

MEMORIES OF THE HONBU

A Practitioner of Hakko Ryu Jujutsu
Recalls His Days of Training at His Style's Home Dojo

By Dennis G. Palumbo

After months of daily practice and training with my instructor, sensei Hideo Abukawa, I had been invited by soke Ryuho Okuyama to come to the hakko ryu honbu as an "inside student" (uchi deshi) for evaluation, and possible shihan testing and certification. It was a bitterly cold October morning in 1963, and I had just made my first trip to the Honbu-Hakkoryu Renkoku Shihankai with my instructor. Although I had prepared myself physically (I thought) for the training at the honbu, it was still quite a shock that first morning when I woke up with the two other candidates after my first night in the honbu.

The candidates, both Japanese, thought nothing of getting out of their warm futons. They proceeded immediately to walk to the sliding doors of the room we slept in, throwing them open to let in the "fresh air" and get rid of the "stale air." This was the traditional practice in Japan. To an American, this would have been a pleasant way to start the day—in summer. But the outside temperature was hovering around 30 degrees, and the cold shot through my body. I stood there, quivering and shivering as I shook my head in disbelief while they went about the process of getting damp towels and wiping down every board, tatami, railing, window sash and wall in the room.

By the time I figured out what they were doing, they were done, and the pot of hot water which had been placed on the small charcoal stove, before I had even got out of bed, was already boiling. I picked up my futon and blankets, and hung them over the outside railing. The candidates then proceeded to sit down in a circle on the tatami around the small hibachi and drink their morning tea.

They and my instructor invited me to join them for *ocha*—green tea. By now it was nearly 7 a.m. and they all looked or seemed like they had been up for hours. The sliding doors were still open, and the cold air seemed partial in whom it attacked—it seemed as if the only person that it affected was me. The candidates and my sensei might as well have been sitting in a sauna for all the indication I got

from them of the temperature. I felt embarrassed, naive, confused, and cold. Since we had come in late the night before, and the other students were already in bed, we had not had a chance to be introduced. My sensei thankfully made the introductions, and I was immediately made to feel at home. They laughed out loud at the idea that we were all in this together, and in it for the duration. One candidate was from Tokyo, and one from Sapporo.

There was a faint call from downstairs as soke Okuyama's wife signalled that breakfast was now ready. With a quick *Tabimasho* ("let's eat") we all jumped up and headed for the breakfast table. At the honbu during training, breakfast and supper are provided each day. If you desire to have lunch, you must fend for yourself. We arrived at the table, were seated and soke's wife gingerly presented the first bowls of hot steaming rice and a large pot of hot water for the everpresent green tea, which though rather pale in color and mild and taste, hits the spot when one's freezing to death. (Note: in Japan, especially at the honbu, heating is provided only by a small portable hibachi, or kerosene stove, in the immediate area where one might be sitting. Central air and heat is the exception, not the rule.)

As the bowls of hot rice were brought to the table, all the candidates placed their hands together, and spouted a quick thank you for the food at hand. A small bowl of colorfully sliced vegetables tainted with spiced horseradish destroyed my tongue immediately. This was followed by raw fish, multicolored small pieces of cut-up, cooked vegetables, and a raw egg. When Soke's wife saw my apparent surprise at eating, she smiled at me, the '*gaijin*,' murmuring "*Chotto matte-kudasai*." She returned with a beautifully fried egg, toast, and butter. I knew I had one important ally already—in the kitchen.

We returned to the upstairs room where we slept, and had more tea and chatted. I was told that the first practice in the dojo would be

At right, the formal graduation photograph following completion of Palumbo's training for the menkyo kaiden license. The technique is *morote osae dori*; the time is November 1963. Ryuho Okuyama, the founder of hakko ryu jujutsu, stands at far right. Hakko ryu means the "school of the eighth light" and was founded and publicly presented by Okuyama in the year 1941. No challenge, no resistance and no injury are the tenets of the style.



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at 9:30 in the morning. About 9:00 we were dressed in our gi and hakama and went downstairs to the dojo.

