

# The Kingdom of Dust

PIOTR MASZTALERZ



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A sad story about the happiness

# The Kingdom of Dust

*Piotr Masztalerz*

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Piotr Masztalerz

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*The Kingdom of Dust was published in Polish in 2018. This is a book about being an Uchideshi- a full time student – about building a full time Dojo, and about the nature of teacher-student relationships.*

*For us it is also another way to support our home, the Dojo, during the Covid Pandemic.*

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“I was in Wroclaw as an uchideshi<sup>1</sup> for six months. I lived in the dojo,<sup>2</sup> and during this time I spent 700 hours training. Apart from Aikido,<sup>3</sup> weapons, Iaido,<sup>4</sup> and zazen,<sup>5</sup> I had to practise Brazilian jujitsu,<sup>6</sup> Krav Maga,<sup>7</sup> yoga and karate. My nose was broken twice, my elbow and knees were damaged, every day new bruises appeared; I had a few concussions. For many days I had difficulty moving due to the all-pervading pain. Sensei made me do cryotherapy—I walked half-naked around a room in which the temperature was -125°C. We fasted for four days, drinking only water. Because Sensei knew about my fear of heights, he ordered me to climb in rope parks between trees, many meters above the ground. He left me in other cities so that I had to find my way back by myself. I was in England, France, Germany, and the Czech Republic—I went to some of those countries illegally, as my visa had already expired. Once, Polish nationalists mistook me for an Arab and threatened me with death. Never in my life I have been so tired and terrified. Never have I suffered so much, hated so much, or been so happy, and never I have felt more alive. It was the worst and the most beautiful time of my life. And I want more.

Diego (Chile), six months as uchideshi in Poland

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1 Uchideshi – in Japanese, an “inside disciple” – a student who lives in the dojo and is devoted only to the training.

2 Dojo (in Japanese, “place of the Way”) – a place for practise – a room, or a whole building.

3 Aikido – a Japanese martial art created by M. Ueshiba (1883–1969).

4 Iaido – the art of drawing the sword.

5 Zazen – the practise of meditation.

6 Brazilian Jujitsu – developed in Brazil, a sport version of Japanese jujutsu.

7 Krav Maga – an Israeli system of self-defence.

# Introduction

**F**irst Murashige<sup>8</sup> Sensei died; two years later, it was Chiba<sup>9</sup> Sensei. I told a story to one of my students and confused the place, time, and people who were there with me. Time tangles everything, enhances memories. I was scared I was going to lose it all, that is how it started – from writing down a few important stories, conversations.

This is not to be a book about Aikido. Nor is it to be a book about Chiba Sensei. I have no right to write about Aikido because it is different for each one of us. Neither is it possible to describe Chiba, because this man spent almost 60 years on the mat, his life itself is a great book, a volume full of stories and of the thousands of people he encountered along the way. There were many who knew him as a teacher better than I did and, there were those who went through more with him, their experience being more intense, more beautiful, and much more terrifying. This is a subjective story about what 30 years on the mat did to me. A story about trying to follow one's passions as strongly as possible. But most of all it is a

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<sup>8</sup> M. Murashige shihan (1945–2013) 6 dan, Japanese Aikido teacher, assistant instructor at San Diego Aikikai.

<sup>9</sup> T. K. Chiba shihan (1940 – 2015) 8 dan, Japanese Aikido teacher, chief instructor of San Diego Aikikai and founder of Birankai International.

story about what happens when on the road in front of you stands a real teacher.

I started by describing what I had learnt with Chiba Sensei. I used to sit down at an internet café with a cup of coffee and write. The words flowed out themselves. The story would unfold for a few pages and then die. The end. The coffee and the memories both finished. I had allowed myself to write organically and this is how many stories came alive. After some time, I re-read them and realised that, for a person who does not understand the context, they made no sense. It was as if I were describing the peak of a mountain without the story of the weeks spent climbing it. This is how I came to understand that I must write about myself.

I had tried to shield myself against this kind of exhibitionism as much as I could, but without it the stories about being a teacher would completely lose their meaning and strength. Progress is a confrontation with one's own weaknesses, or at least acknowledging them. This is how you must study yourself – calmly and with no mercy.

The moment of simple childlike understanding can come from reading an ancient manuscript as much as it can appear in a drill instruction manual. This is the reason that the motto that underlies each one of the following chapters are so varied. But this is not important as long as they compel the reader into even a moment of reflection.

I am using initials because what we went through was a personal journey and I have no right to share real names and surnames. The world of martial arts is a world of ambitions, passions, and emotions. I apologise to everyone who could

be offended by my words. Many people can receive the same experience totally differently. We may look the same and do the same things, but we feel and see something different, filtering everything through our upbringing, values, religion. Most of what happened exists more in my head than in reality. But this is how it is.



## CHAPTER ONE

# Before Why?

I look over my books. Some time ago I realised that the majority of them are memoirs by insurgents, descriptions of wars, accounts from extermination camps, and biographies of the greatest scumbags in history. All are about people who have been put up against a wall and forced to make ultimate decisions. All are about the determined or defeated. All are about times that are both distinct and terrible. It is as if I have been unconsciously searching for the answers to questions which I cannot put to rest, which haunt me.

What happens to a person who fights, not for love, for a new car, or even for their motherland, but for a single breath? What

happens in the head of a mother whose child is pulled from her arms? What happens inside you when you are paralysed with fear, when the worst horrors, ones you have only met in your nightmares, become true? Does blood really have a metallic taste, and can you choke on it?

Do I have the strength within myself to jump from a train that races through hundreds of kilometres of frozen forest?<sup>10</sup> Or will I be sitting in the corner of the carriage whining and squealing in fear about what is to come? Waiting like a pig to slaughter.

I do not know.

Me and my own. We are the first generation orphaned after the war. We are the first generation free from such hardship – without blood, tragedy, exile, conspiracy, *filipinki*,<sup>11</sup> barricades. We are people who have not been told by life whether they will be a hero or a traitor. Do we have the strength to sacrifice ourselves, or would the fear of pain and hunger change us into a shadow of a person trembling in the corner?

They even took compulsory military service from us, thereby creating a legion of aged children who cannot, by any means, now be dragged to adulthood. We caught the end of martial law, and with wild enthusiasm we ran to the streets. It turned out that the worst thing that could happen out there was a kick up the arse, and even then, most of what was happening we exaggerated in our heads. For a while we had an enemy; he was bad, and we were good.

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<sup>10</sup> Russian and Soviet authorities exiled many Poles to Siberia from the 17th to 20th centuries.

<sup>11</sup> A *filipinka* was a homemade hand grenade produced for the Armian Krajowa in occupied Poland during World War II.

Imbued with Katyn,<sup>12</sup> Hussars,<sup>13</sup> coats of arms, Lwow's children,<sup>14</sup> we spend our whole lives searching for our time – our distinct time – the time of black and white. The years go by and everything is grey. No one is entirely bad or entirely good. Somewhere inside we feel like wild animals. We are waiting for this time as if it were our destiny, but it never comes. Instead of blood and grieving widows, we have new mortgages and cars. The wimps who would be crushed by the first breath of war now live with their mothers or are our bosses in banks, corporations, or insurance agencies. Who knows whether a hundred years ago I would have drowned in a clay pit behind a barn? Or maybe I would have been eaten by a goat, or killed by scurvy or tuberculosis. Either way, canals<sup>15</sup> and petrol bombs have been replaced by mindless hours spent gaping at a screen and eating junk food. We are warm in winter and cold in summer. We have air conditioning in our brand-new cars and internet in every place possible. Wolves that chew mouthfuls of grass pretending they are cows. Or maybe they are not wolves – maybe they are, and will be, sheep.

War, suffering, and fear are evil. Then why am I both fascinated and haunted by them? Why can't I stop thinking about them? Why do I dig inside myself looking for remnants of fear? Why, when I am asked to present my ticket on the tram, am I overtaken with guilt even when I do in fact have

12 The Katyn massacre was a series of mass executions of nearly 22,000 Polish military officers and intelligentsia carried out by the Soviet Union.

13 The Polish heavy hussars of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth formed about 1500.

14 Lwów Eaglets (Polish: *Orleńta Lwowskie*) is a term of affection applied to the Polish teenagers who defended the city of Lwów (Ukrainian: L'viv), in Eastern Galicia, during the Polish-Ukrainian War (1918–1919).

15 During the Warsaw uprising in 1944, members of the Armia Krajowa and civilians used sewage canals to escape. *Kanał* is also the title of a 1957 film by Andrzej Wajda.

a valid ticket? I am scared of ZUS,<sup>16</sup> the tax office, and official letters. Am I a wolf or a rabbit? I want to know who I am and how much I am worth. I want to believe in myself and trust in myself. Only then will I free myself from such tenacious uncertainty. Then I will be free.

Maybe this journey is a therapeutic trial to put myself in a position where I can no longer hide. It was not a conscious choice, but ultimately, looking back I can see that this would explain everything that has happened to me in the last 30 years. The fact that I stumbled upon Aikido was just a coincidence. Perhaps it, too, became a victim of this therapy. The poor thing fitted perfectly to who I was then and what I was looking for; it went along with the list of my complexes and my dreams.

It impossible to understand my whole story without a few words about the place I started my journey from. I am nobody special and I have not achieved anything particularly extraordinary, but my journey is all I have. I was born and raised in a different Poland. It was much simpler – grey and crude. Everything was done slower and the results were never as you wished. Without cell phones, without cars, every kilometre had to be paid for with pain in your feet and with perpetual boredom. Every decision had to be thought through multiple times and cost a long trip to the nearest city: one kilometre through a field and an hour by tram.

Winter was harsh and summer was hot; relief was brought only by a cool dip in the clay pit. When the cold came, we burned coal – as soon as I could carry a bucket, I carried coal

<sup>16</sup> ZUS is the Polish Social Insurance Institution, a government agency.

to the cellar with my mother. In the cold mornings I bartered with my bladder for every minute I could spend longer under the quilt. We had no phone and on our block there was just one landline. This was not important, however, as we had no one to call. Everyone lived close by.

We grew up in packs of kids, running around the neighbourhood. There was everything: secret hiding places, football matches on the street, runny noses, nicking baskets of strawberries, broken arms, throwing cherries pips at passing cars, fishing for sticklebacks . . . The first time I went abroad was at Agricultural College. It was 1986, and we went to the GDR,<sup>17</sup> where Secretary Honecker<sup>18</sup> was still king. Our job was to sort the rotten potatoes from the factory conveyer belt. In front of me hung a portrait of the secretary splattered with fly shit. For us it was like touching a different world. Shops were full of sweets and colourful cans of fizzy drinks. We took kilograms of gelatine and coffee grinders back to Poland. We also had space heaters, but I cannot remember if we were buying or selling them. The Spetsnaz army was stationed in the village next to ours. I can remember hanging out with the soldiers. They sat with us in our rooms, showing us pictures of them breaking burning bricks with their heads. It is hard to explain the repressions of my generation to the young, and the old need no explanation at all.

A generation raised in grey stability. Where, even with the obvious lack of colourful perspective, there were reliable certainties: education guarantees work, the country provides for

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<sup>17</sup> GDR East Germany, officially the German Democratic Republic, was a country that existed from 1949 to 1990.

<sup>18</sup> Erich Ernst Paul Honecker was a German politician who was the General Secretary of the Socialist Unity Party of Germany.

the minimum of your basic needs, you won't die of starvation, it's not worth it to stand out, don't let yourself dream too much because it's ridiculous.

In every family there was a drunk, a priest, or both. No one was either too rich or too poor. I know that what I write only applies to me. Inside my head I had built a cage made from my complexes, insecurities, lack of self-confidence. This was the result of those times and of those people. There was many of us like this and many of us remained like this – even though in the meantime everything around us changed completely. Or perhaps it was just me?

We lived in the villagelike suburbs of Wrocław. Out there in the city there were elegant people with cars and clean flats. In the post-Soviet blocks, they built a life for themselves in flats with straight walls and nice furniture. They dressed their kids in smart uniforms and drove around in Fiat 126p's.<sup>19</sup> We, on the contrary, had nothing straight or clean.

Life in Poland is safe. Nothing is going to eat you. When it isn't winter you can sleep in the forest; it's hard to die of starvation here or become lost in the wilderness. It is enough to walk a few hours in a straight line and you will reach some people or a bus stop. To survive here, you do not need the skills of a Bedouin in the desert or of Dersu Uzala<sup>20</sup> in Siberia. This safe mediocrity pours into us and makes us soft. Of course, we have drunks, poverty, and severity; we had opponents; we had occupiers, thieves, and informers. All of those, however, are internal enemies. Each Pole has inside of himself a hero,

<sup>19</sup> The *Fiat 126* (Type 126), a four-passenger car with a rear engine, was the most popular car in postwar Poland.

<sup>20</sup> Dersu Uzala was a Russian hunter portrayed in a 1975 Soviet-Japanese film of the same name directed by Akira Kurosawa.

a drunk, and a traitor. Such seeds are planted deep inside, but upbringing is that which waters and nurtures them into something specific. At least, I have to believe in that. This greyness is my curse and my strength. The little scared-Pole was, is, and will be living inside of us.

Each September I ask the kids where they went on holiday. A seven-year-old boy tells me: 'Tarnobrzeg<sup>21</sup> or Turkey, I can't remember.' I can remember each day I spent in the GDR when I was sixteen. Each journey I make now is experienced by the hungry seven-year-old within me. My heart is made of post-communist dust and it will never have enough. I praise Tony Halik <sup>22</sup> and his silly stories. Thanks to him the hunger of the journey lives within me. I deeply believe that even though I have seen most of the world, the power that carries me through and gives me passion is this greyness and the ashes of the childhood in which I grew up.

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<sup>21</sup> Tarnobrzeg is a small city in southeastern Poland.

<sup>22</sup> Toni Halik is a Polish-Argentinian film operator, documentary filmmaker, author of travel books, and traveller.

# Niuniek

“*It is better not to learn at all than to learn from a bad teacher.*

T.K. Chiba

I cannot remember much. Part of a building in Wrocław that was once a school now houses a huge testing centre. In the mid '80s it was home to a Technical Agricultural College. It smelt of machinery grease and scattered around were remains of old Soviet tractors.

The buildings were neglected, occupied by hundreds of teenagers hanging around dressed in knock-off jeans. The majority were boys from surrounding villages. Kids, rustic like dry bread with brawn. There were also a few boys like me from Wrocław who would never get into a normal college or whose parents didn't care either way.

That was a different time and a different world. We were growing up in Communism, quietly accepting the greyness and powerlessness. In education we saw nothing else than an extension of childhood. You had to go to secondary school, and you applied to go to university to avoid going to military service. Everything was simplified and controlled. We were studying just enough to pass, and good grades brought more shame than pride. Learning a language was not useful and, as a subject, was no more important than learning the intricacies of emptying a cesspool. In this whole rusted world of hillside



ploughs, manure spreaders, and internships in the PGR (State Agricultural Farms), it was Niuniek that we feared the most.

I do not remember his full name, everyone just called him Niuniek. A prefect even once came to the class to deliver a register to 'Professor Niuniek.' He was a history teacher, located on the first floor, and we knew about him from the first day of school. In the world of blacksmiths, tractor-driving instructors, and turnery teachers, he was the most terrifying. Physically he reminded me of a young Marek Kondrat in *Playing with the Devil*.<sup>23</sup>

His homosexuality was unquestionable. His character was so strong that even in this austere, agrarian world, where acceptance was unheard of, it was never talked about. There were rumours that he brought his boyfriend on school trips. I do not know, as I never witnessed that, but for me it fit his character. He hung around with female teachers drinking filtered coffee from a tall glass and carried with himself a leather handbag-like satchel. His effeminate gestures and high-pitched voice did not fit into our system. For most of us he was the first homosexual we had ever seen.

He would inspect our badges and the cleanliness of our uniforms before we entered the class. After an initial test, according to the marks, he divided our class.<sup>24</sup> Those with seconds – the lowest of the group – sat on the left; those with thirds and fourths, opposite him. The higher fourths and fifths sat in

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<sup>23</sup> *Playing with the Devil* was a 1979 TV and theatrical production by J. Drda. It was very popular in Poland.

<sup>24</sup> The Polish grading system in higher education was based on the 5 to 2 scale, where 5 is the best mark and 2 is the worst. Moreover, students can also be marked with additional signs of + and –.

the row on the right-hand side. The best of us were called experts and sat in the corner behind one of the huge old maps which hung from the walls – blessed with the privilege to sit in their place and do what they wanted. There was only one condition – if, during one of the terror-filled classes, someone did not know the answer, Niuniek would suddenly strike the map with his stick and shout, ‘Expert answer!’ If the expert in question failed the professor three times, then he lost his place.

I had a strong four; the position of the expert was beyond my reach. After each test we swapped places again. Establishing the first division of the class, Niuniek spoke to the seconds and the weak thirds: ‘I am speaking to you for the last time. There is no possibility of you passing this class, so I will not waste this nightingale’s voice on you.’ He turned his back on them and never looked in that direction again. He led the classes facing the other students. At the beginning of each class, he selected five students to undergo an oral test. The prefect was excused, as he was preparing maps for the class. Niuniek would open the register and run his finger up and down the list of names. ‘Perhaps the seafood menu today? Oh, I haven’t seen this person at La Scala restaurant in quite a while . . .’ Here he would call out a surname, then a second, then a fourth and a fifth. Four of them were asked to write the answers to the questions on the board, whilst the fifth had to answer orally next to Niuniek’s desk.

Niuniek was ruthless and malicious. His sense of humour was phenomenal, perverse, and merciless. At the time of black-and-white communism an intelligent man, ground down by

the system for his obvious, discernible homosexuality, was either consumed by ruin or turned to bitterness. His salvation was teaching and his passion for history. He knew that he had ended up in a shabby school where no one cared for his subject, but within it he had created his own small, fully controlled world. We were still kids, and for us, such charisma and strength were equally fascinating and frightening. Even the roughest, hardest boys from the state villages feared him.

Niuniek divided the community that was our class into simple groups and then went on to berate certain individuals. He knew about his aura of fascination in regard to men and the awkwardness that accompanied it for us, but he managed to disarm it by making fun of himself. He ordered us to clean up, brush our hair, look smart. For those who were already blessed with facial hair, the expectation was to come to his classes cleanly shaven. One of us was always, regardless of his grade, named the most beautiful boy of the class. Looking back on it now I can see that amongst the sea of anonymous faces, hundreds learning in overcrowded classes, he was the only one that built a living relationship. Perhaps it was ridiculous and toxic, but at least it was personal and consistent.

‘What does it mean?’ – A student was landed with this question during his ritual morning questioning.

— What does what mean, Professor?

— You said, idiot, that your name is Lichtenstein?

— Yes . . .

— What does it mean? In Polish, what does Lichtenstein mean?

— I don't know, it's just my surname.

I remember that Niuniek threw him out of the class, demanding that he find out immediately. It was a time of no cell phones, so the student had to run to the telephone box and call his parents to find out the answer.

– 'Bright stone!' he exclaimed as he ran into the class, panting.

Another time a friend named Pawel who arrived to class unshaved was sent back to his dorm. He returned with his face covered in small bits of bloody tissue.

Many of us had nicknames. I remember almost none of them. In second grade I became 'Anteater', I do not know why. Maybe it was because of my big nose, which I had a habit of picking.

In third grade, during one of the lessons, Niuniek addressed me.

'Anteater, for the next class I would like a letter from your mother confirming that she is aware that for three years you have come to your history classes with your hair uncombed.'

In my house, children had to be clean enough for our parents to tell them apart. They did not have high aesthetic expectations – in this field I am and always will be a cross between a wild pig and a badger. I was surprised by this command and I assumed it was a joke. The next class he immediately asked me about the letter and consequently threw me out. After this happened for the third time, I went to my parents who, more through laughter than from embarrassment, wrote the letter for me.

Why am I writing all of this? Personally, I did not have a great bond with Niuniek. I liked the subject that he taught, but for him I wasn't particularly special. He did not show an extraordinary liking toward me, but he was the reason I went to study history and, subsequently, became a teacher. I do not know if he would care. My friends told me, a few years after I left the school, that he died of AIDS.

# Aikido

“*When I speak about victory, I speak about the victory over your mind. A calm and open mind is a goal to which you should always aspire.*

M. Ueshiba

**B**efore we continue, my dear reader, I propose that you should get to know the principles and practices of this martial art. You must understand a few basic concepts, because without them, later you will be lost. I spent my whole life practicing Aikido. For all these years the mat remained the thing that was constant and secure for me. I changed my jobs, place of training, friends. Hundreds of students turn into a sea of names. Only the practice was constant.

Aikido is a Japanese martial art. It was born late in the '40s, created by the legendary Morihei Ueshiba – who we call O-Sensei – a great teacher. He based it on Japanese swordplay and old systems of hand-to-hand combat – jujutsu.

We practise in keikogi, traditional training attire (gi – attire; keiko – training). Traditionally we wear only white or black belts (obi – belt) Those that are advanced also wear wide dark trousers (hakama). We use wooden weapons which consist of a sword (bokken), a staff (jo), and a knife (tanto).



After O-Sensei's death, main division of the organisation is the school of Aikikai, based in Tokyo. In the main centre (Hombu Dojo) which is led by a descendant of O-Sensei, who is called Doshu (meaning 'head of the path').

The place where you practise, regardless of whether it is a rented hall in a school or a place solely dedicated to that function, we call a dojo, the place of the path. At its centre is the kamiza, which can be just a portrait of O-Sensei or a complete construction within the dojo which is based on traditions of Buddhism or Shinto. We call the teacher Sensei. The training begins and ends with a ritual. Students sit in a row and along with the teacher they bow, kneeling in a Japanese seated position (seiza), first bowing to the kamiza and then to each other. After the warmup (aikitaiso) and practise of falls (ukemi), the ways of moving around (ashi sabaki), and walking on the knees (shikko), proceeds the main part of the training – practise of the techniques. Aikido is based primarily on throws, locks, and holds, which most of the time are practised in pairs. The attacker is called 'uke,' and the one who performs the technique, 'tori'. That is all – we do not have fights, sparring, or competitions. You can draw a slight comparison to meditation or yoga in pairs.

The main concept of Ueshiba was to direct the power of the attacker against himself. He preserved the traditional ways of attacking from the original systems – mainly grabs (-dori) and attacks based on sword cuts (shomen-uchi; yokomen-uchi) or knife thrusts (tsuki).

The aesthetic aspect of Aikido attracts many people. The movements are wide, performed with a straight back, and



in its entirety are reminiscent more of an elegant dance than a deadly confrontation. As practitioners of a traditional martial art, we are bound to follow an array of rules within the training. Above all, silence, and obedience to the teacher.

I started practising in a huge group in 1988 in AZS AWF (Sports College) Wroclaw on the no longer existing Zielinskiego Street. The group was led by young people in their 20s under the eye of Daniel Brunner Sensei, who visited them twice a year from Lausanne in Switzerland. It was this man who, by the fire of his engagement, sacrificing his time and money, supported, saved, and navigated us for 30 years.

Thinking back to that huge hall, the entire generation of Judoka and Aikidoka are flooded with nostalgia. The free market and damned capitalism were ultimately the reason for its closure, and the groups were scattered around small commercial clubs around the city.

Aikido survived this transformation much better than Judo. It seemed that the system-spoiled Judoka were lost within a world of paying for training and electricity. Aikido was never supported; it was never a sport – it was financed by amateur associations. For us, there was no difference between the systems. Internet and video games dragged young people away, depleting their need for engagement, and soon these huge groups were turned to small and closed environments.

In 1997, fresh from my black belt exam (student level – kyu; master level – dan) I set up a group in a college in the Kozanow district of Wroclaw. I was not too enthusiastic about starting, as I was terrified by the jungle of tax offices and paperwork, but I had no choice as I had to eat something whilst studying.

In those times you taught Aikido not for money but for need to fulfil a mission. Until now I am ashamed, deep down, of the money I made even though I know this is ridiculous. I graduated from my university and left for a horribly difficult and gruelling year in London where I had been invited by Minoru Kanetsuka Sensei, who was a resident of Aikikai England. For most of my time there I lived illegally, rat-like, as thousands of others did. I was a construction worker, a kitchen porter. I slept in the flats of Gypsies. I practised as much as I could, but I did not manage to find myself within this system. Disappointed with the lack of direct contact with the teacher and my inability to understand his message, I returned to Poland, where, in the meantime, Daniel Sensei had been trying to establish an Aikido system which was then taught by T. K. Chiba shihan (teacher levels: fukushidoin – teacher's assistant, minimum 2nd dan; shidoin – teacher, minimum 4th dan: shihan – teachers' teacher, minimum 6th dan)

We were brought up in a rather nameless system of different teachers from the Aikikai circles. Not a single Japanese teacher came to Poland imposing their interpretation of the form or approach to the training. For many years we had been tossed around various trainings and seminars trying, with great effort, to join elements from different systems. Despite our over-optimism we gave birth to Frankenstein's child, whose hands and legs moved independently from each other, each in a different direction. Chiba Sensei led a school, not an organisation. It was a small group (in comparison to other systems) made up of people blindly following him, and one which he taught in a way that I had never seen before.

This is a story about how I entered this world and what happened to me.

## Sensei

“Our eyes met for the first time: it was a moment I will never forget! I did not know what to do so I bowed as deeply as I could. O–Sensei said to me: ‘Martial arts are very hard. Can you do it?’ I said: ‘Yes, Sensei’.

T.K. Chiba

Twenty years ago, as a young instructor I set up my first group. I was still a student. Aikido was popular, and a few posters around the city drew around 50 people to the gymnastic hall in Kozanow, Wroclaw. Most of my students were not much younger than me; many of them were people my age. Back then my inexperience in life had tossed me turbulently around the world, and so I didn’t know much about being a conscious teacher. After one of the trainings a young man approached me as I was folding my hakama. He bowed to me and said, ‘Sensei, teach me. I want to be your student.’

We all burst out with laughter. I laughed about it for many days after and, until now, when I think about it I cannot help myself from smiling. Thank god I did not ruin anyone's life with my juvenile approach, and in this case the young man did in fact turn out to be literal madman. Nevertheless, the whole story shows how different the understanding can be of a teacher's role.

'Sensei' is a teacher, a doctor, a lawyer. Among the Japanese it is just a polite title, nothing more. The transferal of this word and the symbolic connotations it brings to our culture gave it a mystical meaning – one of great power. There are many who do not want to be called by this name, and there are equally as many who want to be called it but should not. It is a power over human souls and a great responsibility. It is a cross to bear, a burden, fuel for the ego.

It is the first step to being frozen, immortalised as a monument and a symbol. It makes you consider who you are; demands that you take responsibility for everything you do both on and off the mat. Sensei is a teacher – someone who you allow to be yours. Sensei is someone to whom you can refer only in this way – because nothing else fits. When, many years after graduating secondary school, in the queue for your groceries you meet your old teacher and you help her carry her shopping up the stairs, you call her Mrs. Professor. That is the only thing that fits and that is the only thing which is appropriate. The Polish language is much more convenient here than English, in which everyone is addressed as 'you' – in this case the word Sensei creates a distance because it requires the use of the third person. The almost obsolete

manner of addressing your mother and father in the third person was reborn in the dojo, and seems natural for everyone.

– Can Sensei please tell me . . . ? – a young man asks, and his father opens his mouth in disbelief and envy.

There was this guy, Grzesiek, who began training with me when he was seven years old. His father trained too, he was also a prospective teacher, and my friend. The years went by, marking the mat with drops blood and sweat and, finally Grzes turned 18. In the dojo's kitchen he, along with me and his father, drank his first legal beer. Then, in a feat of curiosity in how the human soul develops I reached out my hand to Grzesiek.

— You're an adult now, call me Piotrek.<sup>25</sup>

Initially he reached out his hand but stopped halfway, looking at me and tilted his head. He tutted, sighed, as if something didn't quite fit.

— Noooo – he groaned hesitantly – I would prefer not to.

The student chooses his teacher, not the teacher his student. That is it. You are a Sensei or you are not a Sensei. If you want it or not. For most of my students I am not a teacher, I am just a paid instructor. Occasionally one of them matures enough for a more serious relationship. I cannot do anything. The whole process happens on their side. My duty is only to be consistent and honest. That is hard enough.

There are those who negate this relationship. Twenty-something-year-olds at the start of their path call me 'you'. I look into their eyes, and customarily reply:

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<sup>25</sup> A nickname for Piotr.

— I think, sir, you are mistaken, because I am not accustomed to being called ‘you’ by little shits.

There was this lady in secondary school, who would, for my witty comments, answer in a similar style: ‘I am not used to entering into discussions with people who shave themselves with a towel.’

It is something I remember to this day.

On the other hand, the need for authority is great. People are looking for a word which will not only show respect but also establish distance. In its own way, it will ultimately put you on a pedestal and will create a model to follow. I can remember one of the first trainings at university, when one of the students who had been struck by a strong nikkyo (a nasty joint lock applied to the wrist) fell to his knees and screamed, ‘It hurts, Professor!’

The word Sensei is a vessel containing a secret which a student has not yet grown to know, and for that reason, it gives a teacher a huge amount of credit when it comes to trust. It is a mutual agreement, thanks to which both sides can sculpt a shared monument. Many times people get so deeply involved into this relationship that the artificial monument becomes more real than the human – a human with his flaws who cannot bear it.

I am writing these words in a hotel in Warsaw. At midnight, in an empty room. On the floor below Waka Sensei is staying, the 36-year-old great-grandchild of O-Sensei. We brought him here today for a conference of 700 people which celebrates 40 years of Aikido in Poland. As a representative of one of the

schools, I sit here now, as one, along with a small group of those taking care of him and his Otomo – young ushideshi from the Aikikai headquarters in Tokyo.

As we ate dinner earlier, I spent the whole time observing this small, still relatively young man, who has already become more of a symbol than a human. How much does this burden cost him? How much does this dehumanisation squeeze him like tight-fitting shoes? There is sincerity in his eyes, however, as if he were a pope or a president and he is condemned to engage in small talk about unimportant things until his death. This is an extreme example of sacrificing one's life in the name of a symbol.

Sensei-ing, in itself, is much simpler. I do not know when this appeared. At the beginning Sensei-ing made me feel uncomfortable – I was too young, and it was not natural. Later, it became something which gave me relief. Perhaps it is because I started to be the age of the parents of my students, and Sensei simply became a substitute for 'sir' or 'professor'. This word dehumanises, reminds us of the role, obligation, and most of all, it limits personal relationships. For an instructor it is a prison, and for a teacher it is freedom. In the relationship with Chiba Sensei it was utterly natural, and it happened by itself. For us, he was Sensei.





# A Road to Perdition

**H**e was perhaps 25 years old; his name was Willy. We met him at an Aikido camp in Poland somewhere in the middle of the forest close to a lake. It was, I think, 1995. He invited us to the South of France, where in a months' time, the legendary Chiba was supposed to come. I do not know what lured us in – neither I nor my girlfriend had ever been so far away from Poland. We did not have any money or idea about Chiba's school. I had just got my black belt and she was one step behind me. We competed, and in our relationship, Aikido was possibly always more important than each other.

It was in this way, that in that summer 20 years ago, a pair of 20-year-olds set off hitchhiking from Szczecin to somewhere near Avignon. To this day, I think back to this journey – sleeping, during a storm in a corn field, on a pile of trash, in a gas station close to Nuremberg: the reek of fear, cigarettes, and exhaustion. It was the first time we had been so far away; we were both scared and poor as church mice. We arrived at our destination one day early and, for many hours, we waited in Avignon, hiding ourselves from the unbearable heat in Rocher de Doms park. We drank water from the fountain and finished off the last morsels from the tins we brought from Poland. This mix of exhaustion, anxiety, and awe for the beauty around us will forever be defining.

Like the Barbarian in the Garden<sup>26</sup> – fifteen years later, as a teacher appointed by Chiba, I would be leading classes there. He and I would be going to Avignon for a coffee and an ice cream, travelling in an air-conditioned car. Back then, it was a world we feared, and one which we could not afford, mentally or financially. We felt like peasants walking around the corridors of the Louvre in dirty shoes.

Finally, we reached the small town where the seminar was taking place. It was here that I saw Chiba Sensei for the first time. More than his person, I was shaken by the atmosphere of his training, the gloom, murk, and sadism. This was how I saw it, and I did not like it at all. Aikido, for me, was a refuge protecting me from the stress and nightmares brought by life. But here they lay on the mat like a piece of bloody meat. For the first time I saw a teacher shouting at his student. For the first time someone tried to rip off my arm and hit me with it. Instead of majestically wading in a beautiful stream surrounded by other magical unicorns – I was in a cage with a pack of mangy, hungry hyenas who had been thrown a scrap of meat. – And I was the scrap.

I liked none of what I saw. The movement was rough and sharp, the ukemi was loud, people were sadistic. Most of all, I did not like that I did not know anything and, with each movement, each technique, this become more exposed, and I had no ability to hide it. I could not fall after receiving their techniques and so I could not take the pain that they caused. I did not know the weapons and did not understand their importance.

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<sup>26</sup> *The Barbarian in the Garden* is a book of essays by Zbigniew Hebert on the culture and art of Italy and France.

I was 25 years old, armed with my fresh black belt and a massive ego. In my dojo I was the golden boy, but here it turned out that the unicorn was in fact a rhinoceros who thought he was skinny. Stupidly I went for black belt training. Sensei taught the second part of Kiie Sansho, the kata of 'Three Victories'. He did not show any basics – he performed the whole form with an assistant, it lasted around 40 seconds and I had no time to even process this before someone had tapped me on the back. I was like a child in the fog. I had no idea what I was supposed to be doing. Ego had driven me there and now I was paying for it. After a short while he approached me and fixed the position of my wrist and then my leg – and there his patience ran out. I did not know what to do, so I smiled stupidly. In all the big, nameless traineeships, the teachers were kind and reassuring. You wanted support and a welcoming atmosphere, you paid for it, you got it. Here, the teacher looked at me once more, realising I was a lost cause and he was only wasting his time. He frowned and walked away without saying a word.

Years went by, and after I returned from London, we drifted in the direction of Birankai, which was Chiba Sensei's organisation. I had my doubts, after the first meeting my ego was still hurt, but I had been unavoidably soaked up by this system, although, I have to say, that the real fire had appeared just after our direct contact. It was at this time that, in the mountains of Alsace, in a small village Labaroche, in April, a summer school for Chiba's students took place. Around one or two hundred people came there. For a few years we attended, slowly learning the system. It was perhaps in 2001 when I understood that I wanted to live with Aikido. I finished my

degree and I tried to accommodate the training and work. After a few trials I realised that nothing interested me as much as the mat, and that in each job I was simply selling my time which I could be using for my own development.

I remember the conversation I had with Daniel Sensei. I said that I wanted to become a teacher, and he looked at me and said, 'I will agree to this under one condition: That you go to Chiba Sensei to become his ushideshi and you stay there until he agrees.'

I was not surprised, but I was relieved. After my return from England I was disappointed and lost. I did not know what to do with myself. One evening I was walking back to my parents' house. I walked through Lesnicki Park and after crossing the bridge I went down a steep path. This was where I thought about the legendary San Diego. In this tangled mess of doubt, regret, disappointment, and uncertain future, the answer appeared. A challenge. A legendary hell. Why not? It was an ideal choice.

The kid's classes were thriving, so I had enough money put aside for a ticket and food. A few months later Daniel Sensei officially asked me to do it and the only thing left to do was to ask Chiba Sensei. But, as fate would have it, a few days before the next meeting in Labaroche I broke two ribs on the mat, and I moved with great difficulty. Nonetheless, I went there, and for one week I watched the Aikido from a chair six hours daily. I loved the training but watching it in this way was boring as hell. On the third day I fell asleep and fell off my chair, a stupid stunt which immediately became a running joke amongst everyone there. On the fourth, I put on nice

clothes and I went to ask for an appointment as ushideshi. The teachers lived in a nice house with a garden. A few of them were sitting around a table on the patio. Someone told me it would be difficult. The only thing I was ashamed of was that I could not train and so could not show them what I was capable of. I did not give them the exact day of my arrival, because I had to sort out my visa. It was two years before I was eventually able to. I went to the embassy in Krakow probably four times begging in a crowd of highlanders. It was during this time that I ended up in Strasbourg training with Gabriel Valibouze Sensei – who was, back then, one of the most important teachers of the system in Europe. Finally, by some miracle, I got the visa, and in December 2003, I went for the first time to San Diego, to live as the ushideshi of Kazuo Chiba.

## Money

“*Money is your servant if you know how to use it. If you do not know, it becomes your master.*

Publilius Syrus

**W**hen you follow your passion, money is your biggest obstacle, and the best excuse. The groundbreaking bi-

ography *Okrążymy świat raz jeszcze* (*We will circle the world once more*) tells the story of how, in the year 1926, two 20-year-olds from Poznań set off on a journey around the world – with a few jars of jam and pickled cucumbers. It would take them four years, and they would visit Sweden, Norway, the Netherlands, France, Brazil, Argentina, Chile, Mexico, USA, the Havana Islands, Japan, China, Indochina, Malaysia, Ceylon, Tanzania, Congo, Senegal, Morocco, Spain, France, Italy, Austria, and Czechoslovakia. 1926. With hardly any money. Or what about the wild adventures of Kazimierz Nowak?<sup>27</sup> A man who, in the '30s, travelled across the whole of Africa by bike, camel, and canoe. From North to South and back again. Defending himself from lions with his bicycle pump. Everything is possible if you want it. Money is not important unless it is important for you; if it is, only then do the impossibilities arise.

Passion is measured by the price you are willing to pay for it. That is it. For me, money could always be found, because priorities were established. When people my age took mortgages to pay for a flat, I rented a room. When they took loans for a flashy new car, I took the tram. In my years of chasing after knowledge and seeking out a teacher, I had no other ties holding me back. A pay-as-you-go phone, all my possessions in two backpacks, no loans. Find someone to cover the next training, and the following week I could be on the other side of the world. Without a wife, without kids, without loans, without debts, without contracts.

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27 Kazimierz Nowak (January 11, 1897 – October 13, 1937) was a Polish traveller, correspondent, reporter, and photographer.

For many years I lived in rented boxes. I played at being a samurai – the most expensive thing I owned was a sword. A few books, a backpack full of clothes and the walls covered in wooden swords, sticks, and bows. Nothing interested me apart from training and going on trips abroad to seminars. I do not know how many people I offended and alienated. I did not meet anyone outside of this world. They didn't understand me, and I didn't understand them. Sometimes life ties us to a place by a net of spiderwebs. As a 20-year-old I could go away for half a year and nothing would happen. Now it takes me three weeks to make up for a two-week trip. Piles of bills, dozens of calls. For the teacher, the time of the open search and gypsy lifestyle finishes somewhere around 30. I cannot be an eternal child because it is around this time when the responsibility for others begins to appear. I paid for most of my trips myself. The first half-year in California was expensive – in the middle of my stay my money ran out and my ticket lost its validity. I hung there futilely, wondering whether the problems would solve themselves. On Saturdays and Sundays, I worked a bit on a construction site – enough to eat, but not enough to come home. Finally, one of my friends from Chicago reached out and for two weeks I went to work on a building site with other Poles.

Leading the children's group paid me enough to go away and, after some time, Chiba Sensei did not want to take any money from me for living in the dojo. Other teachers also did the same when they smelt on me a madness similar to their own and took a symbolic amount of money.

Over the last 15 years I have been in France 40 times, 15 times in Great Britain, 5 times in Switzerland, 3 times in Austria, 4 times in Kenya, 3 times in Chile, 6 times in the United States. I spent a year in London and another in San Diego. There was also Japan and Canada. Now it is simpler – I go as a teacher and those who invite me cover the costs. Yet in the beginning it was difficult. For all those years of training, I did around 65 week-long camps. Half of them took place abroad. The cost of a week-long conference abroad was approximately the average monthly Polish wage. We are a poor country and I wasn't very wealthy. For years, I went to these camps with sandwiches in my backpack, pouring boiling water on instant noodles, and sitting, making a small pint of beer last two hours.

Going away is addictive. I had it easy because I made my choices – I wanted to live that way and that was the price. For my students it is a passion, and fun. Simplifying it – until they are 30, they go with the current and spend all their money on seminars and camps. After that, life catches up with them and they leave it all for loans and mortgages. New ones, overcome with passion, take their place.

