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Words From Obata-Kaiso

Tameshigiri in Modern Times

2010 MARKS MY thirtieth year here in the United States, and the twentieth of Shinkendo. Over the years, I have seen how many people have imitated the tameshigiri aspect of Shinkendo, but it is something I cannot control.

Seventy years ago, Nakayama Hakudo, the father of Iaido, saw tameshigiri rise in popularity, accompanied by frequent cases of injury, as many students began neglecting kata practice in favor of cutting. Consequently, Nakayama prohibited his students from cutting, seeing how recklessly and dangerously it was being performed. These days, test-cutting has become popular once again, but I would like our students to focus on all aspects of the sword, and not just tameshigiri.

Two years ago, when I turned sixty, my son Yukishiro was officially ordained Soke Dairi (representative of the soke). He is currently undertaking Soke Dairi shugyo (training) at the Honbu Dojo. All students who train at Honbu will learn from me, the Kaiso, and my son, the Soke Dairi. In addition, my wife, my son Michishiro, and my daughter Yoko are all assisting the ISF as Soke Hosa (assistants to the soke).

When I was young, I never imagined that I would be living in English-speaking America in the future. I have experienced many language obstacles, and at times I was not sure that students were comprehending some of the finer points of technique and theory. Now, with a Soke Dairi fluent in English, this barrier will be broken. I highly recommend that instructors hosting seminars invite the Soke Dairi as assistant instructor to me during seminars, during which he will be able to assist you further in English.

Michishiro has been working hard documenting the body of Shinkendo techniques for archival purposes. Beginning in 2011, instructors can come to my home and view these techniques. Michishiro is also updating the Shinkendo charter, which will include more details concerning the specific roles of instructors by rank.

Currently, Marimo and my wife are finishing up the Shinkendo philosophy book with Honbu student Nicholas, and we hope to have it completed by the end of this year.

At the Honbu Dojo, before regular class, there is an extra thirty-minute training session for advanced Honbu students. Visiting students are welcome to watch or train during this session, depending on their level.



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A Transforming Year

By Gabriel Koneta
Honbu Dojo

It seems to me that this has been an interesting, and somewhat transforming, year at Honbu so far. First of all, the daily presence and deeper involvement of Yukishiro Obata-soke dairi has infused our classes with a new kind of energy and excitement. We now have the privilege to see the same wonderfully rich world of martial arts we've been taught by Kaiso for many years from a slightly different perspective as well. While Kaiso still dictates the main approach of our studies and leads classes, Yukishiro-soke dairi's involvement with every detail is giving us a new opportunity to understand the particular techniques in a broader sense and context. Getting instruction from two different angles – from Kaiso and Soke Dairi – can illuminate some otherwise difficult-to-grasp aspects, and it can shake up our attention while forcing us to double-check all the hardened (not always good) habits we have previously developed.

I'm certain we all feel privileged being able to learn from a most formidable martial artist on a daily basis. But now having two magnificent teachers helping and pushing us up this steep hill is truly priceless and humbling – not to mention all the help and support coming from Michishiro Obata, Yoko Obata, and Mrs. Obata. It does – and should – make us feel more obliged to do our best to validate that their efforts are invested in dedicated, grateful, and worthy individuals.

The positive effects of this development have been enhanced further by the overlapping visits of three students from three different countries. We do get visitors at Honbu quite regularly, and those visits always affect our daily training in a positive way. Practicing with different people, with different attitudes and styles, is always helpful and even necessary to avoid falling back on comfortable habits and incomplete solutions.

This time around, though, the effect of the long stays of Saki from Japan, Konstantine-sensei from Greece, and Peter-sensei from Hungary, was more profound than usual. While Peter-sensei is a long-time instructor in Hungary, Konstantine-sensei established his own dojo fairly recently and Saki practically had to start from scratch and become an instructor in Japan in just a few

months. The intensity was palpable at the dojo every day. Kaiso and Soke Dairi poured everything into bringing the new instructors up to speed and cultivating a reasonable level of proficiency. They used every tool in their arsenal to maintain a steady pace of progress. They demonstrated, described, explained and sometimes applied some "tough love" to get the point across.