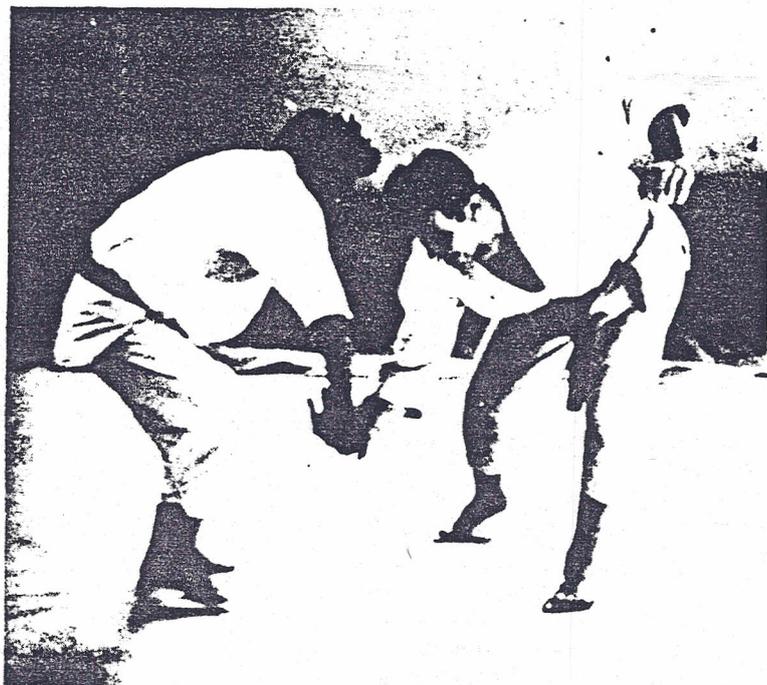
The first order of business was to clean the entire dojo: tatami mat area; windows, sills; sashes. This took 20 minutes with all of us working together. After we finished we loosened up our (my) cold stiff joints in preparation for the practice. At 9:35 the head instructor for the honbu arrived. A very old, tall, thin shihan menkyo kaiden with a look of quietness about him, I will refer to him as "Ro-sensei." As the sensei entered, we all bowed to the front of the dojo and then to him. He dropped into seiza and began to speak. Fortunately my instructor, sensei Abukawa, could speak fairly good English, or I would have been completely confused.

Ro-sensei explained that for the next five days, we would be reviewing all of the techniques of shodan through yondan to see if we had in fact mastered these techniques, understood the principles of them, and were able to apply them in any given situation without hesitation. He also stated that in addition to practicing each day from 9:30-11:30, and after lunch from 2:30-4:30, we would be practicing and teaching the students who came to the honbu for classes in the evening. After this practice session, we would train with Okuyama in private session.

After 20 minutes of kneeling in seiza while listening to the Chief Instructor speak, my knees were beginning to ache. Not from the "hardness" of the tatami, but from its texture. It was not the same thing we had slept on. It was a special "work" tatami, made for hard use, and long endurance. It was like sandpiper with small spikes in it, which went easily through the knees of my gi. I couldn't wait for the actual practice to begin . . . *I thought.*

We bowed to the sensei and began practice. In preparation for this day, I had been doing extra sets of pushups (about 200/day on the backs of my wrists, on my fingertips, insides of the wrists, etc.), and had been having the students and my instructor "put it to me" in anticipation of what would come. I figured my arms and wrists were

Below, Abukawa applies *shibari* grip to Palumbo in training preparatory to journeying to the honbu. Right: members of the honbu on their mountain retreat. Okuyama and his wife stand in the second row, sixth and fifth from right. Standing next to them is Palumbo.



pretty well desensitized by now, and I'd be able to stand about anything.

The Chief Instructor stood up, and called out " . . . *Parunbo san, qi-de kudasai.*" (Mr. Palumbo, please come here.) I immediately ran up to him, bowed, and waited in eager anticipation. My sensei formally introduced me to him, and I was thinking, "This should be interesting." I was five feet eleven inches, about 200 pounds. This man was about five feet four inches and about seventy-five years old.

