

Iris Scanlon: “Find out what your strength is and then do it”

Interview by Lisa Alsentzer and Anže Rapoš Božič

Summer 2021



Iris Scanlon was born in 1958 and has been practicing aikido since 1985, when she was captivated by a sense of déjà vu and a chance meeting with Yoshigasaki Sensei. Her daughter Stella motivated her to start teaching aikido to children in 1995. In 2001, Iris started her own dojo and made aikido her profession, teaching adults as well as children of different ages ever since. In this, she gets help from her aikido husband Raymond, who moved to Mülheim in 2003 and has been helping her with the dojo and teaching aikido classes himself.

Lisa and Anže met Iris in two very different ways. Lisa met her when she started practicing aikido in one of the children's classes at the age of 8. Now, 18 years later, she is one of Iris's senior students and supports her especially with leading younger students and organizing the daily dojo life as well as seminars. Anže met Iris at a seminar in Essen, shortly after he had moved to Germany for work. Very soon, he was travelling with her and Raymond to other seminars in the region and attending Saturday morning practices in Mülheim whenever possible. Recently, we met online to ask Iris about her life and aikido practice.

You have been practicing aikido for a long time. What was your first encounter with aikido? What drew you into it?

After coming back from Asia where I was studying Buddhist history and was trained in yoga, I met some people who were practicing aikido. They invited me to a workshop about Ki, and even though I was not interested in practicing martial arts, they seemed to be nice and so I decided to go. The teacher at the workshop introduced Ki-meditation, and I had a moment of déjà vu because I suddenly realized that I had done that technique as a very small child to go into my own world when I was alone in my room in the evening after my parents had put me to bed. As an adult who is more connected to the outside world, I forgot this technique, of course, but when I was in this workshop it was as if something suddenly hit me, "I know this technique, I have done this before." It was something that was "mine."

This was also a strong motivation for me to go and see Yoshigasaki Sensei in Essen, where he gave a seminar a few weeks later. I went as a visitor and I was on a bench waiting for the class to start. When he entered the room and went to bow, I was completely mesmerized; I thought "I want to learn how to move like this." And these were my first encounters with aikido and the most important moments that made me want to learn this art.

What happened afterwards, how did you start practicing? And how has your relationship to practice changed over time?

I first practiced with a teacher who had a class twice a week at the Pädagogische Hochschule in Essen. The teacher came over from Berlin and was studying in Essen, and he had a 2nd or a 1st Kyu when he started teaching there. We were about 20 people practicing with him, which went on for some three or four years before the group fell apart for different reasons. There were a few of us left who wanted to continue, but the highest ranked one was a 4th Kyu. We have been going to several seminars with Yoshigasaki Sensei over these four years, and we decided to ask him if we can continue without a teacher. I was chosen to ask him as my English was the best—and that was a very exciting moment for me to go and ask him. And he said "no problem," so we opened a dojo in Duisburg and four people of this group started teaching. I was just a student. This also didn't last long, and in the end three dojos developed from this: in Essen,

Duisburg, and Mülheim—so we had a dojo in Mülheim after 1988, 1989, something like this. And in 2001, I opened my own dojo in Mülheim.

As for my relationship to the practice, I don't think it has changed over the years. Of course, when you practice for so many years, you become more familiar with what you practice and start embodying things. It becomes a part of your nature and your body and mind. So that is the feeling you get: Aikido is not just a part of your life, it becomes your life. But as for the practice itself—for me, it's the same kind of curiosity and surprises, and a never-ending room I'm entering when I go on the mat. Every time is new. And this is the fascinating thing for me: There is never an end to anything, there is always a new moment. For me, aikido practice is meditation—in a visible way and with another person.

At approximately the same time when you opened your own dojo in Mülheim you married Raymond, who has also been practicing aikido for a long time. He teaches in your dojo and helps you run it. How is the experience of having an aikidoka for a husband?

