The Meaning of WA NIN

After 26 years of visiting Soke Sensei (my teacher and the Saiko Shihan, Supreme Teacher of Chito Ryu world wide) at the Sohonbu (International Headquarters in Japan) I decided it was time to take a group of students with me. From an outsider’s perspective that sounds reasonable enough but it was a major risk for me. Everything that the students do will be a reflection on me. Their manners, their attitude to training, their ability to cope with harsh training and even their willingness to try food offered to them. There would be many favours from friends and Karate teachers that know me and I would be responsible to repay those favours. The Karate world is deep once you take the plunge.

I sent an email out extending an invitation to anyone that wanted to make the journey. I tried to be as discouraging as possible, I laced the invitation with phrases like “this is not a holiday, we are not there to sightsee,” “the training is incredibly tough and you MUST do it.” I considered each individual application and eventually we ended up with a group of eight. We met and had several discussions before embarking. I did my utmost to warn them of what to expect. However no amount of words could really prepare them for what they were about to face.

Soke Sensei did not disappoint, he had a special extra long training schedule in place for the students of the Tasseikan Dojo (our dojo.) Every morning and every night would be training and they would get to train in both the Kids’ and Adults’ classes.

By day two I could see many of them questioning themselves, “What have I got myself into, why am I here, is this really for me?” I could see those questions in their eyes because I had been there many times myself, I had asked myself those questions. No one voiced this opinion, although one member made it very clear by their actions that this was not for him. That person subsequently left without completing the training. It’s not for everyone.

The days go on, exhaustion sets in. About 6-7 hours training per day (a 5 hour stint at night) in 30+ degrees heat and 98% humidity. Training finishes at 10pm. You need to get back, eat, shower etc. and then be ready to leave by 5:40 am next morning. The seven committed students have a determination previously not seen come over them. They know they just have to keep going no matter what.
I fall very ill, nearly ending up in hospital. I know I must keep training to set the right example. Miwako, my wife understands this and urges me on until Sensei stops me and says that he will pick me up when training is over for the night and take me to the hospital. I reply that it can wait until morning.

I am having a tough time of it, I am here to train and I have been stopped. My body burns through the night and wake each morning to a bed that looks as though someone had hosed it in sweat. On the other hand every session I watch my students train makes me feel better. The trip is worth it regardless of my condition. My students are embracing what they are going through, they are driving themselves further, pushing and supporting each other. No one dares to slacken off because they know it will affect their comrades. Seeing their determination more than compensated for my personal frustration.

The final day comes, and the first day in Kumamoto without rain. The students choose to spend their personal time working on the backyard of the dojo cleaning up the mess, clearing the garden, getting rid of miles of rubbish and most importantly putting in a makiwara (a 2.5 meter long board that we punch, 1.1 meters goes into the ground, the very hard ground.) I wanted to give something back, training here gives you so much and I wanted to show our appreciation in a way that would be remembered, the students felt the same way. Soke Sensei had explained that some “crazy guy” had broken the last two makiwara (but that’s another story.)

The team works 5 hours straight in the heat like a well oiled machine in perfect harmony. The intensity of the training has broken down any barriers between them, there’s no complaining, no shirking, they just do it. Kugizaki Sensei, one of the oldest and most respected Senseis, comes to the dojo to say good-bye. He sees what the students are doing and leaves with a smile from ear to ear. Takasu Sensei (one of the Sohonbu teachers) is busy helping inspired by our efforts, and Soke Sensei looks pleased. I am swelling with admiration for this group. That night the training is as hard as ever and they finish their final five grueling hours.

Those that make the journey to the Sohonbu are usually black belts and even they struggle. I had the privilege of being part of a team of novice karate-ka (karate practitioners) that displayed as much guts as any black belt. They now wear their new dogi(s) (karate uniforms) with the kanji (Chinese ideograms) on the back

WA and NIN

I believe those two words have taken on new meaning to them now.
Then the call came from Soke Sensei for “shomen ni, rei!” and it was time to get the blood flowing back into my legs and feet.

