

My Uchideshi Experience

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I have been practicing Aikido for 13 years, but for the last 2 years I've had to spend more time at work and had less opportunity to practice. I've studied hard and worked hard in my profession as a Chemical Engineer, and I enjoy many aspects of my work, but pursuing work to the detriment of my aikido practice is not the direction I wanted my life to follow. After much deliberation I decided a step change was needed, and with the opportunity to visit Japan and practice as an Uchideshi under Hiroaki Sensei and Kobayashi Sensei, I could think of nothing I would enjoy more than to quit my job and devote some time to the art I love.

Having spoken many times with Jeff Mills about his experience as an Uchideshi, my main preconception of Uchideshi life was that it would involve a lot of cleaning and early mornings.

My heavy workload, right up to the point of departure from the UK, meant that I was unable to do much preparation for my trip, so apart from buying my flight, insurance, Japanese yen and language books, it was a leap of faith. I knew that it would be a complete and sudden change of everything in my life, so my best approach was to try and keep an open mind and make the most of every experience.

It wasn't until I reached the gates of the airport departure lounge that I realised quite the step I'd taken. For a brief moment I thought 'what have I let myself in for', after which the excitement of the impending adventure took over.

I have experienced so much during my 3 months in Japan, there is so much to describe, the Aikido practice, the change in cultural environment, the change in lifestyle, not to mention all the places I have visited, and most importantly, the people I have met.

In terms of aikido practice, I am used to training hard aerobically, so I could cope with the hours of Keiko, but the biggest (and unanticipated) effect on me initially was that of the long days and short nights, leaving me with a feeling of permanent sleep deprivation. The Keiko timetable looks like there should be time to rest, relax and recover, but once you've allowed for Dojo cleaning before class, you find yourself very busy, with little time to yourself. Even on our day off, we were up by 7.30am to clean the dojo.

The dojo becomes your life for the time that you are an uchideshi. You quickly realise that your duty is first to the Dojo, Sensei and club members, and lastly to yourself.

There is however, something very satisfying about the devotion of self to the service of others, and in no way do I begrudge the lack of sleep or control over my own life that the uchideshi lifestyle resulted in. On the contrary, feeling a part of something that is providing happiness to so many people has been very fulfilling, and ultimately, it is these people's kindness and friendliness that have made my stay here so enjoyable.

Kobayashi Sensei and Hiroaki sensei have been the ultimate hosts, ensuring that my timetable has been packed with highly enjoyable training, and fun and interesting things to do. No two weeks have been alike. Kasahara has made sure that my stay has been as comfortable as possible, looking after my everyday needs. And then there are all the Sensei's, fellow uchideshis and dojo members that I've had the opportunity to practice with, not only at Tokorozawa and Kodaira dojos, but also on the Iwai camp, in Tsumagoi, Hashimoto, Kurobe, Fuchu, Tanashi, Tachikawa, Soka, and Itabashi to name but a few. Everywhere I've been I feel that I have made new friends, on and off the mat, the Keiko has been fun and I have learnt lots.



The dojo life is a unique experience, and I feel very privileged to have lived it for these past months. I feel that I've seen a 'real' side of Japanese life and culture that most other westerners living here do not.

I am writing this on my last day in Japan, and I feel very at home here after 3 months, so I anticipate a bit of 'reverse culture shock' when I get back to the UK. I have a few weeks holiday before starting a new job, so my world is still 'all change', but suffice to say that if I did not have a job to return for, I would be very happy to spend longer in Japan.

I will miss the Aikido Keiko, Japanese food, hot baths, trains running on time, machines that dispense hot tins of cocoa, riding bicycle with an umbrella, the very polite shop staff, and of course all my new friends. Hopefully it will not be too long before I return, and I intend to keep up my Japanese lessons in anticipation of seeing everyone again.



(From left to right) Myself, Kaho (Grand-daughter of Kobayashi sensei), Kobayashi sensei