**IoA Summer School 2018**

The 2018 IoA Summer School was held at Oatridge Agricultural College in Ecclesmachan, near Edinburgh. It ran from Saturday, 11th August to Saturday, 18th August under the direction of Sensei Lawson Moore and Sensei William Timms.

As a rather junior Kyu grade, I had mixed feelings about attending: although I have become exceedingly enthusiastic about all-things-Aikido and was keen to extend my knowledge and experience, I experienced some disquiet in wondering whether my current level of proficiency would be adequate to sustain me throughout the week.

Late last year, I had the good fortune to discover The Hut Dojo: the place, as I have learnt, where it all began for the IoA with Sensei Haydn Foster, who I never had the privilege to meet, but about whom I have heard so many extraordinary things.

Since joining the Hut Dojo, I have benefited from some outstanding tuition and guidance from my Sensei Tanith Barry, Sensei Paul Foster-Dent and of course, the redoubtable Tommy Tonner and all the Dan and Kyu grades who have been exceptionally generous with their time, knowledge and experience.

Sensei Tanith Barry and the other Dan grades had told me that I would really enjoy the week and not to worry that I was too junior to participate. Tommy Tonner also said that many things would be heard and seen, some of which would resonate more for each participant than others – more of that later.

I arrived in Oatridge as Saturday’s afternoon class was coming to an end, was allocated my room and then joined the large and diverse group (Dan and Kyu grades from Dojos around England, Ireland and Scotland) for dinner.

The facilities and venue are ideal: with excellent accommodation (and good laundry facilities) and catering and just a short walk to the Dojo: one omission on my part, emphasised by the occasionally inclement Scottish weather, was the lack of appropriate footwear!

There was also a common room for use in the evenings and this gave the welcome and valuable opportunity to start to get to know some colleagues from other Dojos.

What an astonishing and memorable week!

The course structure was exceptional, with early morning classes before breakfast, followed by the morning sessions up to lunch time, then the afternoon classes until dinner and the added bonus of additional evening classes. There were two free afternoons in the week and certainly for someone of my years, whilst the spirit stayed the course, it was rather welcome to have a little down time in order not to test the body too much!

There was a huge variety of classes, with the instruction – weapons and open-hand - being provided by the Dan grades from the Shinbukan Dojo in Ireland (with instruction also delivered by John Payne), though to Steve Colvill of the Iwama School in Scotland and thence to numerous Dan grades from Scottish and English Dojos and of course, Sensei Timms and Sensei Lawson.

The atmosphere was quite exceptional: a very special group of people, each on their own journey and all of whom had come to Aikido at different points in their lives for their own unique reasons. There was a palpable common bond: everyone seeking something and uniting on the mat in a spirit of fellowship, camaraderie, respect and love of what I start to understand is a quite unique and holistic discipline - a pursuit of balance in a world where this may often appear to be in short supply and embracing physical, spiritual and mental strands.

What was covered?! I missed Sensei Timms’ Mike Opaque demonstration and also his Kokyu Nage class for Kyu grades, but was able to participate in pretty much everything else: from the very subtle to the “way too much information to take on board”; covering both static and dynamic and everything in between; spiced-up Bokken Kumitachi; the pairing of the 20 Jo Suburi; insights - big and small; enhancement and improvement of techniques; rationale for techniques and responses to them; unbendable arm and flexible wrist; adjusting and responding according to the strength and resistance of an opponent; slightly accentuating aspects of techniques to great effect; keeping a technique tight to prevent your own Tanto being used against you; posture, lightness and movement; new techniques and combinations, to name but just a few! Some techniques I had seen or practised before, whilst others were entirely new.

I tried and hopefully, in some small way, succeeded, to appreciate a little more of what my Sensei and training colleagues have been seeking to impart. It would not be true to say that I have remembered everything, because there was just too much there – too much content and too much behind it.

Perhaps, much to the amusement of others, I did experience a couple of light bulb moments during the week. But my Sensei Tanith Barry, Tommy Tanner and colleagues were so right – even all these weeks afterwards, when reflections have been distilled down, even at my junior level, there are particular things that I will remember and will actively seek to apply when I return to the mat.

What were my overriding take-aways from the week, apart from Sensei Timms’s suspect jokes?! The welcome and support from all grades and the encouraging of junior students like me, to seek to improve and enhance knowledge, understanding and technique.

It was also very apparent what an exceptional grounding The Hut Dojo has afforded me, in all respects.

In some small way, the real impact of some things became clear. How keen I am to continue this journey and how I suspect that many people may become good friends.

Epilogue

Unfortunately, on the Thursday afternoon, I had an accident and broke my right clavicle. I mention it only, because at my age, had it occurred with any other activity or sport, my probable response would have been to call time and try something else.

Not that I am particularly surprised, however, but this is not the case and I cannot wait to resume and return to the mat. My hope is to resume training in earnest next January and my intention is to attend next year’s Winter and Summer schools: it is particularly good to know that the latter will be held at the same venue as this year. If you have not attended, then I urge you to do so: it is a quite unique experience and privilege to share the mat and time with such individuals during these courses.

Finally, and with no sense of immodesty: before my premature departure, I was quite astonished to be awarded the Brian Davies Memorial shield. In having accepted this honour and also being given the opportunity to pen this personal recollection, I would like to dedicate it to my Sensei and colleagues at The Hut Dojo: it was, after all, their achievement to open my eyes to the road that leads somewhere in Aikido.

***Philip Spanos, 5th Kyu, The Hut***