

Netherlands 2010 with Shimamoto Shihan

Prelude/ Breda

Our first destination after Amsterdam Schipol Airport is Root's house in Breda, where we are presented with a dazzling variety of dishes from a Chinese take-away - in this way, we can taste our Dutch surroundings not only in the comfortable warmly-lit dwelling complete with garden terrace and canal, but also through several Indonesian style dishes including saté chicken and peanut sauce.

As we dine buffet-style and drink - water, coke, Belgian beer - Katsuyuki Shimamoto Shihan honors his old friend Root's hospitality with a calligraphy scroll he has written for him and attached to a special base that appears to be woven out of bamboo straw. The scroll reads: 一輪名照禪心 (ichi rin mei sho zen shin) - 'one ring splendid moon shining zen mind', a sparkling message to open our trip.

We are then divided into the Bastion Hotel and our different host families where we receive a warm welcome, evening tea and conversations. Every morning, we get to feast on brown bread, pindakaas (peanut butter), and natural cheese for breakfast (the exact items I have been craving for, even among the divine host of exquisite Japanese cuisine that surrounds me daily), our own rooms and beds, and, more than anything, the pleasure to really get to know these wonderful members of our worldwide aikido family, people, who, without knowing anything about us, grant us shelter and food and bless us with their much valued friendship.

As Shihan repeatedly says throughout this trip: we are all like brothers and sisters. Then he pauses and re-adjusts his expression: OK, let's be honest, maybe it's more like I'm your grandfather. But his sweet humor aside, the point is: we are all one family. And this trip makes his message ring truer than ever.

First Training

Our first training is at Rob Sensei's 'Yoshida Dojo' in Uiden. His aikido group is called the Niseikan. The dojo is used together with a large variety of other martial arts groups including kyokushin karate, kickboxing, and MMA. A full-size boxing ring on one side, punching and kicking pads, as well as heavy bags along the walls clearly show the harmonious confluence of martial arts in this place. A spectators' watching bridge, comfortable lounge rooms, and a bar further testify that martial arts can, contrary to their misleading title and reputation, actually stimulate peaceful cooperation.

International Harmony

As the class gathers for a 90 minute training session, Shihan opens with a statement addressing just that aspect of aikido: harmony.

Harmony is difficult to put into words. But today, we have guests here from Germany, Belgium, Poland, Israel, and Croatia. The mere fact that so many nationalities are represented here shows that you are practicing harmony here in Holland.

Shizentai

'Shizentai' means 'natural body' or 'natural posture'. But in order to achieve it, we have to put in a lot of effort.

Miyamoto Musashi said: 'Kamae is no kamae.'

If you focus on your partner too much you will not be ready for attacks coming from other people.

If you watch your partner's right hand too closely, you will not be ready for attacks from his left hand or his legs.

Shizentai means to be as free as possible.

Your shoulder blades should be close to your spine and down. Keep your knees relaxed and ready to move. With your eyes, look at everything at once. Don't focus on one thing in particular. Your whole body should be straight and relaxed.

Hunching forward does not allow your body and mind to truly relax. A lot of the time, people hunch over, their arms swinging only in front of their bodies. Japanese yakuza (mafia) people tend to walk this way. They also get into a lot of fights.

If you walk straight and breathe calmly, you won't get into fights. Keep shizentai at all times.

Your Partner is Your Guest

1. 打ち水 Uchi-Mizu - Welcome

In Japan, we have a tradition to sprinkle water in the entrance hall of our house when we expect a visitor. You don't just dump a whole bucket. You put some water on your hands and sprinkle it evenly with your finger tips. You can't do it right before the guest arrives, because then the floor will be wet and slippery. But you can't do it too long before he arrives either, because then it will get dusty again. This custom is called 'uchi-mizu'.

In aikido, I always want you to think of your partner as a dear guest who is honoring you with a visit. So when he comes in for a pleasant exchange of energy (or for an attack if you want to put it that way) you should be ready for him. You should have sprinkled 'uchi-mizu' in your entrance hall just a little while ago. You should have everything prepared for his visit.

In aikido, this translates into the kind of 'non-kamae' Musashi suggested: do not be tense or focused on a certain attack to come in. Instead, simply keep a straight, open, welcoming posture. Kamae is no kamae. Another way of putting it is: Kamae is shizentai.

