

SENSEI and STUDENT

Kim Taylor April 2020

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A selection of musings related to teachers, teaching and being a student.

My sensei's sensei. Instructor of the first iaido seminar at the University of Guelph.



What is a sensei?

To some folks, a sensei is someone with a 5dan. Or whatever rank works for your dojo or your organization. Once you hit "the rank" you're a teacher. It's not a huge problem I suppose, and community centres need some sort of certification so why not just define it as 5dan.

Does rank prepare you to teach? Sure it does if all you're worrying about is the technique, if you know the kata you can teach the kata. If you know the moves of chess you can teach your cousin how to play chess.

Does that sound different? Do you assume it takes more than knowing how the knight moves to play a game of chess? It doesn't, you're thinking of playing a good game of chess aren't you? Not just a game. It doesn't take very long to learn a kata, and it takes not that much longer to do it smoothly and accurately.

Then you're done? For some, yes you're done. For some, you're never done, you keep practising to get even more smooth and more accurate. And of course, to stay up to date with the latest changes from on high.

Do we wonder why so many people drop out of the martial arts? I mean the "shodan drop" where you get your black belt and quit. If it's about learning the techniques why would anyone carry on? Especially if there's nothing beyond learning the moves. Now some folks figure tournaments are what's beyond, playing chess at the local club, competing in kendo or judo or MMA, or doing karate and iaido taikai, working for the nod for the best performance.

Some folks figure the reason you stay is the company, going out for beers after class. Getting the plate of team wings and having a laugh.

Why not? In those cases your sensei should be the coach who teaches you how to win the tournament, and maybe he's the guy who buys the first pitcher and tells the first story.

I've met lots of sensei I like, who meet those criteria, but they're not the ones I treasure. The sensei I've met who have most influenced me, who are closest to my heart, are, how can I put this, disturbing.

This sensei is uncomfortable, often not very likeable, they disturb, they off-balance, they challenge, they almost never praise, they are never satisfied. They push, they prod, they have that "look" that they give you when you have figured something out and show them. The look that happens just before they blow through your newfound technique and put you on your ass.

This sensei is pretty simple. He forces change, constant, often violent change. Change in your technique, change in your attitude to life. He forces growth, plain and simple.

You know, sometimes the things he demands go in circles, you know how to strike, then you don't, you spend two years changing the strike, modifying it to please sensei and then, one day two years down the road, he's telling you to do it exactly the way you did it two years ago.

But it's not, it's not the same way is it? You've changed. You've grown, what's behind that strike is something quite different than was there originally.

Have you met one of these sensei? I hope you do.

Dec 22, 2018

The students I look for

The answer to that is "whoever shows up at class", to be honest, but last evening we got onto a somewhat more specific criteria. The students I most appreciate when they show up are the ones who will stick with this stuff for a long time, perhaps the rest of their lives. I've been fortunate enough to have had several of them. Two or three of them were with me at the bar last evening.

The Pamurai just got back from Chile where she was helping out with a jodo seminar. She has found herself a job and a boss who lets her spend a week working from her laptop. This was deliberate, she gets a lot from budo and intends to do it for a very long time. One of the first things she told us about the seminar was "Ueda sensei OWNED me". She was delighted that an 8dan took her to school on Ran Ai in front of a room full of students. This is a good attitude, "step up and get your medicine" as is said. You rarely look as bad as it feels from the inside but you've got to be willing to look awful in public if you want to keep improving on this stuff. Class last evening was three experienced students and two beginners. We spent an hour and a half on Mae from Seitei Gata Iai and I concentrated on "fixing" the seniors while letting the beginners "see and do". I look for resentment in my seniors in this sort of situation and I found none at all, just an openness to corrections without any worry about what that looked like in front of the newbies.

It doesn't hurt that they are a couple of post-grads and a Prof. I've always found that the ego is inversely proportional to the reasons to be prideful. That Prof is one of those who will stick for the long term I think, he was away from practice for a while, teaching at another college, but has returned and is as regular at class as he ever was. More than that, though, he has begun to pick up the work on Niten Ichiryu, organizing the next seminar, a fast one taking advantage of the instructor's travel to elsewhere. Picking up, not quite accurate, taking it away from me perhaps. This willingness to take up the work of organizing for others (the students) is another good sign. We don't make money at this stuff, we spend it, and so stepping up to organize a seminar or to start a dojo is a commitment without reward. It certainly shows willing.