Real fire is felt by people with passion, and they are the only one's worth working with. I was hungry and poor on the other side of the world. But there was always someone who would help me because they felt that honest fire inside of me. Now it's me who pays for the training of my uchideshi. Recently a friend told me the story of how, in the '80s, her sandwiches packed, she hitchhiked to Germany with her friends for a seminar because someone had given them free tickets. The



whole family chipped in and they managed to collect 10 dollars. Chased throughout Europe by pure passion and the hunger for adventure, they arrived at their destination. The teacher didn't accept their letter of recommendation and demanded that they pay. For them, it was an unimaginable amount of money. In just a few hours, the people who took part in the training got together and paid for their places.



## CHAPTER TWO

# Uchideshi

“I am Hub McCann. I’ve fought in two World Wars and countless smaller ones on three continents. I led thousands of men into battle with everything from horses and swords to artillery and tanks. I’ve seen the headwaters of the Nile, and tribes of natives no white man had ever seen before. I’ve won and lost a dozen fortunes, **KILLED MANY MEN** and loved only one woman with a passion a **FLEA** like you could never begin to understand. That’s who I am. **NOW, GO HOME, BOY!**

Robert Duvall as Hub McCann<sup>28</sup>

## Chiba

**T**o understand who Chiba was, there is only one thing you need to know: he belonged to the group of those rare people who fall in love with one thing and dedicate their whole life to it. Their whole time, their whole attention. He was a soldier, one who served Aikido – he believed in his mission and sacrificed his whole self for it. For it he abandoned Japan. Under the command of O’Sensei he spent 10 years in

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<sup>28</sup> *Secondhand Lions*, dir. Tim McCanlies, USA 2003.

barbarous Britain where they overcook fish and it always rained. Under the same orders, there he spent years building the foundations for the international organisation in Tokyo, and following another command he then went away to spend the rest of his life in the United States. All because, when he was a teenager, in a small book shop in Tokyo he came across a book about Aikido and first laid eyes upon a portrait of Ueshiba. Apparently, this is the exact moment when he understood that he wanted to follow Ueshiba as his master. He packed his bags, and for three days he sat in front of the dojo waiting for approval to enter. Regular, composed people are terrified of such characters. They should be. For him, the training or studying wasn't a hobby but a sense and centre of life. The rest was just a side effect – a marriage arranged by Ueshiba, a house close to the dojo. There were no holidays, only summer schools, sleep was only a rest from the training. He hosted the first generation of uchideshi, so he even had to give up his privacy. Home and dojo intertwined – he gave his whole self to people.

It is these kinds of people you must be afraid of because with each gesture, each word, they show you that you don't do enough.

For most of us Aikido was a nice hobby, an interesting way of spending one's time. He was an apostle and a madman, and we were playing with that which he had sacrificed his life for. Like a child who plays with his insurgent father's gun. In another time and place he would, most likely, have stood with an axe on the front line of the army, or have been a kamikaze<sup>29</sup> pilot or a suicide bomber. Or maybe I am mistaken,

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29 Kamikaze (divine wind) – the World War II military division in which

and he would be a monk? Aikido is what made him. He was wrenched away from Japan, but he took her everywhere around the world with him. In this way after thousands of years he had more of the old Japan inside him than what was left in his native land. Wrenched from the field of battle 300 years ago, that is how we used to talk about him. The art which he sacrificed his life to was not his mask, it was just him. This was why he was not able to play the role of peaceful master. Aikido was his life: complete, natural, honest, and organic. He lived with fascination and anger. With great patience and fits of rage. For us he was the god of Aikido. A concerned god who accepted hard work in silence without praise and punished faults in a divine rage. He broke bones, screamed, and beat.

He was a living man, not a mask. A legend, one of few living students of Ueshiba. After years spent with the founder of Aikido, he knew what he was doing – and no one could challenge that. Inside him he held an ultimate truth which everyone had to agree with. What he was doing was beautiful, terrifying, and true. Around this core, like around the eye of a cyclone, circled broken hands, knee surgeries, bruises, pain, stress, fear, and a sea of sweat. Chiba was honest and open for everyone. Anyone could enter inside if they managed to confront what was happening outside.

# Uchideshi

“As Jesus was walking beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers: Simon, called Peter, and his brother Andrew. They were casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. “Come, follow me,” Jesus said, “and I will send you out to fish for people.” At once they left their nets and followed him.

Mathew 4: 18–22

In Japanese, the term “uchideshi” means a disciple living inside the dojo (*deshi* – disciple, *uchi* – inside), as opposed to “sotodeshi” – a regular student who lives in their own home and comes only for training. Uchideshi is the remains of a primordial and very personal relationship with the teacher. In our culture it is equivalent to a journeyman or an apprentice.

Imagine, my dear reader, a young boy who appears on the doorstep of a cobbler’s workshop and is received in to work. He sleeps on a pile of sacks in the back room, he cleans, he does the shopping, he serves the family of his master. As time goes on, he starts to handle simple jobs that do not require a great amount of skill. Then he receives singular, more complicated tasks. He moves from the cellar to a small room. He gets to know the master in all of his virtues and flaws. He puts up with the moods and the malice. As time goes on, he opens and closes up the workshop. The master gives him a part of his own duties, himself staying only to overlook the



work. Finally, one day, after years of common living, the youngster receives the approval to set up his own workshop and master title, or maybe even takes over the workshop of his own master. This whole process takes years and is intertwined with physical maturing and the transfiguration of a boy into man. This model has existed in many cultures. The passing down of a craft, of artisanry and of skill, took place in a one-to-one relationship. Heart to heart, as Sensei used to say.

The uchideshi lives in the dojo, he opens it in the morning and closes it in the evening. He cleans it, he fixes it, he repairs it, and is responsible for it. He takes part in every class. He is constantly tired, sleepy, and hungry. He puts his former life in suspension – he is not in a relationship, he doesn't work, he doesn't study. The dojo, for him, is a mix of a monastery and a prison to which he has appointed himself. Often, he travels from very far away. Uchideshi come from different countries and speak many different languages. Like Rob Cole, the hero of N. Gordon's book *Medicus*, who had to travel through the whole of the then-discovered world to follow his true calling. Many uchideshi had to learn a foreign language, sell most of their belongings, and set off on a journey of their life. Pushing like salmon against the current: in the name of existence and death. The importance of this message is condensed into a symbol, the imprinted hand of Chiba Sensei – a seal hung in each dojo controlled by him.

This model is, of course, interwoven with the relationship between father and son, and this aspect cannot be ignored. A teacher as a substitute for a father is the binding force.



The phenomenon of uchideshi which truly interests me has nothing to do with the students. It applies to a very specific type of people, and to compare them with normal students would be harmful for both sides.

The relationship between sensei and uchideshi is special and personal. It awakens extreme emotions, as the relationship with the teacher transcends traditionally accepted roles of student and trainer. In many cases the personal relationship with a particular person is much more important than the craft which is taught. Uchideshi begins from the feeling of hunger, the feeling of “not enough”. From the awareness that what you are doing is not enough. Uchideshi is a state of mind in which the dream takes control of reality. Uchideshi is doing what you really want to do, not what befits you. It is a time to confront yourself and take responsibility for your failure. A young person packs their backpack and goes far away to find themselves. Maybe this is the reason why, for all these years, among hundreds of students, I found only one person from Wroclaw who wanted to be an uchideshi in their own city?

The ultimate truth of being uchideshi is born from the initial choice. This need does not thrive in all soil. A teenager who chews on the pulp of TV, for whom parents are a vacuum cleaner in his room, is not suited for it and would not agree to it. This is a program for those who are squashed, drained, dissatisfied by life.

Leave everything and follow me, come with me. Live in the dust, in pain, sleepless exhaustion, and constant discontent with yourself. You will see doors; I will show them to you

– you walk through them if you can find strength within yourself. If you manage, nothing will ever be the same. Not better, but different – deeper, more true.

In 20, 30 years, during a dinner at your Auntie's with her poorly dyed hair, over a plate of *golabki* and *bigos*,<sup>30</sup> some fat Uncle Janusz<sup>31</sup> will be boasting that during his youth he practised Judo, but he stopped because, wife, work, injury and so on. That he could have been good, that if he had pushed forward then . . . The only thing I can guarantee you is that you will look then at your son and he will know that you went until the end and that you regret nothing. That is it. For me, it is worth it.

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<sup>30</sup> Gołąbki, bigos – traditional heavy old-fashioned Polish dishes typically served at family gatherings.

<sup>31</sup> Janusz – A Polish name, also used as slang for our version of a “red-neck” poorly educated, conservative, old-fashioned person.

# The Pressure Cooker<sup>32</sup> (Kocioł)

Each dojo is a different anthill with strictly defined social roles. There is a teacher, there is one alpha male, a few wannabes, a few nice ones, some social climbers. The dojo sometimes also generates a clown, a gossip, the prettiest one, and a few sidekicks. A bit like in the office of a secondary school. Only through seminars and big summer camps do over 200 people show up from 20 different dojos. All social roles drop like masks. All people, except a few recognised by others, lose their invisible powers. The positions built through years are obliterated. Everybody looks the same, and a beginner can often block the technique of an advanced master with a beer belly. Somewhere under the surface of learning the techniques a panic-stricken trial of quickly establishing a new hierarchy takes place.

Chiba Sensei was aware of this, and I am under the impression that his presence was able to limit this silly behaviour. This is how human nature works. Of course, similar situations always took place, but in comparison to the mass seminars of nameless participants, we had this much less of this.

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<sup>32</sup> The original title for this chapter is Kocioł – the Polish nickname for the most active part of the soccer stadium which is full of crazy fans and hooligans. “Pressure Cooker” is a good translation; it was also the nickname for Chiba sensei’s dojo at Fairmont Avenue in the 1990s. The author never trained at this place.

Everyone sees what they want to see, through the filter of their own experience. Our relationship with Chiba was special and primal, and it was the most important thing for us at the time. Like in Maslov<sup>33</sup> – the basic need is one of saving your own ass. It was primitive and addictive. I called this the pressure cooker, like the most dangerous place in the stadium stands. Just next to the kamiza,<sup>34</sup> close to the teacher there is a lot of space. The beginners hide away timidly in the corners, the old teachers or the lazy ones also run from there. This is a place of feeding your ego and risking your health. Here is where the teacher sits and where the young lions descend. The former and current uchideshi, the young, and the gifted, full-time uke.<sup>35</sup> All of this collides here and boils over. I loved this place.

I was around 35 years old; I was big and strong. Stiff, but I hadn't yet reached the limit of my abilities. I could be quicker, stronger, more dangerous. You left the training almost on all fours. Sometimes before it you had to take an ibuprofen or two. Atavistically, every day we had to establish the primitive hierarchy between us anew. Sensei was sat on a zafu,<sup>36</sup> under the kamiza, and pretended he didn't see it. When two of us clashed – most often he averted his eyes and waited until the issue solved itself. Sometimes he jumped up and intervened at the excess of violence. Most often with violence.

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33 A. Maslov (1908–1970) American psychologist who was best known for creating Maslov's hierarchy of needs.

34 Kamiza – having its origin in Shinto tradition, a central place in the dojo. In Aikido is made up of, most often, the portrait of O'Sensei and calligraphy with the inscription of 'Aikido' or name of the dojo.

35 Uke – In Aikido practice, the person who "receives" the technique.

36 Zafu – a pillow used for sitting during meditation.

Many didn't understand the message. Through the basic effect of getting to know your own limits and tough training which exuded violence, he was sending the strength of his own school into the world. Only players can play the game. There was no bad blood between us. Indeed, there was envy, sometimes anger for unnecessary violence. However, this was like the wind – it passed, and the only thing remaining was the respect for the other's work and the readiness to measure up to the better ones. The more sweat, the more respect. Sensei built this atmosphere, and he was the lead actor in this play. Most of us knew the roles and we played them instinctively. The main tool here was his reputation and fear. Everyone who practised Aikido had heard of him. Among dozens of teachers who were active at his time and learnt from Ueshiba, Chiba Sensei held a special position. He was able to join his past – the time spent as an uchideshi to the very founder of Aikido – with his tough character and a unique, deadly serious devotion for the essence of this art. In a world without rivalry – without rivals – he grew up to be Darth Vader, and his dojo was the Death Star. The tales of his brutality and unpredictability preceded him; I had heard about them from many people who had never even seen him. I grew up listening to them, and I feared him before I met him.

Aikido, in its purest form, fulfils dreams of such an art without unnecessary violence, which can be practised by anyone. It draws in the people who are afraid of forms with more contact, or due to their own convictions, choose the one which offers a clean conscience, simply because of the ethical message which it maintains. However, everyone needs to feel that what they do has meaning. Chiba Sensei – with the gaze of a Samurai,

violence, and broken hands – authenticated not only his own practise, but all of those who do soft and cosy Aikido. They need him to show everyone what potential of violence lies in Aikido. That they could also do it this way, but they decided to do it differently. Sensei knew about it and used this fact to build his own legendary reputation. Of course, there were many who rejected his teaching. However, on his side he had a history of being uchideshi to Ueshiba Sensei and an immense respect from his students. The Japanese supported each other, and despite the significant differences in what they were teaching, their underlying loyalty always came first.

Obviously, what many thought of the brutality and violence was utter nonsense. It was a mixture of a difficult character and a sociological forming of one's own image. A bit like the head of the mafia family, he was building his own reputation as well as that of his school.

He functioned, albeit quite well, on the map of different mafia families which did the same using their own image for better or worse. His character would never allow for creating a mass current/torrent/wave with hundreds of clubs or local organisations. He destroyed everything that he built, and he never stopped testing the limits of endurance, of loyalty and of the standard of his people. It was his home – as time went by, he forced the closest ones and best ones to run away. On this level he used people like pawns in a game of chess. He changed tactics, turned them against each other. A piece of meat, not a cream cake – this is what often came to my mind when I observed him. A real practise, not a mask not an

artificial game. Raw meat on the counter. Not an artificially sweetened dessert.

“Small is beautiful”, he used to say. He was not able to build a big organisation because he had to oversee everything. This rupture between the ambition of creating an empire and destroying everything that was not controlled defined his demeanour. From one side he wanted to be like one of the most prominent and popular teachers. Big, famous, at the centre of attention. On the other hand, he knew that only a small and controlled group can work on the level which guarantees the progress that aligned with his definition. Ultimately, he got stuck somewhere in between.

Aikido is a world of dreamers – amateurs. It’s not a sport with an established structure which can be verified through competition and assessed through a score. Neither is it a cult or a mafia family – in most cases one is just following a hobby or a dream in their free time. As much as you want and when you want. The language through which we convey the message needs to be adjusted to the target group audience – this is how you build an empire. On a simple message, on an undertone, and foremost on a safe and anonymous indefinability. It is a simple corporate PR which is shrouded by a certain type of mythological trademark. In this world, where the teacher is a symbol – a corporate image for hundreds of clubs, organisations, and thousands of students – personal contact would be absurd. But this is the only way Chiba could do it. When I appeared in the organisation, he personally knew all the black belts and many people with white ones. In all the countries that he visited, his people would always be

there. He remembered the names and stories from the past. “Small is beautiful”, he used to say. I would add that it’s also terrifying. A. de Mello cited, in one of his collections of short stories, a conversation between two priests:

— In this year, our community has come much closer to the Creator. – one of them says with pride.

— Did you gain more followers? – the other asks.

— No, we lost 50!

We were never large in numbers. In its time, in the United States, the organisation grew to around 60 clubs. In Great Britain there were maybe 20 and in continental Europe maybe around 15. We ran individual clubs in Chile, Kazakhstan, Canada, Mexico, Kenya. We couldn’t grow because Chiba wanted to operate us like an army in a time of war. He hated weakness around his closest ones, who he trained intensively. At the same time, he accepted and rewarded with ranks many people who were often mediocre yet submissively loyal. This contradiction was the reason for the resentment felt by many of the close ones – those who went with him through the hell of training and personal pressure. Those who couldn’t understand why others got for free that which they had paid for with their life and blood. At the same time, the people who had been recognised for their rank even though they were from a different organisation, and without any difficulties, managed to get close to Sensei, but most often received false communication. They believed that the gift received in times of war is something well deserved and well earned. Yet Chiba was always in a state of war, and adequately to the situation, he took on mercenaries whom he did not fully trust.



Tangled in alliances with other teachers in the headquarters and deadly loyal to the family of Ueshiba, he was prepared to die in battle.

For years we watched as he wrestled in his fight against the world of Aikido. We saw him when he understood that the war was only taking place in his head. When he understood there is no enemy, no army, and no one wants to die. Perhaps this is what explained his language. The way in which he wanted to lead his group. It was a mixture of an authoritarian mafia boss, a father raising his children, and a priest; his words were freighted with messianic significance and a responsibility for bearing the true message of O'Sensei to the next generation.

It all sounded, to people outside our circle, unnaturally serious and utterly bombastic. This is because most of us treat Aikido as a nice way of de-stressing, like keeping fish or stamp-collecting. It is almost as if the chairman of the philatelic society was to induce his members to die in the name of a new series of mallard-decorated stamps. Or if he beat you for ripping the corner of a stamp. Aikido had become a hobby, a product – like fitness, a trademark. Chiba couldn't find himself in this world because this world wasn't serious enough.

Illusion sold the best. He took on a mask of a brute because it gave him freedom and winnowed away most of the weak people who tried to build their position without training.

95% of instructors are hobbyists who work full-time in other professions. Two or three times a week they dress in a keikogi and a hakama, and they go on the mat. I did that for years, but in the back of my head I always had a thought that it was

make-believe. If martial arts are a discipline to which you must sacrifice your life, how could I teach it if I hadn't done that? If, in reality, I spend more time on the toilet than on the mat teaching others – not to mention for my own practise?

A man in a corporate machine is a stork<sup>37</sup> for one person and a frog for another. Apart from this is the everyday considerably senseless chase after money. In Aikido he can find his refuge. The dojo and the mat become an escape from the monotony, hard work, endless paperwork, chattering clients. It becomes a sanctuary, a place in which you cut off the everyday and do something special, just for yourself. Additionally, the instructor – often also a cog in the corporate machine, exhausted with the everydayness, stress at home or at work – finds a place where he is a half-god. For a few hours in the week people listen to him, no one laughs at him, berates him, no one argues with him, no one will even correct him. The dojo, a small microcosm, funds him with a daily therapy. If we add here an apparent physical supremacy, we will have a full picture of playing with the teacher's role. Obviously, being a professional does not make one a better teacher than an amateur. I know a lot of amateurs who are better than a tired professional who is bored with his job. Certainly, for Chiba taking on the role of a full-time teacher was much simpler, as he was a Japanese, trained by the founder of Aikido. He didn't risk being ridiculed, because no one would undermine his expertise. He was a descendant of a culture which created this martial art; he understood its origin and essence. Unlike us, he was a servant of a true message, not a surfer on the wave of illusion.

<sup>37</sup> Storks are large, long-legged, long-necked wading birds living in Poland.



He had a little house with a garden on the outskirts of San Diego, a few blocks away from the dojo. He drove a battered white Toyota and he was always driving into something. As ushideshi we were always fixing broken mirrors or a bumper. I can remember one of us, furious after a heavy training, who walked down to the parking lot, stood next to Sensei's car, and, indicating to the numerous dents, snapped, "And who is the one with no spatial awareness?!"

Sensei drove this car like a teacher: without caring at all about the rules. Once, in the middle of the night, we were waiting for him on the street, guarding the parking spot in front of the house of one of the instructors. Suddenly a black shape appeared – it turned out that he was driving around with no lights on. Not one of us had the courage to tell him.

I was always fascinated by the phenomenon of the creation of the feudal relationship Chiba had with his students. He didn't tolerate resistance; he was authoritarian and sometimes cruel. How does this role function in present everyday life? Apparently, once, whilst fishing, he caught the thigh of a surfer with his hook.

— Cut the line! – the surfer screamed.

— Pull out the hook! – shouted Chiba.

In this dialogue, as in a koan,<sup>38</sup> there is everything. The more I think about it, the more I am terrified by the simplicity of the message.

Everyone has to stand in a queue in the post office, fight with ZUS or whatever bureaucracy they have in the US. In those

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<sup>38</sup> Koan – an exercise in the practise of meditation. A question or a form.

moments, the role of a great teacher must have been very hard for him. However, everyone who knew him confirmed that it was not a mask, it was him.

Perhaps for 50 years it grew within him? When did this happen? After all, he left Japan as a 26-year-old. He sailed on a ship through the ocean for long weeks, up to the coast of England. Was this boy already an all-knowing master back then? Mind you, that is a stupid thought. He was a kid with some raw knowledge, unfamiliar with the language, with no money, probably always hungry and scared. In a strange, foreign world, a different religion and culture. He told us that he couldn't stand the weather and overcooked food. He missed fresh fish and he hated the English chattering about nothing. Was this boy, lost in the cosmos but with a mission of popularizing an art which he loved like a woman, already a teacher then?

Once, both of us were sitting in a small café opposite the dojo on Adams Avenue.<sup>39</sup> After half a year of training five, six hours daily, I wanted to thank him. I asked him for five minutes and he invited me for a coffee. That itself was a big joke. As an Uchideshi for six months I had a complete ban from drinking coffee. Now, at the end of the training Chiba invited me to a coffee house and, looking straight into my eyes, he ordered a double espresso. I took some kind of a spicy herbal tea, which gave me diarrhoea for the whole day. In this time, I had already led a dojo in Poland which trained a hundred people, and there was another hundred in the children's group. I wasn't ready, I wanted more. For

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<sup>39</sup> The San Diego Aikikai dojo was located on the Adams Avenue, in a building which used to be a bank.

the first time in my life I felt that I was drinking from the right source. I needed more and more. I didn't want to come back, I didn't want to fool the people who saw a teacher in me. I told him that.

'You will never be ready.' He looked at me seriously. 'When I left Japan, I was 26 years old. Do you think I knew much? Everything I know now I learnt much later'.

Coming back to the pressure cooker, I was bubbling up with youth and ambition. There was a deep need in me to show my commitment to Sensei.

"You have to decide if you want to be a sergeant or a general," he told me once after a heavy training where I had been fighting for my life. "How long will you still pretend that you are a teenager?" he continued.

I knew what I wanted but inside of me everything was rebelling against it. He wanted to make me a leader, a teacher. A conductor of an orchestra. Yet, I wasn't ready for that. Perhaps I never really wanted it? Each of us has their goal, their own reason to go on the mat. Each of us deals with their own dirt, each one different.

I knew people who were only interested in opening the doors to their inner demon. They had the potential to be much better technically. However, for that they would have to build a cage from the technique and, at least for a moment, to tame their aggression and other emotions. And this is not the reason they were there.

# It's Not a Sport, It's Not a Recreation – It Is a Madness

“ (...) it is necessary to know that the martial art is back-to-back with death. However, the potential death is in an inevitable balance of tension with the instinctive desire to survive. This fact bears itself heavily upon the seeker's mind and body in the training process, while vividly emphasizing the existential dignity and respect of the lives of the self and others.

T.K. Chiba<sup>40</sup>

The training was hard and dangerous. We were young, and every day we were stronger and more agile. The blood was boiling inside of us and the dynamism which beamed from Sensei was like a green light for our own experiments. Aikido is a work on repetitive techniques. There are no sparring matches, official competitions, contests, training seasons, peaks of the abilities, teams, or representation. This is the biggest beauty and equally a curse of what we do. A blessing for a lifetime of work, and an excuse for complacency and sloppiness.

In Judo or in wrestling, for the first half of the training you calmly and patiently practise the techniques. No one is

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<sup>40</sup> T.K. Chiba, *Aikido Forum*, Victoria Aikikai, 1985, [online:] <https://aikidosphere.com/kc-e-beware>

blocking, no one practises with a partner. The whole storm of emotions is waiting for the second half: the sparring match or the fight. This is when you throw out all that is inside of you; you block, you tug, you dominate, and you work through the waves of everything that will reach your head in the times of the extreme exhaustion.

Traditional Aikido rejects training in fighting and is based solely on the repetition of the forms. There is no confrontation or sparring matches; in theory there is also no rivalry. But that is only an illusory truth, as the irresistible need for a constant re-establishing of a hierarchy within a group lies within human nature. For that reason, a whole sea of emotions seethes somewhere under the surface in almost everything that we do.

An uchideshi lives in a dojo, trains for five, seven hours every day. He cleans, eats, and sleeps. This is all. Everything that he does is connected to the training. A man must cook in this training. He must practise Aikido, breathe it, love it, and hate it. He must stay in the dojo the whole day. He must, at all times, bang his head on the wall of his own limitations. He must study them endlessly. He must try do something hundreds, thousands of times, something that he couldn't even do yesterday. The whole dojo: cleanliness, water, gas, electricity, and toilets are his responsibility. There are no excuses and there is no escape into work, school, friends. Responsibility, the lack of privacy, and a place for physical and mental escape is what characterises this time.

I have practised many different styles, and the school of Chiba Sensei was the only one to use such an extreme ter-



minology. Training on the verge, brushing up against death, here and now, the awareness of the place, time, and danger. All of this sounds incredibly dramatic and, for most of us, it is just funny. The classical strand of the art became diluted and the training is, most of all, a leisure pursuit and a way of de-stressing. It is based on positive reinforcement and on stuffing the demand up with the supply. This manner has created an image of a safe, faceless system, in which nothing is “too much”. You can learn a bit, get a bit tired, relax a bit. At Chiba’s Sensei nothing was “a bit”. In the relationship with him nothing was comfortable or simple. In a fitness club you can run on a treadmill accompanied by nice music and air conditioning. You can watch pretty girls and parade in your designer clothes. An instructor stands next to you and feeds your ego with compliments. Sensei would, most likely, run in front of you barefoot with a rucksack full of rocks. Screaming at you the whole time.

But perhaps I was the only one who saw him that way? He had a fantastic sensing of people and he approached everyone in a different way. At some, he shouted incessantly, at others he never raised his voice. There were those to whom he never even spoke. I am trying to find words to express what struck me the most about Chiba Sensei. The only word that comes to my mind is Truth. Aikido can be an illusion, like patriotism or love. Then, it is only a cloud of ideas – it is more a dream than a tangible matter which can be weighed and measured. When did it start to be this way? It seems like the unique concept of avoiding the violence, which was tangentially introduced by the charismatic O’sensei and found fertile soil in the superficial West. To know a martial art is,

primarily, a masculine need, which has nothing to do neither with the authentic situation of danger nor with the reality of our modern times. This is applicable to any discipline. All professionals know about this, regardless to the style which they teach. Those schools are closed systems, most often impossible to compare. As time goes by, they become hermetic by creating an internal system of ranks, titles, and hierarchy. Small microcosms and a simplified model of the world.

After the introduction of firearms, physical domination was set aside. For most people the knowledge of the martial arts became another attribute and a tiger tooth on the necklace of the alpha male. The instrumentalism of this phenomenon is both amusing and terrifying. In general, we choose a discipline which would suit our personality type and our way of perceiving ourselves. In the process of creating the self-image of a typical redneck, training in MMA will be as important as a gold chain, a tattoo, or a pit bull. An over-intellectualised highbrow would, if he were to train at all, choose Aikido, Tai-chi, or something else which will fit into his individual list of dreams and imaginary qualities. Of course, there are exceptions. Martial arts evolved from their educational and practical purposes to become a sport which is focused on the score, a hobby, or a pure business service.

Aikido is not a sport, and the training is based on the constant practise of the same forms in a similar way. For months, years. Aikido, for the majority of us, is a hobby and not a profession or a number one priority. It is a way of de-stressing, a passion – like collecting stamps or keeping fish in an

aquarium. It lasts for years and for many is a reason for pride and sense of a happy life.

Training is truly relaxing. It gives strength to work, patience to bear the moaning of the boss, mother, or wife. All of this is true; however, for me, it was always too little. Somewhere in the back of my head I had a feeling that it was all just a joke. That it was not serious enough and that I was not making use of the tools which I carry. Aside from this, we are operating with terminology which does not at all apply to the reality of our times. We utter words about practise on the mat and off the mat, about far-distant goals and changing one's life. About a journey to perfection, constant practise, and thousands of repetitions. About an evolution of the body and the spirit. We are operating with the language from the movies like *Karate Kid* and *Star Wars*. There is not a big difference between the common perception of the relationship between teacher and student in martial arts and a conversation of Yoda with the young Padawan. In fact, this is one of the biggest diseases of the modern teachings of martial arts – the image of the teacher was taken by pop culture, ground up and dumbed down. It became a fixed mask which is, on the one hand, sought out by people who believe in this image of a student; on the other, by teachers who are putting it on and who are selling what the consumers want to buy. All of this path towards enlightenment has thrown me into many places and groups. All of them were more or less alike. They were hermetic and they followed a similar set of rules. All of them, with no exception, believed in their own exceptionality. All of them, before I became an uchideshi of Chiba Sensei, disappointed me with their lack of true commitment. It is

hard to explain because I really do not think of myself as exceptionally talented – I do not like my own Aikido and I do not like to teach people who have a similar physical build to mine. This was, however, the first school and style which was searching for value in an attempt at discovering and attacking one's own mistakes. We were our biggest enemies. Sensei did not allow a vain pose of uniqueness. We were all joined by a fear of his appraisal. Also by a real checking of our development. It was a living school.

## Pain

“Salt in our wounds, a whole carriage of salt,

*So no one can say that it doesn't hurt.*

Rafał Wojaczek<sup>41</sup>

Pain is what separates the illusion from the truth and the dream from the reality. Many of us become so attached to illusion that we run away from pain and treat it as pointless. But in fact, there is good pain and bad pain. Physical pain, pain of helplessness, pain of anger and resentment. Pain of death, experiencing, pain of someone's departure

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41 R. Wojaczek (1945–1971) was a Polish poet of the postwar generation.

and pain present in the birth of a new life. The shell breaks and something dies in agony so that something else can be born in pain.

Living in a world of painkilling, motivation, assertiveness, and looking for the positives, we move further and further away from unpleasant experiences – every kind of pain we consider as bad. It was only some years ago that every evening we came back from the playground or from school with grazed knees, elbows, and black eyes. Burned by the sun, wind-beaten, frostbitten cheeks, stung by a nettle, stung by bees and wasps, sticky from nut juice. A ten-year-old boy had a Swiss Army knife and everyone, every now and then, was whacked with a stick or at least a small rock. In the time of my childhood everyone got their foot trapped in a bike wheel. Pain, smaller or bigger, accompanied us always and we knew many flavours of it. Burns, cuts, bruises, grazes. Everyone at one point fell asleep with their fingers in a glass of cold water or soothed their burns with milk. Pain was a part of growing up and no one had any resentment against it. Your tooth hurt before going to the dentist and the dentist hurt even more.

Pain as a warning and as a consequence. Pain as an unavoidable thing. Pain in your heels scraped by shoes that were too tight and pain of a poorly plucked out splinter. Pain from tiny needles of glass and the seeds of rosehips. As in the Matrix, we chose a life of pain for us and our families. Every ache in our throat, head, or muscles we fight with a painkiller. Kids sit inside houses, in front of glass screens and cry when they are bitten by a mosquito. It is a magical lethargy – like after a few hours of watching TV. It is warm and the air condi-

tioning in the house, the garage and at work, causes us to drift through life like in a pleasant dream.

Good pain is the pain of breaking out of this dream. Pain of cold, hunger, fear, danger. Losing control. Sometimes it seems to me that the main tool of Chiba Sensei was precisely breaking a person out of this shell. People who live in the illusion of nice Aikido, where nothing is supposed to hurt, believe that stroking each other during the training should be done with a smile on your face. Those people chafed Chiba like a blister on his ass. It was at these times he had an expression of pure disgust on his face and he avoided them like the plague. If such situations took place on our seminars, we knew that he expected the utmost “hospitality” from us, and familiarising with the local reality. I saw this so many times that I am no longer surprised by the foolishly earned reputation of this style.

We lived in a terror of word games, political pressure, and mutual friction that was invisible to the untrained eye. There was no space for any illusion because each of us was busy with the trials of surviving or forgetting about what was happening on the mat. If training is the process of upbringing, our little journey into adulthood, it needs to consist of all of the grazed knees, getting lost in the supermarket, and running noses. If it is to be a farm of chickens on steroids, detached from fresh air and real food, it will be a journey into illusion. It would be no different to the dreamy gliding in the impersonal, air-conditioned world. We will juggle the pop-culture images – as if after putting together a cabinet from IKEA someone called themselves a carpenter. Perhaps

this is the reason why such crowds go for Yoga, Zumba, and other anonymous nonsense. There you can keep your bubble, no one touches you, no one gives you pain, no one throws you, you remain safe in your own world. Even if you break a sweat or are left panting, you do it on your own terms and as much as you want.

Pain and tiredness were the first experiences that people had in Chiba's school. Those were the doors to a magnificent garden. The garden was beautiful and menacing. Full of all the writhing mess which could eat you, cut you, or burn you, but still was beautiful.

The pain of a changing body. Muscle soreness, the sensation of aching and stiff muscles, pain of being wrenched away from the tomb of stagnation. Pain of tiredness. Every morning I woke up and I lay for a while without moving my finger (there is a song by the band Voo Voo<sup>42</sup> that paints a picture: "I lift one hand, I lift the other hand, I lift one leg, I lift the other leg . . . I am alive").<sup>43</sup> Somewhere along the way there was almost always pain that awaited me. Sometimes it was simply sore muscles, a sprain, or a bruise. Sometimes it was something more serious. In the world of everyday pain, bad, big pain is truly big and bad. I fall to the floor, knocked down by the wave of paralysing suffering. I feel sick and I find myself in a foetal position surrounded by people who I now hate – I want only for them to go away and leave me alone just for a minute. I am 45 years old and for the last 15 years something hurts me every day. I cannot see the end of this, because the body is getting old and takes much longer to heal.

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42 Voo Voo – Polish rock band.

43 Voo Voo, 'Ja Zyje' from the album Sno-powiazalka, 1987.

The devil of pain surrounds me, trying to get out differently every time. Bad pain of a break or fracture, strained spine, or knee always terrifies me. It is a setback. Cuts, injury, a hurt shoulder or even a broken arm is nothing. I can live with it and teach with it. What I am afraid of the most is injuring the lower part of my spine and my knees. This would mean hunger and the end of the dojo.

A sportsman has his career. When he is 30 years old the time of hard work and pain, extreme diet, constant muscle soreness is over. He can become a trainer, step back from the sport, or play around in leisure pursuits. I will do what I do until the end of my life. In our industry there is no retiring. In the mornings when I am 70 or 80, I will take my cheap set of dentures from a glass and I will go on the mat at 6am. Possibly I would have to get up much earlier to try and take a piss. I am condemned to be within sight of young people to see weakness in me.

A young brat who kicks a ball in a second-league club will have a ligament transplant and rehabilitation only two days after an injury. We live in a world of local medical centres. No one cares about us, and a ripped off knee puts you only in the queue to earn a treatment in half a year. Rehabilitation in four years. The system will eat you and spit you out, the strongest will prevail. So many people quit, not because they didn't like the training anymore, but because they were scared of our medical care. I saw Chiba Sensei whose physical shell began to rapidly deteriorate and age. We saw this anger and rage towards oneself. That this is the end, that the pain starts to eat at you every day. It gets worse and worse. Injuries



heal slower and the body starts to implacably stiffen. Pain no longer appears; it is there to stay. Dozens of smaller and bigger injuries. Harmless, ignored, sometimes new, sometimes scary. "If you wake up one day and nothing hurts you, you are dead," they say. This saying comes back to me all the time, making me less happy and more sad.



# Injury



*Why do you scream? What, your leg?*

*This guy's head was ripped off and he doesn't shout, and you do over such a petty thing.*

– Józef Piłsudski<sup>44</sup> to his wounded soldiers.

The smallest ones were the worst – a scratch on your wrist was not an excuse to miss the training. After a few days, the sweaty and infected cut would grow so that you would have to put a bandage on it. Instead of drying up it would fester and inflame. The bandage rubbed against it, and after a couple of weeks from a little scratch it would grow into serious wound, filled with pus. The same thing happened with grazed knees. Always, when I came back after a break to the rigour of being uchideshi, I suffered from an inflammation of the nerves in my elbows. This nastiness radiates all the way down to the little fingers – in the night I would be woken up by a pain which would cause both of my palms to shake. It would go away after a week or so. We practise barefoot and each of us after some time got accustomed to different types of fungus which grew on the mat. The French prefer to use mattresses wrapped in rough blankets, which are slightly softer than plastic tatami mats.<sup>45</sup> After just two hours of training on them the skin between my toes begins to crack and bleed.

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<sup>44</sup> J. Piłsudski (1867–1935) Polish statesman and head of state. He is viewed as a father of the Second Polish Republic re-established in 1918.

<sup>45</sup> Tatami – The Japanese name for the training mat. Modern mats are made of foam covered with plastic. The traditional Japanese ones are made of rice straw and igus grass.

Always in the same spots: under the little toe of my left foot and just along the nail of my big toe. Invariably, for over 15 years. I treat it with antibiotics, but I feel as if this fungal devil sits somewhere inside of me, waiting for me to put my foot on the mat – then it attacks, tearing the skin. It cannot be taped up or ignored.

In the case of more serious injuries the scenario is as follows: a student falls badly and dislocates his shoulder. If no one in the dojo resets it, he goes to the doctor. The doctor orders him to stop training for two months. Sensei looks at him and says: one month. A month of sitting on the mat in seiza and watching the training for 5 hours every day. An hour in seiza is a pure pain, five is a nightmare. Tricks don't help, double socks, squirming and fidgeting, being still, leaning, crossing the feet. Nothing helps. After two weeks the student reports that he feels fine and he can practise. This is how, in the dojo, you can heal a dislocated shoulder not in two months but in two weeks.

There were legends among the students about our predecessors. The tales of titans magnified by time which were comforting and inspiring. The tales that you can keep training with a dislocated shoulder – you can secure it with a bicycle inner tube. The bruised and swollen palms you need to cool not with ice but with packets of frozen peas because they fit to the shape of your body perfectly. The cuts on the head from the sticks, should be held closed with the membrane from under the shell of a broken egg. When the membrane dries up it patches up your skin better than stiches.

We lived in a hermetic world – condemned to natural remedies more than to antibiotics and X-rays. The Pole, the Mexican, the Albanian, the Columbian, all the weirdos from the second- and third- world countries. Without money, without insurance. I remember how, during an exam in San Francisco, my knee, which was unhealed after surgery, popped out of its joint in one movement. The feeling was horrific, but as an uchideshi I couldn't leave the mat and stop attacking. I was taking ukemi.<sup>46</sup> I don't remember who was passing and for which rank, but I ruined this poor guy's exam. I suffered until the end of my turn and I sat down in seiza with my knee which had I simply destroyed. I couldn't leave so I sat there, like an idiot, with an aching leg doing everything I could to control my sphincter. After the training I quickly covered it in ice. On the same day, Sensei sent me away to see a willowy 50-year-old man with a mop of hair. They called him Doctor Fu and he was a medic in the Navy Seals. He stuck three needles in my knee – without any painkillers, 5 centimetres deep – and plugged them into a current of electricity. The next day I walked without limping. We also used moxibustion, burning sticks of compressed dried mugwort thick as a thumb, to put on the aching spots. In the room there was a cupboard filled with bandages, splints, we had walking sticks and even an old wheelchair. There were neck braces, a fridge full of icepacks, and you could buy an arnica ointment in the office. An injury was part of the practise and dealing with it was a test, an opportunity to check yourself. Studied poses and techniques were just an illusion if the pain destroyed them, and a man dropped to the floor in convulsions.

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<sup>46</sup> Ukemi – Japanese meaning “receiving body”. When one “takes uke-mi” they attack and absorb the technique by falling or rolling.

Some of the forms, especially the ones in which weapons were used, were inextricably connected to pain and were a test of strong will and determination. I can remember looped kiri-otoshi<sup>47</sup> with two partners. You attack the head of your opponent with a wooden sword and he goes off the line and cuts with his own sword. And again. Occasionally one of them hits your palm. The wave of pain goes straight to your head and your hand opens. You cannot stop because the other person is already waiting for the attack, so you begin to make mistakes. The hits now come more frequently, and the outer side of the palm begins to puff up like a ball. Often, the skin tears and start to bleed. Each hit now hurts much more. Weakness takes over the body and every Samurai transforms into a trembling child. As time goes on you learn how to observe this process and to notice when you begin to lose control. The form works when you stop fearing the pain. You stop fearing the pain when you get used to it or when it becomes indifferent to you. This is one difference between art and sport: we do not train people so that they win. We prepare them to die. Dignified and with no regrets.

