

## Being Uchi Deshi ( live-in student ) in the Iwama Dojo

In the Iwama Dojo, there are three categories of Aikido practitioners: 'uchi-deshi', literally 'inside student', a person who lives in the dojo in an apprentice-like kind of relationship with Saito Sensei; 'soto-deshi' literally 'outside student', a person who has served as uchi-deshi for some time and then moved into own accommodations but still has a close relationship with Saito Sensei. Soto-deshi are still expected to train as diligently as possible while living outside the dojo, a sort of extended uchi-deshi relationship; and 'deshi': 'student', referring to the people who come and train as they please as regular members of the Iwama dojo.

I have been to Iwama 7 times, the first time in 1984. I met my wife Midoriko on this first trip. I have been back to Japan almost every other year since then, to train and to visit family. My wife and I have lived with our daughter Nanami and our son Yuji in the town next to Iwama, Tomobe, for a year and three months in 1990-91. I trained as soto deshi for this period, experiencing training and living through four beautiful seasons in this wonderful part of Japan, northeast of Tokyo.

The small country town of Iwama is located in Ibaraki prefecture, northeast of Tokyo, close to the sea, in a mountainous area abundant with lush forests. The capital of Ibaraki prefecture is Mito. A bit further north of Mito you will find the city called Hitachi, which is home city of the electrical appliance and electronics corporation of the same name.

Iwama is about a 2 hour ride by train from Tokyo, going north on the Joban train line. The Iwama Dojo is a ten minute walk from the station, in a quiet area with mostly private houses. If you walk from the Iwama dojo through to the far side of town, you reach the mountain called Atago-san (san is another pronunciation of the word 'yama' meaning mountain, not the polite prefix you add to names in Japanese, although with the beauty of the mountains in Japan, you do wish to address them with respect!). On top of this mountain is the Atago Jinja (Shinto shrine) that O-Sensei would go to for special practice, being gently pushed up the steep steps by his students. On the far side of the mountain, past an area with old, thatched-roof farmhouses, lies a special jinja next to a small brook with a waterfall and pond by it. This is where O-Sensei would come to do misogi (purification) under the waterfall, a tradition which is still carried on today by Saito Sensei and the students in the Iwama dojo. Special weapons practice is still carried on here, just as in O Sensei's day. This area is truly magical. It is difficult to find places in Japan where you don't see signs of modernisation, but standing with the mountains sloping down on one side, and the mountain stream cascading into the pond, the worn-down stone steps leading up to the simple wooden structure of the shrine, the small cluster of farm houses further down the small road leading up to the shrine, time seems to really have stood still.

My first trip to the Iwama Dojo to study as uchi-deshi under Saito sensei was in 1984. I was 26 years old and had been practicing Aikido since 1976 under Takeji Tomita sensei, one of Saito sensei's best students who had moved to Stockholm, Sweden. I went together with my good friend and fellow Copenhagen Aikido Club instructor Torben Dyrberg. We spent two months in the dojo, and at that time there were only 4 uchi-deshi, all from the Copenhagen club. This was a special opportunity to experience the feeling of training and living together in very close proximity to Saito Sensei. Sensei's house is about 50 meters from the dojo, and when our chores were finished Sensei would often go out of his way to cook a special meal for us and use these occasions to teach us a myriad of things, ranging from table manners to using a tenugui (Japanese handkerchief) for self defense!

Torben and I, on the train going to Iwama and had been unsure of when to get off. Some young people who spoke a bit of English were helping us when an older gentleman who seemed to

understand that we were going to the Iwama Aikido dojo said something to them. They turned to us and with astonishment said, "He is an Aikido sensei in Iwama?". We had been introduced to Saito Sensei before, so we knew this gentleman was not our sensei, but were not ones to argue! The man kindly walked with us from the station to the dojo and deposited us at Saito Sensei's house, with Sensei thanking him profusely for his help. The gentleman turned out to be Zensaburo Akazawa, an old student of O-Sensei who also lives in Iwama but is no longer active in Aikido. A very special coincidence, indeed!

As far as the daily dojo routine goes, it's basically the same as it was back then: sleeping in the dojo on futons, at 6:00 you are up and the futons are folded just so, and stowed in proper rows in a small room adjacent to the dojo. Before the 7:00 AM weapons practice, there is weeding to be done around the dojo area. The Aiki Jinja grounds are swept with straw brooms and raked. One soon learns that there is a certain way of doing even the most seemingly everyday things here, and it all is part of training. For instance: rakes are used in a deep hanmi stance which not only does least damage to the ground but also trains the posture and hips.

Morning practice is primarily for uchi deshi. Also soto deshi are given permission to attend by Saito Sensei. We bow in inside the dojo with Saito Sensei and then proceed outside to start practice either in front of the Aiki Jinja or the grounds around the dojo. Morning practice is always either ken or jo. If it rains it is jo dori or tachi dori in the dojo. This is a continuation of the same practice that Saito Sensei did with O-Sensei during his 24 years of practice with the founder. Training in O-Sensei's dojo, sleeping in front of the kami-dana where every item there is an object directly belonging to the Founder, seeing his calligraphy on the dojo wall, the feeling of practicing tanren uchi (striking a tire with a suburi bokken) under the trees that O-Sensei planted, almost wherever you look, the legacy of the founder is around you when you are in the Iwama dojo.

After morning keiko, it is time for jiyu keiko (free practice), to attempt to file away what you have just learned.

"All meals are fixed by the uchi-deshi themselves in turns, with two people on kitchen duty per day. This is called Toban. After breakfast, chores are assigned. These can be weeding, raking, cleaning the shokudo (the combined kitchen/dining hall/sitting room/shower/laundry room), toilets (read "outhouse" - good for breath control practice), hauling branches, mowing, and much more. There is usually a work period from after breakfast until around noon. Lunch is partaken and afternoons are for free practice and free time unless there are special chores to be done. At 6 PM the dojo is swept and made ready for evening practice which is from 7 PM until 8 PM. This is taijutsu, and this is the everyday practice for the regular members of the Iwama dojo. People come from Iwama, the towns nearby and some even come in from Tokyo. Practice goes from Tuesday till Saturday with Sunday being a combined children's class/adult class from 10 AM till 11 AM. The emphasis is on practicing with the children. They get to sit up in the front line when we bow in, and they have to be the ones who start the techniques during practice. About halfway through the class, the adults who aren't practicing with a child are given a bit more advanced techniques to work on. Mondays are free, with time to relax or go sightseeing. Often there will be gasshuku (training camps) where different Aikido groups from universities and private dojos come for a weekend of training. Then there are extra classes during the day. This is an interesting opportunity to meet other Aikidoka from other parts of Japan.

I sincerely hope that many other of my fellow Aikidoka can enjoy the experience of living and

training in the very special setting of the Iwama Dojo under the guidance of Morihiro Saito sensei.

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