My Experience as a Guest
at the 23rd Gasshuku of the Hokushin Itto-ryu Hyoho

by Alexandre Long Trinh



It took a while, but I wanted to have some time to reflect on my exhausting yet incredibly rewarding experience at the 23rd Gasshuku of the Hokushin Itto-ryu Hyoho at the Chiba-Dojo. Even after several days later I'm still amazed at what I had lived through during this week-long trial. So many accomplishments, so many limits pushed and broken, so much laughter, and in the end, fulfilment. I'll provide the full-length description below, but the key takeaways are this:

I really, really encourage people who are curious or even skeptical about the Hokushin Itto-ryu or Otsuka Ryunosuke Soke to give them a visit and train with them during the many seminars they have or even during the regular training sessions. It really is eye-opening (and body-changing) to experience the men and women behind the various Facebook profiles and participate in a true koryu brotherhood that holds true to effectiveness, tradition, passion and knowledge.

1. The Hokushin Itto-ryu seminar is incredibly intense and demanding, both physically and emotionally. Despite being very fit and healthy, we were pushed to our very limits and experienced incredible discomfort. In the end however everything was worth it and you only remember your accomplishments, not your pain.

2. Otsuka Soke is an incredibly strong warrior/athlete always in the center of the action, a very knowledgeable scholar, and a very passionate teacher. Most importantly however, he is a wonderful person to be around and he cares a lot for his students.

3. The high-level kenshi are all very skilled swordsmen, this is proven in both shiai and kata practice, yet they remain very humble and likable people.

4. The Hokushin Itto-ryu is an extremely effective ryuha, the training is authentic and uses historical methods in these modern times to forge real combatants. It is also very complete and includes all components of traditional bushi training: kenjutsu, battojutsu, naginatajutsu, gekiken, military drills (fighting in groups and in formation) and historical studies.

5. The community feels like a real family. Everybody was very friendly and went the extra mile to help each other (and especially the guests) We train, eat, live, clean and party together. Otsuka Soke and Ingmar even helped me through a very difficult moment in my life.

Full length description below:

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Ingmar and I arrived on Sunday before the Gasshuku was supposed to start. Otsuka Soke greeted us with some of his students, who were immediately very friendly. I want to emphasize on how polite and friendly people were by pointing this out: **During this seminar I was the only person who did not speak German.** Yet Otsuka sensei and everybody else made an effort to speak English for the whole time so I could understand and participate. Having lived 15 years of my life as an expat I can say this is a huge effort from the community because mostly people don't go out of their way to accommodate “strangers” for that.

We expected to get some rest but that hope was cut short because training started immediately that night for 3 hours to warm people up for the Gasshuku. For the night, we sleep in the dojo. Otsuka Soke had even bought some very comfortable mattress for us to sleep in. I love it and it felt like a camping trip for adult warriors!

1. The training and the Gasshuku

Training officially started every day from noon to 6PM (though we usually went far beyond that) However before training, everybody participated in cleaning the dojo. The act of cleaning itself is actually also practice for Hokushin Itto-Ryu techniques (a bit like the car washing in the movie karate kid). One of the most intensive parts of the training is, quite ironically, the warm-up suburi. Although we started with some simple suburi this quickly escalated into very demanding exercises. The suburi

were done with the Hokushin Itto-Ryu bokuto which was a pretty thick and heavy one, designed to mimic the weight of a shinken, and it was 1kg.

