

Essays on Niten Ichiryu

2014-2019



Introduction

This book is a chronological set of essays written from 2014 to the beginning of 2020. There are other essays on Niten but those can be found in the “Half a Century” books available online.

Chronological because it makes as much sense as anything else, it might show my changing ideas over six years, and let’s face it, it’s a lot easier to format than trying to arrange things into topics or some other such thing. I have written three books on Hyo Ho Niten Ichiryu so far, they are:

“Niten Ichi Ryu: The Sword of Musashi Miyamoto” A manual of the kata of the school.

“The Go Rin no Sho of Miyamoto Musashi” A translation and commentary on Musashi’s famous book

“Hyoho: The strategy, ethics and philosophy of Miyamoto Musashi” A translation and commentary on Musashi’s earlier writings, and descriptions of the “oyo waza”, ten extra two-sword kata.

These essays are not particularly vital, provided you have read the previous material, but they may inspire a new thought or two. Who knows where that might lead.

This book is dedicated to Ms Pamela Morgan, otherwise known to many as “The Pamurai” who, despite all my intentions of simply passing along what I can and being content with that, has received a certificate of full transmission from me. What does that mean, exactly? For one thing, it means the very first essay is now incorrect. It means that she knows what I know, all of it up to the moment. It means that if you want to know what I think of Niten Ichiryu, you can ask her. She has what I have, and I suspect she will go on to become better than I ever was.

In the meantime, enjoy the thoughts that these essays represent. I leave them with the hope that they will be of some use to someone.

Please forgive me any horrible mistakes of fact. These essays were written in cafes, along with many more and posted on Facebook at about one a day. They are not researched like my books were, they are simply my way of thinking about something or other.

But I Won't

Niten Ichiryu is a tiny school, there may just be more people practising in Europe than there are in Japan these days. It is of course the sword school of Miyamoto Musashi. I am half way through a weekend seminar and last evening we spent a while going through the various videos we could find on the net, comparing one line to another and even checking out variations over time in one line. You can do that now, so anyone who is posting a video these days should date it for the rest of us researchers.

As the end of my line of instruction, and with none of my teachers alive now, I suppose I could also do with the school what I wish. It's "mine" now, in that what I have is what I have, and it's up to me to have it as it makes sense, so if I change something to make sense, that's entirely legitimate.

But I won't. I don't really own the art because I was given it. I didn't create it any more than I created the box that holds my Grandfather's drill, he did. Even if someone handed me papers that said I was the certified holder of the papers, I would not have my own permission to change the art. It was handed to me in good faith and I will pass it along in the same good faith. I can change anything I want, who is to say no? Who is to say that's not what I was taught? Yet I won't.

I'm not playing the hero here, it's an entirely selfish attitude to be so conservative. If I change it to something that I understand, I cut off my teacher. It's only by struggling with the kata as they were given to me, that I can hope to learn what my teacher was trying to give to me. If I change the kata to suit myself, my current understanding of the art, I stop growing, I stop learning, because now I get it, by definition I understand it.

It's not that I don't like playing with my understanding of the sword, but I've got a place to do that, it's in my Aikido class where I am giving a couple of dedicated and eager folks my version of aiki ken, and aiki cane and aiki jo and whatever else they want to learn in that class. I love teaching them and even write up sets of kata for them, but what I'm doing there is ephemeral to me. I create a technique to make a point, I teach it, they get it to the best of their ability, and it's gone. It teaches me nothing because it's my creation, it simply tells me what I know now. They may have years of learning since I'm years ahead of them, but for me that new kata is just another chalkboard full of notes.

So today I will be teaching the Niten kata as I was taught. The students will turn their videos on and record my footsteps and my sword motions and then they'll practice and I'll make comments and in those comments, which they probably won't be filming, they'll hear my opinions on what I was taught. I'll tell them things that they may never hear again because what I'm saying is geared to someone else, to my student rather than to me. Why would I remember it? What I say "offhandedly" in class is what I know, or what I figure will work for them. It's not something I'm going to remember, but they might, and they will incorporate what I say and it may change their understanding of the art and it may change the way they do the kata and in that way maybe I'm changing the art to suit my understanding.

But change it because I can? I won't do that.

June 22, 2014

Kata and Theory in Niten Ichiryu

I received a question about Niten Ichiryu recently which touched on kata and theory and real-life fighting (as any discussion of Musashi almost inevitably does).

The question: Can we find the principles and techniques Musashi talks about in the Go Rin no Sho in the modern kata of HNIR? Musashi describes a wild, realistic fight scenario and wrote about fundamental, universal fighting principles with a sword that give you the chance to live. There is nothing static and no "ritualized" guidelines that tell you "stop here...hold your sword here...go forward and then stop and cut now - do this and this and this...." which we can see in the kata today from HNIR.

Good question. The Go Rin no Sho contains 5 kata, the nito seiho and depending on how you translate those instructions they are actually quite specific and are read as guidelines like any other descriptions of kata. Those who study the Niten Ichiryu read (or should read) the book quite often and to us it does read like a manual.

The other chapters which contain more theory are read quite widely by students of the Japanese sword from many arts and some of what Musashi wrote is more or less the common language of the sword. Hold the sword in the last two fingers, see the opponent but also see his intention, these are now "old chestnuts" (theory) of the arts. So yes indeed, my study of Niten Ichiryu includes and is informed by what is written in the Go Rin no Sho, always has been. Most of what I know can be found in that book. I just finished a koryu iaido seminar with my sensei, Goyo Ohmi, and he is currently reading a copy of the Go Rin no Sho which he picked up at a rummage sale. He advised everyone in the class to read it as well, but to watch out for bad translations as he found one that was completely off base and he "threw it away". I hope he wasn't talking about my version, which he may not have found yet on his tablet.

Question 2: Can you give some information on which year or in which period of time and by whom these kata were founded?

The five Nito Seiho kata are contained in the Go Rin no Sho so they are "original". Can each line of Niten get their Nito kata from what is written? Perhaps with some effort. I know that the first time I read the book (after I started practising the ryu) I only got the kamae from the descriptions, I couldn't get the technique. After many more readings and thought, I can get closer but I won't ever be really confident that what I was taught is exactly what Musashi taught.

Is that a problem?

There is no film, photograph or detailed manual of Musashi's techniques. This is the same with all Japanese schools of sword, there is much to be filled in from any of the writings. Things change over time. Look at all the lines of Niten, calculate generations back to the split-off of each, consider that we all start with the kamae and perhaps we could come back to a root movement. All lines and all teachers emphasize some aspects of the technique, their students take this as gospel and reinforce or damp it down as they teach their own students. This is how things change but if the core remains I figure we're good.

As for the rest of the kata, the kodachi seiho and the tachi seiho, I don't know when they came into the school. I do know that most of the lines of Niten use the same names and look roughly the same so they have existed through many splits and must be old. I know that in my line there were three Santo generations (hence my line being "santo ha") before Aoki sensei who was the seventh head. I assume Grandfather Santo knew what Grandchild Santo was being taught so I assume a conservative time there, not much change through three generations. Aoki sensei once commented that the two extra nito sets (sessa and aikuchi) were "recently created") so those must be younger than the shoto set or the single sword set. Those five sets came to Aoki sensei from the Santo generations so I have always assumed that the kodachi and tachi sets were there at least by the time of the first Santo sensei, who would have been the fourth head. My guess is that those kata came in at minimum by the third head, so Musashi's student or grand-student, which would, in all probability mean that Musashi was teaching them but didn't include them in the Go Rin no Sho since they were not all that unusual at the time. The nito seiho were worth noting down and Musashi suggested they were his entire school. Not being able to read his actual words, I might suggest he meant that they were what he considered most important, or perhaps that they contained all of his wisdom in one place. Or maybe he did indeed only teach those five kata to his students. This last I doubt very much.

The two extra sets? There are photos of Aoki sensei in bogu in the nito seiho kamae with shinai, he was a kendo teacher, and the extra nito sets seem quite suited to nito kendo so perhaps they were developed by Aoki sensei himself? I'm not that much of a scholar of the school to know.

Techniques drift, theory tends to stick. Theory can be expressed in many physical forms so kata change with the generations.

Nov 3, 2014



The Things you Learn

We're practicing Niten Ichiryu on a fixed schedule these days (Friday evenings) because we've been neglecting it and it is one of the core arts of Sei Do Kai. Last week I started with nito seiho because that's where I started, and I want to examine kodachi and tachi as kihon for the nito set. In other words I want to reverse the assumed order of practice.

But part way through the class I found myself yelling at my senior student. We were simply demonstrating so that the beginners could learn the dance steps but damnit, why wasn't I being driven back into the wall? I explained what I discovered in that moment, that I really, really care about this school of sword. Not in any sort of academic way, but as if it was the essence of my being, and something that I have to pass along if I want to call myself a teacher.

I had no idea I felt that strongly about Niten. Perhaps it is because my teacher has died, and I feel the responsibility to pass on his gift to me. That seems a bit cockeyed to some people, if you've lost your teacher you ought to go find another one and be passionate about that instruction yes? Well, no. Budo is much more than collecting kata, you have to get over the dance moves within the first couple of years and move along if you want to really learn budo, so changing to a new art or even just a new teacher when you lose your own, means throwing all those years away and starting over. If you've only got a couple of years invested that's fine, with 20 it's just too late. So I continue to learn from the knowledge my teacher gave me and as I go deeper into the school I get more demanding of my students that they follow along and challenge me.

Which, I suppose explains this black finger I'm looking at today. My student really does pay attention to me and a few minutes after I was giving her hell for not being aggressive enough I changed up a kata to demonstrate how one might just drive someone across the room. Halfway there she presented me with proof that my right hand was open. Yep, ask a good student to hit you and you may just get hit.

Quite a few years ago I was at a seminar with a student who had moved away and is now teaching in his own club. As I was demonstrating something or other I motioned vaguely at him to strike down at me and then looked back at the class. Next thing I knew I was stepping smartly back off the line as his bokuto whooshed down in front of my nose. I looked at him and he looked right back and said "What??".

Yep, what indeed, I had forgotten that he was quite happy to cave my skull in because that's what we had agreed upon way back when. I had just been practising with, shall we call them "less enthusiastic" students for a while.

Nice to know some of this stuff still gets me excited, and nice to know there's a student or two out there willing to help me along by trying to break my bones.

Jan 12, 2015

You can't teach that there

Sunday's class is three hours long and the last one featured a whole three kata. That's a kata an hour which I suppose might sound OK if the kata were long, complex things. But they weren't. The most complex was chudan from the nito seiho set of niten ichiryu.

Put the two swords in front of you, avoid having them struck down twice, cut for your partner's wrists, then cut up under his wrist while blocking his sword as he cuts for your head.

Not particularly complex, but I got a bit frustrated because I couldn't teach what I wanted to teach there. It set off a lecture... OK a rant, on paying attention to the partner and doing something other than what my iai sensei calls a "sword dance". Especially one that only fits with the sword dance your partner is doing, by accident.

Wave the swords around in exactly the correct manner, timing, and position as is dictated in the manual and you'll still end up dead, just with a feeling of the unfairness of life because you did it all correctly.

Be a bit confused about the movements, fine, I'm OK with that, but there aren't that many, and after you are shown them, practice them a bit and have them memorized, that's the moment you can start the kata. Up to then it's just gathering the wood to make the fire. Necessary but no matter how big the log pile, it won't get the rabbit cooked.

This is the problem with iaido, it's so easy to make it a dance. Maybe I should say we make it a boring, poor dance because dancers would say that a mechanical, lifeless dance is just "doing iaido". Or they would if they knew what iaido is.

Partner kata means you can interact with a non-virtual representation of your opponent. A teki instead of a kasso teki. So that's where I teach stuff about dealing with an opponent. My iai sensei teaches that stuff in kendo class.

So out came the lecture on the roles of the attacker (uchidachi) and the defender (shidachi) in Niten Ichiryu. The attacker seems to be pretty dumb. If his left foot is forward the sword is in hasso. If his right foot is forward he's cutting. Not hard to deal with, then. So why do the two sides end up too close or miles apart, and the various attacks and avoidances and whatnot end up mismatching?

Well if you know the movements why not go ahead and do them and damn the consequences? Perhaps because there are real world consequences to the wrong timing? The wrong distance. The wrong angles and poor hip shifts.

How do we teach that?

Ah, finally. First, at the beginner level we have to understand that there's a teaching side and a learning side. Uchidachi, that simple-minded loser, is teaching. We've lately had the luxury of having some experienced students around and we almost always put them on the uchidachi side. Beginners stay on the shidachi side. Uchidachi teaches, he leads all the motions, he sets the distances, he sets the timing, he never, ever, gives up the initiative to shidachi. Not out of skill, but because this is what is supposed to happen.

Shidachi's job, once he memorizes the movements, is to pay attention to uchidachi. That's it, no showing off, no jumping ahead to chapter 12, just do the movements as controlled by uchidachi. Shidachi's side is the simple one, despite what we think, to win is easy. Uchidachi has the tough job, to be at the edge of shidachi's skill, to be clear, to stick rigidly to the kata, to force shidachi to pay attention.

To mess with shidachi's head by changing the timing slightly, to pull a long stride out of shidachi, or a short one, to slowly speed up and to speedily slow down shidachi's motions when necessary.

If uchidachi isn't on his best job, shidachi won't learn a damned thing. If both sides aren't paying attention, I can't teach the fun stuff, like how to speed up and slow down, how to stretch a stride or shorten it, how to catch an opponent's movement before he knows he's moving. Maybe I can do that, maybe not, but I know for a fact that nobody learns that stuff if they can't do the kata together.

So we dropped the two-sword set and went back to the simplest of one sword kata, hasso hidari. Both walk forward three steps. Uchidachi cuts down on the head, shidachi steps to the right and cuts down on uchidachi's neck. How much simpler could you get? Every sword school has a move something like this don't they? Anyone can do this, why not move on to something more interesting?

Because I don't think there can be anything more interesting than this kata. This is the essence of Musashi's sword. No flash, no trash, just walk up and kill him. The thing most people forget is that the other guy is also trying to kill you, and that makes a difference. With a complex kata you have a hard time teaching that bit, it's just too dangerous, uchidachi has to dance carefully so that shidachi can follow and remember all the waving around and stepping here and there. It takes decades to get to the part where uchidachi tries to kill you. With hasso hidari it takes about ten minutes to get to that point.

IF, if, if you can get shidachi to pay attention.

Jan 18, 2015

Seitei vs Koryu

Or perhaps, rules vs reason or form vs function.

At our last class we were practising the kodachi seiho of Niten Ichiru, the short sword. At one point I told my student to separate at the end of the kata without becoming overly focused on my long sword. In other words, don't leave her short sword in contact with my long sword down by her hip, because it is too easy for me to circle around it and obtain the upper and centre position and attack again.

Instead, I asked her to take a position a bit higher, where the tsuba of the shoto will cover my sword, and be slightly to the right of her centreline to protect her centre.

This was done faithfully but two kata later I noticed a bit of stiffness, sure enough I lifted my sword over the shoto and took center, then walked slowly down the line until my kissaki was in contact with her body.

Upon yelling at her about this, she told me that she had considered moving her shoto to cover the centreline but I had told her to leave it a bit to the right side of centre.

Was she winding me up? I mean, one of the best ways to tell sensei he is overly specific is to do exactly what he tells you to do and let the kata fall apart... But I don't think she was doing that this time.

Don't make a fetish out of anything sensei says. If he says "to the side of centreline" don't take that as a rule to be followed at all times and then lose your life.

This happens all the time in a seitai kata because standardized kata are supposed to be standardized. The more things are clarified, the more they are described to a standard, the more those rules become fetishized and extended to all situations. In the Zen Ken Ren Iai we are told to have the tip of the sword above the hands when we are in furi kaburi (when the sword is above the head and we are in position to strike). Somewhere along the way this got translated into keep the tip above the hands all the time. That became so fetishized that form dominated function and eventually the hanshi, the top instructors, had to clarify that when you have thrust someone you can't lift the sword up overhead keeping the tip above the hands, that would mean lifting the opponent overhead with your sword. If you are smart enough to get this, you end up doing strange movements to first pull the sword out and then shove it back into position to lift it up with that tip above the hands. Inefficient at best.

No, stop looking at the form and think of the function. If you simply raise the hilt over your head while turning your body the tip comes out of the opponent quite nicely. The problem is not getting it out, the problem is letting the tip be, at one point in the turn, below the hands when one has made a fetish of not letting that happen. Your fascination with the rule that you have invented/extended won't allow you to let that tip be below the hands so you break the swing instead. You make the next cut into a three part thing instead of one. Pull, readjust, cut instead of just cut.

Rules do not replace reason, they are supposed to help us approach reason. Seitei kata are to allow judges to see a standard performance so that rank can be assigned, they are very good for that. They are not as efficient at teaching the principles, the riai of sword. This I suppose, is why the Zen Ken Ren Iai judging manual states that Riai becomes important as a judging criteria at 8dan.

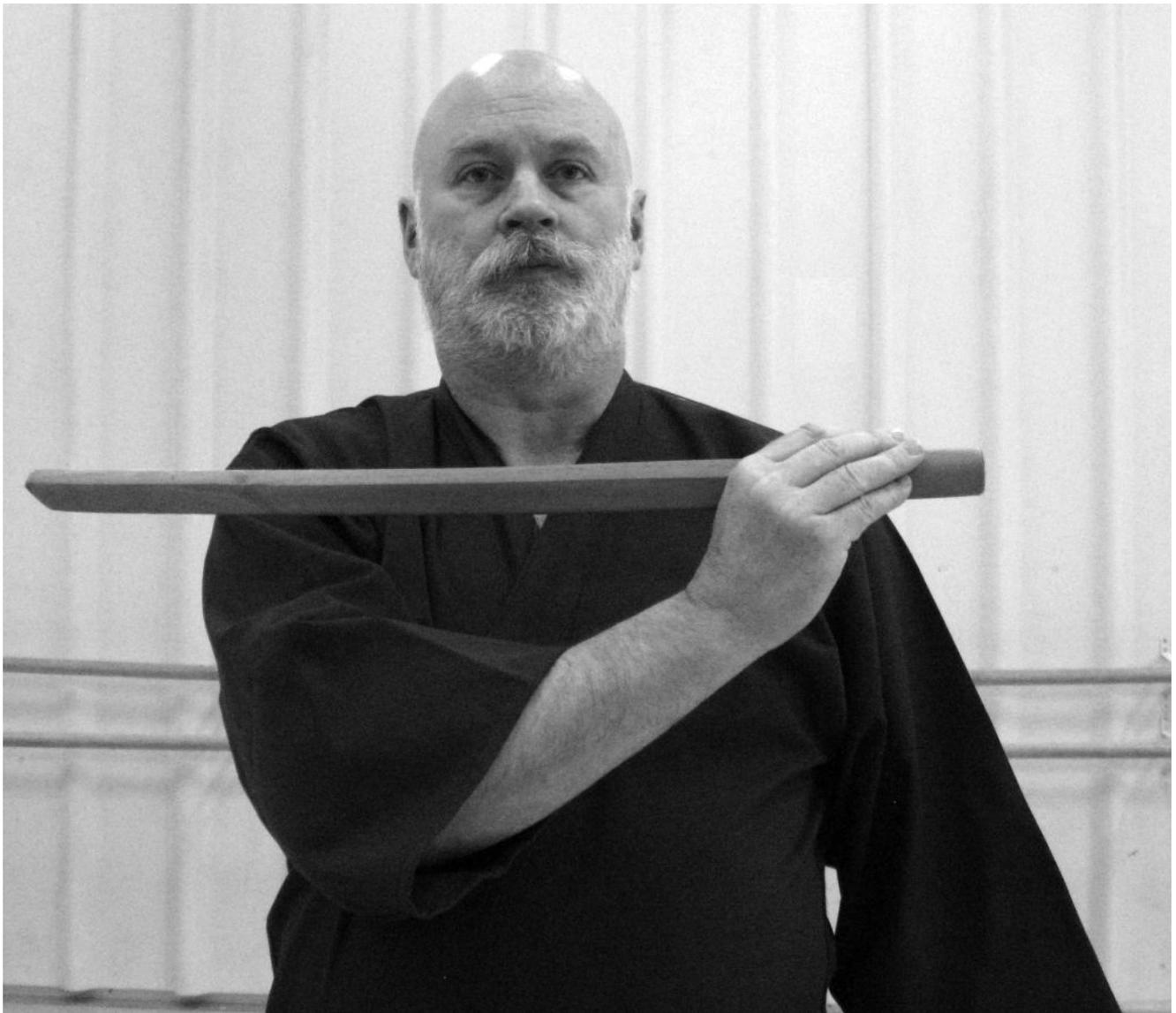
If you hear sensei say "put the shoto slightly to the right of centre" you should hear the additional explanation "so that you can prevent your opponent's sword from taking centre through your shoto because the function is to protect your centre not to have the shoto to the right of centre". If he does take centre by going around your shoto, for goodness' sake take it back! That's function over form, reason over rules, and what you ought to be learning in koryu.

What did I yell at her without thinking? "This isn't seitei! Think about what you should be doing not what I told you to do!"

Oops.

Kim Taylor

Feb 8, 2015



Speaking of Timing

I just put up article 35 of the Heiho Sanjugokajo which dealt with Jiki Tsu which may have something to do with timing or perhaps with direct communication or maybe a mysterious energy that can't be explained but that emanates from a swordsman with enough practice. Or is that the body of a big rock?

Oh yes, practice. Last night we went through Koyo no uchi, the autumn leaves cut where you drop the opponent's sword out of his hands, and then went through Sessa, a set of five kata that are pretty kendo-like in their look. We discussed the simplicity of them and the way they really don't allow anything other than immediately working on timing and distancing and intimidation and all the things that Musashi writes about. If you're not using his principles these kata don't work at any speed.

In this aspect they are like the itto seiho (long vs long sword) and the kodachi seiho (short vs long). Most of those kata have a single movement, "walk up and hit the opponent".

The Musashi Kai, a group that does nito kendo, and have visited the west coast several times, has a set of 13 kata for nito kendo, supposedly based on the Niten Ichiryu and we went through those a couple weeks ago. They are very well suited to kendo and I'd recommend them to any Niten Ichiryu students. If you practice nito seiho you can "get" these pretty fast. There's a video online and Robert Stroud has some notes up on his Idaho Kendo website. They aren't quite the same feel as the sessa though, not quite as dependent on dominating the opponent straight down the line.

These oyo waza (sessa and aikuchi) and the Musashi kai kata all deal very quickly with timing and distance and reading the opponent. They also train the two-sword movements from a slightly different direction so are excellent for breaking habits, and I recommend them to anyone practising Niten Ichiryu these days.

Which I suppose is mostly my point, because what we were learning last night while doing these kata is not easy to write about, "stomp on the sword" makes a bit more sense after practising Ryusui Uchidome but how much more could I write beyond what I wrote in the comments on the 35 articles?

Jiki Tsu indeed, or... you must investigate this for yourself.

Feb 21, 2015

Seitei Niten Ichiryu

We were having fun with tachi seiho last night, two of us learning the set, two seniors. A good mix when you are learning because the senior side can take care of the timing and distance for you.

Of course we got questions on which foot goes where and that started putting thoughts of "seitei niten" into my head. You know, the niten where you have to pass an exam by putting the correct foot in the correct place and cutting to the precise position because that's what is written in the book.

Even though I "wrote the book" that idea gives me the willies. Fortunately, I suspect I'll never have to worry about that sort of thing. Niten kata are just too simple to be used that way. Most of the tachi seiho (long sword vs long sword) are of the "he cuts for your head, step to the side and cut off his head" variety. Everyone would be a 7dan in two years if we did testing on that sort of stuff. Thing is, you don't step where you step because it's "in the book", you put the right foot in the right place because you have to, otherwise you get smacked on the head.

Which is of course why I love Niten. You know all those things Musashi says in his book, all the "stick like glue" and "steel and flint" and "body of a massive rock" stuff? When you stop memorizing dance steps you actually get to explore that stuff. Take the fourth technique, Uke Nagashi hidari. You walk up to your partner, on the third step he cuts down at your head, you step to the right while deflecting his sword down to your left, then as he steps back into hasso you step in and cut him on the wrist or the head.

Simple neh? Who cares about that sort of kata, it's hardly even a waza, you can learn it in four minutes, six if you're a bit slow. I've had lots of potential students come and go saying it's just too easy. But, but, when do you step to the side? Where does your partner swing at your head? Where do you move? How come he steps back? How come you have to step in to hit him? How come he doesn't just crash through your block? Can't you step back and hit him before he hits you? Why do my bokuto keep breaking?

Oh this is joy my friends, these are the things I live for. Keep your memorization exercises, I want a simple kata and a vicious partner who will try to hit me. Someone who will track me if I start going into automatic pilot, who will cheat by changing the attack if I don't wait, wait, wait for the right moment. Someone who will just step out of range if I hesitate when that right moment arrives.

Don't make me go inside my head and do the metronome-timing micrometer-distance double-solo-dance grading thing. Let me instead look into my partner's soul and try to catch that instant when the attack can't be changed. Not when it starts, that's too easy, but that point half way through when there's total commitment, when I can move and laugh at the widened eyes of someone who knows they just died but haven't fallen over yet...

Was it good for you too?

Once we've done that for a while, let's look into the stuff that's "hidden" in the kata. Hidden, hah! Musashi wrote a lot of stuff that doesn't seem to fit the kata he left, if you're not paying attention. After you learn how to pay attention to your partner with those simple niten techniques, maybe you go back to the book and pay attention this time.

OMG I thought the last kata was amazing!

Dec 19, 2015



Find your place

Once again last evening I was yelling at the class because they couldn't get the right distance to start a Niten Ichiryu kata. They were too close, too far, or drifting toward one side of the dojo.

It's easiest to explain why knowing where you are in the dojo is important when you're practising kata. Not knowing the maai in a Niten kata means you die, it's as simple as that. Our kata aren't long and fancy, there isn't any room for little errors that you will correct later, and certainly no excuse for poor distancing. If you miss, and your partner can cut you, you fail. Niten kata are of the "walk up and cut him while stepping to one side as he tries to cut you" variety. They can't be called fancy. In fact, one student was wondering last evening why Nagashi Uchi is a thing, considering that earlier we did Uke Nagashi hidari and ended things right there. (Nagashi uchi is two uke nagashi, one on each side). The answer of course is in the distance of first contact with your partner. One distance means he's back on his heels and can't defend himself, the other means he is not and he can. The lesson is "if at first you don't succeed...".

We have a nice large dojo to practice our sword work in, but I still rant about finding your place. You need to be able to look across a room and know whether you're going to live or die at that range. There's no room for walking in and "seeing what happens".

