Essay

Zagaku
An Auto-ethnographic Account

Amy Tapsfield
Goldsmiths, University of London

Abstract
Most of this article consists of an unadulterated piece of auto-ethnographic writing depicting a key experience from my anthropological fieldwork. For my PhD research on Japanese policing, I spent two years living in Tokyo and training at the Yoshinkan Aikido Honbu Dojo together with groups of Japanese police officers. This particular dojo has a program called the Senshusei course where Tokyo police officers take part in a nine-month full-time training period that will bring them up to first class black belt instructor level. Alongside the aikido training, the senshusei have other duties such as being responsible for cleaning the entire building, maintaining a training diary, writing weekly essays, and helping at dojo functions. This course removes them from their policing duties for the duration of the training, yet they remain on salary. The Japanese police are encouraged to train in either aikido, judo, or kendo, as well as required firearm practice, as a part of their job. The senshusei course enrolls a maximum of ten officers each year and is just one of many training options available to them for their professional development. From interviews conducted I discovered that, despite being known amongst the Tokyo police for the intensity of the training, completion of senshusei does not necessarily bestow greater importance, respect, or professional status onto those who do it, and most of the officers I trained with signed up simply due to a personal interest in martial arts. A couple of the police told me that judo and kendo have a larger following, so there is apparently less competition if you choose aikido. After completing the course, they are expected to act as instructors to the other officers in their area units (though this is largely dependent on whether anyone is interested). Alongside this, there is a course that civilians can enrol in, of slightly longer duration (eleven months), that trains together with the police and shares all the same duties, usually containing mostly non-Japanese nationals and is therefore known as the International Senshusei or Kokusai Senshusei course. This course has been running since 1990 and was set up due to popular demand from non-Japanese aikido practitioners, many of whom had already been travelling to Japan to train for some years. This course is what I undertook and completed in 2017-18. This piece of writing is a first-hand description of one of the aspects of that training, called zagaku: meaning ‘seated learning,’ once a week all senshusei had to spend one full 90-minute training session in seiza, the traditional kneeling position. This practice was derived from the era when Shioda Gozo-sensei (the founder of Yoshinkan Aikido) was still alive and leading the dojo in the late 1990s; it was for all the senseis to attend and reflect on their progress and techniques. This session would usually last around 45mins, during which time everyone had to pay attention to the discussion despite the pain they were in, as Shioda-sensei could call on anyone to contribute at any time. This was a method of training the mind as well as the body, to be able to maintain concentration whilst in significant pain and stress, similar to the meditative practice of zazen performed by...
Buddhist monks. Ueda-sensei, who had attended these sessions when a young man and was head of the dojo whilst I was there, had been greatly influenced by this practice and decided to implement it for the senshusei course. This decision appeared to be something of a whim, as he had only begun using the practice three years earlier, despite having been in charge of the course for a lot longer (the next year, when a different sensei took over management of the police training, the practice of zagaku was dropped). This experience was incredibly painful and hated by both the police and the international senshusei, yet we all submitted ourselves to its torture at the same time every week. Describing this training to Japanese friends outside of the dojo, they would look at me with horrified disbelief just thinking about how painful it would be, and that was the point; the pain and discomfort were a crucial element of zagaku. Even the senseis felt it despite their decades of practice.

This auto-ethnographic piece will form the opening chapter of my PhD thesis, from which starting point I will go on to examine the key themes of pain, discipline, consent, embodied experience, auto-ethnography, methods of learning, behaviours of respect, non-violence, power, and social responsibility within the context of Japan. However, I have made the decision to leave theory out of this article, as the main purpose is for the reader to be given an uninterrupted, embodied taste of the experience as it was lived. There are many academics from various disciplines writing about the theory of pain, but it remains an elusive experience that is rarely described for its own sake. The medical profession still struggles to create methods that patients can use to accurately communicate the intensity and form of their pain, as language is decidedly lacking for such things, so I wanted to use this longer piece as an attempt to communicate what usually remains incommunicable. The anthropology of martial arts is acquiring a strong collection of ethnographies, but descriptions of the embodied experiential elements of training are often cut short to prioritise theoretical analysis. It is an area where the ethnographer often uses their own body as a source of data; training, learning, and getting injured becoming a crucial part of the research methodology. Watching from the side-lines would not have allowed me any insight into the experience of zagaku; the fact that I did experience it, as a researcher, has enabled me to write about it. In order to avoid interrupting my auto-ethnographic description with sections of theory and citations, I have included a further reading list at the end of this piece; a list of books and articles that explore key themes from my research, that readers might find relevant.

**Keywords**

Japan, martial arts, police training, pain, embodiment, auto-ethnography

**Japanese Terms**

I have provided translations of the Japanese terms used in this piece below, but not for the longer sentences; as the purpose is to describe my own experience, and I did not know the meaning of these phrases at the time (I had memorised them phonetically), I wanted to withhold the literal translation at the beginning and instead have the reader make inferences from the context of the situation. When being taught the phrases, our senseis did not see the need to tell us their meanings; the weekly recitation was for performative purposes. Instead, a general translation is provided in a footnote.
Dogi – training clothes, in the case of aikido this includes white trousers and top tied with a belt of a colour that corresponds to one’s rank.

Dojo – name of the fully-matted training space, but also of the building itself (including office, changing rooms, etc.).

Hai – meaning ‘yes’.

Jiyuwaza – free-flow techniques, performed continuously whilst moving around the space.

Kamidana – traditional Shinto shrine that contains the house deities.

Obi – belt.

Osu – an affirmative response that we were expected to give to any question/comment/order from a sensei whilst at the dojo.

Rei – to bow.

Seiza – traditional kneeling seated position.

Sensei – teacher/instructor. Used as a suffix to names to demonstrate their position.

Senshusei – name of the course and those who take part. Also used as a suffix to the names of those enrolled on the course; for the 11 months of the course, I was known as Amy-senshusei.

Shinkoku Toban – title of the senshusei who acts as leader for that day; duties included leading the greetings and filling out the training diary.

Ukemi – breakfalls.
It starts from a standing position. In converse relation to a normal session, where you sit for the 5mins before the sensei arrives to begin the class, this time we are standing during that time. Although, spending 5mins sitting on tired, injured knees is often painful, it is nothing by comparison to this weekly 5mins spent on your feet. The physical pain might not be felt at the time, but the anticipation of how bad it is about to become is enough to trigger fight or flight physiological responses in your body.

We stand to attention in two rows, evenly spaced along each side of the dojo, everyone facing directly across from their training partner. My position is on the end, furthest from the sensei and facing the window (one side of the dojo is window from floor to ceiling, one story up from street level), which means I can see the street outside whilst I am standing, and can try to distract myself with watching the innocent business of those lucky people who are not inside this room right now. Seeing them, my thoughts always oscillate between wondering whether they realise how lucky they are not to be in here at this moment, and wondering how crazy I am to be voluntarily putting myself in this situation. Once the session begins my view will change, and I will only be able to see sky and rooftops, behind the row of half my comrades sitting together with me on the mats. I will be able to see the sensei if I turn my head to the left, but I cannot see the other people who are sat in line with me, except the one directly next to me, as his body blocks the others from view. Those of us sat on our side also have a view of the clock hanging on the wall. I still cannot tell whether this was a blessing or a curse.

