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Words From Obata-Kaiso

The Next Decade In Shinkendo

IN JANUARY, the Honbu Dojo participated in the New Year's demonstration in Little Tokyo and



hosted Keiko Hajime. For the coming first half of the year, my seminar schedule includes Illinois in March, Poland in April, England and the Netherlands in May, a Honbu seminar in May, and Georgia in June. I used to dream of going to Europe when I was younger, and now I can go every year.

Shinkendo was developed in the early '90s, and slowly began to spread. This was a time when I concentrated all my effort on teaching techniques. From 2000 to 2010, Shinkendo spread far and wide, with instructors around the world. The Shinkendo name has become more commonly known and recognized with the efforts of these instructors. The goal for the next ten years is to cultivate more instructors who understand Jinsei Shinkendo and have a deeper understanding of the Shinkendo philosophy. This will be the decade in which the real meaning of Jinsei Shinkendo will be understood around the world. As we go into our thirtieth year, I would like everyone to focus their energies on understanding these deeper philosophies on top of their daily training.

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Keiko Hajime Gallery

By Nicholas Lauridsen
Honbu Dojo

This year's Keiko Hajime seminar once again brought students and instructors of all levels from around the globe to Honbu. Although we have seminars four times a year at Honbu, it is nothing short of remarkable each time to have so many practitioners, some who have just embarked on their training and some who have been studying for decades, gathered in the same place, interacting with each other, sharing stories, and learning from each other. I look forward to each of these seminars and the energy they bring to our practice, but Keiko Hajime perhaps more so, as we are not only attending a training seminar with our art's founder, but partaking in an age-old tradition of re-dedicating ourselves to our art, and re-consecrating this activity in which many of us have had been involved for a significant part of our lives. In short, it is a wonderful way to begin a new year.

Among the participants in this year's Keiko Hajime were Cuc Phan-sensei and Stéphane Molina-sensei from France, Byron Shepherd-sensei and his student Ian Webb from England, Jim Alvarez-sensei from Livermore, Trevis Crane-sensei and two of his students, Peter Parker and Rachael McEniry, from Chicago, Byron Harrison-sensei from Arizona, as well as Honbu and local shibu students.

The following photos were taken at Keiko Hajime by the Obata family.







My First Keiko Hajime

By Cuc Phan
Arcueil Dojo, France



From January 14th through 16th, I attended Keiko Hajime, my first Honbu seminar. But it was my second stay at Honbu Dojo. I came in 2009 with two other French students. I have to admit I prepared for this trip very seriously and trained harder at Arcueil Dojo in the two months before my departure. Kaiso's time and advice are so precious that I wanted to be ready to receive his teachings under the best possible conditions.



Kaiso reminded us during the seminar of three important and equal elements of Shinkendo practice – ashi sabaki, tai sabaki, and ken sabaki. Important and equal; no part should be neglected. All our exercises focused on these three aspects. Also, this seminar gave me the opportunity to meet and train with Honbu and senior US students. That was really great – they helped me fix so many details!

I did enjoy the seminar. I learned so much! I can tell you I took many precious notes! Another positive part of the seminar: the nice weather in Los Angeles. I did not expect it to be so warm and sunny.



Thank you to all the attendees who practiced with me. And last but not least, thank you so much to Kaiso, the Soke Dairi, Mrs. Obata-sensei, Michishiro-sensei, Yoko-sensei. Shinkendo is the martial art I will practice all my life. It is a pure diamond. Jinsei Shinkendo!



The Expert Mind

By Trevis Crane
Sojokan Dojo, Chicago

Reading Gabriel-sensei's recent newsletter article, I was struck by a particular passage:

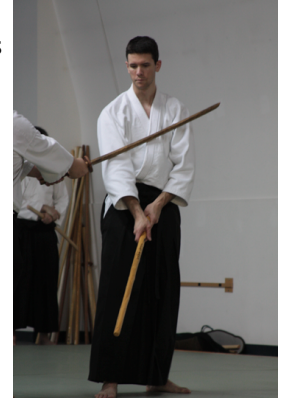
“Our recent visitors showed the almost ridiculous amount of progress one can make even in a limited time frame, given the dedication and will to push to the limit.”

This reflects what I often tell my students, which is based not only on experience in Shinkendo and other areas but also on an article I read in 2006 which I found to be very interesting. The article, called “The Expert Mind,” (the title of which I have shamelessly stolen) was published in Scientific American (August 2006) and focuses on the mental processes of chess masters and the clues those processes provide as to how people become experts in other fields. In this newsletter article, I will summarize some of the key points made in “The Expert Mind” article and discuss their applicability to our practice of Shinkendo.



