

Sharing the Fun and Fascination of Shodo

Aika

(Shodo Club, Third year, Saitama Prefectural Kawaguchi High School*)

I really love *shodo*—Japanese calligraphy done with a brush and *sumi* ink—and have been taking lessons since I was in third grade. I want everyone to know how much fun it is and how fascinating it can be.



You can listen to Aika's voice.



At my private shodo lessons I saw calligraphy done by a member of the Kawaguchi High School Shodo Club in an album of works done at “Sho no Koshien,” an international high school shodo competition. Until then I had thought of shodo as something to be done faithfully, as close to orthodox brushwork as possible. But this work was completely different. Its powerful lines and dynamic strokes completely changed my image of shodo. I decided that I really wanted to join the shodo club to which that student belonged, so I entered Kawaguchi High School.

Getting Your Message Across

I changed a lot after I joined the shodo club in high school. Junior high school was very conformist, and it was difficult to express an opinion if it differed from what other people were saying, so I acquired the habit of keeping my views to myself. When I first joined the shodo club in high school, too, I was reluctant to say what I really thought. Then one day the teacher advised me, “You won’t get anything across to others if you don’t say what you think,” so I finally worked up the courage to express my opinion. And I found that the others listened carefully and valued what I had to say. From that time on, I was able to speak my mind forthrightly.

One of the main activities of our shodo club is what is known as “performance shodo,” in which a number of members of the club collaborate to create a large-scale work executed as a public performance. Because it is a group effort, often the way individual members see the project differs. Especially at times like that, it’s important to state what is on our minds. For example, when we were getting ready for the Shodo Girls Koshien one year,

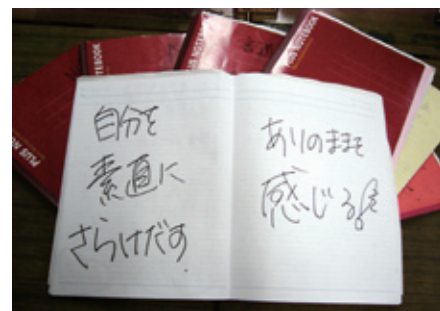
there was one time when two members got into a disagreement on how we should practice. The anger between the two made the atmosphere very unpleasant. Remembering the teacher’s advice, I suggested to them, “If you don’t explain what makes you angry, no one will understand,” and “if you don’t ask what the other person is thinking, you won’t understand.” After that, they managed to explain themselves to each other and worked out their differences. From experiences like that, I’ve learned that people can understand each other if they can get their ideas across.



These are large brushes used for performances. When filled with ink, each one weighs about 10 kilograms. Sometimes the performer uses both at once. One work can require three liters of ink.

Getting Over Frustration

I’ve adopted the practice of keeping a kind of diary about shodo practice. I record observations about daily practice and things the teacher says, and try to put what I hear and observe to use in subsequent practices. I use study notebooks and already have seven volumes!



“I’ve got to show myself just as I am, and feel things as they are!”

At one time, I wrote in my notes, “I’ve got to show myself just as I am, and feel things as they are!” What made me write that was an experience I had in the summer of my third year. I was having trouble in our performance-shodo practice and in completing my entries for various exhibits and competitions; I couldn’t seem to express properly what I had learned. I’d think I was trying hard, but the results didn’t show it. I felt like a fail-

Introduction of the shodo club

The club meets for practice 5:00 to 8:30 a.m. and 4:00 to 8:00 p.m. Monday through Friday. The sessions are devoted to practicing moves for performance shodo and creating works to present at major competitions. This is followed by a discussion meeting, and often includes close brushwork guidance with the shodo teacher who is the club’s faculty advisor. Every morning, the teacher made delicious soup for us, something we all looked forward to.

Activities:

- * Entries to 30 nationwide exhibitions/competitions annually
- * Sponsoring Kawaguchi High School Shodo Exhibit
- * Performance shodo (“Shodo Girls Koshien”—calligraphy tournament sponsored by Nihon Television’s “Zoom-in!! SUPER” program; champions three years in a row).

ure and then became jealous of other members who were doing good work. I couldn't explain what I couldn't do or didn't understand; I just felt frustrated and unhappy. I was on edge, gloomy, and grouchy—often taking out my irritation on others.