Advanced Honbu students were also greatly pressured to demonstrate their most accurate and effective form and lead by good example. Sensing the urgency and dedication from both Kaiso and the new instructors, we

tried to assist them as much as possible on the mat, as well as offering counsel off the mat on how to manage the considerable pressures of assuming leadership and instructing others. These visitors were training practically all day, taking notes after classes, practicing in their free time, and in general showing so much dedication and courage that everyone who paid attention could not help but feel profound admiration toward them.

We have all learned a great deal during these intense times. But apart from the technical issues, I find an obvious, but often comfortably overlooked, message here. There is always – always – more we can do to learn and better ourselves, both in martial arts and life in general. Our recent visitors showed the almost ridiculous amount of progress one can make even in a limited time frame, given the dedication and will to push to the limit. They not only jumped to the next level in their studies, but also proved they can take extreme pressure like true samurai.

Even in the most favorable circumstances, people tend to get comfortable and take things for granted. I believe these new experiences have helped many of us to see our progress more realistically and regain some of the initial wonder that started us on our journey on this highly rewarding and beautiful path.

Senior Students Train Together at Honbu

By Matthew Lynch
Honbu Dojo

Recently, Obata-kaiso started holding a special class for senior students (licensed instructors of ten years experience or more) at Honbu Dojo. In my over eleven years at Honbu, this is the first time I know of that he has ever done this. We train for about thirty minutes before regular class begins, and then stay on for that class as well.

One benefit of this system is that the other students who show up early get to watch us train. I cannot stress enough the importance, when you get the chance, of watching training from the sidelines. There is so much to learn when you don't have to concentrate on doing it yourself. You can see other people's good habits and flaws, and compare them to your own skill level. You can see the drills "from the outside" and gain a much better perspective on training as a whole. Hopefully, students will be inspired by our skill level and dedication, but my real hope is that they take advantage of the chance to observe. Students ought to take notes, memorize the drills, and take Kaiso's corrections and critiques to us as their own. This is more valuable than I can say.

A big benefit for us, of course, is getting to train with our peers. I love teaching, and I love guiding junior students and pushing them to do better. But I value my time at Honbu Dojo because it is where I get to be a student, too, and training with my fellow senior students is a big part of that. We don't always train at lightning speed, nor do we always do super-advanced drills, but there is an intensity, a sincerity, a precision to working with high-level students that improves my own technique so very much. I suppose, on occasion, I am guilty of sleep-walking through a drill when teaching it to a beginner. Maybe I don't take his attacks seriously, or am focusing on some other aspect of the drill. I can



guarantee, however, that I am paying total attention to every moment when I am facing off with James or Nicholas or Mike Shu. I know they are good enough that they would never hurt me if I made an error, but when we cross our bokuto I always feel like I am facing a real warrior with a real sword, and any mistake or lapse of concentration will cost me my life.

Perhaps the greatest benefit is that Obata-kaiso has only a few of us to observe, which means we each get more critiques and corrections than we would in a room full of students. Firsthand correction from Obata-kaiso is obviously the most valuable training there can be. I remember that, when I started my own dojo, Obata-kaiso made it very clear that I was to continue to train at Honbu as much as I could. He told me that he has seen too many excellent students leave Honbu to teach somewhere, and when they come back months or years later, their skills are rusty and dull. It is easy to become soft when your own teacher is far away. In sports, for example, the best athletes still have coaches and still receive regular training and corrections. You cannot do this for yourself. In Shinkendo this is also true. No matter how good you ever become, you *need* the observations and corrections of your instructor. We all have bad habits that creep in when nobody is watching us.

Thank you, Obata-kaiso, for continuing to polish and sharpen your senior students at Honbu. We will always do our best to set a good example by training hard and listening to your corrections, and, with your help, we will continue to improve throughout the course of our time in Shinkendo.