When your guest arrives, you invite him in. In aikido, this translates into inviting your partner in, exactly the way you want to receive him. Make it easy and pleasant for him to enter and attack you.

2. Exchange: 水の心 Mizu no Kokoro and 気の流れ Ki no Nagare

When your guest has followed you into the house, you have a pleasant time together, exchanging views and experiences, nourishing body and soul, connecting by way of respect in a peaceful exchange, creating and enjoying harmony.

In aikido, this is the 'main part' of the technique - the part we usually consider to be the whole technique. I hope after internalizing this story, you will gain a different view. This middle part of the technique should be dominated by 'mizu no kokoro' ('mind of water') and 'ki no nagare' ('ki flow').

'Mizu no kokoro' usually refers to the following image: picture a lake with a completely still surface. There is no breeze in the air, not a ripple in the water. When the water is that calm, the moon is reflected in it perfectly. If the moon is full, a perfect full moon is reflected in it. If the moon is a sickle, a perfect sickle moon appears. If there are waves in the water, however, the image of the moon is distorted and does not reflect the reality of the moon in the sky.

Your mind is the same. If your mind is calm, it perfectly reflects the reality around it, the impacts upon it. If there are waves and turbulences in your mind, it will not be able to grasp reality clearly but distort it into something else, making you unable to judge and react appropriately.

'Ki no nagare' can also be explained using water imagery, this time focusing on different qualities. Water can flow. It has the strength to punch holes into the hardest rocks, rinse out all dirt, and cleanse everything. It simply incorporates things in encounters into its flow and then keeps moving and flowing at its own pace. In this way, it is not limited.

It even has the power to cleanse your mind of impurities. It can rinse out the weakness lurking inside you that makes you want to look at your partner's hand and body, that makes you want to push, pull, and throw him, that makes you want to look cool and win.

Water has the strength to flush away this weakness. It can even flush away the impact of your partner's attack that would otherwise unbalance your system.

So using 'mizu no kokoro' and 'ki no nagare' you can emulate the powerful qualities of water to create harmony in your technique. Keep mind and body calm and flow.

3. 残心 Zanshin

After you have enjoyed a pleasant evening with your guest, you accompany him to the gate and say good bye. You watch him until he is out of sight. After he has turned the corner, or walked too far away for you to see him, you bow, thank him for coming and send a prayer: 'Please have a safe trip home and come again soon.' This is another tradition in Japan.

In aikido this translates into a concept called 'zanshin', or 'remaining mind'. After you have finished the middle part of the technique, it is not yet complete. Make sure your partner is where you want him to be, make sure you are still in control, make sure he is safe, and you are safe. Remain with your mind and center where you have come to see your partner off. This is the part where you send your prayer: 'Have a safe trip home, and come again soon.' This is 'zanshin'.

A True Master

Whenever Osawa Sensei asked me to be his uke, he would be very humble and kind about it, and invite me gently to grab his wrist. He would even hold and move his arm in a way that made it easy for me to grab it. He always bowed humbly.

There is a haiku that expresses an old Japanese teaching:

実るほど	Minoru hodo
頭が垂れる	Koabe ga tareru
稲穂かな	Inaho kana

As the grain ripens
The rice plant bows down lower.
Ready for harvest.

The more skill and status you acquire, the more humble you should get. A truly great master doesn't show off and treat his students roughly and disrespectfully. A true master is never arrogant and never puts himself above others. A true master bows down low and encounters everybody with respect and humility.

Seminar Training

如意 Nyo-i - This calligraphy by Shimamoto Shihan is hanging in front of the seminar hall in Breda. Shihan has given it to Root a long time ago.

What does it mean?

Really 如 (nyo) means 'like/as' and 意 (i) means 'intention/will'. So you could interpret this phrase to mean 'As you like it', or 'Do what you want'. But in my opinion, the 意 (i) part refers to the Buddha's mind, the Buddha's intentions, the Buddha's will.

So really, it means we should always try to live by his principles, and polish ourselves so we may learn how to express the true, pure heart of the Buddha that resides in all of us. We should be conscious and aware, and live to our full potential.

Heavenly Dango

Every one of you is the center of the universe. O-Sensei said 'I am a microcosmos of the universe.' O-Sensei was actually able to live this truth, as he had truly understood it. If you are the universe, nothing can stand in your way. Everything in your experience becomes the universe. You are in control. This is why O-Sensei was a god.