As I stood up and looked around, I saw that I was not alone. We had done it together; a subconscious force spurring each other on. Thus, each training day started. Standing before Soke Sensei, within the Sohonbu, in Japan was like a dream. Taking in his careful and considered guidance as he took us through the morning training session was the dream coming true. It was a privilege availed to us only because Mike Sensei was prepared to put his reputation on the line and as a result of the faith and belief he had in this group. I was certainly not about to let him down. I made a promise to overcome all physical and mental obstacles and to train and work as hard as possible to make him proud. It was hot and humid and the training was tough but at the end of the session, the hours had seemed mere minutes. Hard or not, we were having fun and by the time we had returned to the hotel, we couldn’t wait to go back for the evening session.

Our evening sessions began with Takasu Sensei and the kid’s class. No less intense than the morning sessions, the way the local students handled the tough training was a true inspiration. They took it all in their stride as they performed all that was asked of them with amazing skill and strength. They too pushed themselves just as hard as we were pushing ourselves yet the smiles never left their little faces. Clearly they were having fun. This was also an opportunity to learn from another great instructor who had his own unique style. Chalk and chopsticks just a couple of the props within his arsenal of teaching aids. After a small break, we then began the adult’s class with Soke Sensei and numerous black belts who joined the class throughout the week. Despite their rank, they were all generous with their time, eager to share their knowledge and to help us improve. With their motivation and encouragement, we pushed on and before we knew it, the training had once again come to an end. Just like in the morning sessions, hours had turned into minutes and we returned to the hotel with pride; on completing another full day of training.

**Milton’s Thoughts …**

When you get to a certain age in your life and you have been through, seen and experienced so much, you don’t expect to be challenged physically and mentally nor moved emotionally to a whole new level. Yet, this is what happened during our training trip to Kumamoto, Japan.

The main purpose of the trip was to train. To train long and hard and to learn from the best. This we certainly did! Along the way, we also enjoyed and learned so much more. The people, the culture, the food and all that is so beautiful about Japan. They moved us all and for me personally there was one more lesson. The true meaning of ‘camaraderie.’ I’m not sure I would have survived the whole journey was it not for those that travelled with me.

Long before leaving I had already made the commitment to make Chito Ryu a part of my life so when the opportunity to travel to the Sohonbu came up, I knew I had to be a part of it. I saw this as the best opportunity to acquire a deeper understanding of this ‘art’ we were studying and to gain a greater appreciation for “rikki hitatsu” (striving to reach one’s goals) and what Mike Sensei had been through all these years. I had heeded Sensei’s numerous warnings about the purpose of the trip and the intensity of the training ahead, so I was well prepared for what was to come. Or so I thought. No words could have prepared me enough for the first training day and the opening session of seiza. Until that day, I had not realised that there were so many phases of pain one could go through. Pain, that became all the more concentrated and intense as the seconds ticked by. Yet, as I sat there breathing and meditating, I was calm. I thought back on the day before when we entered this hallowed space. I thought back on the emotions I had felt when I looked around the Sohonbu for the first time thinking about the hundreds if not thousands of students who had walked the same sweat sealed floor that my friends and I were now sitting on and I thought back on the aura emanating from this dojo when I took my first step inside. I felt safe and this gave me the strength to push on until “yame” (finish).

Then the call came from Soke Sensei for “shomen ni, rei!” and it was time to get the blood flowing back into my legs and feet.
One of the major highlights of the trip for me was to be invited to train with Kugizaki Sensei at his dojo. This without a doubt was another great honour bestowed upon us because of Mike Sensei and his reputation. Like the Sohonbu, this too was a very special place and generous does not even come close to describing the amount of time that was afforded us on this night. From the hours of training in the dojo to dinner at Kugizaki Sensei’s home. As people we were strangers but as Karate students we were family. The banquet laid out for us was humbling. The night was filled with great traditional Japanese food and many a “kanpai” (cheers) for good health to all. This kindness and benevolence was a hallmark of the entire trip. Whether it was strangers in the street offering unsolicited assistance when we were lost, or hotel staff trying to make our stay more comfortable, the warmth felt from all the Japanese people was endless and unconditional. Of all though, one person who made the trip as great is Miwako san. It didn’t matter what day or time it was and despite her personal responsibilities, she was always there willing to support us in whatever we needed. At the hotel, in the dojo, on the street, in restaurants, during our trip to Mt Aso and beyond, we could never repay her for her time, effort and hard work in making the trip the success it was.