Of all the various suburi which we did each day, Haya suburi are the most intense, and neither I nor Ingmar had seen anything like it despite decades of practicing martial arts. We were supposed to do 500 haya suburi on the first day, which consist of jumping back and forth quickly while cutting men. The tempo of the Hokushin Itto-Ryu kenshi was extremely fast, and around 300 suburi my body was trembling and giving out, I couldn't breathe, and my shoulders felt like it was weighted with lead. After the 400 or so even my mind started blacking out, I couldn't see clearly and was simply following the motion in a stubborn refusal to give up. I was determined to not dishonor the Soke's invitation. **However, I looked around me and everyone was doing their part, even though they were exhausted nobody gave up, and this collective effort motivated everyone to keep going.** When I looked to Ingmar I saw that he grimacing in pain, sweat pouring out from his temple like a river, yet he too kept going. Keep in mind, in Kendo, Haya-suburi is done with lightweight Shinai…



Mame-Maki Geiko, traditional Hokushin Itto-ryu training with soybeans on the floor to improve your footwork. Wrong Ashiwaza hurts!

But that wasn't all. After a very short break, we had to do sonkyo suburi, which is basically jumping squats while cutting men. By the time I finished I couldn't feel my legs and for the rest of the gasshuku I had to crawl down the stairs on 4 legs. Never skip legs days!

After the suburi we were all exhausted, and then the main keiko followed. Battojutsu was done only with sharp shinken and even though I've done Iaido before I wasn't prepared for this. You have a much better sense of awareness and caution when you are handling a live blade with other people around. Also, you get detailed instructions on how to properly and safely handle a live blade, by the various senior students and teachers of the school. No accidents happened and that even despite everyone being pretty exhausted, physically and mentally.

The Gekiken Uchikomi and Shiai Geiko were undoubtedly the most exciting and in my opinion, the most useful parts of training. Not that the Kata Geiko is not useful. However, Gekiken puts your endurance to the limits (the suburi training was hard so as to prepare you for shiai). It is during shiai that the true merit of your training is put to the test. What is the point of doing a perfect kata if you cannot apply it in a real fight? I'm not at liberty to discuss details of the training at the Chiba-Dojo but I've never felt so alive during all my years of martial arts training. My whole body was covered in bruises of all colors, my limbs were shaking, but the adrenaline was pumping so hard I could barely feel the pain.

So many times, I fell down and just wanted to give up, but as my partner attacked again, I just instinctively got up and fought even more fiercely. **It is in those moments that you truly discover the extent of the human will to survive, to dominate and to overcome, and that is what has made our species so powerful.**

This is why I believe Gekiken is a very important part of koryu training because without it you are simply missing out on the most challenging and most fundamental part of being a kenshi: learning to excel in order to survive. I have struggled so much in finding a ryuha that still has shiai in its curriculum and after having fought in the fashion of Hokushin Itto-ryu's gekiken training my feelings are totally vindicated.

In shiai, you can have no ego, no excuses, no "yeah I lost but but but…" As Otsuka Soke said, it doesn't matter if you lose or win, every match is an opportunity to learn, but you cannot learn if you let your ego overtake you. If you get hit, you get hit. Accept it, bow to your opponent and do better next time. Most of the time I feel like the endless discussions about techniques / katas during our modern times could have been easily settled by picking up a bokuto/shinai, like it was done during the old days. And that was exactly how it was done during the Gasshuku.

2. Otsuka Ryunosuke, the 7th Soke

People who have met Otsuka Soke would not need much convincing. Before I met him at the Gasshuku, I just knew that he is an incredibly generous person (granting 2 lottery places to outsiders instead of his own students) and very meticulous in everything he posts online.

Now that I met him, I know for sure that he is meticulous and passionate about everything he does and not just his online posts, and still I'm amazed at his accomplishments.

The first question people have is, how on earth did a Gaijin, and on top of that a very young one, become the Soke of one of the strongest and most famous koryu in Japanese history? **My answer: a lot of genius, a bottomless passion for his art, over 20.000 hours of training (he actually counts the hours of his active training time and I believe him), but most importantly, so many personal sacrifices that most of us (especially me) would not be willing to make.**

Otsuka Soke has incredible techniques and can back it up with solid performance. During the tameshigiri session we were cutting rolled tatami mats with thickness of three or four times the usual. Important to note is that those mats are not secured on a spike on the stand like they are during normal tameshigiri. Instead they are just placed on a flat stand completely unsecured. If the angle of the edge is only slightly off, while cutting such a thick and unsecured target, the cut won't go through and one would just hit the makiwara off the stand. Most people including some of the senior students struggled to manage a completely clean and perfect cut even with a full force kesa giri. Otsuka Soke on the contrary cut those targets with ease and even cut a triple-thickness one cleanly in half while using Nuki (drawing his sword from scabbard)! Impressive feat.

