

The Uchideshi Life Magnus Reusch



At the 20th of September, I took the plane down from Norway, pit-stopping in Vienna, and from there flying directly to Japan for 11 and a half hour. My belly was filled with butterflies and my head was set on practice.

To fly off to a country on the other side of the world for the first time was kind of an interesting experience, as well as a tad frightening one. What does one expect when arriving at the other side of the world, living in a completely different country, with immense cultural differences, behavior, norms and rules? Nothing? Or maybe you expect too much? Personally I believe that you, as a first time traveler to a foreign country, can never prepare entirely for what you are going to experience in the coming time. And I was indeed proven right.

Once I arrived in Japan I took the bus to Saitama, Tokorozawa, where I also met my Norwegian friend and sempai, Lars Peder Fjellidal. We had heard that during autumn, Tokyo was in fact quite chilly, not exactly warm. However,



when we arrived, there was an intense heat wave, lasting for almost a week, with nearly, if not more than, 35 degrees Celsius. Luckily I had summer clothes on because a Japanese friend tipped me. Lars Peder on the other hand; “Walking around in mountain boots, jacket and a sweater surely must be immensely warm” I remember myself thinking.

The first meeting with Hiroaki Sensei was a humble yet casual one. I have been to several of both Kobayashi Yasuo’s and Hiroaki’s seminars, but coming to their own dojos in Japan is an incredibly special feeling. The atmosphere was calm and welcoming, and I easily felt at peace. I never thought I would be able to feel so at home in a completely new dojo in a country I had never visited before.

After the slightly confusing arrival with abnormally warm weather and the explanation of new tasks and what needed to be done, the practice started quickly in the evening. With jet-lag and far too little sleep on the airplane, the practice was hard and difficult, it was like walking in a blur! But the training itself helped me more than I thought. My body was more at ease and I felt the jet-lag disappearing already. Sleep that first day came very early.

The morning the next day, cleaning duties started. Sweeping the tatami, collecting leaves on the street outside, brushing off dust on the Bokken and Jo racks, the edges on the doors, tables, computers, sinks and whatnot, even the toilet got a thorough cleansing. At first I saw it as a task, a thing that had to be done because I was told to, but later it became “keiko”, practice. You took honor

in your cleaning; you took pride in making it shine like it never had before. The cleaning itself became a mirror, reflecting yourself and your dedication to what you were doing. Because of that, we always persuaded perfection, for nothing else was acceptable! In the end I actually found myself enjoying the cleaning and sweeping. It was calming, yet still sharpening my senses. It truly became a part of Aikido, as everything else came to be in the coming weeks and months. Something truly changed in me while I was an uchideshi.



The Uchideshi stay was, one can say, a spiritual one for me, and I did not understand how important it was until many months after it ended. The purpose of the training, and the stay itself became a question that asked me "Why are you practicing Aikido? What do you want to Achieve? Do you do this for the right reasons?" At first, I must say that my goal and my "mission" with being an uchideshi was to practice, practice, practice, practice... and practice a little more, until I became a lot better. Later, however, a few weeks thereafter, I realized that for me this was not the case, and that there was something else that was important. It became an experience that was about maturity, behavior, respect, attitude, friendliness and an inner calm, the question always protruding my thoughts, asking me "why?" In a sense, everything in an aikidoka's life is practice. The way you interact with other people, the way you literally behave and speak! To truly reach an inner peace, you will have to implement Aikido into all aspects of your life. This is one of the most important things I've learned in my life. Aikido is not necessarily about the practice itself, it is about everything else too.

The way I practice Aikido has changed drastically because of this, and definitely for the better.

To quickly discuss the way we practice aikido today; we practice kata, a set technique with a set attack, with a set pair of movements that connect into each other and create a fluid, liquid motion when you have practiced it enough. What I learned was that no technique necessarily needs a form. What you do depends on the situation, and no ikkyo is alike, because it all depends on the partner's (uke's) height, weight, connection, center, ki and everything else. No Ikkyo is alike. To exemplify this: I could do shomenuchi Ikkyo on Lars, we have a very strong connection, but I never managed on Yamawaki sensei. After much practice, acceptance, relaxation and more, I finally managed to do an ikkyo, in slow motion. Looking at it afterwards I realized that these two Ikkyo's were very different, not necessarily in form, but in feeling. When I say that "no technique necessarily needs a set form", I also mean the way it "feels". You could say there is a "form" in the way a technique is supposed to feel as well,



but this might not actually be possible, for every aikidoka have his/her own connection.

Conclusively, this is something I came to realize while I was in Kobayashi dojo, the ability to accept your partner. To not do it your own way, but listen to your partner, connect to him/her and do your technique while, at all times, listening to your uké and moving in harmony with him. You do the technique “together”. You create the “way” together. There are things in Aikido that cannot be realized unless you practice for many hours, for many years, and I feel like I have just scratched the surface of it.

The stay in Kobayashi dojo included a lot more than just a spiritual experience of course. I was taken along on many interesting trips, social events and a seminar in Iwai as well. The weekly Wednesday breakfasts at Hiroaki Sensei`s house were something I always looked forward to a week in advance! Miyoko-san`s amazingly good food, with pumpkin soup, nattó, homemade Wasabi and much much more, plus the lovely coffees Hiroaki sensei made with the coffee-machine after each meal, was truly unforgettable. The joyous and positive mood around the table is something I will remember for the rest of my life.

The honor of experiencing a true, traditional tea ceremony, with also being allowed to try and make my own cup of tea was a great moment for me too!

The trip to Tsumagoi was also an unforgettable experience, with many trips to different *onsens* (bath-houses), as well as deliciously cooked food by Yamawaki sensei's wife.

Kanda Sensei invited me and Lars for a trip to an onsen bath up in the mountains where he used to live. The place radiated a very special feeling, a similar feeling to the one I felt when I visited Yamawaki sensei up in the mountains in Tsumagoi. There was an immense feeling of peace and calmness over the place, despite of the many people who visited this famous onsen. Hiroaki sensei's birthday was one I will hardly forget. Lars, myself and Afef were invited to go on a trip to Nikko together with sensei's family, visiting a hotel with a lot of history, seeing the temples at Nikko, the first emperor's grave and more, made a huge impact on me, and changed how I perceive Japan and its culture. Sadly I caught a cold the same day, and was unable to join for the sushi meal after we came back to the dojo. While I was sick with high fever and soar throat, I was allowed to sleep in sensei's own apartment, and I was taken extremely well care of. I truly felt like a member of the family. I cannot possibly begin to explain how grateful I am for your care, and I am eternally grateful for your hospitality.

I went together to Kobayashi dojo as an uchideshi with my fellow student and sempai, Lars Fjellidal. Together we embarked on a journey that cannot be experienced nor properly expressed through this essay. To be integrated into the Japanese society to the extent we did, if only for two months, do intensive training, cleaning and feel the satisfaction and peace of focusing on only one thing, leaves me amazed, and longing for more!

I thank you, Kobayashi sensei, Hiroaki sensei and your families, and all the members of kobayashi dojo, for giving me the most wonderful gift I have ever received in my life. *Domo arigato gozaimashita!*

