

My Stay As an Uchideshi in Kobayashi Dojo September 2010 Lars Peder Fjelldal



When I arrived in Tokyo on the 21th of September 2010 I was not totally unprepared for what was coming. I had already been there for two months in April/May 2009, and those were the best but also most challenging two months of my life. There was so much happening, both around me and inside of me that it took at least a year for me to absorb it. When I arrived the first time, I had merely practised aikido for a year or so, and I was continually suffering from great pain and agony stemming from years of unhealthy lifestyle and bad habits. At the tender age of 28 I was feeling like an old man. My first stay in Kobayashi dojo proved a turning point though, just as I hoped it would.

Born and raised in the modern Western tradition of individuality, independency and freedom of thought and speech, I carried with me the idea that whatever I was feeling or thinking should be expressed at any cost. Not the easiest point of departure for a rigorous training regime in Japan you might think, and you are right. But then again, deep down I knew that these were also the very reasons I had to go, to face myself and my ideas that had brought me little happiness and that had become my prison. So I was very afraid when I came the first time, but when I left I brought home great gifts from the Kobayashi Dojo. I had gained some control over my negative tendencies, started opening my body, I felt energy running through me like never before, and I knew that I had made friends in a country far from my homeland. I will always be grateful to Kobayashi Dojo for this.

The second time I went to Japan and Kobayashi Dojo, I thought that I was prepared. And in a way I was, the training was more easily absorbed, my body did not ache as much. Even though I could still not sit seiza for a long periode of time, I could at least sit cross-legged without much agony. I knew more about Japanese customs and my duties in the dojo. Yet, I was not prepared for the reactions of my mind when confronted with the necessity to change, to let go of old patterns and make room for new knowledge.

As a consequence my mind led me into believing that I should break off the uchideshi stay and go out on my own in search of what I needed. I made the classical mistake of thinking that the grass is greener on the other side of the fence. I am ashamed of this now, and I would like to take the opportunity once more to apologize to Kobayashi sensei, Hiroaki sensei and all the other people that I offended by committing this stupid mistake.

Fortunately though, Kobayashi sensei in his wisdom and experience could



see what was going on in my mind, and while explaining to him the reasons for my actions, I realized that I was making a big mistake. At this point I was afraid that what I had done was irrevocable, but Kobayashi sensei being the generous and understanding person that he is urged me to continue my stay as an uchideshi in Kobayashi Dojo. I felt great relieve after this. Even though my troubling mind had caused problems, Kobayashi sensei helped me to get over it. An episode that tells the story of the wisdom and understanding of Kobayashi sensei and Hiroaki sensei, as well as showing the generosity and forgiving culture of Kobayashi Dojo. This is another great gift that I am thankful to receive.

There are so many good memories from my last uchideshi stay that its hard to know where to start. Wednesday morning breakfast at Hiroaki sensei's home when Myoko san cooks for us is always a great treat! I love to go to Yamawaki sensei's house in the mountains, beautiful surroundings and always such a welcoming atmosphere. And it's a good opportunity to practise my French!

One of the special memories is when Hiroaki sensei with family brought us uchideshis to the famous Nikko temples and shrines. A deeply spiritual place where nature meets human endeavour. Hiroaki sensei also organized for me to play a piano concert at a nearby venue. Whenever I had time, which was not very often since aikido practise and dojo duties take up most of it, I ran upstairs to prepare for my Beethoven recital. Friday morning was one such time, after breakfast and cleaning up I used to ask Kobayashi sensei if it was alright that I go practise the piano for a while. He would say *daijobu* and I would run off. I have to admit that one morning I was so sleepy I feel asleep on the floor of Kaho chan's room shortly after I started playing, only to wake up to the sounds of the morning meeting ending one hour later. I was worried about there not being enough time for preparation, but somehow the concert went well. It seems that the extensive aikido practise made me prone to learning quickly! The annual Iwama camp was another great experience. Unfortunately the bad weather denied us the traditional run on the beach before morning practise, but in return we had a great party the following night!

And then there are all the little things, like sitting in a train, enjoying sushi and sake and grilled fish after evening practise, trying to make time for a coffee inbetween sessions. The crisp, crystal clear air of Tokyo autumn, the trees



shedding their leaves so that we can sweep them up again, the simplicity and natural rythm of things as an uchideshi.

O'sensei sad that aikido is *misogi*, purification of body, mind and spirit. There are many ways that one can practise aikido, some take it as self-defence, others as merely excersize, and others still use it as a means to

purify oneself on all levels of being. Personally, I believe that all these aspects are inherent to aikido, nevertheless I think it is important to remember O'sensei's words: Aikido is *misogi*.

How is aikido *misogi*? To fully answer this question one needs to have a lot more insight than I have, but I can at least point to some effects that the training has on my body and mind. Aikido practice strengthens the muscles and tendons, increases circulation and thereby enhances the getting rid of waste material from the body. It gives a feeling of centered-ness and increases balance, improves the posture and makes all parts of the body fall in their natural place, both limbs and internal organs. If for some reason they are not already there, this process can cause pain, but this is part of the fun. Everyone who loves a good *nikkyo* agrees with this!

On a finer level aikido increases the flow of *ki* through your body. This will help you to use your body more efficiently, to be able to learn new things quicker and better, stay healthy and enjoy life more.

There are also other aspects of aikido practice that I find important. There is the social aspect, which is much more than just getting together and having some fun, not that there is anything wrong with that though. In aikido you learn to trust your fellow human beings, you let them put yourself in compromising and weak positions where you are vulnerable to injury. As *nage* you learn to take care of people and feel their limitations, to help them overcome whatever is that they are struggling with. You refine your character, examine your feelings towards others, locate negative thoughts and emotions and eradicate them if you want to. The meeting between *tori* and *uke* provides an opportunity to examine yourself, your body, your emotions and your thoughts. Together you can create an environment for fellow growth.



As your skills improve, it is easy to forget about humility. You don't want to remember that you were once suffering from all kinds of pain and mental afflictions. One of the great mistakes of people who are growing stronger is to despise those who are not yet so strong, whether it be in their body, will power or elsewhere. With strength comes power, and with power comes responsibility. In aikido practice you meet people who are less skilled than yourself, and you meet people who are infinitely more skilled than yourself. These encounters offer different challenges and opportunities for growth and learning. You learn that you are connected to other people and cultures, to the ground, to nature itself. O'sensei said that aikido has the power to harmonize heaven and earth. Even if I cannot understand what he means, I try to keep this in the back of my mind while I practice. Hopefully, little by little insight will come.