We bowed to each other, sat down in seiza, bowed again and moved closer to each other to begin practice. As we began the first two techniques, I felt this was going to be a piece of cake. He made some minor points of correction to my technique, but nothing major. I felt good. The next technique was called *aiki nage*, a kneeling throw



which involved perfect balance, and execution of the principle of *nage*, involving the little finger side of the hand.

Actually, performed against such a slight old man, this should have been a cinch, even if I did it less than perfectly. As I began the technique, pulling him off balance with one hand while preparing to throw him to the side with the other, I couldn't help thinking something was going to be different. I was right—sensei did not move! I applied more power (a bad thing to do). He would not budge. We stopped. Sensei said to do it again. Again the same result.

No matter how I tried to move him over, he merely looked at me. After a few more unsuccessful tries he explained to me what I was doing wrong. He said he could've fallen over, though I was executing the technique incorrectly, but that he would not, because

“I should have been able to snap this man's wrist with ease, or cause him to flip over with no problem at all—but *nothing happened!*”

he wanted *me to do it correctly*. What amazed me though, was that I couldn't really budge this little man—who weighed but 120 pounds—whether I used strength or power or whatever! After three more tries, he finally went over. After doing this technique a thousand times in the past, the instructor pointed out one small critical point I was

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Graduation testing with assembled witnesses. Palumbo is third from right; Okuyama is to his right. During the test, the candidates were required to execute ten techniques of their own choosing from the various dan and shihan levels. Following the testing and the awarding of certificates, the graduates were honored with a ceremonial banquet. Palumbo recalls songs, stories—and many jokes that stretched into the late hours.

neglecting that made all the difference. I was flabbergasted. It was definitely going to be an interesting stay.

After performing the technique correctly ten more times, we went on to the next technique—*te kagami*. This technique, which takes its name (“hand mirror”) from the opening movement, had always been one of my favorites. It was easy to apply and had a very quick effect on the attacker, dropping him immediately to the floor, lest his wrist break or his forearm dislocate from the pain of resistance. I thought, “He may have gotten me on *aiki nage*, but I’ll show him the way to do *te kagami* . . .”

Let me say that sensei’s wrists were rather small. Considering his size, they were probably only six inches in diameter. Mine, on the other hand, were about 10½ to 11 inches around and rather strong. I began the technique and was about to apply the pressure to the back of his hand, to drop him to the side, when I saw him smiling at me. I didn’t think anything of it, until I began to finish the technique. Again, he wouldn’t budge. I pushed, pulled, applied power (*dumb!*), and just saw the grin on his face grow wider.

I should have been able to snap this man’s wrist with ease, or cause him to flip over with no problem at all—but *nothing happened!* He stopped me and said “Do it again.” I did—with the same results, same smile, same embarrassment.

Sensei then told me to grasp his wrists in the same manner and allow him to perform the technique. He began just as I did, but when he put on the bind, I thought my entire forearm was going to shatter before I could get over on my back and away from the pain. It was unbelievable. Sensei had put me in excruciating pain so quickly I could not fall fast enough. He smiled again, and said to grab him once more. He then proceeded to do it to me again, on the other side. Now both of my wrists and forearms were throbbing. We then stopped and he explained to me what I had been doing wrong, and

that I was to perform the technique “ . . . until I got it right.” Each time I did it, he was going to “illustrate” it and reinforce it by doing it again, to me. It was an excruciating half hour. The other candidates were practicing diligently with each other and my sensei, quietly behind me, but when my cries of ‘*Itai, itai!*’ began, they laughed. They had all apparently been to the honbu before for their dan training and knew exactly what I was going through. No sympathy from them. Finally, after practicing the *te kagami* technique another 30-40 times, and having it done to me each time afterwards—just to “reinforce” my knowledge—the instructor said that was enough for now. I was excused to practice with the other students. I backed away in *seiza*, bowed and went to stand up, not realizing that my knees had gone numb. I promptly dropped to the *tatami* again. Sensei laughed, and walked away to begin work with another candidate.