Refreshed and rested after our trip to the retreat in Mt Aso, we returned to Kumamoto for one more day of training and still one more objective to fulfill. After weeks of rain, the final day saw clear skies and finally the opportunity we had been waiting for. To put in the makiwara. Clearly it was meant to be and when Sensei gave us the good news, we could not wait to get to the Sohonbu the next morning. What could any of us have done to repay Soke Sensei for all that he had done for us?

This was our way of saying “thank you” and we got stuck into the task with excitement and vigor. Everyone played their part and worked to their strengths and the end result was a space that one was proud to enter and train in. A legacy that we all hoped reflected the Australian spirit and pride and one to be shared for years to come. It was a huge privilege to have signed my name on the back of the makiwara and an enormous honour to see Soke Sensei nod his approval. This opportunity, I am extremely grateful for and will never forget.

On the flight home, I had the opportunity to reflect back on my time in Japan and to consider what I had set out to achieve. The pre trip advice from Sensei also resonated clearly in my mind.

- Learn at least one karaoke song, you may end up singing it — I did my best but feel I screamed it rather than sang it.

- Eat when food is available – Food was indeed plentiful and tasted fantastic so there was plenty of eating.

- Seiza is harder than it looks – Yes it was and it certainly gave me the opportunity to learn more about myself than I ever expected.

- Everyone is watching, even when you don’t think anyone is watching – I can only hope that my behavior and hard work reflected my deepest respect for Sensei and Chito Ryu.

- When you can’t train anymore you will train some more – Every day saw a new challenge and I certainly tried to push myself harder and harder every day.

And finally, enjoy the experience and go with the flow. This I can say with certainty I achieved. What I am taking away from this trip are many wonderful friendships, memories and experiences that will stay with me forever. I hope this is the first of many more trips to Kumamoto and I look forward to guiding others on the same ‘Path To Enlightenment’ that I have now traveled.
Andrew’s Thoughts ...

Dear readers,

What a great experience the Japan training trip was. The thing that I need to stress the absolute most, is that I couldn't have done it without the support of my training group. I nearly cracked a few times, I was physically and emotionally exhausted, I had a few extra challenges thrown into the mix just for good measure, but with the support of the group and especially Oliver and Onie (Nicholas), I managed to get through just fine. :)

I really loved the training, for me that was the highlight, I loved being in or around the Dojo, that’s where I seemed to get my strength and energy. I usually felt like crap until that first kick or punch was thrown, but once I was in that special dojo, I was there and ready to go. I often thought of how insignificant I was and all the amazing Karate people that had been there before me, and that just pushed me to try harder. I think training under Soke Sensei has that effect on you, Soke Sensei has a certain presence and energy about him, you know that he has seen it all before and you can't help but be motivated to try your best and try and improve your Karate. I will NOT miss the 20 minutes of seiiza every morning, that was tough. I'll never forget, once I opened my eyes and I could see Neil and the struggle he was going through on his face but not giving up, that just motivated me not to give up either.

During the days Kumamato seemed to be a blur, eating and doing washing, walking around Kamitori and Shimatori (huge arcades), the massive department store (can't remember what it's called now) getting a crappy massage, when everyone else in group got a good one, lol. I also remember wishing I could get some more sleep, I just wanted a few more naps, the training schedule was so hectic we hardly had time for sleep! I was pretty exhausted for a few days there. Our rest day was so good, the Onsen was amazing, what a beautiful place. My body felt so relaxed after being in that boiling water. We had some good deep and meaningful discussions in that boiling sulphur rich water, I think it brought out everything, it really was very cleansing physically and emotionally. I highly recommend it to anyone travelling to Japan.

I would like to thank Miwako for being our personal translator, I really do owe her a great deal of thanks. She was amazing.

I would like to thank the group, what a bond we have formed with each other.

Last but certainly not least, a special thank you to our own Noonan Sensei for everything! I would never have thought going to a dojo (in Peakhurst of all places), I would be training in Japan with the absolute best. Without him and his pioneering efforts there would be no group Japan trip and certainly not a successful one.

Thank you all and thank you Sensei, domo arigato.
What an unbelievable experience....

First of all I would like take this opportunity to express my gratitude to everyone in Kumamoto, I have never felt so welcome in a foreign country. Their hospitality was nothing short of exceptional and can't thank them enough. A big thank you also to Sensei and Miwako for organizing everything for the group, you definitely made things a lot easier for us and I hope we weren't too much of a burden.