The 5mins passes in silence. I am tense. So is everyone else. Even though I have just spent the entire break stretching and trying to make my muscles as loose as possible, it feels like these minutes of standing straight and unmoving are putting all of my efforts to waste. The only thought that comforts me is that, in just 90mins time, it will be my very favourite time of the week: the point at which it will be over, and I will be at the moment furthest away from the next time I have to go through the same experience all over again. I remember that I will be expected to speak, and I rehearse the Japanese phrase we all have to recite in my head, as it’s long and we only say it once a week. I also think about what my comment will be for this instalment.

Time is up as Ueda-sensei enters the room. He removes his dojo slippers and they are left in the hallway, as he performs his usual ritual of bowing once to the kamidana shrine before entering, then once more after crossing the threshold. His bows are at an exact angle, and he pauses during each one; they are never quick or perfunctory, but always measured and with a show of deep feeling. After bowing he reaches his hands down and hooks both thumbs over the top of his obi (belt), gives it an adjustment by pulling it downwards whilst rotating his shoulders, then his hands drop to his sides as he walks to his position directly below the kamidana shrine in front of the mirror and kneels down into place without waiting. All of Ueda-sensei’s actions I am only imagining in my head, matching the movements to the sounds I can hear along with my memories of having watched.
him enter the *dojo* hundreds of times before. I cannot see him from my position, as I have to remain facing forwards and cannot turn my head. The moment Ueda-sensei starts to kneel is when Nakagawa-sensei gives the dreaded command, “*seiza!*” from his position at the top of the line.

*Seiza* is a specific position that contains cultural meanings of etiquette; in a country that often sits on the floor instead of on chairs, there are ‘correct’ ways of sitting in formal situations. This formal position is *seiza*: on your knees with feet tucked beneath your bottom. Different settings may have subtle differences in position, but in this *dojo*, we were instructed the toes must be touching but not crossed, knees should be one fists width apart, back straight, shoulders down and relaxed, hands with fingers together and pointing inwards, resting on the upper thighs.

As *senshusei*, we are expected to do everything immediately, and as fast as we can, with sharp, snappy movements, but at this moment, our collective decent into *seiza* is slower than usual. Every millisecond we are able to delay what is coming is worth it. I also make a few clothing adjustments as I go down into position, pulling at my *dogi* trousers to make sure I am not kneeling on a crease in the cloth, as well as loosening the material around my knees (if it is too tight across the front of the knees then this pressure can increase the pain, and if the material is too bunched up at the crease in the back of the knees, it can lead to sores). The moment I sit back on my heels is when I know whether the pain will start right from the beginning, or if I’ll have some minutes of ease. Mostly, due to the stiffness of muscles tired from the day’s morning training, my knees are painful from the moment we begin. The disappointment of this realisation hits me, but I give no outward sign of distress. I take a few deep breaths. Nakagawa-sensei gives the command for “*Rei!*” and we all lean forwards to bow; placing hands on the mats in front of you, index fingers and thumbs creating a diamond shape as you bend at the waist, keeping your back and neck straight, then come back up in reverse of the same movement.

Ueda-sensei gives a command in Japanese that I don’t understand, and we all move our hands into a specific meditation position (tips of the thumb and index finger from the left hand are pressed against the tips from the right, index fingers pointing straight upwards, with the rest of the fingers interlocked) and close our eyes. We remain in this position silently for maybe a minute (my sense of time becomes distorted during *zagaku*), until Ueda-sensei gives another command, and everyone returns to normal position and opens their eyes. He then gives an introduction in Japanese before the individual reviews begin. First up, “Matteo” is called by Ueda-sensei; he responds with a loud, “*HAI!*” and then everybody bows together. Once we are back up, Ueda-sensei asks in a level tone, “*Kōshū no hansei to shuukan ni tsuite setsuimei seïyo*”, to which Matteo has to shout in response, “*Kōshū no*
Once he has given the correct phrase, he then has to talk about how he feels the past week of senshusei went and how he hopes to improve. We kokusai senshusei are permitted to say this part in English, but we are also not supposed to speak for very long, as we are only there as extras, and it is the police who this is all meant for. No one can understand our English anyway. I listen whilst Matteo speaks and notice the ways he is repeating himself from the weeks before, see him struggling with his English. Even though we are sat opposite one another, I do not look directly at him but instead focus my eyes on the mats in front of me and just listen. I continue to recite the Japanese phrase in my head so that I will be ready when my turn comes; I am up next. My legs feel uncomfortable. Once Matteo is finished speaking, he shouts, “IJOU DESU!”, and we all bow together.

Then, I hear Ueda-sensei say, “Amy”, and I shout my, “HAI!” in a loud response, and we all bow again. I am asked the same question as Matteo, and I shout back my expected response. Even when I am addressing Ueda-sensei I do not turn my head towards him, but maintain my form, head straight, facing forwards. It is easier to shout loudly for the short, sharp bursts, such as ‘HAI!’; and ‘OSU!’, but, even with so much practice, it is more difficult to maintain the loud volume for longer sentences. Still, I do my best to shout the entire phrase, as I know I am supposed to. I am measured in the speed of my response; I have learnt that it’s better to keep a steady pace when speaking the memorised Japanese phrases rather than trying to rush through them due to nervousness, as this leads to mistakes and fumbling. I speak my piece.

“KONSHU NO HANSEI TO SHUUKAN NE TSUITE SETUSEI SHIMASU!” We have started doing jiyuwaza practice in training this week, and I found it very difficult. Not only is my ukemi technique still too weak, but I am also struggling with the rhythm of the new movements. Jiyuwaza is all about speed and timing, but being unfamiliar with all of the techniques, I do not yet have the muscle memory to perform the movements, so I end up getting stuck as I try and think of what to do next. Uh, I know that the only way to get better at this is to practice over and over, so I want to do my best to improve as quickly as possible so that I can keep up with everyone else during training. IJOU DESU!” (The Japanese phrases at the open and close are spoken with more volume, although I try to project my voice loudly throughout the speech.)

Everybody bows. Ueda-sensei then moves onto the police and this same ritual is repeated, only with a slight difference; every new person who speaks has to talk about themselves but also comment on everyone else who spoke before them. This means they all have to maintain their concentration and listen closely to the others’ speeches before it is their turn. The order in which Ueda-sensei calls their names changes every week, and everyone hopes to be called early. It seemed to be

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1 Essentially, Ueda-sensei is asking the senshusei to explain their reflections and habits from the past week; then the senshusei responds that they will now explain their reflections and habits from the past week.
random, but I also noticed that those who were worse at maintaining their composure tended to be picked last more often.

My brain does not follow the rest of the speeches, only listening out for the moments when I will need to bow. It is all spoken in Japanese, so I cannot understand what they are saying anyway. Once my speaking part is over, my brain can relax a little, as I don’t need to keep practicing the phrase. But this also means that I have no more distractions. My legs hurt. I do not let myself look at the clock, but instead try to calculate how many minutes might have passed. I quickly crush this thought out of my mind, as it’s too depressing to think of such figures yet, as we have barely begun, and I don’t want to remind myself of how much longer I still have to go. I stare at the mats in front of me. They are a faded green colour. There are patches where the sunlight creates a sheen and I can see faint scratches, not permanent damage but created from toenails and the rough skin on the bare feet of everyone moving around during practice.