A few other students were out last week doing the demonstration thing, to drum up the new students we need for the class. I wasn't there, its fade-away time for my generation, and that's a lot easier knowing that there is another generation to take over.

I wrote something like this to a student from Chile who passed his shodan and was thanking me for sending Pam to help out. I explained that the first generation has done their job, the five or six pioneers in South America have, through a huge effort and expense to themselves, obtained enough rank overseas to begin jodo grading's at home. This is not easy in the Kendo Federation, it takes a 4dan to sit on a shodan panel, and 4dan takes at a minimum, ten or eleven years. That's if you pass every grading at the first try, IF you can find a grading you can get to. Not only that, but you need 5 people to get this rank.

The effort has been made, and the first shodan grading has happened. This means the new ranks in Chile, Argentina, Uruguay and Brazil will be the future of the art. They will be the second generation, one that can be home-grown, and that means the leaders will be looking, already, for

their replacements. They will be looking for those who are willing to start new dojo, and help with future seminars, and just, mostly, get out to class to keep learning.

When someone flies in from overseas it can be assumed that they are keen, so you give them all you can. When it comes to home-grown, grading's and instruction is easier, so you need to search out the long-termers, nurture them a bit, make sure you don't load them up with work too soon, make sure they don't get burned out by others.

Oh yes, I've had promising students who I've asked to do too much too soon, but not many. On the other hand, I've had far too many who have been used up and thrown away by others. That I do not appreciate at all. These guys aren't a "dime a dozen" and we aren't paying them. To ask them, to expect them, to do too much in exchange for no pay, expense to themselves in fact, and to be rewarded by abuse and criticism is a very good way to move them on to some other hobby.

Find your replacements and use them well. Give them as much as you can, let them pull the work away from you, don't thrust it at them.

And recognize them when you see them. They're not hard to spot, they're the ones that show up at class for ten years or so. Appreciate them, they are gems.

More valuable than rubies.

Sept 15, 2018

Perfection

Seek perfection of character. We used to do the dojo kun before every Tae Kwon Do class. Live the way of truth, endeavour, be faithful, refrain from violent behaviour. I haven't thought about that for years, but now I wonder why? I mean, why aren't we reciting something similar in our Japanese budo classes? Why just Karate and TKD? A certain sensei I know would say "the peasants need to be reminded of that stuff, us samurai types already know it". Peasants includes jodoka by the way, according to him, Ashigaru.

Never mind, it's cultural I'm sure. But perfection, that's what I'm supposed to be talking about right now. That's perfection in the kihon and by extension perfection in the kata. We need to seek it, constantly.

What are the kihon for? Oh, step back, kihon are bits of movement from the martial art you're doing. So they are for learning the movements of your art right? Yes, sure, and that's where many people stop. How else to explain being in a large seminar with Namitome sensei out front doing all the kihon with us. I glanced up and down the lines and there was a very interesting pattern of head angles. In the beginner ranks the faces were turned toward sensei. In the senior ranks they were straight forward. The beginners were moving roughly the same as sensei, the seniors were all over the place, each one in his own head. What a waste of a class (we often did a half a day of kihon at the start of each seminar). I'm sure the seniors thought it was a waste of time too, they knew the kihon and were eager to "move on" to the kata.

So everyone was in agreement that the kihon were a waste of time, although perhaps for different reasons. Did I mention that Namitome sensei was out front, leading, doing every single kihon the rest of us did? I don't do that in my classes these days, it hurts too much, but I do as many as I can because I want the class to know the timing of Namitome sensei, and all the other hanshi who have visited over the years. How do I know that timing? I watched sensei and relaxed into it, I matched it until I learned it.