I am truly grateful to be given the opportunity to train at the Sohonbu dojo and hopefully it won't be my last. It was an honor and a privilege to have been able to train with the crème of the crop. Thank you to Soke Sensei and Kugizaki Sensei and of course their families for taking the time to put together a training schedule to fit us in. It was a great gesture on their behalf and I think it made us all that more determined to train as hard as we could to show that we all really wanted to be there.

It was great to have been able to train with all the other Senseis and learn from the various methods of teaching. I really enjoyed how everything we did was broken down into segments and then worked on individual components to improve technique, this was something I noticed amongst most of the Sensei's and it definitely aided my experience. I would also like to extend my thanks to Takasu Sensei and Todd Sensei for their contribution, they were both fantastic and I take onboard their advice in my Chito Ryu journey.

Hopefully one day they make the trip to Australia and pass on some of their knowledge to each and every one of you.

The younger students at Sohonbu were amazing, their technique was excellent considering their age and I have no doubt they all have bright futures in Chito Ryu. Credit must definitely go to Takasu Sensei who has done a tremendous job with the kids. I was really impressed with their kicking technique, knowing that's an area I need to improve on I hope to one day have the flexibility to kick as freely as some of these kids.

The backyard blitz and the installation of the makiwara board at the Sohonbu was definitely a great memory of mine. It was a great feeling to have been able to give something back and hopefully we will be remembered for many years to come.....The Tasseikan Dojo Legacy.

To my fellow Karate-ka/travellers/colleagues/friends, you guys were all awesome and I couldn't ask for a better group to have shared this experience with. I know the training schedule was quite tough; however in saying that the progress we saw in everyone was definitely worth all the effort. Thank you all and hopefully we get to do this again in the not too distant future.

A message to all Chito Ryu students, if you ever get the chance to train in the Sohonbu, grasp it with two hands as it's an experience you will never forget...I'm sure the others feel the same way.

Japan has definitely left its mark on me, train hard and you will succeed.

Next up Soke Sensei's visit to Australia in November......can't wait.
Our evening training session was an intense 5 hours. We got to train the children first; their level of discipline and skill could really put us to shame. We would spend hour’s just practicing one kata which really helped to drum it into our heads. Around the inside wall of the dojo there are wooden panels for practicing punches. After the first couple of day the body would ache and just be tight, this is a feeling I later got used to as it did not pass until I returned from the trip.

After 5 crazy days of training, we went to Mt Aso to an onsen for some relaxation time. The hot mineral baths were a welcomed relief for aching and tired bodies. It recouped us enough so that we could take on the final day of training with every piece of strength we had left.

It was sad to finish training, but as they say, all good things must come to an end. We still had a couple of days left in Japan, so headed up to Nagoya to watch the sumo. After catching buses, trains, planes, cabs and lots of walking, we finally reached our destination. Was it worth it? A long way for a couple of hours of sumo. After a week of seiza having to sit in seiza in the small area got the better of us, so we headed off for the 2nd leg of our amazing race back to Fukuoka. At least we can say we’ve been to a sumo match.

One of our days sightseeing we walked up to Kumamoto Castle, which had actually been burnt down in 1877 during a siege and now only partially rebuilt. It was quite an impressive building, and we spent a few hours exploring the castle and its grounds.

Scared and excited we headed to Kumamoto, to Chito-Ryu headquarters. Not quite knowing what to expect, only that Sensei had told us that this was not a holiday and not to bother putting your name down for the trip if this is what you wanted. We quickly found out just how intense it was going to be!

We had a couple of days to relax and overcome the travel, before getting straight into it. The students and Soke Sensei, Takasu Sensei, Kugizaki Sensei, Todd Sensei and Mark Sensei of the dojo made us feel very welcome, with Kugizaki Sensei even welcoming us into his home after training for a traditional Japanese dinner! (Banquet)

While language was a barrier, they still managed to instruct us, Miwako was an amazing help the whole time, with the organizing of trips, dinners, and communications and then when Noonan Sensei fell sick on the trip. Miwako became the backbone of the trip always being there in the background if any problem were to arise.

