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World Oyama Karate

Honbu Newsletter

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Sweet Home... Alabama

By Founder Saiko Shihan Y. Oyama



My Chi Explodes With the Coming of Spring

Throughout the last decade, everyone has been talking about global warming. However, the past winter seemed especially cold. Not just here in the Deep South, but across the entire country. There were a few days in which every state, with the exception of Hawaii, had measurable amounts of snow on the ground at the same time. Birmingham saw two snow storms this year, one of which had substantial accumulation. In the past ten years, we haven't seen much snow, but this year we saw it twice. I wondered at times if spring would ever come, but at last it did. And so I set off on my trip to Japan and New Zealand. The following are some highlights from my travels.

March 18

I went to Japan to conduct the annual spring training clinics and promotion testings. I did one in Tokyo and the other in Himeji, in southern Japan. Senpai Karl took me to the airport at 7:00 a.m. so we could beat the traffic. We got there in plenty of time and he kicked me out of the car, raising his arms in celebration before driving back home to take a nap. From Birmingham, I made a connecting flight in Atlanta, then on to Tokyo.

Back when I reserved my ticket, my travel agent had told me that the flight from Atlanta to Tokyo wasn't crowded, so I'd have plenty of space to relax. But when I got to Atlanta, the flight was overbooked. We all crowded into the jumbo jet—a decrepit relic from the past. Most planes used now on international flights are hi-tech, with video monitors on the back of every headrest. The seats are newly designed to give optimal comfort. But this old jumbo had only a few tiny monitors

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hanging overhead and seats that seemed especially uncomfortable from the amount of people jammed into the cabin.

But I stayed positive. I read my book and went over everything I'd be teaching in the clinics. One of the good points of a trip like this is it gives you time to think clearly. By getting out of my regular environment, I can see things from all angles, like someone standing on top of a mountain and seeing the vast stretches of land below. I wrote things down in my notebook, and the time passed. But after a couple hours, I was through with all that.

I tried to find other things to do for the remainder of the 13-hour flight. I attempted to watch the movies on the screen, but the monitor was too old and too far away to see anything clearly. I went back to reading my book, sometimes meditated, and little by little the hours passed until we finally reached Narita airport.

March 19

When I landed in Tokyo, Shihan Goda, Sensei Kaobe and Sensei Naoi were waiting for me. Narita airport is in the heart of Tokyo, which has bumper-to-bumper traffic worse than New York. If we'd driven to my hotel, it would've taken about a month, so we opted for the express train. The trains in Tokyo run all through the city; not like the Amtrak trains here in the U.S. During the morning rush, a train will stop at each station every 30 seconds. I was born and raised in Tokyo, but after living in the U.S. for so long, I find the train system overwhelming and confusing. When I was growing up, there were actual people at the station who would take the tickets, but now the turnstiles and everything else is computerized. If you make a mistake when inserting your ticket into the machine, it clamps down on you like something out of a Sci-Fi movie.

Anyway, the train ride to the hotel took about an hour and a half. We got there with just enough time for me to check-in, take a shower and change clothes before heading off to my favorite restaurant/pub—*Kitahachi*. Going there is always one of the best parts of my trip. If you ever go to Japan, I'll make sure to take you. The four of us ate, drank and talked and had a great time.

March 20

I spent the majority of the day in a jet-lag fog. I met my publisher for a lunch meeting around 11:00. I talked about a lot of things that I can't remember now. Other people said things to me, but I just nodded without really listening. At about 3:00 we shook hands, and they said "Thank you". So I guess we were able to communicate well enough about whatever it was we discussed.

March 21

Sensei Ishikawa and Sensei Masa got me from the hotel in the morning. We headed over to the gym for the clinic and promotion testing, which was scheduled to start at 12:30. I still felt groggy, but when we got to the entrance, Shihan Suzuki and all the Black Belts were already lined up at attention. When they saw me, they shouted, "Osu!" Their energy and power woke me up, and I thought, "Yes! Let's do it—let's sweat!"

The clinic was for students above green belt. We covered Kata, Kihon and Kumite. I was really impressed



The Quality of Th

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with the teenagers. Their movements were so sharp and I could feel their eagerness to soak up whatever I taught. The training was great and lasted for about two and a half hours. We took a 10 minute break, and then started the promotion.