He is also an incredibly strong and fast kenshi, this is made obvious during shiai, kata and suburi. And yes, Soke participated in the suburi with us and not just sitting around counting the suburi. What is admirable is that he does it with a burning passion**,** almost like the passion you see in a kid in a candy store. While everyone is struggling to finish the suburi he is doing it because he loves it and wants to lead by example. That's what I really love about it, since he's not only a teacher but also a fellow kenshi: he fights with us and does the kata with us to teach us.

Otsuka Soke also did Gekiken together with everyone, and I had the honor to fight him in an Uchikomi-Geiko session on the last day of the Gasshuku. It was an incredible experience. **I'm used to sparring in heavy armor with my HEMA group in France,** and our club has several gold-medals winners from Europe, **and still I was shocked by the speed, strength and ferocity of Soke's strikes.**

He didn't spare me just because I was not at his level, and that's a great respect you can grant to your training partner. He pushed me to the very limits and even though I'm exhausted and thrown to the ground several times, I was proud of myself to always get up and continue the fight. I also watched him fight shiai against his senior students and despite them being very skilled swordsmen in their own right (some with decades of experience in the Japanese sword arts), he always came out on top.



Otsuka Soke fighting and dominating one of the Mokuroku ranked practitioners in a shiai fought in front of all students

As a student of the martial arts, it is very important to me to know for sure that my teacher knows what he is talking about, and that he is able to defend himself when challenged. Well, with Otsuka Soke I'm highly convinced that not only is he an expert in his field, he can also reliably win against most if not all challengers (up until now he has not lost a duel over the last eight years). We all know the saying "he who cannot fight, teaches" and many of us have teachers who can no longer fight, or cannot even fight against their own students. When you have that kind of doubt about your teacher's capabilities, the bond between teacher and students is already broken from the beginning. But students of the Hokushin Itto-ryu are lucky in the sense that not only their Soke can train and teach great kenshi, he is and will be for a long time be a formidable kenshi himself (given he is still 28 years old)

His passion for his art is inspiring and infectious and it carries over to his students, even me. He is not distant like many Sensei, rather he wants you to feel the love that he feels and want you to do better, be better. Honestly, true koryu training is hard and unforgiving, and an intolerant or harsh teacher could easily discourage his students. While Otsuka Soke does not go easy on you, he always gives you the extra motivation to keep going. "Most people who died in the front lines during a battle did so because they gave up out of exhaustion, not because they were bad fighters" was one of the things he said to us during Gekiken (among many other things) and this kept people continuing to fight despite their exhaustion.

But the most endearing quality from Otsuka Soke is not that he is an excellent Soke. **It is because he is a very enjoyable person to be around, and I know that he is a very gentle person at heart**. He

talks openly to everyone and always asks people if they are doing ok and having a good time, or encouraging them to do better. We all know the "nice host who takes care of everyone" and "the cool guy at the party", that's Otsuka Soke. He doesn't have different personalities on and off the dojo like a lot of teachers do. He is just being himself all the time and this gives the dojo a very cheerful and friendly atmosphere.

However, what amazed me most it's the length he was willing to go to help people, even those not close to him. I was going through a very difficult time lately due to a fresh breakup, and on the third day of the Gasshuku I was not feeling well. Soke took me outside in the middle of training, ordered the training to be led by the Shihandai and Shidoin and talked to me for 2 hours to make sure I feel better. That's an incredible feat of kindness that most people often can't even do to people they know, yet alone to someone you just know for a few days.