In Aikido we have a massive dojo. One of the largest areas of mat I've ever seen. Some classes we have maybe four couples working on their techniques and guess where they are? That's right, a dojo the size of a house and these guys are dropping their partners right on top of each other. Find your space.

Iaido is always the tough one to teach this sort of thing. With a room full of people swinging metal swords you'd figure it would be easy, but apparently it's not. Being the most self-indulgent of martial arts, it's easy for iaidoka to roll their eyes into their heads and figure there's nobody around but themselves. Just swing that sword, hit those grading points and you're good. No need to know where you are... until you get a sword in your back from the kid behind you who is also in his own little world. It seems that there are those who like to drift back, and those who tend to drift forward, and they always seem to line up the wrong way around. When I'm teaching I look for these guys and switch them. Egos be damned, you drift back, you ought to be in the back row.

As an aside, it's fun to check out which schools put seniors up front (for the beginners to watch), down at one end (because it's the high point in the dojo) or at the back (to smack the beginners on the head when they misbehave). Our policy is to surround that lone beginner with our masses (usually at least two or three) of seniors so they have to move in lock step or get smacked. Force-learning is best learning, yes?

Find your place, put a little gold star on the floor and look for it later kids. Or for the grown-ups, look for a mark on the wall in front of you, then look for a mark on the wall beside you. When you find them, stand at right angles to them. Simple enough.

When you're starting to "get" this stuff, just feel how much space you have in the eight directions around you. In any room, wherever you are, see if you can start feeling how much room you have around you. Eventually the air will become compressed as you get near a wall, and thinner where you

have space. Now it's like driving, you know where you can go at all times so that when the truck appears in front of you it's easy to go right or left depending on the feeling of space you've created by paying attention. You avoid hitting the guy in your blind spot because you don't have a blind spot.

I get very upset with myself these days when I trip over something. I never used to do that, some part of my brain always knew where things were around me and I just stepped over or around them. Now it seems that the brain is getting as crippled as the body and I can't keep track of the loose stuff that shifts around the place.

Or maybe it's that the kids are gone and my brain figures things will be where they ought to be.

In their place.

Jan 11, 2016



That's my students, flaming marshmallows off the deck.

Game theory, probabilities and budo

Nothing written here so grand as the title I'm afraid, it's just that the topic of game theory came up in relation to kata, in that it would be a good research project to see what game theory had to say about predicting the next move of a kata.

Now I have some sort of vague idea what game theory is, started to read a book about it years ago, but I'd bet Musashi had an even smaller understanding of the theory. Probably. Yet his writings about his school would indicate he had a pretty good idea that being predictable was a bad thing in a fight.

Many people say that by the time he wrote the Go Rin no Sho he was down to five kata. If you read the book you'll see he writes of five stances which are five kata. While I have no doubt that everything he wanted to teach could be put into five kata (one is enough for a clever student) I very much doubt he was teaching only those five by the time he wrote the book. He certainly taught other kata at earlier stages of his life. In his subsequent lineages, other kata were added PDQ by his students if they weren't directly from Musashi.

No, what he said was "here are the five stances, up, middle, down, left and right". What other places are there? In a fight your sword is going to be high to low, left to right, that covers all of it from what I can see. Behind your back is pretty much just for the movies. Instead of assuming the five kata of the book are all there is, maybe we think of them as examples of how to use the swords from those initial positions.

The two swords? Not something it seems he used much in a fight, but an excellent way to get your second hand off of the hilt. Put it on, certainly, when you need to really hack at something, but why keep two hands on the weapon, thus restricting your movements?

It was all about defeating the odds, or rather making the odds so high that prediction is practically impossible. You really don't want your opponent to be able to predict your next move. Two hands on one sword means restrictions on the way the sword is used, on where it is in relation to your body. A set of 30 kata? Well if someone has seen them and recognizes what you're about to do.....

Musashi said here's the five places your sword is likely to be, work from there. He further, and most importantly said that no matter what is happening, the idea is to cut the opponent. If you have to block, block with the idea that it will lead to cutting him. If you have to wait, wait for the chance to cut him, if you have to jump aside, jump to a place where you can cut him. If you are going to be hit and can do nothing else at all, step in and stick to him like glue and then when he tries to separate from you, cut him.

Work from the function, the form only exists to contain the function. The function is to cut your opponent down. Do that in as few moves as possible and if you are, for all practical purposes, unpredictable as you do that, good.

I'm not saying that game theory or probability theory would be wasted on an analysis of kata, far from it, I think it would be a great thesis topic, but one would want to put some restrictions on the topic first. If one wanted to use Niten Ichiryu then one would restrict all possible actions to those contained within

the kata. One might justifiably restrict the analysis to a single set, on the assumption that one goes into a fight with the weapons in hand and does not draw another or substitute one for another. (Of course, Musashi said that you fight with one sword, the one in your hand or the long sword if you have to draw, and then draw the short sword when you can.) In a single tempo / encounter / passage (is there a Japanese term for the single clash of weapons?) there is little switching from one sword to another or adding the shoto half way through swinging the tachi. Even video games won't let you change a tachi into a shoto half way through a swing if you're too close to cut with the tachi. Will they? Surely not.

Looking at the tachi seiho, they are mostly one step. He swings, you stab him in the throat. He swings, you lop off his head. That takes care of the first three. Next he swings, you block his swing, as he tries to disengage to attack again you lop off his head. That's five. That's also both sides of the attack line depending on which foot is moving forward at the time he starts his cut down on you.

You could totally model that. From six onward it gets a little more complicated, in that there are three movements in the next kata (moji gamae) but essentially you are going either right, left or straight down the middle to start every kata. Since our opponent is only cutting down the middle from high to low, at least at the beginning of each kata, the variation occurs on only one side.

So to analyze the set with probability you could figure out how many possible moves, how often those moves are made, etc. etc.

Game theory would be a lot more profitable for a post-grad thesis I suspect, since a lot of the work done in the kata is psychological. How do you get your opponent to back up? Crowd him a little so that he naturally goes back to get his cutting distance, but not too much so that he steps in to do tai atari (body strike). Where is that point? It depends on your opponent/partner. How do you get your opponent to commit to a strike? Take all the other strikes away, but without making it too obvious that you are trying to restrict his choices, because if you do that, he will then give up striking you in favour of disrupting your stance.

It could be fun! (It also makes me think that the old guys might have known a lot more about game theory than we give them credit for.)

Musashi's point of course is that you really need to get to the void. You need to get beyond all this "if you do that I'll do this" sort of thing and simply cut as if lightning from a clear blue sky.

(Unpredictable.)

Takes a while to get there and in the meantime much fun can be had from the kata.

June 5, 2016

Broad and Narrow Education

Last evening at Niten practice I found myself saying "kissaki gaeshi performs the same function as the opening movement from Shinto Ryu Nito Ai, if the sword is being pushed down, turn the edge up, this strengthens the grip" and "the footwork on the final cut of Gedan is the same as kuri tsuke from jodo". The class gets it, it's comparative budology.

Narrow education is represented in something like me trying to explain that the release of the initial cross-block in Jodan must be precisely timed to disrupt shidachi's escape. Too soon and he's in range and will simply thrust, too late and he gains the initiative by "popping" his sword into chudan instead of continuing back into hasso. So too must you remove the tachi just an instant before the kodachi or you end up in a stalemate ai uchi situation.

The result of that was me being told by one of the senior students that "look, there are some things it's just better for us to discover rather than you trying to tell us". Absolutely correct. That's the function of kata, to provide the playground in which we discover. The kata are not themselves the point, it's what we learn through them. What I actually said was "hey, this is my practice right now, just be patient and I'll be finished talking to myself in a moment".

This narrow, of broad and narrow, isn't quite the same as the ideal of learning more and more about less and less. We are constantly discussing the form of Seitei Gata, which angle here, which height there, what timing in the other place, getting closer and closer (one would think) to the critical point where everyone in the world looks exactly the same. At that point we get to one of those "if everyone in China were to jump at exactly the same time they'd all feel pretty silly afterward" things.

No, the point of everyone doing it all the same way isn't for us to make a mass "musical iaido" demonstration as we used to call them, but for us all to learn the same underlying principles. Things like "the most efficient and strongest way to move forward is to align the feet". This was actually the subject of a scientific study using force plates and it really is true. The more angle on the back foot the more the body tends to move to the left as well as forward.

Sort of obvious when you think about it, like almost every scientifically investigated thing ever. Up to then you get, as some put it, filling in from somewhere else. If you take out all the filling in, you ought to get to the same underlying principles, which are Kendo principles. "Oh Kim you say that as if it's a bad thing". No, I say it as if it would be a good idea for every iaidoka who is young enough not to break when starting kendo, to find a good kendo sensei and start kendo if they're serious about their Seitei Iai. Or at least listen very hard at their kendo-playing sensei if they have one. I did a summer of kendo with Taro Ariga when he was at the University of Waterloo... so there. Just another beginner in the back.

I like the combination of broad and narrow, it suits my education and since most of my students are University Educated, they get it.

Do what works for you.

June 3, 2016

Kata aren't important

Yes I know I recently said that kata were the way the schools are transmitted and that we ought to pass them along unchanged. Yes that would imply that they are important but I was talking to a beginner to the club. We do a lot of arts, compared with most dojo, and the topic of the day is dictated by the seniors in the class. It's up to them to tell me what they need to work on because I don't keep track. This means a beginner doesn't often get the chance to collect the kata in order or with much chance of repetition.

When they've been around long enough they start collating the kata, and of course all the books are written to help with this. If they've got the fundamentals the specifics aren't hard to pick up.

So, for that beginner? The kata are not important, they can be left to me to worry about, for now the goal is to understand what the kata are teaching, or what the art is teaching at the moment. It's important to get at the principles and the kihon when you're beginning. Too much memorizing of steps will distract from the lesson.

As many of my professors said throughout my school years. "It's in the book, pay attention to what I'm saying now". So yes, kata aren't important. Not right now.

And the lesson? We did a lot of Niten Ichiryu kihon last night, we were working on Nito Seiho, the two sword stuff and the way we do it requires a lot of shoulder movement. It doesn't take long for those shoulders to start screaming if you "try". Put anything but a bit of a grip and your arm falling, assisted by gravity and you will pay for it in the morning. Light hands, light arms and an accurate track of the sword, that's the key.

The swords we use are light so it's possible to work with no tension in the shoulders but light swords mean you want to cut heavy and as a result you're fighting your instincts. Two swords moving in different directions at different times are hard to coordinate. You need to concentrate there too. To add trying to memorize the movements of a kata is just a bit of an overload. There's not much to the kata anyway, except for timing and distance and paying attention to your partner, which is what we did. Lots of analysis of the kata and not very much memorization because memorization leads to "getting your part down" without much attention to the other guy's part. That way leads to, as the Pamurai put it and as I'm going to steal it, "synchronized swinging".

Take a longish kata, memorize the heck out of your side of it, have a partner that does the same, now go through it as fast as you can, intersect with each other once in a while and you've got synchronized swinging but not a kata. When I see those sorts of thing on the interweb I want to reach into the screen and poke the folks just a little to watch them fall over. No balance at all, just a series of movements done real fast and barely in control.

When the defensive movement comes before the attack you know you've got synchronized swinging going on.

June 10, 2016

How's my emFAsis?

A video just showed up on youtube, or at least someone just discovered it up there, which is from 1997 and is a gathering of my particular line of Niten Ichiryu in the home dojo of the sensei who taught it to me.

I watched enough of it to see that the Oyo Waza were there. These are a couple of sets of extra kata that I was taught just about the same time as this video was shot. That would be almost exactly twenty years ago. So I've been doing these kata for 20 years and am just now seeing how they were done by folks other than my sensei.

Or perhaps I will see them done by my sensei, as I said, I haven't watched it yet.

What will I see? Will I see that I've been doing it wrong for two decades? Am I nervous? One would think so, but I'm really not. "I do these kata the way I was taught them" as I say repeatedly. The thing is, I don't. I really can't. If I did them as I was taught them I'd be 20 years younger and considerably less practised in all the arts. I have no idea what that would mean, except that I have seen some truly cringe-worthy video of myself from that age. The edges are rough, the elbows seem to be in different angles on my body and don't talk to me about my knees.

No, I do the kata as I have come to do them after 20 years of practice, that's what I should say. Not that I've done these particular kata all that often in the last 20. They were given to us all at once, once. I wrote them down in my notebook and dragged them out occasionally after I'd taught this or that bunch of students the rest of the school, which would mean perhaps once each 3 to 5 years or so. But the school itself has been in constant rotation since the early '90s, so coming up on 30 years now, and a seldom-practised set of kata in a school is going to be "filled in" with the movements of that school and so is going to be "correct". Correct?

"You'll see" you say? I suppose I will, but here's what I expect to see. Different. I expect to see these several dojo and sub-lines of the school doing the kata in different ways. It's all supposed to be the same, the "Santo-ha Niten Ichiryu" but it's also a "summit" or some such. In other words, "let's get all the folks together and see how we're doing it now". I'm assuming of course but knowing what my sensei said back then I'm pretty sure that's what this is. So I'm going to see variation, I'm going to see different interpretations of the same kata.

They're all going to be interesting, they're all going to be recognizable but maybe I'm going to see someone on the other side of the attack line from where I expect to be at the end of a kata. (I cheated, I saw that when I was poking through the vid to see what was on it.)

Amazing, some people, even back then (1997) were doing it wrong. Or I'm doing it wrong?

Well, having read Musashi's works, and assuming the various translators are not all idiots, I'd say that it would be a pretty good idea not to call anyone right or wrong if trying to "go back to the source" to figure out how to do it. Musashi was not particularly clear in some of his explanations of the physical movements of his kata. Considering that his books were written all at once as licenses, and he wasn't all

that interested in passing along physical movements, I'd say that isn't surprising. In fact he was rather dismissive of those schools that dealt only with the physical shape and fingerwork and timing of kata.

However, for me the source isn't Musashi, it's my teacher from around the time of this video. I'm still not going to look too closely for "the source" because I'm not too worried about being wrong. What is wrong? If I'm doing it now in a different way than my sensei did it then, what does that mean? It means I get to think about why I'm doing it differently now than when I was taught it. Maybe I mis-learned it then? Maybe I took lousy notes?

Maybe I learn something more than "I was wrong". That would be nice.

Look, if you're firing a rocket at Mars and you miss, (yes I'm really going to rocket science here) you would be wrong. The idea was to hit the planet and if you miss you were wrong somewhere along the line. Defined goal, obtained or not? Right or wrong.

What's the defined goal of Niten Ichiryu that you can be right or wrong? That you do the kata exactly as Musashi taught them?

No, I'm not too worried that I'll see the kata being done differently than I do it now, or even then. I expect to see differences and I expect that I'll enjoy thinking about why in the world anyone would do it like that. I will learn from the differences.

What if I see that I'm doing it exactly like it was done then, and that everyone then did it exactly the same way?

Then I'll regret wasting my time watching the video. It won't make me feel superior that I'm doing the kata as they were done then because I don't feel that those doing the kata in ways different to how I do them now are wrong. How could I feel validated and "right" and superior if I don't feel others are incorrect.

I'm right:

Let's examine the case where I am right and others are wrong. What can be done with that? Well I could tell them they are wrong and I could teach them how to do it right. The wisdom can flow from me to them. How does that help me? It would feed my ego? Is that a good thing?

We're different:

What if they do it differently than me? What if we are both working toward the same goal (Musashi's hyoho) but are looking at the kata from different angles? Then I could argue with those other folks. I could defend my way of doing it and listen to them defend the way they do it. Maybe we both learn something. Yes!

I'm wrong:

And if they are convinced they are correct and I am not? Then I shut up and let them teach me their way and I learn something and they learn nothing. I love that one, they get what they want and I maybe get what I don't want but maybe need. They are right and I know more than I did an hour before. Yes!

How can you learn if you don't think you're wrong? Or at the very least, permit the small possibility that you might perhaps be slightly wrong?

Oh damn, we're back to faith vs science again aren't we?

June 21, 2016



Fudoshin

Fudoshin, immovable mind, and fushin, frozen mind. A recent paper concerning this has been my sauna reading for a few days. It is an analysis of Takuan Soho's letters to Yagyu. I have been struck with similarities to things that Musashi said in his writings. These men were contemporaries and given our "surprising discoveries" that people and things in the old days were more widely connected than we thought, it might be that these men, or at least their ideas, were familiar to a wider audience. Make a good post grad thesis for someone perhaps. As a hint, Musashi wrote his 35 articles for Lord Hosokawa, who already had menkyo kaiden and the Heiho Kadensho from Yagyu. Might Musashi have seen this document? Musashi said that he wrote the Go Rin no Sho with no references from the classics or other military books. This would seem to imply that he had read such things.

Thinking about the frozen mind, the mind that gets dragged about by being caught on ideas, or on things, it occurred to me that aikido practice was a good place to study the concept. A metaphor? Takuan used the sword cutting toward the swordsman, if you become caught on that object it will go badly for you. I used the Canadian example last evening, if you stick your tongue on an ice cream truck in winter, you will be dragged around when that truck drives off.

Good eh?

My point for the class was to demonstrate that named techniques are just place holders. That they are convenient jargon for movements or positions that arise when doing the real work of budo, which is to place balance against balance. We spent the evening doing uncomfortable things, we moved straight back from a punch to the face and tried to see how many ways we could touch that punch with our hand. Two hands, both sides with fingertips up, either hand placed on top (palm down), either hand placed below (palm up). Remembering that the other fist would be coming, we moved the hand across the body, inside or outside to block the punch or to unbalance the attacker.

Out of those simple actions we discovered the techniques we have named ikkyo, nikyo, sankyo, yonkyo, kote gaeshi, shiho nage, sumi otoshi and many others. When we were not naming them the less experienced students had no trouble making their partner fall down. Once we named them however, there seemed to be something for the mind to latch onto and confusion ensued as they tried to do things "the right way".

Move, don't get hit, move, don't get hit, move.... oh, technique, don't get hit.

I say Aikido is a good place to study fudoshin because of this fluidity of technique to technique to... or is that the wrong way to think of it? From this fundamental idea (don't get hit, don't be there) arise ways to unbalance and throw our opponent. We name these techniques but that very naming can cause us to focus on them, to become frozen on them. We should not focus on the technique, on the named form, but instead on responding to our opponent in appropriate ways which will allow techniques to arise "from the void" as Musashi says, without excess rationalization. If you are not trying to "do kotegaeshi" your resisting partner will simply be falling to the ground from sumi otoshi, or find himself in sankyo, or...

Can we start with fudoshin and cut out all these decades of study? Not even Musashi thought so, he spent a lifetime teaching from kata, as did many others of his time, but he eventually pared all that down to five kata, his nito seiho. Start with the swords high, middle or low, left or right according to circumstance, and then find the techniques as they appear from the void.

This is the result of forty years of practice, not four, so why am I bothering to tell it to beginners? Part of the answer is that I'm a selfish barnyard and I'm not really teaching, I'm learning. But the nice side of it is that I don't want my students to spend too much time looking too closely at the kata (the named or demonstrated sequence of attack and defence that is invented every time an aikido sensei says "do this"). Sure, the students want to learn techniques and they do. We look closely at the "leaves" of the pins and the throws, but I want the students to step back and look at the forest at the same time. Not the exact same time, alongside, alternatively, in the same class, as they look at the leaves. Sometimes focus on a little finger, other times on the big movement of the body to avoid being punched while looking at that little finger.

That's the very nub of the problem. You can't focus on the little picture and the big picture at the same time. We do not multitask, if we could you would be able to text and drive safely. You may think you can do that but you can not. The brain concentrates, it focuses, "becomes frozen" on one thing at a time. If you are concentrating on getting the perfect angle on your opponent's wrist to do nikkyo you are not seeing his other hand coming around to clap you on the earhole. You can't see the forest for the trees, you can't look at a leaf and see the landscape.

Mostly when I am working on fudoshin I like moving a couple of inches and turning a couple of degrees so that the opponent has missed and now I am facing the short side of his stability box and can tap him on the chest and watch him fall down. Want to do that? OK Uke is striking down with a beer bottle in his right hand and has stepped forward with his right foot to do so... no? He's holding a sword, your kendo guy will be in that position. As the sword is coming down he is committed to the attack, very difficult to change direction, so now you slide very slightly to your right front. Put your shoulder width left foot in front of his left foot and your left shoulder will be offline from the descending sword. This is a twitch, it ought to be faster than lifting your own sword (which you don't have) to block. Now that our body is in the right place, let your left foot drift slightly further so that your hips now line up facing your attacker. Look at his feet, do you see the box between his toes and heels? It's pretty narrow in the direction you are now facing. All you have to do to unbalance him is push his centre of mass outside that box. If you can do that just as his right foot is coming down onto the ground so much the better, he will not only unbalance but twist away from you as you tap him. Chances are, in his rush to re-establish his balance he will catch the outside of his right foot and trip. He certainly won't have much power in that sword cut once he is off balance.

Pretty boring isn't it? You can do it, so let's go on to a fancy technique with a cool name.

Sure, let's do that.

Nov 6, 2016

It's a two-handed sword

or, It's all the same.

How many ways can you kill someone with a two handed sword? Far fewer than you think. We practised Niten Ichiryu (tachi seiho) last evening and the words "it's just like..." kept being said. Not, I might add, by me. The Pamurai said it, Mr. Kanohead said it and Rey Rey (twicest as good as Rey) said it I think. Ikkyu boy said "which foot goes in front this time" but he's a beginner and was forgiven.

The Pamurai also said "I love it when my students start self-correcting" and that's what I was thinking. I love it when these guys start seeing the principles behind the kata and start realizing that we could put this one and that one together as variations because the only difference is the target and...

On the other hand, we talked about the principle of the hammer. If you only have a hammer, everything will start to look like a nail. We do a lot of kata from a lot of schools but we don't particularly try to make them look different. We try to figure out what each is trying to say to us. Some have different ways to swing, some have different ways to move the hips. Using a five foot long sword is similar but different to moving a three foot cane or a shoto. This is what we look for, the differences in our bodies that need to be there to adapt to the weapon and the distances between us and our opponent.

Yet the footwork could be said to be identical in each. For instance, in tachi seiho our first kata was to step to the right side of the line as the attack is received and counter with a thrust through the throat. We do the same thing with a shoto in the same school and the distance has to be adjusted. We do the same thing with a tanjo but this time we drop to one knee and strike the solar plexus. Why? We do the same foot movement while drawing a sword in tachi uchi no kurai. We do it from seiza while drawing a sword in another place.

All of these kata come down to the same instruction. Step to your right, off line of the attack and simultaneously attack your opponent. We could reduce it all to one kata and get really, really good at it.

Except for the time when our opponent does something slightly different and we don't adapt to that, or when we happen to have a tire iron in our hand rather than a bokuto. Or nothing at all. When we do a one-size-fits-all kata we run the risk of making a reflex instead of learning a principle. That reflex will be marvellous where it can be applied, but we risk a certain rigidity of mind.

On the other hand, too many kata for too many places will risk creating a different rigidity of attitude, a sort of computer-like searching through the database of possible moves to figure out where to move the pawn. We don't think that fast or in that search algorithm sort of way. We are more "gestalt", which is why we practice like we do, lots of kata and a search for the principles that bind bunches of them together. Then we get creative.

Last evening we started with sasen, slide to the right and thrust the throat. We looked at several more kata and realized that there is a left and a right side for many of the tachi seiho. Why not for sasen? So we moved off to the left to see what happens. The result was "sasen hidari" which, while being the exact same kata (move off the line and stab the throat) ended up looking a bit different. It was a two-handed thrust for one thing, had to be. It was also an attack to the kote for safety, since this was brand

new and we weren't going to spend much time on it and probably never do it again. Don't waste practice time perfecting something that doesn't exist. We had our sasen hidari and we left it.

Going on to the next two kata we did the same thing but with cuts to the head rather than the neck. Same footwork, same hip shifts, different target with a different attack. Four and five are uke nagashi, but not the uke nagashi most people imagine when they hear those words. Yet it is. It's just deeper and closer and a different timing. You would look at it and perhaps say "we don't do uke nagashi like that". We would answer "yes you do".

In fact, you might do uke nagashi like this if you have no sword in your hand at all and you are practicing Aikido. We put down the bokuto and practised smacking our attackers (who still had bokuto) in the face and then thumping them on the side of the head with our other hand, for a while. That was to look closely at the hips and the shoulders before picking up the bokuto again to do Niten Ichiryu.

I mean really, how many ways can you turn your body off the line?

Musashi's "thing" was to use the sword one-handed. That's the principle underneath his two-sword style. You use two swords by having one in each hand so you are learning how to use the sword one-handed. This gives you more flexibility than using a sword with two hands glued onto the hilt. There are only so many ways to use a two-handed sword. If you switch between two-handed and one-handed you become more flexible of movement and perhaps even of mind.

Is this a good thing? Perhaps. Can you think of places where flexibility might be a benefit?

Dec 19, 2016

Niten Kihon

Recently we started class with two forms of Niten Ichiryu kihon. We've always done lots of informal kihon but it seems to be getting a bit more defined so I want to write some of it down. You lucky non-niten-students-of-mine can flip to the next essay, this likely won't make any sense at all. For other Niten Ichiryu students, please be aware that some of this might be a bit Sei Do Kai specific but I bet you can adapt it to your own practice.

First Kihon practice for Tachi Seiho.

Do each kata, one after the other with no walking. Do it solo and while advancing across the floor. Deep koshimi, then square the hips as you bring the feet together. Our club switches the last two kata, which suits the foot positions.

From feet together in gedan, Sasen
feet together in hasso. Hasso Hidari
feet together in hasso, Hasso Migi
feet together in gedan, Uke Nagashi Hidari
feet together in gedan, Uke Nagashi Migi
remain with the left foot forward, move the bokuto into mogiri gamae, Moji Gamae
remain with the right foot forward, drop the sword to gedan, Hari Tsuke
feet together in gedan, Nagashi Uchi
remain with the left foot forward, move the sword into migi waki gamae, Tora Buri
feet together in gedan, Kazu Ki
remain with the left foot forward in hasso, Amashi Uchi
remain with the right foot forward in chudan, Ai Sen Uchi Dome.

Since this is simply stringing the kata together and doing them solo, it should not require much more explanation, should you wish to try it yourself.

A challenge is to do every kata from the finishing position of the last one, rather than bringing the feet together between. Switching the kata around will help this, for example, from right foot forward after Sasen, lift the sword to hasso and do Hasso Migi. Then assume hasso and do Hasso Hidari. This lets you do Uke Nagashi Hidari without changing your feet. To do Uke Nagashi Migi you might simply shift the right foot to the left on the deflection. You get the idea.