There were a lot of younger guys and a couple older ones (but still much younger than me) who were trying for promotion. They all tried really hard. At promotions, I always ask students what their favorite Kata is. Lots of them pick more advanced Katas, thinking it will impress me. But these Katas have been passed down through the centuries—sometimes the meanings of particular movements are not very clear. So, I ask the student, “What is the purpose of this movement?”

“Um...attacking.” Their answer is so abstract.

“Yes, I know, but attacking how?”

“Uh, uh, attacking the opponent.”

“Of course you’re attacking the opponent. But what are you doing exactly?”

“Osu, um, uh, attacking the stomach.”

I just shake my head and say, “Nevermind.” Conducting clinics is very exciting, but promotions can be exhausting. I have to watch every movement of each student and read what kind of habits they have, how their training has been up unto that point, what they need to work on in the future. Doing all of that takes tremendous energy.

We finished about 5:15. I took a quick shower and went to catch a train to Shihan Goda’s 70th birthday party, which was supposed to start at 6:30. Sensei Ishikawa took me to the station, bought my ticket, and explained to me how to get there. He offered to go with me, but I told him, “No, no, no. I can handle it, I’m fine.”

But I was wrong.

I got off at what I thought was my stop. Shihan Goda was supposed to be waiting for me, but he was nowhere around. I waited and waited, but never saw him. I didn’t have a cell phone to call him. Payphones have been pretty much phased out in Tokyo, but even if I



These Young Students Makes Me Excited for the Bright Future Ahead

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What Are You Doing Here!? You Coming to America? Yes, I *am* From Alabama. I'm Te

could've found one, I didn't know his phone number. So, in the end, I just bought another ticket and went back to my hotel. I got there about 7:00, completely worn out.

March 22

Shihan Suzuki came for me at 5:30 so we could take the *Shinkansen* (bullet train) to Himeji. The bullet trains run across much of Japan and travel at speeds around 200 mph. Before boarding, we bought a *bento* (boxed meal) from a kiosk at the station. (Whenever I visit Japan, I look forward to seeing my friends and relatives, but I'm just as excited by all the wonderful food). The seats on the train were really comfortable, and we sat down and ate our meal. Shihan Suzuki explained the day's schedule: 12:00 lunch with the Branch Chiefs, 1:00 – 3:00 clinic, and 3:00 – 5:00 promotion. We finished eating and drank some tea (I missed McDonald's coffee). Things were quiet for a few minutes. I turned to ask Shihan Suzuki a question, but he was already snoring. That's his special technique. No matter where he is, he can sit down, *mo-kuso*, and fall asleep. I tried to sleep, but couldn't. I just gazed out the window at the passing mountains and countryside.

After about three hours, we arrived in Himeji. Shihan

Yamamoto and the other Branch Chiefs met us and took us to lunch. We ate at a noodle shop that had been around for more than 100 years. I wasn't very hungry, but ate anyway. Afterwards, all the Branch Chiefs reported on the status of their dojos. Overall, things were good, but the state of the economy had slowed things down for most of them.

We then headed over to the Himeji Budokan, for the clinic and promotion. The Budokan holds all types of martial arts events (Judo, Karate, Kendo, etc.). The exterior is very modern, but inside everything is very traditional with hardwood floors. It's a beautiful complex multiple venues for events, each with seating for spectators.

The clinic was supposed to be for advanced students only. But somehow, five 5/6 year-old white belt kids had shown up. Along with them were their parents, grandparents, brothers and sisters, all eager to watch. They held cameras and smiled and bowed to me as we entered. I looked at Shihan Yamamoto, he looked at Shihan Suzuki, Shihan Suzuki looked back at me, I looked back at Shihan Yamamoto. Shihan Yamamoto looked at his Black Belts, they looked at each other, and back at him, he looked back at me. Where had these kids come from? I felt like telling the parents,

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Teaching You Karate, so You Better Kiai!