Then the teacher suggested that I shouldn't think so hard about not being able to produce results I was satisfied with, but just try to figure out why. So I tried that, putting aside thoughts of failure and instead letting myself feel the way I felt and thinking "How can I get my brushwork to go the way I want it to?" "Why is it that I cannot do it well?" Finally, I realized that there were ways I could change my grip on the brush and adjust my handling of the brush so I could get the results I wanted. And then, my work did improve. I now see that I was just making myself suffer. That experience made me understand that when I faced difficulties, I could find a solution if I just humbly admitted what I couldn't do and looked for a different perspective or approach. It was a really hard time, but I discovered a lot about myself. Failure is, as they say, the source of success.

Working toward a Dream

My mother says that if I had not joined the shodo club, I might have shut myself up in my room and stopped going to school—what we call *hikikomori*. She is probably right. During one period I got to a point where I didn't want to interact with anyone. If it had not been for my friends in the shodo club, the advice of the club's advisor, and the experience of performance shodo, I might have dropped out of school. Shodo has become part of my life—indeed, it is my life itself. I hope I can always stay involved in shodo.

My dream, in fact, is to become a maker of shodo brushes. Since I began shodo, I've used all sorts of brushes and been surprised at how different it feels when writing with each kind, depending on the materials from which it is made. Studying about the different brushes, I've gotten so intrigued that I want to learn to make them myself some day.

In my three years in shodo club I've not only learned the skills of a good calligrapher but about good manners and traditional customs. The experience has also given me more mental discipline and strength. These are qualities that will stand me in good stead after I graduate. I know I'll be able to make failure a springboard for success as I go along.

The Fascination of Shodo

In shodo, even the same character can be seen entirely different depending on the amount of ink used and the pressure applied to the brush. For example, if you fill the brush with a lot of ink and press down hard, the stroke is thick. Characters written with

a brush also reveal the habits and character of the person who writes them. I believe we can transmit our character to others through our handwriting. To me this is part of the fascination.

The attraction of performance shodo, meanwhile, is that it is something not only those doing the performance, but the spectators as well, can enjoy. I began to learn performance shodo only after joining my high school shodo club. At first I couldn't understand how anyone could wield a brush over such a huge piece of paper; I tensed up when I took one of the big ones in my hand. By now, I love it! The feeling you get—throwing your whole body into making the strokes go across the paper to the rhythm of the music—is just indescribable! And because we're obviously enjoying it, the people watching our performance get caught up in the energy, and we can tell they are sharing our feeling. What's so exciting is that both the calligrapher and the viewer can share that feeling.

*This article was prepared based on an interview held in February 2010. The status of the students mentioned is given as of the time of the interview.



Kawaguchi High School Shodo Club performance work: "Michi" (Path).



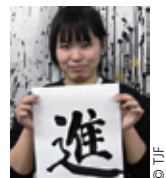
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My favorites

好きな文字 Favorite word

「進」—which means "go forward," "progress."

わたし しょうぶ なかま 私たち書道部の仲間はこれから、それぞれ違う道へ「進」むけれど、ここで学んだことを大事にすれば、まっすぐに「進」んでいける、と思うからです。



All of us in the shodo club will go on after graduation, each our separate ways, but if we treasure what we have learned here, I feel certain we can find a sure and steady way forward.

好きなことば Favorite phrase

「あきらめない」—that is, "not give up."

いま じぶん しょうぶ 今の自分があるのは、つらいことがあっても書道をあきらめずにきたからです。

I am what I am today because I have persevered in shodo even when things got tough.

The club faculty advisor Miyake-sensei's message to Aika

Through her three years in the club, and through participation in performance shodo, Aika learned how to work with others to achieve a common goal. She became aware of how we are supported by others and how we support others ourselves. She learned to be thoughtful and caring toward others. She also learned about herself—her own strengths and weaknesses—and I think she is strong enough now that she will not give up easily.