

My Uchideshi Experience Erika Kurucz

Four years ago I had spent two months in Japan as uchideshi, last year I was awarded with the possibility for a full year - which came to be prolonged to one year and three months, due to the Covid 19 crisis.

I have been practicing Aikido for 25 years and I have a master's degree in Asian studies, prompting me to come for a longer period.

For more than a year I could have been doing 'professionally' all that I studied before, I could see many things with my own eyes that I had known only from books or photos, I saw religious rituals, I traveled to Mount Hiei, I had the chance to help to carry a mikoshi.



For all these I am very grateful to Hiroaki sensei for providing me this opportunity through Musubi Kikin - I tried to repay his kindness by making 'Somlói galuska' for him, which is his favorite Hungarian dessert. :)



(My favorite, Kaho's cheese cake, and 'Somlói galuska' tart on my sayonara party)

Soshihan likes to show old Aikido photographs and on one of those I saw him with Tamura Nobuyoshi sensei in Enoshima. Tamura sensei was the first Japanese Aikido teacher I had the chance to learn from at his seminar in Hungary. Back then many direct disciples of O-sensei visited Hungary.

Looking at those old pictures in the dojo and listening to Soshihan's stories about Aikido, the Iwama times, early history of Aikido has become closer, more vivid, now I don't feel myself an outsider.

The world has opened to me here in Kodaira, more precisely, it has entered the dojo: people from every corner of the world came to train together. What a wonderful thing it must be to travel around the world just like Soshihan, Hiroaki sensei and Masuda sensei do!

For all those who like Aikido and are deeply interested in it, uchideshi experience can be very useful. There are many trainings, many chances to learn and to correct even subtle things. After some time your body teaches you through the experience of pain: ukemi and zagi becomes softer. When I was uchideshi for the first time, I trained for weeks with painful knees - so my shikko developed to be very smooth by now.



(Enoshima)

An important factor is that number of trainings vastly exceeds the level of amateur athletes - possibly not reaching the level of professional athletes, but it is very different from everyday standards. To bear with it you must be healthy and fit, you must pay attention to food as well, otherwise it is difficult to keep up on the long run and a sense of failure becomes overwhelming.

The climate is very different, heat and humidity is there, it's not easy to predict how your body would react to that. Still, if one arrives fit and healthy, despite exhaustion and pains, enjoying trainings will prevail.

Trainings are demanding mentally, too, your mind must get used to continuous concentration - more so as a foreigner, as Japanese conventions are not born with us, special attention is necessary all the time.

What has been especially difficult for me, causing problems even now, is using multiple languages all the time. I had never lived abroad longer before so using English for a longtime was strange. One of my main goals was to develop my skill in Japanese, but repeated switching between the languages proved to be very difficult. Being tired all the time did not make this task any easier...

On Mondays, my day off, I liked to travel to the neighboring area when I was not too tired.

My big favorite is Mount Takao, I have been there five times. Another favorite was Enoshima. The Koma Shrine, which I visited with Hiroaki sensei, was a special place, too. I loved visiting shrines, I will miss those as well, just like museums and the arts.



(Atami)

I liked very much when we visited other dojos - an uchideshi spends most time in Kodaira or Tokorozawa, it was nice to go to other places. I also liked my time with Masuda sensei.

I liked a lot our visit to Hanno, I could escort Hiroaki sensei to there, it was cold and the dojo had floor heating, it was great feeling to train on warm tatamis! After training we had a delicious dinner with dojo members, I loved it.

I participated in six bonenkai and two shinnenkai parties, all were real fun, many of the dojo members are real showmen. :)



(Hombu shinnenkai)

The more time I spent here the more clearly I have seen how special our senseis are: they were teaching us with great patience, correcting well-embedded mistakes. I only hope they have seen how much I appreciated it.

Training is meaningful only when one pays constant attention to the techniques and aims at developing a little day by day. It is not easy to reach the level of people who have been practicing since childhood but not impossible.

It is not only about techniques but personality, tolerance, respect and politeness. I have always considered fellow uchideshis as comrades - we are training together, both tired, it is good not to be alone. It is not a competition, no need to overcome or dominate the other. It is a pity to waste one's time in Japan for that, that person deceives only him or herself.

Being here is great potential to learn, not just Aikido. Japan is a highly developed country, ahead of the world in many aspects.

There was a two-month break due to the virus situation that gave me a chance to concentrate more on learning the language. I had the time then to spend more time in food stores, getting to know better the ingredients. I have tried and tasted many things, even getting some weight, so I had to start jogging to keep in shape. This let me know Kodaira better, all green and beautiful by then.

I had always thought that I have no problem with insects: in Hungary there are not so many types around us and even those are smaller. In Japan it is a totally different case, despite nets on windows I was bitten by them severely all the time. It was also first time in my life that I saw cockroaches can fly...After the lockdown trainings restarted

with wearing masks, and it was okay until hot weather has arrived... My movements slowed down and I was feeling unwell many times.



When my mood was not so bright I cheered myself up by baking cakes - I have no idea how but it worked. There is a little oven in Kodaira Dojo and after a while I knew what I could bake using that and what not. It became a challenge and entertainment for me, besides I provided Friday meetings with cakes.

As I spent more time in Kobayashi Dojo I started thinking about the future of Aikido - is it possible that weapons techniques will disappear from many dojos? I really love those techniques as taught here, I would practice them most of training time.

Hiroaki sensei has asked me if I would stay for one more year, even had my visa prolonged just in case - I really gave it much thought, but I think I have become very tired mentally. I was thinking of going home a little and then returning to Japan, but all the situation with air tickets and rapidly changing rules make it very difficult. I felt bad that I don't stay but I honestly could not do it.

I was full of doubts before if it is right to spend so much time on Aikido and my studies but now I know my uncertainties derived solely from lack of possibilities and good company. This period taught me in spite of much pain and exhaustion that I was right, I am on the right path. I have been most of the time very happy here.

Returning home I will take some rest first but then I will find my ways to do what I really like to do.