

# LOS ANGELES DOWNTOWN NEWS

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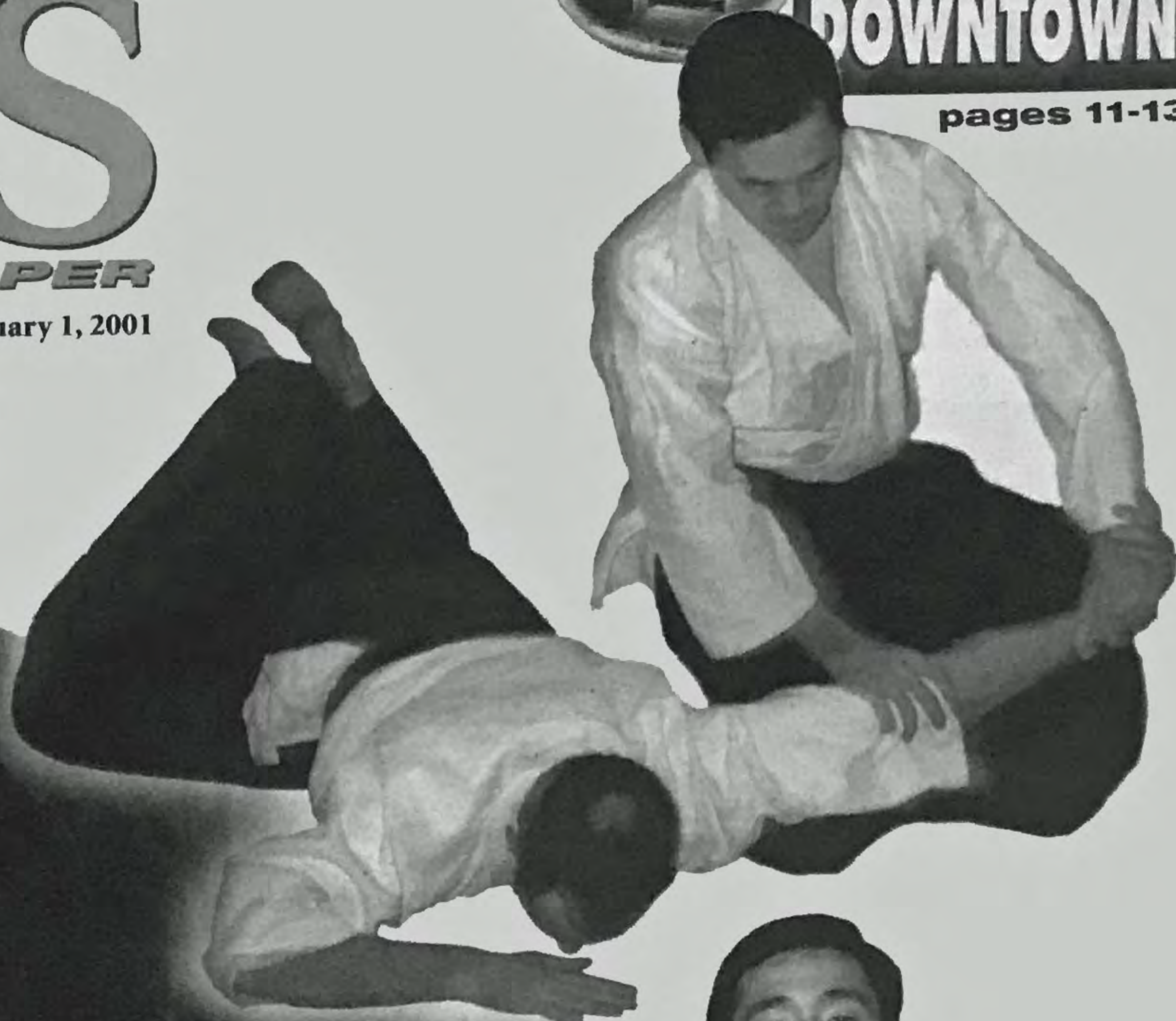
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**100 THINGS  
TO DO  
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## The Little Tokyo Dojo That Could

*Martial Arts Teacher Exposes Locals  
to Japanese Tradition, Culture*

by John Grimmett

**A**t Downtown's only center for aikido, a traditional Japanese martial art, the graceful, twirling performers look more like dancers than lethal warriors.

As aikido master and philosopher Kensho Furuya points out, despite the form's samurai origins, an aikido artist does not try to overwhelm an opponent, but to channel the attacker's energy flow. This is a martial art

### IN THE SPOTLIGHT

form with a psychological edge.

"It's called the martial art of non-violence and harmony," said Sensei Furuya, who owns and operates the Aikido Center of Los Angeles in an old industrial loft he has converted into a traditional dojo, or practice area.

