

My Experience of Uchideshi Life

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Formerly a member of Kodaira Dojo and now employed as an assistant professor of Japanese history at Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut, Jeffrey Bayliss recently returned to Japan and underwent training as an “uchideshi” (live-in trainee). Here are his thoughts on his experience:



This was my first trip to Japan in three years. My plans were to stay in Japan for a month and a half, and since I was coming all the way back after such a long time, it seemed only natural to catch up with so many people all over Japan whom I hadn't seen in such a long time. First and foremost among such people came all my friends at Aikido Kobayashi Dojo. So many of the techniques and “points” of Aikido that I learned from Kobayashi-sensei, Hiroaki-sensei, and all of the instructors and members of Kobayashi Dojo have come to greatly influence my approach to Aikido, and are now reflected in the way I practice and teach Aikido in America. Furthermore, my memories of the warm friendship that everyone showed me had not faded even after nearly four years away. In order to try to relive and drink in the warm feelings of those “old days” as much as possible during the short time of my stay, I decided to spend two weeks living and training intensively at Tokorozawa Dojo.

“Live-in training? There's a lot of cleaning to do, you know...” Such was Hiroaki-sensei's initial reaction to my query. In spite of that, I made up my mind to undertake the rigors of uchideshi life, however briefly. And once I did, I realized that it was just as Hiroaki-sensei had warned.

At first I had a hard time grasping the complexities of the daily schedule and the process involved in cleaning the dojo before each practice, but thanks to the kind and patient guidance of Kasahara-san, I gradually came to learn them. By the end of my stay, I had at least managed to move through the daily round of duties in such a way that I was not just “in the way.”

Through my experience of uchideshi life, I have come to view the importance of cleaning in a new light. I came to realize that it is not just the simple act of cleaning a room, but actually a form of spiritual training of one's attention to detail in its own right. Attention to such details that are often overlooked in our daily lives has the remarkable effect of focusing one, and prepares the mind to be attentive to the details of Aikido training as well.

Of course, live-in training involves more than just cleaning. It should go without saying that - more than anything else - it is about absorbing oneself in practice throughout the day. And this was where my problems began. At first I was fine, but as my knees came into contact with the incomparably hard tatami of Kodaira Dojo more and more, they gradually began to put up a fuss. Eventually, I found it almost unbearable even to sit in *seiza* position. On top of this, there was a general

lack of sleep. When I considered that the instructors put up with many long years of such a lifestyle during their training, I couldn't help but admire them for their unbending determination and tireless effort.

Despite the lack of sleep and persistent pain in the knees, practice times were truly fun. Perhaps it was because of being tired all the time, but as I trained intensively it seemed to me that my body had become lighter, and my execution of the techniques more fluid than before. I found that I was suddenly able to appreciate techniques I had done hundreds or thousands of times from a new perspective, and my hips and limbs moved in a rounder, more coordinated way as I did them. I was also fortunate enough to have the opportunity to work intensively on many of the jo techniques that I've always had a hard time with (such as the paired exercise for the 31-jo series). All in all, I enjoyed a very fulfilling and thorough training at Kobayashi Dojo.

In my "career" in Aikido thus far, I have had the opportunity to train in numerous dojos in both Japan and America. I believe that among all of these Kobayashi Dojo stands out as unique. As I've gone around from dojo to dojo, I've come across places in which there is an atmosphere of arrogance, or an unwelcoming feeling projected toward "outsiders." Such is certainly not the case at Kobayashi Dojo.

The two characteristics in which Kobayashi Dojo can take great pride in are the thoroughness of the instruction it offers and the fact that, beginners and experienced Aikidoka alike, everyone who comes to practice is welcome and treated with kindness and generosity. It is my heartfelt wish that such a treasured place never disappear. I would like to thank everyone at Kobayashi Dojo for making a wonderful two weeks' stay possible. We'll meet again – hopefully before another three years passes.