I glance up towards the faces of the police sat opposite me, and two of them have their eyes closed. I try to close mine, remembering what Scott-sensei told me about his senshusei experience, that he had always closed his eyes and slept for the first 20mins of zazaku. I try to close my eyes but, as usual, after only a few seconds, they pop back open again. I close them. I try to keep them closed, but I realise that I am having to exert considerable effort to keep them closed, so I allow them to open again. I am confused by this, as I know I am exhausted; I have been awake since 6am and training at the dojo all morning, the same as yesterday and the day before that. Yet still, I cannot keep my eyes closed. I am too tired. I am physically, mentally, and emotionally exhausted, but I am still in extreme-concentration mode, and this will not switch off until I leave the dojo. I stare at the green mats.

I want to look at the clock, but I don’t. I’ve made myself a rule: I have to put off looking at the clock for as long as possible. It’s a game I play with myself – what time will it read when I finally break and have to look? Will the predictions of how long it’s been that I’ve been keeping in my head cause disappointment or joy when the comparison is made?

My legs hurt. Patterns on the mats.

The first police senshusei has finished their speech and we are moving onto the next, which means bowing. This movement is a brief respite for my lower back.

Doing guess work in my head, I calculate that must mean we’re 5-10mins in. Do not look at the clock. Scenes from the TV show I am in the middle of watching start to run through my head. I think about the current plot, the characters, and wonder how they will get themselves out of the situation they have found themselves in. How will the romance resolve itself?

Green mats.
A song is running through my head, but I don’t know all the words.

My legs hurt. Don’t look at the clock.

The second police senshusei has finished speaking – or were they the third? I run through an internal list of all of their faces and voices inside my head, checking off who has and hasn’t spoken yet. This is only the second. We all bow. My legs hurt. The next police senshusei is called and starts speaking, about himself and the previous two.

How much time does that mean has passed?

My legs hurt, but the numbing process has begun, thank goodness. In this kneeling position, the blood gets cut off from below the knees. This means I will soon lose all feeling in my feet and calves – good, a few less body parts to be causing pain. Once the process is complete, I will have a short window of respite. However, this momentary ease will then lead to something much worse.

Do not look at the clock.

If the numbness in my body is at this stage, then that must mean we have been sitting for 15-20mins, right? However, time is warped in this state, so I must always assume the lowest possible estimate. 15mins. But maybe it’s only been 10mins? If I think we’re at 15mins but it has actually been less than that, when I finally allow myself to look at the clock, I’ll have more time left than I expect, and it will be devastating. Must under-estimate. But we’re now into the third police senshusei, so if you add up the time for me and Matteo, plus the two police before this one, it must mean more than 10mins has gone by, right? Still, for the purpose of giving myself a pleasant surprise instead of crushing disappointment when I do look at the clock, I have to go low.

Do not look at the clock.

I realise I’ve had the same three lines of the same song repeating in my head for a while, so I try to skip to another part of the same song that I also know the words for. How did the end of that second verse line go again? I make up what I think the line is. It doesn’t sound quite right, but I sing it to myself like that anyway. I must look up the lyrics when I get home, as this mistake will bug me.

Patterns of scratches on the mats; I can see them on the one that’s two mats away, but not the one directly in front of me, as the light doesn’t hit it at the correct angle from where I am sitting.

Do not look at the clock.

In front of me, Matteo is fidgeting. No one else has moved, nor have their facial expressions changed.
My feet are almost completely numb.

One police senshusei finishes speaking and the next one is called. We all perform the two bows. It is now getting more difficult to sit back upright, and I find myself pushing my torso back up using my hands, instead of the usual, more graceful rise from the core muscles. Sitting back on my heels, I realise there is still the tiniest bit of feeling left in my lower legs.

Do not look at the clock.

Green mats.

How long has it been? Surely it must be 20mins by now? Do not look at the clock. How many of the police have already spoken? Run through the mental list, checking them off. We’re on number five now, right?

Everything below my knees is numb. That means we must have been sat here for 20mins. But do not check the clock.

Matteo’s fidgeting has gotten worse. He’s put his hands down to the mats to relieve the pain. I wonder what issues he is having with his injured ankle? What does his experience feel like?

Do not look at him. Do not put your hands down.

Do not move. Not yet. You’re not allowed to move yet. Stay still.

Do not look up at the clock, I know it’s right there, but do not let your eyes flicker upwards to it. Look at the mats in front of you.

That song lyric is wrong, and it’s throwing off the timing of the verse. How did this song get in my head anyway, was it the radio this morning?

The police senshusei have not moved. Do not move! It’s not time yet. This numbness is a gift, do not waste it. Wait some more, wait till it gets much worse than this.

Think about it, right now it isn’t so bad, right? Your feet and calves are numb, that’s a gift. If you focus in on the parts that hurt, I mean really focus, examine it, pick the feeling apart. What is pain? What is this sensation coming from my knees and thighs? Why do I consider this feeling to be so terrible? What is it exactly? Can I put it in words? If I think about it really intensely, I can deconstruct the sensation of pain with my mind. Focus. Whilst you can concentrate on it, you can recondition your experience of it. FOCUS. As soon as you stop thinking about it intensely, it will return to being just pain. Stay focused. Don’t move, you don’t need to move.
Don't look at the clock.

Don’t move yet, not yet, you can’t move until at least 35mins has passed.

Ok, maybe 30mins would be ok, same as last week. You made it to 30mins without moving last week, so make it to 32mins this week.

But you won’t know how much time has passed until you look at the clock, so don’t look at the clock yet.

You know what happens as soon as you look at the clock once, you break the seal and you can’t stop yourself from looking at it again constantly after that, so don’t look at it yet. Stay strong and don’t look.

Don’t move. Don’t shift your weight.

The numbness is a gift. You know that as soon as you move the blood will rush back. The numbness was an investment, so don’t waste it.

The pain in my knees and thighs is growing stronger. Quickly.

The urge to move is almost unbearable. But don't look at the clock yet.

Ok, once this police senshusei has finished her speech, then I can look. You have to make it until then. Don’t move, wait for her to finish. She’s already been talking for a while now, so it shouldn’t be much longer. I just heard her say the name of one of the guys who spoke before – how far down the line was he again? How much more does that mean she still has to say? How long will she keep talking?

It doesn’t matter, just wait. You’re not allowed to move until she’s finished.

She’s paused in her speech; is she trying to remember something or is she suffering from the pain?

My legs hurt so much. The pain keeps growing.

Every cell in my body feels like it’s screaming at me to move – anywhere, just move. Sitting still is the most difficult thing in the entire world.

How much time has gone?

I need to move; it hurts so much.

Don’t move, she’s still talking. She must be finishing soon.

Why isn’t she finished yet. Hurry up! How long has she been talking for?

Pain.
Don’t move, not yet, just a little longer.

I don’t know where the pain is anymore. It’s not my entire body, but it’s everywhere.

There’s just so much pain.

Don’t move.

Don’t look at the clock.

Why is she not finished yet? Just finish already!

It hurts, it hurts.

The police senshusei finally shouts, “IJOU DESU!” and we all perform the two bows as the next person begins to speak. The bowing is now an incredibly awkward movement, and does not offer any relief from the pain, only from the urge to move. My legs are dead-weight beneath me. I sit back up straight with difficulty and try to find the correct posture, but quickly realise that the posture I’ve been taught for seiza (pushing hips forward and belly out) is too painful, as it slightly increases the pressure on my knees and upper thighs, so I sit straighter. The pain is excruciating.

Look at the mats.

Immediately look up to the clock.

12:28. We’ve only done 28mins. I was telling myself only 25mins had passed, to avoid disappointment, but really, I had hoped we were at 35mins. My internal timer failed again.

There is still over an hour left to go.