Only, how to practise so it doesn't become a banality? After all, we know that no one is going to die here. People have been practising Aikido for almost 80 years, and I think that no one has ever died on the mat. I once read about a man who, during a practise in the headquarters of the Yoshinkan – one of the styles of Aikido – fell after one technique and never got up. However, he was suffering from some kind of terminal illness and his family was prepared for such a sorrowful and sudden event. Especially significant was the reaction of his

<sup>47</sup> Kiri-otoshi – A technique from the school of Chiba Sensei practised with a wooden sword (bokken).

wife who approached the teachers and said, “I am happy that he died here. He loved this place; it was a good death.”

Once I was coming back half-conscious from a knee surgery. I remember that I was in a glass lift when the doctor told me, “For you, the sport is finished. From now on it’s just strolling.”

It wasn’t even a serious surgery. Arthroscopy of a knee: three little holes and resection of the meniscus. They “shuffled” around the kneecap and that was it. People have their ligaments transplanted or their broken bones drilled with screws to then come back to do what they can’t live without. I had just finished my first run of 6 months in San Diego. I was strong and I believed in what I saw there. I knew that it is me who owns the body, owns the knee, not the other way around. It was my first serious injury and I remember I was concerned after the conversation with my doctor. I didn’t believe her, but I was concerned. I knew I would keep practising and nothing was going to change that. I felt that what was inside me was much stronger than my body, my shell – that this body, those injuries, were there to fulfil their purpose. Now, after many years, I know that neither the injury nor the surgery was serious enough to stop me. Not then, not now. This is precisely what separates the madmen from the hobbyists. We are not able to stop because it is the only thing that makes us who we are. We don’t have anything else.

My knee broke on Tuesday morning – Thursday afternoon I had a treatment, on Saturday I was signed off, and on Monday I had five trainings. I have already led classes with my ribs fractured or broken, with a concussion, broken fingers

and toes, a broken nose; I have led classes with a high fever, with viral conjunctivitis; for years I was healing new types of athlete's foot. I have broken my midfoot, ripped the ligaments in my calves and thighs, I limped around the training room supported by a walking stick when I had sciatica. Once I lay motionless on the mat for 12 hours when my disc had slipped. From walking in the mountains with the youth group I got an abscess on my butt that was the size of a ping-pong ball. For a week I trained, with no falls, with a meter of string in my butt. None of this stopped me training for longer than two days. There was so much of this that sometimes I don't even know if something happened to me or to someone else. When training is the goal – there is nothing special about that. When the goal is something different – pain will stop you. I don't want to idealise this approach because there is also something sick/perverved/twisted about it; but the strength which lies within it is remarkable.

Stevie from England was hit in the nose by a stick whilst he was in the middle taking ukemi for Sensei, in front of everybody. He ran to the changing room, reset it, put cotton plugs in his nostrils and came back to continue training. Michal, my student, was hit in the face by my elbow right before his exam. He ran to reset his bleeding nose, right front of his mother's eyes, then he came back and passed a beautiful exam. I broke one of the bones in Krzysiek's forearm when doing kote-gaeshi<sup>48</sup> – he didn't even feel it but the whole room of beginners groaned. Ordered by me he went straight to the emergency room and came back with his hand in a plaster to watch the rest of the training in seiza.

<sup>48</sup> Kote-gaeshi – a technique for Aikido which is based on the bending of one's wrist.

Roo in San Diego pierced her heel with a sharp sword whilst doing a beautiful jump with an overhead cut. She went to the hospital herself where they put in some stitches. She was back in time to help us to prepare dinner with Sensei. More? There is more of it. One could talk about it for hours, as the right atmosphere births a true, illogical fire. In the place where it is done for real. In the place where it is really happening.

“Is something wrong?” asked Sensei when we tried to lift our bodies up from a pool of blood.

“I’m fine,” was our mantra.

This is nothing special. Don’t pity yourself. The others have it much worse. It is just a broken bone. Somewhere, over the years of this madness, there appears the ability to ignore trivial matters. The internet is full of it: boxers with dislocated shoulders, a ski runner winning with her leg broken. A syndrome of giving up to pain, hiding away behind an illness is something natural. An injury awakens compassion, pity, a willingness to help. For one moment we are in the centre of attention. It is an addiction, and I know a few people, even among the advanced, who were addicted to being ill. It is not a normal hypochondria but the perverse Aikido-type. People hide away in an illness or hundreds of illnesses, constantly coming up with new syndromes of fidgety legs or an upset ear.

I am slowly entering an age in which I will begin to pay for my stupidity. For training with a dislocated shoulder or slaying my unhealed knees. As an answer to a question Sensei asked me after my injury, I said boastfully that my knees have survived the surgery as if it was nothing.



“I was lucky,” I said.

“You weren’t,” he responded sadly. “Your body is strong, but you will lose those muscles around 60 and then all of the injuries will return once again, but much worse. All the fractured elbows, fingers, shoulders, and knees, all will strike you at once or one after another. With rheumatism, pain and god knows what else. You are writing a book which you will, eventually, read . . .”

Obviously, none of us cared about that. We were fascinated by the atmosphere and the power of those people. Whilst she was in the middle of the mat, Gabriella, a tall journalist from Australia, hit Chiba Sensei with a wooden sword. The skin on his forehead split open and he went away for a while to stop the bleeding. The girl froze, terrified at the thought of what would happen. Sensei came out of his office with a smile on his lips, pointing to his forehead.

“Very good *shomen*,<sup>49</sup> right in the middle!” he laughed.

He never mentioned it again, and for us the message was clear. No one is perfect and we all bleed – the only thing that matters is whether we do it with class and dignity.

The most poignant story, for me, is one I heard from a third party, so I don’t even know if what I learnt was completely true. However, it became an inspiration for me for many years and on various occasions it gave me strength to win in the battle with my moaning body. One of the French teachers had kidney surgery. It got nasty, as it became infected, so they had to cut him open again. Complications had crippled his body – the man was lying in hospital, weighing not more

<sup>49</sup> Shomen – overhead strike.

than skin and bones. Everybody was terrified and gradually started to say their farewells. The message of Chiba Sensei was simple. He expressed his sympathy and then he said, "Move your ass and get better because someone needs to take care of the dojo. The surgery is the surgery, but how long you will be lying here?"

I don't know how true it is, but for me it is a powerful tool. At this very moment, I am sitting in my office after five hours of training. My students from the advanced group do pull-ups on a bar, a few are throwing knives at a target. I have ice on my knee which swelled up yesterday for no apparent reason, and it's now twice as big as the other one. Two weeks ago, my back snapped – I couldn't bend over for four days, then I was hit with a flu. There was a time when injuries didn't heal for years. Like a small, vicious devil, they circled around inside my body, gnawing on something new every day.

After some point you stop worrying. Chiba Sensei wore bandages and supports like medals. Proudly. I understood it later. He was a symbol that even with a damaged shoulder or a bandage dripping with blood, you do not stop your journey, you do not hide, you do not leave the mat. He taught us what was important. After something like that, none of us could run out of the training room with a bruised finger.

I wonder if some part of those manifestations wasn't staged. They probably were. I myself have done similar things many times. Who can bear more, who is stronger. Silly, juvenile grappling can become a brilliant tool for building a group and toughening people. Like when, during a summer seminar in the south of France, Davinder – who was then, I think, a 4<sup>th</sup>

dan – trapped his finger in a door. Blood rushed under the nail and the finger began to swell. We were sleeping in tents on the northern side of a hill which was battered by mistral wind all day long. In a small house lived our host Michael, an old freak who was keeping a rather big marihuana field. We were sitting at a table in the garden, the wind incessantly blowing everything off it. Before the eyes of the students we pierced Davinder's finger with a red-hot safety pin. Blood squirted on everyone. The pressure from the finger went down and the next day he could train normally. At spring camp at Labaroche,<sup>50</sup> we used to cut the blisters which had appeared on students' palms after gripping the swords.

Students thought that we were lunatics, they looked at as if we were madmen – but we knew it would be better than if they were to see weakness in us; then this admiration-based relationship would die at once. When does the contrived front of power end? As you wake up in the morning alone, with no audience and the big and little pains begin to encircle you? It is not cancer – you tell yourself. I will pass. You are no one special. A boxer can handle more. However, a boxer, if he is good, earns big money at what he does, and then he retires. I am 45 and I can see no end. I will die in the corner of the mat like a dog: with mycosis and god knows what else. Or perhaps I will, like the wrestler played by Rourke in one film, take fists – full of painkillers and I will end every training covered with ice-packs?

When a young girl, an Uchideshi, damaged her elbow after a training, I gave a motivational speech. I began with con-

<sup>50</sup> Labaroche – A commune in the Haut-Rhin department in Grand Est in northeastern France. Location of the Birankai Spring Camp for many years.

cussion, then I covered the topic of broken noses and finally I talked about fracturing your mid-foot. I looked at them and instead of concern I saw smiles on their faces. I asked them why they were smiling and they started to tell me, one after another, about each of their injuries. As if from the shadows, everything came back. Who took who into AE: open fractures, carrying people to an ambulance on a mattress. A girl who was kicked in the face, which we then covered with snow as there was no ice, passed an exam for the 4<sup>th</sup> kyu the next day with 11 stiches in.

Once more life hit me in the face. You are not special. Those people follow this path just like you, paying for the learning with blood and pain. And still they are here. It is easy to fall into the trap of pitying oneself or becoming a megalomaniac. Working with pain was, in the teachings of Chiba Sensei, something very basic as physical suffering is, definitely, an opposite of dreams and illusion. I think that the fight with a naïve image of Aikido was something which tortured him for his whole life. For him that was the door which could be opened only by those who he wanted to work with. Those who he didn't want would smash against those doors. Pain, blood, injury – this is what makes the training real. It rips off the mask and pulls you out from the Matrix. You are no longer an imaginary elf frolicking with a shiny sword around a meadow. You are overweight, the sword is not shiny, and you have dog poo in-between your toes.

# 十二月

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# Silence

“When a job applicant starts telling me how Pacific Rim-job cuisine turns him on and inspires him, I see trouble coming. Send me another Mexican dishwasher anytime. I can teach him to cook. I can’t teach character. Show up at work on time six months in a row and we’ll talk about red curry paste and lemon grass. Until then, I have four words for you: ‘Shut the fuck up’.

Anthony Bourdain, *Kitchen Confidential*

“The old master used to teach us: Reject all of your desires, be like withered ashes and shrivelled flowers, close your lips and do not open them until they are covered in mould.

D. T. Suzuki, *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism* (author’s translation)

There is a need to speak within us all. Sending forth empty words which are an attempt to keep others’ attention – this is the domain of Western culture. It brings to mind an Italian family dinner or American small talk. We have a need to fill the emptiness with words. Silence, in our conception, only fuels a vicious circle of thoughts and awakens anxiety. It is a long process, but Zazen teaches how to make peace with the silence. The first thing that it awakens is a flood of

thoughts, dreams, and various paths one could take to escape. We also perceive an interaction with the other person very verbally. In the case of a teacher, that would be long hours in a car, a plane, in train stations or airports.

Chiba Sensei used to say that throughout the years he spent with O-Sensei, during hundreds of hours of common travelling, he spoke to him only a few times. Communication between Sensei and Otomo takes place on a non-verbal level. What comes naturally and is universally understood in Japanese culture for us brings one of the biggest cultural dissonances. Many hours of silence between people to us seems like an unnatural way of covering up a conflict. Like children – we are constantly sending verifying signals. The role of a student is simple. They give answers and ask only when it is necessary. They guess the things they should be doing and do them.

The first time Chiba Sensei visited Poland was incredibly stressful for me. I could not believe that he would ever want to come. In the times when I was his uchideshi, he told many stories about his travels. Then he always turned in my direction and said:

‘I will never go to Poland. It is too cold there!’

A few years later we organised a summer school in Wroclaw that would take place just after Sensei was in England. We wrote an unofficial invitation – not to teach, but to visit Poland for pleasure. After a few days we received a response: ‘I would be happy to come for it all’. For whole week I was running around him with others, trying to guess his every

wish and bombarding him with words. I remember a conversation with one of the teachers from London.

‘Silence,’ he told me. ‘Recently, I drove him in my car for four hours and on purpose I didn’t speak a single word to him. He expects that, don’t push anything.’

A year passed. Before the next summer school, I took him fishing on a cutter and for a cruise on the Baltic sea. There were a dozen or so of us. We caught fifty fish, one kilo each, which a few guys took in ice and nettles to Wroclaw to be smoked. From Gdansk we flew, just the two of us, to Wroclaw, via Warszawa. I went with him to the airport, and it turned out that the plane was cancelled. The next one was in seven hours. I stayed alone with him. We came back to the flat and we had all this time ahead of us, just us two. Then I reminded myself of the words of the British guy. Silence. I felt guilty because of the delay and I was had an impression that he felt reproach towards me, but silence gave me calmness and a defence against the pressure. Suddenly, I found safety in it and a place for myself. We sat all those hours in silence. In silence we went back to the airport and in silence, without a word, we flew to Warszawa and then to Wroclaw. During all those hours, I might have offered him coffee a couple of times.

Sensei told the stories of his travels with O-Sensei. How he found out that in an hour they would be going to a different city. He had to pack and call for a taxi within that time. O-Sensei would get in the car and then he would go straight to the train. In the meantime, the one accompanying him, crushed by the weight of the bags, had to clear the way for



him, buy a ticket and reserve a place for him in the carriage. O'sensei acted as if he simply didn't see him.

When we landed in Wroclaw, Sensei went to the exit, where he was welcomed by our teachers. I stopped in front of the exit. If I left the hall, I couldn't pick up the luggage.

'We can go,' said Sensei.

'Let's wait for Piotr', said one of the teachers, 'He doesn't have a car and he has to pick up the luggage.'

'There's no need, he will be fine,' he said, not even turning his head in my direction. And he left. They went together to the car and left me in the airport with the luggage.

Back in San Diego, he once confessed: 'My father used to say that a true man shows his teeth only once in few days'. There is no grinning, joking around, senseless chattering, guffawing, or even a pointless smile.

And yet, our communication is based on those signals. As children we call out to our parents like chicks, chirping constantly, searching for contact. This way we are never left alone, and we don't learn how to be an adult. It is a lesson for me which I am still discovering. In cultures which are closer to nature a father takes his son and they travel through the bush, taiga, desert, in silence. They are silent for hours lest they scare away the game or attract predators. They are watchful, alert, a bit scared. In our safe reality this has been lost somewhere. I can recall that in my childhood, before autumn and winter every couple of days my father took me with a sledge for wood. We searched for dry wood or discarded timber. With a long saw we cut it all for hours and,

alternating in pushing and pulling, we dragged everything to the house. There was not a lot of talking then. There was silence. Back then there were still a lot of wild bushes and forests which belonged to no one. Overgrown bushes and fallen trees on the post-PGR<sup>51</sup> fields. Later, the area became domesticated – now everything is trimmed, raked up, belonging to someone. I was embarrassed by those trips for wood. No one else did it and I felt like a beggar. Most of my friends bought a few tons of coal and we, like paupers, collected twigs from around the neighbourhood. Now I look back and I treasure this time – maybe over the years I have idealised this memory and my butt has forgotten how cold it was. In silence and in cold I got to know the sound of my father's panting, the smell of his sweat and breath. In the thousand moments of despair, anger, and exhaustion we built something deeper than empty chatter.



# Exhaustion

“We conduct the following experiment: we put a rat into an aquarium, and, subsequently, after five minutes we put a second rat into a different aquarium. In this way, in two aquariums we have swimming rats. After ten minutes we observe: in the aquarium on my left-hand side: the rat is already starting to drown. It becomes weak, you can clearly notice its faint breathing. You can see bubbles of air which come from rat's nostrils, the nostrils which are just under the surface of the water. You can see how, subsequently, the rat weakens, and the rat drowns. Whereas, in the aquarium on my right-hand side we can see a rat which was placed there five minutes later. A rat which is swimming and who goes on the plank of wood very easily. In those times, the rat rests. It evens its breathing a bit. . . . We place a rat again in the aquarium on the right-hand side. The rat swims again. . . . The tenth hour of the experiment passes. The rat . . . is still swimming. . . . it can be seen that the rat often comes back to the place where the plank of wood was placed before. . . . The fifteenth hour of experiment passes. The rat, which was swimming for almost fifteen hours, drowns.

From the film *Szczurołap*<sup>52</sup>

I remember that, almost thirty years ago, one of my first teachers highlighted that Aikido is something you study, not exercise. It is a practise, not a training. The point is not to get tired, break a sweat, get sore muscles. What counts is

the understanding, not pointless and senseless repetition. We practised three times a week in a massive hall at Zielińskiego Street.<sup>53</sup> Before our practice was the Polish judo training session. Kruszyna, Kubacki, Bałach, and others: sweaty, massive, muscular judoka rolled out from the hall, half dead. In the corridor there were dozens of us waiting. Skeletons in glasses, teenagers, and weedy intellectuals. Even though in comparison to them we were just a group of amateurs, our training incorporated many elements of general fitness, strength training, or acrobatics. Not because we knew how important these things were – there were simply no good aikido teachers or training background, so the half of the training we stole from judo, karate, wrestling, and European gymnastics. At the same time, indoctrinated by the instructors and our own pride, we believed that what we were doing was, developmentally, more advanced, and better. Now that time has gone by and now, being forty-something, I take judo and ju-jitsu classes privately. The only reason is so that I truly understand my aikido. As a kid, right under my nose I had the best of Polish judo, and I did nothing about it. Perhaps this is how it is supposed to be? To understand something the circle needs to close.

I know people who, in their years of training, never broke a sweat. The lack of an open fight and an easy-going atmosphere allows you to hide in the over-intellectualised corners. This is where the fat masters and the prattling on instead of training comes from. T. K. Chiba Sensei was building an atmosphere of his dojo based on fear. Authority, his past having spent

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<sup>53</sup> This judo hall, AZS AWF Wrocław, has since been transformed into a shopping mall. Old Aikidoka and Judoka avoid the area because it hurts their hearts.

time in the company of O-Sensei, knowledge, rank – all of this based on the relentless feeling of fear. Anybody who contradicts this is lying. A fear that Chiba would hurt you even if you were a beginner, and an even more interesting type of fear: that you would disappoint him. It is a phenomenon that, even after Sensei's death, brings us together, the people who were closely touched by his hand. I wake up in a cold sweat in the middle of the night because I dream that I will be late for the training.

When Aikido arrived in Europe and the United States, like a wild weed it sprawled into the world without competition. Firstly in Europe, then in USA it spread in many different branches, wild blends of ours and the Japanese tradition, mentality, and desires. As a shapeless cloud of ideas which couldn't be verified, those peculiarities bloomed everywhere with infinite colours and concentrations of toxins. I could only imagine what the Japanese shihan<sup>54</sup> felt. What Ueshiba's students felt when they saw what sprouted out from those seeds thrown into the wind. They defined the teachings of Ueshiba completely differently – from the physically demanding, militaristic Yoshinkan school<sup>55</sup> to the contactless system in which the main subject of studies is the legendary energy called *ki*.<sup>56</sup> Chiba Sensei based his system on a very strong physical contact and a pressure which you put on your partner. In traditional aikido, in contrast to sports, the physical background and ability are not an integral part of the practise. Training consists of a warm-up, which lasts

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54 Shihan – the highest rank of teachers in aikido and other Japanese martial arts.

55 Yoshinkan – a school of aikido created by Gozo Shioda (1915–1994), famously used to train Tokyo's riot police.

56 Ki – vital energy.

a few minutes, and the rest is repetitions of forms with a partner. That is all. Sensei built, in the world of uchideshi, a cult of a strong body. Training was physically exhausting if you wanted it to be. There was always a way to escape into a slower tempo or bend the rules slightly, but the stress and the pressure from his side was constant. During my first visit to San Diego, a few people were preparing for their *dan* (black belt) examinations<sup>57</sup> As a part of the preparation, every Friday for a couple of months the whole group underwent a mock exam which lasted for two and a half hours. It took place during *kenshusei* (teacher trainee) training, and of course as an uchideshi I took part in the practice. I remember one of those trainings in particular: two and a half hours in *suwari waza*,<sup>58</sup> techniques performed on the knees. My first partner was called Ben and I can only remember that he had a massive, bald head. I opened dynamically with *shomenuchi* – a strike to the head from above – but he didn't control my hand and entered with his head. Something cracked and a moment later I fell with my elbow to his eye socket. A brow bone fractured, blood spouted. Someone covered him with ice, and I was told off by one of Chiba's assistants.

'What happened?! Why are you sitting? Go and find yourself another partner!'

The next one was Roo, higher rank than me and better. We fought together until the end of the training. During this type of class, you fight for your survival. It is crucial to impose your

<sup>57</sup> In the system of Aikido, junior practitioners are kyu ranks (from 5 to 1) and seniors are dan ranks (from 1 higher). Practitioners with kyu ranks wear a white belt. People with 1 dan or higher wear a black belt and wide trousers called hakama. Hakama at times can be granted to people who still hold a kyu rank.

<sup>58</sup> *Suwari waza* – aikido techniques performed from a kneeling position.

tempo on the partner. It is not a fight – it cannot be finished early. The time is predictable. It will last for two and a half hours, regardless of what you do during that time. The most important thing then is to impose your physical rhythm on the partner – adjusted to your own body, length of breath, technique, and stamina. The first ten minutes is, most often, enough to tire your partner enough to adjust to this tempo. That day, Roo and I fought for domination until the end. She gave me a black eye and I didn't even know it. Sensei sat under the kamiza, watching us all as if he was feeding on this invisible life trembling in the air. Many times, we broke through what marathon-runners call a wall, a crisis. I don't know how many times I lifted myself up, not believing that I would go on. At one point, Sensei stood up, went up to us and fixed some mistake of ours. I was young, strong, and still I had no idea what he was talking about. We were separated by a fog; I couldn't see anything through it. I was simply grateful that I could sit down. Suddenly, I realised that I had never felt so relaxed. Literally, I felt my internal organs hanging on fascia. I have never sat so deeply in seiza either. 'I guess I have, finally, relaxed all my muscles,' I thought. In this moment, in the fumes of tiredness, some kind of chest opened up in my head with a loud crack. I reminded myself that, apparently, only the rectal sphincter is tense all one's life. If I relaxed everything, probably also the sphincter – I murmured to myself. Instantly, of course, I had decided to tense it again. I was so tired I didn't feel anything. Following, then, a natural pattern of logic, I reached the conclusion that evidently I had also relaxed my sphincter. It took me a while to join facts together. Chiba Sensei was saying something



to us, standing a meter away from me, and I only thought about one thing, 'I am sure I have shit myself, I am just too tired to feel it yet.' The conclusion made sense because I was dripping wet from the sweat. The next step was to check it organoleptically. Slowly I began to lower my hand, which I put in the side cut of the hakama and followed down in the direction of my butt. There I held it for some time. Then, slowly, I reached my hand in the direction of my face, feigning contemplation and deep thoughtfulness over Chiba's words, which I couldn't even hear. I probably looked like a student fascinated by the lecture. In reality I was sniffing my fingers, checking that my sphincter worked. On the verge of losing consciousness, those fumes of nonsense devoid of logic are a powerful and fearsome tool. Only a teacher aware of its potential can use it.

What do you get from this type of training? In a primitive way it shows you how much you can do. It is a basic message. After surviving three hours of falling, you cannot complain about an hour of training. You know then that it is only an excuse. I used to say to my panting students at the university: 'A tired student is the one who hates me so much he wants to throw himself at me but he knows he can't do it because he won't have a strength to get up. And he passes out after a failed attempt to spit at me. That is tiredness, gentlemen. For now, you're just short of breath'. A person who runs a marathon will never see a 10km run as a life achievement. The feeling of confidence and self-assurance with less fear appears. On the level of a group, a cohesion is born which is sculpted by a common effort and experience. We live in a comfort zone. Whether you want it or not, the majority of our life choices

serve us to not go beyond the level of tolerated tiredness, hunger, pain, physical and mental suffering. However, the strength of a human is created by attempts to exceed those borders and extend this level. Absurd initiation ceremonies, torture in military camps, kicks in the stomach during karate trainings, are all attempts to push beyond this level of comfort. Observing oneself in those moments is a treasure, and it is what creates the strengths of a person in the world of martial arts. Technique becomes a tool for overstepping the border of exhaustion, pain. As running is a tool for millions of amateurs who dream about a marathon. Each time one meter, two meters further. Each time with more proficiency they break through the wave of exhaustion, walls of crisis.

## Sleep

“*I only wanted to eat and sleep. That is, it. Always tired, exhausted. Always hungry. Never well-rested. It was so important to me, to sleep – even only for ten, fifteen minutes.*

Chiba Sensei on being an uchideshi<sup>59</sup>

**A**n anywhere and anytime. Even only ten minutes. Like a dog – to curl up in a bundle, kneading the grass around – to

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<sup>59</sup> From a lecture by Chiba Sensei at Hampshire College in Amherst, Massachusetts, in 2000.

fall asleep. Sleep is an escape from stress, fear, sometimes hunger. Sleep is mine.

‘Uchideshi is able to use even five minutes for sleeping’, Sensei used to say. ‘Uchideshi is always tired, hungry, or sleepy. Most often, all those things at the same time.’

We slept everywhere: on the floors, rugs, mats, benches. Wherever. Alone, in pairs, in a crowd. I always needed silence for that and to have reached a certain level of tiredness; the chattering of others disturbs me. However, when you cross a certain point, those problems no longer exist. You will collapse anywhere. When body and mind understand that this crazy mayhem of daily training will not finish soon, what awaits you is a process of collapse. The strength that you brought from home runs out after three days; the next crisis will hit you after three weeks. The energy runs out and the body, in panic, searches for new sources. The third month of an everyday battle passes by and everything collapses. The car slows down, and all the lights dim and fade away. You feel as if you were still going fast, but in fact the only thing keeping you in motion is momentum. Major and minor injuries appear, the body is drowsy, and the spirit is lethargic and absent. It lasts and lasts. Unconsciously you search for a discipline in eating, sleeping more, and taking it easy during the training. In a natural way the body finds its own rhythm, the way of obtaining energy appears. A process of evolution begins that is fascinating on the physical as well as any other aspect. Here sleep is one of the most basic elements. You learn how to respect it – every opportunity, every fifteen minutes. Here comes this first night when suddenly the uchideshi gets up and asks everyone to leave because he would rather go to

sleep. The sleep is alert and anxious. All the worries of the day appear in it and you are like a hunted animal which reacts to every rustle. However, once in a while this tired body falls into deep, rock-like sleep, and you wouldn't wake up even if a train ran over you. At this point the atavistic readiness to regress into becoming an animal is pervasive. I once asked mothers I knew if they were not afraid that they would crush their baby with their body whilst they were sleeping. They all smiled at me and said that it was not possible. Chiba Sensei, reportedly, was able to wake up when O-Sensei was walking in the direction of his room. Always. I believe that, because I know the sleep of a roe deer that perks up its ears. A wild animal lives as long as it doesn't drift off into this state too deeply. Like the Capitoline geese. Or, perhaps, like a few-years old child of an alcoholic, who can hear the father's footsteps on the stairs through their sleep?

Sometime after his stroke, Chiba Sensei locked himself up in his house. For a few weeks he did not come to the dojo. The senior students called me and ordered me, as the lone uchideshi, to go to his house and help him with the garden. The weeds were getting too high, and before long the neighbours were going to call the authorities. I enjoyed going there and I saw no problem, so I agreed. However, there was a problem. Chiba had forbidden it, and did not want anyone to help him. This is when I understood that it would not be easy. They sent me to a man who was locked up in a small house, armed to the teeth with things that he didn't even need to break my neck. A man who did not want me to be there and, additionally, who could feel when someone was getting close. I came in the morning, under the delusion that he would be still asleep.

The windows were shut blind from inside with blankets and the house was overgrown to its windows. It looked like the cottage of a granddad-weirdo from American movies for teenagers. I plucked fistfuls of weeds, tossed them in a pile, and from time to time I glanced over to see if the shutters had opened. Slowly I approached the windows. Finally, I had only one pile of weeds left. I picked up a flat stone and saw a long snake lying there with his tongue sticking out. It was fat and with an abrupt end as if it was cut short with a spade – it looked a bit like a thumb. It was a sunny day, and its skin was glowing. I have never touched a snake like that before, and with a childish stupidity I reached out with my palm in its direction. My hand cast a shadow on its head and the young rattlesnake rattled and slithered away into the last standing clump of grass. And so, from one side I had a devil who was most surely watching me from the gap between thick blankets and from the other a terrified young snake, hiding in a bush. When I plucked the grass to the last blade – it was nowhere to be seen. It must have run away.



# Seiza

“All pain is bad, but not all pain should be avoided.

Epicurus, *Letter to Menoecius*

Seiza is pain. Seiza is a weakness and a fight with your own self. Seiza hurts everyone. It is one of the most natural positions for a child, who kneels sitting on his feet. In the history of Japan, it was a result of frequently being on the tatami, the position was also passed through to martial arts, from karate to judo, kendo or aikido. It is a ceremonial position which signifies a readiness to fight. A position from which it is easy to stand up while the hands remain free. Seiza is a formal position in which people sit ceremonially at the beginning of training (keiko) and while the teacher demonstrates the techniques. For people from the West, this position is painful after just few minutes. You lose sensation in your legs, you get cramps, your knees suffer. The longer you remain motionless, the greater the pain is. This is probably why, for Chiba Sensei, this position was one of the basic tools of teaching. Each summer school concluded with a session of Q&A that was hated by the uchideshi. A hundred to two hundred people sat in seiza on the wooden floor around Sensei (the mats were already packed up) and he, for an hour or two, told stories and answered questions.

‘Sit comfortably,’ he would say after some time, smiling.

Guests from outside our school and junior trainees trustfully crossed their legs and sat comfortably. Seniors exchanged bitter smiles, as the game was just about to begin. People closest to him sat just next to him and did what they could not to move. It seemed like he noticed every twitch. Every lean in. I recall those sessions through a cloud of nauseated pain. I can remember all the times when the cramp defeated me and for a moment I sat with crossed legs, trembling with relief. God be my witness that his eyes instantly caught me like a starving vulture. I remember pain on the verge of fainting or throwing up. After a week of falling and throwing for five, six hours every day, everything hurts twice as much.

It was, perhaps, in Michigan, during one of the last summer schools. We sat around, trembling with pain. Chiba looked untouched and his seiza was completely natural. Then I noticed a trick which was applied by the Japanese and a few Americans who just came from Tokyo. After each of Sensei’s jokes, they leaned forward, almost touching the ground in front of them, laughing vigorously. In this time, they shifted their legs and straighten them up a little. Cheaters – I thought, but on the next joke I was also on the edge of falling flat on my face. Next to me there was some guy who wasn’t from our school. He sat the whole time with his legs crossed, hunched like Gollum. Suddenly, he straightened up, sat in seiza, and raised his hand.

‘What are the meanings of a triangle, a square, and a circle in aikido?’ he asked politely.<sup>60</sup>

60 A circle, a triangle and a square – concepts originating from the Shinto tradition which are commonly used in Aikido to illustrate the physical



I hate you, little piece of shit – I thought to myself, somewhere deep in my land of pain.

Sensei looked at him and began to explain.

‘A triangle signifies stability. Or maybe that was a square? No, I think it was a triangle . . .’ he scratched his head. ‘O-Sensei explained it so many times, but you know what? I had to sit in seiza and I was in so much pain I didn’t even listen to him.’

The pain of seiza is a special pain. You can hold it quite comfortably for around forty minutes. Then the nasty things begin to happen. Generally, you lose sensation in your legs. There is a theory according to which you should not move because if you do blood will begin to circulate again and the pain is unbearable. You can faint, throw up, you can do anything – as long as you stay in seiza. An immortal theory of ‘it will be fine’ proves itself perfectly here. American wrestling mats are probably the worst ones in that respect. The foot is positioned flat, the toes are crushed into the floor in some weird way, and after a moment you can already feel paralyzing cramps. On one of the summer schools, I sat in the first row during the lecture and there was no possibility for me to change my position. I was squirming tremendously and, suddenly, in one moment I got a cramp of my right foot. It was the first and the only time when I decided, in some wave of energy and determination, to face this crap – and I sat through it. I almost fainted but I did it. It turned out that what worked was a full tensing of the whole body. I thought that I would burst, but the wave of pain suddenly stopped.



How long can you sit like that? Apart from the hell of Ichikukai,<sup>61</sup> where for four days you sit like that for around thirty hours, the worst for me are the exams. They can last as long as four hours, and as a leader you cannot expect your students to endure the pain if you are not capable of it. By showing a weakness, you allow them to do the same. And by forcing them to do something you don't do yourself, you commit the basic sin of a teacher. You do not send a student for a journey which you yourself didn't undertake. Seiza is a physical sign of an order and discipline.

'You are no one special,' I say to my students. 'When it really hurts, you look at the person on your left and then at the person on your right. It hurts them equally. You are no one special. Neither is your pain. On this square of the mat before you sat dozens of others, who fought with the pain as you do now.'

I hate seiza because I know it is necessary. Because it hurt, hurts, and will hurt. Because it sends me into the depths and every day it is my mirror. Seiza is stupid. Uncomfortable and unnecessary. This is an explanation for those who lost the fight against this pain. I once sat in seiza during exams held by an enormous organization. They lasted for around two hours, and the only people who sat in this position were me and another guy who was Japanese. I knew him because he was from Chiba Sensei's circles. Over a hundred other people were in the room, and they sat as they wanted.

This is when I noticed how our physical position influences the general discipline. Seiza is orderly: you sit straight, and

<sup>61</sup> Ichikukai – a legendary centre of *misogi* purification practise in Tokyo. The initiation comprises four days of sitting in seiza for many hours.

you keep your palms on your thighs. That is all. There is no leaning forward, chattering is technically constricted – you need to turn around to talk to someone. In an atmosphere without an appointed position, everything fell apart and was lost. At the beginning people sat with crossed legs, but without the zafu, after a while, most of them began to lounge around and spread out on the mat. They could fidget, so they began to lean towards each other and talk. At the beginning shyly, quietly – then, unreprimanded, shamelessly – they started to chat freely. In the black mass of trainings of Birankai you would be thrown out in a flash for such behaviour. Behind me, literally like on a beach, a couple was lying down. The guy was chatting up a girl, telling her his life stories. I looked at the Japanese man and he pretended not to see any of this.

I remember the cult of seiza in Hombu Dojo in Tokyo,<sup>62</sup> four-year-old kids sat motionlessly for long minutes to quarters of an hour. A discipline, silence, and a physical position. The educational relationship with those elements got lost somewhere; I have absolutely no idea how you can give them any logical significance and explain to Polish people what it is all about. I mostly play around with the given challenge to endure pain because such a challenge works for Polish feistiness. As time goes on, the understanding for that tool appears. However, most of all I need to force myself, with no mercy, to sit in seiza. Every day.

# Zazen

“*The body has obtained an equilibrium. Take a deep breath and rock to the right and to the left. Focus, sit motionlessly, and thinking will become unthinking.*

Dogen<sup>63</sup>

The session of zazen started at 6 am. Sensei sometimes came at 5 am and sat in his office, no one knew why. I was scared that he would catch me sleeping, so I got up just after 4 am. I took naps on a fold-out armchair, with my face directed to the glass doors which faced the car park. When he drove in, the lights of the car woke me up and I could greet him at the door. I managed to do it many times – every time he looked at me like I was a madman. We prepared zafu pillows and the square zabuton mattresses to sit on. Zazen lasted for an hour and a half with breaks. As an uchideshi, I was first on the mat and I had the right to choose my spot. I always sat in the same corner, next to the medical kit. Through a window I saw a bit of a pavement and a tree. In California it is already light at 6 am, and for long months, every time around 6:50 am I saw a middle-aged woman running on the pavement with her head tilted in a funny way. A few times I

63 Dogen Zenji was the founder of the Soto school of Zazen. Quote is from Funak zazengi, przel. M.Karnet, Krakow: Wydawnictwo A 2003, s.51, (translated by author).

saw hummingbirds flying close to the tree. None of us liked zazen, and those who didn't have to did not come in the morning. Around ten or fifteen people always appeared, but they were different to those who tried to rip each other's heads off every evening. Most of the tough guys ran away unless Chiba Sensei had, in some way, convinced, extorted, ordered them or I don't know what else.

At the beginning I liked zazen. As soon as I realised that I was able to sit in stillness for an hour and a half, I decided, putting the pain of the legs and spine aside, that it was not that bad. No one beats you, no one screams, no one tramples you. It is safe. I had sat regularly before, during the winter in France. In the dojo there, however, it had been 5 degrees and I sat straight after I crawled out from my sleeping bag. A nightmare of cold and freezing snot. It was different here. The smell of morning California, flowers, sun, incense. Silence. Zazen in San Diego was like a trip to heaven – at least at the beginning. I sat in half-lotus posture.<sup>64</sup> In many parts of my body I am stiff as Pinocchio; however, I have unusually well stretched legs for lotus. Zazen, for the few first months, was an escape from the pressure for me. I sat straight, with my face towards the wall, locked up in my head. My legs, like clockwork, began to go numb around twenty-third minute after taking the position – so what awaited me during a session was only seven minutes of a light pain and my own oasis. After around three months, Sensei came to me and forced the lumbar part of my spine out forward. For the love of God, I

<sup>64</sup> In the practise of zazen you sit in stillness on a pillow with your legs crossed. Both knees should be touching the floor. Depending on your flexibility, you can sit with one calf on top of the other one – this is called half-lotus – or in a more difficult position with either foot stretched on the opposite calf, which is full lotus.

couldn't bear this position for one moment. The spell was broken and sitting slowly lost its charm. He struck the final blow after some time. In the silence of the morning, in the middle of a session, his words and husky voice entered our heads like a rusty knife in the throat.

'Don't feel safe! When you lean your head backwards, I know you're dreaming, when you lean forward, I know you're falling asleep!'

And this is how he killed all the fun. Sometimes in the middle of a session, when silence soaked into us, the palms became heavy and swollen with blood, and our throats dried up. When the heart slowed down, and breath became longer, when from time to time reality and dream intertwined, this is when he let loose a raging roar: 'WAKE UP!' His voice was hoarse, and I felt as if someone had pulled me up out of a blowhole by my hair. My palms trembled and my heart was pounding. On Fridays, after a week of beating each other's heads with sticks and thirty hours of rolls, we had an extra hour of zazen in the evening. I was tired as hell, and silence in darkness was just an inducement for me to fall asleep. I limped through this hour heavily, every few minutes falling into a new dream.

A session of zazen is nothing. Anyone can endure it, even every day. The real fun begins when you do sesshin.<sup>65</sup> Sensei made kenshusei do one or two sesshin every year. Moreover,

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<sup>65</sup> Sesshin – A multi-day zazen practice consisting of many consecutive meditation sessions beginning early in the morning and ending late at night. In San Diego it would start on Friday evening and continue until Sunday afternoon.

once every year, in the monastery in Seattle, the gruelling eight days of sitting<sup>66</sup> took place.

I took part in sesshin for the first time in April 2003 in San Diego. I flew from Chicago after two weeks working on a building site in Jackowo<sup>67</sup>. Wrenched away from the land of Poles and relocated in the world of Aikido, I shoved myself straight away into the beginning of sesshin. I gave Mrs. Chiba everything that I had earned towards the expenses of the following months, and at once I joined the group on a zafu. There were perhaps thirty people in the room. Sesshin was led by a monk who had been invited by Sensei. We sat in two rows opposite each other. Exactly in front of me sat Misa, a bit on the right Chiba Sensei. It was Friday afternoon. We sat in a session which lasted for 40 to 60 minutes, until around 9pm, and then on Saturday from 5 am to 1 pm and from 3 pm to 10 pm, as I recall. On Sunday from 5 am to 4 pm or so. Sessions were interlaced with chanting sutras, ceremonious meals in silence, and samu – meditative work. For three days I sat motionlessly with an awareness that Chiba Sensei was constantly looking at me. He sat like a rock, proud and straight. I remember how on one of the sessions in the morning, the horizontal rays of the red sun illuminated Misa's face. I was looking at her when her eyes began to water, and for the first time I saw a person crying in stillness. I was young, strong, and physically I endured those few days with ease. We approached everything like a great challenge. We

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66 Rohatsu Sesshin – An eight-day sesshin conducted around the beginning of December every year to commemorate the enlightenment of Shakyamuni Buddha, which occurred when he saw a star at dawn on the eighth day of sitting.

67 Jackowo, Chicago Polish neighborhood



did those things mostly considering them the price of being with Chiba Sensei. I remember a monk who warned us: 'Do not do it only because someone tells you to'. He was right, but young age has its right of stupidity, and back then we had other priorities.