It is also during this time that I get to know him better. It is easy to say "yeah, if I'm a full time kenshi with a nice dojo and not a day job I could do it too" but I'm here to tell you that's not true. **Otsuka Soke sacrificed a lot to study and take over** the Hokushin Itto-ryu from his predecessor and adoptive father, Otsuka Yoichiro Soke and leads it as we know it today: he had to give up on his family, his stable career as a tax advisor, his health and even his original family's heritage and identity. How many of us are ready and willing to leave home when 18 years old, go to a foreign country where you don't even speak the language, just to pursue the dream of becoming a sword-master? How many of us are willing to abandon a promising career that pays a very nice income, to open a dojo with very little financial prospects? How many are willing to pour thousands and thousands of hours and the very essence of your being into training, risking several injuries that will have consequences for your life?

We like to think of having our dreams come true as a combination of good luck and passion and things that "just happen", but we forget that it's just a lot of pain and sacrifices. For more information you can go to his blog on www.the-samurai-mind.com to learn more details about his life's journey. Personally, I can only say that, was I in the position of Otsuka Soke, I would not have the courage nor the willingness to make the sacrifice that he did.

Overall, it's just an incredibly rewarding experience to know Otsuka Soke and I'm looking forward to spending more time with him and all the kenshi of the Hokushin Itto-ryu Hyoho! This leads me to the next part:

3. The Higher-Level Students and Teachers

We often say "if you want to see how good the teacher is, look at his students" and this really comes true with regards to the Mokuroku-Level practitioners of the Hokushin Itto-ryu. There were about 9 Shihandai and Shidoin at the Gasshuku. All of them teach either directly at the Honbu or lead their own groups in various cities in Germany or in other countries. Most of them you might already know from the Koryu-Bujutsu Facebook group: Stehli Martin-Sensei, Albrecht Sven, Lyutov Dmitry, Oláh Tamás, Schoof Dominic, Roth Torben, Regese Sebastian, Pfander Benedikt and Sasaki Rafał. Sadly no

one from Japan and some of the other countries could attend this time, due to the Corona related travel restrictions…

If I must sum it up in two words: skill and kindness. All these gentlemen are extremely skilled and knowledgeable in the teachings of the Hokushin Itto-ryu and are able to clearly explain what they know in a no-bullshit way. As an Asian who trained in Asian martial arts since I was a kid, I always believe that if somebody cannot explain something to you, it simply means he doesn't know. Most people like to say "it's too advanced to explain to you" as an excuse to not having to admit that they don't know the answer and save their ego. The Mokuroku ranked practitioners were able to explain well why and how they do certain things, both in kata and in shiai, and what they said is all consistent with what the Soke teaches (I always check with the Soke afterwards). Yet they have no ego and freely tell me to go ask Otsuka Soke directly if there's something they can't explain or are not fully sure about. Soke then often interrupts the keiko and explains (or physically shows) the question a student asked in full detail to everyone.

Furthermore, all of the Shihandai and Shidoin are very willing and patient to help the newcomers, and are always available. There was absolutely no "I'm too good to train with you" attitude, or "follow this advice because I'm more advanced than you" attitude that is sadly very common in martial arts I have experienced so far. They gave advice for me to consider and to discover myself during my training but do not impose anything upon me.

Finally, each of them has a specialty. Sasaki Rafał for example is the endurance champion, and the only one who is able to keep a steady pace during the 500-1000 haya suburi. When everybody has to slow down and I almost blacked out due to lack of breath, Rafał JUST KEPT GOING at the same rate while shouting out the count loudly like a war cry. Martin-Sensei, Tamas and Sebastian have excellent maai and techniques for shiai. I took so many katate tsuki from Tamas, that I was able to incorporate it into my own shiai effectively. Those are a few examples but there's something to learn from EVERYONE in the Gasshuku.