I stood up again, walked to the back of the dojo to see my instructor. He greeted me with a smile, laughed, and said in English “ . . . I told you it would be fun, *neh?*” I knew now that I was in for a painful stay at the honbu.

We finished the morning session at 11:30 and broke for lunch. My wrists were still throbbing and had begun to swell. We changed clothes to go downtown for lunch. I wasn’t looking forward to the afternoon practice. I was even having great difficulty even holding my chopsticks. The pain in my wrists and forearms did not subside. I asked my instructor how long it would be before the pain would go away. He smiled and said, “ . . . in about one week—*after* we leave the honbu.”

I was beginning to realize what I had gotten into. My worst thoughts, unfortunately, came true. At the afternoon practice, we got into the pinning technique of *shodan*. I saw so many stars. I thought I was practicing in the middle of the Milky Way . . .

In my practices with my own instructor and other students in

Northern Japan, we always applied technique with controlled pressure, usually stopping the technique when uke tapped out, indicating that he or she was feeling the pain of the waza. But the difference in the honbu was that by the time I tapped out, I was already in excruciating pain. The tap was merely a "gesture"—IF you could make it... and IF they didn't hear the tap, they might wait until you responded with 'Itai, Itai' (It hurts!).

Needless to say, this phrase became almost second nature to me during my stay at the honbu. There was never any attitude of punishment or malice displayed in these cases. It was merely a way of saying, "This is how the technique should be done; this is what it should feel like; and if you don't believe it, we'll prove it to you." I kept telling myself that this was a learning experience and a training experience: not only in technique; but in humility. I was the largest person there—but I never felt so helpless as I did during the first week of review and training.

During the evening class we had the opportunity to teach new students who had come for training. Although my Japanese was sorely lacking in conversational language, the language of hakko ryu, the wazas and the basic courtesies, were all I needed to communicate with the visiting students.

Following the evening class, we were told to prepare for soke Okuyama. As he entered, dressed in hakama, we bowed and took our places on the tatami. He spoke for 15 minutes, telling us what we were about to embark on, the significance of our training, the purpose of the *okuden* ("hidden techniques") of hakko ryu and what they meant. He informed us that these techniques were never written down in other than name. Written explanations were not made, and the techniques were restricted in practice to those of high rank.

Okuyama at this time was approximately fifty-eight years old, a jovial and vigorous looking man. Though he was small—about 5' 2"—he exuded an aura of internal power. Okuyama told us that the training sessions would be relatively short each night, but that we uchi deshi (inside students) should spend as much time as possible practicing together.

This first session lasted an hour, after which Okuyama left. We wiped down the dojo mats and sills, and finally retired. This schedule of training and practice continued for two weeks. At the hakko ryu honbu, all training in the techniques for shihan rank and above was done exclusively by Okuyama.

The main thrust of training in shihan is the application of extremely subtle technique involving little or no body movement or strength and relying on the mind and the *hara* (stomach) to develop the internal power (*ki*) that is necessary to the performance of these techniques. Okuyama would show and explain each technique individually. We would then have to demonstrate it to him, on him, until he was completely satisfied that we fully understood and could perform the technique. We would then demonstrate the technique on each other, and with the Head Instructor at the honbu. Only after we had fully satisfied Okuyama would we go on to another technique.

I was fascinated by Okuyama's abilities. An example of his abilities came one night during the fourth evening of "special practice." Soke had been teaching us a specific technique which allows the practitioner to remain totally stationary against an aggressor. We would in fact be like a rooted tree, using no external strength at all.

Okuyama called me over to demonstrate this technique and an application. He asked me to take a bo and place its end on his stomach, just below his navel (in the *tanden-hara* area). He then stood comfortably and asked me to push against him with the stick. Feeling silly, I gave him a gentle push.