Before Raymond moved to Germany, we sat down and created a vision of what we wanted for the dojo. We talked a lot about how we saw our roles; for example, he spoke no German and was not connected to the community, so it was clear that I would run the day-to-day business of the dojo and do most of the teaching as he had to work full-time. He agreed to support me from the beginning. Raymond had intensely trained in a dojo in the UK and recognized which qualities a dojo leader needed. He said that I suited the role of dojo leader. He saw many dojos with the wrong type of leader, which, in the end, never develop past a certain point. He felt that knowing how to do, for instance, Shomenuchi Ikkyo had no correlation to running a dojo.

I am very lucky that, from the very beginning, Raymond has had the clear intention and attitude to support me. Of course, we are both independent people, often with different views about aikido. However, we are not both running the dojo, I am. I take the overall responsibility for the decisions after we have discussed them. Raymond is an independent thinker, an independent teacher, and he practices in the dojo. And he is also the president of the dojo. But the everyday business, I do it. I discuss ideas with him, and many times he has a different opinion than me, usually I end up doing what I think is right anyway. But having the possibility to ask him and consider his ideas is helpful for me, even if they are different from mine.

I don't know if it would work if he would be a professional aikido teacher like I am, with no other day job. That would be different, and I don't know how it would work, maybe you find a way. It always depends on what you do, you must have a lot of confidence, a strong base together, and a strong independence of mind. We want to be together, but we don't need each other. So that is, for me, the formula of a successful relationship. Of course, I would miss him—it is not that. It is, that we don't need each other to make our decisions, to be emotionally independent. And that is the basis for me, and that is also the basis in the dojo. I appreciate that he is there, teaching in his unique way, and many times I don't agree with what he does, and vice versa. But people like him as a teacher, and they appreciate his unusual way. And his heart is very good. This is the most important thing.

With years, you went from a student to a teacher. One thing we have always especially admired is your work with children and aikido. How did you start teaching children aikido classes?

The first time I thought about teaching was when I had a daughter, because I was practicing Aikido and she knew what we were doing. When you have a little child around you, you have a lot of physical contact, and you discover the physique of the child outside the mat, how they move and what they do. I somehow saw that moving together with the child—playing, tumbling around—is nice if you do it in an aikido way. And I could see that it would be beautiful if children could learn to do aikido—for discovering their body and movement in a deeper and richer way

Everybody I knew, including the people I was practicing with, had the impression that this would be very difficult, because the philosophy of aikido is too difficult, and the children would not understand it. But despite this I thought there has to be a way, because it is so natural, and maybe you can translate this difficult philosophy into something simpler that children can understand. This idea was growing in me and when my daughter Stella was about five years old—must have been around 1994 or something like that—we got a chance to have an extra class in the afternoon. I was also working in a kindergarten at the time and I had a lot of children around me, and so I did a little workshop there, too, and people liked it. And so I started an aikido class for children, which was my first experience as an aikido teacher, which did not feel like a big change because it was my profession after all to be a children educator. I liked it, they liked it, and it quickly grew very big and we had many more children than adults as students.

And I enjoyed the challenge of, let's say, translating aikido into a children's language and children's exercises.

Later on, I also did some workshops with teenagers in different schools, such as aikido-based self-defence. Of course, I was during that time also practicing and assisting in adult classes, and once I started my own dojo I took over the adult classes for people who wanted to stay with me in my dojo. I never really thought much about it, I just did it. In the first years, I felt much more like a coach than a Sensei, just practicing with people. Just by chance I'm in the front on the mat because I have the highest rank, that's all. Somehow it changed later on, there is a difference if you just practice with people or if you lead them. And I just grew into this role. What else can you do? To me, it felt like a natural development, there was no choice. It's never been intended—I never saw this kind of a "career," but it just happened.

I had to go through many difficulties and a lot of pain to go where I wanted to go. And for me, it has never been about power, I never wanted to have a big dojo or be a big teacher. I just wanted to practice and share it. I could have gone to a completely different professional career if I wanted to and do aikido on the side, like many people do and which is okay. But it is not enough for me, I wanted to really explore aikido, have a space like a dojo to practice and teach aikido because I want this art to exist, I want it to be in the world. I want children, teenagers, adults to come and practice and have the feeling of "Yes, this is good. This is something deep in my body and mind." That is my motivation and my way. I never think about what could have been if I had made different decisions.

