

## Serving as Uchideshi Dylan Shanahan



Five years ago filling out the paperwork to enter the JET program (Japan Exchange and Teaching Program) I wrote ‘no preference’ in the section about my preference for placement areas in Japan. Besides the opportunity to live and work in Japan teaching English, I wanted to practice aikido but I knew nearly nothing about who taught where.

Hence, when I first arrived in Japan and was being driven to my new home in Iruma with my new English department supervisor, how synchronistic -dare I say ‘destiny’ - it was that he told me he was a member of Kobayashi dojo. He asked me about my interest in aikido that he had read from my application essay to the JET program. After I got settled into my new apartment, new job, and new life in Japan; he introduced me to Kobayashi dojo and took me to my first aikido practice in Japan on a Sunday at Tokorozawa dojo.

I couldn’t have been placed in a better location, wedged between Kobayashi dojo to the east and hiking hills to the west (and a few minutes to Costco for the priceless peanut butter and American cheese). I have been very fortunate to learn aikido from a dojo so close to the roots of aikido, dojo members that have centuries of combined training experience, and furthermore being able to be a part of Kobayashi dojo’s wide embracing community. Living alone in a foreign country with little Japanese language skills, made this an essential life-line into the inside of Japanese culture and a much appreciated social network. I’d like to thank all the dojo members for teaching me everything from how to tie my training pants to the subtle timings of *kumi-tachi*, and so many great memories in the dojo and of course at the many year-end parties, year beginning parties, BBQs, *hanami*, Iwai camps, Tsumagoi camps, birthdays, welcome parties, and farewell parties. In Kobayashi dojo life’s a party, training hard and playing hard; *Kampai!*

There is a song by the famous folk singer, Bob Dylan (yes, my father is a big fan), called “Gotta Serve Somebody” that describes we all inevitably serve somebody or something in life. In aikido, with a philosophy as vast and mysterious as the depths of space, what are we serving? Living the easy life in economically developed countries, like the USA or Japan, can leave me unsatisfied when I feel like I am solely serving the interests of propelling our capitalistic society forward with my employment and monetary spending. That is why the grading system at Kobayashi dojo and preparing for my tests over the years has been such a helpful structured pursuit in Japan. I found much fulfillment in reaching for new



goals, new levels of aikido proficiency, in the process of reaching and then receiving, only to aspire to reach higher next time.

As a vigorous challenge, unique Japanese experience, and chance to give back to a dojo that has given me so much over the years; I'd been eyeing the Kobayashi dojo live-in training program from the first time I learned about it four years ago. Although, my work schedule and holidays never seemed to allow enough time for a proper uchideshi experience. It wasn't until I finished my contract in the JET program that I could finally take that next step into a challenge unknown, a simplified life centered on aikido, and a chance to set aside other pursuits and distractions to focus on my aikido training.

I grew up with a pretty conventional image of the Japanese martial arts from movies like Karate Kid and various books I had read on *budo*. Even if my ideas of the live-in program were slightly over romanticized, in reality I'd guess it shared similarities to what the Japanese teacher/student experience was like hundreds of years ago. Besides actually going back in time by cooking with wood and riding a horse between Kodaira and Tokorozawa dojo, I did feel like I was living the dream (or maybe I was dreaming from lack of sleep). Like Daniel san sanding and painting ("wax on, wax off"), there was also 'uchideshi work' in between cleaning the dojo and training. The gas heaters and Wi-Fi at Tokorozawa dojo were much appreciated upgrades. Surely, I don't think that I missed out on any necessary experience by making use of the advances in living standards, because one of the things that struck me the most has probably been a constant throughout the history of live-in students in Japan; learning about how to serve.

Even if the tasks were small, or at other times large, one uplifting part was supporting such a global aikido community, and the group of teachers who run it. I appreciated that the teachers of Kobayashi dojo allowed me to share in the responsibility of the dojo. I felt a part of the dojo family and an integral part of the Kobayashi aikido community. When I could get past my own tiredness or sore muscles, keeping that perspective was a source of motivation. The other regular energizer was the practices, and fortunately there were plenty of those. I was really only tired between practices. Kobayashi dojo practices were like riding a wave that I could hop on and ride the *genki* atmosphere. Of course, with the quantity and consistent training of the program, the insights and epiphanies into improving my technique and deepening my understanding of aikido added its own source of stimulation and inspiration.

That process of refining my technique was nicely supported with plenty of time cleaning the dojo, and then back on the mats to clean my aikido again. Everybody loves a clean dojo, and it doesn't take much to feel a special quality in aikido technique that has been polished over years of diligent training. The live-in program was a clarifying experience that revealed the areas for improvement in my aikido technique, thanks to the support of the dojo instructors and senior practitioners. The program also brought to my attention the ways in which I hold myself, in daily life or on the tatami, that bring imbalance to my health, posture, and later affect my aikido. Through such repetition, a small lean off my center of mass made for a big pain in my back. During the numerous innumerable hours of training I realized

how far I have to go and how much I have to learn, especially with *kokyuhou* technique. *Ganbarimasu!* I tried my best to be a sponge to the wealth of aikido schooling the Kobayashi dojo teachers offered me. This program allowed me such an immersion in aikido with consistent support that I'm looking forward to applying to the program again someday.

I'm 'probably' not going to continue training as repeatedly as I did during my time in the program and I 'probably' won't clean as many toilets in my life now as I did during 'uchideshi life', but one of the things that I intend to maintain is 'uchideshi mind'. During an explanation about what was expected of me on my weekly day off, I was told I should still get up rather early to clean the dojo and sweep up outside. That way I could maintain my 'uchideshi mind'; not to mention the practicality of reducing the shock returning to waking up before 5 am during most of the week. For me, there was a very different mindset during the live-in training program. We are always encouraged as uchideshi to be of service to the dojo, it's teachers, and the dojo members. I found myself becoming increasingly aware of my surroundings and mentally preparing for the next step. This level of self sacrifice was particularly humbling and helpful in getting my ego out of the way of my training.

Kobayashi dojo has brought aikido a long way, throughout much of Japan and the world. I remember back to the 40th anniversary event seeming like a United Nations summit. I aspire to be a part of the arts growth and the uchideshi program was a vital education towards that goal. During the program I was able to get an inside look at how to run a dojo; with dojo maintenance, training camps, demonstrations, grading events, etc. Kobayashi dojo teachers taught me a great deal and I am grateful for their kindness, encouragement, and guidance. Along with running a natural medicine clinic someday, I dream of offering aikido to my future community and sharing the warm welcoming atmosphere of Kobayashi dojo. When the time is right to start a dojo in the Pacific Northwest of the U.S., I hope to spread the word back in Japan that you all have a place to visit, practice aikido, and feel welcome. Please give me a chance to return the favor.

