

Learning as Uchideshi at Kobayashi Dojo Angel Velikov

Learning was my goal when I came to Japan. One month as uchideshi at Kobayashi Dojo was too short time to learn much. But nevertheless I have learned a lot from the time spent here.

There are many ways to learn. I learned from the instructors. I learned from the other aikidoka. I learned from watching. I learned from practicing. I learned from pain. I learned from all my surroundings.

For me being uchideshi is like having two seminars each week. The best Kobayashi Dojo instructors are teaching you on every practice. And even though the techniques are the same, different instructors give you different perspective on it so you can improve yourself in many ways: I learned more about speed and rhythm, accuracy and details, handling different types of uke, working with weapons. I also learned more about the work with children - a special knowledge that is needed for every instructor.

During the practices I met a lot of different people. Many of them had knowledge of Aikido much better than mine. I could watch them perform techniques with different people. This helped me to learn how to better handle different ukes: slow, fast, strong, heavy, and flexible. The free practice at the end of the training was like a special performance where everyone showed his best – and this allowed me to learn new variants of the techniques.

As uchideshi I realized that I don't have good safety as uke. The dojo that I normally practice in is not with tatami. It is softer and there is easier to make hard falls. The tatami at Tokorozawa and Kodaira dojos are soft, but still harder than what I was used to. The tatami at the dojos where I practiced with Masuda sensei, in the Hoya dojo and in Hombu dojo were even harder. This caused a lot of pain to me. But this pain helped me to learn.

My first training was at Hoya. And there was the first pain – in the heels. But this helped me realize a mistake that I make: I know that when doing the mae ukemi, you should keep the shape of a ball, but in my case the front leg was a little further ahead, which caused me to hit my heels when doing ukemi. I learned to keep the front leg just 5 cm closer to the body and this fixed my problem.

On the first week as uchideshi I was trying to give my best at every training. This was exhausting. At the end of the week all muscles were in pain and I had several small injuries, but the biggest problem was the loss of stamina. I had started to feel it after Wednesday trainings and I tried to find what I was missing.

Here is what I learned:

- You should be well-hydrated. Drink a lot of water (especially if you sweat more).
- You should get a good sleep. Uchideshi schedule is very tight and some of the free time is best spent for sleeping.
- You should eat well. The trainings require energy. Again the tight schedule if making this hard, so you need to plan ahead what you will eat and where you will buy it from.

There were some strange bruises that appeared on my waist. At the back and on the hips, it was like I was hit and it hurt me every time I make ushiro ukemi. When these bruises became painful enough to be noticed on every ushiro ukemi, I realized that they are caused by the combination of hard tatami and knots in my gi and hakama. So this is how I learned to put on my gi, my belt and my hakama in a different way that didn't have big knots and look better.

At the end of the second week I had a serious accident that injured my neck and strained my left arm. That was the most painful lessons of all. I learned that one wrong step could cost you a lot. But I also learned how kind and caring all the people around me are. Everyone was concerned and wanted to help. That was very touching and I am very grateful. I had to miss a couple of days of practice. But this gave me the opportunity to watch the trainings and write down all the interesting details that I notice.

At the end of the third week I started to feel big pain in my left knee. My knees were already in pain, because I was not used to so much sitting in seiza. But this was different. It felt like kneeling on needles. I had to do my ushiro ukemis slower and the zagi too. I changed my kneeling a little, so that the point that touches the tatami is different, but that didn't work very well. It took me one more week to learn what my mistake was: I was overusing the left knee when doing ushiro ukemi. So when I was uke in some techniques I unconsciously kneeled on my left knee even when the right was more appropriate. This was possible when the nage was gentler - my body was not twisted to the right and I could perform ukemi with either left or right leg. I think that this is because I am used to kneel down to seiza with the left leg first. Now I have to be more careful and practice the correct way of doing the ukemi.

This was the first time for me to visit Japan, Tokyo and Kobayashi Dojo. Most trainings that I had before were in rented spaces, not dojos, so now I could see for myself how a proper dojo looks like. The Tokorozawa and Kodaira dojos were my examples and the Masuda sensei and Koyanagi sensei dojos too. There are many different details that you might miss if you make your own dojo –

beginner mistakes – but if I have the chance to make my own dojo, now I am better prepared and I know that there are great examples to follow. As uchideshi I had to go deep into the dojo maintenance and I learned how to keep the dojo clean, well-organized and space efficient.

And at the end of my stay in Japan I remember how I learned what is the best feeling that the uchideshi could experience: when the sensei came to me and said “Do you want to know the secret?”.