:

AiShinKai

*Japanese Martial Arts & Culture*

Edmonds, WA 98026 USA

tel.425-771-6816

[www.aishinkai.com](http://www.aishinkai.com)

Dr. Jonathan Bannister, *Founder & President*

**AiShinRyu Aikido**

**All Japan Kendo Federation Iaido**

**Muso Shinden Ryu Iai**

*Founding member of the Pacific Northwest Budo Association, a federal 501c3 nonprofit educational organization dedicated to fostering appreciation for Japanese martial arts and traditional culture as worthwhile means to promote character development, conflict resolution, and global citizenship.*