O-Sensei liked dango. Dango are a popular treat in Japan: sticky, sweet rice balls, about the size of crabapples. The most common variety we can buy are the so-called sakura-dango, or cherry blossom rice balls: three dango on a small wooden stick, a pink one, a white one, and a green one.

But O-Sensei's dango were exceptionally big. When HE ate dango, one of them was the sun. The next one the moon. And the third one was the earth. Then he sprinkled some stardust on them and enjoyed his treat.

Maybe if you try this snack, you will feel a little bigger. That is about how big I want you to feel. Each one of you is a microcosmos of the universe. If you can imagine yourself as the universe, there will be no fighting.

Softness Needs A Center

If I try to just be soft without using my center, my softness will be weak. But softness with a center is strong. Make sure you always remember this important difference. Doing soft techniques is good. But the softness needs a center. Otherwise it will be the wrong kind of softness and achieve nothing.

Molt and Breathe!

Even if we cannot immediately feel like the universe, let's approach this goal step by step. Start with small things. Don't just look at your partner or focus on pushing down his hand. Widen your focus. Try to keep your axis stable, and things will start revolving around you more smoothly. Let's leave our limited worlds behind, bit by bit, step by step.

Every time we manage to go one step further towards a big world, we are like a snake that sheds its skin in order to grow. Let's molt! Like the snake, let's molt again and again, each time making our world a little bigger.

So when you do a technique, don't just breathe in the air in front of your face. Like a freshly molted snake that now has space to breathe again, space for its lungs to stretch, breathe in the air, your partner, the stars, and the earth. Breathe in the whole universe!

Aim

If I could actually be the universe and execute limitless techniques, I would no longer be myself, so I can't really achieve this while I'm still myself. But what we all CAN do is to AIM to become the universe and AIM for our techniques to become limitless.

Respectful Alignment

When I sit down in front of O□-Sensei at the beginning of our session, I align my center with his, so my center line becomes a continuation of his center line. When you sit down in front of our founder, align your center with his, face him and feel as close to him as if to say 'OK, then, come on, O□-Sensei!' (Here, Shihan uses English)

This is a form of paying respect, a type of etiquette in Japan, so when you train with your teachers and bow to them, please try to align your center with theirs.

Thirsty

You're all doing quite well, but one mistake I still notice is that you are focusing too much on your partner. You are creating a very small, very limited world when you simply think about this partner and this hand, when your only concerns are: 'How can I move this hand?', 'How can I throw this person?'

Think outside the box and enter the circle. Create a circle of ki. Put your partner in your circle, your sphere of influence. Absorb him and his attack – only then are you free to do with it whatever you like. If you reject his attack, you will never be able to control it.

When you drink your partner into your sphere, don't absorb your partner only. Drink in the earth and the stars, the whole universe.

Big World, Small World, Your World

To do a good katame in ikkyo□, all I have to do is be in the right place, put one knee here in my partner's armpit once he is lying on the tatami, place the other by his wrist – not on top of it – and open my knees a little further. Maintain shizentai: straight, good posture. Then, form a circle with your arms and turn up your palms as they descend, the whole earth inside your center.

It is impossible for him to get up, but he doesn't feel angry or irritated about being in that position. He doesn't think 'O no, I've been defeated!' So he doesn't fight back. This is because I'm maintaining shizentai, doing a big waza.

If I try with all my might to push down his arm, this tiny person's tiny arm, I narrow down my world and my sphere of influence. It doesn't work. I fight, he feels it. He becomes irritated, fights back, and can easily get up. Because now I'm not maintaining shizentai. I'm focusing on just one tiny little detail. I'm doing a small waza.

Expand your world. Expand your sphere of influence. If you are the universe, nothing can go against you, and the concept of fighting is eliminated.

Training in Amsterdam

On our last day in the Netherlands, before our departure to Warsaw, we get to do some sightseeing in Amsterdam. While I meet my sister who has come over from Germany for the day, and simply walk through Amsterdam's colorful, gracht (canal)-lined city center with her, Shihan, Mama-san, and the others go on a boat trip. The beautiful old boat impresses Mama-san so much, she keeps talking about it long after we get back to Japan.

In the evening, we train in a sports hall. Mats have to be laid out and returned to the storage room for every training. It is a good sized hall, but once again, large numbers of people have gathered to be taught by Shihamoto Shihan, today's special guest, making this class a very cozy experience.