I have ranted and raved about this for a long time, and our seniors do tend to take this stuff seriously. In fact the seniors in the CKF jodo section voted to put kihon into every rank test up to 3dan (the highest rank we could offer at the time) so that all the dojo would be reminded that kihon was important. If I remember the discussion, it was something like "my students don't like doing kihon so we need to have it in the grading's to force us to do it". A later proposal for partner kihon in the grading's was vetoed by me on the grounds of time, as in not enough of it at the May seminar, but that's in the back of my mind. No we won't introduce it to the smaller grading's, you don't have variations from one grading to another, and you don't drop changes into grading's on a whim. All this stuff has to go through the CKF exec and board.

What is it that our seniors understand about kihon? That it's more than just learning the movements of Jodo, that it's about perfecting the movements of jodo. The kihon are where you can isolate a movement and work on it, give it your full concentration. It's not about repetition, it's about the gift of multiple chances to do a perfect movement. It's about the gift of making multiple small changes in your performance at one time in one place in that search for perfection.

On Sunday I was asked "can you do that? Is it allowed?" when I showed a variation. I replied "call it a kihon". You can extract a movement from a kata and practice it, that's allowed. In fact, for seniors, it should be encouraged as something that shakes up the practice, which forces some attention back onto the movements. Recently we switched our hands on the sword and did iai kihon just to remind the seniors what it felt like to struggle. Incidentally, if you do jodo this hand switch isn't as disturbing as one might think.

Don't be perfect only in the kihon, the kata are supposed to be perfect too. It's amazing how well some people can do the kihon and then completely lose that skill when doing the kata. There's nothing like rushing through a kata while being worried about that sword coming toward your head, to make for short, tight, herky-jerky movements.

Slow down, calm down, and be perfect in the kata. There's plenty of time in the back alleyway when the alien samurai or the fast zombies attack, to get all tight and jerky with your stick. No need to practice that in class.

And the coffee, which was black, bitter and hot this morning is now gone.

Perfection.

Nov 13, 2018

Leading horses to water

After a lot of years of trying to make everyone as good as they can be, I no longer worry too much about "everyone". You can lead a horse to water but you can't make it drink. This saying has some application to budo. You can give someone a suggestion but you can't make them try it out.

During a seminar I will give a bit of advice to anyone, and as the event progresses I find myself talking to fewer and fewer people. I give some advice and then I watch to see what happens. If the student makes no attempt at all to try out the advice, the message is clear. "I don't want your help thank you very much".

Fine with me. I'll move along.

You know, reading this over again I realize I tend not to do it like that these days, I give the advice and move on, try it or not, up to you.

The student side of this might be useful to think about. If sensei tells you to try something, concentrate and try it. Forget about what you were working on, you are now working on what sensei is telling you to do. That's if you want sensei to help you at all of course. Your choice, drink or not.

We talked about this in class a few weeks ago and one comment was "even if sensei tells you to do something, often the body just won't do it". That may be true, but when I say "look at the enemy, don't ignore him" and the next repetition shows no effort whatsoever to look, not even a twitch of the head, I'm not buying that it's an attempt that is refused by the body. Not, at least, from someone who has been doing this stuff for ten years.

Or ten minutes.

Now, there are times when the student you are talking to just doesn't understand what you're saying. This happens, especially when they are not your student. Background is important, if you don't know the particular shorthand of that sensei you may not understand what he is asking you to do. The solution of course is to say "hai" and do whatever you have been doing right? He'll tell you again if you didn't do it right? No of course not, the solution is to say "I don't understand what you're asking me to do". What I'm saying here is that if you don't try to do it, sensei wanders away and you are left wondering what he was asking you to do.

This happens to me with other people's students at lower ranks and with my own students at higher ranks. Weird but true, I seem to get less understandable over the years.

Can you force those horses to drink the water? Some people think so, you tell them to do something and then you look for that on the next test. If they haven't changed it you fail them. I'm not a fan of that. It's not good judging, especially if what you're asking is a personal preference, something that doesn't require an automatic fail on a test. Are there automatic fails? Some say so, but I've never seen them listed anywhere.

Seminars are for learning. Learning means drinking the water that sensei has led you to. Give it a try. If you don't trust that sensei, and he's not the type to "go off on you" ranting and raving at full volume, just don't do what he asked you to do, he'll go away. If he's the ranting and raving type, try doing it, try random things, keep changing what you're doing until he gets bored and goes away. Or do nothing and enjoy the show as he explodes.