Although the aikido movement, headquartered at the International Aikido Society in Tokyo, has drawn several hundred thousand members around the world, this is the only aikido room in Los Angeles. Furuya, a third generation Japanese American, has studied aikido since he was 10, and trained in Japan under one of the modern movement's founders. His dojo will be the subject of a Discovery Channel documentary in March exploring the traditional roots of Asian martial arts.

"I was a little bit different from other Japanese-American kids," he explained. "While they were doing everything to become American, I was going the other way, more interested in traditional Japanese culture."

That is why he chose to study aikido, he said, the most traditional of Japanese martial arts, and a window into the depths of Japanese culture and history.

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photos by Gary Leonard



# Dojo

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## Making His Move

In 1984 he relocated his studio from Silver Lake to Little Tokyo, at 940 East Second Street.

"I like the sense of dynamic growth in this area," he said. "And Downtown is central to everything, which makes it easy for my customers to get here. I also like the Artists' District, with a trendy, creative feel."

Furuya, a rotund but energetic man who looks younger than his years despite a shock of gray hair, is not only a master of aikido, but a self-taught expert on traditional Japanese architecture and carpentry. He designed and directed the construction of the dojo, which is modeled and hand-crafted after a medieval Japanese samurai mansion.

"Japanese visitors have said it's the most traditional dojo outside Japan," he said. "I wanted to move away from the martial arts as sport and spectator entertainment and create an environment for personal development."

This meditative setting, marked by Japanese symmetry and elegant, sparse furnishings surrounding a padded training floor, conveys the same harmony that Furuya says he wants his pupils to gain.

## Traditional Approach

Furuya teaches some 100 students, a mixture of Asian and non-Asian Americans, with mostly evening classes five days a week

and all day Saturday. About half his students work Downtown, including a superior court judge, a photojournalist, several doctors and students from the University of Southern California. He also teaches about 20 children. Each student pays \$85 a month.

"Most martial arts academies treat their students like paying customers," he said, "Martial arts today is very business-oriented. Like a shopkeeper, you might try to keep the customer happy."

But Furuya said he adheres to strict principles, with the intense, hierarchical relationship traditional to East Asia, marked by severe discipline and unrelenting repetition, all intended to develop the mental and spiritual capacity of the learner.

His insistence on traditional Japanese discipline draws a loyal following, with many students practicing six days a week. As in other martial arts, students graduate through levels. Furuya is a "sixth dan," or level.

Mike Van Ruth, a ceramics artist who has studied aikido for nine years and is now at the third dan, attests to the positive affects of the form. "It's a daily occurrence," he said. "It sharpens your focus, how you deal with people. People are surprised that you can learn etiquette from fighting."

Likewise, the psychological principles underlying aikido are practiced on a daily basis in Asia, where unspoken communication is more valued than spoken. Furuya said he would like his students to gain that Asian sensitivity.

"In aikido, we say that if your *ki* [life force]

is working you are very attentive to others and to your own behavior," he said. "That is what I hope people learn from aikido."

## The Driving Force

Besides learning self-defense skills, students gain a higher consciousness, an attention to detail and personal discipline, he said. "The idea of aikido is not to escalate the violence in a conflict," he explained, "but to use a blending process and principles of harmony to divert or redirect the opponent's force." By blending with the opponent's energy, an aikido expert can "use that energy to cause his opponent's downfall." Timing, spacing and balance are all more important than physical force, he added, and unlike in most martial arts, aikido participants can start in any position.

The name "aikido" translates into "the way to harmonize energy or life force." The focus on harmony, along with a conservative use of energy, is what makes the twirling movements of aikido look so much like practiced dance.

The sport is non-competitive, with one person playing the role of attacker, while the other practices defense. Much like judo, an aikido artist fends off an attacker's lunges by grabbing an arm, hand, leg or foot to slow the attacker's momentum and divert a punch or throw the attacker off balance.

Unlike in other martial arts, the aikido artist moves with the attack.

"The ideal outcome of this movement would be to throw my opponent without effort and without injury," Furuya said.

Because of its inherently non-combative nature, Furuya said, the form appeals to children, women and older people who want the whole-body workout martial arts can give without a high risk of injury. Many law enforcement officers, who need to subdue violent suspects without direct force, also practice aikido, Furuya said.

Aikido traces its origins to the samurai warriors of the 11th century, when it was viewed as an innovative method not only for self-defense, but for mind-control, since its practitioners assumed they could blend their life force with that of others. But aikido in its present form began in Japan about 80 years ago, when a Japanese martial artist who had met a descendant of the form's creator revived the techniques. After World War II, that master, Ueshiba Morihei, decided to make the form public, so that the common Japanese, recovering from the war's cultural impact, could learn and benefit from it.

Today, aikido world headquarters are in Tokyo, with nearly one million students world-wide, Furuya said.