What is Shizentai?

'Shizentai' means 'natural body' or 'natural posture', but this does not mean we should just let ourselves adopt sloppy postures following our lazy impulses.

Shizentai means:

- moving your shoulder blades close together and down

- relaxing your shoulders
- letting your hands swing both behind and in front of your body when you walk
- keeping your center and your balance
- breathing out in a long, thin stream, and about 3 to 5 times as long as you breathe in
- keeping your knees relaxed so you can move in any direction whenever you want
- keeping your field of vision wide and all-inclusive
- relaxing body and mind
- making your world as big as the universe, not as small as your partner's hand and your petty impulse to push it down.

Always try to maintain shizentai.

How to Win

According to the famous ancient Chinese strategist Sun Tzu ('The Art of War'), there are 3 types of victory.

The least skillful one is to simply fight your opponent and win.

The second one is to win against your opponent and then fight him. This sounds like a difficult concept. But what it means is simply this: make sure you train more, have better weapons, and generally put yourself in a position that ensures you have the advantage when you fight. Then you fight, and, naturally, you win.

But the highest, most sophisticated level of victory is to win against your opponent without fighting.

In my opinion, to achieve this, we first have to master the type of victory we are looking for in aikido: win against yourself - against your own flaws and weaknesses. This is your first task in aikido.

My name is Shimamoto, and I am a Flawed Human Being

I have been training aikido for 50 years, and still I have a lot of flaws and weaknesses. It is really embarrassing. I am standing here in front of you - and somewhere inside me, there is this voice of weakness that tells me to make sure I do great techniques and look good. But really, this is not the point. I need to overcome this impulse and be natural.

Also, there is a really strong man with a wooden sword standing next to me. Of course the voice of my inner weakness tells me to look at him, to check out his mighty sword and prepare myself, to think about a good counter for a possible attack. Somewhere inside me, this weakness that lets my partner steal my composure lingers on. Once again: I need to overcome this and simply be natural, look at everything, and not expect anything in particular.

Each time I beat a piece of my weakness and manage to overcome it I get a little bit closer to Ohsawa-Sensei, and O Sensei. But I am just a normal human being full of flaws. I don't consider it my task to teach you perfect techniques. I won't say: Do nikyo like this or kotegaeshi like that. You can learn great techniques from videos and books.

I consider it my task to open myself up in front of you as a weak human being full of flaws, and do the best that I can to SEARCH for the perfect aikido - together with you.

OK, so I have flaws and weaknesses. I need to be open about it, identify them, and figure out strategies to overcome and win against them.

Remember, this dojo is a safe place where all of you can do that. Don't try to cover your flaws. Open yourself up and start identifying and overcoming them. Your partners are here to help you with that.

Catching the Bullet - Catching Ki

There are always three stages to any attack. It is the same in golf, baseball, sword fighting, and weaponless fighting. Even with a gun, it is the same.

- 1) The thought of attack, the intention, the 'ki' occurs.
- 2) The preparation move: the bat is swung back, the sword lifted, the trigger pulled
- 3) The attack materializes: the bat hits the ball, the sword comes down, the bullet comes flying

If you only notice you are being attacked at the third stage, it will be too late. It is best to catch your opponent's ki, his first thought of attack: the first stage.

In order to achieve this, keep shizentai. Wide field of vision, calm breathing, relaxed shoulders, knees, body, and mind.

You can practice this by having your partner attack with shomen-uchi from 3 or 9 o'clock. Open your field of vision wide. When you sense his thought of attack, lift your arms, stretch your hand towards his face. But never look to the side. Don't let him steal your composure.

5 Points for Iriminage

Last time I was here, I said O Sensei passed on these teachings to me mouth to mouth. In Japanese we have a word called 口伝 (kuden), written with the characters for 'mouth' and 'transmission', so somehow I associated this with the phrase mouth-to-mouth I had heard somewhere. Everybody laughed at me. Afterwards, somebody

explained to me what I had said, but by that time it was too late. So here are the legendary mouth-to-mouth teachings for irimi-nage.

- 1) Enter your partner's space, his dead angle, where he can't see you.
- 2) Create a wave motion that rises and falls. Create a wave that lets your partner surf but then smoothly delivers him directly to the beach.
- 3) Keep an iron ring with your arms. Not a tense ring, but an unbreakable circle of flowing ki. It can become tilted, but it needs to remain intact.
- 4) Fold your partner into your sphere of influence, no matter what size he is, so you can deal with him comfortably.
- 5) Turn your fingertips down at the end.

