

Anita's Uchideshi Experience: Take Two

It seemed the logical thing to do when I asked to be a full-time uchideshi for the second time. My 'Monday-to-Friday-nine-to-five' job teaching English finished in April because I wouldn't re-sign for a further two terms, and I wanted to try for my black belt after taking my first kyu 3 months earlier in the preceding March. A 3½ month stint as uchideshi would give me the best preparation before the test, and I didn't have much to gain by arriving in the UK four months before my teacher training course started in September. The best preparation for being uchideshi is to take a long holiday before you start so my boyfriend came over from the UK and we spent three weeks 'living it up' following the cherry blossom across Japan.



I'd spent the last 18 months working as an English teacher trying to encourage dis-interested teenage girls to speak English. Although I was surrounded by people all day, I didn't have much support from either my employment company or the school management, so I often felt lonely and isolated. Although I spent a lot of time making resources and planning lessons, so the girls could do something enjoyable during their conversation class, I couldn't judge whether it was making much of an impact. When I left some of them wrote me some really lovely "Thank you!" letters which made me realise that I hadn't been doing too bad a job, if only I'd have understood that whilst I was in post!

Whilst I was working, developing a social life outside of School life became an incentive. I began training at Koshigaya, Kodaira and Tokorozawa Dojo's several times a week because Dojo members rapidly became friends I could rely on to share some fun and relieve me from my sense of isolation. Kobayashi Dojo's ethos is to use Aikido as a way for people to interact with one another positively, and build a community based on these values and I wouldn't have survived as long as I did without it. As time went on and different festivals (as well as Gasshuku Season!) came and went, I found that I'd be told about Japanese culture and traditions in school and then I'd experience it for myself through the dojo. I think the staff at school thought I was some sort of Fight Club addict, but I think 'Born to Party' might have been a more appropriate title.



My routine became my source of support because I didn't give myself time to feel lonely, or much time to contact home. I'm very lucky that my folks in the UK were so supportive and understanding about how I managed my time outside of work. I went home for 6 weeks in August 2008 and it when it was time to return to Japan, I realised I couldn't say goodbye to my folks again so I resolved to leave Japan in 2009. I wanted to help out with the 40th Anniversary Dojo celebrations and try to get my black belt before I left, so I made that my goal and reason to stay another 12 months.



I tried to set my routine for survival straight away: I cleaned the kitchen, worked out what I'd use and where best to keep it, as well as separate my 'incredibly useful' belongings' from the 'Once in a while' pile. That's when I realised I had enough Aikido T-Shirts for every day in the month. I adopted a zero-tolerance approach to cockroaches; food waste went out after every meal, and starting the washing machine was the first job on the list once my free time had started.

Uchideshi is a job to try your soul as well as your body; keeping a sense of perspective is difficult because you are immersed in dojo life 24/7. You live your life by your watch and your body is begging for rest. Boy, do you prize every minute of sleep you get. I had stayed in the dojo during the weekends for the last 18 months and I'd been a full time uchideshi for 10 weeks two years before, but that still proved insufficient preparation. I started after having spent 3 weeks very enjoyable holiday around Japan, but that became a dim and distant memory in no time at all. Uchideshi dojo life is all about the present; other members may have time to reminisce but you don't and the future is always changing (if you had any information about future plans to start with). Your job is to check that everybody else has whatever they need, that the dojo is clean and working efficiently and that you're as prepared as you can be. Once you're sure of all of the above, do it again in case something has changed!



Even though I was a fairly long term gaikokujin dojo member, I felt quite isolated. It was difficult for me to gauge how I was



doing and I felt much better when fellow gaikokujin came to stay. I'm probably the sort of person who does much better when they're sharing, apart from when it comes to food! I still find that difficult. People who want to become an uchideshi are a unique bunch: many of them became very close friends and I know I couldn't have got through those two years without them.

I decided to focus heavily on training: I have no idea when I'll come back and have the opportunity to go again. Every time I got an invite, I tried to take it up, so I saw a large number of Sensei within Kobayashi Dojo's as well as Igarashi Sensei, Arai Sensei and some of the Sensei at Hombu Dojo. That was a really informative experience, because I got a clearer picture of what Kobayashi Aikido is about as well as a better context of how it compares with other Aikido groups. Although going to two morning classes at Hombu meant getting up at 4.40am, I realise that not everybody who wants to experience practising with the Sensei there has the opportunity to go, so whenever I had doubts about whether I should go, I tried to remember that I was very privileged to have the chance.

