

My Uchideshi Experience

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When I signed up to become an uchideshi a live-in student at Aikido Kobayashi dojo in Japan I fully expected to be crawling to bed every night, wondering why I did this to myself.

Not regretting it, necessarily. Just... surviving it. I thought it would be one of those experiences that sounds noble in hindsight but feels like boot camp while you're living it.

But that's not how it went.

I didn't wake up in awe.

I didn't wake up confused either.

It was my first morning in Japan, and for some reason, everything felt... normal. Like I'd been living there my whole life. I didn't sit up with wonder in my eyes or check my phone to remind myself where I was. I just got up, quietly, the same way I would've back home before school except there was no smell of breakfast, no bustling house, no family talking in the other room, just silence.

Hiroaki-sensei soon came to teach how to clean the dojo. There's something strange about doing chores in a place you don't own. You'd think it would feel like work or at the very least, like a duty. But it didn't. We had to clean. Almost every morning. Sweep, pick up leaves, tidy, empty the trash. And outside, that tree had clearly made it its life's goal to cover the dojo front with as many leaves as possible.

I ended up liking it more than I should've.

Some mornings it was windy, and the leaves would drift down as I swept, like the tree was teasing me. But I never got mad. I just kept sweeping.

It felt like therapy disguised as obligation.

It didn't matter that I was thousands of kilometers from home. That moment the cold air on my skin, the dead leaves staring at my soul as my soul stared back, the rhythm of the broom felt more familiar than anything I'd left behind.

Training came after at the Higashi-Murayama dojo and this is the part where people usually expect stories of suffering, sore joints and bloody soles but training wasn't like that. It was real, and it was demanding, but it wasn't cruel.

The sessions followed a quiet flow. Clean. Warmups. Technique. Ukemi. A short break. More keiko. Clean. Repeat.

You'd step onto the tatami, bow in, and let the rest of the world dissolve.

But it wasn't all serene. And it wasn't all perfect.

There were moments where I could feel the ego crackle beneath the surface mostly from some of the instructors. Not all, but some. The kind of presence that made the air just a little stiffer when they entered. They were undeniably skilled beautiful technique, sharp execution but not always the kind of people you'd call "teachers" They taught, yes. But it felt more like they were demonstrating than reaching out. There were others who were the opposite. Less refined in their movement, perhaps, or not the flashiest in the room—but they had this quiet way of transmitting understanding. They didn't need to explain much. You just felt clearer after being on the mat with them. They made the room lighter, not heavier. And somehow, that was more valuable than perfect form. Corrections were rare. You could go through an entire class repeating a mistake and never be told. And when someone did correct you, it wasn't always... right. There were contradictions. One sensei would say something and the next day, another would

say the opposite, Eventually, you just learned to listen, absorb, try it, and then quietly decide for yourself what made sense in your body.

That's when the practitioners started to matter more than the teachers.

They didn't help by explaining things. They helped by doing things. Most of them didn't speak English, and I spoke maybe five and a half words of Japanese, but it didn't matter. They didn't talk much anyway. They spoke Aikido. Their timing. Their center. The way they offered their balance and took yours. It was a kind of language more honest than words.

You'd be partnered with someone older, maybe smaller, and before you knew it, your technique collapsed and they were standing over you smiling, as if to say, Try again. They never needed to say it aloud. The fall itself was the sentence. The recovery was the punctuation. It was strange and beautiful and humbling. Even in silence, I learned more from them than I could've from a lecture.

And then there were the trains.

Oh man. The trains.

You don't really understand how bad your own country's transport system is until you ride a train in Japan. It's like stepping into a timeline where humanity decided to actually try. Everything is clean. Everything is quiet. People don't talk loudly. Phones are on silent. And the thing actually arrives when it says it will. To the minute.

I'd ride those trains every day to get from one dojo to another and on rest days if we had time to explore. Watching the trees blur past through the window. Old shrines tucked between apartment blocks. The strange comfort of vending machines on every corner. You sit there, tired but content, watching the world outside melt into itself.

The trains took us places.

We had one day off a week just one. And we used it like we were trying to experience an entire country in twelve hours. We'd finish morning chores and suddenly we were tourists. Or at least pretending to be.

We went to Meiji Jingu, the famous Shinto shrine in Tokyo. The forest surrounding it? Absolutely stunning. Trees so tall and so ancient-looking that the air itself felt different. Cooler. Thicker. It didn't feel like Tokyo anymore. It felt like a secret. Like if you took a wrong turn, you'd bump into a wandering spirit from some old story.

And then the temple appeared—clean, symmetrical, organized.

And fake.

I mean, it's real. The wood is real. The history is technically real. But the feeling? It was off. People funneled in with cameras out, dropping coins into labeled boxes marked as “offerings,” buying charms, taking selfies under signs that told them not to. And I stood there, thinking not with anger, but with this quiet frustration that this wasn't sacred. This was intrusion. Nature had made something beautiful. The shrine felt like humanity couldn't leave it alone without building something and slapping a price tag on it.

Then came Akihabara's Electric Town.

It was the opposite of sacred and it didn't pretend to be anything else. Neon signs everywhere, anime characters on every wall, vending machines selling the weirdest things you've ever seen. It was fun in the way a fever dream is fun loud, overstimulating, and weird. That's where we bought most of our souvenirs. I say "we" but really, my friend bought enough to fill a second suitcase. T-shirts, keychains, figurines, snacks, he was on a mission to single handedly support the Japanese economy

And then there was Omiya

The train station alone was cleaner, brighter, and more organized than my country's entire international airport. I'm not even exaggerating. You walk in, and it feels like entering a civilization that figured out how to function. Screens everywhere. Calm voices over the intercom. Everything labeled clearly. Zero chaos.

And then you walk outside, and the city itself just looks... futuristic. Like some alternate timeline where humanity actually evolved properly. Buildings sleek and glassy. Trees perfectly placed. I stood on the sidewalk and felt like I was on another planet. A better one. One that maybe didn't need shrines to feel sacred.

The days blurred, but not in a bad way. It wasn't monotony. It was rhythm.

Wake up. Sweep leaves. Train. Eat. Rest. Laugh at how sore your legs are.

I think that's what surprised me the most, how gentle it all felt. Not the training, not the ukemi but the experience. The life of it. There were no grand epiphanies or dramatic turning points. No anime-style "everything changed" moment. Just a slow, quiet blooming of something peaceful.

You come in expecting to be torn down and rebuilt. But instead, you just settle in. You become part of the place.

I remember my last morning there. Same silence. Same light through the window. My friend wide awake before me. I stood there for a moment, broom in hand, staring at the familiar scatter of leaves waiting outside.

And for the first time since arriving, I didn't feel like I'd been living there forever.