

A pinch of haka, a touch of kung fu – Anya Kussler meets the creator of Aroha, an exercise method that relaxes the mind, empowers the spirit and tones the body, all in one go

IT'S a stunning summer's morning in the budding West Auckland metropolis of Titirangi. At the Hardware Café, abuzz as per usual, I am sipping frothy lattes with German fitness expert Bernhard Jakszt, who is in town to visit to his son, Linus. The six-year-old, he tells me, lives just a few streets down from here with his mother (Bernhard's ex-partner), in



FIT BIZ
Anya Kussler

FROM GERMANY WITH LOVE

the home the couple built after falling in love with New Zealand 10 years ago. For the remainder of the year, Bernhard lives and works in Berlin with his current partner, an airline hostess.

As you do, we begin our chinwag by casually debating the social ramifications of boy racerdom, or more to the point, teenagers who roam the streets because they have a little too much testosterone and free time to spare. According to Bernhard, 'testosterone teens' were already an issue in Titirangi back in 1997 when his house was under construction. Grinning mischievously, the 40-year-old recalls one memorable encounter while they were living in the garage.



"One night, I heard a noise and peeked through the window. I saw these kids lifting up all the cars that were parked along the road and turning them around to face the curb. They thought it was a huge joke! Well, I decided to give them some of their own medicine."

The tale that follows has us both in stitches. Wearing a pair of frog-green pyjamas, Bernhard says he emerged from the garage, clutching the chainsaw he'd been using to clear the section and walked towards the kids, legs straight like a zombie. "You should have seen the look on their faces... and that was the end of that problem!"

As quirky, easy-going and almost boyish as Bernhard is at this moment in our conversation, he can be just as deeply philosophical and contemplative the next. In fact, most of our discussions revolve

First, a bit about Bernhard's fitness background: At six foot plus and sporting a lean, toned physique, it comes as no surprise to me when he describes himself as being "sports-mad ever since I can remember, particularly about water activities". His forte, he says, was rowing (he used to be a German national champ in this sport), and he also has a penchant for canoe polo, water polo and windsurfing.

Martial arts is another area of fitness that takes the fancy of this lad with hair just tousled enough to indicate he's had a good holiday. At age 15, he took up tae kwon do, then continued on with jujitsu. "But it was kung fu that finally did it for me. It's softer than most martial arts; you gain strength from your partner rather than using brute force. Besides," he smiles, "it's also preferable for my age group!"

Bernhard changed tack and entered the gym scene. He started off teaching ski gymnastics, then went on to become a Les Mills national trainer in Germany, under the mentorship of Les Mills International guru Mike McSweeney and others.

In 1998, Bernhard immersed himself in teaching Les Mills group fitness classes, everything from Body Attack through to Body Pump. "Scientifically, these programmes are excellent. They offer exactly the results they promise, whether it's weight loss or muscle gain." Nevertheless, teaching about 10 to 12 of these classes a week eventually took its toll on Bernhard's health. "I was living by the 'go hard or go home' slogan," he confesses, "and consequently I ended up feeling totally exhausted."

Then, in 1991, Bernhard happened upon New Zealand on an around-the-world trip. It became the first of many visits (around eight to date) to change his outlook on life, and also his approach to wellness. The Maori people and their traditions in particular have left a lasting impression on the German. "They opened my eyes to a different way of thinking than my own. They taught me how important it is to allow yourself to be there in the moment – having dinner, having a laugh, and generally just sussing each other out instead of getting down to business and doing everything by the book. I recognised how necessary it is to let intuition do the talking, to really be able to feel something instead of just talking about it, because that's what you 'know'."

Feeling inspired by this Maori wisdom, Bernhard has made it his personal goal to "be able to really feel unconditional love. Where there is love, the rest will follow – if you can allow yourself to be open, anything is possible. This is a very spiritual, empowering feeling."

“The haka awakens the power – the willpower – that slumbers in each of us. It helps us feel centred and grounded, which enhances our general wellbeing”

around how this former PE teacher and Les Mills trainer awakened to a more spiritual purpose in life, the exercise method his soul-searching has inspired and the fundamental role New Zealand and in particular Maori culture have played in his professional and spiritual evolution.