JSOG's Trip to Shochu-Geiko

By Nayef Smith
JSOG Dojo – Gwinnet, GA

After a pleasantly uneventful flight into LAX, we made our way to Little Tokyo by way of the "Super Shuttle." This can be an adventure in itself, as you'll be with a number of other passengers going in the same general direction, which can be a fairly large section of the city. The more members of your group going to the same place, the better. We had some pleasant conversations with the passengers and, along the way, a discussion about the Old West started. The question arose as to whether or not California was a significant location in the Old West period of American history. After some discussion, a Google lookup on the iPhone, and some further questions about the Gold Rush, we were able to determine with some certainty that California was part of the Old West. With the major historical concerns of our Honbu's fair state put to rest and our initial journey at an end, we got settled into the Miyako hotel in Little Tokyo and prepared for class at Honbu.

After lunch, we went searching for the Honbu Dojo. We found the building, but were unable to determine how to enter. As a note, Honbu has its own stair access next to the main lobby of the building. When we arrived, the dojo sign was not visible to us, and we went into the main lobby of the building, where there is an elevator. We noted that the elevator would go the third floor, but not the second, where the dojo is located. After walking the building up, down, and around, we decided to return later, closer to the start of class time. We concluded that this must be one of the qualifications for joining the Little Tokyo dojo – you first have to find your way in.

We attended normal class on Thursday night and trained with Obata-kaiso and Honbu students, as well as visiting students Saki, Konstantine, and Peter. We were introduced to a new series of tsuki tachiuchi, which, consisting of twelve sets in all, was the main focus of the seminar and very interesting to study. Having attended 36 seminars over the course of my Shinkendo career, I've always learned something new at every seminar. This seminar was no exception.



As we ended training on Thursday, Kaiso noted that we had arrived at the start of a heat wave in L.A. We drew the conclusion that we had brought the heat from Atlanta with us. Given Kaiso's comment that the Atlanta group was bringing the heat to Honbu, hopefully we would take it back with us. The heat wave in L.A. was 85-degree highs and 20-percent humidity the entire time we were there.

The seminar was jam-packed with new material and refinement of forms that improved our technique. Included in the seminar were the techniques of juppon-dachi and juppon-ura, bojutsu (including kumite), modori-kata ashi sabaki, shiho-dachi, Toyama Ryu battojutsu in two-man box formation, and a comprehensive review of tanrenkata.



At the end of each day's training, we gathered as students and as a dojo to enjoy dining at one of the many area restaurants within walking distance. Good

hard training during the hot L.A. days made the dining in the wonderfully cool nights all the more enjoyable. We had our fair share of "unique" dining experiences, the highlight of which was some peppermint-flavored drinking water at a Korean BBQ, where a local patron had to be removed from the restaurant after passing out drunk at a table. We also managed to stump the kitchen at the Omasa restaurant, when a dish of plain udon, prepared with no broth (or, as the wait staff put it, "no taste") was ordered. They checked three times with us to make sure we knew what we were getting, sanity-checking our order each time. A sanity-check was appropriate, considering our mental state after the last day of training. The last two nights of our trip, we did dojo karaoke. Our karaoke ability could be considered "kihon" at best. Before Shochu-Geiko ended, Benny Lima, Tom Mulheron, and Thomas Murphy received menjo certificates presented by Obata-kaiso. Both Tom and Thomas were given the teaching rank of Shidojin and the responsibility of doing better everyday. All of the students enjoyed the time at Honbu and look forward to returning in the near future.

I would like to thank Kaiso for his continuing efforts to make Shinkendo a living art, Mrs. Sensei for her hospitality sharing current events, and the Honbu Dojo students for working with us and bringing us up to speed on the new material during the seminar. A special thanks to Yukishiro-sensei, Michishiro-sensei, and Yokosensei for their help during the seminar.

JSOG is Japanese Swordsmanship of Gwinnett, the school of Shinkendo established by Nayef Smith-sensei.