During sesshin, compulsory conversations with a monk take place. The monk sat in Sensei's darkened room, and in front of the entrance to the hall a huge bell was placed. During designated hours we lined up in front of this bell. One after another we walked towards it and rang it before we talked to the monk. A good leader, even before the conversation has begun, can recognise the mood and maybe even the character of the person by the way he rings the bell. I got it into my head that the monk would ask me something and I would respond with whatever came to me. I was a bit embarrassed, but there was no other choice, and after hitting the bell I walked into Sensei's room. I sat in front of the monk in silence, waiting for a question. It lasted for a while until he asked, quite impatiently:

'Don't you have any questions?'

I got a little confused and quickly made up a question about having a head rush. This phenomenon had appeared when I tried to focus too much on my breathing. It was quite horrible. I felt that the world was spinning, and I was falling backwards, endlessly. There was also a feeling of mild nausea. I had heard about people with sudden labyrinth disorder and they described the exact same thing. I only experienced it during zazen when I closed my eyes and counted my breaths. When the sensation appeared, it lasted even half an hour after

I had opened my eyes. I also felt that my palms, the fingers in particular, were fat like sausages or inflated balloons. It seemed like my head was up in the sky and my butt hung just above the ground. As if I was 10 meters tall and I swayed in the wind. I don't remember what he answered me. Probably that it would pass with time. And imagine this – it did pass.

We heard dozens of funny stories about those conversations. One of the girls peeled away from her sitting on the second or third day and entered monk's room.

‘What is shomen?’<sup>68</sup> he asked her.

In a delusion between dream, pain, and reality, she heard what she heard. She leaned forward and hit the stern monk on the head, the air trembled with a model shomen.

Another legendary story is about a teacher from France. He entered the monk's room during the eight-day-long Rohatsu. This is another level. Days and nights merge in an endless mirage. On Monday you suffer, on Tuesday you are in hell, on Wednesday and for half of Thursday you fly like a bird. In the evening you fall again into the hell of pain . . . And so on. I don't know what state this man was in as he entered the darkened room in which the monk sat, illuminated by the light from a solitary candle.

‘What is ikkyo?’ the monk asked.<sup>69</sup>

The French teacher had promised himself earlier that he would do the first thing that came to mind. And he did. He licked his fingers and stubbed out the candle. Total darkness

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68 Shomen (uchi) – an overhead cut, a basic attack in a sword training.

69 Ikkyo – “First technique,” an aikido basic.

set in, total silence. They sat like that for a while, until the monk said quietly:

‘Well, yes, but this is my candle . . .’

I can also remember quite a funny story from a shorter, one-day long zazen session. During one sit I saw A., an Albanian deshi, beckoning to me. I entered the kitchen silently. Here a bit of drama took place. A. and M. a student at the dojo who was from Mexico, were preparing pieces of cake and green tea which were supposed to be served during the breaks between sits. As uchideshi, I was also responsible for that. It turned out that we didn’t have any green tea. We were running out of time, and we knew we were screwed anyway. We poured boiling water over sweet strawberry powdered tea and we went with a tray to the dojo. In theory, one of us should now emerge with dignity from behind a curtain and hit two pieces of hard wood (taku) together twice. Except that the taku had been left on the kamiza behind Sensei’s back.

Now, a Mexican, an Albanian, and a Pole are a combination which serves only for improvisation. In general, all those countries function by being tied together with wire, string, and duct tape. All of us are programmed with a default setting of solving problems in a minute. I do not remember who appeared from behind the curtain, covering the other one from the eyes of Chiba Sensei and who proudly hit together the clogs they had found somewhere. I poured out the strawberry tea, and to this day I remember the mixture of surprise and fury which appeared on Chiba’s Sensei face when he tried it.

My second sesshin I did in Japan, many years later. The weekend before, we had survived the nightmare of misogi, and

in the weekend following, we were supposed to sit through an entire two days.

The place where this occurred, Ichikukai dojo, had one floor for the Shinto ritual of misogi, and the upstairs for the Buddhist practice of zazen. While waiting for the leading monk and his assistants – a bunch of clean-shaven teenagers – we lined up in two rows in front of the entrance to the monastery. There were around twenty or thirty people there: the vast majority from Japan, a few Bulgarians, Mexicans, Sikh, and me. None of the gaijin<sup>70</sup> spoke any Japanese. I was exhausted. I had lost my voice after four days of shouting, I had damaged the nerve endings in my feet and I couldn't even feel needles inserted in them (yes, I tried it). Sesshin in Japan was supposed to be much harder than the American one. We were in the motherland of this practise and I expected hell. Allegedly, keisaku would be broken on our backs every session.

A keisaku (or kyosaku, in the Soto zen tradition) is a flat piece of wood, in translation 'a waking-up stick' or 'an encouraging stick'. In our tradition, if you cannot focus on the practise or you are struggling not to fall asleep, you can ask the leader for help. You bow and join your hands in the gassho gesture.<sup>71</sup> You lean forward and you bow your head and, in order to help you, a monk cracks the stick down on the muscles between the shoulder and spine.

I have heard about a place in Tokyo where the keisaku are lined up on a wooden bar under the ceiling and monks break them on a person's back if they move even slightly. And that

<sup>70</sup> Gaijin (literally: a person from the outside) – A common term for foreigners in Japan.

<sup>71</sup> Gassho – In Buddhism, a gesture of raising folded palms in the air. It signifies gratitude or respect.

you don't need to ask for help – everyone is so eager to offer it to you that the wooden keisaku is not able to bear this excessive amount of care.

Here, the hall was large, and we sat in two rows facing each other. The foreigners were in one line, the Japanese in another. The leading monk sat on the platform – a funny-looking podium which we had dragged in the previous day. I was physically totally exhausted, which made this practise much harder for me. My head and body had just come back from a trip to hell, and sitting in stillness for the next three days was the last thing I wanted to do. It also seemed that for the locals, zazen was not a priority. The teacher walked in, passed through a row of Japanese who were wearing their traditional, ancestral kimonos, and sat on the last zafu. We chanted the Heart Sutra<sup>72</sup> and after a few breathing exercises he rang a little bell signalling the beginning of meditation. At the same moment, all the Japanese simply fell asleep. Starting with the leader, who leaned his head forward and after a moment began to snore, quite explicitly. For a while we pretended that we didn't see this, and later we looked at each other, slowly shrugging our shoulders. This day I shared with my friend my nightmare of falling asleep during zazen. Zazen does not hurt me and, when I am tired, I easily fall asleep. I wake up even quicker, but then I doze off again. In this way I can have thirty or forty totally different dreams during one session. I hate them, and they make me feel sick.

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<sup>72</sup> An extract from the Buddhist teachings, recited during the practise of zazen.



‘I bought special tablets in India’, he told me. ‘After one of these you won’t be sleepy at all. You won’t be hyper like after a coffee, you just won’t want to sleep’.

I do not know what tempted me to take it. On this day everyone slept through every session. Everyone except me. I felt like an idiot who had woken up on a spacecraft during the hibernation of the entire crew. A trillion light years away from the destination. I counted all the wooden planks on the floor and ceiling five times. I twirled circles with my thumbs in one direction and then the other. A hundred times each. – Wait a minute, someone else wasn’t asleep. It was M., who was haunted by knee and back injuries, and he was going through a horrible and silent battle with the pain. I decided not to look at him so as not to feel guilty. He trembled in spasms of pain the whole day. That evening, during a break, one of the Bulgarians won a bet against me. He said that, while sitting on his butt with his legs straight, he could touch his toes with his chin. He could. It turned out that it was simply a good combination of flexibility, long feet, and short legs. A few years later, in the corridor of the dojo at Hubska street, I witnessed one of the youngsters licking his own elbow. From that point I knew that everything is possible.

The following day, pain came to me. In the space of one day my fatigued body took a journey through all my old injuries. I do not remember what was there exactly, but all the sprains, damages, and fractures came by to say ‘hi’. For a few sessions I felt as if someone had rammed a knife under my shoulder blade. My body shivered with pain. When the session ended

and I finished sitting, the pain would dissolve, only to appear again after the break.

On the second day, the monk led a lecture, interpreting one of the Buddhist scriptures. Each of us got a book in kanji, and at certain moments we flipped through the pages, nodding our heads in understanding. In the middle of the hour-long lecture one of us realised that we were holding books upside down. One of the strongest memories I have from this sesshin is meeting one elder who came into the room in the middle of the day. Hiruta Sensei told us to observe him. We were sitting next to the zafu pillows, stretching our legs when he suddenly entered. He ambled in between the rows of people, limping with a hunched back. He was maybe around eighty years old, maybe a bit younger. The bastard inside of me woke up and whispered: 'What is there to look at?' The grandpa limped to Sensei and with difficulty and a grunt he sat in seiza in front of the leader, who was maybe half his age. They bowed to each other and the old man began his Via Crucis back to the other side of the room. He was grunting and panting, and we felt the pain of each of his steps. Sensei waited patiently until he reached his pillow; finally, after bowing he collapsed his butt onto the zafu. Hiruta Sensei hit the bell, beginning an hour of stillness. This is when I looked at that old, sick man, who, in front of my eyes, transformed like an inflatable mattress. In a few, maybe a dozen seconds, he straightened up his back and his crossed knees touched the ground. He extended his head to the sky – his face changed into something proud and somewhat frightening. Now he was no more than fifty or sixty years old and was twice his original height. His posture was illuminated with dignity, vigour, and calmness



so grandiose that, immediately, I felt ashamed for the pity and discountenance I had felt a moment ago. This man didn't even twitch for an hour. I had a feeling that sitting in front of me was an enormous tiger, ready to jump. As I found out later on, he had spent his youth in a monastery mediating for long hours every day. He sat like that for few hours, maybe three or four, and then he stood up – again overwhelmed with his age. He repeated his Via Crucis, bowed, and left the room. I never met him again, but I still see him. That inner strength, dignity, confidence, pride, calm.

Our training is based on a relationship with a partner. Even when it is intensive and heavy, it might often be empty and meaningless. It can feed your ego, basic instincts of domination, an inferiority complex, or feelings of superiority. In the microcosm of the dojo – both during the classes and outside of them – we are bombarded with external impulses. Only silence and facing yourself can give depth to this practise. In zazen, like in iaido, you can only cheat yourself. You are alone and you are fighting with yourself. You fight to win and to lose with yourself. This is the reason why so many people do not want to do it. From the very beginning, zazen forces you to work hard. The stillness hurts, physically and mentally. Knees and back hurt, the body rebels against you, it itches, shrinks, and puffs up. You lose to a fly and a mosquito, to a drop of sweat on your back or on your nose. Most of us, the grand, inflated masters, cannot stand themselves for an hour. The vicious circle of thoughts is even worse. We produce numerous escape routes from the silence and calmness and, at the beginning, the rare breaks between the clouds in the sky terrify us more than they reassure.

I am not a teacher of zazen. Like the work with the sword, I do it so that it strengthens my aikido. It is for me like taking a long bath – one with a sword in your hand, hidden under the water. After returning from San Diego I didn't do zazen for some few years. I had to mature into it. I tried a few times, but it looked as if my uncertainty spread amongst the people, because after a few months I was left on the mat by myself.

I remember a morning in one of the rooms – it was in a rented hall we used for training. This is where we sat facing the wall like we did in San Diego. Behind us a lathe factory was located. It was morning, maybe 6.50 am, and apart from me there was just one girl sitting there. At one point, we heard the loud roar of an engine, and then the walls trembled. The building wobbled and our heads were sprinkled with plaster dust. At that moment I recalled the collapse of the trade fair building during the pigeon exhibition in Katowice<sup>73</sup> in 2006. I was paralysed in my stillness, and God knows what the girl sitting next to me felt. The waves of doubt, the desire to run away, an even stronger need to endure it all – all of this was strong and real. It was probably the most truthful zazen I have done in my life. From that day on, in moments of doubt, I always visualise this event.

After the session we looked up. Precisely over our heads, around 30 centimetres from the wall, a wide crack had appeared across the entire length. I realised that the ceiling had split.

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<sup>73</sup> On 28 January 2006, the trade hall of the Katowice International Fair where the 56th National Exhibition of Carrier Pigeons was happening collapsed under heavy snow. Of the roughly 700 people in the hall at the time of the collapse, 65 were killed and some 170 were injured. More than 1,000 of the pigeons survived.

*Dosis  
facit  
venenum*

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2021**



# The Poison and the Medicine

“ *Sola dosis facit venenum.*<sup>74</sup>

Paracelsus

Taken in excess, a dose of medicine becomes poison. I heard Chiba utter that sentiment many times. When I wanted to take my students with me to Japan for a very tough training, he got mad.

“As a teacher, you need to do it by yourself first,” he snapped, “to see if for you and your people this will be medicine or poison!”

When we spoke about his former students scattered around the world, who did not keep in touch with him and who taught outside of the organization, he used to say:

“I am like medicine. If you overdose on me, I am bad for you. They had enough.”

I didn’t understand. Perhaps because I had been searching for this source for so long? I was already mature; I was an adult, and perhaps this experience did not transform me from boy to man? I soaked in the poison slowly. I didn’t understand how you could have enough. After I had spent a few years

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74 “Only the dose makes the poison”; a quote attributed to Paracelsus (1493–1541).

with him, he eventually forbade me to come anymore. That was when I started to search for the others – those people who were the subject of the legends we told each other in San Diego. His knowledge was inside of them, whether they wanted it or not. Regardless of how far they would run away – they were still the ones closest to him. One of them, who was particularly close to Sensei, accepted me as an uchideshi, but demanded that I ask Chiba Sensei for his permission. I was shocked because I knew that he remained outside of the organisation and that they no longer talked to each other. Chiba only laughed:

“If you don’t speak to your son – does he stop being your son? Of course you can go.”

I began to notice a pattern. The closest ones, who roasted in his fire most intensively, eventually ran away and hid in the corners. They led their own groups according to his style of Aikido but, at the same time, they did not keep in touch with him, they would not contribute to the growth of his organisation. A part of this was a result of their inability to understand the vision, to accept the double standards which Chiba would apply while building his school.

Imagine a family without a mother, where a man raises the children. Very early on, the oldest son begins to help him. The father remains extremely harsh and demanding with him. He punishes him for every mistake and does not show any signs of warmth. For the younger children, on the other hand, he is a bit more like a granddad – giving them more freedom and appreciation. This is how I see it: when the son grows up, he wants to set up his own family and no longer needs

such strong contact with his father. The father-son dynamic is a key to understanding the relationship. Traditionally, in martial arts we call it a teacher-student relationship. However, let's not kid ourselves. The phenomenon of uchideshi is, in its entirety, based on the substitution of a demanding father. Each of us has a deep need for a mature relationship with his father who will introduce us to the world and will be a critical advisor rather than a supportive partner. It is not a coincidence that this place gathered so many colourful characters from strange countries: Mexicans, Albanians, Kazakhs, in the older generation Cypriots – there even was a half-Egyptian, half-English. People whose cultures valued a strong father-figure, the man of the house. A father who introduces you to adulthood rather than displaying forgiveness and care. During my trips to Africa, I saw it extremely clearly. In the tribal dynamics, the father is the one to be feared: Father will hit you if you make a mistake. Next time your mistake will cost you a lot. In places where life is still harsh and dangerous, the role of the father remains primal. In African culture, the early stages of bringing up a small child are controlled by the mother. The helpless child lives in the world of her closeness. The father is almost absent – he appears later, when the child is ready to learn how to hunt, to work in the field, to fight. After a symbolic act of the first haircut (a ritualistic act in a rite of passage) he is placed under the charge of the father. This model functions in different versions in various cultures. Additionally, the initiation aspect is also crucial – a symbolic transition into adulthood. It primarily involves men, and is apparent in the majority of cultures spanning from the legendary rituals of ancient Sparta

to the admission system of modern, elite, military services. The remnants of this atavistic need for verification remain around us in the initiations of fraternity houses and baptisms by fire. The role of the father is to be an example and to teach. Harshness, violence, and physical domination are an intrinsic part of this model. In this way, the path into adulthood leads through a period of a total trust along with a full domination by a parent – through a time in which the child copies the behaviour of the adult – until the period of rebellion and a rejection of the restrictions. What follows, at the end, is a natural separation and the establishment of a family on one's own. Although this simplified pattern describes specifically a path of human upbringing, it could also be a definition of a true learning of anything. It constitutes the foundation of the famous stages passed through when studying many Japanese arts – shu, ha, and ri,<sup>75</sup> which Chiba Sensei often referred to. Before me there were dozens of others; after me, there were a few more. Each of us was touched in a different way and received this experience differently. In ourselves, there is an understanding of each other. Without words, because you cannot describe it with words – although I keep trying.

Life continues to toss me around the world, and in various places I sit in pubs with a pint of beer alongside people who touched Chiba before me. A true relationship can be felt immediately. In a glance, in silence, in a deep feeling of guilt that you have let him down. What also appears is resentment. Like towards a woman who has broken your heart – reaching so deeply but without respect.

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75 Shu, ha, ri – a Japanese concept of reaching mastery in an art. The stages are shu, or copying the form; ha, or breaking the form; and ri, transcending the form.

People with passion act instinctively and illogically. Perhaps he saw a person more as a creature with weaknesses.

“Chiba Sensei will find your weak spot and will break you. He will smash you into pieces and he will watch you put yourself together. He will help you, if necessary, but he won’t do it for you. If you do not have enough strength to pick up the pieces, he will leave you shattered and walk away. The world is full of people whom he broke and who still live in the past.” This is what his first uchideshi told me. “Do you know why our relationship is so intense?” he asked. “Because never, for all those years, did I let him in, I never gave him the whole. He knew it, he felt it, and it made him crazy.”

Sensei was like a person searching for ambers on the beach. Among thousands of pieces of glass and grains of sand he wants to find a shiny amber. He grasps hundreds of pebbles and pellets in his hands, rubbing them, squeezing them – from time to time he encounters a shiny stone. In the meantime, he rejects the worthless waste, others he mashes to dust. In our unending longing for the perfect template of a human, we leave no space for weakness. Nobody is perfect, and this is who we most often look for in a fabricated relationship with a teacher. A stage of idealising and fascination, as in love, takes over the true perception – and only when it is over can you make a real choice. Because only then you can see a real person. Sensei died. He became, for those who did not drink his poison, only a symbol. An icon which we will now juggle around like we do our image of O’Sensei. For my students he will only be a surname, a badge on my shoulder. For me he is a scar and something which, I hope, I will never let go of.



I am sitting in a small coffee shop in a Turkish neighbourhood in London. It is Sunday morning, and opposite me sits I. He doesn't allow me to call him Sensei, but I do it anyway – for myself more than for him. In a minute we will go to the dojo, which is located in the basement of a 400-year-old church. We are sitting opposite each other, and he does not stop telling me stories. He speaks all the time, as if it was all boiling inside of him. I am a good listener, and I enjoy it, so that is what I do, only adding something from time to time.

He saw Chiba for the first time in England in 1983, and after two years of saving money he left for San Diego. Today, he is in a group of three or four people who experienced the most. Twenty years have passed, and he still doesn't speak about anything else. I meet him every few months in Poland, England, or Scotland, and after five minutes of chit-chat we always float toward the subject of the man who shook both of us. I listen to him and I see clearly how much he tries to discover himself in it. How much work he puts into scraping the layers of illusion from the myth. How beautifully he sees a human in a teacher, not what he would like to see. For me, it is still too early. Besides, perhaps, I didn't boil in this broth enough.

It is a grand question. As children who grow up in the shadow of a famous father, who try to measure up to him all their life, we get lost in this comparison. How do you find your real self in it?



# Shomen

“The King did not wrestle with the knot for long. “It doesn’t matter” he said, “which way you undo it.” And with a sword he cut all of the strings. In this way he either mocks the oracle or he has fulfilled it.”<sup>76</sup>

**K***iri-otoshi* is a special form. A variety of this technique can be seen in “The Seven Samurai.” Kurosawa introduces the character Kyuzo – a quiet Japanese warrior. Kyuzo fights with a wooden sword. The opponent approaches him, and he steps off the line, almost invisibly, and cuts through him. Then he calmly explains that he was faster, and he won. In this scene, the enemy functions as a symbol of impatience and self-confidence. He is luminous with aggression, a reluctance to admit his defeat. He insists on a repetition of the technique using real swords and he gets killed.

This scene in the movie explains a Japanese concept of a full expression of physical technique, awareness, and focus – synchronised in the right time. The execution of the technique lasts literally one second. This second contains long years of training, meditation which leads to full control, acceptance of death to which we consciously expose ourselves. One’s entire life, the past, and the future – all of it explodes in one second, like a supernova.

<sup>76</sup> The story of the Gordian Knot, as recounted by Quintus Curtius Rufus (paraphrased by the author based on *Historia Aleksandra Wielkiego* [The History of Alexander the Great] edited by L. Winniczuk).

For me, kiri-otoshi is a definition of the school of Chiba Sen-sei. It is the essence of his life, character, desires. A second of magic, nightmare, and truth. We stand opposite each other. Our swords touch at the tip and through this contact I feel the slightest movement of the opponent's muscles. With my left foot I take one step forward. To maintain the distance, he takes one step backwards. We both raise our swords above our heads. Me – to expose my hands. Him – to attack and to use the opening. The opponent closes the distance and, while taking a step forward with his right foot, cuts vertically through my hands and head. He cuts in order to kill. The power of his cut comes from hundreds of thousands of repetitions. It is a legendary shomen (overhead) cut which we repeat for years and which recurs through everything we do: iaido, aikido, weapons. When the cut drops, I take a step backwards, without withdrawing my body. I twist my hips and the sword misses my head by a few centimetres. At the same time, I make my own cut. Following almost the same trajectory, the sword meets my opponent's blade and slides down along it. The difference of the angles deflects his cut. At the end, my blade hits strongly into the tsuba (hand guard) at the base of the blade. The attacker's sword drops to the side and his body is fully exposed. A man who performs any form is called 'Shidachi' and the attacker – 'Uchidashi'. Uchidashi works on the cut – it needs to be real and honest. Most of us, despite years of experience, are scared to hit or to cut another person. Only by having full confidence in the skills of a partner can one reach the stage of a form that is alive. Shidachi needs to expose his hands and head for a cut. He needs to fulfil his task in a way that lets him stay within

striking distance without escaping. When the technique is performed well you can literally feel the breeze on your face when the sword of your partner cuts the air next to your head. The form itself has so many technical details that it is enough to see it once to recognize the level of practitioners. As in Iaido – there is no way to cheat; nothing will happen by chance. The foundation of all of this is the magical and cursed shomen – a simple vertical cut.

‘Shomen’ means a cut to the head. It is a basic dynamic attack in aikido, which refers to the primal work with the sword. You can recognise a person by their shomen, just as you recognise a horse by its teeth. You only need to lift your sword and then lower it. That is all. This movement is repeated with the jo (staff), with the bokken, the sword, and in the interpretations of hand-to-hand fighting in body art. Thousands of times. In the mainstream lineage of our art, weapons are neglected; because of that, the analogies to swordfighting are purely theoretical. I originated from this lineage, but it turned out that in the world of Chiba Sensei, weapons are sometimes treated more seriously than body art. It is in weapons training where you get to know the letters and the words in order to write poetry through body art. You cannot do it the other way round.

Sensei reached the primal understanding of the movement exactly through shomen. We repeated it with no end. In a group, by ourselves, with all the possible weapons and without them. The rules remained the same. Extension – a big movement and relaxation of the upper body. It was my curse. I was strong, but my shoulders were tight. By training for

years with my shoulders tensed, I built muscles around them. The body learnt to hide in the strength of my shoulders – if I was not controlled by a teacher, I returned to repetition of errors, again and again. Like the cursed release of a string in a bow, as described by Herrigel,<sup>77</sup> the cut needed to happen by itself. The only way of understanding it are thousands of repetitions under the eye of a teacher. Muscles hold for as long as they can – but finally they let go and once every hundreds of cuts, a single proper one will emerge.

We were standing with our legs spread over a meter wide. In a circle. We lifted our swords over our heads and with a bend in our knees we let them drop, whilst our straight upper body put more strain on our stretched leg muscles. We cut together, one after another, counting to ten in Japanese. My right hand was covered in cuts and my shoulders were raised. The grip was weak, and the line of the cut was crooked and unsure. A single technique reveals everything. Aikido, simplified to a basic cut or a step, shows your weakness and hesitation. With no mercy it reveals the phony mask, strength, control, it ridicules all the movement, tricks, and all of the unnecessary decorations that you hang stupidly on this tree.

Months passed and I repeated shomen hundreds and thousands of times. Every day, I stood in a dojo, by myself, in front of the mirror and just for my peace of mind I did at least 500 of them. It was not a lot, but at least I calmed my consciousness down. It is not true that you can suddenly understand a technique and then repeat it flawlessly. Sometimes a proper execution will shine through, but for most of the training time you penetrate many layers of losing control.

77 Eugene Herrigel, *Zen in the Art of Archery*.

Weeks, months, years of treading the same worn-out path through tiredness, numb muscles, fatigue from repeating the same process. The anger you feel at yourself emerges. You understand the basic mechanism that drives you. Every day you move around confined to the same thoughts, jumping from one to another as if on ice floes. The body grows strong. The worse the shomen, the physically stronger it is, because a movement which is supposed to happen by itself is jerked by the muscles – as when lifting the weights in the gym. I needed more and more repetitions so that the movements would grow natural.

I went to the US for a few months, as long as my visa permitted. Later I came back to Poland to teach. I remember once when I flew to San Diego after being gone for a year and a half. The Iaido training had just started and as usual we were standing in a circle. Shomen was my obsession; for all of the months I spent in Poland I had practised intensively to finally understand it. Sensei walked around with a white fukuroshinai<sup>78</sup> on his shoulder, and he was watching us. There were a dozen of us, each counting loudly in Japanese. After a few hundred repetitions, when we were dripping sweat and panting loudly, Sensei suddenly stopped and pointed at me. He ordered me to go in the middle and demonstrate shomen. People lowered their weapons and sat down, making the most of this short break. The faint belief that I had finally got it woke up in me – my obsessive pursuit of perfecting the cut that had lasted for over two years. It was about time for a sign from the master that I had been moving in the right direction. He told me to stop and turned towards the others.

<sup>78</sup> A fukuroshinai is a length of partially split bamboo wrapped in leather. It is used to practise techniques with contact in some sword schools.)

“This is the worst shomen performed here for a very long time. I tell him to let go and stop controlling” – he turned towards me with a frown of disappointment. “You are oriented on the right hand and you don’t do anything with that. You are wasting my time.”

I was 30 years old and it was hard to offend me. Training with Sensei quickly cured an inflated ego. It was transformed into aggression, energy in the forms, and a competition between ourselves that was more or less hidden. Therefore, he could say anything about my character, my appearance, God knows what else, but not about my shomen – so many hours and thousands of repetitions . . . It hurt, but at the same time I realised something – it was just at that moment that I truly saw the right arm during this cut, and the unnaturally curved and crumpled shoulders. I would like to say that from this moment onwards everything changed, that my shomen is good, but it doesn’t work like that. Life is not a fairy tale, and for 15 years I have continued to limp through my shomen, every day. If you don’t do it regularly, you forget. Like Sisyphus, who lets go of the rock. If you let yours go, then you need to move your ass and go downhill, to start everything from scratch.

There is a beautiful story about a boy who was taught by a storyteller. The master ordered him to learn one story and tell it every day. He was never happy with the result, and tortured his student by making him repeat it hundreds of times. He didn’t approve of anything, and the student finally got fed up and left, searching for a different purpose in life. One day, hungry and cold, he found himself in an inn that was



hosting a storytelling competition. Having nothing to lose, he told the hated story. He won, and the crowd cried with laughter for a long time. Everybody was delighted; however, he saw only what he was doing wrong.

This beautiful fable, though perhaps a bit naïve, has in itself a primal truth. It is all about our own abilities and limitations – it is not about being better or worse than someone else. In this world, we float around banalities that we listen to throughout all our life, but once in a while, in a flash of understanding, they really talk to us.

On the day I'm remembering now, I felt strong and confident. My partner was my age; he had similar experience and was on a similar level as me. We had good weapons, strong tsuba, and we were synced. We began carefully, when we felt more comfortable, we went faster and stronger. We didn't put each other in danger, and although the forms were very powerful, nobody got seriously hurt. That jacked us up even more, so we sped up. For me that was a period of fascination with the power of the form which I slowly discovered. I cut stronger and stronger and I was filled up with contentment. The power and certainty made me happy. My heavy, thick bokken hit my partner's tsuba with a loud thud. I don't know when Chiba Sensei appeared in front of me. He must have been watching us and he came to check whether there was any truth behind this façade. I remember only that he pushed my partner away and stood in front of me.

"Do it with me" he said, looking strangely.

At the beginning I thought that he wanted to show the form, but he was the one to attack. I was excited and ready. We

raised our swords, and at that moment I noticed that he didn't have a tsuba. Chiba Sensei's hands were unprotected, and if I did the form half as strongly as before, I would break all of his fingers. He attacked me without hesitation. Fully dazed I hit his side, committing a basic mistake. He looked at me.

"Don't worry about me, cut for real! I will be fine."

The next cut I did correctly, but definitely too slowly and too late.

"Stronger!" he shouted, and lifted his weapon.

Through my head ran dozens of thoughts. He is my teacher, I cannot hit him, if I hit him I will hurt him. He is over 60 years old, I must not, I cannot! He stood with the sword above his head and with cold, calm eyes he looked at me. Everything I had considered a certainty and power two minutes ago, fell apart. He hit and I messed it all up. My hands were trembling, my technique crumbled, and I was eight years old again. He stopped, looked at me, grimaced and walked away. For a couple of days, I couldn't sleep. I spent the whole time thinking about what I should have done.

The idea of a student who would be able to harm his own teacher is so illogical that no explanation of this incident made sense to me. Did he, like Akela,<sup>79</sup> have to be exiled from his own pack? I was furious at myself. Having taken an expressway from a false feeling of confidence to the level of quivering jelly, unable to dominate an old man, terrified me. Years passed and the thorn kept on pricking me: I re-

79 In the Jungle Book by Rudyard Kipling, Akela is the leader of a pack of wolves that adopted a human child. When part of the pack bands together against Akela to drive the human out of the pack, Akela leaves as well and becomes a lone wolf.

lived this scenario hundreds of times. Sometimes, in my thoughts I cut frighteningly and for real; sometimes I left the dojo, throwing my bokken at the kamiza. Sometimes I only screamed. A rational solution did not exist, but back then I did not know that.

Five years passed, and I went to San Diego for a few months every year. My visits became less frequent and shorter as time went on. At the end, Sensei agreed to visit Poland. It was year 2007. There were 200 people on the mat. The seminar had already been going for a couple of days when, during a weapons class, Sensei did the same thing to one of the teachers from France. This guy, exactly as I had five years ago, completely fell apart. At that time, we were practicing with fukuroshinai. I saw the entire emotional breakdown of the French teacher from the third row, sitting in seiza. Being one of the 200 people on the mat. While I was watching it, the whole story came back to me: sleepless nights, doubts, and anger. Suddenly, everything went quiet and the people around me disappeared. I felt my heart rate speeding up. My hand involuntarily clenched the weapon and squeezed it so hard the bamboo squeaked. Sensei finished up with the Frenchman and turned towards the crowd. Everything inside of me was screaming: I am here. I am ready. Now. I was breathing deeply and calmly, and I was sure of what was about to happen, although it did not make any sense. He looked around in the sea of heads for a long time, as if searching. I knew he was looking for me. Or perhaps it was my certainty that called him? He looked at me and nodded. Everything unravelled, as if in a dream. I only know that I was calm, as if I was looking at myself from the outside.

There was no one there apart from us, and I went in to die or to kill. Normally, being in the middle with him as an uke we all show off in front of each other – to a greater or lesser extent. Later on, for a long time I kept thinking of what I was feeling back then. Apart from an absolute readiness, there was also a tremendous indifference. I did kiri-otoshi four times, hitting him in his hands very strongly and precisely. I felt calmness and strength, but I didn't allow it to overcome me. I was fully indifferent to whether he hit me or I hit him. The form was stable and correct secured. There was no feeling of guilt, fear, or excitement in it. I lived through a moment of a true harmony. A brushing through the truth – and I was smitten by it. That evening, during the official dinner for the teachers, Chiba Sensei got up and, with his glass in one hand, he introduced everyone to each other. Between his index finger and his thumb there was a massive bruise. He pointed at me and said:

“Today he cut me four times exactly in the same spot. Very good.”

There was pride in Chiba's eyes. There is no logic in it. This kind of experience exceeds morals and rationalising. The realness of the relationship with the teacher transcends over-intellectualisation. I don't have many experiences like this one. They stick out from hundreds of trainings with Sensei. Years will pass before I understand its meaning – if there is a chance to understand it at all.



# Enliven the Weapon

“Put your sword back into its place; for all who take the sword will perish by the sword.

Matthew 26:52

In Aikido we use a few types of weapons. Those are: a wooden sword (bokken), a wooden knife (tanto), and a wooden staff (jo). Additionally, in the system of Chiba Sensei we sometimes practised with *wakizashi*, short wooden swords. We also made ourselves *fukuroshinai* – lengths of partly split bamboo wrapped in leather. For iaido, at the beginning, we used unsharpened *iaito* practise swords. In the iaido martial art system, at least in Europe, using sharp swords is forbidden due to safety reasons. We practised *koryu* – old school – styles of iaido as an addition to aikido; we were beyond the organisation system of iaido and we did not care about those kinds of rules. An active, considerably large market in the trade of authentic Japanese swords functioned in the US. It was pumped up primarily by the hauls from the Second World War and then by the wide stream of imports after the war. So, practically, every kenshusei (teacher trainee) and most advanced students practised with swords that were hundreds of years old and had been made in ancient Japan. Chiba Sensei was an expert on swords, and he studied this topic for many years. He was the one to choose the weapon for his students, and most of the blades went through his hands. Woe to those

who did not take good care of their swords, on whose swords Sensei noticed rusty *tsuba* (handguards) or cracked scabbards.

For Chiba, training with a sword was equally important as the aikido itself. Over decades he managed to construct a system in which the physical elements of working with sword and body intertwined and complemented each other. Similar elements were to be found in the techniques with bokken and in the throws. The concept of relaxation of the shoulders and the dynamic footwork was repeated everywhere. Training with the wooden bokken was deepened by the work with traditional, sharp sword, teaching us the real cut. In addition, we sometimes practised tameshigiri, cutting targets made of rolled reed mats soaked in water. Everything was coherent and ruthlessly consequent. Each mistake in the hand-to-hand technique echoed everywhere else: with jo, bokken, or during training with sword. And the other way around – there were sometimes those rare moments of enlightenment. When you finally understood something that had been right in front of your eyes for many years. Those moments helped to understand it all.

I guess Chiba had to wrestle with the importance of this training. He had to bestow upon it a deeper meaning, because it always brushed up against the danger of Japanese kitsch. A gang of adult people in pyjamas, waving their swords senselessly. It is a natural tendency – only strong discipline and discovering some kind of reasonable definition of training will save you from floating in this direction. Chiba Sensei chose danger and deadly seriousness. He pushed us into responsibility for the heritage of his ancestors – that was the terminology he used.

How do you avoid 'kitschiness' and create a tool for working with real issues from things completely detached from reality? The sword training was so serious and frightening that, once we started to talk, it turned out that no one liked it. Like going to the dentist. Fear, pain, real danger.

We pretended nothing. There were broken noses, concussions, fractured fingers and ribs. No one counted bruises or sprains. The atmosphere wasn't nice, and no one tapped anybody on the shoulder. Once, before my time, Sensei, furious, had chased some poor student out with a sword in his hand, and the guy fled from the dojo. Apparently, one of the first uchideshi hightailed it for the hills for two days dressed in keikogi. This, perhaps, was why we had real weapons. Not the Chinese fakes. Along with the sword you undertook a responsibility for it and for the training. I saw people who bought 200- or 300-year-old blades, often spending their last penny. They lived in rented flats, close to the dojo, they slept on a mattress, and a sword was one of the few things they had in their rooms.

You could not neglect the training. The last element of the forms in iaido is noto – putting away the sword. The story has already happened, the dead body lies at your feet in a puddle of blood, and you return your blade to its sheath. Then you lower your hand, which is clenched on the hilt. This movement symbolises the tremendous stress you experience after taking another person's life. You are not able to open your palm – you slip it, still clenched, down the hilt. Woe to those who ignored those details. When we practised junto, a form that represented assisting in ritual suicide, we assumed a role



of a helper who cut the head off a person who was opening his belly with his own weapon. During this form, the commands need to be uttered quietly and with the respect demanded by the time and the place. In the American circus of MacDonaldised versions of martial arts – pink kimonos, plastic swords, and everything for sale, this seemed like a stronghold of logic. To get the sense of tsuki – a thrust with a sword – Sensei told us to study the example of the assassination of left-wing statesman Inejiro Asanuma.<sup>80</sup> As Asanuma spoke at the podium, a youngster entered and managed to penetrate his victim with a thrust supported by the weight of his own body before being captured by the guards.

You had to take care of your wooden weapons. The best ones are made from Japanese white oak. It is treated as a national treasure and, apparently, you cannot take logs of this timber outside the borders of Japan – only the finished products. Various schools prefer different models and profiles of bokkens. Our system uses heavy contact, with wood hitting wood, so most often we used heavy Iwama bokkens – allegedly designed by Saito Sensei<sup>81</sup> himself. At one point we put our bokkens into a trough filled with linseed oil for a couple of weeks – sometimes months. Then, for the same period of time, we wrapped them in with dry cloths and we waited until they sweated off the excess. Some people would drill into the weapon with a thin bit and perfuse them with oil for many days that way. The oil would drip down between the growth rings all day long to finally leak away through the

<sup>80</sup> On October 12, 1960, Inejiro Asanuma, during a political debate transmitted live on television, was killed with a wakizashi (short sword) by 17-year-old assassin Otoyo Yamaguchi.

<sup>81</sup> Saito Morihiro (1928–2002), one of the early students of O'Sensei was the head of the main Aikikai dojo in Iwama.

center of a sword over a meter long. Some made their own tsuba (handguards) from leather. The health of our hands depended on the protection offered by the tsuba, and here there were many ideas for survival. From massive plastic ones to the standard rubberized plastic ones, up to the most expensive ones, made from the skin of a bull's forehead.

I specialised in making fukuroshinai from split bamboo wrapped in leather. I learnt how to do it in San Diego and then for a few years I supported my dojo by making dozens of them to sell in Europe. Firstly, you had to split the bamboo sticks. Bamboo is a grass, so it is rather a pleasant and simple labour. Then you had to wrap it all in a piece of leather. You puncture hundreds of holes, through which you thread a lash, in a specific way. In the end you have a lightweight weapon that is safe for both sides. The biggest problem was finding high-quality bamboo in Poland. For some time, I imported it from the south of France. We cut the plants in the mountains of Provence when they were still green. After being cut down they had to be gimleted while they were still green so that they did not split while drying out.

Sometimes during the exercises we used hockey gloves, but Chiba believed that we felt too secure in them and were not careful enough. In my dojo I work with them so that the fear of hurting people does not restrict you in the search of your own strength. In zazen every one of us sat with a bokken in front of us. Sensei wanted to keep us close to this weapon, to make us accustomed to it, forced us to touch it.

A few years before I left for San Diego, I slept in a dojo in Strasburg. There were a dozen of us from Poland there; we

had come back from the camp in the Alsace mountains and we decided to spend two days there. It was the middle of the day; we were sitting by ourselves in the dojo when Chiba Sensei walked into the kitchen. He was strolling around the garden and he entered inside, seeing the light. He sat on a chair. He was holding a dirty, crooked twig in his hand. While looking at us he made short movements with his wrist, waving with the stick he brought. Always work with the weapon. Even if it's small movements, always be doing something. Until it becomes a part of your body. He was sitting there with a piece of French pear, like a village granddad. He was never too preoccupied with his clothes, and outside the mat he more resembled an old guy, tired out by life.

Most of us slept with a weapon. It was illogical and silly, but it happened naturally. In the pervasive feeling of danger, having a bokken or a knife at hand provided, to some extent, an illusionary sense of security. Even now, when I sleep in the dojo I put a machete under my bed. My sword was forged in the year 1460. In the Bizen school. Once upon a time it was a long blade, but somewhere, along the way, someone shortened it. It looks terrible, like an old butcher's knife. It has many scratches and fractures. From the repeated polishing, the surface layer is long gone, and it is very far from being a Japanese national treasure. When I die, my son will take it over. I was born in 1971; my father in 1940; his father in 1910; then 1880, 1850, 1820, 1790, 1760, 1730, 1700, 1670, 1640, 1610, 1580, 1550, 1510, 1480, 1450. My son will represent the 19th generation of people owning this object.

