



## **Lars Peder Fjelldal**

April 2008 - June 2008

Nationality: Norwegian

Dojo: Sunyata Aikido Dojo

Lars stayed in Tokorozawa dojo as an uchideshi for more than two months. He proved that even a white belt student can be a good uchideshi. He gave us a wonderful time at his mini piano concert!

## **Two Months in Japan**

Lars Peder Fjelldal

When I left for Japan on April 10, 2008, I did not know what to expect. I only knew that I was going to stay in Kobayashi Dojo in Tokyo, Japan for two months. I knew that it was going to be tough and that it was probably going to be different from anything I had ever experienced before. I was right.

I had trained Aikido for a year and a half at Sunyata Dojo in Oslo, Norway, under the guidance of Mouliko sensei, 6th dan, and I was only 4th kyu when I embarked on my uchideshi program. I had little or no experience with martial art when I started Aikido. I must admit that I was a bit anxious about what it would be like. Were the Japanese aikidokas going to be really strong and tough? What about my fingers (I am studying to become a pianist back in Norway)? I remember thinking: o.k., this is going to be very different, leave your non-complying Norwegian mind back home and just try to do your best! There is no way you can do everything right. You are going to make lots of mistakes, but just learn the Japanese phrase for “I am sorry” and use it! I did learn that phrase and I had several occasions to use it.

Having finally discovered Aikido at the age of 26, I decided I should go to Japan as soon as possible to see for myself the source of all this. The way you think about Aikido keeps changing. While some people see it as simply another martial art and practice that way, others have little interest in the martial aspect and practice just because they like it. The reasons I started doing Aikido were many. I must admit in the beginning there was the idea of learning self-defense. Furthermore, having encountered serious problems with my hands and upper body due to exaggerated use of force during piano practice, I was looking for something that could loosen up my body and make me feel physically comfortable again. I soon realized that Aikido was just the right thing for me. Even if I am only a beginner I have already noticed how Aikido can change your life. The attitude with which you enter the Dojo has everything to say. Enter with a smile and an open heart, and people will teach you what they know. Enter with an irritated and stressed mind, and not even your best friend wants to practice with you.

Bjorn, my Swedish uchideshi companion, and me developed the theory of enjoyment. This theory is quite simple and easy to understand, and it helped us

through all the hard times. It simply says that whatever you do, you should enjoy it. Period. If you get thrown *koshinage* and lands on your neck, you enjoy. If you clean the toilet you enjoy. When you are dead tired but still cannot rest, you enjoy even that. And believe it or not, it works! I never thought I would enjoy cleaning toilets but there you go....

During my two months of being an *uchideshi* at the Kobayashi Dojo I experienced so much that it will be impossible to mention it all. All the people of the Dojo were so friendly and generous to me that there is no way I can fully thank them. First of all there is Kobayashi sensei. His whole being emanates warmth, friendliness and generosity and he made me feel at home immediately. He made me forget my anxiety and fear and taught me much more than I can even know about. He gives you the impression that the whole training is being done only for you. Of course, I do not think that this is the case, rather it seems like he is able to communicate directly with everyone present in the Dojo and give something to everyone at the same time, without much explaining or displaying of techniques. I am so grateful for having had the opportunity to train under a real master of Aikido.

I remember the first time Hiroaki sensei threw me *irimi-nage*, I now know what it feels like to fly! He always starts training with some version of *irimi-nage*, and it is great because it really heats up your entire body. Hiroaki sensei also speaks perfectly English which is good for me since I am not very good at Japanese... He was the reason I came to Japan in the first place. Having attended seminars with him in Stockholm and Oslo, I decided I had to go and see for my self what it was like in Japan.

Everyone Wednesday morning his wife, Miyoko san, cooked breakfast to the *uchideshis* and this was another unforgettable experience. I suggested she should open a restaurant, but I do not think that she took it seriously. I have not completely understood how anyone can REALLY enjoy *natto* (fermented soy beans) though. I do not think that it is very good, *sumimasen!* I guess it only means that I am not Japanese.