Teaching aikido to children is in general something we do not get prepared for during the usual adult classes. Do you have some advice for instructors who would want to start their own aikido classes for children?

You must ask yourself if you love children. You have to know that you really like them, and you must feel this in your heart. You should go on the mat and put your own intentions away and be with them, practice with them, and enjoy what they do while taking care of their development. Otherwise, I do not think it will work in the long-term, at least not in the way I understand it. While discipline is necessary, the art is to make the kids like to be disciplined. That is not so easy, it comes with difficulties and depends on your own radiation, which you cannot fake. Some martial art teachers are very authoritative and they use intimidation as a tool to keep people disciplined. And some

kids are attracted to power and they will be attracted by such features. But for me, aikido is not about power, and thus it's not right to express power in this way.

This is the thing: the children have to really want to come. They must really like what you are doing, what you are telling them. It is in a way more like a mother- or fatherhood than authority. If you want to start a class for children, you must be very flexible in your mind, and at the same time you must be someone that they will look up to. You must be strong and able to extend Ki all the time—because they will challenge this, more than the adults. You also have to be very loving and forgiving, you have to like what you do and be creative in many ways. That is all I can say.

In general, what do you see as good qualities in an aikido teacher?

Oh, that's a wide topic, you know. Personally, I must have the feeling that people love what they are doing. They must be completely convinced about the art, and serious about what they do. I find creativity in movement, integrity as a person, and a strong, peaceful, and open mind all to be important qualities.

I don't know whether I am a good aikido teacher, but my supervisor in a MBSR course that I recently took told me that I am a little bit crazy. And maybe this is also a good quality in an aikido teacher. Crazy in the sense of having some freedom and joy in discovering things. At some point, I think every aikido teacher has to find independence from their teachers, while still keeping the respect for where they come from and who gave them the abilities to become who they are. The latter is an important thing for me, too, a kind of loyalty to the teaching. A person has to be free and clear enough to practice aikido in their own way, and at the same time not just abandon what they have inherited. I find this important—a kind of mix of traditional and going into the future freely. I can't put this quality into one word. Let's say, a kind of transformation which is necessary, a self-renewing kind of art which you express in how you do it and teach it.

Another thing I value is the teacher-student relationship, if the teacher is really a teacher. And there is also a personal connection that should not be underestimated, where people inspire each other and challenge each other. All of this forms the student.

Tradition is often something which is emphasized in martial arts but does not necessarily have a clear meaning. How do you perceive tradition in aikido, and this balance between tradition and independence, or freedom?

For me, this is really something which cannot be put into a box. You can see when people ask themselves this question honestly, about the friction between developing something new and the tradition from where it comes. And of course this is a sort of a symbol for everything in life. Your life is like that, not only aikido is like this. I always find the beauty in aikido in this link, as you can always have it as a template for what is happening in life.

We are exactly at this point in KNKI. We had this teacher who went through all of that; he came from Japan in the name of the Japanese KNK, and freed himself from all of that by creating his own organisation. And he has managed to somehow keep very different kinds of people and dojos under one big umbrella or shield by giving them freedom and not demanding that they follow his imagination. It's quite difficult to realize that now without him, and there's no clarity yet how we are going to do it. That means that people have to do exactly that now, think about the past and the future, and see where and how we fit in there. Personally, I wish to see as much freedom as possible while not making too many structures and rules. But at the same time, without the latter, a big community cannot exist in my opinion, because there are many people who are not ready for that.

I think many aspects of tradition are good, especially the deep-lying things. It's not about "the techniques have always been done this way, so we should not change them" — that's not the point. The point is "What are the values of the teaching? And do they still apply in this world?" Of course, you should know your skills, you should know the basics, but at the end of the day, you should always be aware that nothing is certain. If someone attacks you, you have to change; you cannot put your hand there or there — you have to flow and improvise. And then comes the Ki, and the mind is the leading factor, and not so much the body, once you have the skill. You have to learn the skills for many years, of course. But there should come a freedom at some point where you are not thinking about technique, where you don't have a kind of knowledge anymore about how you move, it's just one unique experience.

