

My Uchideshi Experience Brandon Nimz



It is strange to me that today is my last day here; I am packed and finishing final projects for Kobayashi Shihan. Soon I will begin the usual morning routine of cleaning the dojo, eating breakfast, and heading to Fuchu to train. However, unlike usual, I won't be returning to get more work and cleaning done and then to continue the regular uchideshi life. Instead, I will be heading out to a hotel near the airport and then flying away. Now at the

end of my time here, it seems like it was both a short time and a long time.

Each person comes to this uchideshi program with different goals and motivations, and many people here have different, and sometimes conflicting, expectations of what uchideshi are and what they are supposed to do. Add to that the fact that dojo communities are living, changing groups, and I'm fairly certain that no one person's experience here will ever be quite the same as another person's.

For myself, I came to train with Kobayashi Shihan and learn from him, to learn more about the heart and history of Aikido from his perspective, and to learn more about the culture and how Aikido is perceived in Japan by practicing at multiple dojos in the Kobayashi Dojo network and at Hombu dojo. I planned to do my best to serve Sensei and the dojo community, and I also planned to have some time away from my usual life to pray and reflect on what's going on back home without being immersed in it to where I couldn't see. My wife and I have some challenging things to think through as the Christian ministry and the dojo that I run in Kansas both continue to grow and change, as do we.

To some degree, I would say that each of my original goals was met, though once I was here I was too busy to ever actively work towards any of them too much. Besides the usual uchideshi life, I still had duties back home that I had to take care of through emails, messages, and a few phone calls. That and extra training and experiences with the other uchideshi tended to use up all of my time.

Nonetheless, through the experience itself I did learn a lot about Japanese culture, I learned more about how Aikido is perceived here in Japan, and I also learned a lot from Soshihan—more by watching and observing than anything else as my Japanese was too limited to have any deep talks with him. Most of my reflections would take too long to put into one essay, and a lot of them would be hard to put into words anyway (or would be inappropriate to discuss as they came about by observing different instructors here, and I don't feel it's right to compare and contrast teachers in a public forum like this). However, perhaps the biggest thing





that sticks out to me about Soshihan, and one of the larger ideas I picked up here is something I can share.

Part of Soshihan's great success and part of why so many of his students and those who've met him deeply respect and care about him is that he is humble, caring, and he is truly himself. He does not put on airs or act like he's above everyone. On the contrary, he is friendly with everyone in the dojo, he throws and is thrown by the

lowest rank, and though everyone knows that he's Soshihan, he feels like he's practicing Aikido and sharing his joy and skill with you rather than standing above you and teaching down to you.

Other Sensei of higher rank in many places in the world will still work with anyone, but they do so in a way that shows how far above they are; they intentionally create a gap so that their rank and authority is always on display, and they make certain no one ever forgets their position. These Sensei create very vertical relationships founded on rank and hierarchy.

What I find funny is that Soshihan, by not emphasizing rank and hierarchy is actually more successful at having people respect him than those that demand respect through a vertical system. The reason is that a vertical system demands respect because of the way that it's built. The structure and ranking is the reason that people are supposed to give their respect. However, creating such a system makes many people actually resent the people at the top instead of respecting them. This is largely due to the fact that actual respect that is sincere and from the heart comes with time, trust, and relationships—all things that Soshihan freely gives—not from a system that demands respect. A system that demands respect creates fake respect on the outside of a person in the way they behave, but it usually creates disrespect and conflict in their hearts. On the flip side, when a person like Soshihan lives a sincere life, their time, devotion, and skill become evident. When he trains with you and you feel his joy and that he's living what he believes, you find yourself respecting him in your heart even though he hasn't demanded it. In fact, your desire to respect what he is and does even makes your respect result in actions on the outside. It's the way that a true uchideshi program should operate. By getting to know someone and train with them, an uchideshi develops trust and respect for the person and does all of their work because they want to. In fact, they may even go out of their way to do more just because their respect is genuine. Other programs in other places that simply demand respect and obedience because of how the system is built may be functional on the outside, but inside of the people's hearts they are dysfunctional.

Soshihan's humility has also allowed him to become a tremendous bridge and connector of people in the Aikido





world. By being humble and living his life sincerely, he has earned the respect of many people from many different groups, some of which would not normally work together and some of whom may not work with any other groups. If he demanded loyalty due to his rank and seniority, he would have it—but from far less people. By being humble and making no demands but living what he believed, he has earned respect and loyalty from many more.

This lesson is an important one, and it gives me some hope for how I run my dojo and how I teach. I have been told by students from other places that I feel less Sensei-like than other Sensei who have taught workshops or intensives for them, but they say it's a good thing. They feel like I'm real and approachable and like they can relate with me and ask me questions, whereas the other Sensei are too far above them for them to be able to talk to. On one hand, I liked that they were comfortable, but on the other, I worried that maybe I was being too casual or that I wasn't being professional enough. In the past, I'd been told that I may need to create more of a gap between myself and my students to prevent disrespect from being a problem in the dojo, even though there is no disrespect problem occurring at this time. Ironically, through reflecting on what Soshihan does right, I now know that creating more of a gap would have actually created a disrespect problem that was never there.

Soshihan's strong example of effectively leading as someone who is humble and casual makes me feel much better about how I teach and my leadership style, when previously I was conflicted. Soshihan's life, sincerity, and above all his humility and caring heart will always be an inspiration and a good example to me—I have so much more growing to do! I wish him many more healthy years in his beloved dojo community, and I was honored to be part of it for five short-and long-weeks.