Something so personal, which defended someone's life – and perhaps even took someone else's – now lies on the first floor in a post-communistic block of flats inside a chest of drawers from Ikea. A few hundred years ago someone had it tucked away behind a belt, riding his horse through poor Japanese settlements. Perhaps a samurai, perhaps a bandit. I touch the blade, I clean it and I become a fragment of this story, as real as them. Maybe even more, since I have chipped it on an aluminium pipe of a tent during some kind of youth camp in a Polish village. A Japanese blacksmith, living in 1460, probably would clutch his head in disbelief.

# And What Would That Change?

“*And when he comes for me as well,  
The Purple Watchmaker of the Light,  
to stir the blue in my mind,  
I will be waiting ready and bright.*<sup>82</sup>

In the movie *Bridge of Spies*, an old Soviet mole is captured by American agents. Even in the moment of his sentencing at trial he keeps an absolute calm, what would almost seem like boredom. When asked by the protagonist if he is not terrified of what is happening around him and if he is not worried, his response is always the same: “And what would that change?” He keeps the same calm while he is painting, conveying secret information, putting on his coat, and receiving a life sentence for spying.

Months of fear and uncertainty passed before I found peace inside myself. I went from Poland to San Diego to a man who was considered to be one of the best. He accepted me as a personal student and every day for hours I experienced his classes. The whole journey I went through to get there was for me a burden as well as an obligation – my greatest fear was that I would disappoint. The obligation weighed so heavily that it physically tensed and restricted me.

<sup>82</sup> From the song *Zegarmistrz światła* [The Watchmaker of Light], text by B. Chorążuk, performer by T. Woźniak, 1972.

In Aikido there are no sparring matches or fights. The pressure is hidden deeper, somewhere else. For us, the ceremonial trainings with Chiba Sensei were like an addictive black mass. Not a self-defence course but an hour of juggling with explosives. After a warmup and rolls he called someone out, he showed a technique on them a few times, which then we repeated. The problem was that Sensei did not show the technique beforehand, and we all knew about that. Sensei kneaded us like clay, cornered us like a cat. This first time showed your quality as an uke. The technique was performed with full strength and speed. The response could only be intuitive. Most often it was also poor. The forms that followed were more predictable and slightly safer. It was not about us learning the little steps, but to use those techniques for more serious matters. A yudansha, or black belt, already knows all the techniques, because in Aikido there are not that many of them. They now become an object of study; our fears and needs slowly pass through them. They become a tight piece of clothing, a mirror. More and more they reflect who you are and what you feel. In this way, when he called me to be his uke I barrelled in with the whole burden of responsibility and years of training. I was young, strong, very physically able but at the same time stiff and numb to any contact. Apart from an obvious fear of injury, my biggest problem was my over-eagerness. I was like a dog on a walk – jumping around him, wagging my tail. The true relationship in its real form is like the calm before the storm, and then explosion. Two wolves staring at each other in a deadly silence before an attack. The air gets thick, every step is conscious and steady. The short forms, especially those with weapons, contain the

essence of life and death. The stillness before the lightning, then the flare and later, the peal of thunder. There is a tranquillity before the attack, the response in the silence and the sound of the body falling on the mat. The solution turned out to be repetition and hard training.

As the time went by, I got used to the stress before the call. With admiration, I watched some of the uke. They seemed unaffected by what was about to come and a calmness beamed from their physical posture. It came with time; there was no enlightenment or sudden understanding. I called it a syndrome of "Screw it, what will be will be." Zazen helped a lot, when I repeatedly imagined forms in which he broke my hands or snapped my neck. Chiba Sensei knocked me out two times, punching me in the face. He bruised my hands a zillion times with jo and bokken, but it was nothing serious. For me, the key was an acceptance and a permission for what was about to come. In this moment I went there with no baggage and slowly I stopped speaking, and I began to calmly listen. The dog stopped jumping, begging to have a ball thrown. A toy pinscher gradually transformed into a wolf. I do not say that I became a better uke. Perhaps a little bit, because the stress of the anticipation tensed my shoulders and before that I felt no contact. The stillness I discovered opened my eyes. "The worst thing that can happen is he will kill me," I would say to myself. Then I walked, confident and calm. A physical certainty is different. You hold your body straight, you have no fear in your eyes. Allegedly, you can tell if somebody is ready for death by their eyes. There are not a lot of emotions there anymore. A few hundred years ago, when hundreds of thousands of dirty bearded faces, armed with swords and axes,

waited for a battle, this is what they probably were thinking of. Screw it, whatever happens, happens. In a moment, the stones will drop from the sky followed by a cloud of arrows and somewhere from behind the hill beard-faces with axes will rush out. It will be a miracle if you survive or don't have to have some part of your body chopped off. It will be horrible, and it will hurt. The only things that can save you are faith or training. One or the other – because only these can prepare you for death. The Soviet agent probably kept calm because he had always been certain that they would catch him eventually – he accepted it as his faith long ago. I can imagine that the only emotion which he allowed himself to feel was a slight surprise every evening. Perhaps he turned off the lights, and when nobody saw, he raised his eyebrow slightly and murmured, “Surprisingly, I got away with it again.”





# Contact

“*If soldiers are punished before they have grown attached to you, they will not prove submissive.*

Sun Tzu<sup>83</sup>

Contact on every level. Chiba Sensei based the entirety of his technical message on physical and mental contact – on the mat and outside of it. Ubiquity and awareness. Like a mother who observes her child out of the corner of her eye – she doesn’t need to watch it constantly, but she knows where it is and what it does. Control. Like a farmer who watches over a growing crop. This comparison with a farmer comes back to me for various reasons. Most of all, I am fascinated by the phenomenon of maturing to change and readiness for receiving a truth. A teacher is a man who plants the seed, waters it with his own attention, and waits. From time to time, he can adjust a sapling which grows in the wrong direction, pull the weeds, or straighten up the support stake. However, much of the work needs to be done by the plant. It is the one that penetrates the surface of the soil, that fights with the sun and rain, that withstands the attacks of vermin, and, most importantly – it grows by itself.

I saw many people who were too preoccupied with their students’ every step. They positioned them in ideal poses, adjusting every element of the movement so that their form

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83 Sun Tzu, The Art of War.

died. A man who is corrected all the time does not find any freedom in the form, and eventually loses all interest in the training. A plant which is watered too profusely will rot; if it is tugged from the ground it won't stretch or grow faster. Everything has its time and lasts. This is very hard for the YouTube generation to understand. There is a type of knowledge which accesses deep, and one which flows down the surface, even if something is heard a thousand times. You can hit your head on a wall for years and never see it.

Chiba Sensei sat in front of the kamiza and watched us. Even now, in my memory I have an image of him sitting in half-lotus, in stillness. More than at us, he seemed to be looking through us. For him, the dojo was like a field where we grew. We were hit by the wind; it rained on us. Sometimes the plants barged into each other, twigs broke with a bang. Some turned out to be weeds; some grew tall but bore no fruit, only shadow. Around some of them, nothing grew because they poisoned their neighbours with a toxic venom. At times he got up and came up to help. However, in the majority of cases he only sat there and looked, allowing nature to take care of the progress.

One day a beginner appeared in the iaido classes – he was neither a kenshusei nor an uchideshi. He came for the first few months, practised the basic form, shohatto.<sup>84</sup> In solitude he slaughtered this short form twice a week for 90 minutes. While he was doing it, he slouched terribly and made basic mistakes, waving and flailing his sword around. Watching him was painful. Chiba Sensei did not correct him at all. He

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<sup>84</sup> The first of the Shoden set of forms in the Muso Shinden Ryu school. It is performed from the seiza (kneeling) position.

tortured us, criticising every little thing, yet he didn't look twice at that student's hunched back. The guy waved his sword like a mace for many weeks, looking like a blend of Gollum and a troll. After three months, Sensei finally got up and approached him. He put one hand on his forehead and the other one on the lower part of his spine. With a quick movement, he straightened up the guy's entire back. I still remember the surprise in the student's eyes. He did not hunch over after that. Simply, he matured to this knowledge and understood it. Suddenly, all the pain in his spine that had accumulated after the weeks of slouching disappeared. The straight back allowed him to work with his hands freely. Proper posture solved five other issues. Sensei could have forced him to straighten up at the very beginning. The student, however, was not ready for it, because he did not yet have body awareness. He had to waggle his sword around, like a young person who needs to go out and let loose before they can settle down. In this way, instead of breeding artificially puffed broilers, you can raise a wild animal.

Like a farmer who looks over his field. How knowledgeable do you need to be, how responsible? How many plants will break or shrivel up before you learn this? The contact and the control. The constant awareness. The relationship with Chiba Sensei functioned beyond words – when the physical contact was broken, when we all went back to our cities and countries, the invisible contact still lasted. We were unceasingly accompanied by the feeling of responsibility and fear of disappointing him.

At times you had to write reports; as he sat physically in front of kamiza, watching over our training, he equally held an invisible net of his students around the world. Like the master of puppets with his fingers widely spread over the stage – he performed big and small dramas. I still don't understand this aspect. He was a man who wanted to control everything, but he acted on a scale which you can't control. But he still tried. He destroyed everything that eluded this, that grew too big. That had enough of this control. Deru kui wa utareru – the nail that sticks out gets hammered down. This Japanese proverb perfectly describes what happened when he lost control.

We had to, regularly, write essays. For every exam for dan (black-belt) level, to obtain permission to train somewhere, and on other occasions. Sesshin for the first time, three days of zazen – essay, describing the impressions. Rohatsu for the first time, eight days of meditation – essay. You go to learn in a different country – essay. One, two pages with a description of your observations and comments. It was important not to rush into an analysis of your own problems but to focus on an individual understanding of Aikido. As uchideshi, we hated writing. We were machines for doing cleaning and taking falls, not for over-intellectualised contemplation. The best at writing were those who gave the least during the class. We were always fascinated at the way someone who was mostly focused on mucking about and hiding in the corners of the mat had so many wise reflections. The essays by uchideshi after days of horrible sessions of zazen were always predictable and similar: “I did it because I had to. It was terribly hard, and it hurt all the time. I still don't know why I had to do this, and

if I had a choice, I wouldn't." Sensei would sigh helplessly. Honesty was equally our weapon and our shield. After many years I, myself, require from uchideshi honest reports when their time living in the dojo ends. In the majority of cases I find out things I didn't know about. So often we project our own thoughts on someone else that, in the end, we have no idea what people around us think.

Many times I heard that you needed to write to him by hand. That he wouldn't receive emails, wouldn't read printouts or letters written on a machine. Only those written by hand. Many people had told me that, so at the beginning, that was what I did. However, my handwriting is dreadful and delivery to the US takes weeks, so after a first shy attempt at sending an email to his secretary, I continued to contact him that way thereafter.

When I lived in the dojo, every day I saw piles of letters. Reports from internships, private correspondence, accounts and denouncements of others. He was always complaining that people flooded him with a mountain of this sludge. Those were the costs of totalitarianism. Absolute power, even a constructive one, one with a human face, produces side effects. Denunciatory activities, fighting for influence, jealousy, and everything which doesn't go along with the beautiful vision of Aikido. He knew about this, and although he complained about the inconvenience, he had an even bigger problem with those who didn't write to him. I never wrote voluntarily. Only when he ordered me to send reports or when I had to ask for his permission to take part in a seminar. I felt that I should write regularly about what I was up to every few

months. However, I was not doing anything special. All day long I was on the mat, practising or teaching, 5 to 8 hours a day. At times I went for a seminar, to teach or to learn. What do you write about? About your doubts? About what you have achieved? He was a legend and I saw those mountains of papers. I hadn't thought of anything that he didn't discover himself many years ago. Now, after many years, I think that I should have sent him postcards. Something along the lines of: "Hello Sensei, I am doing fine. I am cultivating my field, everything is growing. Regards, Awatemono<sup>85</sup>."

There was this young guy in France. Many years ago, when I lived in the dojo over there as an uchideshi, he signed up, and I was responsible for him. I remember that, as a teenager, he made tea for the teachers by putting the teabags straight into the electric kettle. Years passed and he grew up and matured, and beautiful Aikido blossomed in him. He was one of those young talents and at the same time quiet and modest. He reached 2nd dan and his teacher sent him to San Diego to learn. He lived in the dojo for a few months and Sensei was incredibly happy with him. The problem was, however, that everything went great for him. The process of teaching an uchideshi at Chiba Sensei's was based on generating a problem and developing it under the circumstances of permanent stress. Forcing to do un-doable things. He required you to bounce off the walls of your own limitations for weeks or months, so that it leads you to a small, or big, enlightenment – if you finally managed to break through that wall. The young Frenchman was so able that he did everything

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<sup>85</sup> Awatemono(Scatterbrain) Nickname given to the author by Chiba sensei

he was ordered to do well. He ripped a basic tool out of the teacher's hands, and Sensei was lost. He needed a reason to be offended by him. He needed drama.

The time passed, and the guy came back home with praise. Sensei was still boiling, searching for an excuse to build a true relationship with him through extremely intense emotions. A few months passed and the youngster did not write a letter to thank him for the stay. It was enough. The avalanche started, and after a hysterical attack from Sensei, he forbade him to come ever again. I remember when he told me this story and I responded that never, not after any of the five times I was there, did I write any stupid letters. I didn't need to because I generated enough drama when I was there, and I simply wasn't that gifted in my movements. Or, perhaps, I was simply too old to play this game?

At the end of his life, Chiba Sensei taught us how to die and he hid in his house, stopped replying to any letters. I sent him official letters, a few times asking for permission to go for a seminar, but he never replied. Trained by him in the way of dramas, when he was no longer around us, as teachers, we began to generate big and small conflicts of our own. The school began to crumble, even whilst he was still alive. As if it was only a monument, unable to exist without its living protagonist. Everything was based on his charm, and at the end we were not even able to talk to each other.

After one of those dramas, I received an order to send a report to Chiba Sensei. I was involved in that conflict and I remember how I sat in front of a blank page wondering what I should or shouldn't write. I made 10 versions of the same letter.



From honest and emotionally engaged ones, to short and factual. In the end, I sent a formal note filled with a few dry facts and a statement that I did not want to manipulate him as a person who was directly involved. My personal opinion, I said, I will include in a different letter. For many months nothing happened, and I, of course, was bluffing. I didn't want to write to a dying man whom I respect about what I truly think of his life's work. Besides, he hadn't replied to my letters for years.

After three months I received an email from his secretary: "Sensei still awaits your opinion." I was hit on a head with a hammer because I had cornered myself. For three days I wrote the letter of my life. Eight pages criticising what he had done and what we all had done. I don't know how many versions I deleted, but finally I pressed 'send.'

For some time, I waited for a blow. I knew that I had just made myself into the nail that sticks out. If he had been healthy, probably within a week I would have been called back to San Diego. I know a few stories like that. As an example: the secretary calls back a teacher from England to San Diego. A former uchideshi – within two days he is at the airport in California, he hails a taxi to the dojo and arrives straight to Chiba Sensei's office. For starters, he gets slapped in the face, and then finds out that he has just been expelled from the organization and that his teacher never wants to see him again. And that he must go back. One of the poor guys even managed to get the same taxi because the driver hadn't left yet.

However, Sensei has never gotten back to me, maybe he was too old to play this game or maybe what I wrote was not that strong after all. Or, perhaps, he never even read it.

II  
2021



# The Kitchen

“Jola: When I was passing my driver’s licence exam my teacher told me, “You have to drive as if everybody wants to kill you.”  
Szu: You had a good teacher.

(from the 1983 film *Wielki Szu*<sup>86</sup>)

Every day after the last evening class, I rushed back to my room. I had to get myself in order, clean the table, and prepare it in case Sensei wanted to stay with us. I would put some peanuts or Japanese crackers in a little bowl. On the floor next to the corner of the table I hid an ashtray. He smoked like a chimney, and he was embarrassed about it. He told us stories how he started to smoke as a four-year-old during wartime, collecting cigarette butts off the ground. His mother caught him and gave him such a hiding that he didn’t come back to it until he was a teenager.

Japanese people of his generation did not have a clear definition of what an addiction was. Drinking or smoking wasn’t a sign of weakness. Chiba drank red wine, so I would place a glass close to him and have a bottle at hand. If he went straight home, I would put everything away.

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86 *Wielki Szu*, a Polish film directed by S.Chęciński.

During these evening gatherings, we sat on zafu (meditation pillows). The room was small, 3 meters by 9 meters, but it could fit up to 15 people.

There was a Japanese table, half a meter tall. In the beginning everybody sat on their knees in seiza, then slowly moved into more comfortable positions as time went on. As long as Sensei was in the room no one would slouch, lean back or support themselves with their hands on the floor. With him appeared an atmosphere of training, tension, and discomfort.

Guests from all over the world sat around him happily and played out a repetitive and truly boring performance over and over again. They came there for the same reason I had – to be close to him for a few days and then to talk about it for the rest of their lives. Even though he is portrayed differently, Sensei was a skilled politician, a man who desired fame and applause. Like anyone who has devoted their whole life to something unique and has only studied that one thing, he needed validation of the reason behind such extreme decisions.

They chattered and he laughed jovially and nodded his head. For us, the entirety of this performance was shallow and incomprehensible. It was similar to being in the house of an alcoholic who has washed and dressed up his children and now is joking around with some distant next-of-kin, pretending to be a happy family. The children, however, know what they know, and regardless of this circus-like atmosphere of bliss they will not come within an arm's length of their father, because they know better. Also, when the next-of-kin are not looking, he shoots daggers at them through his eyes as if to say, "Just wait until they are gone."

The guests had a great time. They were sitting next to a leg-end. They talked and they could ask him questions – always the same ones. How did you begin to practise? What kind of person was Ueshiba? It didn't matter where they came from, they all felt uncomfortable in the silence and apparently thought they had to kill it with stupid questions. He, on the other hand, always responded, and as long as the questions were not amazingly stupid, he surprised us with his patience. God forbid a question would be asked by one of us. That was not the reason we were there, and the only thing he could do was to grunt: “Baka!” (“idiot” in Japanese). When the guests disappeared, the atmosphere became completely different. We sat in silence for the whole evening. Sensei could attack at any moment, either beginning to criticize all of us or someone specific. Each of us had heard those rants before, and after some time none of us had any secrets. Often, they involved something personal, so very quickly those who really wanted to be close to him grew a thick skin. Obviously, he could also be kind and charming, even to us. However, no one trusted him – we knew that somewhere there a danger lay in wait. Alcohol loosens tongues. After a while, some things start to slip out – and then the lion would jump at your throat. The right relationship between teacher and his students should be like a nonintrusive piece of music. It plays quietly in the background and nobody minds it. Everyone knows their place in this melody and appears at precise times with the accurate volume.

In silence you can eat and drink for hours. When the moment of relaxation comes – for a joke or a question – it appears by itself, naturally. We liked the silence because there was

stillness in it and a break from the stress of training. Except that Sensei was like a volcano. He despised stagnation and the feeling of safety; he destroyed everything if dust settled on it. The music of understanding played softly in the background, but no one felt safe. Sometimes something slipped out. Someone did or said something stupid and a crack would shatter the harmonious chain of sounds. Everyone would open their mouths and stare at the fool in amazement. What followed was an explosion.

Or not – in that sense Sensei was unpredictable. Once, on some formal occasion, a certain giggly Mexican lady brought two litres of vanilla ice cream for the shared dinner, but escaped unscathed. Sweets were blacklisted. Sweets are fodder for childish weakness, and Sensei fought with our inner children and despised them with pure and deep hatred. Obviously, he was correct. We all know that sugar destroys teeth, fattens the body, and fools you with an illusion of fake power. Obviously, sweets are bad, but he didn't like them anyway. Old Japanese have different tastebuds. The young ones are already changed and formatted by McDonalds and TV, but the elders still eat raw fish and rice porridge for breakfast. On the pragmatic level of understanding the dos and don'ts in the life of an uchideshi, there was no consistency. On the one hand, we were forbidden coffee or sweets, but on the other, we stuffed ourselves until late at night, drinking seas of beer or whatever else you wanted. After years of leading my own dojo, I now know what he wanted to do. Back then I saw in it some rational consistency – he just followed his instinct, wanting to build a natural relationship with his students, based on the primitive honesty and responsibility

for oneself. So many times, he compared it to the irrational love toward a beautiful woman, but I did not know that this relationship also needed to be natural, like a dance of lovebirds. Inexplicable, understood only by those who were touched by this disease. We were stuck in a trance, enchanted for months, some of us for years. The table and those dinners were a tactile manifestation of that. He, at the head of the table, like the chief of a tribe, a father in a Mongolian yurt, a mafia boss, a pope on the Synod, a ringleader. The rest of us, sitting according to some weird hierarchy born out of animal instinct. When we were at the level of a wolf pack, such things happened naturally, and they offered peace of mind and a sense of meaning. With this language he reached us, irrespective of our age, sex, nationality, religion, past, or level of advancement in the art. Arm in arm sat a sniper from the Navy Seals, a builder from Mexico, a poet-plumber from California, a Jew from New York, and a historian from Poland. Everybody felt the same.

“Awareness is much more important than religion,” Chiba used to say. Once someone told me to never sit next to him as an uchideshi. I don’t know why, but this really stuck in my memory. I always sat far away, and I never let him out of my sight. For that whole time, I only let something out twice – and both those times I paid severely and immediately. With time you create a deceptive feeling of security, because the routine becomes predictable and safe. Back then, I was 32 years old; he was 62. He got old and turned grey. Without a keikogi and a bokken, in a worn-out T-shirt and shabby jeans, he looked like an old uncle – it could seem that he was kind and warm-hearted. His eyes, however, were made



of steel, and I felt that this whole thing about being “nice” irritated him so much that he would have preferred to tear it out from himself and beat us up with it.

It was perhaps during my last stay. I lived in the dojo with A, an Albanian from New York. He was a quiet and a focused man, marked by a Balkan simplicity which I envied him. He appeared to be a man whose desires, thoughts, and actions were all unified. Sensei sensed this honesty, and for me their relationship was always a model of what dedication and trust can build. On the mat they collided with each other like a hammer with red-hot metal. Sparks flew everywhere. Sensei yelled at him, trying to release even more of this honesty, and he nodded and tried his best. Later, they never spoke of it, as if the fire had extinguished itself on the mat.

On the day I am thinking of, the two of us, along with M, went to Sensei’s house to pick up an old table which was supposed to replace the one in our room. I had been in the living room a couple of times, when invited for official dinners or to eat something after working in the garden. His house was different than the dojo. Cats, grandchildren running around, a piano . . . Naturally, an atmosphere of family warmth appeared, and we felt much more relaxed. Sensei sat in his place, and also behaved differently. We were rarely there because, also for him, it was much more difficult to keep up his mask and consequently play his role around piles of laundry or running children. We took the table, packed it in the back of a pickup truck, and drove back to the dojo. I remember how scared I was, sitting in the back. I held the table with my hands and prayed that we would not be stopped by the police. In



Tijuana, which was 10 miles away, entire families travelled on highways on the back of trucks, but here it was still America.

The relationships between uchideshi were strong and honest but at the same time childish and immature. The three of us were around 30 years old, raised up in poverty in Albania, Poland, or Mexico; we all found ourselves as students of a man who had grown up in impoverished postwar Japan. And all of us had been tossed into the wealthiest part of one of the richest countries in the world. In a childish way, we were constantly competing. To be closest to him, or to be the strongest, or bravest, or the one who didn't care anymore. It is a cliché, but we were fighting for a father's attention. It was probably stupid and inevitable, but also something that was stronger than most of the things we felt in our life.

We dragged the table to the uchideshi quarters and left it leaning against the wall for a moment. That was when we noticed, hidden under the table, two extended wires, in the place when Sensei normally sat. We set the table up and began to wonder what their purpose was. I don't remember who solved the riddle, but at one moment we all got chills when we realized: He kept his sword there. At home, while having dinner – under the wooden tabletop – he stored a weapon. Exactly when we, distracted by children, cats and that bloody piano, had finally felt safe. We wrung our hands, as one always does when, after many attempts, whatever you do seems useless. While drinking beer we spent ages trying to arrange a short sword on the wires in a way that would allow you to cut a human in one motion.

A few days later, we were sitting at the new table during an official dinner. We had forgotten about the whole situation, and none of us had enough courage to ask him about it. Sensei spoke to some people, and the quiet music of our dependency played on in tune. Suddenly, all three of us heard the clatter of wood and metal wires. Straight away, we understood what was going on and we looked at him. He had habitually moved his hand under the table, and had encountered the sword we had obliviously left there. Everyone else kept eating, unaware of what was happening. He glanced at us and understood that we knew. He nodded, and without looking at any of us, quite angrily grunted, "I see that you figured it out."

"We were only wondering if it was for a sword or a sawn-off shotgun," A said quietly.

"You'll never know," Sensei answered.

We never spoke about it again.

Of course, it was all nonsense. He was not a Yakuza boss or a gangster. It was a game; he never killed anyone. He didn't have real reasons for keeping a weapon under a table. I also saw that his face of disappointment in our discovery was rehearsed. However, none of this had any meaning. What was important was the real attention. Perhaps he had done it all deliberately from beginning to the end? Perhaps he had given us this table fully intending us to find those wires?

In the life of an uchideshi, the distinction between what is really happening in your tangled relationship with your teacher and what you imagine after some months is ever-changing.

Very often I was scared that what I had imagined while I was sitting by myself for days had nothing to do with reality.

I gave up everything, I sold all that I had, I stopped paying all my taxes, ignored letters from the Revenues, my studies, I messed up relationships with women and I went away to another part of the world. Something pulled me here, something which seemed to make everything worth it. Here was someone who spent his life the way I wanted to spend mine. I got so tangled up that I had nothing to lose. I ran out of money, my ticket expired. I stopped thinking about it and grabbed hold of the training. Now, it seemed each of his comments was not only a way of improving my technique, but an attack on my whole life and the decisions I had made. I remember lonely nights when I couldn't sleep because of the tiredness and the plethora of thoughts running through my head. Nights during which strange birds interwoven into a reed mat on the floor next to my bed came to life. I remember when one of them tried to fly with only one healthy wing, the rest of its body rotten, producing slime from which twisted bones poked out. How much of all of this was born in my head and how much really happened?

One of those times I was bustling about in the kitchen after class. As always, I appeared at the table last, unnoticed. Everybody was already eating and drinking beer. I sat down at the end of the wooden tabletop, opposite Chiba Sensei, who was talking to someone. Everyone was busy, so I thoughtlessly grabbed a bottle of beer, opened it, and started to drink in silence. The attack came straight away, and I wasn't ready for it at all.

“Don’t drink from a bottle like an animal! Use a glass!”

He yelled at me for a while, and I realised that when I had been busy in the kitchen, I hadn’t heard the conversation going on around the table. Apparently, it was on the topic of using a glass. I was told off, and there was nothing special about it. It was neither the first nor the last time. I poured my beer into a glass, apologised, and kept on drinking.

A few years passed. I came back to San Diego and again found myself at the bottom of the food chain in the dojo for a couple of months. I was the last one to sit down, again, opposite my teacher who was conversing. Perhaps I recalled the story about the glass. I looked around, unnoticed. Sensei was sipping wine and everyone else was drinking beer from the bottles. I was speechless. This made no sense. I remembered vividly the situation from a few years back. Arguments about drinking a bloody beer from a bloody glass. And now all of these people, obsessed with him, are drinking – no, gulping – beer down straight from the bottles?

And there, sitting at the end of the table – the ultimate fool. The first Pole who had come to America to spend money and not to earn it. An idiot who had gotten into debt again, broken up with some innocent girl. And again, had no place to live when he came back. And for all of that – nonsense, an insignificant game of roles. I took a bottle and I opened it. All of this was so ridiculously sad. I gave my whole life to this circus and it turned out to be a joke . . . The little Polish gnome in my head had a great time. I don’t even know where I took the strength from. Screw that. Not for him and not for them. Some consequences, some significance for me.

Otherwise, there is nothing inside you to respect. I got up, fuming, and went to the kitchen. Surrounded by chatter, I poured the beer into a glass and I raised it.

In all of this noise, around the sounds of conversations and clatter of bottles, Chiba Sensei sat motionlessly at the end of the table, looking straight into my eyes. I lowered the glass. He raised his hand and pointed at me. The chatter immediately stopped.

“You remember,” he said slowly, weighing the words. “And this is the moment. This is what counts.”

## Food

“*The devil said to him, “If you are the Son of God, tell this stone to become bread.” Jesus answered, “It is written: ‘Man shall not live on bread alone.’*”

Luke 4, 3-4

**I**n the world of my childhood, no one was on a diet. We stood in the queues to the butchers and chocolate was only for Christmas. In the world of my childhood, dinner was always served with soup. There was sausage, smoked to ashes, and hominy made by grandma from a recipe from Lviv. Once a year

we slaughtered a pig and the patio, crowded with metal bowls full of pieces of meat, smelled of blood. Food was a trophy, and a real man ate everything. Being a picky eater was a sign of weakness. No one was allergic to anything; you ate out of hunger. We never left anything on the plate.

We would run around the yard carrying a piece of sausage. There were no Italian restaurants, no sophisticated cuisine. There were exotic tastes, but there was no hunger either. This is what created our way. Food was a tool and fuel, not a goal in itself.

In San Diego, a handwritten rulebook of meals hung in the dojo. I remember that when I first saw it, I thought of it as a sign of American weakness. I had it drilled into me that food didn't matter. You did it because you had to. That was it. "We eat meat to have strength for our practise. We receive with respect the sacrifice of beings which had to give their lives. We only put as much as we can eat on the plate; we do not waste food."

Fifteen years have passed, and Poland has changed. Massive chains of supermarkets throw away tons of good products every day. Kids have everything in excess and don't know hunger anymore. Reading this rule book now, I understand the attempt to limit the absurdity of consumption. Back then I read it as a sign of capitalistic spoiling: everybody is on a diet. During one generation – from kids who at the church were given a bounty of salted butter and blocks of tasteless orange cheese – we have grown into adults who have more than they need. Christmas no longer smells of tangerines, and chocolate isn't a reward. As was true of many other things that Chiba



did, the purpose of controlling our food I understood only several years later. During my time as uchideshi, it seemed stupid and cult-like to me. I don't think I ever gave myself into it fully. I cheated, mostly with sugar, which gave me the strength for at least one class. At the end of the week, we were very tired. I would sneak out to Adams Avenue, to the grocery store next to the dojo, to buy a chocolate bar and flavoured milk. Apart from guaranteed diarrhoea, it gave me a kick for the first practice. But then the packaging had to be disposed of. At the beginning I threw it away in a bin in the car park, but then, at some point, I saw Chiba Sensei looking through our garbage. From that moment onward, I threw it away on the way back. Sensei checked our fridge and the trash can in the dojo. Once a week we all had dinner together, for which each of us had to prepare something and then explain what exactly was on the plate. Most of the time there would be a traditional dish. I managed to cook chicken broth and a beetroot soup. Later on, I came up with meals which were safe and cheap. Most of us were unable to uphold the rules of eating, though. In our spare time we devoured sweets and drank coffee. The official regime of the dojo was based mostly on Japanese traditions. We ate plenty of fish, rice – I can also remember strips of roast squid, prawns, soba (buckwheat noodles), pickled radish. We didn't eat red meat, as it was too expensive. Looking at it now, I see how much I wasted an opportunity to control my own body. Limiting the diet and cleaning up the way you eat can change your entire life. Uchideshi live in the world of extreme emotions and on the edge of physical exhaustion. Because of that, food becomes one of the naturally emerging forms of self-reward. A way of

comforting. Food, sleep, and alcohol. Anything that can take your mind away from the dojo, even for a while. In the times of O-Sensei, in postwar Japan, the uchideshi were always hungry. Every big meal was a celebration. Chiba Sensei told us that once he was cleaning the pot after cooking rice and poured out the water, which still had a few grains of rice in it. Then he saw O-Sensei's wife carefully picking out those leftover grains from the mud. Likewise, my grandmother was furious at seeing food being thrown away. People who have been touched by poverty, war, labour camps, and such will be happy with a dry piece of bread until the end of their days.

A teacher wants a serious student. Now I understand it. He doesn't want to lead classes twice a week. He doesn't want to teach how to twist the arm, but to show the path of self-control. By enforcing a regime, Sensei was seeing how much he could interfere in our lives. Food is an escape – if we also gave that away, the only thing left which was truly ours was sleep. This is, of course, just part of the truth. The most obvious thing is that during intense training you have to respect yourself and not to eat rubbish. That after red meat, man is sluggish and gets tired easily. That fast food is poison and that you can give yourself cancer. That you have to control your weight because a fat teacher is a disgrace; he shows you that he has no control over his body. I remember eating unrefined brown rice. The bloody stuff had to be boiled for almost an hour. A few people ate nothing but that for a week. On a roll of showing off I asked for more details, but he instantly forbade me:

“You are from a cold country and you need meat.”

He believed that you should only eat products which grow naturally in your area. The world got crazy, though, and now in the middle of winter in Poland you can eat papayas, mangoes, and bananas.

The diet accompanies the practise of meditation as much as it used to accompany medieval Catholic monks. Perhaps you need to mature to it? Fighting with food is a fight with one's self. It is also a means of control. From one side I see Chiba as a master who tried to limit his own diet as well as his students'. He was aware of the role of food, its influence on the training, on self-awareness. He was disgusted by weakness, gluttony, and the lack of attentiveness of what you are consuming. But on the other side, there was this hungry little boy living inside of him who had grown up in old-time Japan. The one running around in a pair of too-large zori sandals through the ruins of postwar Tokyo. He loved to eat and drink. He ate good things, and he could cook. He respected himself; however, he was far from a martyr. Now, many years later, I also have uchideshi, and I can see how independence and simple skills, such as cooking, doing laundry, responsibility for cleaning, in life are as valuable as having the heart for training.



# Hunger and Survival

“Once, when I was six years old, I saw a magnificent picture in a book called *True Stories from Nature* about the primeval forest. It was a picture of a boa constrictor swallowing a wild beast . . . In the book it said: ‘Boa constrictors swallow their prey whole, without chewing it. After that they are not able to move, and they sleep through the six months that they need for digestion.’ I pondered deeply, then, over the adventures of the jungle. And after some work with a coloured pencil I succeeded in making my first drawing . . . I showed my masterpiece to the grown-ups, and asked them whether the drawing frightened them. They answered me: ‘Why should anyone be frightened by a hat?’

Antoine de Saint-Exupéry<sup>87</sup>

I felt that I had to start controlling what would reach me. I felt that I had to start filtering out what came my way. To not take anything on, to not eat, to lock myself in and hide away. To wait it out. Like a dying elephant or that snake from *The Little Prince* that had stuffed itself with much more than it could really fit. Each next piece of information bounces off me, it does not fit in. I do not understand what I know, information contradicts itself and I cannot put it in order, find a meaning. Only those who have had to, or wanted to, acquire a lot in a short time will understand this. For years you take the knowledge without any criticism, based

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<sup>87</sup> Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, *The Little Prince*. Translation at [deji.chez.com/se\\_eng/textes/littprin.htm](http://deji.chez.com/se_eng/textes/littprin.htm)

wholly on trust you hide in the safehouse of being a student. Knowledge bears responsibility – you have to fill it with life. From time to time, take all of the puzzles and lock yourself up in a room. Do not let anyone in while you unscramble it all. Throw away the pieces that don't fit and finally build something. There was a time when I bluntly listened to anyone and training in seminars over and over was natural for me. I was a sponge that would absorb anything. Years passed by and each word stayed with me like a rock in my backpack. Instead of running, I walked, until I finally collapsed under all that weight. I stopped listening and reacted with aggression. I remember seminars when I had to leave and lock myself up in a bathroom for a while. There was too much of everything. I wanted to hide, to close my eyes. To take one technique, one movement, and let it work. To see where that would lead me. Without people, without words, without explanations and masks.

In the middle of the night, I sit close to my four-year-old son, who is having a nightmare and is breathing heavily, and put my hand on him. Like a wild animal, he can feel the warmth and my smell. Suddenly he begins to breathe calmly and deeply, and he relaxes fully. He drifts off into a peaceful sleep.

This is how I felt when I was hiding inside of myself. The battle cannot be endless. For me and those like me, every day is a battle. The analogy with food is exceptionally accurate. In every culture, in every religion, the basic way of treating overeating or food poisoning is to stop eating at all. Like a hungry animal, we wake up and change: from a dog into

a wolf, from a goat into a deer. You can hear more, you can feel more.

There was this one time when I decided to challenge myself, feeling mostly anger caused by the lack of the control over what I was eating. It was in Poland, years after being an uchideshi in San Diego. All the doctors I know said that fasting is a placebo, and all of those theories about burning the deposits of old pork sitting in our gut is the same kind of nonsense that can be compared with “aikido” plasters. However, they also said: if it works for you, do it. There was really only one thing that interested me – do I own the food or does the food own me?

When we began, there were four of us. One of us did it every year; the rest of us had never done it. There was a skinny uchideshi from Chile among us: he did not want to, but he had to. The first day was easy. I don't like breakfast, and I don't get hungry until midday. Then it gets tough. Like a chubby teenager, I paced around the flat and my wife made fun of me. I knew that if I managed to go to sleep, I would wake up with no hunger the next day. I had done that many times before and I knew that it was my weakness, playing with me. I felt hunger that was not there. The second day was the same. My body had plenty of energy, and four hours of training did not influence the level of my hunger at all. I drank only water. In the evening I went through the same circus of going back and forth to the fridge. The third day was the worst. In some suicidal attack I made myself do cardio training and then finished with pullups on a bar. I spent the whole evening lying on my side, dreaming about a roll with

roasted pumpkin seeds. I even thought about just putting some in my mouth and sucking on it without swallowing. The awakening of the animal happened in a theatrically clichéd manner the next day. I took my dog for a walk and I was happy. It was autumn, I could see the colours of leaves and the sky more beautifully and fully. I could appreciate smells and the wind passing through fingers of my open palm. It was like when you change into a werewolf and you can hear a burp of an ant. Somewhere deep inside I clearly knew what was happening – it was my body understanding that the provider had not found food for three days, and so it needed to activate the hunter-gatherer program. Still, I only drank water, and I lost a kilogram each day. The hunger had completely vanished, I found peace and lightness. It was the fourth day – the uchideshi who got slimmer just from exercising 30 hours a week began to faint, his weight had reached 60 kilograms. We left him behind and went on, watching enviously as he ate his first cooked carrot with tears in his eyes. I kept on losing weight and the hunger did not return. Slowly my enthusiasm and strength also disappeared. The body understood that the operator had lost his mind and was not searching for food. At this stage it begins to eat itself from the inside. Apparently, the muscles go first. You are watching this like a TV show, with the satisfaction of a kid picking scab off his wounded knee. On the fifth day I started to stumble, so I bought two bottles of beetroot juice, which I was recommended for a boost. The shits appeared instantly in a terrifying colour of beetroot red. It turned out that the juice should be from cooked beetroots, not raw ones. On the sixth day I fainted twice. I had to ease up on the training



because I floated more than walked. I reached the end with no major problems. The whole thing lasted for 20 days. At the beginning we excluded meat, then around four days before the fast we ate only cooked vegetables. Then, for the whole week, nothing. You come back to life afterwards for the whole week by eating only cooked vegetables. My first meal – two potatoes, a carrot, and half a stalk of parsley – almost made me vomit. One potato would be enough for the whole day, easily. Like the hell of Ichikukai<sup>88</sup> – you find out, most of all, that what you define as a hunger, limitation, doesn't exist. That I don't have to, that I can do anything. With a relaxed lifestyle, you can survive on water for 14 days, supposedly even 21 days. To free yourself from something that you define as an obligation. Like a snake, I digest everything that I have inside of me. The elephant made out of meat; the elephant made out of information. I throw out everything that poisons me. I look at the adverts during the pre-Christmas period. An older man looks greedily and mournfully at a massive pork knuckle. His wife, nudging, says that he shouldn't do it because he will suffer the next day, that it's too greasy for him. The voice in the background responds – don't worry, stuff your belly and then take the medicine XYZ. Apparently, the concept of remedying overeating by consuming even more things appeared along with the modern advertisements of the nineteenth century. The teachings of martial arts say to reject such illusions and masks and not to collect them – said Chiba Sensei. Awareness, rejection, and acceptance – key words. To chew on this. He told us to chew every bite 30 times instead of jumping on a piece of meat ravenously like a dog. We used chopsticks because the bites were smaller then. The same

88 An intensive session of misogi (purification) training in Tokyo.

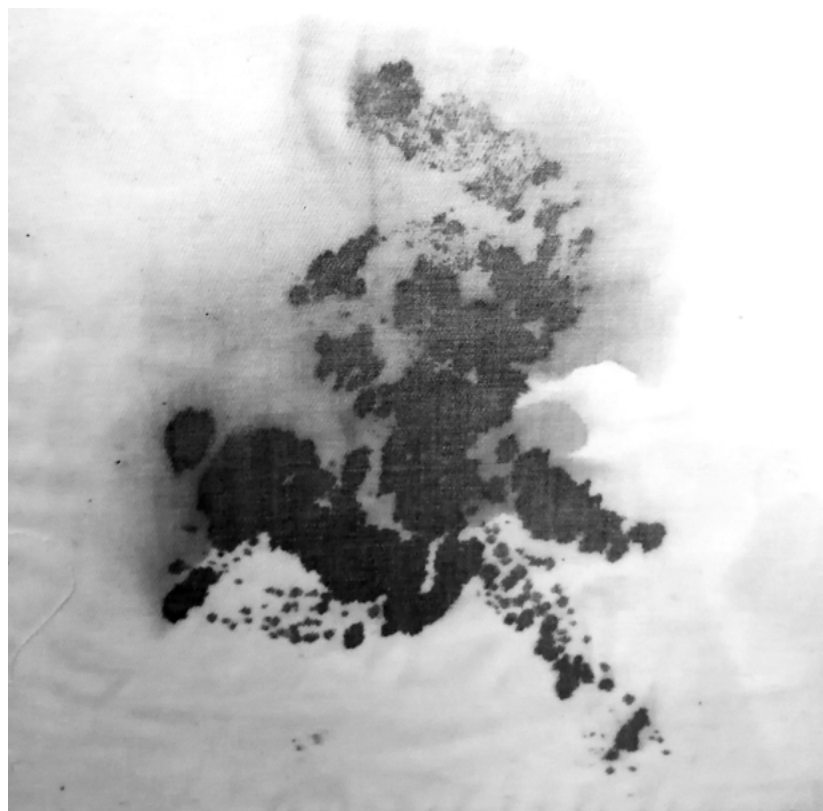
applied to knowledge. The period of a solitary work with no impulses from outside was a gradual tranquilizer. Here, however, I was escaping, because I no longer felt hunger, it was too much. In the world of abstract explanations and mock fights you had to mature enough to accept the truth, as much as to reject it. Like Oyama<sup>89</sup> who practised alone in the mountains, like Gonnosuke Musō<sup>90</sup> who after looking to Musashi Miyamoto disappeared into the mountains for 40 days before he created the jo (staff) as a weapon. In each culture, isolation and time for yourself was a part of legends, beliefs, and truly important stories. Somewhere deep inside of us resides the same thing. The need for seclusion in the wilderness and time to sort things out. It doesn't matter if it's a Japanese imitating an old samurai. It could be you – searching for strength like Simeon Stylites<sup>91</sup>, like Jesus in the desert.