Do not move, you’re not allowed to move yet. It isn’t time yet.

5 more minutes, you’re not allowed to move for 5 more minutes. You have to get to 12:35 before you’re allowed to move, otherwise you won’t last until the end. Saving it up now is an investment for later, so don’t move, not yet, you’re not allowed to move yet.

The numbness is a gift, it means the pain is just everywhere else, but it’s not happening below the knees. If you move the blood will rush back there, so don’t move. I know the feeling of blood rushing back will be a sweet, sweet relief, that strange sensation that is painful and awful, but also somehow pleasant, but you can’t have it yet. The longer you put it off the better.
Glance up at the clock, 12:29 – damn it, why did you look at the clock again so soon? Stop it, it’s only going to make things worse if you watch the clock for every second that goes by. It will make everything seem even slower. Don’t look at the clock.

It hurts so much.

Don’t move.

The pain is making me feel nauseous. Is that actually caused by the pain? How does that work?

It hurts, it hurts. Everything hurts.

Don’t move.

Stare at the green mats.

It’s so painful. It’s horrific, but don’t move, not yet.

Don’t move.

Don’t move.

My hands are so sweaty.

It hurts so much.

Breathe.

The police senshusei is still talking.

Glance at the clock, 12:31 – damn it, you shouldn’t have looked! It was still too soon!

The pain is awful.

Try to think of something else.

Don’t move.

It hurts so much.

The song, what verse am I stuck on? Which bit is currently going through my head? It’s been going around on repeat for a while now and I still can’t figure out that lyric.

So much pain.
Switch to another song. What song do I know the words to?

Don’t move, don’t put your hands down. The relief when you finally get to move is going to feel amazing, just wait a little longer. Breathe. It hurts.

Look at the clock, 12:34, you’re almost there! You’re not there yet, but it’s coming really soon. Don’t move yet, but soon you can!

Maybe I could move now? It’s only 1min earlier. Can I take this anymore? Am I at my limit? What is my limit?

Look up at the clock, still 12:34.

My body starts to move on its own, before my brain has given the OK. I must have dropped my guard, let my concentration dip for a millisecond, because it’s not waiting anymore, it’s going ahead with the first movement. I don’t resist.

This initial relief action is a simple shifting of weight: I lean my body to one side so that the pressure is lifted slightly from the opposing leg, and I hold this position for 10seconds or so before shifting over to the other leg. This momentary loosening of the knee-joint allows for the pressure of the bend to ease, giving respite to the aching thigh, as well as allowing some blood to rush back into the lower leg and foot. As I even my weight back out again across both legs and settle back into position, it takes a few seconds for the sensation of the returning blood circulation to kick in. I wait in anticipation. It starts gradually, in the leg that was lifted up first, a slow, creeping of feeling that builds steadily. It’s close to being pins and needles, and would turn into that if the pressure was released fully. It could be described as painful or uncomfortable, and it is, but it’s a different kind of pain, and not nearly as bad as the original pain of seiza, so it is somehow pleasant. I am actually enjoying this slow spread of pain that is flooding through my lower legs and feet, just because it is new. It begins in one leg, then starts in the other, feeling like a wave crashing through my feet. I like it, and I don’t want it to stop. I’m not sure how long the sensation lasts for, probably only countable in seconds, but I revel in it whilst it lasts. It makes me feel dizzy. It is a sweet relief and distraction from everything – this new pain that seems to be on the move and spreading, fills up my mind completely as I focus on the experience of it.

It is over too soon. It fades from the first leg and then the second, and is replaced by something new: an unbearable urge to move. This isn’t the same as the constant need to relieve the growing pressure in my knees by putting my hands down and lifting my weight up, this is something else. It is specifically concentrated in my legs, and it very nearly makes me fall over because it is a contradiction: it’s an unrelenting physical urge to move a part of my body which is currently unmovable. This urge does not come from my brain, but directly from the legs themselves. The legs take over and try to overwhelm the brain. They need to move. But they cannot move, they are cut off from blood circulation and trapped beneath my full bodyweight. And yet, my legs are screaming out that they need to
move. I feel lightheaded. I do not move. I cannot move, at least, I cannot move my lower legs. The feeling almost makes me lose my balance before it fades and subsides.

Glance at the clock, 12:38. Damn, shouldn’t have looked. Get a hold of yourself, you shouldn’t look so often, it will only disappoint you. Everything is more difficult when you are constantly watching the clock.

Settle down. You’ve just had your treat, now you need to sit still. Be patient, keep thinking about the feeling of relief you just experienced, take that forward. The memory of that needs to stay in your mind to help you sit still for some more time.

Breathe.

My legs hurt. Are they completely numb again, or is there still some small feeling lingering?

Don’t look at the clock.

Sing the song that’s in my head. Still getting the lyrics wrong. What was that other song that was in my head the other day?

Don’t look at the clock.

My hands are sweaty with the effort of not moving.

Random thoughts as I stare at the mats in front of me: my mind remembers back to a particular argument I had with a friend more than 3yrs ago. At the time, I hadn’t said much, as I had convinced myself it wouldn’t change anything. I now run through a monologue of everything I would like to say that I never did. In my imagination I am angry, yet rational and in control, and everything I am saying is worded just right. The other person has no response because my argument is airtight. They have no choice but to see the error of their ways.

It hurts.

Glance at the clock, 12:41, damn it, I looked without thinking again. I shouldn’t have looked. Not even halfway yet.

Can I move again yet? No, definitely not yet, it’s too soon.

So much pain.

My hands are sweating, and my entire body feels hot. Is this because of the terrible pain, or because I just got myself all worked up with the imagined conversation in my head? Need to calm down.

Don’t move.
Breathe.

Don’t look at the clock.

The police senshusei has finished talking and the next is being called; I need to bow. The movement isn’t any kind of a relief, it’s now become incredibly difficult, as I’m no longer able to engage any of the muscles in my upper legs because they are too painful, my upper body flops forwards to where my arms are waiting in front of my body to prop up my weight. It’s then my arms which have to propel me back up again. The movements are jerky and unbalanced.

So much pain everywhere. Look up at the clock, 12:43, which means I’m still not allowed to move. It’s all so unbearable now, but I am not allowed to move.

I see one of the police sat opposite me shifting his weight slightly from one knee to the other, just like I had done. His eyes are closed, and his facial expression shows discomfort briefly before he takes a deep breath. I see the police sat next to him take a long, slow breath as well.

I also breathe.

EVERYTHING IS SO PAINFUL AND THIS IS HORRIFIC.

There’s no way I can concentrate on the pain to deconstruct it anymore, the intensity is too high, and it’s taken over my thinking functions.

Opposite me, Matteo put his hands down to relieve the pressure in his legs a while ago. I haven’t been concentrating on him because I don’t like to compare myself as this usually leads to problems: if I put myself in competition against him, then as soon as he moves, I will think that it’s ok if I move. But it’s not ok. He has some injury troubles which make seiza particularly bad, and anyway, we shouldn’t be in competition. It’s not a competition. The only one I’m competing against right now is myself. All I need to make sure of, is that I do better than I did last week.

It hurts, it hurts, the pain in my legs is consuming me.

I want so badly to put my hands down, but don’t put your hands down.

My hands are sweaty; they hold onto the fabric of my dogi with a vice-like grip to stop them from moving anywhere.

So much pain.

Look at the clock, 12:46. Past the halfway point.

