

# My brother, the Aikido slave

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In my early days in Aikido, my eldest sister could never understand why I would subjugate myself to my Sensei. She found it comical and would joke that “You’re his slave”. The whole Yoshinkan education process of following commands without question even if you didn’t understand or agree was too much for her, and understandably. We were brought up to respect authority, but to think for ourselves, it was ok to challenge other people’s views, belief and faith, but logic and reason were ultimately king. So how can these potentially opposing standpoints coexist with especial regard for the role of deshi? I hope to explain in this article.

When I found Aikido, I completely fell in love with it on my very first lesson. I quickly found myself training every lesson available on almost every day of the week. If you pardon the pun, I threw myself into training, which in those days was without conversation. Each lesson was only punctuated by Japanese commands and technique names, rarely would you hear any description, reason or analysis of technique and students would never talk. This format created a ‘here it is, just do it’ approach, you didn’t question, analyse or debate anything. Much as this method of teaching has its failings it also had its benefits. Students didn’t cloud technique with thought; they simply worked to replicate that which they saw. This lack of ‘self’ can have some extraordinary benefits in the martial arts world.

During this period I found myself in the enviable position of being selected as uke for a number of world class Sensei. In a couple of cases this relationship developed into something known as a deshi.

A deshi is best described as a disciple of a Sensei. The term Uchi Deshi is used for a disciple that lives in the residence of their teacher, with soto deshi or simply deshi for one that lives apart from their teacher.

As a deshi you give and commit far more of yourself than that of the other students. A deshi’s education continues equally off the mat than on and so training becomes one of life rather than simply aikido technique. There is no handbook available when becoming a deshi, you do not get a list of things to do and learn, you stumble and fall and must stay awake and aware to detect the things that you are doing wrong and the things that are right. To become a deshi is to follow a path to an awakening, a clarity of life, and a connection with your teacher and others. I believe that this opportunity for me has been the single most important part of my development in Aikido and arguably life.

A deshi is responsible for learning everything that their Sensei has to teach and more importantly everything that the deshi has within them to learn, with the implicit expectation that someday the deshi will pass on these teachings to others.

Although it would seem to be counter intuitive, it is not ultimately about the wisdom of the teacher, but about what the deshi learns about themselves. The deshi relationship simply offers the opportunity to peel back the layers of ego and resistance that we have created or been imposed upon us in life to find a deeper understanding of Aikido, cultivate a better sense of humanity and connection with the world.

To achieve this deshi will typically undergo a level of training beyond that of the regular student. So what might a deshi do?

- Drive Sensei to all classes and events. In fact anywhere he wishes to go
- Be uke at all classes and demonstrations
- As uke position yourself correctly and supply correct weapons as required
- Wait outside the dojo to greet Sensei
- Carry Sensei's bag
- Protect Sensei (this might seem strange at first as logic would dictate that Sensei is the most proficient to do this)
- Ensure that Sensei has food and drink and that the drink is kept topped up (there is a whole etiquette around the drink piece)
- Open doors for Sensei
- Fold Sensei's hakama
- Organisational administration
- Etc...

Now that I have given you a list I must tell you that the items in themselves are unimportant and irrelevant, it is the opportunity that they afford the deshi that are important. Even more so, it is not the action itself, but when the action has to be performed that is important, and here lies the point, each of these actions must be performed **just as they are needed**, not a moment sooner or later and maybe before the Sensei has even thought about it himself

To exemplify this, Ando Shihan Sensei tells a story that in his early days at Hombu dojo in Japan the uchi deshi were told to answer the office phone, not just answer it, but answer it before it rang, to pick it up even after one ring was too late and the deshi would be scalded - Strange, how can this be achieved you no doubt think?

In another example he explained that the room that the deshi resided in was at the opposite end of the corridor from Kancho Gozo Shioda's office, in the middle was a door to a toilet. Should Kancho Sensei leave his office to go to the toilet, the deshi were expected to be at and open the door to the toilet at that very moment, but should they wait to see his office door open they would never make it in time to get to the toilet door - Again how can they possibly achieve this then?

I would imagine that these examples will polarize readers into one of two camps; the first group will be the; why would I want to do that (elder sister syndrome) and logically it can't work, it's not possible and therefore I wouldn't try to do it. Then of course there are those of you that read this with a sense of challenge with a desire to just 'do it' in the words of Nike with the expectation that you will find the answer if it's there.

By trying to answer the phone before it rang the deshi found that the phone would make a barely perceptible click before it started to ring, something that initially they had not noticed. Now that they were aware of this they could pick up the phone before it rang, a layer had been peeled back.

To be able to reach the toilet door at the correct time for Kancho Sensei the deshi realised that Kancho's Sensei's office door mechanism clicked as he held the handle from the other side giving them sufficient time to cross the distance to the door, a layer had been peeled back.

In my days as a deshi you would always wish to carry Sensei's bag, in fact this training never ends but that is a discussion for another day. You would therefore make it your goal to pick it up when he arrived or had finished changing and deliver it to the correct place in the dojo or to his (or your) car. To start with you would be like a child, unaware of yourself and others, you would not position yourself to succeed, bump into others and amusingly if you grabbed the bag too soon you would be told to let go and Sensei would take it himself. Of course try and pick it up too late and again obviously you have failed, and I wouldn't suggest trying to take it off of Sensei once he has it, although I've seen this done also.

In another example as an Aikido class ended, Sensei would go to the edge of the mat and take off his hakama and prepare to fold it. As students you are happily thanking your fellow aikidoka whilst positioned in seiza, with limited vision and possibly disconnected from all apart from the person you 'Osu!' But to be deshi is to thank the other students whilst knowing where all the students are, if a visitor is in the dojo as Sensei may go and talk to them, of course where Sensei is, how far he has progressed in removing his hakama and ensuring that your position is correct to reach the hakama in time. Reach it too late and you will politely be told to leave it, whilst reaching it too early and Sensei will give you the look of "Yes, what can I do for you!"

As you can see timing and awareness are key to achieving these first steps. The longer your practice the more you become innately sensitive to your Sensei's needs, your awareness increases and then importantly it begins to flourish, you start to see the needs of others. You are now able to help others and better connect with people. This is the awakening.

You also start to better 'see' threats before they develop into problems as you are now aware of the 'clicks'. If you continue to practice you eventually begin to live with your eyes open rather than just opening them for particular actions. There is a great example of this in the Akira Kurosawa film 'Seven Samurai', where prospective recruits must enter a room to be interviewed. A young samurai is ordered to hide behind the door and strike the recruits as they enter. A 'samurai' recruit enters the room unaware of the test and is immediately struck on the head. He is totally unaware of how or why this happened. Another samurai approaches and as he nears the doorway pauses, detecting the threat and decides not to enter the room – he anticipated the attack and so avoided the need for physical combat.

So to be deshi is to neither be a regular student nor an instructor, it is to put your Sensei first, others second and yourself last. To think about others you need to put your own subordinate desires and thoughts to a lower level. This modus operandi systematically strips back the layers of opacity to reveal life without agenda, it subjugates ego whilst developing humility and with awareness comes the opportunity to connect with people and one would hope change the world.

So to be deshi is to be given a great opportunity; at one end of the spectrum it is to improve one's Aikido and gain insight that other students do not get to see and at its extremity it can change your life and that of others for the better.

Of course in the eyes of my sister this will always be an act of self-imposed slavery.