There are always those who will lead a horse to water and then try to force it to drink.

Nov 19, 2018

One bling to rule them all

Bling being style of course, and style being what your sensei has. All sensei have style, and when it comes to koryu they have their own style.

Kisshimoto sensei, former chair of the iaido committee in Japan once said that for seitei iai it was OK to learn from several instructors up until about 3dan or so, then you should settle on one instructor so that your style isn't a muddy mix. If the judges can identify who your teacher is by your style, they are more likely to pass you.

That's seitei, that's passing an exam because the panel knows who is teaching you.

Incidentally, speaking of iaido, someone is telling folks I have quit iaido. I haven't, I'll be teaching in a month or so in Peterborough with my teacher and my student. If you want to see what a lineage of style looks like, register (today), come on out and see how the three of us relate to each other. This will be koryu, where there is often nothing but style, nothing but "do it the way your sensei does it". There's usually a bit of grading prep too, if you're grading, register (today) and do that.

One hanshi has said you need a single sensei to pass the highest ranks in seitei gata. This may be a bleed over from koryu. The kendo federation seems to say otherwise, they say that the art is standardized. They demonstrate their non-lineage based leanings by how they send out official delegations. You cannot ask the Japanese kendo federation to send a specific instructor if that instructor is to sit a grading panel. Well you can, but if it's a higher rank grading they are going to tell you that you can't do that. You request a delegation and they decide who they will send. The delegation that will visit Toronto in December has just been named (Mitani s. and Hatakenaka s.). I wonder if the delay in naming the delegation is part of the solution to the gifting scandal of a couple years ago. If the panelists are not named ahead of time it's more difficult to gift them. I strongly suspect the lack of choice in asking for specific visitors is related to that.

What about kendo? I know that around here the kendo folk have little trouble practising in different dojo, it makes for a full week of practices should you be that genki. This fluidity of instruction may be part of the culture of "sending who they send" from Japan. That said, I suspect that at the higher kendo ranks it would be of some value to concentrate on a specific style/sensei.

I should mention that the "ask and get who you get sent" only applies to Japan. You can request specific instructors from any other country should you need them to sit a panel. That means you could have a specific style being taught over many years by your invited visitor who will also sit your panel.

Now, apart from "official" requests for grading panellists there are also "private" requests and I have been told, in no uncertain terms (got called on the carpet a few years ago) that the kendo federation has nothing at all to say about this. They are aware that koryu exists, they have no interest in who you learn from for either koryu or seitei, that's up to you. "Invite anyone you

want, just don't put them on a grading panel or they will get in trouble". "Private" means you pay and they can teach whatever you want them to teach. "Official" means you still pay but they teach only seitei and they can sit a panel.

The kendo federation has no objection to you following a single instructor for your seitei practice, I suspect they expect it as a matter of course. It's just the gradings that they are concerned with. A grading with a panel is, in fact, "anti-style" by definition. As a panellist it is your duty not to be swayed by a style that you like over one that you don't. Does this contradict what I said Kisshimoto sensei told us? He was speaking in "how to pass" mode, not "how to judge" mode. Humans are human, a recognizable style is more comfortable than one that seems to be cobbled together. It takes a well-trained judge to be unswayed by comfortable.

Style, it might be important in seitei for 4-5 dan, and it's probably important from 6dan up, but for koryu it's important from day one. There is no overall governing body for koryu, nothing that gives rank outside the lineage. Koryu "is" lineage. Maybe you've got an organization but I bet it's one guy at the top and a bunch of guys underneath who follow his style. The kendo federation may have lots of different folks with their own koryu lineages but those koryu are not really associated with the federation.

Why am I saying style is so important to koryu that it "is" koryu? Lately we've been having a sort of extended discussion in the dojo between later and earlier levels of teaching, between powerlifters and bodybuilders, between function and form. This is always percolating away underneath our practice and usually balances out depending on who's grading when. Recently we have had some practice in one of our arts that involved two different styles. If one is trying to do something "in one style" and has the "other style" in their mind at the same time, the result is some stuttering during the kata, some trying to remember which foot we're moving at this moment.