The term “martial arts” is also very broad and is used to mean very different things. How do you understand aikido as a martial art?

I think aikido is a martial art. It is also said that “aikido is a non-martial art”, which gives some space to think about it. Then again you can also say that this is just wordplay, which is also true. Most of all, I think aikido is what you yourself feel. I mean, there is not only one aikido, there are so many of them. Your aikido, my aikido, all the different organizations. And everybody has their own interpretation of how they fill out this word and this art. There are hundreds and thousands of aikido.

For me, yeah, it’s a martial art, but most of all, it is an art. It comes from the martial, and it has a topic of “attack and defence,” so that is the setting that we are working with. Even if we all have the rule of not hurting each other and not dominating each other. This is the basis of our martial art, to keep a peaceful togetherness in our practice, which is most important. And it is not easy to realize, because of the basic question of whether the human mind is without violence. And when you practice a non-martial art with peace and harmony, the biggest challenge is to realize this. For me, that takes a lifetime.

Personally, aikido made me a stronger person. I also think that, after all these years of practice, I can defend myself physically. Not after three or four years of practice, though. But I now have this deep confidence that if I get attacked, I would be able to help myself. This is not to say that I have a guarantee that nothing would happen to me; but there are some abilities that I have learned throughout these years of practice that I am confident about. Particularly about being able to perceive a dangerous situation and disappear. That is the best. But even if something should happen, I have the confidence that, despite being old, I have more abilities now than before I started. But in the end, it’s up to each and every one on how to fill this kind of art. This is one of the beauties for me: it leaves so much space to fill with your individual means.

I also think aikido is a beautiful way to explore your own aggressiveness and violence and peacefulness. Encountering it in a very sheltered environment that we create on the mat with our rules of not harming each other and being respectful, you can be honest to yourself. Encountering other people even with the so-called intention of attacking you as Uke, gives you a chance to explore this in yourself and in the other person. And it is therefore a deep human encounter that you can discover here. It takes a lot of self-discipline to be honest to yourself in that moment, at least from my point of view.

And I very much agree with Osensei's aikido, too. For me, the spiritual part is a very important one. Without it, aikido is not a very efficient martial art.

Martial arts are, for whatever reason, often also very male-dominated. What is your perception of this?

I have met a lot of beautiful female aikidoka in the KNKI and in other Aikido associations. I think without the women in the aikido world, aikido would be only half as good. Women are important, I also think there is a kind of "female" attitude in aikido as a martial art by itself. The female nature is in some ways more adaptive, caring, and not necessarily wanting to stand in front. And balancing this out is a life-long process for both genders. But traditionally, women are not very highly supported in martial arts in general, not only in our martial art. I'm not sure why this is so. My teachers, Beppe Sensei and especially Yoshigasaki Sensei, always supported me so that I could go my own way. And you have to be strong for this, but this is so regardless of the gender. The strongest thing I have learned from Yoshigasaki Sensei is to listen to yourself. Listen to your intuition and do what you think is right. Act according to your convictions.

I think in a way that aikido as a martial art is a traditional one, and you find in it traditional role distribution. So maybe women have to fight more or invest more energy. But then it is what it is, that is life. I always think that if you want to change something, do it. Don't look for who is to blame, or what was in the past, or what is not fair. If you want to go your way you must start to do something new. Don't look back so much. Things change slowly, and it is useless to complain about what is going on. Who knows where it goes. And I just go my own way whether I'm a man or a woman, that is not the most important thing for me. Foremost, I am human, and only then I am a woman.

When you started practicing aikido, the situation in the world was much different. What are some of the biggest differences you notice in the aikido world today and when you started practicing?

