



Fabien Sorin

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Nationality: French

Dojo: MIT Aikido Club

Although, Mr. Sorin, who studied and now works at MIT, stayed at Tokorozawa dojo during the toughest and coldest time of the year, it seems that he had a great time there.

A Month of Uchideshi

by Fabien Sorin

I stayed as an uchideshi in Kobayashi dojo for a month in January of 2008. It has been such a rich and wonderful experience that it's hard to write about it, but I will try to give my first impressions. First though, I would like to deeply thank Kobayashi Shihan and Hiroaki Sensei and their families for their hospitality and the privilege of letting me stay as an uchideshi. Their openness and kindness are reflected in the atmosphere of the dojo where one can find a unique harmony between an intense Aikido practice on one hand, and friendship and simplicity on the other. I can only hope I was worth their trust. I also would like to thank Jeff San who introduced me to Kobayashi dojo and made this experience possible. I owe him sake and beer for a life time!

To give a quick background, I started Aikido in France in the federation of Tamura Shihan under the direction of Dominique Fleury at the Ecole d'Aikido Traditionnel (Paris). I then moved to Boston (US) for my studies and trained there at the dojo of Kanai Shihan, and more regularly at the MIT Aikido club under the instruction of Dick Stroud Sensei. In Boston, I met Jeff San who told me about the uchideshi program at Kobayashi dojo in Japan. When I graduated from grad school, I thought it could be a good time to take a break and travel. I also always wanted to visit Japan and practice there, so naturally I asked Jeff, who was in Japan at the time, if he would agree to recommend me and be my guarantor for the uchideshi program at Kobayashi dojo. And, there I was!

The experience is rich in many ways, but it doesn't come without little inconveniences: cold, tiredness, cuts and dry skin, sore muscles. Did I mention cold? Jeff told me that when I communicated the dates when I could come, Hiroaki Sensei asked him to tell me that it's freaking cold in January! Waking up at 5 am in the morning to leave the warm sleeping bag and meet the cold air of the dojo, knowing that it will be even colder in a few minutes when I open the windows to start cleaning, is not what I would call enjoyable. But, its part of the experience and training, and it's very interesting to see how one cope with it. On top of this, man, there is a lot of cleaning! You may look at the schedule and think you will have some free time between the classes...forget about it! But, if you feel a little overwhelmed by all the things to do at the beginning, you get



used to it pretty quickly and it really becomes part of the training. I have read and heard a lot about the virtue of cleaning and order in the practice of Aikido but never really understood it. I feel I get it a little more now.

These harder aspects of the uchideshi life were part of what I was looking for in coming here. But I was very surprised by how in the end it was not that difficult to cope with them thanks to other aspects of the experience: the Aikido practice of course, but also the people and Japan itself. I have learned so much in Aikido it's impossible to describe it here. Technique wise of course, especially in weapons, and I wish I had stayed a second

month to study more Ken! And I am very grateful to Kobayashi Shihan and Hiroaki Sensei, as well as to all the instructors and dojo members who were very generous in sharing their knowledge and teaching me so many things. It was not only the techniques but also the approach of the practice, of Budo, relaxation, the center, "genki" etc... that was very intriguing to me. It was unspoken, especially with my almost zero Japanese, but I feel I could kind of see in many dojo members and instructors the influence of the Japanese culture on their practice. I will stop here before I say too many stupid things but it was very interesting and gave me the will to practice even harder to try to grasp a bit more of this mystery.

The tiredness and cold also quickly disappeared in front of the warm smiles and kindness of everybody. I can't describe each character individually but I can give common characteristics: dedication to Aikido, openness and simplicity. I could feel it was important for them that I have the best experience possible and for that I am very thankful. Another characteristic is the eagerness to party! The New Year celebration parties at Kodaira dojo and Higashi-Murayama dojo were a great cultural experience for me but also a great opportunity to eat good food and drink good Japanese beer and sake! I am again very thankful for the sayonara party at Tokorozawa dojo at the end of my stay. Even if the practice is not always easy the next day, the parties are definitely something to look for when you come here as an uchideshi!!

Talking about good food, sake and beer, discovering Japan where I came for the first time was also a great experience. Some of the customs seem quite strange at first, especially for a French guy like me: waiting at the stop light when no car is around, the fact that the trains are always on time etc... It's a very intriguing society and, I know it's a cliché but it is how it feels, a complex mix between tradition and modernity that can take a long time, and certainly more than a month, for a foreigner to grasp. The little free time you get as an

uchideshi enables to discover a bit of the Japanese culture and everyday life besides the Aikido world, and this is also definitely worth it.

As you may have understood reading this, the experience I had was amazing and I encourage anyone who has this opportunity to go for it. I would like to finish by thanking especially all the sensei at Kobayashi dojo, and a special thanks to Kasahara Sensei and Anita who taught me the ways of the uchideshi. I hope I wasn't too bad of a student! If anyone comes to Boston, or in the future to Canada or France, I would be more than happy to welcome you and try to give back a little of what I received during my time as an uchideshi in Kobayashi Dojo!



*From left to right: Yasuo Kobayashi shihan, Hiroaki Kobayashi sensei, Mrs. Kobayashi, myself.
photo by Y. Kasahara*