Second kihon practice for Tachi Seiho.

Use a line on the mirror or the wall and work on understanding your hips in relationship to that line. Concentrate on feeling the hips turn rather than going up over your leg as one foot passes the other. Concentrate on using your hip to move your back leg, don't step-step.

Koshimi: This position is a low stance but it is not as long as it looks. The front foot is facing the opponent. The rear foot is at about 90 degrees (no more) to the front and the heels are not quite on the same line. The rear knee is vertically over the rear toes and the front shin is vertical. The hips are straining toward the front foot but do not drag the rear knee from above the rear toes.

1. **Sasen**, start left foot forward and in gedan, not koshimi. Twist the hips toward square far enough to take the weight off the right foot, now throw the right hip to the right of the attack line, the bokuto comes forward off the right hip.

Leave the right foot forward, square up from the koshimi position, and drop the sword to gedan again. Now drive the left foot across the attack line while moving, then keeping, the right hand in front of your bellybutton (heiso), as you come clear of the attack line grip the tsuka with the left hand and the right foot comes around into koshimi (left foot is forward here) as you thrust toward your imaginary teki.

Square up into gedan with the left foot forward and repeat. This is an exercise for sasen but also to understand the one-sidedness (non-symmetry) of the sword. The "Sasen Migi" movement must be different than Sasen.

2. **Hasso**. Start with the left foot forward, drive the right hip off the line and drop into koshimi. You can continue your cut down to the left hand in front of heiso (bellybutton) since there is no partner in the way, but make sure you are reaching out to strike where the target would be, don't allow your cuts to become small and tight.

Leave the right foot forward, square up and raise the sword to hasso. Now drive the left foot forward off the line and cut hasso migi.

Square up to the original position and repeat across the floor.

3. **Uke Nagashi hidari**. Do the uke nagashi sides separately. We are working now on driving the shoulder off the line and moving well forward as we move through the uke nagashi position. Then we are working on the hip turn to do the finishing strike. This is a two part movement by design.

Stand in gedan with the right foot forward. Drive the left foot/hip off the attack line and place the left foot in front of the right. At the same time swing the sword forward so that the tip comes up the attack line, fold the bokuto tip back to miss your left ear as you grip the bokuto with the left hand and release the grip, but not the position on the hilt, with your right. The left hand should be well forward and the hand at about 45 degrees above vertical so that it is above your head. The bokuto should rest on your left shoulder and your left elbow should be tucked safely behind the blade.

Next use the left foot to drive the right hip forward into koshimi. As you turn, your right hand will come closer to the left and you can re-grip with both hands to do the cut as per Hasso Hidari.

4. **Uke Nagashi migi**. This is the opposite side of hidari, the difference is that when you move your right foot across the line and in front of the left, the right hand is driven well forward and the bokuto folded back, the tip missing the right ear. Then as you drive the left hip around to face the attack line your left hand comes close to the bokuto and you can cut as per Hasso Migi.

In both these movements be sure not to turn your back perpendicular to the attack line, this makes your deflection a block as your sword moves perpendicular to the attacking sword. Instead, stretch the shoulder forward to take it off the line, and keep the bokuto as parallel to the line as possible. This movement is not to stop the attack or even to deflect it, it is to provide coverage should the opponent try to "bend" his cut in toward you as he is missing.

5. **Moji Gamae.** Start with the usual moji gamae position, left foot forward, hips in koshimi, sword placed so that the monouchi is across your face (it would be covering your partner's face during the kata). Raise the sword as you drive the right hip forward off the line and into koshimi on the other side. Strike down, "stamping on the sword".

Leave the hips as they are, right foot forward, and move the sword into a position like moji gamae on the other side. Repeat the raising of the sword and drive the left hip around into koshimi. Repeat across the floor.

6. **Hari Tsuke and Kazu Ki.** We pair these kata. Start with the feet together and the sword in gedan. As you drive the left foot forward off the attack line turn the bokuto edge upward and place the left hand on the mune in the correct position as you slap the attacking sword away and then thrust using the same hand position. (this is Hari Tsuke). You are in koshimi.

Keep the left foot forward as you square the hips from koshimi to gedan, (your hips again in the normal walking position). Now drive straight down the attack line with your right leg as you turn the edge of the blade upward and take the same position on the mune with the left hand as above. Lift the blade directly upward, covering your body with the blade horizontal and the edge receiving the the strike. Immediately drive the left hip forward and off the line as you fold the tsuba toward yourself, dropping the right hand and carrying the left hand over the back of the attacker's blade. You will be trapping his blade against your thigh. Thrust in koshimi as per the movement above. (This is Kazu Ki).

Move your feet together and drop the blade to gedan to repeat the entire sequence across the floor.

7. **Nagashi Uchi.** You have done uke nagashi right and left to examine the sword and hand positions already, this exercise is to work the legs and hips. Start in koshimi, right foot forward, with the sword in seigan. Now lift the sword to cover the attack line at the tsuba moto (1/3 near the hilt) as you drive your left hip forward and across the attack line, cut as you come into koshimi once more. Now lift and cover your head on the attack line as you drive the right hip across the attack line into the original koshimi position and cut into seigan once more.

Repeat as many times as you can across the floor. Keep your stance in koshimi, as low as your legs will allow and step forward only a small distance. You must move forward across the floor but only an inch or two each time. This is for stamina, hip and leg strength, breathing, and all the other good stuff.

8. **Tora Buri.** Begin in koshimi with the left foot forward, the sword is held with the tip to the rear, parallel to the floor and the edge held outward. Twist the right hip toward the front to unweight it as you did in Sasen, drive the right hip to the right side of the attack line as you use the turn of the left shoulder to swing the sword through the target. This is the movement that gave birth to the "sei do kai rope sword".

Remain with the right foot forward and move the sword to the rear on your left side to do the same movement on the left side of the attack line. In this case you must virtually connect your left hand to the right hip to pull the sword through the movement. This is difficult and you may wish to use the right hand to begin the sword movement with the same feeling as you had on the other side. As soon as possible, connect the left hand with the right side of your body.

9. **Amashi Uchi:** It is a peculiarity of our club that we switch the last two kata of Tachi Seiho. For this kata we begin in hasso, the left foot forward. As the wrist is attacked, we drop the left hand off of the hilt, move it down and backward as we move to the right front off the line. As our feet come together again the left hand comes back on the hilt and we then cut down using *koshimi* across the line. Make sure in this *kihon* that your forearms are parallel to the floor as is particular to our practice, it is the left forearm that our opponent is trying to cut.

The second version of this *kihon* is done by releasing the left hand from the hilt and carrying it directly back as you push your right hand directly forward so that you are in *hitoemi* (completely sideways) parallel to the attack line on its right side. Turn your hips back to face the attacker as you move back into *hasso* and then cut down in *koshimi*.

10. **Ai Sen Uchi Dome.** For this *kihon* we are working from the *chudan* position of *awase*, just after we have pulled back into the *issoku itto* position from the initial cut. We start with the right foot forward. Now remain low and drive from the left foot while pushing the hilt forward with the left hand, letting it rise naturally from the pivot of the shoulders. Cut down into *koshimi* while remaining directly on the line.

Next move back into the starting position, *chudan*, and then twist the hips slightly to load the front foot and drive off of that front foot, moving your left ahead into *koshimi* as you cut down.

Step through with the right foot to the starting position and repeat across the floor.

This completes the formal *kihon* exercises of our club. You will note that some of these *kihon* do not appear in the kata. Fine, don't do those if you don't want to, but remember that it is more important to know what you're doing than to be a good robot.

Dec 26, 2016

I am a mirror

How do we get really good at what we're doing? I mean how do we develop the ability in our martial arts to move with mushin (with what? with a label, but the label means without excess, harmful, rationalization).

Well we don't learn to drive by reading about it or sitting in a chair making steering motions (yes that's a comment on iaido as a way to learn how to fight). You've got to get out there and do partner practice.

What kind? Again, a bit of a slam on Jodo this time, specifically the Ran Ai kata which are very long (well longer than the others) and created, I am convinced, to "bring in the punters". I mean everyone likes a long kata right? The longer the better because anything that takes a month to learn must be worth a lot.... Maybe.

Me, I think the real work is done in short kata. As one of our jodo sensei said a couple months ago, "the first movement of the kata is the kata, it's finished there, the rest is practice". (Aikido students, this is why I'm so focused on the entry and don't really care about the throw or the pin. If you have his balance the instant he begins to attack, you have everything you need.)

The Tachi Seiho (long sword against long sword) of Niten Ichiryu are the sort of kata I'm thinking of. The first is Sasen and it's: walk up to your partner and as he cuts down stab him in the throat. Lest you go try that one and hurt your buddy, let's talk about number two, Hasso Hidari, instead. You walk together, both in hasso, on the third step uchidachi pauses to make sure shidachi is ready, then steps in with a fourth step and cuts down. Shidachi uses that fourth step to move off the line and cut into uchidachi's left neck. And that's it, centre up, release the kamae, back to the starting position.

This kata takes about three repetitions to learn. After that, what? After that we go on to the good stuff, the two-sword stuff? If you think that learning the steps of that kata is the point of it, you are in good company. Many people figure that's all there is. You learn the steps and go off to teach. It's a small school, there are dozens of little groups all over the world, all directly connected to Japan, all knowing how to do all the kata of the school so all happily walking through the kata.

You're guessing I'm about to drop the other shoe. Well, yes. The art isn't complicated, it really isn't. There are 5 two-sword kata that Musashi finally settled on which are written about in the Go Rin no Sho. You can go buy my book from sdksupplies.com to read my comments on these descriptions and their use. Suffice to say it's not terribly clear, (Musashi's writing, mine is crystal) Musashi was a horrid manual writer, but then again, I suspect he wasn't writing for you or me. In fact, he wasn't writing a manual.

The point is that there are 12, 7, and 5 kata in the modern school (Santo-ha Hyo Ho Niten Ichiryu, my line) and they don't take long to learn so folks can learn them in a couple of days and wander off to be leaders of their own group. Hey, we don't even need paper, the kata are all up on Wikipedia, the densho of everything.

It's harmless, all this sharing of footwork, less than harmless because it spreads awareness of the school, but it's not the point. These are not the Bugaloo or the Bump or even the Twist. They are not

"moves" like a right cross or a left jab. They are tools, they are containers and if you have a jar with nothing in it, you have a pretty tchotchka. Pablo Naruda's house in Isla Negra has a bar full of empty bottles on every shelf and surface. Very pretty collection of shapes. Not a drop of Pisco in sight.

So what are we missing? Besides the point? It's the mirror. We are missing the small instruction on how to practice. It's the thing that sensei mentions very early but we usually gloss over because it's a throwaway comment. It surely sounds like one. Uchidachi is the senior so he leads, shidachi follows.

You know that right? Of course you do, but do you know why? And how?

You probably do, but my students seem to forget, so I'll explain. You need to be a mirror. Yes I said that, but I mean a mirror. What you do is echoed in the mirror yes? You lead and your image follows. Does it follow "some time after"? No. It follows "faster than thought" it follows faster than anything else in the universe except the speed of light. That's because it is following what you do at the speed of light and trust me, your thoughts are not faster than that.

You must be a mirror to uchidachi's movements. There, does that sound different now? Can you wait for uchidachi to take a step and then take a step half a step after he does? What if that's the fourth step? But who can move the very instant they see the other side move? That's the speed of light, who can move like that?

Well you can damned well try, and keep trying for years and years and years. You don't do a bit of an exercise one day in class and say to yourself "I now know how to do this". You do it, and that's the core of your practice of Niten Ichiryu. Watkin sensei has told you that he did only Sasen for a very long time before he moved on to other kata. When sensei showed you all 12 kata at once did you think you were luckier than Watkin sensei? In a very real sense, when sensei showed you 12 kata in a class, he showed you nothing at all.

Be a mirror.

Figure out what that means, figure out how to do that. That's your real practice of Niten, not walking through the dance steps. White guys can't dance, we all know that from long ago. It's because they just copy the dance steps. What would they need to do to actually dance? Figure that out. Now tell me if it's cultural or not.

Let's make it easier. At a recent class I noticed a couple of students preparing to move, winding up and moving, jumping in two different directions at once to get out of the way. You know what I mean? That "oh now what do I have to do".

IT'S A KATA!

Uchidachi isn't going to suddenly change his attack, he's going to cut straight down and you! You are going to move to the right front. How is this a thing to think about? Is it a surprise that you are moving to the right front? Did it change from the last time you moved to the right front? No? Then are you thinking about uchidachi cutting? Are you waiting for him to cut so that you can then move? Stop. You know what he is going to do, you know what you are going to do, there is a single variable and that is when you're going to do what you're going to do.

Be a mirror.

Easy peasy now that I explain it? No problemo? Right, uchidachi starts to turn up the heat. Frog in a pot.

Be a mirror.

Feb 5, 2017



The Pamurai with a Gelato in Sauble Beach, you can't swing swords all the time.

Too Simple

I feel like I just came home again. Last night we did our first class in preparation for the July Niten Ichiryu seminar and it occurred to me that I've been doing Niten perhaps longer than I've been doing Muso Jikiden partner practice. Niten certainly wasn't my first partner practice, or even my first partner weapon practice but it feels like it.

Probably because it's so simple. I've had folks come and go from the class saying that there's nothing to it. There really isn't much there. Walk up and kill him would seem to be the underlying theory.

We went through Seitei Jodo to warm up and as a post-seminar refresher, and then switched to Niten. That triggered a sizable rant from me. The jodo was full of "he has to move first here doesn't he?" All the stuttering and hesitation and getting too close and remembering the details and whatnot that occupies the detail-oriented sensei full time.

That sort of one-two-three, he moves first, is the partner equivalent of doing iaido "by the book". It's all about the details, all about the precision. This is what gives juniors the idea that they can teach. Once you learn the dance steps you can teach the dance steps. Hooray, "put me in coach, I'll take the beginners".

When I'm in the mood for Niten I'm not in the mood for that stuff. Niten is too simple for that stuff. We took 30 seconds to learn the footwork for the very first kata of the long sword set (tachi seiho). Start from one handed gedan and feet together, start right, left and when you step right, step offline and thrust to the throat. It's the same footwork as for tanjo on the right hand side, kote hidari, suigetsu hidari, shamen hidari and migi, it's the same movement as for suigetsu in seitei jo, it's.... bog standard and you learned it by reading this.

So we tried. And we failed. Too close, too far, moved too soon, moved too late, missed the target. Thankfully nobody got too close and put it through the neck. Yet that's the intent of the kata, walk up and stick it through the neck. Come on, how hard can it be? I asked who had done the kata wrong and only a couple of hands went up. According to most of our training, none of them messed up, not really. Move off the line to the right and stab toward the throat is the kata, and it's what they did. Curiously, those who put their hands up were the beginners who had never seen the kata before. The seniors were pretty confident they'd done it correctly.

So we talked of simple kata, of why Niten is just one, single, movement. We went back to seitei jo and did monomi, I moved to the left side and smashed my jo down on my partner's head (OK I stopped it just before I clocked him). That seemed to be the end of the kata. My partner suggested tachi otoshi, suspecting, I suspect, that it had to be more than a single twitch, yet he moved a bit early and so, rather than clocking him on the head I found myself smashing his hands. We tried again and this time he blocked my strike to his head at the very last moment and stopped... we tried again and this time he again managed to block my strike at the last moment and then, before I could register it, he cut my head off.

If you're not following this, don't worry about it. The point is that kata that are more than a single movement are, as our French jodo sensei have told us, practise. The fight is over at first contact, the rest is an agreement to keep going because single movement kata feel way too much like kihon.

Niten doesn't care, when the maai is broken the fight is over. Someone dies as soon as one or the other is in reach of a sword strike. There are three things we need to understand when doing our first Niten kata (the one where you walk in, step off the line to the right and stab our partner in the throat). First, the position of the sword in your hand, not the grip but the movement of the sword in the kata, in this case, shove it forward and stab. In our dojo, that involves a quarter turn so that the edge is to the right rather than down as it is in seitei jo suigetsu. Wait what? OK picture the jo has an edge that is under your second (counting from the palm) knuckles, get it now? In the more modern versions of our line of Niten, the edge remains facing the floor.

This movement of the sword, including angle of the edge, is the least difficult thing to learn, and probably the most argued over... should one be inclined to argue it. I don't, I don't care if the edge is down or sideways, I do it sideways because that's what I was taught. Stuff falls out of both ways of doing the thrust but we'll get to that.

The second thing we need to understand is the distance. Both partners are moving in. I have said three steps many times and so it goes in the kata, three steps. On the third step you are supposed to be within cutting range, so the second step is maai right? Only it isn't, you both need to take that third step, so the second step is nisoku itto not issoku itto (fancy way of saying two steps not one step, are you impressed yet).

So we did kihon, three steps in and stop your swing against an unarmed attacker just above his head. Why are you missing? Just step in three steps and hit him. Why are you missing? Oh, I see, the unarmed attacker is hesitating at step two, waiting different lengths of time and if YOU'RE NOT WATCHING you just step in and cut the space between you. Unarmed guy grins at you. You don't notice because you're dead. You died because you counted to three. What else does unarmed guy do to mess you up? He starts at different distances from you, this messes your pace up, you have to shorten or lengthen your pace. At the start this variation happens automagically because you don't know what that space is. For seniors it should be happening on purpose.

This stuff is hard, especially if you don't have a robot coming at you, yet it's simple, just walk in three steps and cut. Now the kihon changes to walk in three steps and cut six inches in front of the face of the guy walking in. Go on, try it and then pick either "hit on the head" or "miss by six inches" as you're approaching. When you can choose correctly you are ready to be called "the attacker without a big bruise on his throat".

Did I mention that the kihon was also to practice the other part of maai? That's timing. You have to hit or miss the unarmed guy at exactly the same time as he steps down on his third step.

Easy peasy, light and breezy. Now do the kata, uchidachi walks in, pauses slightly at step two to make sure shidachi is paying attention, and cuts down to about six inches in front of the place where shidachi's nose would be on the third step should shidachi step directly forward. Shidachi steps to the right front and thrusts to uchidachi's throat just as he cuts. Musashi calls this "stomp on the sword", you

hit just as uchidachi misses, as if you have stomped on his sword with your front foot just as he finishes his cut, don't let him lift it again.

Did you put the sword through your partner's throat? No, because that clever boy cut about six inches in front of your face which means your sword is two or three inches from his neck. (The difference is the thickness of your neck).

What's the third thing you ask? It's posture. When you thrust with the sword edge facing the floor you can assume the same posture as seitei jo (yaya hanmi). The line of force moves down the sword into your right hip and grounds in your left foot. Actually the force goes the other way in a fight, from ground to tip, but in a kata we test by shoving the tip of the sword back at you. If you have the sword edge facing 90 degrees to the right and you take yaya hanmi, that push on the sword tip will spin you around. In this case you need to adopt koshimi, a strange stance that lets you spiral the force of that push down the sword, through your right shoulder, diagonally down to your left hip and into your left toes.

If you don't do Niten it's not important what it looks like, just understand that posture is important, we aren't using light sabres, just touching the opponent with any part of the sword isn't good enough. This is why that great and tricky "men" you scored at the last kendo tournament was waved off by the shimpan. Your posture was garbage.

So yes, Niten is too simple. Too simple for beginners to teach, too simple for beginners to judge, too simple to be interesting to watch. Remember all that "intercepting fist" stuff we read about in the martial arts magazines in the 1970s?

Simple like that.

Does this sound like an ad for Niten Ichiryu? Do we think you could start now and be ready to attend the July seminar? Of course you could, you can learn most of the dance steps to tachi seiho in half an hour. Three hours would get you the entire school. It's simple. We have operators standing by their email accounts, waiting to assist you and your dojo to add this wonderful art to your practice. Email now for special rates (we need to fundraise, it's expensive to bring sensei from two different countries half way around the world, how's \$20 a head plus gas for an introductory seminar sound? Loaner swords available).

No waiting outside the gate in the rain necessary.

June 7, 2017

Niten Notes for June 8 2017

I'm hoping that our various Niten groups are reviewing and polishing for the seminars coming up. Maybe some ideas here for your practice. They are also notes for the students in my class, so they can learn the names of the kata and to remind them what we did. We continued our classes yesterday with an examination of the first five kata of Tachi Seiho and looked mainly at the three distances involved.

Sasen, a thrust to the throat, requires uchidachi to cut to about six inches in front of shidachi so that shidachi finishes with the point of the bokuto about two inches in front of the throat. I'm not saying this has any particular combative meaning, other than to control the distance (which, OK is pretty combatively effective), but it's good practice. For the beginners and those just starting Niten, we actually started that distance at about a foot (30 cm) from shidachi's face. Thrusts to the throat are just too dangerous to learn at close range. As the kata is learned and control is gained the distance can be closed. Hmm, poor phrasing, cut at the safe range, don't try to close the distance, that will happen naturally and gradually. Trying to jump ahead of your practice will end in tears.

The next kata is Hasso Hidari, start with the sword in hasso, above the right shoulder, and walk in three steps starting with the right foot to cut down on uchidachi's left neck. The footwork is identical to the first kata, step offline to your right, but this time uchidachi can cut to where shidachi's head would have been on the third step in. This is because shidachi is striking toward the left shoulder and if the swing is not controlled the result will simply be a bruise. However, this has never happened as beginners are far more cautious than that. Still, safety first, the cut is the same as per the kendo federation kesa cuts for now, down onto the trapezius muscle. Later the angle can be adjusted to the softer target (the neck just under the jaw line).

So this kata has a realistic combative distance with uchidachi cutting to the target. The timing of this kata and the next one remains the same as the timing of the first kata. The phrase is "stomp on the sword" from Musashi's writings and it means to strike the opponent just as he is finishing his (missed) strike so that he can't raise his sword again. As if you have stepped on his blade.

Number 3 is Hasso Migi. To do this, shidachi simply starts his three steps with the left foot instead of the right and cuts down from hasso onto uchidachi's right shoulder. Second secret (first is start with the left foot) is to get the right elbow out of the way of the cut down, we use the elbows out position for hasso and go through the raised, elbows closed hasso position of most modern groups. So get the elbows closed and raise the sword as uchidachi swings through the position your elbow was occupying.

Start walking on the left foot? What? Yes, it's much less complicated to remember than to reset the distance and use four steps or some other adjustment. These are simply the same kata on whichever foot you happen to be moving forward as uchidachi swings at you. Out in the back alleyway your attackers are not going to line up at a specific distance so you can count steps.

No you can't try running at each other right now, learn to walk three steps first. Count one two..... three.

The third technique (fourth kata) is Uke Nagashi Hidari. This is receive, deflect/flow, and cut to uchidachi's left side (head or left forearm, depending on the distance he jumps back).

Uchidachi attacks exactly as in Hasso, striking down for where shidachi's head would be, but in this case shidachi, starting with the left foot and coming from gedan, moves through a threatened thrust to the throat and then deeply into an uke nagashi position. The point is not to crash swords together, but to get deeply in on uchidachi's left side at your third step. This means you will drive your hips forward more than you did on Hasso. The secret here is to move the left foot in front of the right on your third step, taking your body offline so that uchidachi misses behind your back. If you are as close to uchidachi as you should be (well within his sword range) he must move back to continue fighting, when he does you strike down at the correct distance to finish the kata.

But what if he.... just do the kata and answer your own questions. Read Musashi, put in the left shoulder, or do tai atari (Autumn Monkey) covering him squarely so that he can't respond and must move back. "Become taller". Use your left elbow, do tsuka ate...

We finished with Uke Nagashi Migi, which is simply to start with the right foot and do the same technique on the other side.

With this kata we learn that our usual "stone hands" result in a lot of crashing and clashing of swords. We have to soften up our wrists and keep the sword alive (read Musashi!) if we want to avoid bent, broken or lost weapons. This point brought up a leftover question from the May seminar about the last cut of Sanpo Giri. How do we get the sword aligned from the second cut to the third without the tip being out of place. It's a 90 degree turn so how does it work? The answer is exactly these flexible wrists that are so necessary in Niten Ichiryu. You must move through an uke nagashi position and release the tension in the wrists so that the sword aligns itself. It will, we do not wrench the sword around, we allow the sword to move in its natural rhythm. All weapons have a natural rhythm which we must respect (Read Musashi).

Last evening we welcomed two English as a Second Language students from, of all places, Chile and the Pamurai was supervising during their practice. At the bar she outlined her thoughts on advanced teaching technique which is, in a nutshell, "shut the hell up". Why?

1. Sometimes they just want to practice.
2. Too many corrections all at once and they won't be able to do any of them.
3. Pick your fights, choose what you absolutely have to correct.

As the Pamurai said, watch them try it three times, if a mistake is there all three times, fix it, otherwise it will probably go away on its own.

She's learning, as we demonstrated the rest of the kata at the end of the class I found myself back on my heels and swinging at air a couple of times. I love it when a plan comes together... er when the seniors get close. Now I've got to buckle down and stay ahead, my training is starting up once more.

Ah Niten, nice to be home.

June 9, 2017

Niten Notes June 15

We didn't actually get to the kodachi seiho last evening. For one thing we had yet another crop of folks at a Niten class for the first time this year. I'm truly happy at the number of folks coming out this summer, if they all showed up at class at once the place would be full. We started with some nito kihon but even that didn't get too far. After going through the kamae we just lifted and let fall the bokuto. Up and down and step toward the mirror. We took a long time at that one because it was time to learn not to use the muscles, just gravity, a swing through the shoulders, and eventually the natural spring of the muscles. It was a lot of "let the sword swing you".

Then, according to the modified plan we were to quickly run through the tachi seiho but again, the fundamentals caught us up. The kata were done as kihon, just the shidachi side against "mirror sensei". From sasen we started connecting the sword to the hip. This is easy in this kata because you can touch your hip with your right hand and then launch the sword forward as you move off line. I was going to connect this kata with suigetsu of zen ken ren jodo but didn't remember. Quite a few of the Niten kata have cousins in the jo kata and the students were catching that all evening.

Once we got the idea of connecting the hip to the sword (hips and tips as I used to shout... a lot) we moved on to hidari hasso. From the hasso position, and especially from the position of furi kaburi we once again worked on lining up the muscles from the left foot to the left hand and pulled the sword into the target with the hips. They were getting it, they really were. At one point we were doing the Karate Kid drum technique, letting our arms flail around like strings as we turned our hips. Doing hidari hasso to a target 90 degrees left of front helped get the feel of pulling the sword through the left shoulder rather than shoving it around with the right hand.

The Pamurai called the class "epiphonic" at the bar. I was barely awake by then, having tired myself out with a hundred trips up and down the basement stairs but I woke up enough to be happy to hear that.