We start with a story about a past chess master named Jose Raul Capablanca, and central to the article is the following quote from Capablanca: “I see only one move ahead, but it is always the correct one.” The idea captured here is that chess masters are not masters because they think like a computer, calculating and considering many, many moves ahead. Rather, they see approximately the same number of moves ahead as a player of any other ability (better or worse), but the quality of the moves they consider is vastly superior to those considered by less capable players. The question, then, is in determining where the chess master's considerable ability comes from – is it innate or is it learned? If learned, then how is it learned and what can that tell us about mastering other endeavors?

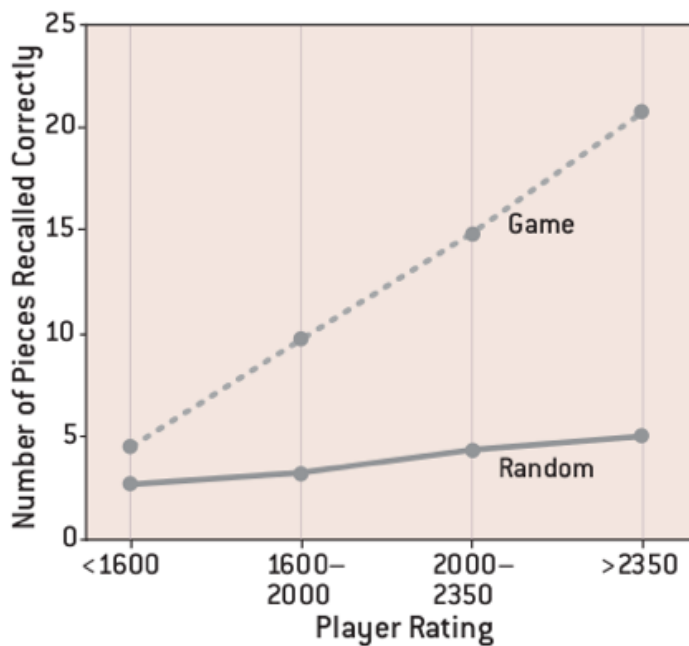
Going back over 100 years, one of the first hypotheses for how a chess master plays a game was the idea that they have an almost photographic memory of the board and the pieces. However, it was soon concluded that this was far too simplistic a notion and that instead a chess master relies upon a system of connections that encode the possible piece positions and most likely moves – such that when we look at a chess master playing blindfolded, while he may have forgotten the precise location of a pawn, he can find it, as it were, by considering the phases through which the game has moved and knowing how pieces will tend to move through those phases.



It is the possession of this intricate body of knowledge and intuitive understanding of this system of connections that allows a chess player to dominate a lesser player. The chess master has a much better network of understanding. This can be seen also in the field of physics as another example (I pick this example because I have extensive experience in this arena as well, gained from seven years as a graduate student and two years as a post doc). An experienced student and an inexperienced student will take markedly different approaches in the initial steps of solving a problem. The inexperienced student may consider several different options to solving the problem, often going down numerous dead ends before finally arriving at the correct solution (if they do at all). However, the experienced student will often arrive at the answer or the correct approach in a matter of only minutes. In both the instance of the chess master and the instance of the physics student, the expert relies not so much on significantly greater powers of analysis, but rather upon their significantly greater store of structured knowledge of the field which allows them to come much more quickly to the solution.

This concept is further illustrated through an experiment described in the article. Chess players of a range of abilities were shown pieces on a chess board. They were shown either random positions or positions arrived at through the course of play in a normal game. The chess players were then asked to memorize the pieces' positions and recall their locations. In the figure below, the number of pieces

correctly recalled is plotted against the chess player's rating.



What is immediately obvious is the strong correlation between the chess player's rating and the number of pieces correctly recalled for situations in which the pieces were placed on the board in the positions associated with a real game as contrasted with the absence of such a correlation for when the pieces are placed randomly. This strongly suggests that the expert players do not have an innate talent for remembering piece locations but instead that they do have a considerable store of chess game knowledge that allows them to glance at a chess board and quickly place it within the context of their experience. The fact that what they observe about the pieces' positions fits within a framework with which they are intimately familiar allows them to recall the pieces' positions not just from memorization of the particular arrangement but also by relying upon their understanding of the arrangement, the pattern, that is present within the context of the likely or possible evolution of a game.

