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July 2009

Nationality: Canadian

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Mr. Doering stayed in Tokorozawa dojo as an uchideshi for a few weeks. At the end of his stay, he challenged for 1st kyu test and successfully passed.

Living Aikido: Lessons Learned as an Uchideshi

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Becoming an Uchideshi

“Why are you here? I mean, why did you decide to become an uchideshi?” curiously inquired my new Aikido colleague on my first the day as a live-in student. The dojo felt like a sauna and I was worn out from a long day a travel, I stumbled around for an answer. “To challenge myself...I guess,” was my inadequate and vague response.

The truth was I came to the Kobayashi Dojo with few expectations. I met Hiroaki Kobayashi sensei only a few times through my training with an affiliated dojo in Miyazaki Prefecture. His exceptional technique and easygoing personality inspired me to learn more about the Kobayashi way of Aikido. I

consequently decided to attend the 44th Iwai Aikido Kobayashi Dojo Annual Camp in the summer of 2008. It was there that I first witnessed the extraordinary Aikido community called Aikido Kobayashi Dojo.

Although brief, these encounters left a lasting impression. With my two-year work contract in Japan soon coming to an end in August, I decided to take the rest of my vacation days to leave my tropical paradise of Southern Japan and become an uchideshi in the heat of Tokyo.



Learning by Living It

“Being an uchideshi is not a tourist experience; it is training to be an Aikido professional. It is not an extended summer gasshuku; it is learning to become a part of the Aikido community and culture in which you’re training. It is neither mysterious nor exotic; it is hard work”.

Uchideshi Journal Day 7 - July 18, 2009

Prior to leaving for Tokyo I had very little time to think about what being an uchideshi meant, or what it really entailed besides rumors of a extremely demanding training schedule, and from what I could gather from the other live-in student reports, an even more arduous cleaning regiment. Training and cleaning undeniably take up the majority of your time and energy, but these acts alone do not define the uchideshi experience.



It quickly became obvious that as a live-in student I was not an Aikido tourist. I had been in living in Japan for a while and had shamefully become accustomed to being treated with some sensitivity to my foreignness, or in other words, I became familiar with being treated with unwarranted privilege simply

because I was not Japanese. This was not the case at Kobayashi dojo.

Everyone was treated equally regardless of ability, place of origin, or how long you were staying. Essentially, there were only two things expected of me (1) train with intensity and enjoyment everyday and (2) make an effort to become a close member of Aikido Kobayashi Dojo, even if only for a short time. Within the first three days it became obvious that this experience was going to be difficult not only physically, but also mentally. It was around the end of the first week that I began to better understand what it meant to live Aikido as an uchideshi.

Living Aikido meant that no matter how exhausted, hungry, hot, or hurt I felt, I went to practice. At times it felt like I was sleepwalking through the early morning sessions, which I sometimes did during the 40-minute train, bike and walk commute that it took to get to the other dojos. But even in my haze I always amazed at what I learned just by showing up. I gained a lot from each

student and teacher I practiced with. For example, Kobayashi shihan and Komine sensei's classes clearly demonstrated that Aikido practice should always be fun. Hiroaki sensei showed me the value of hard work and passion, not just for Aikido, but also for anything in life. Ueno sensei, besides being a very kind man and good friend during my two weeks, taught me the how to magically compact my extremely long legs to improve my suwariwaza. Kasahara sensei revealed to me the secret of how to shrink my 195cm body into Japanese size. Suzuki sensei showed me how all techniques are neither only hard nor soft, but rather both at the same time. And at every practice Anita, my fellow uchideshi, embodied the power of optimism.

I discovered that simply getting to practice was the most difficult part, but I always felt much better afterwards. It is often said that the only competition in Aikido is with one's self. If my experience as an uchideshi has taught me anything it's that I have already won just by showing up every day and persevering. This is a lesson a will take with me no matter where I end up practicing Aikido.

For me *living Aikido* also meant learning about aspects of Aikido that extend beyond practice and technique. A deshi's knowledge is conveyed through experience, and perhaps more importantly, observation. I found that my best tool for learning was



to constantly be aware and observe what was going on around me, not just at practice, but also during cleaning, while eating breakfast, or taking the train with sensei after practice. After a short time I really started to notice and appreciate the lifestyle, culture, and community that are ingrained in the Kobayashi tradition.

The Aikido Kobayashi Dojo community has created a culture that is uniquely 'Kobayashi'. The various dojos in Tokyo and surrounding area truly represent one enormous extended family. It is remarkable to think that in only two weeks I came to feel such a strong connection with the students and teachers of Aikido Kobayashi Dojo. Undoubtedly, what sets Kobayashi Dojos apart from others I have experienced is not only the quality of the teachers, but also the close bond and community which unites such a diverse range of people from all over the world. From the moment I came to the dojo to the day I left, I always

felt welcomed as a part of the Kobayashi Aikido family. From this experience I have realized that enjoying practice, making friends, and working together to make life more enjoyable is the essence of Aikido practice.

Life after Uchideshi

Reflecting honestly upon why I decided to become an uchideshi, I can only speculate that it was because I wanted to test my commitment to Aikido. I was at a stage in my Aikido practice where I was questioning whether I would continue once I moved countries and dojos for the 4th time in 7 years. Anyone who has changed dojos knows how difficult a process this can be. The two weeks I spent as an Aikido Kobayashi live-in student has revived my Aikido spirit. The friends and connections I have made from all over the world through Kobayashi Aikido are far too interesting and important to me to quit.

Moreover, through this experience I have learned to embrace and appreciate the unknown. I now think of Aikido as a question with no answers. I discovered that once I got over trying to find ‘the answers’ I could enjoy practice more. I began to recognize that no one can give me direct solutions to my problems; I have to learn what I can, adapt, and discover my own way. I can never completely ‘know’ Aikido and for that reason that I will always strive to understand it and continue to practice.

I did not expect to learn as much as I did in only two weeks, both about Aikido and life in general. My family and I will move to New Zealand in a few days where there is no Kobayashi Aikido. However, the lessons I have learned during my time as an uchideshi will travel with me and so will a part of the Kobayashi tradition. For this I am truly grateful and forever indebted to the Kobayashi family, and to every student and teacher I met during my two-week stay as an uchideshi.

Thank you all very much.