Our mornings started off with half an hour of seiza (well I believe 20-25 minutes but hey who’s counting LOL). This was the biggest wake up call. The wooden floors were warped due to the age of the natural timbers and the weather, so if you picked a bad spot for your seiza you were in trouble. The different levels of pain while in seiza was quite interesting as the pain kept stepping up, but as Sensei had told us before the trip, this is no holiday! I am always in the race to win, so no pain no gain. Then trying to train while your legs are asleep, a feeling you just need to try and ignore so you can get straight into the next hour of training.

At the completion of the morning training session we would head out for breakfast, do our washing, then have the day to go sightseeing, sleep or just relax in preparation for the next training session.

Neil’s Thoughts …
In early July 2012, a group of 8 students from Tasseikan dojo were fortunate enough to have the opportunity to train at the Chito-Ryu karate Sohonbu (head dojo) in Kumamoto, Japan, for 10 days. No words could describe the richness of our experience, but I’ve provided a few here to provide a record of our trip and to motivate and encourage other students to undertake the same.

Training
Training was generally split up into two sessions each day, with the morning session going for roughly two hours and the afternoon/evening session on average lasting about 5 hours. Morning sessions were quite private – we often found that training was attended only by ourselves, Soke Sensei, Noonan Sensei and Todd Sensei (a 5th dan instructor originally from Canada). These sessions also included at least 20 minutes of seiza – which you’ll no doubt receive an extensive account of from my fellow writers. Afternoon sessions were split up into the Sohonbu’s regular childrens’ class, taught by Takasu Sensei, and adults’ classes, instructed by Soke Sensei and a large cohort of yudansha (black belts). The training itself was, to be quite honest, not too different from the training we’re fortunate enough to receive at Tasseikan dojo – perhaps a result of Noonan Sensei’s history of training with Soke Sensei. There was a strong focus on basic techniques – without fail each day we’d go through stances, stepping, punching, kicking, tandem-developing exercises and other training.

Cultural Experience
As students and guests in a culturally-rich land, we were expected to observe the etiquette of the Japanese karate community. Whether it be bowing, pouring drinks for Senseis or listening. Attentively in class, I found that, with the right attitude, cultural requirements were quite natural and easy to comply with. In return, we were given an undeserving welcome – from the gifts given to all of us by the kids, to the hospitality and attention shown by the Senseis, to being invited to Kugizaki Sensei’s home for a banquet, we were made to feel right at home and part of the local karate community.

Having an open mind to try new things, be it fish, raw horse, or sake, was the key to enjoying the Japanese culinary experience. Whilst not everyone very much enjoyed the aforementioned things, all are in agreement that Japanese draft beer surpasses any of the local fare we have here!

Reflection
All students are also in agreement that the most heartfelt thanks must be afforded to Noonan Sensei, who stuck his reputation on the line and put in hours of effort to ensure his students received the best experience they could, as well as Miwako-san, who tirelessly and ably stepped in as our guide and interpreter in Kumamoto.
Above anything, the trip was a learning experience that taught me what karate really was, where a lifetime of karate could lead and what the requisite effort to get to a worthwhile level of knowledge and application was. If anything, it’s made me more aware that we all have a very long way to go and that there is always, always room for improvement.
Less talk, more training!
Steve’s Thoughts ...

Hi Readers,

Sohonbu Visit 2012

Where do I start?
For me the trip started when Sensei Noonan announced who he chose to attend in March. We then set about organising flights, accommodation etc. All I had was email addresses, I knew some of the guys, but not very personally. All I wanted to know was who would be going that was my rank.

During the next 2 months of emails, phone calls and after training briefs, we worked out our Japan trip. Fly from Sydney to Singapore, land, run from Gate 41 to Gate 58 to board Singapore to Fukuoka, Japan. Get a bus (2 hour trip) from Fukuoka to Kumamoto, stay there for 7 nights, then 1 night in the Onsen (Ryokan), and then back to Kumamoto for 3 more nights then onto Nagoya back to Fukuoka and then homeward bound.

The landing
After spending 20 odd hours in transit we finally made Japanese soil, the communication barrier began. While in customs, Vicky relied on telling the Japanese that we were here for Karate - Chito Ryu, bowing and letting us move on. When we went downstairs and arrived at the bus stop in Fukuoka it was a balmy 33°C and 80% humidity. Water anyone? After boarding the bus and not knowing where in the world we were heading, every stop that we made, we looked for Mike Sensei, we thought that Kumamoto was a rural village, boy were we wrong. The bus was totally quiet except for 7 delirious Australian tourists at the back of the bus.