I don't think I'm very good at analysing from demonstrations by high ranking Sensei how they make particular techniques work. It's a struggle for me to describe what the differences in styles look like never mind work out which movements are responsible. I can't see what makes Kobayashi Sensei an 8th Dan in Aikido because I don't understand Aikido well enough to know what I'm looking at, but I understand what makes him an 8th Dan as a person. Sensei has seen and experienced so much that I find it very difficult to relate to him personally but I think his example of spontaneous generosity and being open towards other people has taught me a lot. Although he's a very free spirit and seemingly uninhibited, little details about people are very important to him. I think he values direct communication with all his dojo members, no matter how old or confident they are, and all those responses are catalogued and/or



actioned as appropriate. The Goddess makes me smile just by being there. How such a dynamic and powerful personality can be packaged into such a diminutive frame is a real wonder. Uchideshi no longer have breakfast upstairs after morning practice in Kodaira, so I missed having regular weekly contact with her.

This time round I found life in dojo quite male dominated. The Sempai/Kohai relationship between Dojo staff members was far more apparent and I found it a very uncomfortable situation to witness. I think that showing respect for the Individual is very important but I still struggle with how I should express that when other people's sensibilities are at stake.

I think I relied heavily on the camaraderie and regular contact with other Dojo members, and spending time with some of you outside class is a greatly treasured memory. It's very likely that I'll find myself talking to my future pupils about you all and the things we did together. Many of you became my personal heroes because you regularly come to practice and contribute to the Dojo's social life despite doing full-time jobs and having lives elsewhere. I'm also very grateful to Hiroaki Sensei and his family for including me so much in what they did, and for taking care of all the arrangements including small details like my egg allergy.



I couldn't stay in Japan, I realised that last summer when I came back to the UK for a holiday. I have my own space over here which suits me very well and since I've been back I've realised how much I value that. I'm going to Aikido practice twice a week instead of everyday, so I'm not as active as I was in Japan. That has been and continues to be frustrating however I hope they'll be opportunities in my forthcoming school placements to address that. My tutors are saying that the numbers of disaffected teenagers known as NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training) is rising in the UK and that's apparent in the amount of disruptive and apathetic behaviour seen in classrooms. I'm just wondering whether Aikido can help them out.

Sitting here now in my house in the UK, Kobayashi Dojo seems a world away and very difficult to relate to. It's very easy to sink into this rural western lifestyle and forget how different yet accessible the rest of the world can be. I hope however that in my new profession as a teacher, I shall have the opportunity to introduce Aikido to others, as well as re-live my experiences with you to the benefit of the listeners.



Two weeks after I returned to the UK after my first uchideshi (two and half months in the spring of 2006) I broke my ankle. I was taking ukemi from sumiotoshi, lost my focus and fell a second too late. A moment before I had a full range of movement and could look after myself, I was totally independent and the next minute I was totally dependent on those around me to keep me fed and watered for the next 3 months whilst it healed.

I'm not a natural at staying still, I've got up and done a few chores whilst writing this just 'cause I feel better when I'm moving. It was a deeply frustrating time but it did give me time to question how I was spending my life. I wondered if I'd be more content doing something else and build up the required energy to do something about it. I realised that my then profession as a Landscape Architect was very office based, involved a lot of sitting down working on tasks alone. I realised during my first Uchideshi experience that I felt much happier

when I was active and in direct contact with a large variety of people on a daily basis. I had a wild thought that maybe I could get back to Japan, fund myself by working as an English teacher and be able to practise Aikido regularly in Kobayashi Dojo, and it felt like the right thing to do. It took a bit of persistence but eventually I found myself an employer with a Mon-Fri 9-5 teaching job in Toride, Ibaraki-ken and so I let out my house and flew back to Tokyo in August 2007.

I'd had a thought whilst my ankle was repairing itself that I might get more job satisfaction from being a teacher, so I looked at this opportunity to teach in Japan as a trial experience for a potential new career.