“Sorry, this clinic is just for advanced students.” But how could I? They were all so excited and smiling. So I just started the clinic anyway. I had planned on going over advanced Katas, but I decided to make everyone sweat. I partnered the Black Belts with the white belt kids. I jumped on the Black Belts, and they jumped on the kids. Some of them almost started crying, but I just shouted, “Oisha! Kiai, kiai! Go, go!” We finished two hours later. The parents took pictures of me with their kids. We smiled and bowed to each other, and they left. Then we had the promotion test.

After everything was finished, we went to a Chinese restaurant for dinner. Spring is a peak holiday season in Japan, so the restaurant was crowded. We sat in a small room, shoulder to shoulder. The food was already laid out on the tables. I fixed my plate first, then everyone else jostled each other to fix theirs. Afterward, I took the three-hour bullet train back to my hotel in Tokyo.

I arrived at the hotel around 12:30. There was a message for me from Shihan Goda. He would be picking me up at 5:15 the next morning to play golf. I took a bath and looked out the window of my room. I usually get the same room every time I go to Japan. It’s on the corner, and I can see Mount Fuji on a clear day. At

night, my view is a sea of lights rising up from the streets below. I laid down and tried to read my book. I brought two books with me. One was an exciting story to read on the plane, and the other was very confusing and hard to follow—I used that one as my sleeping pill. I fell asleep around 1:30.

When I woke up, I thought it was morning, but it was still only 2:30. I was wide awake. So I turned on the TV and flipped through the channels. My TV had channels from all over the world—Japan, China, Korea, Germany, France, and others. I found CNN and attempted to sleep again.

March 23

At 5:00 a.m. my telephone rang. It was Shihan Goda telling me to be ready in 15 minutes. It was my day off from clinics and promotions, but felt like torture. We met in the lobby and drove a couple of hours to the golf course. I love golf, but unlike at home where I can start in the morning and be done around noon, playing in Japan takes an entire day. I always play with Shihan Goda, Sensei Kaobe, and Rik-san, my friend from high school. As usual, I beat them at every hole and made them do push-ups, sit-ups and squats. But they started crying, so I stopped.

March 24

I took a limo to the airport to catch my 9:30 a.m. flight to Auckland, New Zealand. As we drove, I looked out the window and was overcome with the sight of cherry blossoms just beginning to come out for the spring. The sun sparkled brilliantly on the green leaves, giving the impression that winter was finally over, and spring was just beginning to emerge.

For my flight to Auckland, I used Air New Zealand. I asked the woman at the check-in if the flight was full. “Oh, we’re packed,” she answered with a smile. Of course they were. About ninety percent of the time I fly anywhere, international or domestic, I use Delta. This was my first time with Air New Zealand, and I was blown away by their service. The airplane was so clean, and the flight attendants so cheerful. Even though I was in an economy seat, I felt like I was travelling in first class.

March 25

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After a 10 hour flight, I landed in Auckland at about 9:00 a.m. Going through customs, I was surprised by how strict and thorough their inspection was. To enter the country, we weren't allowed to even have any dirt on our shoes. I had to declare *everything* I had with me, including two pieces of gum. A guy next to me didn't declare a banana in his bag, and they pulled him aside, gave him a long lecture and fined him \$200 New Zealand Dollars. Some people complain about all the strict inspections at airports, but I think that it's necessary in the times we live in.

I got out of customs went to the information desk to see about getting to my hotel. They said to take the blue bus. All the buses were color coded depending on their routes. As the bus pulled away, the driver announced what stops we'd be making and that we should push a button when we heard our stop. He also said that if we just wanted to stop and get a better look at the scenery we could push the button and he'd pull over. New Zealanders are really flexible and easy-going.

As we drove along, the scenery seemed funny. The trees had yellow and red leaves. The grass was faded, not green, the air was chili. It is fall in New Zealand now, as it is in the rest of the southern hemisphere. Having fall in March was really disorienting.

My wife was already at the hotel when I arrived. It was still too early to check in, so we walked around the city for awhile. Later on, we met up with another couple, friends of ours we'd be travelling with.