Can I move again now? Is it ok to move again now? Has it been enough time to make it worth it? I’m trying to make the calculations in my head, but I can’t think straight.
Fuck it, I’m moving again, I don’t care if it’s time or not, I just have to move. I start the process of shifting weight onto one leg, then the other. As I am fully aware, the second time I do this movement, it will not have as much of an effect. Not only will the act of the movement itself be much more painful (the leg that takes all the weight is put under increased stress and the tension along the top of the thigh builds, making the pain even worse), but it also won’t deliver that same rush of feeling like before. It’s more difficult to raise my weight up and loosen the knee joint, since my lower leg has become such a dead-weight and the knee has been under so much pressure for an extended period and has become stiff. The first time I perform this movement I try to make it as subtle as possible, so that the others might not notice. The second time I don’t give a damn about this; I lean precariously to either side in an attempt to relieve the unbearable pressure that’s been building up.

It’s so painful when I settle back down into position, my knees protest with excruciating pain. As expected, the sensation of the blood rushing back to my lower legs is much more subdued this time, and is over much too quickly. There is also no urge for movement that follows.

It hurts, it hurts. OH MY GOD THIS IS SO PAINFUL.

Look at the green mats. PAIN.

Breathe. PAIN IS EVERYWHERE.

Don’t move.

Glance at the clock – why did you look? – 12:48, not enough time has gone.

So much pain.

Do not put your hands down.

Hands are sweating and gripping onto my dogi, I force myself to relax them in the hope that they will stop sweating so much. I tighten my abdomen and push my hands down on the top of my legs, but this results in a slight increase in pressure, meaning more pain, so I immediately stop. It’s so difficult to keep my upper body straight and relaxed when my lower body is in the most horrific state. I shift my posture, but with the same result of more pain, so I quickly shift it back, trying to find the best position for the least amount of discomfort. This hurts so much.

Do not move, you’re not allowed to move.

One of the police on the end discretely tries to put a surreptitious fist down onto the mats (using the hand that is on the opposite side of his body to where Ueda-sensei is sitting), but Ueda-sensei immediately spots it and calls out the police senshusei’s name. He does not shout, but the way he calls out could best be
described as a growl of displeasure, coming from deep in his gut. The police senshusei in question immediately lifts the offending arm back up onto his lap as he yells out an “OSU!” in response. His yell is loud, and filled with the pain that he is trying to keep contained within his body. His face is slightly contorted, just a pursing of the lips and slight squinting of the eyes – the face of someone who is suffering, but trying not to show it. The police senshusei who is currently speaking does not pause in his speech, but continues on in a loud voice throughout this scolding.

The pain is unrelenting. It’s so bad and it’s only continuing to get worse. You don’t think it can get any worse when you are in the middle of it being so bad, but it can, and it does.

Breathe.

Glance at the clock, 12:49 – only one minute!?

Don’t look at the clock.

DON'T MOVE, DO NOT PUT YOUR HANDS DOWN! You made it to 52mins last week, that means you have to do better this week, so don’t move, not yet.

It’s so painful, everything hurts so much, it’s unbearable.

Breathe, look at the mats.

Two of the police I can see opposite me are slightly shifting their weight, both have pained expressions being repressed on their faces. The police senshusei who is next to them does not move, he does not look like he is in discomfort, he looks totally calm. He looks bored even. He has not moved, or flinched the entire time. He is amazing. He is a hero, what an incredible person! I am in awe of his strength and endurance.

What does my face look like right now?

I am in so much pain.

Glance at the clock, 12:50, of course it hasn’t been any time at all since you last looked, what an idiot.

I’m losing control, the pain is consuming.

Don’t move, don’t put your hands down. My hands tense and release, tense and release their hold on my *dogi*, like a cat flexing its claws as it relaxes. I am not relaxed; my hands are so sweaty.

I shift my posture again, but it hurts more in any other position.
It hurts so much. IT HURTS SO MUCH.

Breathe.

IT’S SO PAINFUL EVERYWHERE.

Glance at the clock, still 12:50.

Can I move now? It’s almost time, right? So, can I just move now? It’s only a few minutes, and this was how far I managed to get the week before. Maybe it’s fine now.

No, don’t move.

It hurts, it hurts.

Breathe. I’m dizzy, but breathe.

Stare at the green mats.

Look at the clock, 12:51 – only one more minute, just one more and then you’ve reached last weeks’ time. Hold on, just hold on.

Legs are so painful; how can I stop this pain?

Don’t put your hands down. Hands are sweaty.

Shift my posture, spine moves forwards then back again as I shift my hips and abdomen. As I go from a slouch back to straight again, I feel how weightless I am. There’s a sweet spot when my spine is totally straight, where my upper body feels light, due to the balance. In that position, I’m barely using any muscles, or at least it feels that way.

My legs hurt SO MUCH.

Breathe, don’t put your hands down.

Shift my posture back and forth, return to straight.

Glance at the clock, 12:52 – I’VE MADE IT TO LAST WEEKS’ TIME!

But don’t put your hands down yet, don’t break. Now you’ve made it this far, you finally got here, so now you have to beat it, you have to do better. You have to improve your time, that’s all you can do. Now, every second that tick’s past, is a second more – it’s extra, it’s time that you’re winning. You’re now in the plus; keep it going.

It hurts so much, but don’t put your hands down.
Why can’t I put my hands down yet? Why can’t I relieve this horrific pressure yet?
I made it to the designated time, that means I can put my hands down whenever I
want, right? Why can’t I just do it now?

No, don’t put your hands down, not yet. You’ve made it this far, just keep going a
little more, every extra second that goes by is just a little more.

IT’S SO PAINFUL I CAN’T BEAR IT.

Breathe.

Ok, the next time the police speakers change, after that you can put your hands
down, but not before. How long has this guy been speaking for? I have no idea,
but you have a goal now; when he finishes and we’ve done the bowing, then you
can relieve the pressure.

It hurts, it hurts – will I make it until then? I don’t think I can wait.

Look at the clock, 12:53, that’s one extra minute.

Breathe.

The pain is so unbearable – how can I bear this for any longer?

When will he finish speaking, I don’t think I can make it.

Shift my spine back and forth.

My hands are so sweaty. They are so tense, but they are not pushing downwards
into my legs. The entirety of my arms are tense with the purpose of not pushing
downwards, just holding them in place. Do not put your hands down.

Glance at the clock, still 12:53, when is this guy going to stop talking?

I don’t think I can make it until then.

But, if we have to do the bowing whilst I’m in the middle of lifting myself up with
my hands, I won’t be able to go back into seiza properly in order to perform the
movement, so I have to wait. I have to wait until we do the next set of bowing; I
have to be ready for that.

It hurts so much, it’s making me nauseous.

I hear Ueda-sensei growl out someone else’s name, as another of the police senshusei
try to sneak a hand down to the mats by their side in order to relieve the pressure,
if only for a moment. They shout a loud, “OSU!” in response and quickly return
to position.
Amy Tapsfield – Zagaku: An Auto-ethnographic Account

When is this guy going to finish talking?

MY LEGS ARE SO PAINFUL, WHY CAN'T I JUST PUT MY HANDS DOWN AND RELIEVE THIS PRESSURE?

Breathe.

Shift my spine back and forth.

So much pain.

When will he finish?

Shift the position of my hands – DO NOT LET THEM GO DOWN – to a fresh area of dogi in order to relieve the hot sweatiness. The rest of my dogi is also warm from my body though, so this doesn't work very well.

The pain is eating me up, I can't think of anything else.