Hasso migi is a lot more difficult to see the hips, but if you drive the sword up it's long axis into furi kaburi (the instant you start cutting downward) you cross the left elbow to the centre of the chest and then as you step out with the left foot and rotate the hips the left elbow can be connected with the right hip. This hurts us old guys and our shoulders if we shove the sword upward. On the other hand, leaving it still, relative to the room, and stepping past it while relaxing the shoulders (keeping them relaxed) lets the muscles stretch without fighting their opposing muscles and all is peaceful in pain-town.

The two uke nagashi were used to really get into the hip turn driving the sword. Throwing it up in a relaxed curve threatens uchidachi, letting the monouchi come back onto the shoulder protects the ribs from clever uchidachi, and the left hand is in a great position to pull that sword around with the hip turn. Do we need to keep a firm and correct grip on the sword all the time? Maybe not.

The power the students were generating in the sword tips was a bit unsettling. They are starting to understand how powerful a relaxed swing can be, and Niten is certainly the place to work on that.

The rest of the kata went a little bit more conventionally, this foot here then there. Moji gamae was done with emphasis on the hip turn taking the body offline and slapping down on uchidachi's sword.

Hari tsuke was a great chance to once again connect the right hand to the right hip as we used that hip to slap away the attacking sword. I think we used the "Sei Do Kai wet towel attack" to illustrate the "plane of death". Once you understand that bokuto-width wall that is created when uchidachi commits to a swing, it's easier to keep all the body parts off that line.

In working on nagashi uchi we examined the step into the first uke nagashi movement and compared that to the shift of the forward right foot into the second uke nagashi movement. With the plane of death in mind it was easier to see that moving the back foot through meant squaring up the body on that second, close and fast, cut from uchidachi. Faster and safer to just shift the front (right) foot to the left and turn your back on all that bloodshed.

Bwaha, see what I did there?

Which brought us to tori buri and the famous "Sei Do Kai rope sword". We actually have a bunch of rope in the box that we haul out for exactly this kata. (Haul out the rope!) I think this kata might be where it was created. Anyway, the comment from the class was "we should have started with this" as they learned how to pull the rope-sword from the koshimi (waki gamae) position and let the arm stretch out toward the opponent at the right moment (let the sword swing you). You can't manhandle a rope, you have to find its rhythm and use a constant acceleration to get it to go where you want it to go. You coax a rope, you don't shove it around.

When we moved to kazu ki we had a discussion about how this is the other side of hari tsuke but had to be somewhat modified because the "wrong foot" was forward for the sword in the right hand. Try stepping to the left with the right foot forward while swinging the sword to the right.... it's a formula for falling over.

By this time it was beer 'o clock so we talked about ai sen uchi dome and amashi uchi but didn't do much with them. I'm sure the principles worked on, for the two hours last evening, can now be applied by the class.

On the way out the door I tried to recruit the girl on the front desk who said she had a lot of anger and probably shouldn't have a sword in her hand. I promised her that she could try and smack the seniors and they'd get out of the way.

Just a warning if a new girl shows up.

June 16, 2017

Niten Notes June 24-25 2017

The cottage now has a new closet/loft bed over the batteries in the dojo. Having finished that we had a couple practices just to warm up the floor for later in July when we do the Tombo Dojo Kage and Niten seminar.

We went over Nito Seiho, Sessa and Aikuchi (Shikko). I often think these last two sets, which are not practised much any more, should be done as kihon for Nito Seiho. They certainly feel like that's what they are. Still, Nito first, which is the Go Rin no Sho version of the school. Five kata, five opening kamae and that's it. Chudan, jodan, gedan, hidari and migi. Middle, upper, lower, left and right. What else is there?

Aw damnit, I just cracked that back tooth that was getting sensitive. Just what I need before heading into three seminars. Probably a liquid diet for a month. Yep, a chunk of what little of the tooth is left just came away. You want to see what's weak? Change something. By getting other teeth fixed it changes the bite patterns in your mouth and suddenly you're getting force into your old fillings from different angles. Apparently my two crowns on my big rabbit front teeth are wiggling because the majority of my bite is there. It's wearing down my lower front teeth and loosening the top. Likely because as the rest of the mouth is filled it is filed down and doesn't hit any more.

Want to see if your kata are strong? Change something and see what happens with the rest of it. If you start with the other foot or cut from a slightly different angle you may just see how fragile your understanding of the principle really is.

With that in mind, back to Nito.

1. **Chudan** is a covering kamae, you have a short sword in your left hand, a long sword in your right, they are spread in front of you so that uchidachi will have a very hard time getting at you so his only choice is to slap down your swords and then maybe a quick thrust. As he does this you perform kissaki gaeshi to avoid being hit and suddenly you are inside his sword. He naturally stops moving forward, in fact, moves back and now tries to protect his throat by striking down at your swords once more, at which point you strike at his wrist which makes him step back. Staying in gedan, he strikes for your head which is now open and we block upward with the shoto while taking his wrist from below with the long sword.

The finishing strike here is the first kata of Sessa (Sessa Uchidome), walk up in gedan, block his strike to your head with the shoto and take his side or wrist from below.

This is also the first movement of Gedan, the third kata in Nito Seiho.

While comparing these, we see a couple of things. First, yes pretty much everything you can think up to do with two swords is contained in the five Nito Seiho kata, so if you don't know Sessa and Aikuchi, it's no big loss, and second, we have kamae to start, we have kamae to pause in and finish with, but we also have kamae that we move through. Again, waving two swords around our body we need to know where they are, or they will hit each other or our own bodies.

Chudan starts in chudan. It then moves to gedan and then hidari waki gamae before the final cut. Three kamae in one short kata. You get a real feel for the transition from kamae to kamae with Sessa Uchidome, careful investigation sees it go from gedan to chudan to hidari waki gamae before the cut. Yet it is a single movement.

2. **Jodan** starts with the long sword in hasso and the short sword out front in chudan. "But sensei it says jodan yet the sword is in hasso". The sword is up, that's jodan, meaning upper. The specific place, up there, is what the kendo folks call hasso. Different arts, different labels.

Once again uchidachi tries to slap down the short sword before attacking because doing anything else will probably mean being blocked by the short sword and cut by the long sword. Shidachi does kissaki gaeshi with the short sword, comes down on top of the attacking blade and locks it in with the long sword. This is the juji dome, the "famous cross block" of Niten. Uchidachi slips out by stepping back and we're left in gedan, He strikes for our head and we do the cross block upward, then drive his sword down to our right, (yes kids, it's rather like jodo) bring the swords up again and finish with a cut to his head.

The final movement of this kata is the Aikuchi kata called Sekka no Uchi (spark). That one comes from a gedan approach and is the same as from when uchidachi slips out of the lower juji dome in Jodan. On the other hand, the dynamics of Sekka no Uchi are quite different than in Jodan, it's a different feeling to meet someone with a cross block as they are in full motion forward, as opposed to meeting them while they are moving back. This is the change I mentioned with bite patterns, you can lose a tooth in this kata. Decades ago when we were learning this kata I asked a fellow student to cut without telling him what I was going to do. He cut alright, straight through my cross block and got me a good one on the head. I was already moving on to the next step in the kata rather than making sure the first one was good.

Lessons learned through negative reinforcement.

3. **Gedan** starts, as I mentioned, with the shoto block and the cut from hidari waki gamae. It starts as Chudan (1) finishes. What does that mean? After all you've cut his wrist so why is he still attacking in the second part of the kata? Because kata. It's practice after the initial movement in any kata you do, any art.

Gedan continues as uchidachi moves back into hasso and shidachi moves to chudan. Uchidachi cuts down on the swords in chudan, shidachi does kissaki gaeshi, step to the left and cut horizontally into uchdachi's right shoulder while depressing his sword with the shoto.

Hey, another possible move from chudan, and so we practice it in the second Sessa kata, Sessa Uchibarai. In this case we start in gedan, move toward chudan, avoid to the left and cut horizontally. So we can now avoid to the left and cut, from both chudan and gedan. Musashi tells us that from one thing we can learn ten thousand things. Maybe from these kata we can learn all sorts of other things, from five kata we can learn 15, or 50, or maybe an infinite number of responses to attack.

If we could only get over worrying about which foot is at what angle... I better be careful, I'll end up doing kendo to practice responses to unspecified attacks.

4. **Hidari Waki Gamae**, the shoto is in front once more, the long sword is on the left side. Twice we block with the shoto and cut upward into uchidachi's wrist or side, we've done this before, but to finish the kata we sweep his sword out to our left, move the long sword over our right shoulder and cut downward. This sweep outward and cut down is seen in the third kata of Sessa called Ipyoshi Sotobarae where we do it from gedan rather than chudan. In that kata the long sword comes from gedan as well, moving through chudan rather than hidari wakigamae.

The sweep is also done to the inside (the right) in the fourth Sessa kata called Ipyoshi Uchibarae in exactly the same way (just sweep the other direction).

5. The last Nito Seiho kata is **Migi Waki Gamae**, the shoto is in chudan, as it often is, the tachi is on the right hip, tip aimed at uchidachi. As he tries to clear the shoto we move it out of the way and thrust straight along the line of the tachi toward uchidachi's throat. This is followed by a strike at his wrists as per Chudan and we end up in gedan. Uchidachi strikes at our head, we move back to avoid this, then use the shoto to sweep his sword to our left, but from a lowering position rather than pushing it high, so our tip is below our hand to do this. The tachi has not been lazy, it has moved up to strike uchidachi's head as we clear the attacking sword and step back into range.

The last kata of Sessa, called Ryusui Uchidome, is this last movement of Migu Waki Gamae. From gedan we move our swords to chudan, then open our arms to invite uchidachi to cut at your head (as we also do in the gedan position) and step back to avoid, sweep to the left and strike.

I won't go through the Sessa and Aikuchi sets today, I will probably come back to them at some time. The thing to remember is that the Nito Seiho kata are to be done exactly as you were taught them, as we accept that Musashi invented them and passed them along.

But, looking at other lines of Niten, we see that not everyone practices these as we do. Perhaps the line of sensei to student through 300 years will diverge, despite best intentions. Perhaps other kata will be developed, as Sessa and Aikuchi were, derived from the basic set of five. None of this is a reason to panic, it isn't the form of the kata that is important, it's the principles held within. As martial arts students we often say "I wish Musashi had been more clear in his Go Rin no Sho because then we'd know the original form of the kata". But I'd like to remind my students that Musashi did better than write down the shapes of the kata. He gave us quite clear descriptions of the principles held within those kata.

So nice, go read the book.

Even better, come to the seminars.

June 25, 2017

Grumpytown

Must be getting close to another seminar and a flight. I have been getting grumpy for the last few days, and less willing to interact with people. Well it will pass, as long as I don't tick off too many folks along the way.

Last evening I claimed there were three dojo rules but I'm dinged if I can remember them. I think it was something like 1. Pay attention. 2. Don't hurt anybody and 3. Learn stuff. I'm not sure about the first one because it's not so much a rule as a way of life. I could stamp it across my forehead and save a lot of wind. I say it in about three dozen different ways every class.

I was well pleased to hear the class making connections without me pointing them out, one new visitor said "it's funny how we make things more complicated than they really are". I was delighted when the Pamurai came up with an even better empty-handed version of Ai Sen than I had.

Speaking of whom, she came up with yet another reason why sensei ought to just shut up sometimes. It was in her class in Kitchener, just before mine in Guelph, and it was a classic, one of her students saying "why do we move our sword into a preparatory position on the second step, won't the opponent see what we're about to do". Bless them, they're so cute when they're "getting it". She demonstrated that, later on, after they've learned how to do the movement pattern, they could do it all in one go at the third step. She said it took at least four more repetitions of the kata just to get them back to where they were, after swords went all over the place and they grabbed blade edges and whatnot.

Beginners will try to jump over all the steps between where they are now and where you show them they are going, if you show them. So shut up and don't show them until they are ready.

Yes, we keep secrets, get over it.

We did some Nito kihon and then went through the kodachi seiho. Since I've talked about those recently I won't repeat the notes. As usual, chudan seemed to be a problem, I think because there's a confusion between moving back out of the way and backing up. I've heard it translated from Japanese sensei many times that when you move toward the rear you should still be going forward. To maybe help with this feeling, stay on your toes, keep your weight just slightly forward and keep your body posture the same through the movement. This way when you shove back on your right foot you land on the left with the heel up, the calf already stretched and flexed and can drive back in instantly.

If you come back from your head, ducking back, you move onto your heels and your partner can lazily point his sword at you. It's a sword, close doesn't count, move back just enough and then get inside his range quickly. In other words, don't duck, use your feet.

Uke nagashi we did once more on both feet, that is, arriving at uchidachi's cut to our head with both the right foot, as we usually do, and the left foot forward. The Japanese sword is "one sided", not symmetrical and the shoto even more so. To do this kata with either foot forward is a good demonstration of this principle. The kata looks radically different in execution, but actually changes very little, just the body position with relation to the centreline.

Nothing unusual in Moji Gamae and Hari Tsuke, but someone shouted out "isn't hari tsuke just the last part of moji gamae?" Yay! Another foot change as you meet the attack, but yes.

Nagashi uchi got better as people realized it was just the same as for Tachi Seiho, just uke nagashi on both sides.

Which gave us ten minutes of Ai Sen and the usual OMG moments followed by "maybe this can be done" and then "we really do make things harder than they need to be, don't we?".

Overall a good class. Hopefully the nito kihon we've been doing will carry over to next class as we move into that set and then I'm off to Calgary for the first part of the seminar.

We have a few beginners signed up for the seminar but I'd really like to see more. Don't be shy, the bokuto are very light, they don't hurt very much when you get bonked on the head.

Courage mon brave!

June 28, 2017

Back to front

Just three of us in Niten class last evening, that's more like the summer class size I'm used to. We did Nito Seiho, something I wrote about not long ago so I won't repeat any notes. It was mostly kihon-kata anyway since we were learning the movements for the first time.

I was sort of looking forward to seeing a larger class, to see how the beginners picked up the 2-sword kata after several classes of two-sword kihon and going through the long and short sword kata sets. My intent was to set up the movement patterns so that the students could just plug them in while learning the kata.

There was a time, back in the early '90s when we started our niten practice with the two sword set. It's the one that folks had heard of, and wanted to learn and after all, "it's only five kata". While that's true, and while each kata is maybe 3 moves long... (yep, 3, 3, 2, 2, 3 movement patterns) they involve moving the two swords independently of each other. The footwork is not the usual either, certainly not similar to kendo federation iai and jo, or the other koryu we practice. You know, thinking about it, the kata aren't un-symmetrical, the first two have a roughly symmetrical set of patterns, but the third, fourth and fifth are "a windmill with broken wings".

Still, I'm glad I learned the Nito set first, it taught me the importance of movement pattern over kata. Many of the movement skills in the Nito set repeat through the kata, and that taught me the importance of learning the kihon and "letting it go" during the kata. You can't think your way through a Nito kata, your conscious brain just doesn't hold two separate arm movements along with the foot and hip movements. What you need to do is learn each arm separately, put them together, learn that pattern, and then at the correct moment in the kata, fire that sequence at uchidachi. Without setting up the movement patterns you will never get to the point where you are thinking about distance, timing, the angle of your covering blades, the angle of the attacking blade, and all the other interesting stuff. You'll simply be impressed that you remembered all the various "flailing around bits".

When we went on to learn the tachi and kodachi sets they felt like kihon for the nito set. Having done the nito set it gave me a template for the strange and wonderful stances and kamae that we do. For instance, our sasen (a thrust to the throat) comes from the tachi side of Nito Chudan kamae. Imagine being in nito chudan, moving uchidachi's sword aside with the shoto and stepping forward to your right front to pierce uchidachi's throat. What stance would you be in? Drop your shoto and put your left hand on your hip and you are in the finishing position of Sasen.

Looking a bit further, the koshimi stance is the only one that works to put power in the tip when thrusting in that position. Without the Nito training before the tachi seiho I would instinctively have defaulted to the more usual thrust position from jo, tanjo, and iai. No problem with those of course, the movement patterns for them are well ground into the bones, but with Niten I have another pattern available for use should I ever fall through the Alternate Universe Interface and have to rely on my sword skills in the land of the Yik Yaks while rescuing Gwendolyn.

Oh go look it up.

Movement patterns must be worked into the bones, I hope this is clear by now, but another consideration is kamae. If Musashi said "there are no kamae" and that you should use "your normal walk", why so much fuss with having a correct kamae? Quite simply, a kamae is a balanced, powerful, sensible position from which to block, attack or recover. It is a position your body should take automatically as you move through a kata, it is the correct body position for the movement pattern you are performing. Without setting the kamae into your bones you are prone to going off-balance or sticking your face into the meat grinder.

You think using your normal walk is a good idea? Watch people walk. Watch how they stand around. Most people don't walk so much as fall from foot to foot.

So the plan was to check out how students did, learning from front to back (tachi seiho and kodachi seiho before nito seiho), and compare it to my experience learning it back to front.

Maybe next month.

June 30, 2017

New Teachers

One of my students recently suggested that since I didn't have a Menkyo Kaiden in Niten Ichiryu, we couldn't make any more teachers in that art. That will be news to my students who have gone on to teach Niten in other places.

The idea that you can't teach without a license is really strong in the budo world, but it's obviously not correct. That people worry about unlicensed people teaching budo is proof that one does not need a licence to teach for the obvious reason that it happens. Perhaps what people really mean is that you should not learn from an unlicensed teacher.

If that's true, and I don't disagree, stay away from me. I learned Niten Ichiryu from a man who had no Menkyo Kaiden that I knew about, and I have none either. I am studying Kage which has no licencing system. I learned Muso Jikiden Eishin Ryu from an unlicensed fellow and I teach it without licence. Same with.... oh hell, the only licences I have are from the Kendo Federation which allow me to teach Seitei iai and Seitei Jo.

I have no other licences. I had permission to teach, certainly, from all my teachers, but no paper on the wall. Did they have paper? I don't know, why would I ask? They were teaching, I wanted to learn, end of story.

I'm from farm country, I was driving a car before I had a menkyo kaiden to drive a car (look up what the phrase means to the Japanese). I know farm kids who were driving when they were 8 years old. The licence does not give you the ability to do anything at all, it simply allows you to do it within the rules of whoever is in charge of the rules.

Pretending to have a menkyo or some other licence to teach has never been part of my classes, in fact, I say often that I don't have any sort of paper at all, just in case anyone wants to head out the door. I suppose if I implied that I was a legitimate instructor it would put the student's minds at ease, but I really am not there to put their minds at ease am I? I'm there to teach what I know. I do that, and when I run out of interesting things to teach, well, there's the door.

There is no Canadian Government oversight of the martial arts that I do. Combat sports like boxing maybe. In Japan there actually is a sort of government oversight beyond boxing and other medically risky sports. This is not as strong as it once was before and during the war. There are some arts permitted as sports in schools and there are koryu organizations that provide a sort of "we recognize this group as a koryu" legitimacy, but there are many groups, even in Japan, which are of, shall we say, questionable provenance. They teach, they produce teachers.

Are all the "official" instructors in Japan good technicians and good teachers? Are all the questionable teachers bad?

Teachers teach, students learn. Whose job is it to see that the teachers are great and the students faithful, punctual, respectful and attentive? Well, there are some organizations out there who worry about that stuff, they licence teachers and vet students. There are rules, students who don't attend

classes, who don't pay their dues on time, are told to hit the road. Teachers who misbehave are shown the same laneway and their paper is revoked.

What does that mean? Not a lot, really, just that they are out of the organization. Being "hamon", being booted out of the dojo and stripped of a licence has nothing to do with ability to perform or teach budo.

New teachers will happen, no worries.

Students need to sort them out for themselves. A piece of paper on the wall doesn't mean the teacher is any good, just that he passed the minimum requirements.

Just like your dentist.

July 1, 2017

2017 Calgary Seminar, Day 1

The teacher types are all getting up and trying to get themselves in shape to start the first day of the seminar. Long long trip for Watkin sensei and Kajiya soke, coming from Japan and the Philippines and meeting in Korea for the trip over the ocean. A couple of delays but it all worked out eventually.

As for the Canadians, three minutes to get through security and a quiet flight, despite lots of babies on board. We all had to yell Yee Haw or no snacks because it's Stampede weekend.

Coffee, oatmeal and waiting for the rides to Banff and the dojo. Jodo and Iai until 4pm and then Niten and Kage. Watkin sensei said on Facebook that the students ought to strap up. I agree, it's going to be a long hard seminar so no sprints until tomorrow evening.

For the Karate folk in Toronto, we'll be doing Niten Bo this weekend so get yourself out to the seminar and spread the word.

I'll add to this if I get a chance, going to be a long day for me too.

July 5, 2017

The next few essays are not particularly full of information about the Niten Ichiryu, but they will give you an idea of just how how complicated a seminar can be. And how expensive. Yet, with "men of good will" they get done anyway.



2017 Calgary Seminar Day 2

If there was a theme for the 13 hour plus day yesterday, it was relax the shoulders and let the weapons do the work. "Let the sword swing you" was how I put it in the iaido and jodo classes (morning and afternoon). Kajiya sensei said that the uchidachi side of Saseen must be relaxed, to be powerful. Watkin sensei said that the choken is too heavy to muscle around. He demonstrated the speed of a strike by dropping a bokuto from over his head and said "none of you are moving that fast so just let the sword drop once it is raised. The problem with the choken is to stop it, not to swing it."

I hope the other participants noticed a certain similarity of approach as well. With three instructors and four different martial arts, the best thing is to concentrate on the stuff that is common to each. That will be the good stuff, the stuff that underlies all the rest.

The iai session went from 9am to 1:30pm with a break for pizza. The noonhour pizza in the kitchen is one of my enduring images of the martial arts, everyone sitting or standing around a table with stories or questions flying back and forth. The Seitei Iai kata were covered, we began with some stretching and warmup, then did a warmup run-through of the 12 kata with emphasis on leg strength and soft shoulders, not worrying about cutting at all, just going through the motions in a relaxed way so as to be able to survive the marathon day. After that warmup I revealed that this was in fact, the way they ought to train. Soft above, hard below, strong from the ground to the hips and then just letting the sword move the arms, stretch the elbows, that sort of thing. Later in the class we talked about posture, about imagining the spine, shoulders and heads to be a pile of bricks, don't lean over and spill them, but don't imagine they are some sort of rigid rod either. They stay lined up by their own weight, leave them alone and they'll sit there happily forever. Swing from the shoulders and counterbalance with your head and the top brick might just fall off.

We talked about grip, and how it affects the swing. We talked about not "moving the sword through the cut", not trying to control it, but following the natural weight and curve of the blade. We talked about pivot points through the cut, about lifting the left hand up along the centreline to grip the hilt rather than bringing it in from the side, about transferring the power from right to left hand, squaring up the hips precisely at furi kaburi, just as you are about to attack your opponent.

To be honest I can't go into everything we went over because I don't listen to half the stuff I say, I say it every seminar and every class. I hope the students took notes of what caught their attention.

Jodo was from 1:30 to 5 with another hour of iai for a challenger who couldn't make it during the day. Jodo was a bit slower than iai as we went through the first seven kata for the ikkyu through nidan challengers. We examined a different weapon during the kihon and kata but with the same emphasis on footwork, strong legs to connect the weapon to the ground, and soft hands to let the jo or the bokuto travel on the correct line to the target.

6pm to 10pm was Niten and Kage, for Niten we concentrated on Saseen and then did one of the Bo ai tachi kata. It was nice to just hide in the back of the class and concentrate on learning new stuff. Be smooth, be soft in the shoulders, use your hips. The bo was quite interesting to me, it's 1 1/8 inch by six

feet, so quite heavy. I was worried about my shoulders, but it turns out the bo is connected very strongly and physically to the hip, so it moved surprisingly quickly.

When we moved to Kage Ryu the room became even more crowded with the choken moving out, out, out. I spent the class taking photos rather than swinging but what I heard was interesting. Stretch forward, catch him early as he approaches. Let the weapon drop, use its momentum rather than trying to wrestle it around. Finish cutting further forward, once you've cut him there's no real reason to pull your hands deep into your hips.

Distancing was another theme of the day now that I think of it. Know where your opponent is, know where you are, each partner will move slightly differently, each kata will be a practice in how to adjust.

Another 13 plus hours today, better get this coffee into me.

July 6, 2017



2017 Calgary Seminar Day 3

Second verse, same as the first. 9am start, an hour for lunch, 1 to 4 or 5, an hour for supper, 6 to 10. This day we started the day with jodo, working on the line. The Calgary dojo is great for looking at the lines since it is a tile floor, so we took advantage and worked through the kihon with special emphasis on being aware of when we were on the line and when we were off. This was a good place to introduce once more, the idea of an "attack plane". Sometimes you may have moved your head out of the way but the rest of your body is still under the sword. Depending on the opponent's swing (and there is that distance thing again), he may catch your shoulder, your hip, probably not your leg if he was aiming at you instead of the guy behind you, but still, if your leg is on the attack plane you ought to be aware of that. Musashi said that if you miss your target, catch what you can.

Since there are both iai and jo gradings coming up in Vancouver we went through the kata that the challengers need, which were from one to seven for jo. It's been another 12 hours of seminar for me so I hope the students made notes, I can't remember what I said. Probably all nonsense anyway.

Iai in the afternoon was a continuation of the grading practice. We asked what we needed to work on and came up with "how to make power in the nuki tsuke, the difference in footwork between number 6 and 8 (morotezuki and ganmen ate) and, um, something else. Like I said, I hope you guys took your own notes. For nuki tsuke we broke the movement down into three or four parts, to push the tsuka away from the saya, to close the hand (ring then little finger) into the correct grip and finally the opening of the chest to pull the tip across the target. At this point we discussed the idea of power in a sword and then looked at the kissaki (tip) to see that it is raked back quite sharply, we don't need much power (strength) to cut with a razor held at that angle, especially if we are cutting the rather easily cut skin across the forehead, or the eyes. In other words, we are looking for tip speed and correct angle of the blade at nuki tsuke rather than power. We're not trying to take the top of the head off, but to blind the opponent with his own blood. So hasuji, creating a chisel shape rather than a wedge shape on the cut. The movement of the blade into the correct grip as you close your hand, the saya biki which happens when you close the lower part of the scapula when opening the chest.

Even when trying to lop off limbs, it's more important to get the tip speed up, have a correct grip, and have the proper hasuji than it is to try to recruit as many muscles in your body as you can. That's the old arch your back when doing bench presses, as if your legs are any help at all moving that bar. I think it was about here that I made Dennis put a welt on my shoulder just to show that speed and the weight of a bokuto will do plenty of damage. He managed to make a mark that was apparently there for the rest of the day. Honestly, the things we teacher types need to do to convince students.