"Harder," he said. I didn't want to hurt the man, so I gradually increased my shoving. He didn't move. Again he said to my instructor, "Tell him to push as hard as he can," with a little sound of impatience in his voice.

I immediately got the message. I set myself in a low front stance, and began to push with all my might. Still he just stood there, motionless and immovable. Then he looked me straight in the eye, and began to smile. Suddenly he began walking towards me with the stick against his stomach and me pushing against him with all my power. He began shoving me back across the tatami. He pushed

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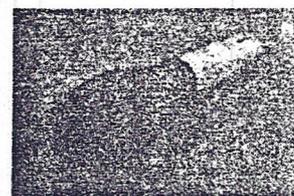
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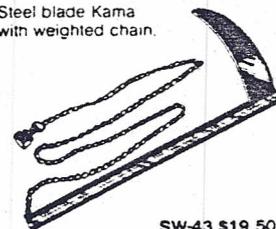


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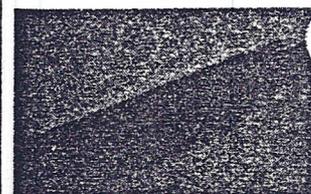
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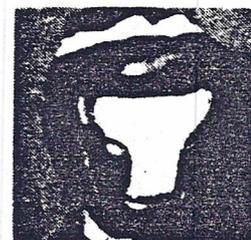


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me back until my right foot was braced against a wooden rail on the border of the tatami.

He had already gotten my front foot off the ground, and with a final laugh and smile, he pushed his stomach forward slightly and flipped me over the rail, out onto the wooden porch and into the small garden at the edge of the porch. He *laughed*. My instructor looked at me, smiled and said in English, "Nice try."

After the first week of practice, things became a bit smoother. The swelling in my forearms and wrists was still there, but the pain had subsided considerably. On Friday morning Okuyama came down to the dojo and watched us practicing for a while before telling us we were going on a special trip to the mountains that weekend. It was a two hour trip to the resort—a beautiful journey through the mountains and a welcome change from the daily training routine. The hotel was very old. We all had individual rooms and that evening there was a special party with soke as the guest of honor and we the candidates as his special guests.

Sake flowed, samisens played, talk was continual. When the party broke up, my sensei said the best way to sober up after one of these things was to go to the hot baths in the hotel. We went into the hot baths, stripped down, and lathered up. After rinsing off, we jumped into the steaming hot water, to soak. I hit the water and thought I was developing third degree burns. That sensation lasted only a few minutes and I settled into the large pool, closed my eyes, and fell asleep. The following day was spent walking through the beautiful

"We said our goodbyes and went downstairs. I promised to return soon. Little did I realize it would be nearly 17 years before I would return . . ."

gardens and viewing the shrines built into the surrounding mountainsides.

Monday morning, practice and training began again with additional training in the afternoons also. One particular evening, which was spent on techniques of rope escape, Okuyama asked two of us to tie him up, tightly as we wished and as we could. Candidate Yamata and myself proceeded to take two ropes and tie up soke as well as we could. I bound his hands and arms behind his back with double knots; Yamata tied his feet and legs tightly. After we finished tying him up, Okuyama could not walk—so the two of us carried him to the side of the dojo. He asked to be placed in a small room attached to the dojo, in the room's far corner, and for us to close the door on our way out. I went to close the door behind me. Before the sliding door even reached the sash, soke had intercepted us, caught the door, and was standing there laughing with both ropes in his hands.

By the end of the second week, formal training came to an end and we were awaiting the results of our training. The graduation ceremonies, demonstration of techniques, and final evaluation and testing was scheduled for the evening of 13 November 1963.

The ceremony was set for the early evening. In the afternoon we cleaned up the dojo, tended to the shrine, and arranged all the items for the ceremony, guests, visitors and soke. I was given my formal clothing (*monsuki*) for the ceremony. A standard part of the outfit are the formal white 'tabi,' or cloth slippers, worn with the *monsuki*. I knew there was going to be a problem there. The largest size tabi the Japanese made was equivalent to about a size eight American shoe. I had size 11 shoes. I couldn't go barefooted for the ceremony, so I asked Abukawa what to do. He said, "You have some white sweat socks don't you? That's better than going barefooted." On a tatami sweat socks are slippery. I didn't realize this would be a problem, not at that point anyway.