Bernhard's love for sport was also a contributing factor in his choice to start his working life as a PE teacher. After completing an exercise science degree as well as his teacher training, he taught PE at a primary school for two years. However, feeling stifled by the school's depressingly un-dynamic approach to physical education,

To enable others to feel so completely empowered in mind, body and spirit, too, Bernhard created a new form of fitness: Aroha. Aroha is a total-body, freestyle-type workout comprising a mix of haka-based elements and traditional movements of kung fu and t'ai chi. It is designed to free up suppressed energies and create a sense of physical, mental and spiritual wellbeing. Physical benefits range from fat-burning, strengthening and toning large muscle groups to improved blood circulation, flexibility and coordination. Mentally, it helps create inner balance and general wellbeing, relieves stress, relaxes the mind, offers a mood boost, and promotes self-esteem within a group situation.

A typical Aroha class will take around 50 minutes, starting off with a three-minute meditative kata to slowly warm up and get into the swing of things. This is followed by 50 minutes of medium-intensity exercises, including plenty of squat movements – up to 1,500 per class! This may seem exorbitant, but Bernhard assures me they are so subtle the participant is hardly aware of them.

All movements are performed to a specially choreographed three-quarter beat, as opposed to the four/four beat favoured in traditional group fitness classes. Another point of difference with Aroha is the continuous, fluid interplay between contraction and relaxation. Most common forms of exercise derive their benefits via contraction (think boxing, weights etc). In Aroha, Bernhard explains, the face is always relaxed and there's an even intensity throughout the workout. "It's a conscious way of dealing with pent-up aggression and other negative emotions – not like punching a boxing bag as if you want to hit the hell out of someone."

Another bonus is that there is no harsh impact on the joints, back or other body parts. "You leave with a feeling that you can still breathe, but you have worked up

a good sweat. Anyone can participate in Aroha, but it is targeted more at people over 30, who tend to exercise not only to lose weight."

Aroha, Bernhard elaborates, is taught in about 200 studios around Germany. Most of these are Injoy Studios that belong to the country's largest fitness company, Inline. For them, he has developed a specific recruitment and training structure, targeted at being scientifically effective within a group fitness environment. Bernhard has also produced an Aroha DVD, which beginners as well as advanced students can benefit from. His entrepreneurial aspirations aside, this free spirit still very much enjoys the hands-on involvement of teaching Aroha. He says the most rewarding part is literally feeling the class participants becoming empowered. "I created Aroha intuitively; a lot of what I am in the programme – that feels fantastic." Bernhard also still teaches two Les Mills Body Pump classes a week.

But Aroha hasn't always been this rewarding. The original programme, known as Sen Fi (short for Sensual Fighting), was a joint venture with a wellness writer. Bernhard feels it was a rushed project that became too popular too soon, reaching the Top 2 in the video charts in 2002. "Before I knew it, Universal approached us, wanting to make a video and write a book. The programme was out in the market before I really had a chance to complete it." To make matters worse, people (read: self-appointed instructors) began copying the movements, without knowing what they were doing or putting the required soul into the programme. Frustrated by having sent the wrong message across, Bernhard eventually went solo and set the record straight.

"I wanted to develop something that creates harmony in the body," he explains. Hence the loose, big-flowing movements of kung fu, where the power of the rival is used to empower oneself. "Participants feel the power

that 'slumbers' inside them surface as they perform the moves, as per the haka." Bernhard named the programme Aroha (after the Maori term for 'love') as a tribute to the concept that if you truly experience love, then inner strength will follow. "The motto is that through mental and emotional strength, anything can be achieved."

So where to from here? Inspired by the *taiaha* training he did in New Zealand, Bernhard is currently in the process of developing an Aroha programme incorporating a stick. Operating it in a pull and push action, Bernhard explains that controlling the stick becomes the focal centre of each movement, allowing more complex movements to be performed. Another work in progress is an Aroha-based programme endorsed by the German medical insurance industry. The idea behind it is to create an exercise programme that is fun and effective while posing minimum risk of injury.

Personally, Bernhard says he will continue on his spiritual journey, and I suspect many of his thoughts and experiences thus far may find their way into the novel he is currently writing. "All my experiences have led me to stand with my feet on the ground, so I could feel what is right for me. I've learnt that passion is everything in the world, and leading a life that is based on how we need to control our emotions, not the other way around."

As we part ways, I return to my computer to write Bernhard's story, while Bernhard returns to his to relay his own. And in between bouts of scribing and doting on Linus, he will head off to his daily one-on-one session with Kiwi kung fu master and fellow Titirangi trainer Chris Eagle, to once more feel empowered in body and mind. 🐼

The Aroha DVD is available via www.aroha-academy.de or email info@aroha-academy.de.