When will he finish speaking?

Look at the clock, 12:54, stop looking so often, it doesn't matter what the time is, you will still have to sit here until Ueda-sensei tells you to stop.

When will the next bowing happen, when? I need to hold off until then, but when? Can I continue like this? I'm breaking, I can feel myself breaking. I'm unravelling. This hurts so bad, my legs, my legs.

Breathe, shift my sweaty hands, but do not let them go down. Grip the dogi.

Look at the clock, still 12:54.

HOW MUCH LONGER IS THIS GUY GOING TO TALK?

There's so much pain, it's unbearable, I can't bear it.

Shift my spine. I feel nauseous, I feel dizzy, I'm breaking.

Why is this so terrible?

Why is he still talking?

THIS PAIN, THIS PAIN.

Look at the clock, still 12:54.
“IJOU DESU!” – We all bow out awkward, jerky bows. The next speaker is called by Ueda-sensei, and we all bow again; it is so painful to bend forward like this, and I have to propel by body back upright by using my arms.

We all return to position as the next police starts speaking. I manage to wait until Ueda-sensei has finished saying his bit (for some reason it feels like it would be so much worse to break my position whilst Ueda-sensei is speaking), and the police has said the introductory line, and then I break.

My hands rush down to the mats, placing down on either side of my knees, they lift up my bodyweight. My bottom rises from its position sat on my feet, and the pressure in my knees and thighs is relieved as the bend in the joint is able to loosen. I lean forward.

I have broken. The clock reads 12:55.

I remain up in this position for a little time, it could be seconds, could be minutes, I have no idea. I don’t care about anything except for the relief from the pressure in my legs.

The blood starts to flow back to my lower legs and feet; the numbness will be gone now, and I know that I won’t be able to get it back again. Because I have now broken.

Ueda-sensei does not growl my name. I am not a Japanese police officer, therefore this horrific test is only for my own benefit, to make myself stronger for my own personal reasons, I do not have to be strong in order to protect others. This is not my job; this is for pleasure.

I want to stay in this raised up position, I don’t want to sit back down in seiza, as I know that there is only pain waiting for me there. But I need to sit back down. Sit back down. Why aren’t you moving back down, sit back down now, you have to sit back down. DO IT.

Sit back into seiza, your relief time is over, sit back down.

I slowly lower my body back into seiza. It is painful, but not as bad as before, although now there is feeling back in my lower legs.

Breathe.

And now comes the guilt. I see the contortions of pain on the faces of my comrades as they try to supress it, and I feel terrible. The fact that I broke, they saw that; they always see it. In this horrific little space, the movements of anyone has an effect on everyone – seeing me put my hands down and break my position would have made the act of maintaining their own composure all the more
difficult. I am weak, and I feel terrible. I tell myself that I will try not to move again as much as possible for the rest of the time, even though I know that I will definitely move again. It’s impossible now, I’ve broken the seal.

Don’t look at the clock, you’re not allowed to look. Sit still and breathe, look at the mats in front of you.

It still hurts, but not as bad as before, so stay still.

Breathe, remember to keep breathing.

Sing the line from the song in my head, the same three lines over and over. They’ve been going around on repeat in the background of my mind this whole time; switch over to the other part of the song you know. What about that instrumental section in between the chorus and verse, can you go through it all in your head? It’s difficult to keep the timing right when it’s just in my head, I lose my place too easily when there aren’t any words.

My legs hurt.

I see two of the police opposite shifting their weight around on their legs.

Breathe. Don’t put your hands down again.

How long has this police senshusei been talking for?

Don’t look at the clock. Don’t put your hands down.

Hands are sweaty, legs are painful, I can feel my feet beneath me now that the numbness has gone.

It hurts.

The time continues to move excruciatingly slowly, but it’s in a fog and I don’t really know what’s happening. I just know that it hurts, the pain is growing, it’s also in my lower legs now, and I’m trying to stop myself from moving or from looking at the clock.

I feel like I’m only semi-conscious, although I still can’t seem to stop myself from feeling all of this pain.

Time on the clock, 13:11, I put my hands down again. I cannot stop it; I have to relieve this pressure. I am broken. Most of my weight is held up on my hands, which are balled up into fists. There is no sensation of blood rushing back, not anymore, as the blood is still there from last time. I am no longer capable of remaining in seiza long enough to get the numbness back. I am pathetic.
I stay up too long; my brain is so useless that it takes a while for it to register that I've been holding myself up out of *seiza* for a while. I should sit back down. I need to sit back down. But I remain up. My internal voice has lost its commanding tone, it has less force, as if even my inner taskmaster does not care to be a part of this anymore. I stay up for too long. PLEASE, sit back down. You NEED to sit back down in *seiza*.

I finally make myself sit, but 30 seconds later I am up on my hands again. I am so pathetic. I don’t want the police to have to see this. I don’t want Ueda-sensei and Nakagawa-sensei to see this — I really want them to think well of me and be impressed by me, but I’m so weak. I want to be an ideal *senshusei*, I want them to be pleasantly surprised by my capabilities, but right now I’m pathetic. I’m broken. Sit back down.

I remain on my hands and tilt forwards so as to enable the unbending of the knee joint even further.

I finally sit back down into *seiza*. I manage to maintain position for another 4 mins before I break and I’m up on my hands again. This is the longest amount of time I am able to remain in position for. I try desperately to switch my willpower back on, to get it going strong again like it was for the first 55 mins, but, for some reason, it just doesn’t work. Sometimes my inner voice is too soft and weak, when I notice this, I try to make it loud and domineering again, shouting loudly, forcefully at myself. But it never lasts, I cannot maintain it with the little energy I have left, and even when it is loud and forceful, my body simply doesn’t want to listen. It’s like I’ve lost my control of it. It’s as if my body feels betrayed by my mind for having forced it to go through such a horrific ordeal (again), and it will no longer listen to its commands, having branded it an evil dictator not worthy to rule. I am broken.

In the final 15 mins, a number of the police who I can see opposite me, are fidgeting, and I can see the anguish on their faces which they are no longer capable of hiding. Shifting a little is ok, but if you do it too much, and your movements are too big, you will receive the Ueda-Sensei growl. I cannot see the police who are in the same line as me, but I know who is struggling by who receives the scolding. Some look fine, some look awful, but this isn’t necessarily an indication of the level of pain each person is in. Some are just stronger willed and/or better at dealing with the pain than others.

For the last 5/10 mins, I am barely able to force myself back into *seiza*, and I spend more time up on my hands. My arms get tired and begin to ache, but this is still preferable to sitting back down. The fuzziness and exhaustion in my head has almost completely drowned out my willpower, which is now barely capable of having any effect.

I am momentarily distracted from my internal battle by a strange noise coming from the other end of my row. I cannot see what’s happening, but I can hear...
slapping sounds, as well as moaning. I glance to the side slightly, just enough to catch movement in my peripheral vision; it’s Oda-senshusei, at the very end. From the little I can see, and what I can hear, he is slapping himself, I think in the face and head, and his upper body is writhing around whilst his legs remain in position. The sound is awful. He’s in so much pain from seiza that he’s trying to distract from it by causing pain elsewhere. Being witness to this makes my nausea increase.

The last police senshusei finished speaking at 13:21. Ueda-sensei speaks for a while after that, but I don’t understand what he’s saying. Some of the police start to moan and groan as they can hardly take it anymore. Ueda-sensei continues to growl at anyone who breaks position by putting their hands down or fidgeting too violently. None of the police have broken like I have; they are all still in position.