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89 Masutatsu Oyama (1923–1994) – the creator of kyokushin karate.

90 Gonnosuke Musō (XVI/XVII century) – the creator of jōjutsu Shintō-musō-ryu school.

91 Simeon Stylites (390–459) – a monk and an ascetic, a Russian Orthodox and Catholic saint who spent 40 years on a pole a few meters long, sitting on a platform which was around 4 square meters.



# Drinking

“Is that vodka?” Margarita asked weakly. The cat jumped up in his seat with indignation. “I beg pardon, my queen,” he rasped, “Would I ever allow myself to offer vodka to a lady? This is pure alcohol!”

M. Bulgakov<sup>92</sup>, *The Master and Margarita*

I grew up, as many of us, with the stench of digested vodka. There was nothing special in this, because vodka was then a part of our life. In fact, it was much better than anywhere else – the real darkness took place outside our home.

For my entire childhood there was no alcohol. None of us tried it, as the problem lived under the skin, under the surface of the earth. Every day it pulsated with small and big dramas. Like in other houses, Mother Vodka was at the table, not ashamed of her slaves – for us she was a secret and an invisible enemy. This was a different world. There weren’t hundreds of various cocktails; no one considered beer to be alcohol. There was no whisky, rum, or eggnog. This was a world of vodka, moonshine, hooch, pretty much muddy rotgut from a den. There were no alcoholics, only drunks.

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92 M. Bulgakov, *The Master and Margarita*. Translation at <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/618903-is-that-vodka-margarita-asked-weakly-the-cat-jumped-up>

Being a drunk was a state of mind, social status, and a definition of a person. The final mark and a way of awaiting death. A living death. Being a drunk was the end of any kind of transformation. It mutated like some kind of animal – from a child into the cocoon of a teenager, and then from this emerged something final. Who knows what? A teacher, a priest, a police officer, a communist party member, a head of PGR or a lady from the butcher's. Some of them mutated once again and their final form crept out: a drunk. In those times in my area, everyone had a TV at home – more or less in colour – a dog on a chain, and a drunk in a family. If it wasn't a father or a mother, it was definitely one of their siblings. We had those in every house on our street. Opposite us lived Mrs. Packo with her son. I cannot remember his name, but he was one of them. He trudged around wearing a grey pinstriped suit and a T-shirt. She, with a small scarf tied on her head like every woman back then, ran a drinking den located in a half of a house in the suburbs, built in the times of Hitler. Sometimes when our group played on the street, our ball would land there by accident, and we took turns sneaking in to get it. In her house Mrs. Packo kept bags full of wheat and corn, some knick-knacks; in drawers she stored piles of old watches, rings, and other wonders that were brought by her slaves. They appeared every evening. Like zombies. Sometimes to buy, sometimes to beg, sometimes with hostility and drunken weeping. I saw it all from my window. Her son was the first one to drink himself to death.

She had an exceptionally vicious cockerel we were all terrified of. One day the little bugger jumped on her back and pecked at her so severely that the wound got infected and she died.

For me, alcohol was the blood of the devil and a sign of illness. I knew very clearly that if I tried it, I would stain myself and betray something fundamental. Now I know that I felt special because of this, and I wanted to hide myself from it more than to show power. After all, I saw victims of this disease each day.

I never tried any alcohol until I went to university. I think I was 24 years old, and it didn't taste nice to me at all. I tried it because I could no longer remember why I didn't drink. Maybe my wounds had healed, maybe I somehow matured to it. Perhaps it was too late for it – or, perhaps, it was never in fact a forbidden fruit – more like something which we blamed for the hell of our childhood?

Polish Aikido was different back then. Many kids trained, and the instructors were twenty-something-year-olds. The atmosphere was a hybrid of a Catholic youth group, Boy Scouts, and a sport club. There were no cigarettes, no alcohol. There was authority and a feeling of responsibility for the youth. Perhaps that is why I hid in this world. Alcohol was domesticated by teachers from the West: with wine, the culture of drinking, special glasses. Drinking for the taste, not to get drunk. Alcohol also appeared among the grown-up students during summer camps. Drinking is a part of Japanese culture, like any other. Many Japanese, due to a botchy gene, get drunk quickly and cheaply. Additionally, in the world of a constant pressure at work and a hysterical fear of losing face, they have to have some kind of a safety vent. Perhaps this is why some of them work like ants for 20 hours, then drink like pigs for the few remaining ones.

Time spent with alcohol is time of forgotten honesty, which you leave behind in a pub, in stains of vomit. I have never seen Chiba Sensei really drunk. Alcohol was part of our relationship; however, even here everything was a minefield full of rules and traps. In a relationship with a student, alcohol offered additional tools for pulling out secrets and highlighting weaknesses. He never stopped being our teacher. He was who he was – at all times. Now I can see how important that was. Most of the long-term uchideshi would never let their defences down in his company. We drank beer because it tasted great after the training. As long as he was in the room, no one was crazy or went overboard with drinking. Apparently, it used to be different. The senior students told us stories that you had to run away from the dojo before midnight, because if you were still there when the clock struck twelve, a bottle of whiskey appeared on the table, and until there was not a single drop left, there were no excuses.

During my days I only saw Chiba drinking something stronger than beer a handful of times. In those cases, usually one of the older students would offer to give him a lift home. Alcohol in the States penetrated the culture in a different sense. You drink everywhere, and most people drive after a few beers or even a larger amount. It is the result of the lack of random controls on the streets. The democracy has got into people's heads, and as long as you drive straight, and you don't shoot passers-by, no one has a right to stop you. There is no practise of organising preventive raids like in Eastern Europe. Perhaps this is why the uchideshi or the seniors offered him help with transport – it was the right thing to do. Sensei would normally accept these offers. I asked him

only once – it was late, and I was the highest rank and I had built up precedence in the room. He stood up from the table with a difficulty, so I approached him, hesitantly.

“Sensei, can I give you a lift?”

As it turned out, he was not that tired, nor drunk. He suddenly jumped at me with a yoko-geri side kick, at the height of my ribs. I had never trusted him once in my life – I always approached him as if he were a ticking bomb – so I managed to dodge the attack and his foot missed me. If I hadn’t been alert enough, I’d have been kicked and probably would have ended up on the table amongst the bottles and the leftovers. I wonder if this is what he wanted.

‘Good reflex’, he nodded, a bit disappointed, ‘But never ask me that again.’

There was only one time I got really drunk and went for training the next day. We drank at the summer school in San Francisco. We were in student halls of the state university. All the floors were occupied by our group. Me and another uchideshi lived with Chiba Sensei on the top floor – the 12th floor, I think. Like the highest level from Bruce Lee’s last movie. You had to beat everyone up on your way to reach us.

In the middle of the week, I was called by a teacher from Manhattan, whom we had gotten completely plastered in a most shameful and unchivalrous way the year before. His revenge was brutal, and I only remember unchronological snippets of it. The blanks I filled out with the assistance of my camera, which was, as it turned out, used by most people that evening.



And this is how, at midnight, the police barged in, quite ridiculously enforcing their newfangled opinion that they take the ban on consuming alcohol in student halls utterly seriously. Like Rejtan,<sup>93</sup> inebriated, I fell into their arms, asking to have a photo taken with the American police. They didn't agree to handcuff me for this picture, although I really wanted it. Because what person with my PESEL number<sup>94</sup> wouldn't like to have a picture where they are handcuffed by police in San Francisco? Holy fuck, it's like in a movie. The photo shoot went on and on. The police left, and it was only in the morning when I realised that pictures come out much better when you turn your camera on.

In the morning I went for training. I survived the first Iaido class with difficulty. I was an uchideshi and there were 200 people in the room. Regardless of who was teaching, I was always called as an uke. I remember that, with a sharp sword under my belt and a wooden one in my hands, I was trying to repeat a form without puking on the older man before me in front of the crowd. I managed, but the following class was classical aikido with the twisting of little paws and the merry jumping of somersaults. I sat close to the doors and far away from the centre of the action. After a warmup, the teacher called someone up. A guy attacked and she, with skittish excitement, turned around and batted him a meter and a half into the air. He flew nicely, but then banged to the floor, breaking his fall heavily. The vibrations ran through the entire room and I could feel the floor around me pulsat-

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93 Tadeusz Rejtan (1742–1780) – A Polish politician who on one occasion, to prevent the passage of the partition of the country, bared his chest and lay down in the doorway to prevent anyone from leaving the chamber.

94 PESEL number – The Polish national identification number.

ing subtly and not at all pleasantly. After the next breakfall, I ran straight into the exotic bushes and palms trees outside.

Why am I writing all this? That was the only time in my 30 years of practise when I really got drunk and went to training – and I lost.

Alcohol is a part of training in martial arts. Everybody drinks. Drink and practice. Regardless of how much you drink, you have to go to class. Alcohol is a part of this legend, and it is difficult to judge that. Alcohol is an escape from the stress, and a disease that people go through, as if in the story of their life they had to drink a proper amount of this crap. Most teachers stop at some point, as if they had enough. Of course, there are also many alcoholics who crash because somewhere along the way they are hunted down by the monster of addiction. I saw some teachers who, as soon as they left the mat, were given their flip-flop sandals and a beer by their assistant.

It seems that the stories of moderation are also intended for those who need to try to live without it beforehand. Because no one will achieve anything if they do everything in moderation. We are there to relish in the training. 'Moderation! Moderation! And he died,' as alcoholics used to say. Alcohol is a part of most of the cultures which Chiba Sensei encountered. I can't remember any Muslims, apart from one teacher from France. I also never saw him putting pressure on non-drinkers; although there were scarcely any, they were always respected.

Many years have passed, and thousands have come and gone through my own dojo. Among them were policemen, spies, ex-convicts, soldiers, and security guards. They created the

strength of this place – along with themselves they brought life and validated what I was saying and teaching. The dojo which I create is to be a stronghold and a safe space for everybody. It is a delicate structure; a teacher needs to cherry-pick his friends and know who he will allow to be close. Know who to allow to influence the dynamic of the group. So far, everything works. So far, everything grows.

## Policemen and Thieves

“My God, send me a dark night so I can go rustling,  
So I can steal two white horses . . .

Jerzy Ficowski,<sup>95</sup> *“Song of a Gypsy Horse Thief”*

He was one of those sly tourists who come for seminars to have their card stamped with a famous name. They have their picture taken with a teacher and then for few years they brag about it to everyone around. We paid for every moment with Chiba with blood, sweat, and tears. They came in like tourists to the zoo in which we sat in cages. This one, in addition, signed up for a private chat. The rule was simple: in the afternoons, those who wanted or had to talk with Chiba Sensei put their name on a list. Most often he came to every

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<sup>95</sup> Jerzy Ficowski, *Cyganie w Polsce* (author’s translation), Warszawa: Interpress 1989, pp. 93.



country only once a year and many wanted to talk to him in peace, to give an account; a few were called into the office to explain themselves. Chiba Sensei approved the list and then we took care of those meetings. There could be no delays, we had to plan everything with perfect timing, bring something to drink, sometimes to translate. In this way we found out many irrelevant personal stories – yet, even more often, we simply listened to reams of political sludge.

I have to admit that listening to those conversations taught me a lot about being a teacher. The questions and the reasons for meeting showed us what those people really wanted from their teacher. Serious people, who had never seen Chiba in person, asked him about private stuff or personal decisions. I was shocked by how much they needed not who he was, but what he came up with. Sometimes he played this game and for a well-rounded question he gave well-rounded, politically correct answers. Sometimes, he wasn't in the mood for that and he snapped at the person. He was only human; he was most likely flattered by this image but was often annoyed with the labels.

That day, a tourist-friend from outside of our school squeezed into the conversation, and between many silly questions he asked an interesting one.

“I teach in a centre where I have a group of young criminals. They are keen, but I have my doubts, perhaps they will use the training for the wrong purpose?”

“Do not judge people. Those criminals are, most of the time, more serious students than ‘normal’ ones. Even if they use violence on daily basis, it becomes something natural for

them. They practise harder because this is what they expect from the training. If they have ever risked their well-being or their life, it is easier to explain weapons training to them. The dojo is a place of refuge. A place where a criminal and a policeman meet and train together.”

I do not know if he understood it. It was like when Chiba Sensei told us that honest training and awareness are more important than religion. People who lived on the edge of the law attracted and fascinated him. I think that the image of himself and the dojo that he was trying to create was validated by those kinds of people.

Thus, instead of a group of IT specialists and over-intellectualised yuppies with transparent hands, who look simply ludicrous whilst talking about a sword cut, he had a cultural mixture. Mexicans, Marines, Navy Seals. The morning training was led by an instructor of hand-to-hand combat from the FBI.

It was 2003 when I got there. A few months earlier the Mexican police had begun to crack open the horrid drug cartel of Ramon Felix<sup>96</sup> in Tijuana, where one of Chiba Sensei's students had established a dojo.

El Chapo<sup>97</sup> was just becoming a king, and everyone was talking about Los Zetas.<sup>98</sup> All of this took place a few miles away from San Diego Aikikai. In the first decade of the century, in the Mexican cities of Baja California, there was blood on

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96 Ramon Arellano Felix (1964–2002) – the leader of the Tijuana drug cartel.

97 Joaquín Archivaldo Guzman Loera, El Chapo (born 1954 or 1957) – the most powerful Mexican drug lord.)

98 Los Zetas – a Mexican criminal group. Ex-commandoes, hired by the cartel, took the control of it over and began to act independently.

the streets every day. I remember my first trip to Tijuana for a weekend. You had to ask Sensei for permission, and his first reaction was a refusal.

‘They will arrest you, and it’ll be a circus again’, he growled. However, he thought about it, and finally he agreed. He pointed at me and said to M: ‘Watch him at all times and don’t get arrested. I won’t bail you out.’

Some time before, a group of kenshusei had gone to a bar in Tijuana on a Saturday night. A fight broke out, and tough guys from the dojo faced off with a few of the local thugs. The whole thing was obviously a set-up, and the police were waiting for the dumb gringos outside. One of them managed to escape, and in the right moment bribed el comandante. This is how our boys managed to dodge a classic “prosecutor” trick.

A drunk fool was locked up under any kind of petty excuse and informed that the prosecutor would look into his case on Monday morning. For a terrified whitey, this meant 48 hours in a Mexican prison, and in his head that would at least end up in him being raped. Because that kind of thing had already happened in the dojo, it seemed that Sensei was scared that the dumb Pole would get into similar trouble.

The dojo in Tijuana was located on one of the main streets. We went there many times. Aikido wasn’t that popular there; the group was small, and people were nice. I remember seeing a hole from a bullet in a window. During our trips, they always sat me on the back seat and put a hat on my head. I would never drive, because apparently I would be stopped immediately by the police, who would be extorting money. At that time, there was fighting going on between the mil-

itary and cartels, and the highway south of Tijuana through Rosarito and all the way to Todos Santos was still checked by armed soldiers. They jabbed spikes into the bags being transported on the trucks going north to San Diego. Apart from drugs, their main business was human trafficking. While I was working in construction in Chicago, I met many Polish people who had crossed the Mexican border with “coyotes.”<sup>99</sup> In 2003 the price was 2,000 dollars. Chicago is a fascination, a Polish jungle, where nothing works legally. An American land of democracy and liberty turns out to be very tolerant of those who pay taxes. As long as you pay, no one checks your work permit. I met people who had companies with 15 trucks, employing plenty of people. They had incomes, accounts, and credit cards, but they had been living in the States illegally for 10 years. They did not fly by plane or take a bus because that was where passport control could take place. If someone was found out this way, they would be kicked out of the country instantly, and there was nothing left for them to do but to come back, again illegally.

For the brave ones, Mexico was quite cheap. There are no visas, so it is easy to get there. Contacts with Mexican smugglers came easily because the Polish worked very closely with illegal Mexicans. It is known that no one lays down plaster as well as them. In the middle of the freeway from San Diego to LA, before the passport control station, there are road signs that I haven't seen anywhere else in the world – they show a family with a child, running. This is because you can run across people who are fleeing from the control. This was the

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<sup>99</sup> Coyotes – criminal groups which specialise in smuggling people from Mexico to the USA.



reality of San Diego. A make-believe city with wealthy, flowery suburbs and houses worth a few million dollars.

For the most part, pleasant and well-put-together individuals came to the dojo. In general, Aikido doesn't attract the criminal element, because to achieve any kind of expertise you have to dig through the ritual, the difficult study of falling and impractical attacks. In terms of usefulness, for an active criminal, in the majority of the cases, it is not attractive at all. However, for Sensei this was supposed to be a place of refuge. Where a convict and a policeman could train together. A master is supposed to be something in between. A dojo is supposed to be purgatory, a place in between heaven and hell. He believed in distinct characters, simple in a beautiful way. They say that once they found a corpse lying on the doorstep of the dojo. I don't know if the poor guy was killed or if he drank himself to death, but apparently Chiba Sensei was happy.

III  
2021



# The Responsibility

“My strongest fear was that I might dishonour O-Sensei’s fame because of my lack of proper weapons skills. I did not want people to look at O-Sensei, who was then a highly regarded martial artist – one in a million, established in an indisputable position as such – and say, “He might be a great master, but look at his student. Is that all he has?”

– Chiba Sensei<sup>100</sup>

A teacher is responsible for passing on knowledge. That day the training was interesting, and we were well-rested. Strong bodies began to play with the technique – yet we apparently did not approach the class seriously enough, as we had to pay for it later. I don’t remember anymore exactly what Chiba said, but he finished with a pompous:

‘O-Sensei was the first one, then I, and now you – you are the third ones!’

My first reaction was a grin. O-Sensei was a legend, like Genghis Khan or Leonardo da Vinci. Chiba was his student, an icon, something which had scared me since my childhood. And me, I was a guy from Poland, no one special on the mat or off it. Clearly, it was a bit of social engineering used for building and integrating the group. Years later, however,

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<sup>100</sup> T.K. Chiba, *The Position of Weapons Training in Aikido: A Consideration of the Unity of Body and Sword*, 1999.

I understood that he was serious. In the world of Aikido, his approach was utterly individualistic and special. In fact, apart from those closest to him, no one understood him. The facade which could be seen by the majority during grand conferences was misconstrued as violence and aloofness. Only through close contact and heavy training could one see the integrity of his message. In the world of big names and celebrities who attract hundreds of people on the mat, our school was tiny and insignificant. 'Small is beautiful,' Sensei used to say when this topic was mentioned. Being the third ones in the line of this message seemed to us ridiculous and pretentious. Especially since most of us were not interested in that. Perhaps we were there more for him than for the Aikido itself.

O-Sensei had taught for dozens of years. People had left him, set up their own schools, and referred to his message. Decades had passed, and more and more masters and high ranks appeared. Today, 50 years after his death, fifth- and sixth-dan practitioners from various organisations number in the thousands; their rank means nothing more than a place in a specific little hierarchy. There is no room for comparison. People with high ranks have almost no chance of meeting each other, living in closed-off communities. Everybody refers to O-Sensei's ideas and uses the word "Aikido," the meaning of which has already been diluted. On the lips of thousands of people, it is received as something completely different. When Chiba Sensei told us about the responsibility for conveying the message of Aikido, we knew about the ocean of interpretations and opinions that this world was drowning in. For precisely that reason, what he said was an absurdity

for us. I needed years and many conversations with my own uchideshi to finally understand it.

I am me – I am responsible only for myself and for what I believe in. For me, Ueshiba is history. I didn't know him; he died before I was born. I don't know Japanese; I didn't get to know the culture well enough to discover the roots of the martial art that I have practised all my life. My guidepost on this road has been my contact with a teacher. This is my Aikido.

Chiba wasn't the only student of O-Sensei. Like a sponge, he was soaked with him – yet in a different way than others. He saw in him something other than his friends saw. For some, the Founder was a warm, kind, older man; for others a strong and wise master; for still others, a charismatic leader worthy of sainthood. For Chiba, O-Sensei was a man who held his demons by the throat. He was a man who Chiba let inside, a man for whom he opened Pandora's box. Before him, he confronted the nastiness that crawled out from it. Ueshiba was an inspiration, an icon, a motivation, and a constant pang of guilt. Ueshiba didn't even have to know that. This is simply how it was. Chiba knew his smell, the feel of his hands, his moods. He recognised him by the sound of his steps on the corridor. He knew his wife and children – they lived together. He was a part of his life. Palpable and honest.

For Chiba Sensei, Takeda, O-Sensei's master, was only a name and a legend – just as O-Sensei was for us; it was Chiba and his message that were the most important. He was the one we knew and were fascinated by. He taught us loyalty to the family of O-Sensei and to the Aikikai Foundation of Hombu

Dojo – like a samurai teaches children loyalty towards a clan and a crest. And, like O-Sensei's students did, each of us also saw something different in our teacher.

When Chiba died, thousands of orphans around the world displayed his portrait on their kamiza. I don't know why, but I chose a picture in which he looks angrily at me, as if he wanted to say, again: 'Baka [fool]!' Many people display photos in which he seems proud, content, smiling. We, too, took from his teachings only that which we wanted. Only what we needed him for. How much was Aikido in this teaching? I don't know. I stepped into his world – Chiba was a king there and I wanted to serve him. If he ordered me – within the framework of his understanding of Aikido – to shear sheep or to sew shoes, I would probably have done it. Because with each day I saw his experience. I saw what influence the things I was doing had on me, even if it was something completely different that did not fit in the traditional concept of the training. Now I believe that there is nothing more in it than a message that came from him – a teacher, a master, a father, a craftsman, a mentor. Even if he was hundredth in line to receive it. For me, he and the responsibility are the only things that count. I am no one special, I have no rights reserved to the word 'Aikido', or even to my teacher's teachings– there were so many of us. Our destiny is to give something that is wholly ours to people, who will understand it in their own ways. The only thing that is repeated in all of those messages, the only thing that connects them, is honesty and a human giving himself fully, trusting the other. I don't even know if what I am doing is still Aikido, or if it is a creation of different times and different cultures. I could

name dozens of people better than me. Who had greater talent. Who had more patience, practiced more intensely. Who understood him better. Aikido blossomed in them, and in his eyes you could see pride and contentment from a job well done. Today, none of them teach; many do not even train anymore – they left this chapter of their lives closed, more or less. I could name dozens of people who were not physically capable of doing it. They did not understand what he wanted from them and were on the verge of a breakdown at every training. People who he had thrown out, who then came back. Fat, weak, stiff. Many of them still teach. Why? Because the feeling of responsibility for the message has nothing to do with a talent or potential. I don't know anyone who, after years of doing nothing, was suddenly pushed by a feeling of obligation to open a dojo and start to teach. You have it or you don't.

After my return from the States, the head of the Sports Department of the University of Wrocław called me and asked to meet me. I went there not knowing what to expect. A man who I had never met before sat in his office and asked me to lead Aikido classes at the University. I looked at him, surprised.

'Why me? There are many teachers.'

'Do you know my name?' he asked.

He gave me his name, and I remembered a tall, blonde guy from 10 years ago. I remembered the name of his son, and it turned out that, in those times, that was enough. I was just starting to build my own dojo back then, and after the first training I felt as if I had touched the feet of God. The room was full of young, fit men who, out many options, had

chosen Aikido. I was ecstatic. For every 100 students who trained once a week, maybe three or four came to the dojo. For a few years I gave them an opportunity to do one extra training session for free. Over the course of 15 years, around five thousand people had passed through – and maybe two had earned a black belt.

## A Teacher's Care

“*I know, the polokoktowcy don't love us. But we shall love them until they finally love us back.*

– Nadszyszkownik Kiklujadek

**I**n the middle of my first stay in San Diego, Chiba Sensei went to France for a spring school in the mountains of Alsace. I was living in the dojo, and it was there that we were informed that he had had a stroke. I didn't feel abandoned – perhaps more glad about the sudden calm in the dojo. Without him, there was none of the nervous, pervasive feeling of a possible cataclysm. I lived in the belief that this man was immortal, and I couldn't imagine how a stroke could kill him. Everything returned to normal quite quickly, however, and until the end of my stay he continued yelling





at us while we tried to survive. Two years later, I travelled from Poland to San Diego. I remember when Chiba called me to his office on the first day, and said:

‘When you were here last time, I had a stroke in the middle of your stay, and it took me a long time to get back to normal. I did not care for you enough. Now this will change.’

It did change. It was then that I came up with a certain life motto that I still use to this day: the only thing worse than the lack of the teacher’s attention is the teacher’s attention. You have to understand – I hadn’t suffered from lack of attention. Sensei probably felt ashamed of his sickness and weakness, guilty for neglecting a man who had come there from other side of the world. From where I stood, though, I already had more attention than I could bear.

Those two months were much more intense than the previous six had been. I especially remember iaido. One training was led by the assistant teachers, advanced students. For a few weeks, Sensei stayed during these classes and sat in seiza on the wooden floor behind me. Wrong! – he shouted all the time. That was a true nightmare: he didn’t correct me, he only shouted that it was wrong. The teachers were frightened by his presence and no one had enough courage to correct me, so I struggled by myself. One of those days, I just tried to draw my sword from its scabbard while sitting in the seiza position. For over 20 minutes I attempted to execute the movement on the leader’s command, but even before I had moved, Chiba shouted his ‘Wrong!’

I can also recall one quite silly story from that time, about a French woman. She was my colleague – back then she was

a 58-year-old lady who was only visiting for a few weeks. She wasn't living in the dojo, but at somebody's house. It was a period when Sensei was paying particular attention to me, so I tried hard to do my best and I was under a lot of stress. Sensei told me that since I knew her, I was responsible for her. What that in fact meant was that it wouldn't be proper to beat up an older lady for her own mistakes – but I could be a human punching bag. She tried really hard, and I never had any problems, apart from one day. All of us were very impressed that she survived the training. On that day, the iaido class was about to start, and I came on the mat and saw her sitting on the side, wearing her street clothes.

‘What are you doing here?’

‘I'm done for today. I will just sit here and watch iaido.’

I yelled at her and told her to run to the changing room and get dressed. I had 10 minutes to save my ass. She tried to say something more, but I did not listen, I only growled. She got changed and trained until the end, and after the class she rushed home. We sat that evening with Sensei at the dinner and someone started to compliment her.

‘Yes, that woman has character’, Chiba Sensei conceded, growing animated. ‘I told her to give up iaido and even so, she still trained. A strong woman.’

It took me a few years to gin up the courage to tell her about it.

A teacher's attention is a fascinating phenomenon. It is like a poison which you cannot overdose on. My dojo is full of transparent people. Those who are moving in the corner of my eye. Kind, well-behaved, who do everything properly and

on time. However, all of them are in the dojo once or twice a week. Apart from some basic information I do not know anything about them. Sometimes 10 years pass I don't even know where they live, what they do exactly, what the names of their children are. Many times, I made the same mistake – I thought that they wanted and needed the same thing as I do. An intense relationship with the teacher. More and more. This almost always ended up the same. When the light shone on them, when I focused on what they were doing and started to be interested in their life – they began to recoil as if they were tortured. And then they ran away. Most of the time it was just for a while, until the situation died down and I focused on a relationship with someone else; then they came back. But many have never returned. Apparently, everyone needs a different dose of courage.

Therefore, this whole theory about a tight relationship between a student and a teacher being a condition for making progress is also nonsense. The transparent ones could also be good. They didn't need attention – they even avoided it. On the opposite end of the spectrum were those who obsessively needed this attention. I call them 'vampires', but they have many names. They are visible, always at the centre of attention. They begin every sentence with 'I' or 'me'. They define the world as something that is happening around them – the rest of us are just extras in this play. I have met many people like this; the relationship with them is very difficult, and, sooner or later, ends in conflict. Addicted to the attention, they train more and better than others, because on many levels they need validation, the constant impulse coming from feedback.

For me, the dojo is home. I bring my whole life there and I am very immensely disappointed in the lack of engagement of most of the students. For them, it is just a place of relaxation twice a week; for me, it is everything I have. Then those Others appear; after some time, the dojo for them becomes even more important than it is for me, and I am the one who gets lost. Those people feed on the relationships inside of the dojo. They play up the conflicts, and often they are the ones to provoke them. A quiet place of refuge, suddenly, for me becomes a pack of wolves, a bush fire which I do the best I can to put out. I go from being, for the vampires, an impartial god to being just a person, one of them. This begins, typically, with criticism of the teacher, talking behind one's back. The small microcosms of the dojo in which they have been hiding become too tight for them. Mostly, I am the one that pinches them, and there is always a conflict. They domesticate that place, appropriating it by achieving higher and higher ranks, by coming more and more into the centre of attention.

The problem is, though, that the main character, the protagonist, in the dojo is me, and the dojo is always a monument of my madness and my mythomania. This living place creates a structure around one person. And, although I attract people similar to me, with time it is my position which troubles them, and a conflict happens. It sounds terrible, but it is as natural and primal as it can be. At the beginning a son who is growing up in a house is fascinated by his father and wants to be like him; as the time passes, he becomes increasingly independent and starts to live his own life. He begins to make the house his own, not on the level of childish fantasies and

inclinations, but through the world of the father. The do's and don'ts begin to bother him, and above all, the illusion of his father's omnipotence disappears. More and more clearly, he sees the imperfections of his father, and his envy towards the power and position keeps growing. This performance is repeated every day – in a large dojo, there is always someone acting out this play. A vampire is easily recognisable and can be removed at the beginning. For the few first years, however, he is incredibly valuable for the dojo. He brings life, awakens engagement in others as well; and although the poor little creature is doomed for an Aikido death, in the meantime he can be quite useful.

I am still living under an illusion that they can be led in some other way. That they will not burn up like a moth flying into a flame. It seems to me that I was also like that, but somehow I found a constructive place for myself in this world. I am getting old, and the repetitiveness of these processes becomes increasingly tiring. The only things that change are the names and the faces. The tastes and the proportions of human features are roughly the same. For now, old age plays to my advantage. There is a bigger age gap between me and my students. Most times I remind them more of their parents – that means that, as a teacher, I do not have to take part in the primitive fight for domination among the people of my age. Now I come into this relationship as a substitute for a parent. Mostly, at the beginning, I am a 'cooler' substitute, but after a time I inevitably reach the phase of generational conflict. At some point, I will enter the position of a granddad. I don't yet know what that will mean, but I am moving from being a living peer to becoming a symbol,

more and more – something that they imagine as a teacher but doesn't in fact exist.

## You Are No One Special

“*And no one pours new wine into old wineskins. Otherwise, the wine will burst the skins, and both the wine and the wineskins will be ruined. No, they pour new wine into new wineskins.*

– The book of Mark, 2:21–22

F. was a tall man, broad-shouldered. He seemed thin, but years of training had given his body the litheness of a cat and shaped his body with muscles. When I met him, he was around 40 years old. For me he seemed like a man from ‘the other side’. Someone who had completed a journey that I was halfway through as a personal student. He had two adopted children, and he had broken out from his house across the country for a week to once again breathe in the air of being an uchideshi. He didn't want to sleep in our room; every night he took his sleeping bag to the kamiza and slept on the mat, inhaling his youth. For me, he was one of those people who featured in the stories we told every evening. He gave the impression of being a warm and kind person. I knew, however, that only someone really crazy could live in a dojo for seven years. We spent a few nights, just the two of us, drinking everything that there was to drink in the dojo.

Chiba Sensei had many guests, and alcohol seemed to be the safest gift. Every few months Sensei ordered us to take all these bottles to the uchideshi room. Most of the time there were local, expensive, and sophisticated beverages. For us, people who just wanted to have a beer after a training, it was torture. We had neither the time nor the stamina to sip on a Chilean pisco or foreign grappas. During those few nights, we downed everything that was there. Hugo joined us, as he finally found two people that he liked – something that was extremely unusual. F. and Hugo told many stories, but there was one that stuck with me so deeply that I'm still trying to figure out its meaning. It is the story of how F. finally stopped being an uchideshi.

He had lived in the dojo for seven years. I can't remember if he was staying there for the whole time; probably some of the time he spent living outside of it – however, as an uchideshi or kenshusei you are still a slave, voluntarily. You become a part of the dojo, like a teacher or like the kami-za. For the beginners and the advanced students, you are a constant element. You create part of the atmosphere of the place. You know everything about everyone and everything. F. loved the training and this place. Despite the pressure and the physical exhaustion, it was his world, and he didn't have a feeling that he was wasting his time there. He was happy because he was doing what he loved. He was in the here and now, like being in love – taking pleasure from every day. Despite his injuries, sometimes despite poverty, fatigue, and stress – he did not calculate, did not meddle, did not think about the future.



Sensei had an inner radar, and he could smell the people who wanted to manipulate him somehow or use him for their own business. Those ones he kept at a distance. With people who were basing their relationships on honesty he would build, after some time, a strong and personal bond. It did not necessarily mean that there were only positive emotions. It was more of a father-like attachment based on care and responsibility. However, in the world of martial arts, that involves plenty of physical and emotional pressure, constant torment. For this week in the dojo, I saw their special relationship, and the warm, paternal care Chiba Sensei felt for his former student, his life, his family, his choices. I felt this warmth, which he would probably deny, and I felt jealous. I don't even remember if it was seven years – it might have been longer or shorter. He came to the dojo as a teenager and he matured on the mat. Sensei became his father; the mat became his home. F. had never considered abandoning this life. But even though it took years, as it does for everyone, the time also came for him. The sponge soaked up so much that it couldn't take even a single drop more. He woke up and for the first time for seven years he thought: I've had enough, maybe it's time to change something. A few days later, after class, Chiba Sensei called him into his office. F. sat down and Sensei said:

'I was observing you for the last few days and I see something serious has happened. I think that your time has passed. In one month, you must move out from the dojo. You cannot mix the old wine with the new one.'

That night we sat in a dark room, sipping on some fragrant elixir, and we wondered how he had taken that. The technique is always a manifestation of a personality and a mood. A good teacher, through an ikkyo, can see what is happening in a person's head. This cannot be hidden if you know how to look. An absent-mindedness, aggression, focus, lack of focus – it is always a manifestation of what we bring with us onto the mat. Sensei smelled it. He gave F. a month to sort out his business and ordered him to lead his last class. It was a special session – everyone came. A farewell training for such an important person – someone who was almost as important as Sensei; someone who they couldn't imagine this place without.

Sensei observed the class, sitting in front of the kamiza. Everyone was ecstatic. After seven years of toil, F. was truly brilliant. Brilliant in receiving the techniques and taking falls, brilliant in weapons, brilliant in Aikido. He had to be brilliant, because he had survived. At the end of the class, everyone was lined up, waiting for the official part. There were bows and a speech. I can only imagine what was said. Probably he was thankful, he tried to make jokes, probably he tried to be serious – but most likely he teared up. Those to whom he was speaking probably were also crying. This is when Sensei got up. The atmosphere was elevated and everyone was moved.

'Good class', he said, looking at F. 'But remember, you are no one special!'

And he walked away. He left them all behind. I don't know what the poor uchideshi expected or what the people expected. This man, ten years later, still tears up when he tells this story.



Twelve years have passed. I have a dojo in which around 200 people practise. Most of my older group are people over thirty or forty, almost everyone has black belts. During the last few years, I had five conversations in which I have said: 'You have to leave, because you cannot mix old wine with new'. Not one of them understood it. I also needed ten years, and most of all I needed to lead my own dojo and to observe a group from the outside, to understand this. Studying is a particular process with repetitive stages. At the beginning, people are lost and trustful. They repeat the forms and learn their physical shells, copying the elders and the teacher. Then they find themselves in it and begin to feel more confident. Strength, speed, and certainty appear in the movements. That is a period of euphoria, naïveté, and immense activity. Those people often commit to the training more than to anything else in their lives. They save up only for schools and seminars. They get addicted to the trips, the atmosphere, and the simple world of the dojo. Here, everything is clear and precise. From social roles to the simple responsibility for your own physical movement and progress. But after some time, life catches up with everyone, with bills, children, a complaining wife. Girls want to have a husband and kids; guys have had enough of injuries, constant exhaustion, they finally want to buy a new car instead of their old heap. Time, and money, is needed somewhere else.

You need to reevaluate everything. This is a difficult point at which many resign because they don't see a place for themselves. The technique and the strength remain. So does their place in the inner hierarchy of the dojo. However, bitterness and lack of motivation appear. At the same time, a

new generation is emerging which is just entering the period of enthusiasm and abandon. It is incredible how much the cynicism of the seniors can destroy the youngsters. A drop of bitterness spoils a barrel of honey. I have experienced it so often, every time saying to myself: 'Now I understand why he did this!' Why he did it in that way, in the presence of all those people, after all those years. Why did he say: 'You are no one special'?

I want to believe that he did it only for F.'s own good, because such a solution destroys the ego. After some years, a person still remembers those words, and something orders him to reflect on it. Because it is true. None of us is special – there were hundreds of people like him, and there will be thousands more. We are special for ourselves because we live with ourselves and we develop. The teacher is responsible for the dojo. An ever-changing river of human's fates: I am in it today; tomorrow there will be others who also have a right to their mistakes and naïve dreams. The dojo is like a forest in which, at times, trees that are tall and strong are growing. However, as years pass, their branches cast shadows everywhere so that nothing can grow around them. The process of creating a place for the others is a topic for a different story.

# Conflicted

“*Those who are only obedient in their will, but have a mind that is opposing, will only enter the monastery halfway.*

– Ignatius of Loyola<sup>101</sup>

Andriej was a small-time mafioso from St. Petersburg. Perhaps that sounds exciting, but I imagine him standing in some dodgy doorway, wearing shabby trainers and a dirty tracksuit, picking at sunflower seeds. In that world, nothing is entirely legal and the authorities and the mafia are intertwined so deeply that, in the end, no one is on either side. I knew Andriej from Poland; he had come to our seminars, accompanied by an older guy who was missing a few fingers on his right hand. They had a fancy SUV, and when someone asked them what they were doing in life they always said, laughing, that they were businessmen.

