East meets West

An interview with Robert Jefford

Sometimes we can meet a person who quietly blows our mind. Robert Jeford did this as we talked for over three hours via Skype about his path with Reiki. I was bowled over by the generosity of his time and his stories, enthused by the twinkling in his eyes and warmed by his elastic smile, spreading across my computer screen, lighting up the airwaves with his laughter!

There’s probably no other Reiki practitioner in the UK with a story quite like Robert’s, and we’d be hard-pressed to find anyone with as much knowledge and experience about Reiki and the Japanese martial arts.

Robert began his training aged seven whilst living in the East. His father was in the army and when his family moved to Japan he took up the Japanese martial arts. Robert describes Mifune Sensei as a Meijin, a Grandmaster and tutelage of Yoshiharu, a direct student of Usui, as very accomplished. Usui retreated upon Mount Kurama five times during his life, and on three of those occasions he was with these great Meijin.*

Although young in years, his path was about claiming personal power and developing spiritual practices to underpin all thoughts and movement. Robert recalls, “I used to be very afraid of dying, but when I was eight, I witnessed death and realised it was not to be feared.” Now he teaches that “The purpose of Reiki is to put us in touch with the universal (Japanese ‘Ki’). The purpose of the Reiki technique is to put us in touch with oursevles. The essential purpose of Reiki is to give direct contact and authentic personal experience with universal energy, with no harm whatsoever to the person(s) using the system. Enlightenment is the goal. Healing is a by-product.”

What makes a good Reiki teacher? “Truth, honesty, integrity, discipline, tenacity. Commitment to the authentic practice, the principles and the transmission of the authentic, unaltered system”. Yoshiharu Sensei

Beginning Reiki Level 1 in 1954 under the tutelage of Yoshiharu, a direct student of Usui, Robert explains “the practice is very tough, so you need a strong foundation”. Since completing Reiki Level 1 in 1965 Robert has continued on the path of Eastern Reiki* with his Sensei. He jokes that it’s a ‘fast-track’ as he chronicles:

1968 Reiki Level 2 completed
1972 Reiki Level 3 completed
1979 Reiki Level 4 completed
1989 Reiki Level 5 completed
1994 Reiki Level 6 completed
Present – studying Reiki Level 7

In recent years Robert has resided in the UK, caring for his parents. “Looking after your elders is very important in Japanese culture, so of course I was going to do that. I’m British born and bred, but while we were travelling around in my youth, I usually found myself socialising with the Japanese kids and quickly integrated into their lifestyle. Japan is where I feel most at home, and I’m looking forward to returning there.”

His martial arts background has also made him a highly sought-after teacher in the West and Robert has taught two police forces as well as recruits at the Sandhurst military training academy. He has many stories of colleagues within this profession and explains the rigorous feats he accomplished to get to that point in his career. “During my Reiki training I was taken with my fellow students to a car park and blindfolded. We were guided onto a bus and taken through a town before being let out in a hilly area with rocks and trees. Each one of us was given a ‘baby’ to hold – our babies were raw eggs and the task was to get from the starting point to a barbed wire fence without crushing the shell. I sent Reiki to the fence and followed the Reiki all the way there. Some of us made it in the allotted time, but not everyone. One student, also a Reiki master, was bumping into every tree and rock, tearing his trousers, injuring himself and breaking the egg. It’s quite different from the Reiki training people experience in the West!”

On another occasion he was required to master the art of ‘Dry bathing’ or ‘Kenyouku Ho’. “The purpose of dry-bathing is purification and raising the Ki. To do this we had to stand under an ice-cold waterfall for one hour practising the technique to prevent getting cold. Most people would have come out with hyperthermia within 10-15 minutes. When you know you can raise your Ki in those extreme conditions, then you really understand the practice.”

With these foundations and black belts in martial arts Robert skillfully talks about focus. “Most people think that Reiki is about healing, but healing is a by-product of spiritual discipline.” Even though he can knock out a group of opponents in a number of seconds (wearing a bag on his head with only nose-holes for breathing) he insists, “martial arts are not about fighting, the martial artist is first and foremost a healer because he has mastered the ability to focus and move Ki*. Only at the lower levels do people fight. Robert admits, “When I gained confidence, I tested my abilities, but my ego took a life-changing beating when I achieved certification as 3rd Dan.” Ultimately Robert respects the non-violent nature of these practices. Aikido means ‘The way of Spiritual Harmony, the practice of God’s love’ and Wado Ryu is known as ‘The Way of Peace’. In his quiet voice Robert declares, “The only person you really fight with is yourself as you face your inner demons and overcome the lower parts of yourself.”

In his later years Robert has become widely known for his tolerance and kindness and gives many examples of diffusing tense situations. He is certain that this is due to Reiki and believes “It’s only when a person loses focus that aggression and violence are expressed. Reiki is all about maintaining focus.”

Robert has a daily Reiki practice that includes five different energy exercises, Gassho, and hands-on self-treatment. He sees Gassho as a key technique for developing focus, along with daily chanting of the spiritual precepts.
Robert’s great teachers were Japanese Reiki and martial arts masters, so he knows they are intertwined. “People ask me if I’m a Reiki master but usually I prefer just to say I am a student on the path. There’s a lot I have learned and accomplished but there is still so much more to learn.”

Over the past 12 years Robert has worked closely with the Reiki Guild and the Reiki Regulatory Working Group (now known as the Reiki Council) to help raise the standards of practice and credence of Reiki in the UK. Having also studied Reiki with many of the leading teachers in the Western* styles of Reiki he is well placed to comment on both the differences and similarities between East and West. One of his students has previously won two Olympic Gold medals for Judo, and another helped to raise £20,000 for charity by arranging for Robert to give treatments to eight of her friends.

“The path of Reiki is becoming clearer in England. Reiki in this country is very honourable and special.” Robert has been at the forefront of the Reiki Council’s work to bring about professional accreditation for Reiki, a quest that has leapt forward with the GRCCT (General Regulatory Council for Complementary Therapies) and CNHC (Complementary and Natural Healthcare Council) registration. He has dedicated his life to learning the intricacies of technique and history. He lovingly reiterates, “I’m passionate about Reiki”.

While he emanates calm with all the manners of a Japanese gentleman, Robert sees his role as sparking curiosity. He can be playful and enjoys starting people with his accurate scanning technique. He teaches by invitation only but is transparent and generous to those who are willing to learn. His closest students have worked alongside Robert for 30 years and have accomplished many of the Eastern techniques shared with martial arts. One of his students has previously won two Olympic Gold medals for Judo, and another helped to raise £20,000 for charity by arranging for Robert to give treatments to eight of her friends.

Robert Jefford spoke to Deb Hoy. Robert will be teaching a very special workshop in London on 28th October. Details on p23.

His book Reiki Kyokai is available from www.reikirevealed.com