I'm not sure if we talked about the line at this point, but it applies, the target is on the line, the tip must be up to speed when it hits the target on that line, so the closing of the hand is vital. The rule of thumb is that you need about 180 degrees to get the tip to speed, so some cuts (koryu) come from below the shoulder, some from horizontal and some may only need to come from jodan.

To talk about the footwork in 6 and 8 we need the line, so we worked on that awareness and talked about two rails and three rails and why, and I even did what teachers probably should not do, I talked about "the way we used to do it".

After a good mac and cheese at the Newcastle (my second in three days) we started the evening session with Niten Ichiryu. Kajiya soke took us through several of the tachi seiho (long sword kata) and the first four (three?) tachi ai bo (sword vs staff) kata. Curiously, he talked quite a bit about the line. Funny how that goes.

The sessions ended with another "sprint to the finish" with Watkin sensei's Kage class. If you've never seen this art you may wonder why we would end with it. The answer is quite simple, if you started with it you'd never last the day.

A fourth meal followed classes and it was late to bed, early to rise as we ended up with front row seats to the Calgary Stampede Parade. 600 horses pooping ten feet in front of us was quite the olfactory experience. Beautiful sunny weather that wasn't too hot for comfort, and a great Stampede Breakfast to anchor us in our seats. We were watching from the start of the route so as the parade ended we had plenty of time to get to the flight before the big crowds hit the C-train.

Many, many thanks to the Calgary crew for their kindness, amazing organization and hospitality. The Calgary seminars are not one dojo or even one organization, but a group of swordsmen from many different arts, eastern and western, who come together to allow these events to happen. This is a true community of interest that has built around Niten Ichiryu and Kage Ryu. Watkin sensei has been key to making this happen and I hope it continues for many years to come. It was Watkin sensei who wished to introduce Kajiya soke to this wider community of interest and I'm sure everyone appreciated the chance to "make connections".

July 10, 2017

2017 Guelph Seminar July 8-9

Four days in Calgary, and an uneventful flight to Kitchener where we climbed down a ladder at the back of the jet, got the baggage and were outside the terminal before our ride even got to the airport (we were ten minutes early on landing). I love KW International. Off to the local for dinner and early to bed to prepare for two days of seminar in the brand spanking new Athletics addition. This place is so big it took me a few minutes to realize the Canada Cup wrestling tournament was happening.

The seminar was all Niten Ichiryu, led by Kajiya Soke and assisted by Watkin sensei. We were about half and half Seidokai students from Ottawa, Kitchener and Guelph, and from Niten Kai in Quebec City, Kingston and Toronto.

While many of our SDK students have practiced with Imai soke, Iwami soke and Watkin sensei, this was our first meeting with Kajiya soke and I hope our folks got as much out of the practice as I did. Mostly I hope they got a "shock to the system". I'm not sure if they understand just how much value can be gained by being forced to look at your school from a different angle. The kata are generally the same, the names are the same, but the bits and pieces are different. This makes for some uncomfortable practice, and in many cases it leads to immobility as you struggle to remember this or that detail.

Habits don't work any more.

It happens to me, which is why I find this practice so incredibly valuable. To be plain and clear, if you can't handle the changes in a kata (the disruption of habits) how are you going to handle a situation where the kata is "broken" out in the real world. Change happens, an enemy in the back alleyway isn't going to do your kata. He just isn't.

Some people would say that there is only one way to practice an art, that you ought to stay current with "the way it is done today" and I would agree with that. Some would say that you should "practice the way you were taught", and I agree with that as well. Because I agree with both of these, my students are sometimes confused, and I wholeheartedly, 100% agree with that. I want them confused, off balance, thinking about what they are being taught by two or three or four different people.

I want them to understand that there is more than one way to do a thing. To know that and accept that, is to be uncomfortable. Some people may not want to see change, this resistance to change gets bigger as you get older, trust me on this, I do not want to change, I want to sit in the same cafe window every morning, I do not want to travel and see new things, I do not want to do Niten Ichiryu in any other way than the way my teacher taught it to me.

But that is not good for me. I want to remain in touch with the school, I want to be connected to the headmasters that taught my teacher and I want to remain connected to the headmasters who followed. If I practice the way my sensei taught me, and I ignore what has come after, I am disconnecting myself from the line. If I practice the current way, and ignore what my teacher taught me, I disrespect my teacher. I respect my sensei and I respect the seito, the direct line. This puts me and my students somewhat to one side of the system, by definition.

A stream that enters the river somewhat before it reaches the delta. Not part of the main river but not separate either.

If my practice looks "three generations ago" that may be a problem for others, but that's not my problem. It's usually not a problem for the current powers that be. There are always, in every school, those who were taught by an earlier generation, and they can either support the current generation, or leave. There is usually no problem at the top with either choice. I have heard of very few headmasters who straight out said "my way or the highway", but if such a thing happens, well one can't unlearn what one knows. This is the "split" that many agonize over.

Hmm, I have thought and written about this before and I'm getting off topic. My point is that I am introducing my students to the mainline. They will be taught by me in the way I learned, but when I'm gone, they may perhaps still be connected to the Ryu. Some of my students are young, and not "from around here" any more, so they ought to consider following the current style of practice rather than my old fashioned stuff. I encourage this because I have no interest in fighting it. The ryu is the ryu whether I'm in it or gone.

Rivers change course but the steams seldom become disconnected.

For my personal students, I expect them to understand the current style. I expect them to benefit from the shock and learn new lessons, gain new insights from seeing the "same old kata" from a new angle.

As to the specifics of the seminar, we repeated what was done in Calgary, went over another couple of tachi kata, and another couple of bo kata. Come Tuesday while we are in Niagara Falls I suspect the students will be discussing what lessons they learned... at least they better be.

July 10, 2017

Soooo tired

Last practice of Kajiya soke's visit to Canada was held in Toronto two days ago. I haven't had a chance to sit down since. The evening started with my car breaking a strut and some scrambling to get us off a bit slowly, then traffic, but we got there about half an hour late. I don't think anyone noticed by the end of the three hour class, sensei went a bit overtime so we could finish both the tachi seiho and the first six bo kata.

Many thanks to Toronto Niten Kai and Jason Nip sensei for hosting us at their dojo and joining us in Guelph. It turns out fewer of our guys are still active with their practice than I thought and, to be perfectly mercenary, the financial support was well appreciated.

Yesterday was Niagara Falls, a wine tour and up the funicular but unfortunately no boat ride, it was closed for an emergency of some kind. Still, an enjoyable day in the sun. We got back to Guelph in time to drop the sensei off to pack while Dennis and I got to class where I looked in the mirror and saw some sort of humpbacked orc holding a bo. I apologized to Soke for my horrible posture at a late night supper afterward.

Today I'm grabbing a coffee and heading home quick for the trip to the airport where Soke will fly out at 1pm. Watkin sensei will be around until next weekend and the third session of seminar at Tombo Dojo.

I feel a nap coming on this afternoon if I don't get to the shop fast enough.

July 12, 2017

Seminar Musings

Kajiya soke should be back home in Japan or close to it by now, Watkin sensei is having a sleep-in at my house and I'm sitting in the window of the cafe watching the rain come down. Tonight we have a class and we'll put Watkin sensei to work, then tomorrow it's up to the cabin for the main part of the Kage Ryu seminar. This has been quite the month so far.

For those who wonder what it would be like to organize a seminar with international visitors, I would say its sort of like when the kids were babies. A massive loss of sleep but you have to push through and keep alert somehow. Snatching what small naps you can is essential, like when someone else is driving, just drop off fast and stay down until someone shakes you. I had a pretty good nap while the sensei and Dennis were doing the wine tour, and another one while they were at Niagara and that got me through the rest of the day, although I was pretty grumpy-snappy at that evening's review class.

By the way students-o-mine, you're not likely to get Niten Bo notes out of me any time soon so do your own and we'll coordinate later. I need to focus on Kage photos for the next four days.

Seminar invitation and financing is always a concern to those who wish to do these things so here are some items for your consideration.

Invitations: This depends on your organization of course, some have strict rules about who can talk to whom but for the most part I've found that teachers are pretty approachable. The more senior the rank in an art, the more relaxed. Personal connections trump bureaucracy most of the time, by the way. Gatekeepers abound everywhere but in my experience, they come and go.

That doesn't mean that you get to phone up the top guy in some art you want to practice and he'll come bounding to your seminar. That doesn't work either. The "introduction" we all keep talking about in the koryu is a real thing, but it isn't of the "my student would like to study with you" sort of formal letter, it's more like "oh, you know fred and he vouches for you, fine, I know fred and he's a good guy, I'll trust you". Now fred is on the hook for you so if you value fred you won't screw up right?

But if you're serious about a seminar, don't hesitate to ask. Also don't organize from the wrong direction. You do not ask your students when they are available and then expect someone to fly across the ocean to your schedule. You ask the visiting instructor when he has time and work from there. Your students had better be willing to rearrange their schedules accordingly. If they can't be bothered to switch that dental appointment, reconsider doing the seminar. Seriously, if they won't put themselves out to get in front of a senior instructor, they don't need one yet, carry on with your classes for another year and ask again.

Never forget that these teachers often have jobs and have very little time to go tripping around. Thus the introduction (others are asking for their limited time too) and your willingness to accommodate to their timetables. Ask early, like a year in advance.

Planning is a different matter. In my experience most dojo have someone who takes care of the details. Seminar travel will be no different than renting the dojo and keeping track of who's paid the dues. You will probably work with this person rather than with your visitor so be nice, even if you think you're

"too important to talk to a flunky". Yes, sometimes the assistant becomes more of a gatekeeper than a help, but again, assistants come and go. Training in the arts is a long-term game and an assistant that ticks you off will likely tick off the rest of their dojo eventually.

Money. I've saved the most important for last. To be blunt, if you're not willing to spend a lot of money with little chance of getting it back, don't even think about organizing a seminar, instead convince someone else to do it. I've been doing seminars for 27 years and the club bank account stands right now at about \$2000. The arts I practice are low numbers, this one currently going on is tiny. I did the books yesterday and as of right now the total cost is as close to \$10,000 as makes no difference. The tickets were half of that and income from seminar fees has not quite paid for those tickets. That means the seminar is over \$5000 in the red.

Don't run away, if I were to go to Japan and the Philippines for two or three weeks to study with our visitors I could easily spend that \$5000, so I don't consider this a loss at all. When you consider that 20 people in Calgary, 20 in Guelph and another 10 beginners or so in Toronto (and maybe a few more yet this weekend at Red Bay) got some training as well, I consider this event a raging success. Also connections, many of those personal connections I talked about earlier were made. The two sensei have now seen 40 or so students of their arts and have a feeling for the interest in Canada. This is much different than seeing one or two visiting students in Japan or the Philippines.

Still not convinced that doing a seminar is a good idea? Scared of that financial loss? A lot of seminars can run at break even or perhaps a profit if they are done in a different way. For instance, a single instructor willing to do a home stay rather than several instructors in hotels will cut hundreds or even thousands of dollars from the costs. If you do an art that has many more students, like perhaps aikido, you will fill your room. Some instructors are willing, or even want to come for a short time, no touring around. More costs saved.

Remember that time off work can be hard. If a sensei is self-employed, or a professional with a dojo of their own, they will incur expenses coming over to teach you, maybe they will be pleased with a per diem and back soonest rather than tours and gifts. Depending on the sensei, the per diem may work out hundreds of dollars less than extra hotel nights and meals/gas/etc. on the tourist trips.

Still, if you've never done a seminar, those expenses that come in from your students at the end of the day can be quite a shock. Beer, beef and biscuits can add up. Be prepared to look at the long game, consider what "income" you gained from the seminar beside the fees. Consider the connections, the instruction you and others gained. Depending on the crowd, there may even be some good-will amongst the senior students. Beginners will usually be looking at the value for seminar fee they got, of course, so don't expect much good will there.

Well, OK maybe I should reverse that and say that those who only look at "value for money" when attending a seminar should be defined as beginners who have yet to understand the value of practising the arts. Or the value of attending a seminar to allow the seminar to happen so that their sensei can get some training of his own. Yes, that's a thing so don't ask your sensei questions while he's beside you at the seminar. Let him train.

Let's see, if 50 more people at \$95 were to attend this weekend's seminar at my cottage we would..... nope, not likely to happen. Still, would be a lovely problem to have, where to put everyone for meals and bed. Since we train outside that would work, or waves, or ...

Oh well. Don't borrow trouble. If you think too much about the problems you will never get out of your chair.

Time for me to get out of mine.

July 13, 2017



Without adaptation July 19, 2017

Written on Musashi's bokuto is the phrase "without adaptation". This means you pass along his teachings without addition or deletion, as you were taught them. No problem there, if you do his school you do it as he taught it, if you don't do it as he taught it, you aren't doing the school.

But what is "it" that you should not change? Is it the kata themselves or the principles, the methods of teaching, the shape of the bokuto? Is it the method of teaching the kata, or the methods of meditation, the worship of specific gods?

It's a good question, we usually assume it's the kata, not unreasonable, we start with the kata and work through them to the rest of the things that make us efficient fighting units, or enlightened beings, depending on what we are aiming at. Which of course assumes we know what Musashi was aiming at.

The kicker is that Musashi didn't teach only one thing in only one way. At the beginning of his life he was interested in being a good fighter in the wars that were still happening. His advice at one time was to be a good duellist, to come to the attention of a great lord and secure a position on that reputation. Later, as he says in the Go Rin no Sho, he realized that being a good fighter can be a matter of luck, or poor swordsmanship from the other guy. He decided the best thing to learn was Hyoho, the principles, rather than the tricks that win you fights.

As for those tricks, the kata if you will, what about those? Musashi taught many kata when he was young. He left behind more than one school, if you read the histories you hear of the Enmei Ryu, the Nito Ichiryu (and other variations that carried on for centuries) before you finally arrive at the Go Rin no Sho and the five (5) kata of Niten Ichiryu.

Niten Ichiryu as practiced in my line, the Santo Ha Hyoho Niten Ichiryu has sets of 12, 7 and 5 sword vs sword, (plus two more of 5), plus 13 bo vs sword plus 7 bo vs bo plus maybe some jutte plus..... I dunno. Where is all this "without adaptation" here? I mean from five we get dozens? How? This I have wondered about for a while, apparently.

http://ejmas.com/pt/ptart_taylor_0802

In that article (Why Koryu? Does rare really mean better) I referred to rumours that the art has changed from what I learned. It turns out it had, as I found when I practised with Imai soke and then Iwami soke. This change, I talked about in a couple of articles in PT but addressed specifically in

http://ejmas.com/pt/2009pt/ptart_taylor-3_0909.html "Changes in Koryu: A case study from Hyoho Niten Ichiryu"

In that article I suggest that changes happened in the school in a very deliberate way for a specific reason. This is just conjecture on my part, they may have happened quite slowly without anyone noticing. Regardless, changes happened and they were made by Imai soke. Is this "without adaptation"?

I say it is. I have practised with three soke of the school now and their verbal instructions are not different from each other, and not different from my teacher's (Haruna Matsuo) instructions to me. I

have had four examples from as many generations and I have seen four different ways of doing the kata, some radical and some subtle but all different. How can this be "without adaptation"?

I happened to be re-reading Karl Friday's "Legacies of the sword" last evening and found this passage on Page 143:

"Moreover, as in the case of kata, ryuha tend to cloak the reality of any such change in a mythos of uncompromised bequeathal extending back to the founder, making it virtually impossible to assess the degree to which received interpretations of texts accurately reflect those intended by the authors. At the same time, insofar as ryuha like the Kashima-Shinryu look upon their task as the preservation of a flame rather than a vessel, unease over possible discrepancies between current and original meanings is largely misplaced. For as the schools themselves view it, constancy to the spirit of the founder's (and subsequent masters') teachings is far more material than maintenance of the form."

Academics love quoting others who support their viewpoint and I'm an academic so listen to Dr. Friday! He is talking of the problem for historians in understanding what certain, deliberately obscure, writings actually mean, and he compares this with the difficulty of knowing whether the kata have been transmitted accurately. His suggestion is that it doesn't matter, as long as the principles have been transmitted accurately. The task is "the preservation of a flame rather than a vessel". In other words, it's not about the kata, the shape, it's about the meaning within the kata. As Colin Watkin would perhaps say, it's about the waza, not the kata.

We do, now, have proof that kata change. We have two or three generations of video to compare, and it is interesting to watch the faces of beginners who look at a video of their teacher's teacher's teacher doing kata that looks "wrong" to them.

Imai soke wasn't particularly concerned that we were "doing it the old way" when we demonstrated the school for him the first time we met. He taught us the "new way" and we did the kata the way he taught. We did it because that's the way he was teaching, that was the vessel being used. Iwami soke taught in a different way, Kajiya soke teaches in a different way.

The differences may not even be acknowledged by those teaching them. If I asked Kajiya soke why he does things the way he does them he would probably reply "that's how I was taught them". Yet to my eyes, the details of his practice are different from what I remember of Iwami soke's style, and from Imai soke's style. I didn't ask because I don't care. I would be concerned if one teacher looked identical to another, to tell you the truth, I would wonder how much that teacher actually understood the school as opposed to simply copying what he had been taught without understanding what was happening.

We are not identical, one person to another, and it would be unrealistic to expect our budo to be identical.

An image from Watkin sensei that was so nice I told him I was stealing it: Think of a tree. On the tree are branches and on the branches are leaves. I challenge you to find a tree with identical branches and identical leaves. Yet it is all the same tree. The leaves are the students, the branches are instructors, the trunk is the school. The roots are Musashi.

Now, what happens to the leaves should a branch saw itself off?

Physiological defaults

Fighting movements seem to default to certain positions. I speak of kamae, if you will, that are easily found, remembered and used. These defaults are easily taught, easily remembered and so really ought to be the positions used.

For example, let's look at a one handed thrust as one would find in suigetsu of the Zen Ken Ren jo, or the same technique of Tanjo, or the one handed thrust of Ganmen Ate of Zen Ken Ren iai, or Sasen of Niten Ichiryu.

All these share a common method of thrusting, easiest seen in jodo where the jo is left in contact with the hip. The weapon (jo, tanjo or sword) is gripped the same in all these schools, it is lined up (or in contact with) the right hip as the right hand delivers the tip to the solar plexus or, in the case of Niten Ichiryu, the neck.

Why are they all the same, the thrust with the western foil is different, it is most often lined up with the shoulder rather than the waist. To answer this first, the foil is a very thin weapon, designed to thrust, it enters the body easily, like a pin, and so requires no particular force to penetrate. It's most effective use is at the end of a lunge, as far away from the swordsman as possible. Reach counts in this case (length matters). The Japanese sword is a slashing blade with a cutting tip, as such, it is not especially good at tip penetration and so needs some strength behind it. The sticks of course would be expected to stop at the skin and so need even more power behind them to inflict damage.

What is the strength position? Try it out, put the point of a bokuto onto a wall and press through the tip. I suspect that you will find that with the Japanese grip the strongest position is off the hip, with the shoulder dropped (the front of the armpit tightened/closed). In this way you can "get your hip into it", you can drive from your back foot through the hip into the point of the sword without breaking your own wrist and without having the opposing force come back through your shoulder, over your hip, unbalancing you.

Do you see it?

So why the strange, at the shoulder position, we use in our style of Niten? This puts the hand much higher, about nipple height. In fact, the position looks a great deal like the finish of the nuki tsuke in Muso Jikiden Eishin Ryu or Muso Shinden Ryu iai. As you might guess, the edge faces the right, just the same as in nuki tsuke.

Try it, it doesn't work, you rock back on your heels if you encounter resistance (as from a wall, or a body). It is not an obvious position. Yet it does work, provided you put the body into the correct alignment. The hand must be down at about armpit height, not at the shoulder. The front of the armpit should not be tightened, instead the lower part of the scapula, as in Nuki Tsuke. The body must be in a stance called "koshimi", the feet about 90 degrees or a bit less to each other, the front foot aimed at the target. The back knee is directly over the back toes, the front shin is vertical. With this position the force from the tip can be connected to the ground at the back (left) toes through a spiral. This is anything but obvious, anything but a "default position". This is probably why one doesn't see it elsewhere. It takes about three years to learn.

Incidentally, lower the sword to line up with the hip while in this posture and you will find yourself back on your heels. Turn the feet a bit more parallel to each other and all is good again.

To return to the default position, and in the case of the swords, the edge is lined up facing the right, not parallel to the floor. This may not be an obvious position to most modern budoka, but a look at some of the old texts can reveal that it also, may be the default/efficient position. Simply put, when someone is stabbed, they tend to turn away. If your blade is edge to the side, it cuts its way out. If your blade is edge downward you must expect the sword to be wrenched in your hand(s).

Simpler than this, poke the wall again. Turn your edge down, not so bad but not as strong, turn it to the left... did you just collapse your armpit so that your elbow made contact with your side?

You have done the two movements of sasen, the thrust with the edge to the right, then a turn of the edge inward as uchidachi shifts back. This shift, as Kajiya soke explained, is more toward a two-handed chudan with the hips facing the left, the sword relaxes toward the body, the elbow closes toward the hips for stability should the left hand not be there to support it.

A rather long example, one that brought on the discussion during class last week. Being good students they debated my claims and I mentioned that with 30 years of "doing it wrong" I can extend power through some pretty strange angles but, and this is critical, there is a price to be paid for doing so. This is how one rips up one's shoulders while doing Aikido or similar arts. These postures are not "default", they are not efficient, they often rely on the strength of ligaments to hold and guide the lines of force. They are possible, but not advisable. It is better to use the muscles than the ligaments. Some positions are easier and more obvious than others, these are the defaults. Some can seem like a poor choice but with proper agreement of muscle and bone, can be learned and can be as strong as the default.

The moral of the story is not to dismiss another art's strange postures out of hand. With understanding they may make sense. To lunge with the heavy, poorly penetrating Japanese sword may seem absurd, but one should feel the sense of it with a foil in hand. I once puzzled over the strange skipping movements of a fellow grad student who demonstrated them in a kata for me, until I felt the power of his hip on my thigh, foot behind my heel and fist under my chin at which point I flew backward because I had thrown a punch that would have floored him.... had it connected. Instead "my punch connected me".

Some of my lessons have been expensively earned.

July 24, 2017

Niten Notes

Yesterday we had a good long session of Nito Seiho, the two sword set of Niten Ichiryu. We returned to our roots and as we were moving through the kata one of the folks stated that we really need to just go through these things and "suck out the marrow". Indeed.

We started with etiquette (you know that budo starts and ends with etiquette right?) and moved to the five kamae which, if you read Musashi, are not kamae. We then went through some breathing exercises and kihon that let us gradually split the movements of our right and left hands apart so that we could do the kata.

In our dojo we put a very large emphasis on kissaki gaeshi, (turning the tip) which isn't there in many other niten dojo and in no other sword arts that we practice, so we spent quite a long time on various kihon that trained those shoulders and hands to relax. The grip was noticed, and we talked quite a bit about how the grip will shift at the front while remaining stable at the back, that is, as Musashi said, the little and ring fingers will snug the sword into the base of the little finger but the thumb, index and middle fingers will shift depending on whether we are in tome te or kiri te, (stopping or cutting hand position), whether we are cutting upward or downward in kissaki gaeshi.

In the Go Rin no Sho there are five kata and that's it. They are named for the five kamae (that aren't kamae). We started with Chudan, the first kamae, the captain from which all the other kamae follow, like soldiers in a squad.

The first level of practice was moving from kamae to kamae, from chudan to hidari waki gamae to kiri age (cutting up). Along the way we compared the various movements to other kata in Niten and in other arts that we practise. So the kiri age was compared to kissaki gaeshi and to kesa giri from zen ken ren iai. A difference between seitei and niten kiri age is the position of the hip, we cut from koshimi, a rather deep stance (not longer than seitei but dropped, with the back knee over the back toes) The difference in hip position demands a different use of the muscles of the back and hips so we worked with that to see what it could teach us.

Again, an observation was made, or perhaps a question, that we could target the side rather than the wrist. Absolutely, it's a matter of distance, if you're close you take waki bara, if you're further away it's kote. Musashi talked about the line of the cut. Make sure it's rich in targets, cut whatever is along that line, depending on your maai. This was a second level of practice that happens when you partner up.

We talked about the difference between kata (chapters in a textbook) and being able to use the lessons of the kata in the messy "real world". This led to a consideration of different styles of doing our kata within our various groups. Are they different? Of course not, it's style, it's a difference in stance, it's turning the sword to cut upward rather than lift it directly with the edge remaining downward. This is where I start talking about functional vs positional approaches to budo. I'm a functional guy, it needs to work so figure out what adjustment of what kamae you need to transfer power from floor to sword. The positional approach says that the shape of the kamae is important. Which is correct? The answer is yes. Kiri age is kiri age, the position of your hips matters but there is more than just one position of the hip

that will work. Simple as that, why not know both, or all six? My base is the one I was taught as a beginner, but that doesn't prevent me from understanding other ways.

For the rest of the kata we went solo through the nito side to move from kamae to kamae, but we took note of what our partner would have been doing. The observation came that it's a lot easier to understand our movements when we can imagine what our partner is doing. Yay, kasso teki from iaido explained.

Musashi only gave us five kata in the Go Rin no Sho but those are plenty. It's not that the tachi and kodachi seiho fall out of these, or that they are needed to do the nito seiho. Musashi had no okuden, he said so. So where do these tachi and kodachi seiho come from?

They could have been carried through by Musashi's students from earlier practice. They may have been there in Musashi's school when he wrote the Go Rin no Sho, just not mentioned. They may have been added by the next couple of headmasters. I don't know, but it doesn't really matter. What matters, according to the founder himself, is that you learn hyoho, you learn the strategy and the principles.

The shapes of the kata are the first step.

Nov 27, 2017



Repeat as needed

Or, always. I mentioned that at a recent class and it was brought back to me yesterday as we were teaching Niten kodachi to five new folks.

As I may have mentioned before, Niten kata are pretty simple, you walk three steps to your partner and stick him in the throat. It's hard not to get them right by the second repetition. Can we say we've learned them if we can put the feet in the right place and swing the swords in the right way so that it ends up looking like it's supposed to look?

Yes, we can say we have learned the kata, we have. We can do it without help, so now we know that kata and we can move along to the next one.

Or not. We could choose to stay with the kata we just learned and see what it can learn from us. The kata gets smarter and smarter the more we practice, it gets more and more difficult, somehow. Each time we practice the kata we practice a brand new kata, there is never the boredom of doing the same thing over and over. If we do Sasei four times we have actually done four different kata.