There are not many, I have to say. But what I see is more freedom in expressing your own aikido, which was something that was instigated by Yoshigasaki Sensei. Because when I started, we were under Tohei Sensei, we were organized in Japan, and everything was very strict. Every movement, every angle of your foot had to be this or that way, there

were the four principles and they had to be applied all the time. It was more like aikido-in-a-box, so to say; I don't want to say that it is bad, it is just a different way of approaching it. Even recently I heard some people say that this "Tohei way" is helping beginners, and that the more "advanced" approach which Yoshigasaki Sensei later developed and taught is not so easy to grasp for beginners, intellectually. I don't know if it's true, it's just a theory that has come up.

I see it as a development in more free direction, which I appreciate. Not because I want to do what I want or because it is more advanced and more challenging, but because it is more related to the nature of the world, that things are more defined and flexible in a way. Things that are put in a box or have strict regulations are for me a bit against nature, the nature of the mind, at least. But you nonetheless need some discipline and some rules, and you can thus come to a contradiction. The challenge is to find a good balance. Because even nature has strict rules and disciplines, this is at least my observation. Where does it make sense, and where not? Where does it help the environment? Where does it cut down the freedom of exploration and development in a freer way?

I see this as the biggest change that came with the teaching of Yoshigasaki Sensei. He opened a field where people can develop and discover more than before.

And then there's naturally the follow-up question: How do you see the change from today into the future? For aikido, and perhaps for KNKI – what changes do you foresee, what changes would you like to see?

I can't foresee anything—I don't think that we are in a moment where we can foresee future development. I hope that the art of aikido continues to live in this world, with the essence that has been intended. As an art to give peace, to understand peace with yourself and with someone else. I have no idea of how this will exactly look like, but this is my wish for aikido.

As for the KNKI, this is a very political question. We are faced with the challenge of how do we keep this spirit that we are all searching for, and how do we realize the structure of an organization where everybody feels well and is heard, understood, and supported. This is what an organization should be—a supportive tool for realizing our dojo and our art that we practice there. No more and no less.

When many people are together, there are always struggles. And my wish is—and I think it is possible, I see a lot of possibilities coming up—that people will understand and realize it together. The majority is at the level where we want to have a peaceful community. It is not easy and it needs a lot of patience and clarity and willingness to listen to each other, especially the latter. And I still believe that it is possible to achieve this without people getting power-oriented, trying to get their own advantage and similar things. Which always happens in big organizations where people begin to desire power over others. I believe that in the KNKI, we want to have a community more than an organization. Many people ask for guidance and support in how to do things, so the community is the centre. And the organization part is—we are living in a real world, and we have to have some kind of organization if we want that community. And I want that, I want a community and a KNKI organization, because it feels like a lineage to my teacher whom I respect very much. And this is where I see the development for the future of the KNKI. People who are really thinking deeply, listening deeply, and making pragmatic and simple decisions. I think it is possible, as long as we want it. And as long as we don't take ourselves and our opinions so seriously.

It also depends very much on how the old-league aikidoka can inspire the younger ones. Because that is the future, taking care that younger people want to follow, want to continue doing it. And giving them the freedom that they do it in the way they understand it. With the precious core of what aikido is. Every generation has their own way of expressing themselves, and aikido is no different. And the young people of aikido have to find their own way. I'm not doing the same aikido that my first teacher did, absolutely not. I don't think I do anybody's aikido, I do my own aikido. And this is good as long as your heart is honest and you have practiced enough. The young people have to find an identity, too. And, of course, they have the orientation of the older teachers and of the past. That is normal, it is like being in a family. The challenge is for older people to let go of their power and give space to the younger people. And there must be a good harmony in this—because when you give a child too early too much power to live their own life, it is also not safe. The mind of the young generation must be mature to a certain extent, but still young enough to be creative and conquer this challenge. That is how I see it, and we just keep the space for you; keep a safe space and enjoy going back and watching you grow. That is wonderful.

With help from her husband Raymond, Iris Scanlon runs Aikido dojo Infinity Moves in Mülheim an der Ruhr in Germany, which has just recently moved to a new location. Find out more about them and their activities at <https://www.infinitymoves.de/>.