Thus it is effectively a body of knowledge and experience in the field of chess that a chess master draws upon to pick what is "always the correct [move]". And while psychological experts may disagree to some extent on the precise mechanisms by which the chess experts access or use this body of knowledge, they do agree on one thing: it takes enormous effort to develop a degree of mastery in any given field, mastery in chess being the most easily

measured. The article argues that what matters is not necessarily time spent practicing in a particular field, but rather "effortful study," which requires always working at or slightly beyond the edges of one's competence. Through this type of study, I think the student ends up with a stored memory of many, many patterns but also the ability to seamlessly access those patterns and derive a sort of intuited response based upon a deep understanding of those patterns and how one's current situation (chess game or physics problem) fits within or is composed of those patterns.

This idea of effortful study explains why a hobbyist can spend thousands of hours at a given endeavor but always remain average in its execution and why a properly trained student can quickly overtake such a hobbyist in a relatively short period of time. One sees this in many areas – golf, driving a car, ability with a musical instrument, etc. Often a novice's ability rockets up at the beginning of studying something, but when a certain point of capability is achieved (can play golf as well as your friends, can drive without wrecking) the amount of effortful study decreases until you reach a point at which you simply maintain your ability without seeing any significant gains.



This brings me full circle to Shinkendo. Dedicated Shinkendoka can spend many years practicing and learning all the kata (patterns) and eventually trying to learn how to go beyond the pattern to allow for a dynamic response to a stimulus that is not predetermined. However, if we fail to push ourselves to the edge of our competency in any given area, our ability will quickly stagnate. What I believe Gabriel-sensei was witnessing firsthand and described in his article was precisely the kind of explosive advancement a dedicated student can make if pushed to the edge and held there for every hour they practice. What is fascinating to

me is that what Gabriel-sensei observed is based fundamentally upon how we as humans learn and strive toward mastery of any endeavor, be it Shinkendo, chess, or in my opinion anything else.

We practice and practice and practice, but if every moment of that practice is not performed in such a way that we are pushing ourselves to the limit (of our understanding, our physical capability, our endurance, or any combination of these), then in a very real sense we are cheating ourselves. Obata-kaiso has said as much himself – when we do not practice with full attention and focus, full commitment to the practice, we are stealing from ourselves.

One can see this further exemplified in how Obata-kaiso teaches and how the curriculum has changed and continues to change to this day. There are a few set standards that we all must learn and continue to practice. However, what we see on a regular basis at seminars is the introduction of new patterns or sets of techniques. The fundamentals don't change (Shinkendo comprising just a few cuts coupled with either stepping, shuffling, or turning), but the ways in which we combine those fundamentals is something that Obata-kaiso is famous for altering, if only slightly, and amplifying. In this way, we are challenged from without to train at the very edge of our ability because, in a very real sense, the material is always new.



Practicing so that you are always pushing has multiple benefits, both personal and on a broader scale. There is the obvious benefit that your technique will improve more quickly. But, in my opinion, as important as that is, there is an equally important benefit of practicing in this fashion – it substantially affects other students and the dojo in general. The energy one student brings to the dojo affects all the other students, and again Gabriel-sensei says it quite well in his article:

“These visitors were training... and in general showing so much dedication and courage that everyone who paid attention could not help but feel profound admiration for them.”

This is what we should all strive toward every time we come to the dojo. For me, this is what it means to do something shinken. This is part of how my life is Shinkendo – Jinsei Shinkendo.

Keiko Hajime 2011

By Rachael McEniry
Sojokan Dojo, Chicago

I recently had the opportunity to travel to Los Angeles and train at the Honbu Dojo during the annual Keiko Hajime seminar. Although I have been training in Shinkendo for several years now, this was the first time I have been able to train at the Honbu.



This was an eye-opening training experience for me in many ways. One of the things that struck me the most was the level of intensity to our training. There was an intensity to our training that regular classes, or even other seminars, seem to lack. In each technique, from taiso ichi to complex tachiuchi, we were all encouraged to push ourselves as much as possible. Now that I have seen this firsthand, I will strive to add this intensity to every training session that I attend.

In addition, I found Keiko Hajime to be a wonderful opportunity to train with a variety of students and instructors from around the world. Each person I had the opportunity to train with had a slightly different perspective on how I could improve my technique. I got lessons on things from where a kote strike should land to better placement of my own hands during a block. I greatly appreciate the insight my fellow Shinkendoka were able to provide me.



I also found it very interesting to watch the different participants. While watching their technique and listening

to their explanations, I was better able to understand why we do things a certain way. It furthered my understanding of what a particular technique should look like and how to pick apart what did not work as well.



One other experience that I enjoyed was when I had the opportunity to work with Byron-sensei from Arizona under the direction of both Obata-kaiso and Yuki-sensei. They were trying to help Byron-sensei improve his teaching technique. Not only did I get advice from all of them on how to improve my own technique, I also got to listen to their advice to him on how to help any student of Shinkendo improve. This is something that I have

been trying to work on recently, and I think their advice on how to teach better will help me improve both my teaching skills and how I work to correct my own technique.