How is this? The kata is just walk up and stab him in the throat isn't it? Well, yes it is, good for you for remembering. But every time you do it you and your partner are in a slightly different position, you have done the kata at a slightly different timing. Sometimes the kata is "too far", sometimes it's "too soon". Sometimes, when the kata learns enough, it gets a bit "too scary". It always learns, it always changes, it challenges you every time, if you are paying attention.

No attention, no learning, we know this already.

The other way the kata learns is by comments from sensei. He may say "go straight through" or "wait a moment before cutting and see what happens", or "why are you cutting where there is nobody to cut?" Each comment teaches the kata a bit more, each one changes it so that new, more complex, kata constantly appear.

Meanwhile, sensei is seeing something else altogether, he's seeing connections, he's seeing why Musashi eventually cut his school back to five kata. Who needs more than center, up, down, left and right? The rest of it is "kill him".

Last evening I noticed, for the very first time, after doing this stuff for the last 25 plus years, just how much of a wrist twist is done in the single sword kata. I mean it's the cornerstone of the way I practice with two swords, but who knew how much of it was in the tachi and kodachi? Well, probably most people, I tend to be a bit slow at this stuff.

All I know is that every time I practice I learn something new. Every time.

Repeat as needed? So far for me, it's needed.

Jan 13, 2018

Grappling at a distance

One of the first things that a swordsman needs to understand is that to another swordsman, the sword is not scary. Sword schools train sword to sword, having a sword in your face becomes familiar, un-frightening, by design. Intimidation by waving a sword around isn't going to work.

What does work? Someone who can control the sword, and someone who can use their body correctly. A lot of the past weekend seminar was devoted to body position, body control. The Friday and Saturday morning Jo sessions were mostly devoted to Chudan if I remember correctly (and I may not, the brain hasn't worked well the last week or two). Just going through the movements and memorizing. Niten Ichiryu started Saturday afternoon and we spent the next four or five classes on Tachi seiho, the first set of 12 kata.

In the particular style of Niten I was taught, a rather old fashioned style, a movement called kissaki gaeshi is very important. This we started with, a step forward and a thrust from gedan (a one handed grip of the sword down by the right side, tip in front of right knee) to the throat. Step and thrust, step back, step and thrust, step back. The sword was rotated 90 degrees so that the thrust hit the throat with the edge to the side. Tip turns/rotates, "kissaki gaeshi".

You'd think this would be a simple thing but we managed to spend most of the class on this movement. The things that were said included "don't wind up", "don't lift it up first, that's winding up" "swing from the hip" "drive the sword forward with your right hip but don't leave your left hip back", "keep your body square to the front through the step from feet together to feet together but drive the sword with your right hip", "the thrust is timed to arrive just as the right foot comes forward", "don't shove your arm out and step in, don't step in and shove your arm out".

This body and sword connection is not easy to see if you think that waving a sword around is useful in a fight. Yes the sword is very sharp, yes it will cut if dropped from your hand and it hits flesh. I'm not talking mechanics, I'm talking seme. I'm talking.... too much. Get a partner and stand beside each other, one holds the right hand of the other, now don't let them swing their arm forward. Swing your arm forward, can you do it? No? So pretend you have your sword in your hand, proper grip and that the tip is at your knee. Now drive your arm forward, down the curve of the sword, what happens to your little finger side of your arm, it stretches, index finger points forward and you move in coordination with your left foot driving. In fact, you've connected, through movement, your index finger to your left foot and you are dragging your partner forward by driving him with that left foot, not by the movement of your right shoulder.

Still can't move your partner? Maybe he's put two hands on your hand? Lock your right wrist to your right hip, press it in there, close your armpit, now take his balance (start him moving) by your right hip, when he is moving you can move your arm forward. This is what it feels like to launch your sword from your hip.

Now do that very same grappling sort of move at a distance, so that you end up driving the tip of the sword toward your partner. Can he feel himself being pushed back? Can he feel that you are driving him along with you once more while he's hanging onto your wrist? Good, that's a form of seme, being

in a powerful, moving kamae directed at your opponent. He feels your power, your connection with the floor, as well as your attention. Just showing a samurai face at someone isn't intimidating if they have scary masks on their wall to practice looking at. Just waving a sword at them isn't intimidating if they are used to having swords waved in their face. Seeing someone drive a sword forward with their back foot is intimidating.

The thrust was, of course, Sasei, the first kata of the school. We practised it directly forward, not to the side. The attitude of Niten Ichiryu, as far as I'm concerned, is "walk up and kill him" not finesse him to death and not sutemi, there is no sense of walk up and kill him while he is killing you. If you think you are going to be killed as you kill him you have accepted his strike, simple as that. You must be arrogant, you must say, as Trev told Nutt "come on if you think you're man enough". You must not care, no that's the wrong word, you must not think about being struck, just move in and assume something will happen and you will strike him down. Mushin doesn't need to be anything more than this, just stop your damned thinking and go kill him. Just walk up and kill him.

You can't adapt if you're frozen, fushin is not just for minds, you can freeze yourself physically by "being ready" by straining to "explode forward". Go ahead, it's not a bad way to train when you're just beginning, but you're a drawn bow. Hold it too long and you can't change your aim, and your present aim starts to waver. Muscles fatigue, you're fighting yourself, you've welded yourself to the position. You've got to be very, very good to do that and then release one set of muscles to let the other set explode. Muscles get confused, both sets may release at once, some may release and others not and now you're wobbling off in all directions.

Worst of all, your opponent can see you lock up ready to explode. He just waits until you collapse and then cuts you down. No, you need to move from the void, you need to simply be in position and move when you need to move. Just walk up and kill him. Don't think about it, don't prepare for some specific cut or another, don't overextend, overbalance or overact. This stuff is simple, stick the tip in his throat. Or don't, according to what happens when you arrive in striking distance. Musashi told us never to forget the goal, to cut your opponent. Don't think about the next step in the kata, don't think about the kata at all, think about hitting him. Hit the target and the rest will take care of itself.

"Oh but we have to learn the kata before we can do that". It's Niten Ichiryu, go ahead, take five minutes to memorize the bejeepers out of the kata, now work on grappling from a distance. Kill him, then swing your sword.

How many years have I been saying that now? No wonder it feels like my brain is turning to mush. No wonder I hear a petulant whine when I start yelling at a student, trying to get this across yet again.

I wish I was a better teacher. I really do.

I feel old.

Sept 5, 2018

Flowers and fruit

Yesterday we went through Jodo Chudan for most of the three hours of class. I tried to stay away from the detail questions, which foot goes where, that sort of thing, because we needed to get through 12 fairly involved kata which, frankly, are hard to remember. I remarked at one point "these are difficult because they are made up of bits and chunks of Seitei". Before you all hop on your computers and tell me how Seitei is made up of the Koryu, you're too late, the Mad Russian already jumped on me for that.

The thing is, we learn Seitei first, so Chudan is made up of bits and pieces of Seitei because that's how our brains work. It was first, it's the base for what comes later. Of course Chudan isn't made up of bits and pieces of anything at all, it's bits and pieces combined to make the kata that got arranged, at some point, into the set. I'm sure every one of the kata has its own history, I doubt very much that someone created any of the sets out of whole cloth at the same moment. Or maybe they did, perhaps there's a book out there.

Regardless of the origins, today we learn it all in one gulp, and we consider the sets to be very important, you must do the kata in order, you must remember their names. Is this yet more proof that we learn Seitei first? Sure it is. Do your seiteia kata out of order at a grading and, depending on the panel, and the level you're attempting, you will fail. (It is in the power of a panel to ask you to repeat something, although I haven't seen it very often.)

For the last half hour of class we did the first five kata from Tachi Seiho of Niten Ichiryu. Mostly because we were supposed to be splitting between Jodo and Niten, but also because I wanted to get away from the flowers for a bit. The flowers being just about everything we worry about, the etiquette, the order of the kata, the starting stuff and the finishing stuff... in short, everything that isn't "smack him on the head".

The founders of Shindo Muso Ryu Jo and Niten Ichiryu, Muso and Musashi, were contemporaries, they knew each other, they bounced around the same area of Japan. I find a lot of similarity in the fruit of each art, the "good stuff" as I called it, the little shifts of body, the way you avoid a strike and counter. Now if you think about it, that's not surprising, after all there are only so many ways to step aside from an attack and smack someone on the head. With Chudan that stuff is buried under a lot of extra movement and multiple "good stuff". With the first five kata of Tachi Seiho it's simple. Walk up and smack him on the head (or poke him in the throat, again, thanks in advance for the help and corrections). It was here that I tried to explain the difference in practice between flowers and fruit, between the frilly bits that tell you which art you are practising, and the core instruction of "get out of the way and hit him before he can hit at you again". It's the fruit, the stances, the etiquette, the timing of you go, now I go, and then you go, the way you tie your hakama himo, the way you... it's that stuff that means other folks will see what you're doing and say "hey that's such and such ryu". As proud members of such and such ryu we pay a lot of attention to that stuff. And why not? If you've got the time, get really good looking at the flower stuff.

But try to figure out which part of what you're doing is the fruit. It can get hidden in there if the kata are long and complex, with multiple attacks, defences and strategies. Try not to assume it's all fruit and

your job is to look good. Try not to do your kata in such a way that your partner is refraining from taking your head off because you're worried about which angle you're supposed to be waving your sword. Sometimes, maybe when sensei says "forget all the details, look at the target and hit it", you should forget all the worrying about details and look for the target.

Fruit before flowers.

That was something that Musashi said, by the way, lest you think I was clever enough to make that up. Something else Musashi said was "when you're in position to kill your opponent, remember that he's close enough to kill you". Read that again, pay attention to the order of the phrases. In this modern age I've heard something similar, usually as "when he can hit you, you're close enough to hit him." This is not the same meaning. The modern version means "be brave, don't be scared of him swinging at you, think of it as being close enough to hit him".

Musashi's version goes along with his instruction to "keep your eyes on the prize" to remember that if you're avoiding or defending or shifting or "tip fencing" or what have you, the goal is to hit your opponent. Musashi expected his students to be going for the kill at all times, there was no assumption that they would be afraid of an opponent being close enough to cut them, they were excited to be close enough to cut their opponent. Hence the warning not to make things an ai uchi, not to get so excited about cutting the opponent that the opponent cuts you. Musashi wasn't interested in sutemi, he was from an earlier age where surviving a fight was a good idea, mostly because fights were something that happened. It was only later when fights were rare that the idea of ai uchi became popular. Hitting your opponent a fraction of a second before he hits you may be a way to win a tournament, but a poor way to win a war unless you outnumber your opponents and can afford to trade one for one.

Every once in a while, and it's fall-time now, let the flowers die and blow away. Every once in a while, when it's harvest time, take a look at the fruit.

Sept 17, 2018

Musashi and Muso

The story goes that Miyamoto Musashi was carving a child's bow when Muso Gunnosuke came along and challenged him with his giant bokuto. Musashi stood, drove Muso back until he hit a wall and tapped him on the head. Muso went off to spend some time on a mountain and discovered the core principle of Jodo.

This is the story I tell in Niten Ichiryu classes, I tell a slightly different one in Jodo classes, because hagiography is to be respected, but here is my core thought on this.

Those in the CKF jodo section should think about coming to the Niten Ichiryu seminar at the end of the month. It will be taught by the current headmaster of Hyo Ho Niten Ichiryu (Santo Ha). Musashi and Muso met, and by some accounts travelled around a bit with each other. They were similar types, big, confident martial artists. They lived in the same area of Japan, so soaked up the same martial influences. Their schools are of similar vintage and I find echos of each school in the other.

In other words, I would like our jodo folks to come and practice some kenjutsu in a school founded by a contemporary of Muso, if for no other reason than to think about the origins of your own budo. This is why we have taken advantage of a sudden chance to practice with Kajiya sensei, the current soke.

For those who have come along with me on my own Niten journey from 1992 to today, I invite you to come meet and practice with Kajiya sensei. For those in the iaido and jodo sections of the CKF, you might be surprised at what your sensei has also studied, for some of you who have expressed an interest in Niten, I would suggest you ask your sensei about this art. You never know...

For those who have studied in the "second wave" of Niten that started from visits to Guelph by Imai soke, Iwami soke and now, Kajiya soke, please feel welcome to take this chance to continue your connection with the school. Teachers may pass away and retire, but it is the students who glue one generation to another.

Mr. Denis Nikitenko has offered to take up the work on this seminar, which we hope will be repeated in the future.

I hope to see friends, old and new at the seminar.

Oct 4, 2018

Making the grade

There is some rumbling in the pipelines that Niten Ichiryu may bring back grading. I have practised the art for 26 years now and have not felt any loss for the lack of a rank or a title. I have been quite content to study the art for the sake of studying it, as I do all my koryu. I have never asked about rank in any of them, and never thought to ask my instructors if they had a rank either. They are good, they can teach, I'm content.

But I can see where grading would have a certain use. People like to know where they are and they certainly benefit from something to work toward. My interest in Niten has been aroused by an upcoming seminar and the resulting requests to have a class or seven beforehand. Happy to accommodate, whatever the class figures it needs is what we do, and I like Niten.

I am curious what sort of criteria people will suggest for the various levels. Will it be something technically standardized like we do for Seitei iai and jo? If so I am, as they say, pooched. I'm hopelessly old-time, having learned the style of three or more soke ago. I'm happy practising whatever the style is today while studying with the soke, but I'm not all that anxious to have a seitei and a koryu version of Niten to work on, having seitei and koryu versions of iaido and jo is work enough thanks. Having a standardized version of Niten would make it something other than a koryu simply because it's been standardized.

If we are talking a test of understanding of fundamental principles as outlined by Musashi and taught by the current instructors, I wonder who, other than the soke and a few of his contemporaries would be qualified to judge this. Because grading requires judging and judging requires knowledge of what and how to judge.

One, other, Niten organization published their requirements, you got a rank for each set of practice you learned until you hit the highest level with Niten Bo (yes there is such a thing). I first looked at that and thought "huh, I'm a Menkyo" (I don't know all the Niten Bo so no Menkyo Kaiden for me). About a year later I noticed that the requirements had changed to include some sort of judgment by the seniors, something about "suitable character" if I remember it right.

I have no particular problem with giving a rank for memorizing a set of kata, after all, a paper that says "so and so has successfully learned the following kata" is pretty much what the old menkyo kaiden were yes? The key is "successfully learned" of course. Who judges, who defines. You get a license for knowing a set, who is that for? You obviously, your sensei knows what you know, and what you don't know. This is a license of completion, something to put on your wall that says "I once knew this stuff", like The Calculus, I passed a course or two where I learned it. And forgot it because I never used it. (Do I give back my old transcripts?)

Grades are demonstrably useful in getting and keeping students around. Certification happens in the sort of spontaneous generation that folks once thought happened with life. One minute a rotten piece of meat, the next flies are swarming out of it. Every new aerobics fad generates a certi-fiction system very shortly after its invention, sometimes at the same time. Community centres like to see the paper that

says "so and so is certified to teach this stuff". They like it for hip-hop hot rhumba and they like it for martial arts. You got paper? Yes. Good, carry on.

You got paper? No but I've been practising this stuff for 30 years. Come on back with some paper. Do you need to see the paper? No, I guess not... You want to know who gave me the paper? Umm.... Does the paper I just told you I have certify that I can teach this stuff, or that I learned this stuff. Errr....

I learned Niten with no certification. One class my instructor said "where are all the other students" and I took that to mean "go teach this", or more accurately, "I figure you're teaching this so go ahead and bring the other students along". My teaching license. I haven't shown that license (story) to anyone in years, they just walk in and start practising, nobody asks for my paper.

Grades or certification often confer... no not the right word, they allow, they permit things like teaching, or sitting in judgment. They don't confer, nobody can be made to teach or sit a panel. The definition of a grade may include "you can put students forward to grade" as our 5dan paper does. It doesn't mean you have to teach, in fact it says put students forth for grading. You can teach any time, before getting a 5dan you need someone else's signature on the grading application, after 5, it's yours.

These are just a few random thoughts on grading, I'm fine with it either way, grade or no grade. I can see benefits to grading and I can see problems. One thing I know, grading systems mean something only to the group that uses it. A grade in one art means nothing in another, a grade in one organization means nothing to the same art in another organization.

You don't have to grade even if gradings are expected in your organization. I've known lots of folks through the years who have dropped out of or never started on the grading ladder. What do you want from your paper? If you want to teach without someone breathing down your neck, get to the teaching rank. Anything beyond that is a rank that implies organizational responsibility. In the CKF, you can put students forth for grades at 5dan. There is no rank beyond that which lets you give rank, we have panels with a sliding scale. Before you "can teach" you can sit on a panel, 4dan can judge 1dan. 5dan can judge 3dan, 6 can judge 4, and 7 can judge 7. Want to be a judge? Get the rank, we could use some more 7dans for sure in both iai and jo where we only have 5 and zero. We're fine for kendo, with enough rank for panels on both sides of the country, Toronto and Vancouver (get it, both sides... oh never mind it's a Canada thing, as in "there's something east of Toronto??").

Aside from teaching and judging, the higher ranks are expected to do the heavy lifting of promoting and organizing the art as well. If you don't have the time or patience for that, why would you grade? As for me, I keep saying I don't care about the rank and I don't. In the arts where I can get no rank, I teach, I promote and organize the arts, and I gently urge students to go teach when they leave the nest. OK I kick them hard and say "you better not have wasted my time, teach this stuff wherever you are". So without a grading system to tell when I can do those things, I do them when they need doing. Thus, I don't need or desire the paper. On the other hand, some of my arts, jodo and iaido specifically, require rank for certain things and expect grading and rank for others. In this case, I grade to the maximum useful rank and then hang the paper on the wall.

You only hang up your last paper, then you stop collecting it. My 7dan iai paper is on the wall, all the rest of those certificates, as many as I could find, are behind that one. I don't know where my jodo or

aikido certificates are, I've lost them again, hopefully they will show up if I need them. Should probably hang the aikido paper, I'm never going to be healthy enough to take another rank. I will if I find it again.

Grades are. Formal or informal, there are grades, “teachers and students” is a grade, probably the only one that has real meaning, the rest may just be signposts on the journey.

Oct 6, 2018



No more lies?

Niten Ichiryu last night at class, we went through tachi seiho and kodachi seiho, long vs long sword and long vs short sword. We are running up to the seminar at the end of the month and the Red Menace (Denis) has been trying to get the soke's style sorted out from mine. "If I step back starting with the right foot instead of the left don't jump on me". Really? I'm pretty sure I wouldn't even notice that, and by the way, footwork isn't mentioned anywhere that I know of, unless there are secret manuals somewhere nobody ever told me about. Maybe there are, but even so, the point is to get back to the starting position, not to start with this or that foot and count your steps which have to be exactly so long apart. In other words "I don't care".

It's koryu. It's kata and therefore, it's all a lie. Menace vs Pamurai, I said "do Nagashi Uchi 1-2-3-4 and decide your footwork. Now do it 1-2.... 3.... 4 because that's more realistic. Be surprised when your first attack is deflected "but I can't block his counterattack if I'm surprised". OK pretend to be surprised but don't actually be surprised. See, it's lies all the way down and all the way up. First strike of Nagashi Uchi, nobody is on their heels, shidachi blocks shallow, away from uchidachi so as to deflect and strike quickly. Uchidachi deflects and then has to re-orient on shidachi to cut. Shidachi slips with another uke nagashi (other side) and jams uchidachi so that he stays on his heels and has to back up to cut again but shidachi strikes the instant the distance becomes correct.

It's all a lie. Let's go to moji gamae, if uchidachi cuts for the wrist why does shidachi lift his sword at all? Why not just move to the side of the line and stab uchidachi in the face? Well for one thing, because we already did that one, it's called Sasen. Why big cuts? It looks better. Little tiny movements, the kata ending in a tenth of a second, booooring. So we pretend a lot of stuff, we pretend a kata. At various points we tell various lies to learn what we're learning or to remember the next step. You cut to just in front of the face in Hari Tsuke so shidachi can knock it away without danger of getting hit. The movement is a lie, you'd be striking the head. So as a senior you strike the head because your equally senior partner can snatch your sword out of the air. Really? Yes, you have to pretend you don't know he's going to do that so you don't apply shibori before the contact with his head. It taps away like suriashi men. Your grip is soft when he taps you to the side. Really? No, it's a lie. You're pretending, do it anyway because what you're doing is not the point. You're both learning other stuff, like driving straight down the line wide open and letting the other guy strike because he can't, not, strike, he can't refuse your invitation. Go no sen. Still don't believe? So change the kata, don't drop your left foot close to uchidachi, put it down in a bit further to your left, do the same exact movement with the sword and you're now raking down from his face to his bellybutton and thrusting in. Not the kata? No you're right, it's a lie. OK call it a variation. Sen no sen.

You learned the lesson you learn in Doku Myo Ken of Muso Jikiden Eishin Ryu. It's about soete zuki, it's about using the tsuba offensively. It's about a bunch of things that we set up one lie at a time. Now this is happening, pay attention to this part. Now something else is happening, pay attention to this other part.

We decided last evening that we were done with the lies, time to learn the highest stuff. Another lie.

And I was up at 6am because there is no position I can lie down in that doesn't hurt across my upper back. Now I think I've got fibromyalgia rather than shoulder impingement syndrome. Does it help if you've got a name for it? Get some exercise, change your mattress, lose some weight. Brenda suggested the proper name is "getting old". Well, as long as I can wander into class and as long as the guys say they're getting something out of it...

I guess I'll keep lying to students and to myself.

Oct 13, 2018

Reading that comment about fibromyalgia makes me realize I was feeling the effects of stage 4 prostate cancer in the bones for quite a while before it was diagnosed. It explains some things that went on for the next four or five months, and some of my comments in these essays. You will read about atrial fibrillation, high blood pressure, high blood sugar. Somewhere in there I slipped on the ice and wrenched my back, or so I thought, I had actually broken my neck which nobody told me about for a couple of months. Hence the neck pain.

All of this was stabilized by a great medical system and I am alive past the time I thought I would be, but it is the reason I decided Pam Morgan should have her license in Niten. She is more than ready, but I may have delayed a few more years, except I may not be here a few more years from now. She has her license because I was gifted some time to give it to her.



Total Drama kata circle

Well the cottage batteries are screwing up yet again, so one more thing to worry about. Might be time to sell the damned thing since we're having trouble paying the taxes anyway. In the last few years I've been cutting down on a lot of things that are a constant source of drama in my life. The photo arts club (gone), several martial arts (some going, going) until I'm more or less down to Jodo and letting others worry about the other arts.

Travel is down to a bare minimum, but still I have to leave the house too often and every time I do there seems to be drama. Drama on the roads, in the classes.....

No, that's me isn't it. There is no drama in the bar where I'm writing this, none in the coffee shop, and lack of money isn't drama, it's lack of money. Well I've been there before.

Let's see if we can do something positive while I'm here calming down over the damned solar system... solar electric system, the position of Jupiter in relation to Mercury doesn't bother me much.

Class Notes: the circle of kata

We have a Niten Ichiryu seminar coming up in a week. (Those who promised to attend, maybe register and pay now?). We also had two beginners to Niten in the class last evening, along with three others. Rather than get all involved in teaching kata, more lies to beginners were done.

We went through a bit of kamae, then a bit of suburi (step forward right foot, cut, left foot, hasso, right foot cut etc.) to warm up the shoulders. Then we did the shidachi side of Sasen, step to the right front and thrust to the throat.

Next we started on the big circle of kata, we took partners and did Tachi Seiho Sasen, the first kata. Attacker cuts down, defender steps to the right front and thrusts to attacker's throat as he cuts down. So far no lies.

Then we did Kodachi Seiho Sasen. Exactly the same as with the long sword. No lies.

Next we took up both swords and practised the first movement of Chudan. Chudan no kamae and kissaki gaeshi. For those who aren't looking this up on youtube, nito chudan is right hand long sword, left hand short, hands spread at nipple height, tips on a line directly in front of your throat. The angles of the swords cover your body, if your attacker tries to cut your head you can easily block with the short sword and stab him in the throat. Best course of action for the attacker (according to the kata) is for him to try to knock your swords down and then come in to cut you. Your grip is such that a strike down on your sword is likely to knock it out of your hand so it's a good attack. To defend against this, just circle your tips, move them outward, long sword to the right, short to the left, to avoid the hit and then close them up again.

Now come the lies. I told the class that this was sasen with two swords, the attacker cuts down enthusiastically, you split and rejoin the tips, step to both feet together and your long sword is in (at) his throat. Like we did before but not stepping to the right front. Because that was a bit scary, (do you thrust under his arms or over, does he see you heading for his throat or not....) we turned the long sword a bit further and cut up under the attacker's wrist, in fact after doing that a couple of times we took a bit

of a swing at it, moving from chudan to hidari waki gamae while we blocked with the short sword and then cut up with the long. Then, since we had figured out the timing and distance, we went back to the thrust, making sure the attacker swung right down.

Next we answered the question "what if he doesn't cut down far enough for you to step in". What if your attacker stops cutting when he doesn't hit anything. The short sword moves back over the sword as it cuts down and is pressed directly down while your long sword does nothing different and now you're in (at) his throat while holding your attacker's sword down. Another lie, compounded with "don't resist him pressing your sword down because this triggers all sorts of struggles that can result in someone getting poked in the throat, just relax and let your sword be pressed down... 'because kata'". (It's not a kata!)

Next we departed further from the truth and we moved the long sword out and back (kissaki gaeshi) when the tips were attacked, but we did soto barai (a sweep to the outside) with the short sword while doing sasen down the line with the long sword. We did this from gedan, which was definitely a lie if we're saying this is Nito Seiho Chudan. Actually if we cut up under the wrist instead of thrusting it's the first half of Gedan but never mind, a lie is a lie.

We practised another lie by doing that same movement of long sword and short sword (start in gedan, walk in, soto barai with the kodachi and tsuki with the tachi) but instead of moving directly down the line we moved to the right front. This means the kodachi wasn't actually sweeping, just making sure the attacking sword can't be curved in to cut us.

Finally, the last lie, we started from migi waki gamae, short sword stuck out in front, long sword back at the hip, in gedan (so NOT migi waki gamae). Uchidachi tries to strike down the short sword, we pull the short sword back to the left hip to get it out of the way, and thrust at the same time with the long sword from the right hip into the throat while we are stepping off line to the right front.

Full circle to tachi seiho sasen but with the kodachi hung out there as a tempting target.

It was fun, it filled two hours. It avoided worries about "style" since we are coming up on a seminar with the Soke and we will be doing what he does rather than what I do for the weekend. No problem, do what you see, and learn.