Andriej got to San Diego because of me. I had finished my first stay there, and I was back in Poland when he asked me for my intercession. In the letter I wrote to Chiba Sensei, I shared what I knew about him – I emphasised that he was very dedicated, but I also wrote that I didn't know him that well. Sensei said yes, Andriej got a visa, and after a few months we met in the dojo on Adams Avenue in San Diego.

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<sup>101</sup> I. Loyola, *Pisma wybrane*, Kraków; Wydawnictwo Apostolstwa Modlitwy, 1969 (author's translation).

He was already there when I arrived, living with Sergiej from Kazakhstan. The two stuck together, thick as thieves, mostly because neither of them spoke any English. A few Russian-speaking dojo members helped them to survive, organizing free English classes for them, helping them get extensions on their visas. English wasn't their strongest suit, and because I was at every class, I got pressed into being an interpreter from English to Russian. Sergiej was a descendant of Russian aristocrats who had been deported to Kazakhstan after the revolution.

For me, Aikido is part of a therapy for illnesses of the soul. Our Polish weakness, a constant fear of the authorities, a respect for strength and certainty, an anxiety for the future hidden deeply somewhere, and a feeling of being under endless threat. An emotional and personal approach to everything that I encounter in life. The Russian soul is a distillation of that. If we are *caffe latte*, they are a *double espresso*. In their case, everything is on the surface. They are honest and foolish at the same time – foolish in the warmest and most disarming way. It is a bit as if they are governed by emotions which we struggle with in our own life. This childish *naïveté* and honesty, openness, singing and hospitability, all of their inner child, conceals a barbarian. A harmony exists – but in the times when it unravels, you can feel Katyn<sup>102</sup> and gulags in the air. The bigger the *naïveté*, the bigger the monster buried inside. A dragon can be awakened – sometimes by vodka, sometimes by fear. I became friends with them quite quickly, although it wasn't easy for me. Both of them created

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102 Katyn – This is a reference to the massacre of 22,000 Polish military officers and intelligence agents by the Russian NKVD, which took place 1940. The mass graves were first discovered in the Katyn Forest.

a shelter out of their Slavdom and I, knowing the ropes in San Diego, didn't have to hide away anymore. For the rest of the time, I was on the side of the executioner, and like a Volksdeutscher<sup>103</sup> I yelled at them in Russian, translating Chiba's insults. They understood that we liked each other, but for me that was very difficult. They constantly reminded me of who I was and what I was running away from.

Andrijej wasn't doing so great. At first, I didn't know what was happening, because the guy was young and physically skilled. There was a strength in him, but at the same time, something basic inside of him was broken. Aikido with Chiba Sensei is not a game of words. It happens on the level of emotional connection. You do not have to understand the words or speak to him. You don't have to understand English to be here and now. You have to be present. And Andrijej was severed from the electricity. He was not there. Sensei could sense his potential and did what he could. That meant that he hit and screamed – then he only screamed. The hitting made sense only if it did the work of awakening, and Andrijej quickly took on the role of a beaten dog. Sensei immediately stopped pushing him when he noticed that this tool stopped working.

I remembered a different Andrijej from Poland – smiling and focused on the training. It turned out that his problem was a young, beautiful wife whom he had left at home. Perhaps he had a fire inside of him and a passion for Aikido, but his

103 *Volksdeutscher* – A person whose language and culture are German, but who is not a citizen of Germany. In the Second World War, the Nazi regime compelled Polish people of German origin to register as Volksdeutsche and gave them certain privileges. Some committed atrocities on behalf of the Nazis, and today being called a "Volksdeutsche" is an insult in Poland, like calling someone a traitor.



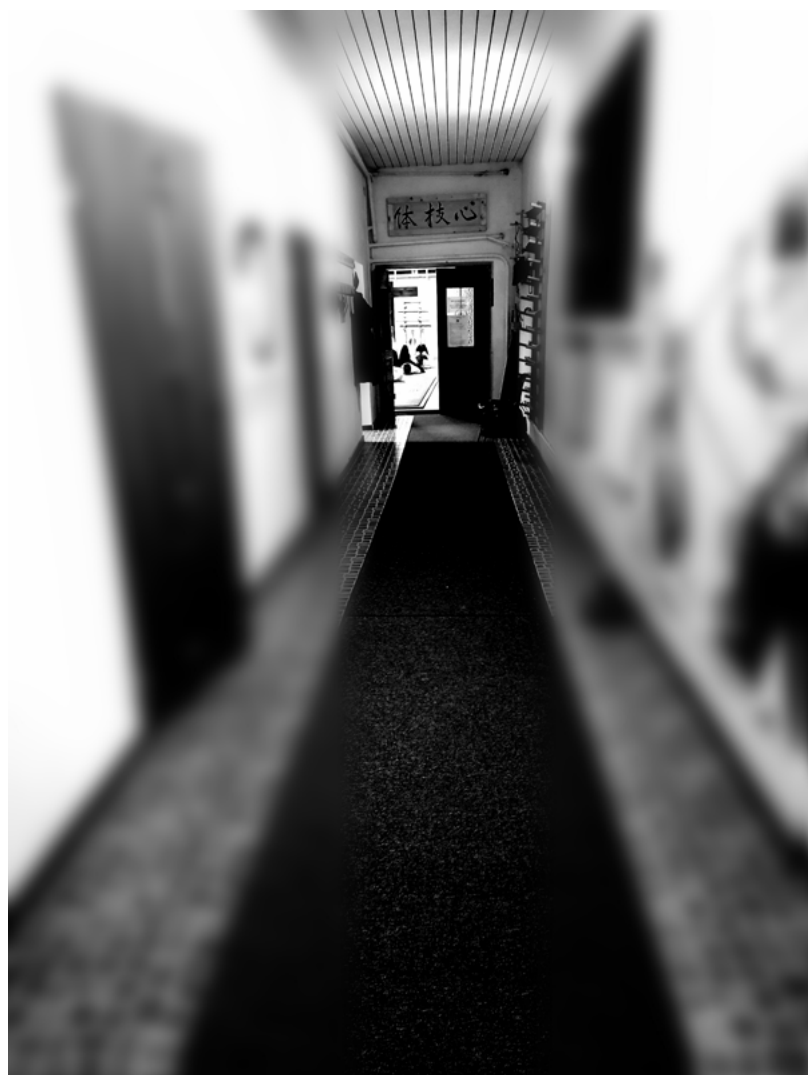
heart stayed with this woman. He called her every day and then he cried. She pressured him to dump this nonsense and go to work or become a businessman like any other Russian guy – to bring her from the muddy outskirts of St. Petersburg to sunny California. One day during dinner, Andrijej disappeared. We looked for him, and finally found him curled up on a sofa in the dark dojo. Sergiej came to him and asked, ‘Are your parents okay?’

‘Parents, whatever. It’s the wife’, I corrected him.

‘To hell with her . . . wife . . . ’ growled the Russian monster in Sergiej. ‘You can change your wife, but not your parents or kids.’

I stayed there for a long time, in the dark dojo, thinking about the simplicity and the strength that these men held inside. I was searching for that in myself; sometimes I can even see it. It is somewhere, suppressed and snarling – but even now, after 30 years of training, I cannot say if it is a wolf or a Labrador. For these men, Chiba Sensei was like Putin or Genghis Khan. He was a manifestation of inaccessible power and authority. Once, during a summer school in England, a group of Kazakhs made an embroidered portrait of Chiba Sensei as a gift for him. Some kind of a deep, Byzantine need to describe God and an acceptance of his omnipotence was, and still is, present inside of them.

Andreij’s situation got worse and worse. A heart in Russia, a beaten-up ass in the States. The woman did a much better job than Sensei. I had a fleeting idea that two of them would hit it off and poor Andreij would be destroyed, or would rise from his knees as a monster. There is a frightening power in



simplicity because it is certain. Uncombed, with thousands of shitty little threads of evasion and shame. Sensei, thanks to his Mongolian roots, could feel this power inside of them. He knew that from the dust, dirt, and ashes of the desert rise mighty flocks of warriors – like Nestor Makhno from the Ukrainian steppes.<sup>104</sup> We who have lived for centuries at the foot of this volcano are aware of it, and we are still waiting for the new eruptions.

Andriej was broken, and he wasn't working. Torn between two worlds, he was not present in either of them. We had dozens of conversations, but there was no solution. He could not stay here because he had never arrived. After six months or so he found some contacts, most probably in the local 'brigades', and with Chiba Sensei's approval, he dove into California. I never met him again. I had seen this type of thing a few times before. To a greater or lesser degree – the lack of a full presence destroyed the whole process. Sometimes people do it on purpose as a kind of a defence mechanism.

There was this one talented guy in the dojo. An observant Jew, living in a local neighbourhood. At first glance he did not look like someone who trains. Neither his clothes nor his behaviour resembled anything even close to our bearded stereotypes. On Fridays he went back to his house on his bike, and he did not eat pork. In the dojo we ate mostly rice and fish, so we did not even notice that. He did not live in the dojo, but when I came there he was almost an uchideshi – he trained every day and he helped out in the dojo. He folded Sensei's hakama and he cleaned his office. He was often used

<sup>104</sup> Nestor Makhno (1888–1934) was a Ukrainian anarchist, the leader of the Revolutionary Insurrectionary Army of Ukraine ('Makhno movement').

as an uke, and he truly had his share of suffering. At the same time, he lived close to his religious community. Sensei, as was his habit when he felt someone's commitment, wanted to see how far he could push the boundaries.

At some point this young guy stopped bowing to the kamiza. In a traditional dojo, classes start and end with a ceremony. We bow to the kamiza, where usually a calligraphy of the kanji for 'Aikido' and a portrait of the founder of the art, Ueshiba, are displayed. In some circles of Judeo-Christianity, this generates an understandable problem. A bow from the kneeling position that is commonplace in Japanese culture is mistaken for a sign of worship. This provokes many misunderstandings. 'Awareness is more important than religion' – that was a phrase Sensei repeated endlessly, most often without being understood by those listening. Finally, Chiba Sensei used his contacts and invited a local rabbi to the dojo. They sat in seiza in front of the kamiza, Chiba Sensei on a zafu, squinting his eyes. The rabbi, in a low voice, muttered blessings in Hebrew, punctuated every now and again with a deep 'Amen'. The Pole inside of me trembled and pulsated. At that point, mystical words from many cultures mixed up, queasily, within me. At the end, the rabbi nailed a mezuzah<sup>105</sup> to one of the pillars of the kamiza. During dinner, Sensei said that he also needed to invite an Imam to remove the spell of Aikido from Islam too. I don't know if that ever took place. The significant thing, in any event, is what happened after that. The young Jewish guy said that for him it didn't change anything – he still would not bow.

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105      Mezuzah – A parchment on which verses from the Torah are written, placed in a decorative case; in Jewish tradition, it is nailed to the doorposts of a house.

This is when I understood – and since then, I have met many people like that. They construct a few shelters in which they hide like a hunted animal. When the rabbi pushed, the guy escaped in Aikido; when Chiba Sensei cornered him, he covered himself up with his religion. In this way he always found a way to escape. That happens, obviously, unconsciously. However, I can imagine how uncomfortable the juncture of those two worlds was for him. Worlds he wove between, which were for each other an escape.

I found Aikido when I was a kid – for me, it was an escape from the problems in my home. The community was a substitute for family relationships and I felt good. After some time, my sister also began to practise. The worlds got mixed up and I didn't like that. Later on, Aikido became my entire life. Firstly by myself, then with my wife, we moved everything to the dojo: time, relationships, emotions, work, and stress. The more we are there, the less we are outside. The dojo became the second – sometimes the first – home. Here is where our dog walks around, where our son practically lives. The dojo, in a natural process, eats up our privacy. People walk all over ours, while trying to protect their own, for many years. It is a weird world.

# Time and Place

“If the enemy leaves a door open, you must rush in.

– Sun Tzu, Sun Pin<sup>106</sup>

**I**t was the annual summer school in the south of France. A few months earlier I had returned from San Diego after being there for half a year. This was supposed to be my first meeting with Chiba Sensei since my stay in his dojo. My group from Poland had been going there for two years, and I hoped to have, at least, a conversation with him.

A summer school is a week of training – around six hours a day with a main teacher and assistant instructors appointed by him. Our organization is not big, but it runs in ten countries in Europe. The particular summer school I am remembering was, I think, in 2004. Back then we were still strong, and the group was developing primarily because of Chiba's Sensei charisma and activity.

Class had already started and we quietly joined a row, with the teacher's permission. I pushed to the front, maybe hoping that he would notice me. After half a year of spending many hours with him every day, I stupidly got it in my head that in this crowd of 150 people I would be someone special. I remember when he appeared in the room. He walked by

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106 Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, p. 115.

rows of people, looking at them with a mixture of a trained, frosty indifference and a full presence. His gaze passed over me without slowing down. And that was all.

The first day of school had passed. I felt uncomfortable because a few months ago I had been responsible for his every step in the dojo; I had been taking care of everything. Now he appeared in the room, surrounded by a cordon of people whom I did not know, older than me and with a higher rank. I don't speak French, and basically by at the end of the first day I felt like I was on holiday. It was a bit sad, because the whole consequence of being uchideshi here did not work. I couldn't understand it, but by the end I felt the convenience of this situation. No one needed my help.

At the end of the first day G. sensei came to me. Two years ago, I had been his uchideshi in Strasbourg for a month. He said:

'You were an uchideshi – you have to take care of Sensei. Before and after the training, you take over. They have no idea what to do. None of them have ever been uchideshi.'

I looked at him like he was a madman.

'But I don't speak any French, I don't know them. They are higher ranked, and they have it figured out. What am I supposed to do? Walk up to them and push them away? After all, he wouldn't want that.'

However, G. sensei had not made a suggestion. He had told me to do it.

'Go there and do your job. Open doors before him, bring him water, stand by him at all times.'

At the next break between classes, G. sensei looked at me with reproach in his eyes, so, hesitantly, I jumped in front to open doors for Sensei. He noticed that and started walking even faster, not giving me a chance. He walked away and I stood there like a fool. Exactly as I had expected. Then, I tucked my tail and withdrew into the anonymous crowd – as I do. The next day G. sensei berated me again. I was told off for not trying.

‘Go there and take what is yours. Don’t ask questions, take it. You’ll see what happens.’

I knew exactly what would happen: I would look like a fool again. I felt uncomfortable. Not even on my own account: as I thought, I was forced into a group of shihans; one would tell me to do things that another did not want to be done. Sensei, in between classes, sat down at a table under a canopy. The people who were organising the school, being typical southerners, had quite a loose approach towards ceremony, and Sensei either had something to drink or he did not. Burning under G. sensei’s glare, I decided to try here. During a tense break I walked towards Sensei with a glass of water and put it on the table. He thanked me and I stood behind his back, saying nothing. Staying out of reach of his hands and legs. People came in to talk to him and I stood there. He felt my presence and he looked at me out of the corner of his eye. During the next break I did the same. And the next one. On the second day he stopped glancing at me.

Then quite a funny situation occurred. We were about to start an iaido training, and I stood behind Sensei with a sword under my belt. In fact, I stood there pointlessly. From a group



standing opposite us, a tall guy moved into our direction, in a decisive walk, looking at Chiba Sensei. He took two steps and began to pull out his sword. I don't know why I did it, because the chance of him actually attacking was close to zero – but instantly I jumped in between them, holding the hilt. It was stupid and cheap, like a bad Japanese movie, but it worked because the terrified guy took a few steps back with fear in his eyes and looked at Chiba, who laughed out loud and said:

‘Don't worry about him’ – he pointed at me – ‘he thinks that he is my bodyguard’.

I then thought about what would happen if I encountered a stronger opponent who would not take a step back. It turned out that they had been appointed for a sword presentation and I had made a fool out of myself. However, that was when an interesting thing happened: from that moment on until the end of the school, about every small thing – calling teachers, organising conversations – he asked me. Or rather, he ordered me. Even more interesting was that local teachers just got out of my way.

For years I have been thinking about what happened there and what the consequences of it had been outside the mat. To go and to take. A damned indecisiveness and a maze of thoughts. Hundreds of thin, dirty threads wrapped up around my legs. I cannot, I am not able to, I am not good enough. My whole life I was jealous of those who just go out there and do – with the certainty of a person who was already there and who has already done it. I have always held back. Each move, each decision was foreshadowed by dozens of thoughts and

doubts. Everything needing to be filtered through complexes and fears. Always going back in time to the '70s, to the district of Zlotniki in Wroclaw. I remember when I was living illegally in London, coming back dirty and hungry every day after job hunting to the sweatbox I rented from a Gypsy family, and I walked past a building site where a small house was going up. All I had to do was to walk in and ask for a job. I couldn't do it for all those months – I always came up with an excuse. As the time passed, I wasn't even able to convince myself anymore, and I stayed by myself with this dirty burden of weakness and limitations. I didn't try to fight it – I just looked at it. This building site, this little house – for me it became a symbol of my weakness and indecisiveness. Short moments in which you have to do something because a specific time and space generate an opening. The doors have been breached, and the one who is awake and attentive will walk through them. A pensive, hunched-over slouch will not. Perhaps, in general, a cow on a meadow sees nothing; perhaps it sees things, but nonetheless will never move its ass.

We have this form in Aikido – a cut with a sword that drops straight down to the centre of your head, and the only thing you have to do to avoid it is take a step to the side. It takes years to free yourself from panicking, twitching, hiding, and escaping. The physical movement and position always manifest a person's strength of a character and their problems. As though laid out in the palm of your hand, you can see complexes, uncertainty, fear. You can also see aggression or darkness in a person, which can be hidden at the beginning. It is easier in training. When you are executing the techniques, you expect the doors to open. Every form is



about that. Attacking and receiving. An execution, a throw, or a pin is always performed just as there is an opening, so you learn to act exactly when the door is left ajar.

How can you keep this attentiveness outside of the mat? Physically, and in a general sense of what is happening? Chiba Sensei was sitting beside a fire during one of the Polish summer schools. I was next to him. Next to us someone was grilling a sausage. At one moment, something sizzled; the sausage broke in half and fell into the fire. The guy sighed with resignation as if his dog had just died. I looked at the sausage in the fire and understood: now I have to reach for it with my hand. The thought was so strong that blood rushed to my head. At that very moment, Sensei leaned forward and put his hand in the fire. He took the sausage and gave it back to the guy. Fat was dribbling from his palm, and in his eyes was his disgust at the guy's weakness and my indecision.

Why do those moments appear in such absurd circumstances? Not when we are in ancestral kimono with a 500-year-old sword. They do not talk about lotuses and a cosmic ki. A small hiccup of enlightenment appears when I see him with a cigarette between his lips and a sausage in his hand. A folksy life, a folksy enlightenment.

# Murashige

“O-Sensei called me for shomenuchi ikkyo and nailed me to the mat with one finger. He said, ‘Get up’ – but I couldn’t. I tried and tried, but I couldn’t. A total disaster. That is my first memory of O-Sensei. Then he did it again. He held me down with a finger on my neck. And I couldn’t move again. And from the mat – probably laughing – Kazuo Chiba sat and watched.

– M. Murashige shihan, talking about meeting O-Sensei.<sup>107</sup>

It is very hard to divorce Mark (Morihiro) Murashige sensei from his legend. I had it easy because I didn’t know this legend; through a child’s eyes, I saw only a warm, petite Japanese man who was always smiling. He was never happy with what I was doing; I could never do what he told me to repeat correctly. Once, when he threw me over his bald head, my nose burst open like Winne the Pooh’s balloon. Twice, after being thrown by him, I had a concussion. Aside from all that, when I hear his name I am flooded with a wave of warmth and grief. He was, despite what he was doing on a mat, full of an absolute good, care and kindness. He was a silent samurai. A man whose phenomenal Aikido was hidden outside of the world of big names and seminars. This is how I remember him. Simple in his relations with others, which were fuelled by honesty. Without politics, without meddling. There was an honesty in him, because you could not get from

him anything else but knowledge. He did not sign certificates, he was not recognisable; a picture with him gave you nothing. He was an older man who showed the pumped-up masters that they knew nothing. Then he would pat them on the shoulder and keep walking. I was always under the impression that he was closer to deshi, people like us, than to the teachers.

Before classes we always swept the parking lot and the street and sidewalk beside the dojo. Trees planted along the street were always dropping red fruits that had to be swept up. Every day Murashige sensei came 15 minutes early and helped us to sweep. He had a red pickup truck and worked as a chef at a sushi bar. I am too old to cherish the illusion that there are people without an ego – but I couldn't see his. In his case, the form was based on total relaxation and the judicious use of timing and body weight. He would drop his relaxed hands and you would fall on the floor. He was a slim man who came up to the height of my chin. His shoulders were loose, and his wrists were dainty and thin. He particularly liked one form in which he only had to make a small movement of his wrist and the person who was holding it would fly 2 meters away. It looked like magic, but in reality it was simply an awfully painful lever, executed by the dynamic of the attack.

Murashige sensei gave us food. He wasn't as strict as Chiba Sensei and, probably, he wouldn't be as upset if he caught us eating sweets. I remember a Sunday when Edmund, the 19-year-old son of a shihan from England, and I got a package of doughnuts. That day a Mexican businessman had taken us on a cruise on the bay. We took turns steering the yacht and the time passed. We saw walruses eating massive squids. In

the evening, in the dark dojo, we started to stuff our faces with our forbidden doughnuts. Someone knocked on the door, and we panicked, scrambling to hide the doughnuts. Murashige sensei came in, bringing the leftovers from a party at his restaurant. He spread tuna sashimi and many pieces of sushi before us. We were stuffed with fast-food doughnuts, but he was sitting there, so we also ate a kilogram of raw fish each. The next day, we both had diarrhoea.

There is always a moment at a Japanese party when everything goes to hell. It's nice, fun, there's good food, beer, conversations. However, in nature there needs to be balance, so during every pleasurable party comes a time of humiliation.

'Let's sing!' someone says.

And the pleasant atmosphere goes down the drain.

In Murashige sensei's restaurant, everyone sang. He began, then the waiters running the food, the chefs who were preparing the food. Then – no one knows why – the customers also began. This Japanese need to fraternize through the loss of face is a mystery to me. No one could actually sing, but they didn't care, because embarrassment was a part of what was happening there. For me, however, that was too much, and you could tell because I never sang.

After this time what fascinates me in the character of Murashige is the dropping of the mask. Chiba Sensei was a dominating character, the head of the dojo. There was no space there for anyone else, and Murashige took on his role with humility and a smile. He was born in 1945, in the family of a famous student of Jigoro Kano (the founder of Judo).

His father, Aritoshi Murashige, had been an executioner in an army in China during the war. Every person who knows history, understands what that meant: a lot of blood on one's hands. Kano Sensei sent him, as he also sent few advanced others, to O-Sensei, to study Aikido. The senior Murashige stuck with it, and finally he became a teacher. If I remember the stories correctly, Aritoshi Murashige was also a teacher of kendo, and they had a little dojo in their garden. He travelled a lot, and when from time to time he came back home, he ran the house with an iron first.

Years later, I remember being in a small Indian restaurant close to the Shinjuku train station in Tokyo. I was at a long dinner with Murashige sensei's sister, his son, and my friend M. from Mexico. From Murashige sensei's sister we managed to draw out some stories about his childhood. Each of us had been treated roughly by our fathers. I remember being beaten with the electrical cord of an iron; M. was hit with a stone whilst running away after he told his father what he thought of him. Our asses were all bruised, but that evening I learned that our fathers were just a slimmer version of Santa Claus. Aritoshi Murashige was Lord Vader. This is the only way you can describe him. Flowers around him withered when he walked by, birds fell from the trees, and cats caught fungus. Chiba Sensei told us that in postwar Japan, the name Murashige was used to scare children, the way our parents used the Black Volga story. So this was the house where Murashige sensei grew up. He met Ueshiba as a kid. He was around 11 years old when he began practicing with his father, going on to train with the founder of Aikido. In the '60s he ended up in New York, helping Yamada sensei lead





his dojo.<sup>108</sup> We heard stories about his fights in Central Park. I knew that was a part of his legend, and I never took them seriously. As an uchideshi I wanted to see people for what they really were, not a collection of myths. For that reason, both Chiba and Murashige, for me, had to be enough as they were. And they were.

After New York, Murashige came back to Japan and I believe worked as a salesman for a company that made camera flash-bulbs. In 1981, he again went to the States, this time to San Diego, where he worked at his brother's sushi restaurant. One day he left the kitchen and noticed three Japanese men at a table in a corner. On the other side of the world, his sempai had found him: Kanai, Yamada and Chiba were sitting there like yakuza footsoldiers.<sup>109</sup>

'Perhaps it's time to do Aikido again, Murashige?' they asked.

'I am settling in San Diego and I will need your help,' Chiba Sensei added.

Kanai had already been in Boston for a long time, and Yamada in New York for even longer. Now Chiba had joined them, and together with Akira Tohei<sup>110</sup> in Chicago, between them they divided the Aikikai-affiliated dojos by region for a few decades. And then, just like that, Murashige sensei joined San Diego Aikikai, and with a smile on his face he took on the

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108 Yoshimitsu Yamada (born. 1938) – 8th dan shihan, presently the head of the United States Aikido Federation and the chief instructor of New York Aikikai.

109 Mitsunari Kanai (1938–2004) – 8th dan shihan. He was one of the founders of the United States Aikido Federation and the chief instructor at Boston Aikikai.

110 Akira Tohei (1929–1999) – 8th dan shihan. One of the founders of the United States Aikido Federation, the head of the Midwest Aikido Federation.

position of assistant instructor. His son, Teru, grew up in the dojo, first as a kid, then an adult, and, finally, as kenshusei. Some of the seniors in the dojo called Murashige sensei by his adopted first name – Mark. I couldn't do that. What this man did on the mat, many called magic. Struggling with the consequences of Kawasaki disease contracted as a child, he had, reportedly beaten US records for life expectancy with this illness, which damaged the heart, living for almost 70 years. He underwent many surgeries, but after all of them he came back on a mat. Increasingly weak, slimmer, and more transparent. I remember his palms, thin wrists, and total relaxation. This style was probably a result of his condition – he couldn't overtax his heart, so he worked with technique. 'Too stiff, relax, drop your hands, you are too strong,' he always said.

Each time, when I came back after months of break, I would see him, and he would repeat the same words. He took me to the side and told me off: for my physicality, for my eating habits, my lack of attention. Together with his son, who had friends in Bulgaria, they planned a tour around Europe. They wanted to visit Poland, but that never happened, because of his health. The last time I saw him in 2011. He and Chiba Sensei had parted ways. No one knew what the reason for their falling-out was and our little world really was full of gossip. Both of them kept it a secret. Murashige would never tell anyone, and no one would ever ask Chiba. Eventually, Murashige sensei moved to a big dojo on the coast where he taught one class a week. After their argument we couldn't train with Murashige sensei anymore. That was always the

case when Chiba Sensei cut ties with a teacher. Officially, the clans were in conflict, and we did not contact each other.

In fact, quietly, we were still in contact, and Chiba Sensei knew about it. He did not lose face as long as we kept it to ourselves. Then, in 2011, I went to Chiba Sensei's dojo for a conference of teachers, and stayed for couple of days.

Murashige sensei was at the house of one of the local teachers. I brought him a rungu from Kenya – a traditional Massaian club which looked a bit like a thighbone. He was happy with it, and a few people got whacked with it. Sometime later, without Chiba Sensei knowing, I went for a training led by Murashige at his new dojo. The space was massive, the style was different, but people tried to repeat everything that we did. He called me to take ukemi many times and corrected me often, as if recognising that I came.

After the training I hoped to take him for a beer or something, but he was in a rush and he left in his pickup. I never saw him again.

'Beware of Murashige', someone once told me in San Diego. 'Beware of him even more than of Chiba Sensei. When Chiba gets mad you will know it. He will scream, there will be steam coming out from his ears. With Murashige, you will see no difference.' Apparently, something in his eyes would change, but it was hard to see. He would look like a kind, smiling man, but it would be an executioner approaching you, ready to rip your head off. His father would awaken in him.

Every time I was in San Diego, Murashige sensei would say that I had just missed his son, Teru. As a result, we didn't

meet for a long time, although I had heard a lot about him, and Sensei claimed that on the mat we would either really like each other or break each other. One of those times I went to the dojo again and I came on the mat, late. I sat in the corner watching the students who were warming up. Chiba Sensei sat before the kamiza as they moved up and down the mat in shikko – walking on the knees. I knew most of them, and noticed only a few new people. At one point, the curtain which separated the dojo from the corridor parted and a toddler, around a year and a half old, ran onto the mat. He stood in the middle of the room and looked around. He went up to a Japanese woman and put his hand on her shoulder. No one reacted – Chiba and the others seemed not to see the child. He tottered around people with the wide steps of a kid that is just learning how to walk. He spread his hands as if they were helping him balance. After some time, he approached the kamiza and, trying to stay on his legs, he leant on the shoulder of Chiba Sensei, who sat there motionlessly like a monument. They stood like that for a while, the small one and the big one, and I regretted that I didn't have a camera with me. After some time Sensei put his massive open palm on the kid's face and pushed him quite strongly backwards onto the mat. The child was thrown a meter or so. He took one, two steps back and, cushioning the fall with his hands, took ushiro ukemi – a roll backwards. He bounced up like a ball and looked around as if nothing had happened. He stayed like that for a minute, and then he walked away. Everything happened without any words.

After the training we sat, as always, in the uchideshi room. I was intrigued by what I had seen, so I finally asked, 'Sensei,

I have taught thousands of children, but I have never seen one roll like that before. Where did he learn that?’

‘That is Teru’s son, one of Murashige’s grandchildren,’ said Sensei, as if that was an answer.

‘Yes, but this kind of talent . . .’ I began again.

‘It is normal, he has the blood of a shihan’, Sensei said with finality.

# IV 2021



# Hugo

“ *Instead of asking the Khan, ask the doorman.*<sup>111</sup>

– Mongolian proverb

**H**ugo was an old Japanese man missing one finger. He was as nasty as a gnome. Venom oozed out of him with each word and gesture. He was like an Asian version of Dobby the house-elf. He sat in the office of the dojo, his back turned to the doors, and he played solitaire all day. He was around 60 years old, short and stocky, with loose jeans strapped tightly with a belt around his big butt. He wore greenish and grey t-shirts, and he shuffled around in the dojo in slippers. His round head was shaven bald, and from his chin dangled a long, grey, wispy beard like that of a Chinese sage. He also had small, round glasses which fulfilled the false image of hidden knowledge and literateness. Beginners crashed into him like a ship into a rock. They looked up to him with a foolish admiration because he fit perfectly the idea of the dojo they had built up in their heads. The problem was, however, that he was like the screech of nails on a chalkboard.

‘What do you want? No one wants you here’, he would growl. ‘I don’t like kids’, he would say slowly, looking directly into the eyes of terrified parents.

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<sup>111</sup> A. Bielak, Koniec siwata mongolskich koczownikow [<https://weekend.gazeta.pl/weekend/1,177333,21693596,koniec-swiata-mongolskich-koczownikow-ci-ktorzy-odchodza.html>] (accessed 13.03.2021); author’s translation]



Why did Chiba accept him? Hugo was his contradiction. In a theatrical manner he ignored the role of a god, growling and complaining about everything and everyone – including Chiba himself. He had limitless respect only for Sensei's wife. He hated the uchideshi and their predictable, repetitive, shallow admiration for the place and for Chiba.

Hugo was a part of the dojo. He moved like a crab and lived in dark corners. He changed light bulbs and tended to the toilet paper. He plunged toilets and killed pests. He was an organic part of that place – like mould on the wall, like a big, fat rat in glasses. He had soaked up the dojo, he was poisoned by it and grew into it. Apparently, he used to train and had 2nd dan. Apparently, he had been diagnosed with heart disease and stopped training, but Sensei took him in. Apparently, he lived in a trailer. Apparently, he had a cat. Apparently, he had some family. Apparently, once or twice a month he went to Las Vegas to lose 100 or 200 dollars. Apparently. Before I moved to San Diego, I was warned about him. They said: 'If you have to ask him for help . . . don't ask'. He welcomed me with reluctance and a fistful of Polish jokes, the Chicago standard. I had bigger problems, so I just ignored him. For long months I lived there just by myself, so I learnt how to avoid him. I like solitude, and there was enough space to miss each other in the corridors. At the beginning I even tried to greet him when he arrived at dojo around 11 am. He never responded, so after some time I stopped trying, with great relief. And this is how we accepted our selfish life together. We divided the space and we both lived in the dojo alone, next to each other.

It was after few of those months that he suddenly accepted me. Every evening he came to me and sat in an armchair in the uchideshi quarters, complaining for long hours about everybody. With apparent satisfaction, he spoke about people who he frightened. About children who cried because of him. I like to listen, and this pathological quasi-friendship lasted. I came back there after two years and it was his reaction I wanted as much as Chiba Sensei's. He did not disappoint me.

'Why the hell did you come here, no one likes you here', he grunted.

We lived together well – like two old, bored spouses. He never ate or drank with us. He would come for a while and then sneak out again.

People reacted differently to him. I was charmed by his venom, because I believed that it was only an attempt to hide an inner warmth which was in him but which disgusted and embarrassed him. And in this way this little man shaped a defence mechanism, so the world wouldn't perceive him as a wimp. Some people simply hated his boorish mask and couldn't stand his presence in the dojo. He despised the political upstarts, and they despised him. I have nothing against them, though; if I were American, I would probably have the same ambition. I also understand the dissonance that is created when, while you're worshiping Chiba like an omnipotent God, you have to justify the presence of Hugo. For me he was like a soul of the dojo, a reminder of the flaws and the force that lies in them. He was like a medieval *portarius*<sup>112</sup> in a monastery. The one who opens the door a crack at the level of your face and

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112 *Portarius*: in medieval Latin, a doorkeeper, gatekeeper.

growls, 'What do you want? Go away!' He was a reminder that this is not a service point, it is not a place for everybody. And that your motivation needs to endure much more than mean-spirited comments from an old Asian.

That one night, I was leaving for Poland again and few people came to me to say goodbye. Before he went home, he appeared in the back room, supposedly checking to see whether that bloody Pole had finally gone home. I pretended that I wanted to hug him, and the old grump ran off into the hallway, jumping around, while everyone else was laughing. I went after him, and even though he was pulling away I hugged him and thanked him. That didn't fit me, nor did it suit him – probably was the result of a few beers. He growled clumsily and walked away. He got into his car and went home. On the way, he lost control of the wheel and ran into something. Apparently, he died on the spot.



# How Old Are You?

“Many young teachers who open a dojo and began to teach without the ability to shift into being a teacher – and not just a student anymore – will face regress, often without even knowing what is happening.”<sup>113</sup>

– Chiba Sensei

With his little house Chiba had a garden of perhaps 30 x 60 meters. A piece of grass and a few trees in the front. On the right side of the house, a narrow passage ran to the back, overgrown with weeds. An additional gate and a narrow path. In the garden there were a few beds, a place for compost, a few trees. I worked there a few times, digging out roots and weeding the garden. Always when he wasn't there. He did not use uchideshi for his own purposes; most of the time it was his wife who asked us for help when he wasn't there. Only once I helped M. repair the roof. He came out to see us then, accompanied by his younger grandchild, and watched our labour. The next day I visited him to say goodbye. He was sitting in an armchair in the garden, smoking a cigarette. I sat opposite him and for five minutes I ceremonially gave shallow thank-you's. He had hundreds of conversations like that in his life, and I knew that what he was saying was also a ceremonial autopilot. It went silent at one point, and after a while I understood that this was the end. We shook hands

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<sup>113</sup> 'Young Lions Face Challenge of Self-Examination', Musubi, January 2013.

and I began to walk toward the gate. I struggled for a second with the latch, and suddenly I was overtaken by a wave of regret. I had flown over here from the other side of the world for just a couple of days. This relationship was my life and I had never even understood the nature of it; I had so many doubts and, in the end, our whole connection was just empty words. I turned around and asked him if we could talk, honestly. Now, from the perspective of the time, I have no idea where I found the courage to do that. Back then I had to be really in a position with no exit, crammed there by the pressure of political tensions, very lost, to do such a thing. I sat there for half an hour asking him things I normally would never dare to ask. In the dojo I would probably have been kicked out, but here we were alone, and he wouldn't lose face. At one point I told him:

'When I'm with you I turn into a kid. I feel as if I was 15 again, and I behave that way. I lose my maturity. Perhaps it is this relationship that takes away my accountability and makes me childish. I hate that. It seems to me that you have that effect on many people.'

I can recall the astonishment on his face. Back then I had already been beaten up on the mat for dozens of years, five or more hours, every day – to define myself as a student had completely lost meaning, and did not work. For my mental health and for giving meaning to what I was doing I had to feel I was a teacher and an adult. Being in a junior role began to grind against me, and he knew it was a time he should leave me in peace and let me teach. I look at those solitary souls who were exhausted by the relationship with him and scattered around the world. Once, before going to

sleep, I remembered the story of Ged, the hero of the book *A Wizard of Earthsea*. His first teacher, Ogion, settles down far away in the desert to find himself in loneliness. When a sponge is soaked, it cannot absorb anything more. When a snake devours something massive it needs to hide away, cover itself with leaves and wait to see whether what it just ate will poison it or energise it – that is the moment of truth. Is that the destination of that whole process? To finally stop, even though everyone else is still running. Wait a second, stop! – you scream as if newly awakened. Actually, who am I? Like Forrest Gump who, after weeks of running, suddenly stops and says: ‘Enough’. We shed our skin like snakes, step by step. There was a time when in my naïve trust towards my teacher I felt like a teenager; then came a period of losing myself in my own ability and a fascination with movement itself – I felt as if I were 22 years old. Around 40 I was like someone who is 29. Now I am slowly catching up with my body.

All day long, you are surrounded by young people. You throw them around, you crush them, touch them, smell them and feel them. You get infected by their youth, and sometimes it’s difficult to feel who you really are. Maybe death is when your sensations catch up with your age? All of those who left Chiba Sensei because they had had enough – did they finally understand how old they were?

A few hundred kilometres north of San Diego, in a very famous university city, where Barańczak<sup>114</sup> and Miłosz<sup>115</sup>

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114 Stanisław Barańczak (1946–2014) was a Polish poet, literary critic, scholar, editor, translator and lecturer.

115 Czesław Miłosz (1911–2004) was a Polish poet, prose writer, translator and diplomat.

worked, a certain Japanese man was teaching aikido. I never met him, but he was reportedly as heavy as Chiba Sensei. He had a student who had moved there from Europe especially to train with him. This student settled down in the US, and for long years he absorbed his master's teaching. He was as close to his teacher as one can be. For many years, in every class, at the teacher's beck and call. He was held up as an example of a good student and a grand talent. He absorbed and absorbed. – Until, finally, the day came. In the middle of class, breaking every rule of etiquette, he got up and headed for the door.

'Where are you going?' his teacher asked him.

The guy looked at him, calmly, and said,

'That's enough. I'm done.'

He left and never returned.





# What Is Your Name?

“ ‘I cannot enter’, he said reluctantly, ‘unless you help me’.  
The doorman responded.  
‘Say your name.’  
Ged, again, stood motionless for a while; for a man never  
says his own name out loud, unless his own life is at  
stake.  
‘I am Ged’, he said, loudly. Then, taking a step forward,  
he walked through the open doors.

–U. Le Guin, A Wizard of Earthsea

I’m trying to recall the name of the woman who taught me Polish in technical college. I can clearly remember one particular lesson. She said a few sentences which got stuck in my memory.

‘People are divided into two types. The first one will think of that as a white wall’ – she pointed at a space next to the board. ‘The other type will come closer and notice an endless mosaic of textures, cracks and wholes. The imperfections and details. You are one or the other, and it cannot be changed. That is your nature. The nature of a mechanic or a poet. A dentist or an artist.

Then I realised that the world mixes up those two abilities, and it is full of poetic mechanics and mechanical poets. A martial art is a way of seeing the world from those two perspectives simultaneously. Taking into consideration the

mad and illogical chaos which surrounds you, you have to act in a simple and logical way. Consistent. A true warrior makes a decision within the space of seven breaths and then sticks to it.<sup>116</sup> The world in its chaotic nature offers us an endless number of questions for which there are no easy answers. For that reason, so many of us get stuck between one imperfect solution and another. From the beginning I knew that I was the second type of person. That I see all of the doubts and imperfections; that no wall will ever be straight for me. That the grey dust in me cracks all the walls around me. The white changes into grey and simple answers never appear in my head. My path is a learning process of decisiveness and looking at the wall from a distance. If 30 years of training have taught me anything, that would be it.