Overall, I found Keiko Hajime to be a wonderful experience. I am very thankful to the Obata family for the opportunity to train with them and their hospitality. I am already looking forward to the next time I am able to visit Honbu!

Autumn Training in Munich with Roland-sensei

By Isabel Hegenbarth & Susanne Stangl
Soryukan Dojo, Munich

In November of 2010, a couple of Shinkendoka from several European countries came to Munich, Germany to train under the guidance of Hungarian Chief Instructor Roland Lajos-sensei. With friends from Belgium, Alsace, England, Switzerland, and our neighbour dojo in Fürstenfeldbruck, we shared two days of inspiring Shinkendo training. We intended to use the opportunity of having Roland-sensei in Munich to first of all work on our

basic technique – and we heavily profited from his input. He not only indicated many details but also showed us useful ways of teaching. We enjoyed a weekend of intensive practice in a positive and amicable atmosphere. Our thanks go to Roland-sensei for coming all the way from Budapest and giving us such a lot of valuable instruction. We also want to thank all the participants for joining – we really had a great time!



Autumn in Tokyo

By Peter Parker
Sojokan Dojo, Chicago



Tokyo is a one-of-a-kind city. There is a unique blend of everything over there. I guess blending is sort of a Japanese specialty anyway. Ancient and modern, spicy and sweet, Asian and European – one can find almost anything here. There is always a vibration that seems to be familiar or close to one's heart.

It is amazing how different the city can be depending on which subway station you exit. You could find yourself in a Shinto shrine, high-tech district, or some other very strange place. The city is clean, enormous, well organized, and only possible because people understand how to live together in extreme congestion.



The present Tokyo metropolis was shaped by two historical events: the Meiji restoration and the last world war. The first of these brought the Emperor to Edo castle and jump-started modernization; the second completely redefined the meaning of modern. History and symbolism are here on every corner. The Imperial headquarters are in the heart of the city. Around it, there are government compounds and commerce towers. The Metropolitan Government Offices building offers remarkable views of the city. Only there can you really

comprehend how enormous the metropolis is. Another great city view is from the buildings in the Roppongi district. The night skyline with its bright outlook on or from Tokyo Tower is extraordinary. There are many places to visit after sunset besides Roppongi and Giza. Nothing beats a cup of coffee in San'ai Building while on-looking crowds fill up streets at dusk.

There are two main spiritual centers in Tokyo: the first is Meiji Shinto Shrine, the second, Buddhist Senso-ji Temple. There are countless shrines and temples all over the city. They blend within and together with many parks providing retreats from busy life in the metropolis. One can find peace and a little rest in places like these. If one place dresses up Samurai figures during flower festival, the Ueno Park proudly displays a statue of the last of them – Saigo Takamori.



The city is connected with a remarkable subway system. The subway itself connects with local Japan railways and

the Shinkansen. Moving around is extremely efficient. One place worth visiting by train is Kamakura, only a short distance from Tokyo, a place made distinct by a great Buddha statue and the center of the historical Kamakura shogunate. The Kamakura period was a time when the greatest sword-makers created their masterpieces. Some of those are displayed in the Tokyo National Museum, but some in less known places. The sword museum is just one room in a hard-to-find building of the Japanese Sword Preservation Society (Nihon Bijutsu Token Hozon Kyokai). It holds an incredible collection of extremely well-preserved blades. It is like taking a journey through time to the era of sword-making, from early tachi through katana, as well as sets of daisho – a must-see for every Shinkendoka visiting the city.

Another place worth visiting close by is Nikko, some 140km away. There is a heritage collection of shrines and temples, home to a sleeping cat and three Zen monkeys. If you are on the quest for peace or deep meditation, Nikko is the place to visit. As much as the buildings are amazing, the location itself, especially in autumn, is even more so. Located in the mountains, it is beautifully forested and colorful. With a little hiking, you can visit the Kanmangafuchi Abyss, the “gateway to the other world,” a place of astounding Hyaku Jizo statues.

Of course, if you are in Tokyo, do not forget about your Shinkendo friends. Some of them might be working there, visiting, studying, or dreaming about opening their own dojo. A special thank you to Saki Yoshida for showing us around her hometown.



Tameshigiri Session Photos

Honbu Dojo

The following photographs were taken at a recent tameshigiri session held at the Honbu Dojo.



Yukishiro-soke dairi



Michiyo-sensei (Mrs. Sensei)