Look at the clock, 13:26. I have just forced myself back down into seiza.

Everything hurts, there is no more numbness, just pain everywhere below my waist. My body feels so heavy.

Glancing around at the police, Shindo-senshusei is baring his teeth with eyes closed. He shifts his weight on his legs without putting his hands down, he actually shifts his left knee over by half an inch, and this action amazes me – how is he able to move his legs at all right now? He has large leg muscles, so maybe that’s why. The police on the end tries to put a sly fist down onto the mat again but is quickly growled at and retreats with an “OSU!” Hori-senshusei, who is sat next to him, does not show any expression on her face but she is flushed red in her cheeks, and her posture is hunched over. Next to her, Takeda-senshusei remains completely in control, and looks as fresh as the moment we started.

Ueda-sensei has finished talking, and is now simply growling out the names of anyone who transgresses.

Look at the clock, 13:27. This could end at any time now. Ueda-sensei could take pity on us – every extra moment is agony, so any tiny amount of time that we finish early is a miracle.

I am back up on my hands again, the pain was too intense. It hurts everywhere and my mind is broken. I can hardly hear my own internal voice anymore.

Ogasaki-senshusei, who is sat next to me, starts to groan. This is now what fills my ears, a deep sound that is being released from his belly. It gives a sound to my own experience – to everyone’s current experience – and there are moments when I cannot tell whether the noise is coming from him or me.

My arms are aching from holding up my weight, my right wrist is incredibly sore from training, and I have to make sure to keep my hand straight.
Sit back down. These words in my head have almost lost their meaning, but I continue to repeat them anyway. Sit back down.

I finally manage to lower myself back into seiza, I nearly raise myself back up immediately, but I resist and place my hands on my lap, where they are supposed to be.

Look at the clock 13:28. This could end anytime now. Ueda-sensei just has to give the word. I tell myself that I will now remain in seiza until the end. I am not allowed to put my hands back down again.

It hurts though, everything hurts.

Do not move. Breathe.

Look at the clock, 13:28.

It hurts, but it’s nearly over, it’s so close to the end so do not move.

The groaning from next to me feels like it’s my own body.

Look at the clock, still 13:28 – when will this end??

Ogasaki-senshusei isn’t the only one letting out groaning noises, Shindo-senshusei too, and maybe someone else, maybe a few more people I can’t see. There are noises of horrific suffering coming from this room. I am not making noises; I am mute. This is not an effort on my part, I simply have nothing left in me to let out. I am so broken.

The pain is everywhere, it is everything.

Look at the clock, 13:29.

There is no point in looking at the clock now, why am I even looking? It’s the end now, but it’s not the end, it’s not over until Ueda-sensei says it’s over, but he can say that whenever he likes now. Actual clock time is irrelevant, we are all on Ueda-sensei’s time. Remember a few weeks ago when he made us continue for an extra 25mins? He doesn’t care what any clock says, he will do what he wants, and what he wants right now is to torture us.

I am so tired and there is so much pain.

Must not move until the end, this is my final resolution, and I must stick to it. I am already so pathetic, I was so weak to be broken so easily – none of these police have broken, they are all still in position, never being allowed to take the pressure off of their knees. What must they all be feeling right now, because I’m sure it’s worse than me. Therefore, you have to hold on now until the end, just do this one last thing.
The groaning becomes louder as Ueda-sensei is speaking about something in Japanese. Are any of the police listening at this point? Are any of them even capable of listening?

Everything is so painful, when is it going to end?

Breathe, do not put your hands down again.

Please end.

Please end.

Please let us finish, it’s time now, surely.

Please end.

So much pain, please let it stop.

I am broken, please end this.

Please end.

Ueda-sensei says something in Japanese and the moaning stops as everyone places their hands in another meditation position. Like the first minute of zagaku, only the position of the fingers is different: the fingers are all straight and together, fingers from left hand placed over fingers on the right, with both thumbs pointing upwards and their tips touching. This signals the end of zagaku, and is what we have all be waiting for, but it is still not quite over. As we are sat in this meditation position, eyes closed, we are told to count.

“ICHI!”

The room is shaken by the force of how loudly we are all screaming these numbers.

“NI!”

The pain we are all currently in is being let out.

“SAN!”

“SHI!”

We are so very close to the end of this torture.

“GO!”
Amy Tapsfield – Zagaku: An Auto-ethnographic Account

The count cannot be overly hurried, however much we are all so desperate for it to end, but it still has to go at the correct pace.

“ROKU!”

“SHICHI!”

“HACHI!”

“KYUU!”

“JYUU!”

Ueda-sensei gives a command, and we all return to normal seiza position. Nakagawa-sensei then gives the command to ‘rei’, and we all flop forward. Already, at this point, I am lifting my weight off of my feet and my backside is starting to rise up into the air. Sitting back up again is excruciating, but I don’t think of it as much, simply because I know it is about to be over. Nakagawa-sensei then commands us to turn towards Ueda-sensei – I am the last to accomplish this. I do not know how, but everyone else manages to shuffle their entire kneeling bodies around 45 degrees, seemingly with ease, whilst I am stuck desperately struggling to move my deadweight. This inability to move with ease does not simply come from a lack of strength, there is also fear; the lower half of my body is so completely messed up at this point, so unable to protect itself or move and hovering in a semi-numbness, that I am afraid what will happen if I move it too suddenly.

With a lot of huffing and effort, I manage to shift myself around, so that I am facing towards Ueda-sensei like everyone else, and Nakagawa-sensei gives the final command for ‘rei’. Everyone bows. I belly flop forwards. I try to maintain my position, but my head is taking my weight by resting on the mats in front of me, and I am slowly unbending my knees. The dojo is silent except for the shuffling noises of Ueda-sensei standing up, walking towards the door, bowing twice to the shrine, putting his slippers back on in the hallway, and then walking back to the office. I have never witnessed this scene myself, as my head was always down to the floor, but I have been curious about it – how is he able to just stand up after zagaku? Are his legs not numb? I don’t understand.

Once the sound of his footsteps fade down the hall, Nakagawa-sensei gives the command that we have all been longing for with every fibre of our being – it’s over. Zagaku is finished. Everybody breaks.

We are all broken.

Groans and cries of simultaneous relief and anguish are suddenly let loose from bodies which are flopping in all directions. Some fall forwards, head first, some sideways. Everyone finally letting all of their pain show.
I want to flop down on my face, but I can’t; I am unable to make such sudden moves as my legs are too stiff. Even though I have been moving them whilst the others remained still, I have to ease my legs out of position slowly. It almost feels as though they would snap if I tried moving too fast. I am on my hands and knees, finally able to lift up my feet and, very delicately, bring my toes to rest on the mats. I stretch them gingerly. There is a feeling of nausea from all the sudden movement of blood. The action of moving any joints and muscles which have, for these torturous 90mins, been trapped and bloodless, is a new type of pain, but it is a pleasant one. It is a pain of relief, and I want to go slowly with it. My knees feel like the hinges on an old wooden door which has remained closed too long, and has become warped and creaking. All I want now is to flop over onto my side and lie, unmoving on the mats, but I know that this is not possible, because right now, we need to stand up. I know from past experience that, if I really let myself fall to the floor, the getting up again will be all the more difficult, so I remain on my hands and knees, trying to flex my screaming ankles so that they can get ready to take my weight again.

I have to stand up now. I tell myself this, but I am not ready yet.