Another teacher and I were on the way to Sensei's house. Chiba was walking between us. In the middle of the journey, he turned around and said, 'The time has come to give you names.'

He walked a bit more and then threw a Japanese word in my friend's direction.

'What does it mean?' my friend asked.

It was something about a dragon with beautiful eyes. I don't remember exactly, but it sounded proud, lofty and exemplary. Perfect for a bio on a website or as a line to pick up girls. Chiba Sensei turned in my direction:

'And you shall be Awate mono', he said.

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116      Tsunetomo Yamamoto, *Hagakure: The Way of the Samurai*. This text was an inspiration for director Jim Jarmusch when he made the 1999 film *Ghost Dog*.

‘And what does that mean?’ I asked, a bit upset that probably a dragon with googly eyes was already taken.

‘You need to find that out for yourself’, he snapped. I focused so that the words didn’t escape my memory. It would be a bit of a shame to forget your own name. That same day I sent an email to Misa, his Japanese secretary in San Diego. In the evening I wondered what type of eagle, tiger or maybe even demon it was going to be. Misa wrote back that there must be a mistake, that Sensei could not call me that name. I double-checked and wrote back to her again, asking for the translation because I was sure there was no mistake.

‘Oh God’, Misa replied, ‘I didn’t expect that from him. Awa-te mono is not offensive, but it’s a rather unkind word for someone who has a big mess in their head.’

To hell with tigers and eagles. A man with a messy mind. Actually, I wasn’t even surprised by that. But it made me upset. I never spoke to him about it, and, possibly, he treated the whole event as an indignity test because he has never publicly used that name. A few times, while writing very honest letters to him, I signed myself in that way.

Even more interesting was the story of the name of my dojo. I started leading the dojo quite early, when I was still studying – and in the company of other uchideshi I was special in that sense. At one point, there were a few hundred people in the dojo; this was equivalent to fully half of the American branch of Birankai. D. sensei, my first teacher from Switzerland, who had sent me to San Diego, told me to ask Chiba Sensei for the name of the dojo. A dojo may have two names: an official one which meets all of the legal and organizational require-

ments, and a second, Japanese one, given by the teacher. Most have just the first, formal one. In our system, that is a combination of 'Aikikai' with the name of the city. For me, then, 'Wroclaw Aikikai' was a logical reference to San Diego Aikikai, Manhattan Aikikai or Strasbourg Aikikai – places where I had served as an uchideshi. The Japanese name is given by the teacher, and most commonly is a combination of Japanese syllables, a poetic metaphor. 'A place where character is formed', 'The house of fire', and so on. There are people who care about those labels, but I never did, and also taking into consideration my rather short-term relationship with Chiba Sensei, I did not expect that honour. When D. sensei proposed that I ask Sensei to name the dojo, I hesitated. To be honest, I did not care about it enough to risk the trouble that the subject might bring. For an uchideshi, a conversation with him was like dancing on a minefield, and you really had to know what you wanted. That was June, 2003. I had just completed a half-year-long residency in the dojo, and I went with Sensei to a café to talk. We soon ran out of topics to discuss, and our cups were still full. There appeared what I defined as an awkward silence – but what in fact could be, as I found out years hence, a comfortable coexisting in silence. Searching for topics in panic, I dug out the issue of the name. 'What the heck', I thought, and I asked him, politely. He looked at me and didn't say anything for a long time. He took a sip of a coffee and he asked slowly, looking into my eyes, 'Who is your teacher?'

In my head ran a hundred hamsters on a wheel. Who is my teacher? With my heart I was already there, as I had never lived through something as intense, as honest, as full of



respect from both sides and frightening at the same time. Simultaneously, D. sensei had been a father and a mother for me since I was 14. I was one of only a few of his students who got really far on that journey, and in his eyes I saw both gratitude and pride. He had sent me there. I remember exactly what I was thinking back then. I wondered whether Chiba was testing me. Trying to see if, after just few months spent here, this upstart would cleave to him, forgetting about the man who had sent him there and brought him up.

‘Sensei’ I said, confidently, ‘my heart is here, and I have never experienced anything more real. However, D. is my first teacher. I do not want to hurt him or to deny that relation.’

He looked at me and he never came back to the subject of the name of the dojo. Neither I nor D. sensei understood that. A year later, D. sensei ordered me to ask again, and this time Sensei plainly ignored my question. I was fed up with making a fool out of myself, especially because I really didn’t need any of this. In the meantime, I became ‘Awate mono’ and, quite logically, I was afraid that a presumptive name would be similar in its poetic meaning. The issue died down and few years passed. We were in the Biskupin neighbourhood in Wroclaw in a flat where Chiba Sensei was staying with a few shihan during one of the Polish seminars. D. sensei called me into a room, and in my presence, he took out a paper scroll with Japanese calligraphy.

‘My friend is a master of calligraphy’ he said, ceremonially. ‘This is what he prepared at my request as the name of Piotr’s dojo: ‘A place where swords are forged’, or ‘A place where you practice heavily’. He gave the scroll to Chiba Sensei.

I stood there like an idiot, not knowing what to do. I did not care about this name and I knew I was there as a stooge – they were both sniffing around, checking who was actually controlling my dojo. I loved them both, but I knew back then that the only thing I needed to do was to keep a safe distance and not speak. Of course, the name would be like Saruman's hand imprinted on my forehead. Probably more for them than for me. In general, I was tired of that topic because it had all happened without my involvement and I had no influence over it. Sensei looked over the calligraphy, rolled it up again:

'It is executed well, good technique', he said, 'but the name is inept. I don't agree.'

And he left us both with our mouths wide open. Once again, he showed that he preferred to play the game than to close the topic. The name-giving process was a more productive tool than the act of naming itself – as that would have closed the topic.

Fifteen years have passed, and I'm about to begin a class in my own dojo. People sit in a row, unevenly; I go on the mat and we all bow to the kamiza. Next to a portrait of Ueshiba hangs that unfortunate calligraphy, rejected by Chiba Sensei. It has been there for six years now. It suits the imagination of the people who come to train here perfectly. It depicts bushes in black ink, very Japanese, with chops stamped in red. Some five thousand people have come through those doors. On average, 40 classes every week, for six years, since this place first opened. That's ten thousand classes. Two bows in each class – that comes up to 20 thousand bows. No one has ever asked the meaning of the massive inscription that they all bow



towards. Out of all five thousand people, not a single person was interested in what was written there, except me. It might as well say 'spring rolls' or 'ladies' toilet'. I was tempted to also hang an inscription in Japanese saying, 'You don't even know what you're bowing towards, you fool'. That idea still makes me laugh – maybe at some point I will have enough courage and stupidity to do that. . . . I kept the inscription, even though I am not using the name. This scroll is a definition of my relationship with Chiba and with D. I look at it a bit like a child looks at his harsh father's belt hanging in the hallway. There is more sense and depth in that than in some momentous words from the movie Karate Kid.

I remember one other evening in San Diego, many years ago. Someone had come from Singapore or Hong Kong and, as a gift, brought a bottle of some expensive, famous sake. I was sitting very dangerously close to Chiba Sensei. He told us that this sake was special due to the unique shape of the bottle. A device at the bottom of the bottle allowed for it to be set on a 45-degree angle, but this was possible only when there was still sake in the bottle. We drank all of it quickly, and smooth, political conversations kept on going. Uchideshi should never smart off or chatter, so I sat silently, drinking and eating. People were still debating, and my sight went to the empty bottle of sake. There were a dozen people there and I, for a half an hour or so, mindlessly tried to put the bottle on its side. I finally managed, and it stood still. I smiled to myself, and it was then that I noticed Sensei looking at me with a furrowed brow. I had just disproven his theory.

'I think I just understood the nature of a Pole', he said seriously.

‘Sensei, for me this bottle is the only straight thing in this room.’

## Fish

“*For he and all his companions were astonished at the catch of fish they had taken, and so were James and John, the sons of Zebedee, Simon’s partners. Then Jesus said to Simon, “Don’t be afraid; from now on you will fish for people.” So they pulled their boats up on shore, left everything, and followed him.*

Luke 5:9–11

Chiba Sensei used to fish. His son did not become an Aikidoka – something which perhaps bothered his father – however, he was, reportedly, a great fisherman and angler. Sensei spoke about him with pride, and I was under the impression that for him fishing and Aikido were the same thing. How is this connected with martial arts? I discovered my own way, and I have no idea what exactly Chiba Sensei found in it. I heard a lot about the gear that he had and about the fish that he caught. Sometimes he happened to bring his catch to the dojo. Often it was tuna, which we ate raw as sashimi.

It reminds me of that quote from the Bible: ‘Don’t be afraid; from now on you will be fishing for people.’ I look at the immensity of the peaceful ocean. The water is calm and the float gently sways on a long, invisible wave. I am sitting

alone, in silence. Everything is done. The bait is cast out, a hook with a worm is hanging somewhere in the depths, luring fish which are or are not there. You realize that despite the apparent calm, there under the surface, life is teeming. You are sitting there and looking calmly at the float. For a minute, or perhaps three hours. At any moment it can tremble delicately or disappear under the water completely. In this stillness, there is also a readiness to act. In the film *The Warrior*,<sup>117</sup> the legendary Marek Piotrowski,<sup>118</sup> destroyed by an illness common to boxers, says with difficulty: 'They ask me how is it possible that in everyday life I am so slow and in the ring I move so quickly? I tell them – look at a cat, it sleeps all day and moves slowly, but when it needs to attack . . .'

While we were sitting zazen, Chiba Sensei ordered us to put a wooden sword in front of us. It was there at arm's length. Like the weapon of a gunslinger. Or, perhaps, like a float which we were looking at, ready to yank at any moment?

In its own way, fishing was for him also a form of being on the brink of life and death. – At least, the fish should think so.

My dojo was always big. Every day I pierce through dozens of conversations, I pass dozens of faces in the corridor. I am searching for peace and quiet in this crowd, but it is not easy. Every face, every conversation drains the life out of me, and every day wears me down a bit more. A few years ago, I discovered fishing. Even on the days when I usually have morning class at 6.30, I get up before 4 to feel the calm, even for just an hour. When everything else is done, I can just wait.

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117      *The Warrior*, dir. J. Bławut, 2007.

118      M. Piotrowski (b. 1964) – the highest titled Polish kickboxer, a multiple world champion.

There is no past or future; there is only now. Everything: the lure, the float, the spinning reel, the stretched fly line, a good position. I am ready. Each breath becomes longer and longer, and I do not want or need to think about anything else. I become a part of everything that surrounds me.

In spring or autumn, the frost still pinches your ass in the morning and the sun, minute by minute, destroys the internal and external chill. One day, staring at the river, I must have been still for quite a long time, because I began to hear the rustle of leaves behind me. The fishing rods stood dead on the stands, covered in delicate frost. It was so cold I couldn't sit, so I stood in a straddle. From the leaves appeared some kind of weasel or ferret – I don't know what it was. It was completely white, beautiful. It approached me from behind and slowly came in between my legs. It sniffed around the fishing rods and, dignified, walked away.

Sensei told us about a certain Zen teacher who went fishing without a line. He just sat over the water with a stick. One day he invited Chiba Sensei to try.

'This is too much, even for me', he told us, laughing.

During the second summer school we held in Poland, I took him to catch cod in Gdansk.<sup>119</sup> We sailed on a fish cutter for over an hour. There were maybe ten of us. We fished for the whole day, and at the end we dragged a hundred pounds of fish back to Wrocław. He seemed satisfied with the number, although disappointed with the taking of the prize. Cod-fishing is a bit like pig-beating. Thanks to depth scanners, you can

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119 Gdańsk (Danzig in German) is a port city on the Baltic coast of Poland.

easily find shoals and sail over them with the cutter. Then, ten or twelve people cast a line with a shiny lure at the end of it. You feel a jerk and you drag the fish to the surface. The change in pressure does its job, and the fish is almost dead when it reaches the surface. There is nothing of the manly, hours-long fight with the elements.

Sensei looked happy. Back then he was maybe 71. In the middle of the day he went belowdecks for a nap; he did not fish a lot, but for many days he told everybody about this expedition. I do not know where he fished in California, but on the coast, he probably caught a lot of massive tuna, salmon, maybe even sharks. Puny Baltic cod, half a kilo each, probably did not make much of an impression on him.

Fishing in Polish cities is much more a game for boys with sticks than it is a real adventure. Except, that is, for the catfish-fishers. Somewhere in a four-storey post-communist block of flats near my home lives a certain youngster. He lives there in between grey blocks. He reminds me a bit of those anonymous weirdos you meet in front of a grocery store. He speaks fast and voluminously. He smokes one cigarette after another, and does not inspire trust. He could be a criminal or an alcoholic. He is perhaps 25 or 30, or maybe 35, who knows. Probably he works somewhere, he lives somewhere, he eats something. I do not know. The only thing I know is that the only thing that he really does is fish for catfish. This is where his heart is at.

I met him when I was searching for the peace of *zazen* in on-land fishing on a river. I did not want people and their shitty fisherman's chit-chat. That moment when some Janusz with

a moustache jumps out of the bushes and makes comments on how I've tied all the knots on my fishing rod. One day, he appeared with a cigarette in his mouth and a spinning rod in his armpit. He spoke for 45 minutes as if the world was about to end and he had to get rid of all those thoughts. His life was hunting those massive catfish, a few dozen kilos each and 2 meters long. In the world of retired gaffers on bicycles who are happy to catch bream or a loach, he was truly a Captain Ahab, I kid you not. He waited impatiently for the season – even in the winter he would go and stare at this grey, urban river; among leafless trees he would scare crows, drunks and lovers. Under the surface of a muddy river there is something bigger than me. In Wroclaw, there are catfish that reach two and a half meters. That grey, dirty water that I have stared at all my life conceals monsters. Dragons do exist. They feed on greyness, and they get bigger and bigger.

Chiba once explained the way you should hold your sword: gently and tender-heartedly. How many times do we stand opposite each other, our only contact being at a sword-tip? A trained and quiet body and a controlled weapon which becomes a part of my hand. I can feel the trembling of my opponent's sword; I know what he wants and what he will do. I feel his pulse. It is like holding a fishing rod – he said.

There is a pond in Wroclaw in which you can no longer fish. I went there, like a fool, because it was quiet, green, and empty, even though I had never caught anything there. Not a single little fish. Never – that's the kind of slouch I am. That day I had already been sitting there for a long time, and I was thinking about going back home. Suddenly, mi-

raculously, something caught. That was the moment when I felt the biggest fish of my life under my control. All of its movement, fear, anger, pounding heart – I could feel all of it in my hands. For a moment I felt her life. Then I messed something up and a massive tench jumped over the water, beautifully arched. She broke free and swam away and I couldn't sleep for a week, furious at myself.

I heard once that Chiba Sensei took all of his fishing equipment to the beach and set it on fire. All of those fishing rods worth hundreds of dollars, lures and God knows what. Everything went up in flames. I do not know how much of that is true, because legends about him live their own life. However, that one would suit me. Because, perhaps, all of this writing of mine about simple allegories is raising an already dead monument to someone as alive and changeable as he was?

Once I proposed wild-boar hunting to him. I was very tempted by the idea of taking the legend into the bush and waiting for a Polish wild hog. All muddy and frightening. Let's kill the inner Polish boar together, I thought. He laughed at me and said that he only dreams about confronting a wild boar with a spear or a knife in his hand. Perhaps that was a similar case with those fish? Finally, under the surface, something bigger and stronger was lying in wait for him, something that would possibly defeat him one day. That is the fight of the old man in Hemingway's book.





# Getting Old

“ ‘A pip from a watermelon – I want to be young forever’  
– all three said at the same time. And that was it. Pippi  
switched on the light. ‘Wonderful!’ she said. ‘Now we  
will never be old, and we will never have corns or other  
misfortunes.’ <sup>120</sup>

– A. Lindgren, *Pippi on the South Seas*

**Y**outh seeps from us like resin. The gentle, barely visible bark of a new tree expands and cracks deeper and deeper, like skin on the dry feet of an old person. The life power that seethes in us when we are young now hides inside. Hair falls out like dry leaves in autumn and fingers are twisted by old age like brittle twigs. Day after day we become more fragile, and we resemble our father or mother whose old age terrified us. My father never cared about clothes – he made my mother furious when he wiped the soup stains from his face with the tablecloth. He was always smacking, panting, and farting. He went bald around age 40, and the less hair he had on his head the more he had in his nose and ears. He is still burning with the fire of passion, and as the years go by, the less and less he cares about anything else. As if that passion is the truth and everything else is just pretending; he has no power, no will to pretend any longer.

<sup>120</sup> A. Lindgren, *Pippi on the South Seas*, Polish translation T. Chlapkowska, Warszawa: Nasza Księgarnia 1960; author's translation to English.

I look at my swollen joints and fingers, which are slowly growing crooked with age. I look at my feet, cracked by decades spent on the mat. I decay, I crumble, I grow brittle. More and yet more unwanted folds of dead skin. I fall into myself more with every passing day. Ad nauseam, I repeat the transformations my own father foreshadowed.

My granddad died in a hospital and I, as a 15-year-old youngster, was given scissors used to cut the dog's talons to chisel down his diabolical claws, which were yellow and ingrown into his fingers. That was old age. My skin was pulsating with life, I could feel it everywhere, whereas he was a log with thick, cracked bark. He faded away.

Chiba Sensei grew old in front of our eyes. A man who had terrified generations became weak and slowly ebbed away. I presume that is the reason he was so angry. He wrote beautiful texts about ageing as an unavoidable and important stage of our existence. They were rich in metaphors of the winter of life and dignified dying. However, from one day to the next he must have felt more and more trapped in his weak body. Every day for 60 years he had sweated and panted, jerked and pushed, fallen and thrown, and he understood the world through touch and physicality. Through movement and body-to-body contact. He sharpened the weapon of his body all his life. He kneaded himself and broke himself many times. He pushed himself through injuries and diseases. And now that body was ending. Slowly, knees, shoulders, wrists said: that is enough, no more. The cage was closing in on him and he was suffocating in it.

‘I am old’, he said to us once in some kitchen in some country. ‘You can still push forward, but for me this is the end.’

It was as if a musician lost his hearing, or a pianist lost his fingers.

‘As long as you can, fight with ageing’, he said. ‘Not the physical one, but with becoming a fossil and surrendering.’

I remember the summer school in Poland when he went running after senior teachers, holding a stick and shouting. They were around 60; he was almost 70.

‘Don’t surrender to ageing!’ he screamed.

Just like that, your face and fingers decay. Like that, your grey beard dries up and your breasts start to hang. Just like that, the life inside of you can also shrivel up. There were seminars when one of those senior teachers sat in seiza and took it better than any of us. We broke into a cold sweat from the pain, and he stared at us, with satisfaction, to then get up and walk away without a problem. Accepting ageing doesn’t mean you can’t fight it. We are like pieces of old, dry clay that needs to be kneaded between warm palms. When it is left motionless, it hardens and starts to crumble. It is cold and coarse. The longer we can push life into the bark which covers us in ageing, the longer that tree can live.

I remember the morning training with Doshu in the Aikikai Hombu dojo in Tokyo. All of the 80-year-old grandpas went there, and with no mercy they fell to the floor on their butts for an hour. There was no sitting in front of the TV, stuffing one’s face with chips or grumbling about HR. A dignified ageing. With no plastic surgeries, with no fake pretending.

My grandma who was 85 years old would drag buckets of coal up the stairs, because she knew that as long as she did that, life would keep circulating in her veins. Getting old is the process of changing your role from that of a student to a teacher – if you want to be a teacher. If not, but you still decide to train, it is the process of accepting the change. The reduced range of movement, daily pain. Accepting the loss of youth. Accepting the power of the new generation.

## Snakes

“Faith is weakening. The wolf is enraged and sets fire to hell.”<sup>121</sup>

– Lao Che [Polish rock band], “Stare Miasto”

I have a tangled mass of snakes living in my guts. Normally they are asleep, and I cannot even feel them. Sometimes, however, a single word, a single gesture is enough to wake them all up. They writhe and bite. I am filled with bitterness and fury. I lose control of myself. This is a malady of my profession. We all have it, and each of us is afflicted with it for years. A teacher very quickly gets used to his role and becomes addicted to the admiration of his students. The ceremonious silence during training is unconsciously perceived

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<sup>121</sup> Lao Che, “Stare Miasto”, from the album Powstanie Warszawskie, Ars Mundi 2005 (translation from tekstowo.pl).



as recognition, which deepens the feelings of exceptionality. For professionals, it is a poison which seeps into us for long years. On the mat, no one questions our words, no one undermines us. Everything is tainted with mental – and most of all physical – domination. That is a horrible mixture, especially for people who are weak. The venom gets into strong ones as well, however. Over the years, it will even seep through the bulwark of near-saintly humility. Drop after drop.

I do not know if I am strong or weak. I know that I have this disease, and it is my heaviest cross. The training has pulled me out of my complexes, it has made me mentally and physically strong, and has sharpened my awareness, but I have not managed to cope with the venom. During a conversation with a student, Chiba Sensei addressed the supposition that Aikido changes one's personality. I remember his distinct answer.

‘No. I have trained for 50 years and I am exactly as I was. My personality hasn't changed, I am just aware of it now.’

For 30 years on the mat, I have met many people, and I guarantee you that neither Aikido nor the training has changed anything. The mean ones are still mean, the jealous ones are still jealous, and the shy ones are still hiding in the corners.

While being addicted to the benefits of his position, the teacher needs to maintain functional relations with those who are like him. Most often, that breeds conflict. Scuffles and slights that play out over decades create deep-seated hatred. Chiba Sensei worked with many people over the years. Very often, the relationships within the framework of various federations ended with theatrical quarrels and the breaking of contact. Chiba Sensei was a man of passion and vision, a madman

who most certainly had difficulty with compromise and accepting others' opinions. In addition, he had a position which ensured his role as an authority. His legendary reputation, as well as his role as a leader, had put him on a pedestal. In the ranks of the other Japanese teachers, a few of them were sempai (senior) to him. With those men, he had never had an open feud.

I have made an effort to study those conflicts and to understand them. Chiba Sensei was not an ideal person. He had the same disease all teachers have. He also had a nest of snakes inside of him. However, his case was much more severe.

A young guy who already has black belts in judo and karate becomes a personal disciple of the legendary Ueshiba. He spends seven years with him. He speaks his language; he understands the local culture and the history of martial arts perfectly. He consciously chooses the life of a teacher. His marriage is arranged by O-Sensei. As Ueshiba's soldier, he travels to the ends of the world, abandoning his motherland. For decades he becomes an apostle of Aikido, living in poverty, without knowing the language or the cultures of countries in which he lives. Already, then, there are people around him who teach poorly and with no understanding. For decades, he fights in vain with interpretations that are empty and detached from reality. The more he fights, the more the mediocrity around him rises. Something which he loved and sacrificed his life to, in his eyes, has begun to mutate into a monstrous travesty. Back then the snakes must have already been growing inside of him. I think that this is why

he started to do zazen. Because zazen is the music that puts the snakes to sleep.

My grandma died when she was 86. At the end of her life, she made up with my mother, much to everyone's surprise. After 50 years of fighting, she lulled the snakes to sleep – or, perhaps, she outlived them and they finally died. A few months later, my grandma was dead. Just as if that hatred and passion and anger had fuelled her, giving her the power for life.

I look at senior teachers who still talk about little slights they received 40 years ago, and I see the venom dripping from their mouths. They are all sick with the same disease. In a world where there is, in theory, no competition, an atavistic need to establish a hierarchy gets into the bedrock. It bubbles up and boils there, uncontrolled and unpredictable. Under the Aikido land of love and harmony, an active volcano is seething. Sometimes an eruption destroys a big part of paradise, and the unicorns run around the meadow with burnt asses for a while.

I have known hundreds of teachers and every single one was sick with it. Only few of them could admit it, though. People are divided into those who look into the tissue after blowing their nose and those who never admit they could produce snot. How many nights was I unable to sleep because the snakes coiled and took over control? The only thing that changed were the people who were making me furious. Once, at university, I worked with a legendary karate teacher who had been a pioneer of his style in this part of Poland. Then, inevitably, the time of pioneers had passed and the younger



generation entered – more resourceful, better at understanding the way the market worked, perhaps greedier, perhaps simply cleverer. For a year I shared an office with that man, and for that whole year, he spent an hour every day telling me about his enemy, the student who had taken his place. This man has committed his life to his hatred. I am convinced that he talks to himself while he is driving. I looked at him and I knew I was sick with the same disease that I already had inside of me. My practice of misogi purification training in Japan has made me aware of that. I do not know if I unconsciously plunged into the nest, or if being there made me aware of being locked up in this cage, and that unless I broke out I could never go any further. That after almost 30 years I am still a slave to what others say about me.

The tether exists only when you believe it does. When an elephant is small, it is tied to a small stake in the ground. It tries to break free, but it is too weak. Then it grows up and the stake remains the same. The elephant no longer tries to get away, because it does not understand that it could easily pull up the stake. A dog which is let off the leash comes back when called. It doesn't run away because it doesn't know that it doesn't have to come back. Do I have that freedom? Can I break free from the venom? Or can I only observe and accept it? I do not want to be a victim of my own self. The venom devours me and takes control. And when you pass your 40th birthday with the tires screeching, it is even worse. You begin to sum up what you have already done. And if you have, as I do, a passion and a goal, you know how little you have actually accomplished. I like hard training. I do not mind if someone else is better than me; I am not bothered by fatigue, pain,

hunger or cold. The worst thing is that venom which I produce myself. Over the decades it has preserved everything: my muscles, bones, skin. Sometimes I wonder if I would survive without it. Sometimes it is gone for a long time, and I think that maybe my snakes have died. However, like an alcoholic, I am a slave to them. It will be this way until I die. They will keep me alive, or they will kill me – I don't know yet.

A few years ago, I felt that I had had enough. That I had created a prison of my own making. Like the hero of a horror movie, I was sitting at a table in a dusty room, the windows covered with thick curtains. In the armchairs around me sat dried-up corpses that I was constantly arguing with. The air was musty and still. I had been breathing that dust for many years. I could no longer leave that room, even though the doors were not locked. I began to break the bonds, titles and relationships that were fed by this stagnation.

The snakes are still there, but I feed them less often.

# Where Do The Monks Pee?

“ *Buddha’s heart, devil’s hands.*

– Japanese proverb

The second time Sensei came to Poland, it was as if he was returning back home. There was no sign of that kindly old man from a year ago. Now, a dark lord had come; I could already feel it at the airport. I did the best I could for those few days not to get into his black books and not to make any mistakes. We were handling everything well, but Sensei seemed to be searching for any problem, so I knew it was just a matter of time. In the end, it was me who messed it up.

That day, even though it was summer, it rained for the entire day. I remember the tapping of the rain on the roof, and that at that point I did not realise what it meant. For a few days now I had sent a student to help him to get to the dojo. Enraged, he had insisted that he knew the way. I had finally given in. But this day, it was raining, and it turned out that the umbrella in his flat was broken. Chiba Sensei had waited for some time, and then he came by himself – soaked, wearing his leather jacket. The leather had soaked through and he had massive stains on the shoulders of his keikogi. It was when I saw this that I understood: there would be no better occasion. I was under the impression that he was

even slightly pleased about it. I was severely berated, and then I stopped existing for him. He did not speak to me for a few days, he did not correct me during classes. He chose different people to present the techniques. He performed his own show. Everyone who has been through such a thing at least once knows that you cannot let go at that point; this is just the beginning of the test.

From the victim's perspective, there is not much you can do. Stay by his side and wait for it to pass. In taking care of him I was directly replaced by someone else, but I remained nearby, aware of my role as a whipping boy. I knew that if I went further away, he would start looking for me. It was this tension in waiting that he was after. A few days later, there was a wedding and then a reception party planned for Michal, one of the instructors. All of the teachers were invited. On the morning of that day, I stood helplessly in front of my wardrobe. Minutes earlier, I had found out that I would be seated next to Chiba Sensei and there was no way of changing it. My wife looked at me with pity in her eyes.

'Why are you so worried? It's a wedding; everyone will be nice.'

'You don't know him. Everything matters.'

'What are you talking about?'

'He doesn't have a suit, so he will come wearing just a shirt. If I come dressed the same, he will tell me off for not being elegant enough. If I wear a suit, he will tell me off for wearing when he is not.'

‘You are 40 years old’, said Kasia, tapping her finger against her forehead as if I was nuts. ‘He is a kindly old man – stop telling yourself all of those things.’

I knew that there was no point in explaining. In the end, I wore a shirt and jacket but no tie. I drove to the church; everyone was already there. Sensei with the other shihans in the front, all the rest in the rows behind. It was a small, wooden, rural church. The priest, aware of the character of our group, spoke nicely about Aikido and life. The mass had passed calmly and I watched with satisfaction as the legendary shihan kneeled and stood along with the crowd in a rural Polish church. Mrs. Chiba was observing everything with a great interest. The mass finished, and everyone exited the church apart from Sensei, who, attracted by the altar, went closer. I struggled through the departing crowd, and after a moment, we were left alone in the church. He looked at me, so I said, ‘I studied the history of the church, Sensei, so if you have any questions . . .’

‘Where is the toilet?’

‘Er . . . there is none. There are no toilets in a church’, I responded, pinned to the ground by this question.

‘So where do the monks pee?’ he snapped at me.

I spent my youth in churches. I made the pilgrimage to Czestochowa five times, I wrote my MA thesis on the history of monasteries, and that had never crossed my mind. Faeces, being profane, must be outside the place of sanctity, I thought. Later, on the Internet, I found dozens of discussions on this topic – apparently the dualism of sacred and profane is not



so prominent anymore. People are outraged by the lack of toilets. The world is changing.

We left the church, and Sensei looked completely shocked by the lack of a commode in a house of worship. One more cultural difference. Buddhism and Shintoism do not fight with the body and do not delineate good from bad. Right now, he was theatrically offended by me and the dualism of Christianity. We walked into the wedding hall, which was located next to the church. I noticed with horror that all of the teachers were seated at one table, while me, Kasia and Chiba and his wife were seated at another one. The rest of the places were occupied by the 20-something-year-old friends of the newlyweds.

In panic I found Michal and asked him to change the seating arrangements. Sensei doesn't like being surrounded by strangers and he isn't speaking to me. This is a recipe for a drama. Michal, however, was in a different world. He had just got married in a room full of shihan, and I soon understood that my efforts were futile.

I came back to the table where Kasia was talking with Mrs. Chiba. Sensei was sitting like a statue. I took my place next to him, waiting for an explosion. Kasia smiled at me, trying to lighten the mood. After a while Chiba Sensei glanced at me and winced. He touched my jacket and growled:

'What are you wearing? Now how do I look, next to you?'

I heard a deep groan from my wife, who finally understood the rules of this game.

'Jesus, that is so stupid', she sighed to me later.

I squirmed around like an eel. Sensei pretended that I wasn't there, but I couldn't leave him because someone had to keep his wineglass full. Apart from my little drama, the party was in full swing. And it soon turned out that every drama can get even more complicated. Someone turned on a microphone and now, one by one, we had to introduce ourselves. I translated it all to Sensei, and yet I felt no enthusiasm from him. The torture began; everyone slowly got up and said a few words about themselves. I sat thinking what I could do to not to make him do it. Seeing what was happening, Sensei went for a cigarette. It took some time, but he came back before his turn. I leaned into his and Mrs. Chiba's direction to say: 'Maybe I could introduce all of us . . .'

I don't know where I got that idea. He looked at me.

'No! I will introduce myself. I don't trust you. I don't know what you will say!'

When his turn came, he got up, coughed, and the room went silent. The aikidoka had been waiting for this, and people from outside our world already seemed to know that this was none other than the dark lord.

'I am BB. Big Brother, Bad Bladder, or Big Beast, and that' he pointed at Mrs. Chiba 'is, unfortunately, my wife'.

There was a stillness in which only Mrs. Chiba quietly and genuinely chuckled. Later, he said a few funny things and the room burst into laughter. Then, some creamy vegetable soup, broccoli I think, was served. It had little spheres of puff pastry floating on top. Sensei poked them with his spoon and looked at me.



‘What is this?’

I exchanged a hopeless look with Kasia. In Polish, we call them ‘pea puffs’, but they are not peas, not really puffs . . .

‘I don’t know’, I admitted.

‘You eat this, and you don’t know what it is? Sensei gloated.

Because of him I became a teacher – in the spirit of controlling my life, myself as an uke, taking care of what I say and eat. And at the same time, I stuffed my face with some foam balls, not even knowing exactly what they were made of. I lost that battle.

That same evening, I drove him to his house through the villages of Dolny Śląsk.<sup>122</sup> He sat silently in the back seat, together with his wife. I hoped that this evening with him would come to an end and that I could go back to the party and rest a bit. An oncoming car flicked on its high beams as it approached, and I instantly slowed down.

‘Something is wrong with your car – do you have lights?’ grunted Chiba Sensei from the back.

‘There is a police car in the next village, trying to catch drivers for speeding. This man just warned me. I’ve already slowed down.’ I said with resignation.

‘What nonsense is that? How can you warn people about the police? The police are there to help people.’

I didn’t know how to explain this to him. We are in a country where you do not trust the police, officials, or any regulatory

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122      Dolny Śląsk (Lower Silesia) is the northwestern part of the historical and geographical region of Silesia in Poland.

agency. We do not trust them; beyond that, we mistrust each other even more. We drove into the village.

‘Look, Sensei’, I pointed out the police car, hidden behind a little shop, with the policeman holding a radar gun. He looked with disbelief at me and then at the police car.

‘I give up, I don’t understand you.’ This time it was he who spoke with resignation.

## A Monument of Madness

“ *A nest (nidus) is built by animals mostly for protecting their young, but also for defending against an enemy or as a permanent shelter.*<sup>123</sup>

– The Great Universal Encyclopaedia, Illustrated, entry for “Nest”

**A** true dojo is always created around one person. It doesn’t matter if they are good or bad. It doesn’t matter how well trained they are. It is a manifestation of the ego of an individual. A dream, a plan, an idea, an ambition, a complex, a fascination, a need, a compulsion, a feeling of a duty – whatever the reason is – in the centre there is always one

<sup>123</sup> *Wielka Encyklopedia Powszechna Ilustrowana*, Warszawa: Drukar-nia A.T. Jezierskiego 1900, t. XXV, p. 248. Author’s translation.

person. I have seen this many times. The death of the teacher kills the dojo.

The physical death of a known teacher always breaks whole organisations. The motivational death of a teacher kills a dojo. Sometimes a place is transformed under the eye of another leader, but most often it withers and crumbles. Whenever Chiba Sensei left for a couple of weeks, the dojo would empty out. In the first week, a lot of people would show up out of habit, but then – less and less. After he retired, only few of them continued to go. The ones who had been there for him sailed into their own lives. I look at my own students and I wonder what would happen if I disappeared, died, broke my spine. Right now, my dojo is a melting pot. A hundred or so adults, a hundred children; workshops; classes for students, parents with kids; seminars on falling; free classes for kindergarten and schools; classes for universities and theatres. However, doing all of that is like trying to put on pants that are too small. Without me, all of my students would train twice a week and the dojo would return to being a ‘natural’ leisure club in a rented hall in some school. Only if someone takes on each form of responsibility – for bills, connections with other dojos and organizations – is there a chance for something more serious to survive. But does it make sense, and is it natural? There is nothing wrong with that. For me, this is a job and a passion – for them, it is only a passion. I like to read books, but I do not have to open a library.

I still have in my mind a scene from a dream I once had. Chiba Sensei, like the chief of a tribe, stands on a hill with a sword in his hands. In a moment there will be a final battle for life and death. Something he has prepared for his whole life,

which he has prepared his people for. He runs down the hill and, alarmed, turns back to look behind him. Instead of an army, he sees a group of obese kids with cardboard swords. Wearing paper hats.

‘It’s time to die!’ he shouts, trembling. There is no excitement from the crowd. You can hear:

‘What do you actually mean?’

‘I can’t today, I have to leave early.’

‘I’m allergic to pollen; I’d rather stay here.’

‘Is this covered by insurance?’

‘It’s not for real, though, is it?’

‘Why are the women in the second row?’

‘We spoke about this, and we agreed that maybe we’ll do it tomorrow.’

Sensei is shaking, devastated. He is on his own, no one understands him and no one wants to die with honour. He breaks through the sea of mediocrity and runs down the hill, alone. And here awaits the biggest tragedy: there is no enemy. There is no one who would wait for him with a sword. Perhaps he ran away? Perhaps he was never there? What is the point of this kind of life? In an endless sea of mundanity, searching for a reason to die with honour.

‘I know thy works, that thou art neither cold, nor hot. I would thou wert cold, or hot. But because thou art lukewarm, and

neither cold, nor hot, I will begin to vomit thee out of my mouth.<sup>124</sup>

This quote comes back to me, constantly showing the horrible power of uncertainty, mediocrity and indecision. A lukewarm and slimy mind. Because martial arts make no sense. You cannot explain it, and lukewarm mediocrity leads nowhere. Even we, as uchideshi, were with him like pilot fish, only for a time. We swam next to him, eating the leftovers and cleaning his dojo as we would the skin of a whale. He was a marathoner – we just accompanied him on his run for a moment. After some time, he either surpassed us or we changed our direction. Many stopped. His mission was not to whisper but to shout – shout with life. Not to accept mistakes; not to forgive hesitation. Throw people out from the dojo, fail them on their exams. To abhor stagnation, to generate conflicts and to scold people for fighting. To tear off their paper hats and hit them on the head with them. Chiba knew that a dojo could be a fake, comfortable illusion or an organic, terrifying place. To be the latter, it needs to devour people and vomit some of them up. And he knew that it would devour him first. That he would become, of his own accord, a mask, a symbol; he would de-humanise himself and walk away like a medieval king.

‘For this reason, many consider that a wise prince, when he has the opportunity, ought to create some enemies against himself, so that, having crushed them, his reputation may rise higher.’<sup>125</sup>

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124 The Bible, Revelations 3:15–16.

125 N. Machiavelli, *The Prince*, chapter 20. (Translation from <https://effectiviology.com/strategy-lessons-from-machiavelli-the-prince/>)



The wide-ranging drama and gossip which were arising about him built the dojo that he wanted; they assured his reputation much more than anything else. An income could not be the priority. Aside from being a place of study, the dojo was also a field for experiments and a sociological theatre where he performed his plays, as the needs of his organisation demanded. I am reminded of an iconic joke: A Soviet television station makes a movie about the kind-heartedness of Stalin. In one of the shots, a small child comes up to Stalin and says: 'Uncle, give me a candy.'

'Get out of here!'

In that moment the camera cuts to a placard that reads: 'And he could kill him!'

One theatrically expelled student was more useful for the structure of the dojo than accepting the manifestation of mediocrity among the advanced. Like that soldier from the special forces who was kicked out of the kenshusei (teacher training) programme for missing a class. It turned out that he had gone to a meeting with his combat friends. Chiba showed no mercy and he never took him back. That story, however, lived for decades as a warning. One way or another, to make a decision and stick to it. A fight with mediocrity and shabbiness. This is how I remember him.

The world today tries to wedge us into the role of a battery chicken on a farm. We are told what to eat, what to wear, what to do, what to buy. What is suitable and what is not; what to like; what is valuable and what is not. What is a waste of time and what is cool. It is easy to switch off, to float

on a lukewarm river in a mediocre lethargy, to be lifted by a dreamy current to the grave. In the lethargy of gaping at a TV; in the lethargy of Slavic mindlessness, picking sunflower seeds; in the lethargy of some small-town woman, sitting in a window on a pillow. Sensei dragged us out by our hair from this water and didn't let us go back. After his death, many started to go downhill from the cliff into a lukewarm river. We began to put in orderly, reasonable sentences what he had done to us, trying to dial it down and to understand. However, there is nothing to understand – you had to feel it. That was hitting the face of one who is asleep. It was not stuffing our faces with lukewarm pulp, but taking a red-hot potato in our hands. Who will stay on the shore, and who will drift away into the greyness? Do we really need a daddy all the time? Will his teaching become poison without him? Or do we have to kill the message because its creator has died, and now, naturally, we will change it all into an easy-to-swallow plastic symbol?

We will see.



CHAPTER THREE

# After

*To be continued...*