March 26

We got up at 6:00 a.m. and headed to the train station. We had tickets for a 7:30 train to Wellington, the capital of New Zealand. The travel brochures billed this train, called the "Overlander" as a spectacular way to see the beautiful countryside of New Zealand. (It was a scenic train, meaning that unlike the bullet trains in Tokyo, speed was not a priority. The train's top speed was about 55 mph, and the entire trip took twelve hours.) The Auckland station didn't have the overwhelming crowds and frenetic pace of Tokyo. There was an old man who carefully checked all our tickets by hand. He seemed in desperate need of glasses as he took each ticket and moved it to and from his face until

he found the ideal distance at which to read it in the dimly lit station. As everyone slowly filed on board, we wondered if the train would actually be able to leave on time, but everything was OK in the end.

When we sat down, I noticed most of the other passengers were retired couples. We pulled out of the station, and everyone started out in good spirits. We marveled at the rolling hills and sheep scattered across the landscape (sheep outnumber people in New Zealand). Half an hour went by. I heard someone in the cabin mention that trains in New Zealand couldn't serve alcohol. That was the first sign of trouble.

An hour passed, and we continued watching the sheep, and the cows, and a couple horses. Two hours passed, and it was still more of the same--sheep, sheep, cow, sheep, horse. We went through a couple villages, but were soon back into the countryside.

At the three-hour mark, people around me started commenting on how everything outside looked the same. It was pretty, but the same. I began wondering what the "spectacular" part was. (A couple times we crossed a bridge over a canyon, but that was about it.) I looked at my wife, she was sound asleep. So were most of the other passengers. I guess with the break-neck pace of the modern world, with all its technological developments, it's nice to slow things down, enjoy the countryside. Maybe for some people that's good. But for me, it was just a long, long, long and boring loop of sheep, cows, horses and sheep and more sheep. "This is different than the brochure," my wife commented. "It's not what I thought it'd be."

"Well, yeah, maybe," I started to answer. What could I say? If I said what I really thought, I'd be out there eating grass with the sheep. So, I just said, "The sheep are cute. And the cows are nice and fat. The horses are pretty..."

Somehow we made it to the Wellington station. After 12 hours on that train, everyone was pushing and cussing each other as they tried to find their luggage. The conductor had to calm some of them down. We had planned to take a taxi to the hotel, but we couldn't bear the thought of sitting down any longer, so we walked. We checked into the hotel, which had a beautiful view of the harbor.

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March 27

The fall sun was shining brilliantly as we drove off to the beach. The town was a hot vacation spot, but since this was the off-season, it looked like a ghost town. The air was cold as well.

March 28

We drove through the mountains, visiting various wineries. We'd stop at each one, sample the wine, listen to the tour guide, and drive on to the next one. Wind-ing through the mountains, we were always within sight of sheep. The people of New Zealand were great. I found them to be very easy-going, using what re-sources they needed and not wasting the rest.

March 29

We got back to Auckland.

March 30

My wife and the other couple flew back to Los Angeles and on home. I still had to get back to Tokyo, so I left at 5:30 in the morning to catch the shuttle to the airport. I landed in Japan at 5:00 that night, and Sensei Masa met me at the airport. We took the express train back to my hotel. Later that night, we had the Tokyo Branch Chief dinner and meeting, which was the last part of my official schedule.

March 31

My day off. Shihan Goda, and Rik-san took me to dinner for my last night in Japan.

April 1

Before boarding my flight home at the Narita airport, I asked the woman at the check-in desk if the flight was crowded. "Oh, yes, very," she answered with a smile. "I think we might actually be over-booked." Of course.

The flight back was on the same type of antique jumbo jet as the one I'd come over on. I sat in aisle seat, next to a young Japanese lady and her mother. While we were taxiing on the runway, we suddenly came to a stop. The captain announced that a United Airlines flight had landed with a flat tire. We'd have to wait.

After two hours, we were finally clear for takeoff. As we sped down the runway, the old plane started rattling. I wondered if we'd actually make it off the ground. Maybe we all needed to jump out of our seats at the same time to give the plane extra lift. In the end, we made it.

Once we were in the air, I felt glad to finally be going home. I love Japan, but I was ready to be back. About an hour and a half into the trip, the flight attendants started serving food. They were so different than the attendants on Air New Zealand. They came down the aisle and demanded that you answer their question, "Chicken or beef?" Their tone made me feel like a prisoner. "What do you want to drink, water? Huh?"