Yamawaki sensei was so kind to take me to his house and dojo at Tsumagoi, on the way up we were listening to Rolling Stones and he was singing along! He knows all the lyrics, incredible. His specialty is French language and culture, and I can tell you it is an unreal experience to be sitting in an Aikido Dojo in the Japanese mountains speaking in French with a great Aikido sensei. His hospitality simply overwhelmed me. I was served wonderful meals cooked by his wife and slept in his house like the most prominent of guests even if I was only a beginner *uchideshi* from Norway. By the way I asked him what Aiki was, but he did not want to tell me... The mountain air and



landscape reminded me of Norway except from the huge volcano in the middle of everything. That was definitely more of a Japanese thing.

The last month of my stay I went regularly to Kou san to get Shiatsu massage for my aching body. The man simply works miracles. My respect for western medicine was low even before I left for Japan, but when I experienced what real Shiatsu massage can do for you, I was even more convinced that the answer to healing does not lie in eating pills.

Kanda sensei and his wife took me and Bjorn san to their house in the hills just outside Tokyo. Situated just about two hours from Kodaira the place really demonstrated that Japan is a mountainous country. The air was wonderfully refreshing and the small onsen left a scent of herbs on my skin for three days. In the night we cooked beef, pork meat and chicken along with all kinds of vegetables and ate until we could not possibly swallow another bite. We had some Red Suntory whiskey while sitting on the veranda listening to the sounds of the Japanese night and we surely enjoyed.

Another memorable experience was going to the Aiki shrine at Iwama for the anniversary of O Sensei. After the Shinto ceremony we had a nice lunch in the open air with beer and sake. It was an almost surreal atmosphere to it, nonetheless very pleasant. Imagine all the masters of Aikido gathered in one place, there was Ki in the air I tell you!

Towards the end of my stay we went to Gratis Dojo to celebrate its 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Again we had a nice meal and a fair number of parties followed. I believe it was three of them altogether. Speaking from a Norwegian point of view I am very impressed by the way that the Japanese organize their parties. They all start and finish at exactly the predestined time by clapping of hands, and then, magnificently, another party begins! Same place, same guests, but new party. No need to worry that there will not be enough time to drink.

Some days later we joined the camp in the mountains with Kobayashi sensei, Igarashi sensei and Yakota sensei. Again I had the opportunity to train under Igarashi sensei, something that I had already done a few times in Scandinavia and that I will keep doing every time I get the chance. He often starts with practicing basic techniques like tenkan kokyuho. He always makes me realize that I still cannot even lift my arm in a natural way. There is a long journey ahead for those who want to learn it.

But what is Aikido really? A martial art? From my humble position I think yes, it is a martial art, but it is not a common martial art. While most martial arts try to do as much damage to your opponent as possible, Aikido has different ideas. The ideas of non-resistance and no-force are mysterious. How can you lead someone that does not want to be lead? What is Aiki? How does it feel to be one with the universe? Should you no longer perceive your opponent as your enemy? I guess the answers to these questions lie infinitely far beyond my 4th kyu level, yet these are amongst the aspects that I find the most interesting in Aikido. While regarded as a cult by some ignorant outsiders,



people who train diligently in Aikido and use their observational skills soon realize that there is great truth to Aikido. It is this truth that we keep chasing after. Yet surely, if at some point I think that I understand something about Aikido, I will be proven wrong within five seconds. From this I must learn patience. When the apple is mature it will fall down from the tree, and I will make a nice apple pie and invite all my friends over. This does not mean that I should passively wait for the apple tree to do all the work by itself, it will still need water and weeding every once in a while. I can never know much about

the force that decides when the apple shall start growing or how it happens. I am only an observer to the miracles of reality.

In the end, maybe thinking too much about Aikido will not help; it might not give you any clear answers. My experience was though, that the more I trained the less I needed answers. Every day I felt my mind growing simpler and lighter. I did not ask as many questions and I did not need as many answers. In the end, I was able to enjoy more whatever I did. Just training Aikido in such a place as Kobayashi Dojo is enough, it will teach you everything that you need. There is no way one can understand with the conscious mind how Dojocho thinks, and there is no need to. One only needs to have faith that he wants what is best for you and keep on training. Sometimes it is hard and your muscles hurt, but those are the days that you need to focus the most. Getting through the hard times in a good way will teach you much more than surfing through all the easy times.

And by the way, the only medicine against sore Aikido muscles is more Aikido.