Oh, and all those lies, sometimes I call them kihon, sometimes I just say "do this next" and don't label them anything. Generally when I say "lies" I'm trying to get folks to pay attention, to try and find the lie and while doing something different, pay attention to what's being said.

Oct 21, 2018

Niten Ichiryu Seminar Report October 2018

Well that was an interesting weekend. Friday evening Kajiya sensei flew in to Toronto and was picked up by Denis Nikitenko who was in for a baptism by fire in his first solo seminar. I went to bed with "palpatations" as my granny used to call them, atrial fibrillation. Not entirely unusual but I woke up at 3am with the same. Fine, to the emergency department where I found out that it's Halloween weekend. The place was full of party people so I didn't get seen until 7am, by which time the fibrillation had cleared up. A check of blood chemistry says I didn't have a heart attack, which was nice to know. High blood pressure and high blood sugar so "it may be time to look at some lifestyle factors.... you get what I'm saying here?" Oh yes I know a threat when I hear it. We finished talking as a stroke emergency came into the hospital and the doctor promised to call later.

Which he did half way through the morning sword class, I caught the message where he said "you're probably having a nap". Well, I did nap about half way through the afternoon class when I got to sit out due to odd numbers of partners. Long story short, Sunday I started beta blockers for the fibrillation and maybe the blood pressure. Apparently I was Mr. Mellow all day long. Placebo effect? How fast does that stuff work? I keep checking my pulse and it's comfortably slow and steady, am I imagining that?

OK to the seminar. We had 16 people Saturday and 13 on Sunday, pretty good numbers for a seminar, not so good for Denis' wallet, but he was expecting that. The crowd was about 90 percent new people for sensei, and half the folks put up their hands when asked if they were beginners.

Dudes, just because you're new to sensei doesn't mean you're new to the art. We started off a bit slow (because beginners) but soon got up to speed and by the end of the weekend we were through the 12 kata of tachi seiho. Sensei was there for Saturday and half of Sunday so it was a good chunk of information for everyone, lots of reps of the kata and lots of questions which helped explain various points.

Did I mention that Denis didn't mind losing a bit of cash on the seminar? That was because he managed to get a couple of private sessions with sensei on the Niten Bo. I say private, but the rest of the class got to watch so nobody felt left out. The next seminar, by the way, will probably include the Bo kata so those who were watching might want to muddle through the footwork if they can. (Ask Denis for help should you need it.)

Denis got to feel a bit of power from Sensei, and was quite impressed when he had the bo stripped from his hands by sensei's bokuto. Being the demo guy is like having three or four lessons at the same time. I think he's going to be a good point man around here for Kajiya sensei. We had a good discussion with Soke about various administrative aspects of the art, assisted by Ohmi sensei who came along to meet him. I have mentioned that I do a slightly antique style (style, not substance, that remains the same) and am more or less antique myself (I think I'm a little bit older than soke) so it's time to send things down the generations to some fresh muscles.

Listen, if I'm going to end up in hospital at the start of a seminar, it's time to make sure things are set for the next 40 years. I don't plan on going anywhere soon, but anyone who hangs on until they croak, without training a successor, is a fool in my opinion. And I have them don't I?

Nothing shocking in the seminar, nobody fainted from overload or boredom and I suspect everyone went home with sore legs and feet. Thanks to Denis "The Mad Russian" for organizing and financing, to Marianne "The Badger" for arranging venues and lunches, to Pam "the Pamurai" for driving the Guelph crew back and forth, and to all the students who attended from near and far (New Brunswick got the record for distance, unless it was Maryland perhaps. Ottawa at six hours was "next door").

Baptism by fire? That was Denis trying to coordinate flights for sensei who went from Toronto to Chile yesterday. That was quite a bit of effort before the seminar and yesterday afternoon.... a delayed flight that would have stranded sensei in Toronto or Miami and got him into Santiago a day late. Denis stuck to it in discussions between a couple of airlines and eventually got Soke a direct flight. A great result all around, and just another example of how much fun it is to organize seminars. Many congratulatory pints were hoisted last evening.

In other news, two of our Niten folks were in Poland for the European Iaido grading to challenge 7dan. The results were zero of nine passed. I have opinions about this but I'll keep them to myself except to say that... no, it's no threat to the survival of iaido in general... Wow, this beta-blocker stuff may really be mellowing me out.

On to the next seminar. I hope to see lots of people next weekend at the Peterborough koryu seminar. Registrations are finally starting to come in but Jim Wilson could use another ten bodies. This seminar isn't expensive folks, get yourself out for a day, half a day even. Show the flag. These things aren't fun to organize, as you have just read, but we do it so that you can attend. So...

Even if you are sitting on the side watching, you are learning. This is our major Muso Jikiden Eishin Ryu seminar of the year. If you consider yourself in the lineage, try to make it. The seminar is not closed, private or secret, if you're in another line of iai or another organization, or just a curious beginner, you are welcome. You can walk in on the day if your other thing gets cancelled. We'd love to see you.

Oct 29, 2018

Not once

"Not once have you ever said that" was what I was told last evening at jodo. Perhaps that's true, I don't know. I was also asked "can you do that?" when we did a movement that wasn't in the kihon or the kata.

I'm not sure what I was doing differently, there were no beginners in class so maybe there was a bit of a rebound effect and I was pushing past where we are with the seniors lately, I don't know.

Can I do that? Why can't I do that? I can do that because I'm the head of Jodo for Canada! No, don't listen to that BS, look, you can do that. Why can't you do that? It's just moving the stick in a different way than we usually do, it's not forbidden, it really isn't. Seriously, who would forbid it?

Should we do variations? Maybe. Should we fake and feint during the kata? Maybe, but probably not. The kata should be done as well as possible, as close to what we're taught as possible. No trying to mess up the partners, no trying to help them either. Just do your side and trust them to do theirs. Hit for the targets and trust your partner to make you miss. If we do that there will be plenty of variation for us to deal with over the years, as long as we are actually trying to hit our partner on the attacking side, and actually trying to do what the kata is telling us to do on the receiving side. My advice for seniors who really want to try to mess each other up, was to go into a corner of the dojo out of sight of beginners and sensei and have at it. Carefully. I've caught a lot of lumber across the head over the years. Also fists and feet. Why not?

We started with "let's rip through the kihon to warm up" and didn't get half way across the floor before I was saying things I've apparently never said before. Maybe I haven't, maybe it was stuff that just occurred to me, but if I remember right (and I don't remember exactly what we were doing that was so shocking), I was just trying to get folks to do honte uchi without a lot of extra movement. Leave the front hand there, don't do anything at all with it, lift the stick up overhead and slide down it to the point where you strike the target, then shibori and the front-now-back hand drops to the chudan position. Ah, I remember, big discussion about striking the target as the foot hits the floor (like in kendo) with the hands and shoulders up (like in kendo) in a weak position. Eventually we got to "strike the target as the foot hits the floor minus 1/8 of an inch". I called them "dojo lawyers" which made them a bit angry with me but I meant it in an affectionate way. They want to understand and when I say things they don't immediately understand, they argue with me. This is good, when I'm gone they will argue with themselves (think) about this stuff.

The discussion led to a nice excuse to talk about variable maai. "If we're out of range why can't we just walk in, why do we have to keep that hand up and stretch forward with the shoulders in a weak position". My answer was "you're not that good. I'M not that good". I don't know what my opponent's maai is. You can't go by the kata, by what is written in the book, that's "lies to beginners". Maai is where your tips cross 10cm. Not long ago we had an argument about whether that was tip to tip or the length from the tip on each weapon, and whether it was up at seigan or chudan or with the weapons held horizontally. Those are all different distances. Last evening we looked at the slippery floor (it's dry season, those unfinished maple boards are dry, dusty, and collecting wax again from the yoga types despite signage outside the door that says "no candles"). We tried getting a hit from one step distance

with the grain of the boards and across the grain. The maai changed. We tried it from issoku itto while walking backward (nope) and walking forward (easy). I'm not good enough to just walk in sloppily and assume I'm going to know where my opponent's distance is. I'm going to start my attack or defence about 5 steps apart and be ready from step one. That way I've got a chance.

It's a three hour practice so we spent the last hour on Niten. Didn't get a lot done, worked on the kodachi seiho but spent quite a while on "do we put our elbows out like you want or in like Kajiya sensei wants". My answer, as always, was "do it one way or the other, don't waste time on things I don't care about". I don't. That's not what Niten Ichiryu is for me. There's only one thing that I care about and that's the single moment of the attack and response. The rest is just getting there and getting ready to get there again.

During that discussion the method of attack came up and I did kissaki gaeshi as from the Oyo Waza at the Pamurai who responded with Kodachi Sasen. "I've never seen that kata, what was it?" Sasen, it was Sasen with a different attack. Apparently we need to go through the Oyo waza again one of these days, just so I don't get accused of making things up again.

"Not once" have I ever showed those kata. Except they are in one of my books, have you guys read my books?

Why would we do that when you're right there.

Umm.... because I forget what I've told/shown you?

Because "not once"?

Nov 12, 2018

Are kata real?

Often I'm asked why we slow down here or don't attack full force there in kata. The answer is always "because kata". Because kata are not real, they are stories with a moral, they are fake, one side attacks and is defeated, the other side wins, no matter what the difference in skill levels.

Having said that, kata are not something to drift through, last class I was yelling at one of our seniors, something like "it's a kata, you know what's coming next, why aren't you moving the instant your partner begins their move? What are you waiting for!" This is the reality of kata, this is how you make them real, you lean into them.

You want real kata? Look at tachi seiho of Niten Ichiryu, these would be called kihon in most schools. Uchidachi attacks full force with a single swing, shidachi responds and uchidachi is dead. One swing, an instant response. It doesn't get a lot more complicated than that, but again, this is not "real" it's a kata, so both sides know what is going to happen.

Most Aikido practice is the same, a single, committed attack and a response. I was often asked "what happens next" after I had thrown or even just taken the balance of my demonstration partner. What happens next? "Anything I want", after all, I have them on the ground or off balance hopping around on one foot, what do you want to happen next?

A kata can be "broken", stopped / finished at any moment by either partner. All one needs is to change the timing, change the distance. There are openings in kata, if there were not, it would not continue past the first exchange. The attacker may cut in a big swing, giving the defender enough time to avoid it. The defender may not continue with a movement that would cripple the attacker and end the exchange. Kata are, by agreement, not real.

Much of a jodo kata is this sort of agreed upon suki (opening). Take hiki otoshi uchi, where the sword leaves their stick hanging out there in chudan while the jo smacks it away. Anyone who has practiced sword kata will wonder why they aren't simply twitching the sword down an inch, so that the jo misses, leaving a big opening. After all, that technique is in every sword school ever... It's the timing, think about the alternative, to hammer the sword out of the air during the cut. That's if jo is very skilled and sword is lucky. Change the distance a tiny bit and it's crushed wrists.

Part of the reason for kata is to keep our training partners around for a while.

When we are doing unarmed training, a little bit of "make it work" isn't too harmful. It may not be elegant to crank someone's arm until they are forced to move, in fact some competitive arts are good with that (if it works). The thing is, on the whole, nobody ends up with a broken arm. If we "make it work" in jodo one or the other partner is likely to end up bleeding or with cracked fingers.

Trust me, an exploded knuckle from a thrust with a jo (no tsuba) takes months to heal, and on cold days...

Even the Niten Ichiryu kata can be broken by "making it work" or by changing the timing or distance. The attacker can get in there faster and connect before the defender responds (OK more fool you, move faster, pay attention to the muscle twitches that tell you an attack is coming), or the attacker can swing

for where the defender is going to be. I see that a lot, unfortunately, unless you actually know the future, you can't know for sure that your opponent is about to step to the right. Maybe the defender just lets you cut somewhere else and stabs you while you're swinging at air. Not-a-kata. That stuff is called Kendo, and the cutting to where your opponent is going to be only comes with the 8dan manual.

Kata are stories, they are a place where techniques can be taught, tools can be provided. They are not real.

So how do you make a kata come alive, make it real? First, find a suitable partner, one who is much better than you for instance. If you're a 3dan and know the kata well, find a 6dan and try to take his head off. The 6dan will step up, make sure he is safe, and match you. Try again, again, again. A little faster here, a little closer there. Don't anticipate, stick to the kata, pretend you don't know what the next move is. In fact, if the 6dan can tell you're giving it your all, and you're ready, he may change the timing so that even if you know what the next move is, you don't know when the next move is.

The kata is the safety net, a kata is safety equipment, it's the helmet and elbow pads. By staying in the kata you will be safe from rapidly swinging wooden sticks. The only time I ever see a boo boo during kata practice is when someone gets ahead of their control, gets excited and swings too far, or at the wrong time. I ought to mention that the smacker is usually practicing with a less experienced smackee, but not always. I get hit lots by beginners and seniors alike, as I should. If you aren't trying to take sensei's head off (INSIDE THE KATA!) you aren't practicing. I get hit when my students break the kata, but I want them outside the envelope, making mistakes, otherwise what's the point of 3 hours into class?

Kata are real, for a given value of real. They are not formula for winning a fight any more than buying a hammer gets you a framed house. You need a hammer to frame a house, it is necessary but not sufficient. Same for the tools you buy with a kata and winning a sword fight.

So, what do you think? Are kata real?

Kim Taylor

Apr 25, 2019

Over to you

Each year around this time I have gathered a bunch of essays into a free book, usually several books, but this year it's impossible to spend any amount of time in front of my computer, so folks, over to you, feel free to gather up anything that I've got written online, and make your own books. I'm assuming nobody is going to want to stick their own name on my writing but you know, if it floats your boat... I'm not giving permission to plagiarize by the way. That's not good for you.

Now, if you want to put yourself down as editor, if you want to actually edit the stuff I write (I just gather it up by date and spit it out) you are most welcome. I'd be happy to stick it on the website so you can share it with everyone. Hah, like asking a photographer to take shots "for the exposure". Years ago I had a kid tell me "you should gather up your writings and make a book!" I said "go ahead". The silence of the enthusiastic.

You can check out what has been done on <https://sdksupplies.com/> in the manuals section, down at the bottom are some free downloads as well as all the other books above those, that you can buy. We are still not rich so feel free not to steal those.

There's a bunch of good stuff there I think, at least for those who like doing the stuff I do. Yesterday afternoon we spent three hours on Nito seiho and got through the first kata. The first 2.5 hours of class were spent on kamae and kihon. I talked quite a bit about the things that make our "style" ours. I hope the students don't forget this stuff, it's worth keeping around for the next generation. It's "over to you" time.

You know, in the last 5 or 6 years the nito movements have been grinding up my shoulders, it's nice to know that I can still do it, but OMG did I ever pay for it last evening and even this morning. Spasms and cramps in the shoulders. Ah well, keep typing and have another coffee. See if it settles down without me having to lie down. I really fear that one day I won't be able to keep my head up. Gimme a neck brace and prop me in the corner.

The guys bought me a folding chair for class and did exactly that. "Sit there and wave a stick at us.". I mentioned a few things from the translation my friend sent and also mentioned that I wasn't going to share it, because I was asked not to, and one of the students said "do you suppose you could let me...." No. Great props for wanting to know all the stuff you can about Musashi, but I'll tell you anything that you don't know already or that isn't in other books.

There are early writings from Musashi out there, other things than the Go Rin no Sho. I've written about a lot of them. Some of them are actually pretty technical, "5 ways to punch and 7 ways to kick" stuff like that. But I don't have the direct translations of those manuscripts and the various authors aren't repeating them. What that tells me is that the authors either don't know what Musashi was talking about, or the instructions are pretty obvious and basic. As in "make a fist and hit him in the face". Wanting to read this stuff is basically wanting to make sure there's nothing we're missing.

I'd like to see the Enmei Ryu, the Musashi Ryu, the Nito Ryu and Musashi's original movements for Niten Ichiryu. I really would, and so would you, but would we learn anything new? Do we suppose there is a secret technique in there that we've lost or missed over the generations?

Isn't this also a case of "over to you" from Musashi to us? A whole chain of "over to you". Our teachers give us everything they know (the Japanese way isn't the kung fu movie way, the teachers don't hold back that super secret technique in case the student turns evil). After they teach us all they know, they say "over to you" make it better. Sometimes we do. We have film of iaido sensei from the 50s and sometimes even earlier. Are we better now? We've got specialists, elite performers who do nothing but practice a subset of iai many hours a day. They compete in tournaments. They'd damned well better be better.

Somewhere I just read of someone getting an 8dan in five years or some such thing. Mentioned it yesterday and have already forgotten... memory going. This was not unusual a few generations ago, you'd get menkyo kaiden at 7 years or some such. That's full transmission, that's "over to you". What do we do now? We require a minimum of 30 years for 8dan and another ten for hanshi. The top guys these days had better be better. Are they? By what criteria are we judging?

Today we like upright, stable postures, fast, light sword and really neat and tidy uniforms. Just after the war there was no material for hakama and montsuki, so by that criteria alone, we're doing better right?

Yesterday I asked the seniors if they should be in front of me or not. As far as I'm concerned "over to you" happened long ago but they're still there. I'm not teaching them the dance steps any more, they know those, but I have to keep teaching them something. Oh, you say, sensei has to keep learning so he can keep teaching the students new stuff. Maybe, that works for a while, but now I'm crippled up, in pain, I can't throw them around the room any more so why are they still there? What's my job now? Yesterday I decided that my job was to somehow find a way to make them better than they are. Better technically, better people.

That was always my job of course, but it gets harder once you've told them "everything". So how do you tell them more than that? Let me know when you figure it out, the best I've got is "show up for class and be there for them".

What about my own training you ask? Hah, I'm done. The last rank I was offered became a joke, a bit of office politics that ended up with a repeated insult to the guy offering the rank. I hadn't asked for it and don't have a use for it. As things stand now I can't challenge again so "call me coach". No more paper to prove I know things.

On the other hand, I learned stuff in the class yesterday, I really did. I watched the students, commented, listened to my comments and said "hey, I'm stealing that". I hope they stole it too.

One day it really will be "over to you" for good, and then they'd better keep getting better somehow.

Jan 28, 2019

My favourite things

Just as I opened the app I use to write with, that title popped into my head. I suppose I will try, but honestly, two things are wrong with it. First, it feels like a summation, and as far as I know, I'm not dying for the next couple of years at least, and second, oh yeah, almost forgot, I forget things. I don't remember last week let alone last year. Nothing to do with the illness or the meds, at least I don't think so, I've never been good at remembering things, even before I got into my 20s and started to live "in the now".

Favourite movie? I dunno, I hardly ever re-watch movies or re-read books, except Terry Pratchett, I re-read Pratchett constantly, and it never gets old because 1. poor memory and 2. he's just that good. I must admit though, to recently reading Piers Anthony's Xanth series. I read a lot of it in my 20s and I seem to recall that sick kids liked it a lot. Hmm.

My coffee shop, where I write every morning. For sure, and the thrift shop I visit every morning after coffee and after writing this stuff. Occasionally, because budo, I worry about being so easy to find, so predictable in my movements that an assassin could find me. One, not likely anyone will be looking to assassinate me and two, dying anyway so go ahead, might be exciting if you miss the first shot.

You've all got smart phones, look up your location history (yes your phone tracks that even if you think it doesn't) and see how boring and predictable you are. Mine used to call the coffee shop "work" as in "five minutes from work to home". Tracking doesn't mean intelligent.

Does it feel like I'm trying very hard not to forget I'm going to die from cancer? I feel good, I have to hang on to that thought very tightly or I will fall into the trap of believing I'm fine, or getting better. Stronger yes, better, not going to happen. The problem is that if I start feeling like I'm not sick, I will start thinking like most other people. I was on the exec of our union at work and I constantly heard people bitch and complain about paying union dues, about paying into the pension fund, about paying for the drug plan. OMG I would have suicided long ago if my wife wasn't working at the University and had the drug plan. One of my meds is apparently \$1500 a shot, and I need four a year. I take 20 pills a day, very few of them cheap. My wife does not complain about paying into the drug plan. I never did because I always knew I was going to be old one day, and in need of a pension and a drug plan. Take that plan away and I jump off a bridge, there's no way I'm spending my kid's house on drugs to keep me alive for a couple more years. So drug plan, favourite thing. I have to remember how lucky I am to be covered by one.

Pay your dues, there are adults dying in America as they try to stretch their insulin from one payday to the next. (Used to my gran telling me to "eat your dinner there are children dying in China" when I was a kid in the early 60s. I still eat all that's put in front of me, which got me to 255 pounds at one point.)

My other grandmother, who came through the depression and WWII, losing a husband and a son (Korea) to wounds and PTSD and "self medicating" until liver failure. That grandmother was afraid of debt. I'm afraid of debt, my kids are afraid of debt. Debt will sink a lot of my generation because they are not "too big to fail" like those banks pushing credit at me. Being within my means is a favourite. Knowing the kids are going to inherit the house and the cottage feels great to me. At least I hope they

will, I hope the rich businessmen who now run politics don't dismantle the public health care plan so that my wife doesn't hand them all our family savings and property in the last half year of her life. Instead, a national drug plan would be favourite, then the family money stays with the family.

Favourite is when healthy people figure this out. Some do, but not enough I'm afraid. "Give me my \$200 a year tax break NOW, I'll pay \$200 a daily pill later... somehow... I'll put it on the credit card".

Dark roast coffee, strong and black. And I can still drink it (have never asked, so I'm assuming) unlike beer which I shouldn't, and doesn't taste good any more.

Kote gaeshi, irimi nage maybe, but kote gaeshi for sure, the more complex the entry the better, like from yokomenuchi.

Mae. Believe it or not, I loved Mae through most of my iaido career. Not so much now that my knees are shot and "you can't do iaido standing".

Partner weapons practice. All of it, but maybe ai sen from niten ichiryu kodachi seiho. The way we do it. It's just so "in your face", literally literally. Not virtually literally. Poopy pants kata as one of our kendo guys called it. I also like... oh hell I like everything about Niten, I love the feeling of that bokuto sliding down the outside of my ribs, brushing my uwagi as I slip to the side and counter-cut. Tora buri, the feeling of snaking my left shoulder to the side of the oncoming cut and then unwinding down my body as I pull the bokuto around like a whip and stop an inch away from my partner's neck on an angle to pop the head off the shoulders.

Weird.

Tenouchi. I used to get all stressed out at work, or elsewhere before all the blood pressure and anti-testosterone drugs. When I did, I used to lift my hands and move them into proper tenouchi shape, it never failed to drop the stress away.

OK happy now Mr. Brain? I've tried to list some of my favourite things and mostly failed, thus proving that I'm crap at making cute lists of stuff... ten ways to perfect abs for bikini season.

Shite, shite shite, days start to get shorter from tomorrow! Now I'm depressed, reminds me of the long slide to darkness and all that.

Well, Niten seminar coming up soon. I hope not too many folks show up so that I get some great time on the floor. More for me, as it were. Still, if you really want to attend, don't put it off until it's too late, too late comes too early for most of us.

OMG morbid much? Stupid brain.

June 20, 2019

You must study this

Musashi wrote several documents (books, scrolls, whatever you wish to call them) and after many of his articles would write something like "think about this" or "practice hard". In my book concerning the Go Rin no Sho I listed all the various phrases to be read all at one time.

The phrase, according to Alex Bennett is actually a buddhist statement which he translates as "revelation through intuitive discernment". This in a footnote, as he translates per usual in the main body of the text. I like "revelation through intuitive discernment", I don't care if it's clunky, it takes the statement out of the rather trite assumption that Musashi is just saying go practice the techniques until you get them right. The techniques of Niten Ichiryu are not complex, one can "get them" after about five minutes, so why say "practice hard"? In none of Musashi's writing do I get the idea that he wants you to do perfect kata, or that he is giving his students a formula to win a sword fight.

In fact, none of his writing really deals with the nuts and bolts, the details, of kata, except for an attempt to describe the five nito seiho, the five two sword kata, which are almost impossible to describe in text. I attempted it in a manual back in the mid-'90s but I suspect the photos are much more helpful than the text.

What Musashi writes, and his writings were mostly licenses (menkyo) for his students, is the other stuff, the not-memorizing-movements. He tries to explain the things that one learns from kata, rather than the kata themselves. Where he finds he can't actually describe that thing (and his writings from earliest to last tend to show less and less detail), he falls back on "practice this until you get it" or "revelation through intuitive discernment". Where in his early writings he might tell you how (by formula) to figure out whether the guy in front of you is inexperienced or an expert, later he just says "test him and see".

So what is this revelation? How does one show it for a test? "How do I show kigurai to the judges sensei?". The answer is that I don't know, I really don't, I'm afraid you will have to practice until you "get it" by accumulating experience until you derive an understanding of the principle. Wait, what test? Musashi probably figured the test was whether you survived a duel, whether you or the other guy had the crushed skull. This was the test Musashi was teaching toward.

Trying to be like Musashi, I give my students exercises that they can use to perhaps eventually, with sweat and thought, derive an understanding of what Musashi is talking about. I can't tell them how to know when to move the tip of their weapon into the space where their attacker is about to be. Not, I shouldn't, but I can't. The best I can do is set up a controlled movement that may allow them to see it.

A kata.

What is "it"? Years ago there was a TV show called Lovejoy, it was about a divvy, a guy who can look at something and instantly tell if it's an antique. That fascinated me at the time, and I wondered how one could do that. Then I started collecting art, mostly Haida prints. I read some books that said "red and black" and other such things of the "formula" type, but the best way I found was to look at a lot of pictures of Haida art. A lot. I also visited museums and stores and eventually got good enough to

suspect. I am no divvy and no expert by any other means but I can usually spot a Boma copy from an argellite figurine at ten paces.

I am currently trying to keep together the archives of a photo magazine I published for almost ten years. I started doing some studio photography around the time my daughter was getting called "Lauren the giraffe" in elementary and middle school. I started using her as a fashion model and developed a portfolio for her to accidentally let slip in school. This helped her stand up straight and become "Lauren the model". To take those photographs I used the new digital technology that let me take thousands of photos without expense, and I started to look at photographs by fashion and art photographers. To compare what I was doing to what they were doing I started the online photography magazine. In practice, a lot, I am currently deleting over 600,000 photos from that website that were the result of photo sessions. If you want to look at that magazine go to <http://180degreeimaging.com/> and follow the links.

The result? I can probably tell you if a photograph comes from a pro or not, by glancing at it. What did that mean for my own style of shooting? Mostly it meant I moved far away from what the majority was doing. I had no reason to do what everyone else was doing because I was not a pro. I never made any money from my photography, never tried really, I have shot since I was 7 years old. These days I don't do much, that 10 or 12 year stretch of studio work seems to have satisfied me for a while.

I lie, I taught photo workshops for a while and paid some of my studio rental out of that, so I did make money of a sort.