"Um, Ok, I'll take water." I didn't want water, but felt like I didn't have much choice in the matter. On Air New Zealand, they offered me champagne and wine. I could even have two if I wanted.

So, I sat there, eating my chicken and water. The flight attendant and cart were a few rows ahead of me. Suddenly, there was a large *BOOM!*, like we'd been hit by a cannon. The plane started descending rapidly. Food and drinks were flung into the air and people were falling in the aisles. The older lady in my row began crying. I just held my seat tight. We continued on through bad turbulence for six hours.

Eventually the plane began settling down. Around that time, a large Caucasian man sitting in the row across from me collapsed in the aisle, fast asleep. I think he had taken a sleeping pill. Those of us around him pushed the button for the flight attendants. No one came. We looked at each other. We didn't want to touch him for fear that we would make things worse. We pushed the buttons again. Finally a female attendant came over.

"What happened?" She asked.

"He just fell," we answered. "What took you so long?"

She didn't answer, but walked away and returned with a male attendant. The male attendant gently patted the guy's face, saying, "Excuse me sir, sir? Excuse me." Both attendants bent down and tried to lift the man back into his seat. But he was pretty heavy. They

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looked at me, as if to ask for help, but I just turned my head. I wasn't going to help them. Maybe I would've helped the attendants from Air New Zealand, but not these guys. Eventually another male attendant came over and they got the guy back in his seat.

We were scheduled to arrive in Atlanta at 2:30 p.m., but didn't touch down until 4:45. My connection to Birmingham was at 4:30., so it was already gone. At the immigration check point, there were separate lines for visitors and citizens. I'm a U.S. citizen, so I joined that line. Usually the visitors' line moves much slower because they have to get translators and do a more lengthy interview process. But at that time there weren't many people in the visitors' line. One of the customs agents, a woman, told us we should go to the visitors' line since the wait was shorter. About twelve of us went over. After a while, a male agent came up and told us we were in the wrong line. We all started yelling at the woman who had put us there, but she just shrugged and said, "Oh, I'm sorry," and walked away. So we were stuck in that line for an hour and a half.

When I finally got to the Delta counter, there was a very elegant ticket agent sitting behind the monitor. I explained my situation and how I'd missed my connecting flight. She smiled and answered, "Oh, no problem." She typed on the computer and told me there was a 6:45 flight I could take leaving from gate B26. She put me on standby.

"How much of a chance do I have of getting on that flight?"

"Oh, a good chance, it's not very crowded."

When I got to gate B26, I was told I had no chance. The flight was over-booked, and I was 5th in line for standby. So they booked me on an 8:45 p.m. flight leaving from gate A2. I went to gate A2 and got my ticket. I called Senpai Karl and told him I'd be late coming to Birmingham, that he should pick me up about 8:30 Birmingham time.

At about 8:00, they announced that our flight would be leaving from gate B26. So, I ran back to B26, determined not to miss that flight and spend the rest of my life in the airport. As I was boarding, the attendant told me, "Oh, Mr. Oyama, we have an opening in first class, and your ticket is eligible for a free upgrade."

Wow, big deal. The flight takes 20 minutes, but OK, sure, I'll sit in first class. I wasn't really thirsty, but I took the free beer they offered me anyway. I opened it and took a sip, by which time we started descending for landing, and they took it away.

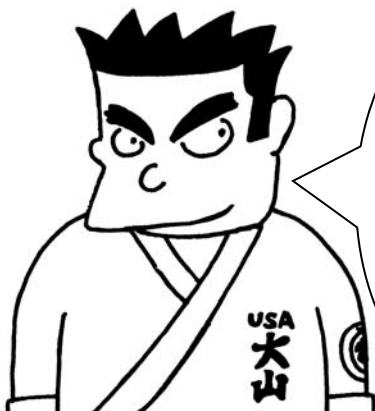
In Birmingham, I stepped outside the airport, but Senpai Karl wasn't there. I called him and asked him, "Where are you now? I'm here."

"Osu, I'm still on Highway 31, I'm on the way."

"What!?"

"Osu, Senpai Stephanie and Senpai Tony bought me dinner."

"Great," I answered and hung up, shaking my head. Take your time, don't worry about Saiko Shihan.



Don't
forget
Summer
Camp!
July 15—
July 18

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