4. The Hokushin Itto-ryu Hyoho

It is important for me to study a "true" koryu and I've searched long and hard for it, mostly in vain since in France there's barely any authentic school (I studied Shinkendo, Kashima Shinto Ryu and Shinkage Ryu). **During this seminar I get to discover the elements that make a true koryu: a deeply-rooted tradition that dates back with the military and political history of Japan; directly and for centuries transmitted techniques that are born out of the need for survival on and off the battlefield and not fancy demonstration techniques; and training methods that prepare you physically and mentally for such a lifestyle, and most importantly, a true warriors mindset that is needed to pursue such a path.**

It is absolutely mind-blowing how well the history of the Hokushin Itto-ryu is documented. Everything is recorded and shown even to outsiders with old scrolls and other primary sources. Some of the famous masters you can see on the portraits at the Chiba-Dojo of the HIR you can easily find if

you are just browsing through samurai history on the internet. That just goes to show how prominent the HIR is as a koryu school.

What's even more impressive is how well Otsuka Soke and the senior students know about these matters. Otsuka Soke regularly gave history lessons during training regarding the school and all aspects of medieval Japan: how people dressed in various situations, how they interacted with each other, the rituals, all the dates and events in history, etc.

You could ask all questions you wanted to ask. Be it about techniques, about philosophy, about reiho, about the lineage of the school, about how and through whom the teachings were directly preserved up to the present day. Everything was answered in full detail verified with historical facts and documents. A level of transparency which sets completely new standards for all koryu.

Again, this is proof of a level of devotion that is highly admirable. I understand now why sceptics call the Hokushin Itto-ryu an obsession, but it is simply because they, and Otsuka Soke in the first place, are truly passionate about their ryuha in a way very few people are.

5. The Community & Dojo Life

On the busiest day we had around 20 people or more, coming from all different walks of life and different locations. What we all share in common, is obviously a deep passion for koryu kenjutsu (in some cases I would even say obsession) I believe it's really this uncommon passion that really binds us together, because people were extremely nice and helpful to each other during the seminar. Everybody participated in the cleaning, training and partying. There's no ego involved. While there is of course a clear hierarchy within the school, still, advanced students do the dishes, clean the tables, go buy the groceries and have fun with everyone, almost like equals. This is not the case with a lot of dojos I have been to, where the higher-ranking practitioners use the social hierarchy to distance themselves from the students.

What I really admired is the fortitude of everyone. **Nobody gave up no matter how uncomfortable the training was.** And it was very uncomfortable. The dojo floor was constantly wet and slippery with sweat despite the weather being rather cool. During the breaks a lot of people were exhausted, some got bruises, but NO ONE gave up or complained during training. Ingmar who came from France with me even had trouble sleeping (he slept for 4 hours most days) so he wasn't feeling well, and yet he still didn't give up in any exercise!

Even more admirable are the students who have knee problems. They had incredible pain just sitting in seiza, go down into a squatting position etc. yet they still sit in seiza without complaining and even fought shiai! I don't have any knee problems and still I find some activities extremely painful, so hat off to these brave people! However, the incredible thing is that Soke doesn't order or force anyone to do the exercises they cannot do because of injuries or other physical conditions. But everyone just gives their best to get stronger and better for themselves.

We also host the best after-training parties ever! Otsuka Soke goes a long way to make sure that everyone has a good time and even ordered 5 fondue sets so that we can party and eat like there's no tomorrow! Also, we had a massage therapist, a mixologist/bartender, and an acupuncturist attending the gasshuku (all of them are students) who treated their fellow kenshi very well, so the dinner parties were really fun and relaxing!

Frankly it really feels like a summer camp for adults who love swords, and the friendships I built there will certainly stay with me for a long time. I'm still talking and keeping in touch with people I met at the Gasshuku.



Ingmar and I trying out the Tosei Gusoku by the Iron Mountain Armory