

An Essay by Otto Lam



Without question, a one week stay at Kobayashi dojo was far too short. However, as anyone familiar with the Kobayashi family would agree, this would hardly be any cause for complaint. The opportunity to train with the Kobayashi family in the traditional Japanese apprentice style is something that apart from its modern day unwontedness, is quite a privilege. Those experienced with uchideshi training and the rigors of the daily chores and responsibilities that come with it are able to focus more on the training itself, and attune themselves to Kobayashi sensei's spirit imbued in the dojo's training methods, rituals, members and of course Aikido. It is important for those of us who are serious about Aikido, to learn all that we can, from as close to O-sensei as possible. To be trained in a style similar to how O-sensei himself trained and by no less than yet another one of his live in students, one always has so much farther to go and yet we know that we are on the right path.

The uchideshi lifestyle can be quite profound for many, but for those who are dedicated to anything in life, it goes without saying that elements of any disciplined lifestyle become matters of routine, facilitating deeper focus to the skills one is trying to develop. Being no stranger to this way of life, the quick adjustment to the uchideshi program here was both seamless and beneficial considering the shortness of the stay. The focus therefore, was clearly centered on the Aikido itself as it was presented by Sensei and the dojo's regular students. The life of the uchideshi is not a troublesome or difficult thing, but merely a different mode. If one regularly treats daily life in this way, things such as waking up early, being self sufficient, hygienic, training hard, and supporting others, adjusting to life at Kobayashi dojo, should present little difficulty.

Sensei's classes would always be a full house leaving everyone squandering for mat space, increasing each person's awareness of their surroundings both when applying and receiving techniques. It was always important to get up quickly after being thrown as well as to stay sharp, making split second decisions as to when to take tobi-ukemi, or when to role back and stop, or when to role out of the way. Throughout such crowded sessions, Sensei would wander randomly through the crowded tatami creating an ever watchful presence, as well as an additional random element to avoid when being thrown or when throwing. As



randomly as Sensei would wander, it became quite normal to get up from a throw and suddenly find Sensei himself in front of you as your next uke or nage. Sensei's being permeated the dojo through the techniques that all the senior students applied and that all the junior students reflected in their various stages of competency. Though we don't always have the chance to physically connect with Sensei in a technique, we are always tuned into him through a heightened awareness of each other in this way.

One of the best things about training in traditional settings is the custom, often new to the visitor but well rooted in tradition. One of the customs in Kobayashi dojo is that of sharing tea after practice. After each session, a large picnic like mat would be spread on the tatami and tea and sometimes sweets would be served. During such times, Sensei would sit in a spot overlooking the dojo, sometimes sipping his tea, sometimes sharing light conversation, and often just watching as other students continued free practice. Feeling that connection with Sensei meant that whether you were sipping tea or talking to sempai or whether you were free practicing, you would always be aware of Sensei sitting at the edge of the tea mat, watching, and monitoring everything, and everyone. It was like a father watching his children in the yard from the living room window. It was yet another one of those things that made training at Kobayashi dojo, more like being part of a family, a very strong and good feeling that sort of hummed in the background sub-consciousness during free practice.

Though it was really too short a stay to comment profoundly, it was certainly a rare opportunity and a privilege. The experience offered yet another chance to connect directly with O-sensei's remaining deshi. After establishing such a connection, further time spent could only transmit deeper levels of tradition, training and of course, Aikido. Perhaps the fondest experience was sharing tea with Sensei after practice as he showed his old photo album. It had pictures of Kobayashi Sensei and my old teacher Kanai Sensei, when they themselves were uchideshi under O-sensei at Hombu dojo. It truly makes one feel close, like part of a great family. It has been quite fortunate for me to have created a rapport here, and the deepest appreciation goes out to Kobayashi sensei for granting this special opportunity as i look forward to further training and cups of tea.