My groans of pain join with everyone else.

All around me there are broken police. Some are still lying on the floor, some have started to stand already, many are moaning, all are moving slowly. Nakagawa-sensei is already on his feet, stood straight, and is starting to hurry everyone along. Many of us still cannot move from the floor. Without anger but with some urgency, he is telling everyone to stand up on their feet, but his voice is soft, and I can barely hear it over the noise of pain being let out. More than his urging, I am motivated by the simple idea that I do not want to be last. This is a common motivation for me throughout training: you do not have to be the best, but just make sure you are not the worst. I do not want to be the one that everyone has to wait for, the senshusei who drags the group down. I have been the last person to get to my feet in the past, and it was mortifying; I absolutely do not want to repeat it. I am already pathetic for having broken seiza, therefore I have no excuse not to be capable of standing. From my position on hands and knees, I slowly stretch out each leg behind me one after the other; my knees will have to straighten fully if I am to stand up, so I need to practice before they have to support my bodyweight.

The groans of pain around me have started to change their nature; instead of just an expression of release, they are now starting to puff with exertion – everyone is trying to get their broken bodies into a standing position in any way they can.

Having finished my preparations, I slowly draw one knee up underneath me, so that the foot is placed on the floor behind my hands. I flex the toes and ankle joint a few times; it is painful. I then start to transfer my weight onto this leg and foot from the corresponding knee, and try to convince my leg to start lifting up my
body into the air. A lot of my bodyweight remains supported by my hands, as I have no ability to balance.

In the dojo around me, about half of the police have already managed to get to a standing position, although they don’t look stable, and cannot straighten themselves up into attention yet. I have to hurry, I don’t want to be the last up; I don’t want everyone to be waiting on me.

I have managed to transfer enough of my weight onto the foot so that I can draw the second leg up beneath me and place that foot down. I initially only rest on the toes, and my ankle is screaming at me that it cannot bend just yet. At this point I have to take a leap of faith – if I am going to stand, then I have to do this – I push off from my hands and try to balance my torso on top of my inept legs. I think I have made it, but then I lose the balance again and feel like I might fall, but Ogasaki-senshusei, who is positioned next to me (who made it to standing a few moments before I did), reaches out and offers me a steadying hand. I grab onto him in response; he is just as wobbly as I am, but together we manage to stay upright somehow. I gradually stabilise myself, bringing my legs into a more comfortable position (if there is such a thing), and we both let go when we can now stand on our own. I am eternally grateful for the help, and it makes me feel connected to the entire room as I see others assisting each other in similar ways. There is no other time during our training when I feel so bonded with my fellow senshusei than in these moments of torture release.

I managed to not be the last person to get to their feet, but it was a close call. Now that I am up the struggle is not over; I need to force myself into kyotsuke (attention), which means heels together with toes pointing outwards at a 45 degree angle, legs straight, back straight, facing forwards, arms straight at our sides with fingers together. This will take a final herculean effort, but it’s ok, none of us really mind, because this is the end. And this pain right now is nothing – our bodies may not be moving like we want them to, but at least we are able to move. The groans and heavy breathing quickly dies down as we all squeeze our sorry bodies into kyotsuke. Once everyone has finally managed it, Nakagawa-sensei gives a final command to rei, and we all stay bowed as he exits the room.

Our bodies sag. Excess moans and breaths escape from lungs. Some people start muttering or saying things to each other in Japanese. Everyone starts to hobble over to the back line of the dojo, where we have to line up again. As some of us move away, we turn back and realise that a couple of people have fallen behind and are not moving. One of them is Oda-senshusei, the one who was slapping himself to distract from the pain, the other is Takeda-senshusei, who had never once moved or shown any change of expression on his face during the 90mins we just endured. Right now, he cannot put one foot in front of the other. They both look so pathetic, and they look up at everyone with slightly amused, yet pleading eyes. A few of us slowly walk back to try and help support them with smiles and laughter, not at their pain, but together with it. Their bodies are a complete mess.
Once we all finally make it back to the line-up facing the mirror, we remain standing, but a few bend over to touch the mats with their hands, and some of us make groaning, pained noises. We are supposed to kneel back down in order to bow to the shrine one final time before the session can officially end. No one kneels. Instead, we make the sound effects as if we were, for the benefit of the tiny, curtained window in the corner, on the other side of which is Ueda-Sensei’s desk in the dojo office. Whoever is shinkoku toban for that day gives the command, “SHINSEI NI REI!” to which we all respond with “OSU!” and a number of us slap the mats with our hands whilst still standing, to make it sound convincing. After this little charade is over, we are free to go. There is much backslapping and laughter as we all hobble out of the room, a feeling of togetherness.

Myself and the two women police hold onto the wall for support as we head towards our changing room down the corridor. I will be in pain for the rest of the day.

6 days, 22hrs, 23mins until next Zagaku begins.

Further Reading
For more detail about the Senshusei course at the Yoshinkan Honbu Dojo in Tokyo, readers can look up my PhD thesis (once it is published) or Angry White Pyjamas written by Robert Twigger after he completed the course in the mid 1990s. There are also a number of books about aikido, including The Spirit of Aikido by Kisshomaru Ueshiba and Dynamic Aikido by Gozo Shioda.


The concept of pain and how it is dealt with situationally and culturally is a core theme of this piece, for which David B. Morris' The Culture of Pain and the volume Pain as Human Experience: An Anthropological Perspective edited by Mary-Jo Delvecchio Good, Paul E. Brodwin, Byron J. Good, & Arthur Kleinman contain some excellent discussions. How pain and health are dealt with medically in the context of Japanese society is a topic explored by Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney in Illness and
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*Culture in Contemporary Japan: An Anthropological View*. In *Asletic Practices in Japanese Religion*, the author Tullio Federico Lobetti engages in a range of extreme ascetic practices in Japan in order to record the experiences and theorise about their spiritual/religious meaning. In the essay *Teaching and learning in the Rinzai Zen monastery*, Victor G. Hori describes his own experiences training as a Zen Buddhist monk in Japan for 12 years, many of the practices of which share much in common with the way the *senshusei* course is run.

For those who wish to know more about policing in Japan, the two books *Forces of Order: Policing Modern Japan* by David H. Bayley and *The Japanese Police System Today: A Comparative Study* by L. Craig Parker, though a little dated, are very insightful as to systems and practices. A more recent volume is Sabine Früstück’s *Uneasy Warriors: Gender, Memory, and Popular Culture in The Japanese Army*, though it looks at the Self Defense Force (SDF) and not the police, it is highly relevant. For a more general overview of Japanese culture, I have found the work of Joy Hendry incredibly insightful, especially the two books *Wrapping Culture: Politeness, Presentation, and Power in Japan and Other Societies* and *Understanding Japanese Society*.

**Author Bio**

Amy Tapsfield is a PhD candidate of Anthropology at Goldsmiths, University of London. The working title for her thesis is *Consent to Violence and The Violence of Consent: Martial Arts Training Amongst the Tokyo Police*, for which she spent almost 2 years training and teaching at a Yoshinkan Aikido *dojo* in Tokyo that has a specialist police training course. Her research focusses on the embodied practices and ritualistic habitus of this training. Examining the embodied forms of communication within strict hierarchies and ritualistic constructions of space, this project looks at how actions of controlled violence are performed, consented to, and balanced with a situation of care. Research interests include Japanese society, policing, martial arts, gender, embodiment, consent, violence, discipline, and ritual.

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**References**