Taught? Mostly I did a Musashi. There's the light, here's a couple of ways to use it, now go kick it around the place and experiment. I did not give lighting diagrams or similar formulae, nor did I critique anyone's work beyond saying "do you like it"? If someone wanted to figure out a specific technique, no problem, but "is this good?" Good for what? Do you like it? Why don't you like it? Can you fix it? No I can't tell you how to get models, I have no idea any more, other than to ask, ask, ask and hope you don't get hash-tagged.

Most of my crafty stuff has been a similar process. Building speakers? Take cheap wood, thrift store speakers (cheaper than buying new drivers, just rip the old stuff apart), an interesting design (transmission line) and start. I read what I could find, and then I started making a mess. Curiously, the very first pair of speakers I made sounded pretty good. Zigmahornets which were stolen in a break-in to the cabin this spring. I hope the thieves appreciate them, they were getting knocked to hell by people flopping down into rocking chairs and smacking them, so thinking of them in a good home where they can be appreciated is comforting.

Dolls and toy robots, just start in and make a mess.

You will notice that most of this is artsy craftsy, not technical. I know people who love doing finances on spreadsheets, and with enough practice they can probably start to "know" what needs to be done. Others probably just remember the formulae and apply them, forcing the real world to fit the formulae they know.

I happen to think the budo are artsy craftsy, intuitive things, not suited to formulae. Some think that such things as iaido are to be done with more and more accuracy to an ideal form. Platonic spheres

aside, my main question to anyone doing budo is "do you like it, what you just did?" If they do, we're done. If not, go back and practice until you understand intuitively, what it is you are looking for.

Revelation through intuitive discernment. You get there by doing it.

You must study this well.

June 25, 2019



Canada Day Seminar Report

Today may be a bit slow for me, after three days of Niten Ichiryu and Choken Kage Ryu. Kajiya soke and Watkin shihan (that's not the way to address them by the way, but a shortcut to introduce them), provided almost 20 hours of training for a few more than 20 participants from Friday to Sunday. Pretty good numbers for shortish notice and a holiday long weekend in the summer.

We covered most of the basics for Kage, the tachi seiho of Niten and several of the kodachi seiho as well. During some free practice periods (during the Kage classes) I noticed students getting corrections in nito seiho and even the tachi ai bo set, the last few kata of which Denis received from Kajiya sensei, much to his (Denis') delight. If my health continues to improve I may get him to teach them to me, but as it is I was happy to make it through one of the Kage classes. Long weapons aren't kind to my weak back these days.

Denis is well pleased that there was a good mixing of groups during the seminar, and that we had several beginners. There is a bit of a historical separation between a couple of groups, never antagonistic, just a couple of foci of instruction. This year what separation existed was dissolved as we all gathered to receive Kajiya sensei's instruction. This is, of course, the purpose of headmasters in any art, as a way to keep separate practice groups from drifting apart. As long as everyone considers themselves students of the same teacher, an art sticks together. If an art gets too big or too separated by geography to be managed, it will naturally drift into different organizational units.

I'm afraid I can't report on any losses of the sensei (it's not a seminar until you lose the sensei) or similar adventures this far. Denis found some experienced helpers who took care of much of the organizational bits and pieces, and he was properly appreciative, saying that he often heard "already done" when checking on this or that. Like most of our seminars over the years, the participants pitched in and cleaned up, moved chairs and generally looked for things that needed doing when not swinging their weapons.

This is budo.

"Free practice is for youngsters" is a thought that floated through my head this morning. I will have to think about this a bit further but was it mostly that free practice suited others, rather than myself? As I have mentioned before, my style of Niten is a bit to one side, a bit two or three generations ago, so I try to keep quiet while sensei is visiting and to practice his style, as every other student in the seminar does. It's almost like getting to learn Niten all over again. The same kata of course, the same principles, but different timing and a different "look" to the kata. I have discussed my history with sensei and his comment was "it's all Niten" so this isn't a problem. But when it comes to free practice I was reluctant. I was in the kage class or helping Denis learn the bo anyway, but if I had been doing the free practice I would have restricted myself to the kata we had learned. To go on to further material would probably mean I slipped into my "style".

Is that it? No, I don't think so, sensei would simply have shown me his method if I'd moved away from what everyone else was doing and I would have done that.

No, "free practice is for youngsters" might have more to do with energy levels? I was happy to sit down after six hours of practice. Also, seniors may be tempted to "help" to teach the youngsters and that is not polite or helpful at a seminar. I don't mind correcting folks to what sensei has just taught us, but to extend that to other kata is a bit much. It's not my seminar so it's not my place to teach. Correction is not instruction.

Kajiya sensei is probably packing right now to head back to Japan and then off to Europe. Watkin sensei is heading for my cabin with Denis (I get to stay in Guelph for a bone scan, such fun) and then they will be heading for Calgary for seminar part II next weekend. (If you're in the left half of the country you might want to check that out).

July 1, 2019



A better day

People seem to have baseline personalities. I have moved back to my more usual friendly self. Well as friendly as I ever get. Less difficult, less ticked off, less jangly than yesterday. Having another good visit to the hospital helps of course, I continue to be stable and the pain in my back wasn't the cancer, it was my challenging it by lifting about 1/5 of the weight I used to lift. Three reps with a deadlift I used to do 20 or 30 times. Still, it gives me the sense of advancing. I have come to hate, really hate, "backsliding" in myself and others. Get on with it, move forward.

Go through.

The alternative is not good.

On to some budo, the last class was interesting to me. One of the few I've been able to present after thinking a bit about it. I think that's called "lesson plan" or some such. Usually my plans are derailed by someone having to do a grading, or beginners, or someone really, really wanting to do something else. The fact is, I don't mind much what I teach so I'm happy to let the class pick. Like these essays I always seem to find something to say, and sometimes someone says they enjoyed it. Yep, here to provide entertainment and distraction from your busy day.

We started with me asking whether anyone minded if we do something on movement, comparing Niten Kodachi Seiho with Seitei Gata Jo. Perhaps it says something about the way my brain works these days that I wanted to do that. Often in the past I've told the class that it doesn't matter what we practice, I'm teaching the same thing. I think I wanted to demonstrate that. To do it we picked something we haven't done much lately and related it to what we've been doing.

Movement. We started with a "chalk talk". Unfortunately we don't have a blackboard in the studio like we used to back in room 210 so I had to use a piece of paper. I drew a diagram of two people (x) and Watkin sensei's "spotlight". The spotlight is a circle defined by the tip of the sword held in chudan. Put two people together with the edges of the spotlight touching and you have issoku itto. Overlap the lights and you are in chika ma, kiri ma (fighting distance, or specifically, "now you are bleeding"). Disconnect the circles and you have to ma, far distance.

What happens if you extend the spotlight, if you make the circle oblong? Our beginner got it after Denis demonstrated. You are off balance, stretched forward, not able to move freely. If you do this you'd better be sure you are doing damage because you've just exposed yourself. Better to move your feet and keep the circular shape.

How can we move in response to an attack? Oh, the attack line is the line of the attack.... um. Never mind. First suggestion was straight in. Interesting first choice, but we do that in both arts, I think the clearest example the class came up with for jodo was Rai Uchi. For niten it was Ai Sen. We drew two x and two arrows aimed at each other. You can do this too, x--><--x

Don't worry about it if you don't practice both these arts, all these essays are sort of a combination of class notes and enticement to come practice with us... oh and advertisements at the end. If you get something more, you're welcome.

Alright, if we can come straight in, can we move straight back? Yes we can, and we drew that as two x that simply shift. The example? Hissage from Jodo. Niten doesn't back up much... at all? But we considered niten Chudan where the opponent strikes diagonally at the shoto held forward in chudan. You will come across many examples on the net of folks saying that "you can't avoid a diagonal strike" and "kendo is all vertical strikes which are easy to dodge". If you can't avoid a diagonal strike perhaps you can push the target forward. If you do that, and take the target away, that diagonal attack means that your opponent has just moved his sword off the attack line and you can "go straight through", you can pass his point and counterattack. Right, what happens if he is diagonally attacking you, your body? Move back out of range, let his sword whiz by and then enter. The principles are exposed in these two kata, the nullification of the attack is seen in Hissage as you maintain the maai by a shift back as tachi attacks forward. In niten Chudan you move back on a diagonal which creates the opening (despite the close to vertical attack) to move in. Why do we target the head instead of the wrist as in kendo no kata number two? Because shoto. Try it.

Kendo's vertical attacks? What happens if your opponent moves straight back to avoid your strike?

What moves next? Diagonally forward to right and left, diagonally back right and left and directly to the sides. That makes 8 moves which gets us to infinity. Really. Just turn the 8 on its side. Oh dear, a dad joke.

The class came up with examples and then we moved onto the floor. We went through the Niten Ichiryu Kodachi Seiho and after each was introduced and practised, the class came up with an example from Seitei Gata Jo which we then practised. The two arts of Niten and Shindo Muso Ryu are contemporary, Musashi and Muso lived at the same time, and I love seeing the similarities of the two arts. With a bit of work one might just derive the principles of combat of that day. Oh wait, already done by Musashi. Our work might be to apply the principles written by Musashi to the art of Muso.

I won't bore you with the details of which kata was paired with which, suffice to say that uke nagashi in niten was kuri tsuke in jodo, and for a couple of pairs we used excerpts from jo kata as a pairing. That some directions were rare to see in the kata says something in itself. By assigning directions to the initial move of each kata, one might be able to derive some good information on combat theory. Go ahead and consider that your homework for the week.

I had a lot of fun working through the sets, our beginner struggled with all the new dance steps but muddled through. Which is a lesson in itself, there is a lot to be said for muddling through.

Grit your teeth and muddle through, tomorrow may be a better day.

August 8, 2019

Learn by demonstrating

This past seminar I did some rather specialized teaching of some of my senior students. In one class I asked the Pamurai to demonstrate a rather scary movement from Jodo where the attacker swings, not to stop in front of you, but for your head, forcing you to shift back and strike the sword out of the air during the swing. She has done this without the move back, but not combining things. I have done this with her as tachi several times but this was her first attempt.

She did this in front of the class, during the seminar. A couple days later I was using Eric and Carole to demonstrate Tachi Uchi no Kurai and Tachi Seiho, again, in front of a class. They haven't practised these partner sets for several years, so it was more or less as if they were seeing them for the first time while I was coming at them with mischief in my eye.

You can only do this with seniors because a beginner will freeze. "I don't know what you want me to do!". Very true, but that's no reason not to go forward anyway. In Pam's case, if she had frozen she would have risked being hit. She knew what I wanted her to do (I gave her lots of hints), she just wasn't sure she could do it. Two tries and she had it perfectly, the first attempt she erred on the side of caution and faded back out of range. I approve.

She needed to step up, to believe she could do it, to ignore that she might look bad in front of the class, to ignore that she may make me look bad. In a word, she had to stop thinking entirely and pay attention to what was happening. This was a short, sharp, leap to another level of skill under some pressure of being watched. It's not fun, for her or me, I have to know just when she is able to do it, and then more or less force it. You can't really refuse to help sensei demonstrate something in front of the class, can you.

Could we have tried it out under more controlled and more private circumstances? Sure, but that's safe. At a certain point in your training you have to step, leap or be pushed into the void. The more this happens, the easier it becomes to "just walk in" and have faith that something will happen. Don't worry what. That a serious injury could happen is something you have to accept or ignore because if you think about being hurt, you will hesitate and be hurt.

I do it myself sometimes, I asked Carole to swing at my head while she had no idea what I was going to do. I had little idea, just a hunch that I should do something. I was perfectly safe because Carole didn't want to break sensei, I think that after about the third try she swung fast enough for me to show something or other. Nice girl, been too long away and too cautious of sick old sensei to try to take his head off.

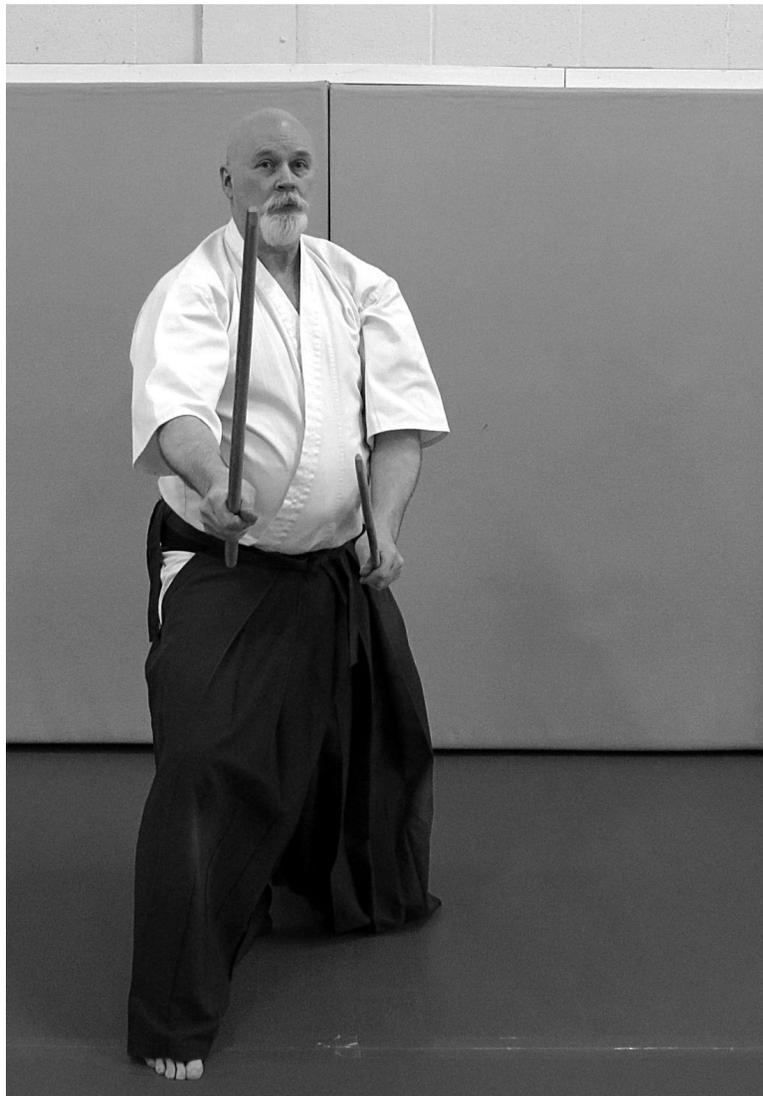
In the case of Eric and Carole I wasn't asking them to do anything risky, just using them as the other side of some partner practices that they didn't remember. They were fine. My goal was to get them to forget any sort of habit, to listen and to be sensitive to what I was doing. To "do something" when something had to be done. I usually described the kata for the class before doing it, I went at teaching speed, and they paid close attention to what I was saying and what targets opened up during the kata. This is excellent practice and should be done whenever possible. Last May our Jodo instructor showed us a bit of Kusarigama. He asked for a partner and I instantly stepped forward while others were

stepping back. I got to guess what was coming next, with no Japanese, I had to listen to what sensei was saying with his body, no time to wait for the translation. I was simply "fighting to survive", to do a good job for sensei. Of course I was in no real danger because sensei had control... um except maybe when he started having some fun whipping the ball into my back while I was wondering just how weak my ribs had become from the cancer.

This sort of practice/lesson is one way I test my students. Do they tell me they don't know how to do that? Do they freeze? Do they flinch? Do they trust me not to injure them? Do they stick to the kata we're demonstrating and not go into whatever other martial arts they know? (This is, after all, a demonstration for the other students). Most of the time, when teaching like this, the student is also a teacher, and they are used to the control that is needed in new situations. They can be trusted not to hurt their students and they trust me not to hurt, or to embarrass, them.

Still, if you can learn by demonstrating, you have passed one of my personal gradings.

Oct 11, 2019



What's In There?

"What's he building in there" says Tom Waits. I used to have a photo project called What's In There where I took a digital point and shoot, fixed focus, fixed lens, and whacked it up against holes in walls and, mostly, put it on manhole covers and grates. The sensor was good enough to pick up what I couldn't see. I never found a pot of gold, but sometimes the shots were quite a lot of fun.

Last evening I returned to Alex Bennett's Musashi book. You will find it online fast enough and I'm not at home, so hunt it down. The main reason I bought the book, aside from reading another translation of the Go Rin no Sho, was that Alex has included Musashi's earlier writing, specifically, the Heiho... oh hell, the mirror of strategy HYODOKYO or Heidokyo. This was Musashi's earliest writing that has been found, it was a license of transmission to one of his students, for his Enmei Ryu, which is what he called his school at that time. This was 1605, a year after he states he mastered his father's teachings. Just looked up his birth date (1584-1645) so he would have been just over 30, which was when he stopped with the duelling and started thinking about strategy. In other words, this is what he realized when he realized what he had learned. You can see why I wanted to read it.

I need to read through all his writings in order one of these days soon, many of his earlier works explain some of his later writing. Look, I've been studying Niten for thirty years now, I've read the Go Rin no Sho dozens of times, and written three books on the subject and I still can't figure out what he is describing in his fairly detailed explanations of his kata. I know what the modern kata look like, and I've seen photos of Aoki sensei's kata so I know for a fact that I know what was happening with the kata for at least 100 plus years back, but I swear I have never come close to convincing myself that what Musashi wrote is what I practice.

This is why I am vastly amused when modern students look at other lines or even the changes that happen when the headmaster changes and declare "they're not doing it right". Thirty years of practice and I can't tell you that what I'm doing is what Musashi did. I wouldn't dare, because I can't figure out what Musashi was saying when describing his kata. I can't even make up a kata from what I am reading. When the translation says "step out with the right foot" does that mean to step to my right or does it mean step forward? I might try to go through this exercise with the Pamurai, we have a solid vocabulary in the school, maybe we can make some sense of the sentences. Maybe not, but it will be practice, it will take our understanding a bit deeper.

But, if I read one of his descriptions with my eyes squinted, so that I don't get caught up in the details, but look at the overall movement, if I keep Musashi's precepts in mind, and they are quite clear to me, I feel like some sort of understanding is tickling around my stomach.

In the Heidokyo, Musashi states quite clearly in his description of Jikitsu, that you must memorize all of his kata, but come the fight, you must not think of them. Instead you must go straight in, you must see the target and hit it no matter how many swords get in your way. Deflect them all and hit the target. Go straight in.

What did I say to my students of ten or twenty years ago? Musashi's secret was to "walk over there and kill him". There are no flowers in his art. So what kata do you need to memorize? In the Go Rin no Sho

he said he had five. We call them Nito Seiho, they are Chudan, Jodan, Gedan, Hidari Waki Gamae and Migi Waki Gamae. Somewhere I ran across fancy names for them but as far as I'm concerned, they are middle, upper, lower, left and right. Not stance, not method, just places where you can put your sword and use it depending on the situation. Once you figure out that Chudan is the captain and the rest of the kata are the company to follow along, you get a lot closer to the idea. Once you decide that Chudan the kata, is not Hidari Waki Gamae, the kata, you have lost the thread. Chudan is chudan kamae, then kissaki gaeshi to jodan, then gedan, then hidari, and then kiri age. The five kata/kamae interpenetrate so that, as Musashi said, you can understand all the principles through those five kata.

But we do 15 nito kata, 12 tachi kata and 7 kodachi kata, what's up with that? Ten of those nito kata were in, now they're out. It's fine, it's all Niten. So working through Musashi's early works, trying to unpick the many more nito kata of his early years will be fine. As long as we have the vocabulary, as long as we have the waza, we can make up the kata. If they are not what Musashi meant, we won't be "making it up", we will be practising, because all kata in a school interpenetrate all others. This is why Seitei Gata Iai doesn't fit comfortably together, and why Seitei Gata Jo does. "Same school" means all kata that are created are "real kata".

Not to try and recreate Musashi's written kata will be fine as well. Don't ask me to show you "Musashi's lost kata" because I won't bother. The school as it is taught today, in any of the lines, is fine. You will learn. It's the lesson that is important, not the pictures in the textbook, not even the language of the textbook. If you think the language is important, you are confusing the fragrance of the flowers with the fruit. The sizzle for the steak.

Much more useful is to ask yourself "what's in there".

PS Oh peanuts, I just found a very cheezy youhoo video of some fellow doing some iaido "inspired" by the hyodokyo. It's quite put me off for the moment. Never, never, never follow links on the web expecting to find useful information! Why do I persist in thinking this time it will lead somewhere. I'm such a romantic.

Feb 4, 2020

The history of the Sei Do Kai: Niten Ichiryu

Having promised to write something on the histories of our club, here is the dojo version of the history of Hyo Ho Niten Ichiryu. The dojo version is not fact checked, it's what I might say when asked during a class, so pay attention to what I say about sources.

In the late 1500s Japan was going through a long series of wars as the feudal kingdoms were being gathered into fewer and fewer camps until, in 1603, Tokugawa Ieyasu emerged as the ultimate victor. The saying goes, Hideyoshi mixed the ingredients, Nobunaga baked the cake, and Tokugawa ate it. Hindsight is great, we know this was the point at which it was all done, but the folks at the time didn't know it was over, and there were a few more battles, 1615 Osaka when Tokugawa defeated Hideyoshi's son, then the Christian uprising in Shimabara in the 1630s, and some other revolts of starving peasants, but mostly it was over.

But those living through it didn't know that. Miyamoto Musashi lived during these times, fought in the wars, and eventually became a pretty famous fellow. Here's the story everyone knows... everyone that is, who has read a bit further than a novel that came out in the 1930s.

Musashi was born in a couple of towns (it's often disputed), one of which is Ohara in Okayama. We accept this one for reasons given later. His father was a good fighter, he beat Yoshikawa two times of three. Yoshikawa was sword instructor to the Ashikaga shogunate. Munisai (dad) was an expert in the jutte, a baton with a sword catching tang on one side. Musashi learned the arts from his father and maybe an uncle. When he was 13 he challenged a swordsman from the Shinto Ryu. The challenge was supposed to be called off but Musashi rushed in anyway, grabbed the swordsman and threw him on the ground, then beat him to death with a bo. Musashi was a big fellow. Something like six feet tall.

Fast forward through 20 years or so of wandering around and duelling, during which time he had 60 matches. One or three of which were with the Yoshikawa swordsmen. The last duel was with Sasaki Ganjiro on Ganryujima where Musashi carved a bokuto out of an oar and whacked Ganjiro on the head while having his headband cut. You've all seen the anime, Musashi was that guy.

At 30, Musashi decided that up to that time he had been lucky, or the other guys were not very good. He started to look into Hyo Ho, strategy, much more seriously. At around 50 he figured he understood. In that 20 years he worked for various lords, took baths, adopted a couple of boys and found them good jobs, fought in a couple of battles, painted some, carved some, did some urban design, and did quite a bit of writing. Musashi wrote several versions of his precepts about budo, many of which seem to have been his form of license to students.

Along the way, those students founded several schools of various names, from what Musashi taught, many of which exist to this day. One of those lines eventually became the Santo Ha Hyo Ho Niten Ichiryu, the school we practice.

Now, you can find this history, and much more in the many, many books that have been written about Musashi. The last book he wrote, the Go Rin no Sho is famous now, but was first published in 1909 in Japan. Be aware of that. Other manuscripts of such writings as the Sanjugokajo are coming to light. The first English version of the Go Rin no Sho was written by Victor Harris, and this is the first version

that I read. Many translations have been done since then, including one with explanations by yours truly. I have also done a book on the Sanjugokajo with explanations, and you can find both of them at SDKsupplies.com. These contain much more history, lists of sword schools from Musashi, lineages of our branch and others, including descriptions of the kata (and videos elsewhere).

The history of our dojo begins, I suppose, with Aoki sensei, who was headmaster of the Santo ha Hyo Ho Niten Ichiryu for a very long time. After him was Kiyonaga sensei (the senior) and Imai sensei. These three headmasters (8, 9, and 10) taught in many places, and our direct instructor, Matsuo Haruna sensei from Ohara in Okayama (birthplace of Musashi and location of the Musashi dojo) studied with all three of these headmasters.

In the early 1990s, Haruna sensei began teaching at our yearly iaido seminar here in Guelph. On his second visit he asked me what we would like to learn that year and I, not knowing any better, said I'd like to learn Niten Ichiryu. That got a surprised look, but this was pre-internet and Canada was a long way from Japan so he said yes. I think this was 1992, and we have practised ever since. For the first year or so it was only a few of us practising but when sensei asked me "where are all the other students?" I took that as an expectation that I would pass along what I had learned, which was the three usual sets of sword practice plus a couple of extra sets of two-sword kata.

When Haruna sensei died, I asked the students that were around at that time what they wanted to do. Invite the headmaster (soke) they decided, so I got in touch with Colin Watkin (Hyakutake) who was practicing with Imai sensei at that time. They visited Guelph, along with Iwami sensei in the early 2000s, and when Imai died, Iwami sensei and then Kajiya sensei have visited Canada each year. Those are the 10, 11, and 12th headmasters. Eventually, it became more efficient for the Soke to visit Europe rather than have several of those students come to Canada each year, so the seminars shifted overseas.

Imai sensei had changed the style of practice a bit, so that it was somewhat different from what I teach, but not radically so. Certainly not enough for the headmasters to tell me to stop teaching "my way", and I did ask. Kajiya soke's comment, the last time I brought it up, was "it's all Niten". So this is why the Niten at Sei Do Kai looks different from that in other places. Koryu practice can change, and it does. In the last 20 years or so there have been some complaints about those changes from students who were taught one way and were upset at seeing another. This is natural, and I would ask all my students to learn from anyone, but to remember your roots.

About this, please consider the current understanding of how to learn. Repeating something many times works, of course, but repeating that same thing with small variations is a much more efficient way to learn. Go look up the science. Anecdotally, over 40 years of practice in many martial arts I've found that it is indeed true. Learn from everyone BECAUSE they "do it different".

Our practice of Niten has continued now for 30 years and there are many students out there who have come through our dojo. As I come to the end of my useful shelf life, I have made arrangements that our style of practice will continue to the next generation. Pam Morgan has kindly accepted a license from me which represents my confidence that she knows what I know.

Please don't call what we do Haruna ha, or for goodness sake, not Taylor Ha. We practice Niten Ichi Ryu, and we recognize the Headmaster, Kajiya sensei. "It's all Niten"

One further point, Kajiya sensei has taught us the Niten bo, and since I was not very healthy at the time, Denis Nikitenko has kindly assumed that part of the curriculum.

Jan 30, 2020



I know it's 2021 now and I may have written a few more essays on Niten, but having re-read these, I can't think of anything that I haven't covered here. So we will go with this as the "Niten Essays from 2014-2020". I hope you get something out of them.

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Kim Taylor July 2021.