Be A Good Partner

Shihan invites Pawel Z. to be his uke.

Training with Pawel is always very bright and pleasant. This is very important in aikido. If you are like this (he slouches down and looks tired, beaten down by his problems, annoyed at the prospect of doing anything or being dealt another dose of human scum), your partner is not going to enjoy training with you, and neither are you! Make your training bright and pleasant. This is your responsibility. Make it enjoyable.

Keep Your Hair

Grab my hair!

Shihan's uke is at a loss. Shihan's head is shorn. Shihan laughs and takes his hand. Pretend!

In this situation, it is our first impulse to pull away. It is our weakness as human beings to react this way, to try and separate his hand from our head. But if you pull his hand away, the whole thing turns into a struggle. He is pulling your hair, and it hurts.

So instead of rejecting the attack, accept it. Aikido is not rejection but acceptance. Take the attack. Put your hand on top of his - keep his hand close to your head and bow - just like you do in a greeting - bow thank you.

This way, there is no fighting, and you're safe. No pain. The problem flies right over your head. Keep his hand, keep your hair!

Summary

Right now, whatever you are doing, check your stance and posture. Are you breathing calmly? Is your field of vision wide? Are your shoulders relaxed? If the answer is yes, you are in control of the situation. If the answer is no, try to pay attention to these points, and you will gain control.

It is quite normal to get nervous in front of people and want to look great. It is also quite normal to be scared of a strong looking opponent or a weapon, and to let these things take away our composure. I have these problems, too. So it is not my place to tell you what to do. I myself am full of flaws.

What I think is important is to become more and more aware of our own weaknesses and train hard to overcome them. Aikido is training to win against yourself, not against others.

So when I say I 'teach', I do not want to teach you my aikido, or my way of doing certain techniques. I just want to search for the best possible aikido together with all of you. All I'm doing in these classes is suggest certain strategies we can use to tackle common human flaws.

We should constantly work on improving ourselves, always be the best people we can be, and always work on widening our horizons, on opening up our worlds. Molt!

Every one of you is the core of the universe. If you let yourself get lazy and sloppy, this is extremely rude towards the universe. It will fall apart. Always maintain a good, stable axis around which the universe can revolve smoothly and comfortably.

Whether you sit or stand, walk, or do anything else, always maintain shizentai, a 'natural posture', but not a posture dictated by laziness. A good straight posture that lets human beings use their natural gifts to the fullest.

Best

After the last training in the Netherlands this time, we drive back to our respective homes. In the car, Shihan asks: 'How was this class?' 'Very nice!' I answer. He says: 'I think this was the best class on this trip.'

He is happy to have talked about his own weaknesses, about the fact that the dojo is a safe place for all of us to open up, to discover our flaws, and work on overcoming them.

'Every time I come here, I teach with the thought in mind that this could be the last time.' I let the weight of these words sink into my heart. The statement sounds like an autumn leaf falling. A beautiful dance, a sad good bye, the essence of living life to the full and giving it everything you have, everything nature has given you.

'Some things need to be told again and again. Every time, they sound new to the person who hears them. Some things can only be understood when you are at a certain point in your life. Others are simple but difficult. Shizentai is a topic we need to deal with throughout our lives. So I won't stop talking about it. I'm happy. Today was the best training on this trip.'

Dance!

Another calligraphy Shihan has written several times, presents to give to the treasured members of his European aikido family, reads:

和敬清寂 wa kei sei jaku

人と和 hito to wa

天地と和 tenchi to wa

人と舞い hito to mai

天地と舞う tenchi to mau

Wa Kei Sei Jaku are four principles devised by Sen no Rikyu, the inventor of the tea ceremony: Harmony, Respect, Cleanliness, Calm.

The rest is a poem, his message to us, his students, his international aikido family:

Harmonize with others.

Harmonize with Heaven and Earth.

Dance with others.

Dance with Heaven and Earth.

Let's honor his wish, brothers and sisters. Listen to the melody of the clouds flying by, the rhythm of the earth revolving beneath our feet, the harmony oscillating between them. Joining them is only natural. What do you think?

Shall we dance?