By this time, many of the guests and visitors had begun to arrive. They included the mayor of the town, several high ranking masters of the martial arts, including karate, judo and kendo—none of whom

I had ever met or seen before. In those days, very little was published for public consumption on the heads of the varied ryu, or schools. By the time the ceremony began there were 40 guests, all kneeling in the rear of the dojo, awaiting Okuyama and the Shinto priest who would begin the ceremony. The ceremony began with soke at the podium on the right front side of the dojo, and the Shinto priest formally saying the prayers to signal the start of the ceremony.

During testing, we were each required to demonstrate ten techniques of our choosing—one from each dan level, five from the techniques of shihan rank. I was scheduled last. The other candidates all performed well—and then it was my chance.

I stood and bowed to soke. I thought: All I want to do is not make a stupid mistake and make a fool of myself. As Okuyama called off the names of each technique to be demonstrated, I was fortunate enough to have an uke that was not only very good, but understanding. I performed the first five techniques with no problem. On the sixth technique, which required a rather long step through and turn my white sweatsocks turned traitor on me! The soft cotton of the socks didn't grab the tatami like the rubber soles of the tabi. My foot kept edging out from me. Before I could regain my balance, I slid to the floor in a perfect pair of splits. My face must have been as red as the eighth light of the hakko ryu rainbow, because soke began to laugh—and the entire gallery of spectators joined in the laughter.

At this point, I figured I'd failed the test, embarrassed soke—or it was something to be laughed at by all.

I stood, regained my composure, and asked permission to complete the technique a second time—without my socks. I then continued to demonstrate the remaining waza I had picked. Upon completion, I bowed to uke, and we in turn bowed to soke, and I returned to my place in the front of the line, sat down—and put my socks back on.

In a few minutes, Okuyama called each of the candidates forward to read them their scrolls and their *menkyo* licenses, saying a few words about each of us and presenting us with our certificates and belts. It was a proud moment for all of us. After the presentation ceremony was over, there was picture taking and congratulations from the visitors who had witnessed the ceremony. We then adjourned upstairs where the festivities of celebration began.

The room had been set up with small tables, and cushions on the floor. There was a gas grill at each table. There was sake and there was a special hostess assigned to each table. She poured sake for each of us, and the toasts began. To this day, I believe that every visitor there stood and made a toast—and each toast required you to drink down your cup of sake. While the toasts were made, dinner was cooked on each table by the hostess.

Some of the visitors would stand and tell stories, others would tell jokes or sing. Although I couldn't understand much of what was said, as the only gaijin there, I could tell that many of the jokes were made about me. My instructor, Abukawa, was at my side. But each time a joke was made, Abukawa would merely say, "That was very funny." The celebration went on until about midnight. By now, I was completely exhausted. The time finally came when the celebration adjourned. We rolled out the futons, crawled in, and fell asleep.

The next morning I changed into traveling clothes and packed my suitcase. Abukawa and I were scheduled to leave Omiya at noon for the long ride back to the Northern tip of Japan—Wakkanai, from whence we came. I was glad it was over, but a little sad at having to leave. We sat around the small pot in the room for a while, drinking green tea, until my instructor said we had to pay our respects to Okuyama and his family before leaving. I said my goodbyes and we went downstairs. Okuyama was waiting for us. After Abukawa spoke a few words of thanks, I gave soke my sincere thanks—and he made a small joke about my sweat socks. He thanked me for coming to the honbu, and I assured him it was the experience of my life.

I promised then that I would return soon. Little did I realize then it would be nearly 17 years before I would return . . .

About the author: Dennis G. Palumbo holds shihan rank and a *menkyo* kaiden license in hakko ryu jujutsu. He currently resides and teaches in Denver, Colorado.