Upon arriving in Kumamoto we were greeted by Miwako, Mike Sensei and Ken. Relief. We weren’t here alone.

Having Sensei Mike, Miwako and Ken was a relief and one that I was humbled with. Miwako is a life saver. Without her, the experience would not have been everything it was. Sensei and Miwako made us feel like family. We were looked after no end, helping us with where to eat, where to clean our gear and more.

It wasn’t until the 3rd day I really started to realise what we were privileged to experience, for example, after training at Kugizaki’s Dojo we were then welcomed into Kugizaki Sensei’s home and being lavished with a feast beyond words.

I really can’t describe how privileged I felt and I can say the same for the rest of the Tasseikan team who attended. There was an aura, like O’Sensei (the founder) was watching us.

With Mike Sensei ill, we all wanted to make him proud and set a level of expectation of what we could do. I know that we’re only scraping the surface with our ability, but going to Japan to fast track our technique, with matters of Chito Ryu, would not have been possible without Mike Sensei taking that risk. We had the privilege to train with Soke Sensei, Takasu Sensei, Kugizaki Sensei and Todd Sensei.

On this trip I gained new friends, ones that I hope will last a lifetime. Everyone gave me support and in return I gave support back. I couldn’t think of a better team to travel with.

I could talk about the experience forever. I don’t think that anyone will really understand what we went through unless they experience it for themselves I hope that with the effort we all put in, you too will get that experience. Remember though, this is definitely not a sightseeing trip. This is Karate in its most pure form. Life or Death as it was explained to me, just like it was 1000 yeas ago in battle.

If the opportunity arises again, even knowing what lies ahead, I will be the first to ask to attend. It really was that great. It’s one of the defining moments in my life and one that I will cherish for the rest of my life.
Vicky’s Thoughts ...

Where do I start? When I first thought about going to Japan, I knew it would not be a holiday. Sensei made it very clear that it would be physically and mentally challenging and I knew it was going to be difficult. Was I prepared for what was to come? Absolutely not. This trip gave me a lot more than I expected.

The arrival - Saturday
Like all good things, it started off with a bang. We all arrived in Japan, all excited (and I was a bit scared.) We managed to book and catch the right bus from Fukuoka to Kumamoto. A 2 hour journey where we started getting to know each other a bit better. On arriving at the bus station, we called Mike Sensei and he arrived shortly afterwards with his family. We all got into taxis and they were instructed by Miwako (Mike's wife) which hotel to take us to. We checked in, showered and got together for our first day in Japan. We ventured out in search of food. We finally all agreed on a lunch venue and had a great first meal. We got back to the hotel for some rest before meeting our lunch venue and had a great first meal. We all ventured out in search of food. We finally all agreed on a lunch venue and had a great first meal. We set off in 3 taxis to be at the dojo by 6am. Training begins. My alarm is set for 5:30am. We need to be at the dojo by 6am so that we can start stretching and be ready for our 6:30am start. We set off in 3 taxis, which soon becomes the norm. Sitting in seiza for 20 minutes - surely sitting can’t be that hard! After 2 minutes you start to feel that your legs are going to give in 10 minutes you start to feel that your legs are going to give in 10 minutes you start to feel that your legs are going to give in.
The competition is fierce really getting into it, cheering our team members on. Relay races around the dojo. By this stage we're all class! Phew!! We are split into 2 teams with the kids! going strong!! minutes! I am so out of breathe but the Ken is called upon to warm up the class. After 5 5pm! How hard can it be?! parents! We do some stretching. Kids 3 taxis, off we g congregate in the hotel for our bi that we can arrive at the dojo by 4:30. !ood here is great! nice place for break session but then we walk around Kumamoto and find a what's ahead. Most of the team is showered and ready someone to talk to so that I don't think too much about! out to the communal area in the hotel. Hoping to find another 5 hours of training! I get dressed and venture out to the communal area in the hotel. Hoping to find someone to talk to so that I don't think too much about what's ahead. Most of the team is showered and ready for lunch. Some discussions ensue about the morning’s session but then we walk around Kumamoto and find a nice place for breakfast (since its only 9:30). Did I mention that the food here is great!

3:45pm -where has the day gone? Need to get ready so that we can arrive at the dojo by 4:30. At 4:15 we all congregate in the hotel for our bi-daily trip to the dojo. 3 taxis, off we go! We arrive at the dojo, sign in and start to meet some of the other students and their parents. We do some stretching. Kids’ class starts at 5pm. How hard can it be?

Ken is called upon to warm up the class. After 5 minutes I am so out of breathe but the kids are still going strong! Takasu Sensei calls time and begins the class. Phew! We are split into 2 teams with the kids. Relay races around the dojo. By this stage we're all really getting into it, cheering our team members on. The competition is fierce!

After the racing we get back into our lines. Takasu Sensei loves to use props. We run through exercises where we punch pieces of paper that are held up by the rest of our teams. It is at this point that I start to realise just how good these kids are (and how big the gap is between our capability and theirs) On to some kata and kumite! The gap only seems to be getting wider. I am not sure whether this was the day that we were first introduced to Takasu Sensei's stick. I guess that throughout our time, the days started to blur from one to the next. But I won’t forget the first time the stick came out. It showed me just how tough these kids were. When a technique was incorrect, the stick would be used. What a great motivational tool or so I thought until it was our turn! I won't say too much more about the stick other than to reiterate how brave and talented these kids were!

Kids’ class is over. Just the adults’ class to go and we have survived day 1 of training. We start off with warm ups, punches, kicks, kata, really fast movements, more and more and more and more! My head is spinning, and I feel physically and mentally exhausted. Can't wait to get back for a bath and sleep. Dinner - no thanks. Too tired to eat. But everyone is going so should make the effort. So off to dinner and in bed by 12am. The alarm is set for 5:30 tomorrow morning.

The next few days are similar to the first. Some days were more difficult than others. Every second day we would go to the laundromat to wash and dry our gi and clothes. Some nights we were at the laundromat at midnight and knew we had to get up early the next day!

If you are looking for a holiday then this trip is not for you. If you are looking to challenge your mind and body and better your karate, then I highly recommend this trip. It’s difficult, it's grueling, but at the same time very exciting and rewarding. It's an experience that has changed me forever and one that I hope I'll be able to do again.

The kindness of all the people we met was overwhelming. I’d like to thank all the people we met there. Thank you to all the Senseis who trained us, for their time, patience and for their generosity. A very special thank you to Miwako who was absolutely amazing. She looked after us, translated for us, guided us, and made the experience very special. A great big thank you to Mike Sensei. Thank you for allowing us to be part of this incredible experience, and giving us a glimpse of your world, and for your support and belief in us.
Some Pictures from our time in Japan

At Kugizaki Sensei’s House

At Kugizaki Sensei’s Dojo

Dinner at the Onsen

Who was there?

Noonan Sensei Neil Pragnell
Miwako Noonan Nicholas Onie
Ken Noonan Oliver Sekulceski
Andrew Giovenco Steve Grumbier
Milton Kaloudis Vicky Donnelly

Sohonbu Dojo Special Training Schedule

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mon 2-Jul</th>
<th>Tue 3-Jul</th>
<th>Wed 4-Jul</th>
<th>Thu 5-Jul</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6:30-7:00</td>
<td>Seiza</td>
<td>Seiza</td>
<td>Seiza</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7:00-8:00</td>
<td>Morning Training</td>
<td>Morning Training</td>
<td>Morning Training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17:00-22:00</td>
<td>Evening Training</td>
<td>Evening Training</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fri 6-Jul</th>
<th>Sat 7-Jul</th>
<th>Sun 8-Jul</th>
<th>Mon 9-Jul</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6:30-7:00</td>
<td>Seiza</td>
<td>Site Seeing (Mt Aso)</td>
<td>Seiza</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7:00-8:00</td>
<td>Morning Training</td>
<td>(Mt Aso)</td>
<td>Morning Training</td>
</tr>
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<td>17:00-22:00</td>
<td>Evening Training</td>
<td></td>
<td>Work in the dojo</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Site Seeing (Mt Aso)

Site Seeing

Seiza

Morning Training

Evening Training

Morning Training

Evening Training

Evening Training

Evening Training

Morning Training

Work in the dojo

Evening Training

(At Kugizaki Sensei’s Dojo)

(Mt Aso)