This is dangerous if we're in powerlifter mode. If I'm yelling "swing faster, hit the target, don't place the sword here and there, don't pose, hit him" while one of the partners is trying to remember which foot moves, there's a problem.

You can't chase two rabbits. You can certainly try, in iaido we have two styles, one for koryu and one for seitei. They have different goals and as long as you understand the differences, you can in fact, chase these two rabbits. But when you try to chase two rabbits after the same goal, if you try to practice two styles of one koryu within the same practice, it, frankly, doesn't work on anything but a superficial level.

The solution, in my dojo where I don't really care if people follow me or someone else, is to pick one and stick with it.

I honestly don't mind if you follow someone else. However, and there is a however, I expect you to learn the powerlifter stuff from the other guy because

1. it's rude if I stomp all over someone else's teaching
2. I probably don't know what he wants you to do anyway so I'll mess you up, and
3. you're going to find some stuff doesn't fit.

Style isn't actually meaningless bling, style in koryu is something that makes everything hang together, it's blue jeans and a t-shirt, you can relax into it and concentrate on doing what you need to do. If you switch from jeans to a suit and suddenly decide you're going to paint the shed because you've got half an hour before you go to the wedding, your style will interfere with doing the job. So you change back to jeans but now you don't have time to paint so you change back and now you're late for the wedding.

Style in koryu isn't something that you put on and off, you don't get to pick and choose this guy's swing and that guy's footwork. You follow your sensei, one sensei, in order to be able to do what your sensei can do. By doing that you end up looking like your sensei, you acquire his style. If he is a good instructor that style will be adapted to you, your experience, your body type, your mental attitude. Style isn't found in Walmart, it's not mass produced.

Ultimately, as you mature, as you learn what your sensei has to teach, after many, many years you may hear what Ohmi sensei says. "Show me YOUR iaido". Be careful you know who he is talking to, if you're a beginner he's not asking that you mix and match up some chimera. No. He's not actually talking to you at all, or if he is he's asking you to stop trying to do three different styles at once, or to do four different "changes" at once.

Pick one. One bling to rule them all.

Oct 17, 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 "palpitations" 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 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.

Oct 29, 2018

Move from the centre

I have a note tucked into my notebook (a meta-note?) that says moving from the centre implies two things. I have no idea what was in my head at the time I wrote it, but let's go with it and see what happens.

Sort of like when someone says "what if he does this" and you say "I don't know, try it and see... oh, that. You OK?"

Ah, I think I see. So moving from the centre can mean two things but I disagree with both. I wonder which two things? To move your arms around "from the centre" is a thing I hear said. It has something to do with keeping your elbows in, to punch or kick outward from your centre of mass with the aim of keeping the movement connected to the ground. Disconnect your arm from your centre (raise your elbow) and you have nothing to connect to as you apply force. Like trying to start a screw into metal over your head. All you end up doing is pushing yourself backward off the ladder.

Seems reasonable as far as it goes, and it goes a long way.

There's a mental aspect to this as well. You should be "centred" before you do things, if you're mentally off balance you will make mistakes and get hit on the head. If you're physically off balance you may perform your technique correctly but there will be no power there. Which is what I said above isn't it?

Yet I disagreed with the idea of moving from the centre, I suspect because moving from something implies leaving it. Don't move from the centre, move the centre.

There, clever neh? Move the centre, move the whole thing. I seemed to want to talk about kata and moving in pieces. If you move "things" like your foot then your arms, even if you move from the centre you will get hit. Swords are fast, you can't move things separately. You must move the centre instead. Everything must be in the centre, you must be centred, and then move the centre.

Even the centre can be a piece to be moved. If you fold your body in half as you move your tanden away from the swinging sword, your head remains in the path of the attack. You get hit. Lots of people move the tanden and leave the head and feet in one place. Or move the head and feet and then the tanden. Don't confuse the tanden with the centre. The entire body should be left upright, shoulders over feet, and the entire unit should move when you move.

What if you do your part of the kata and your partner does his? That's moving in pieces too, you aren't together, you aren't unified, you aren't centred. In fact you are probably ignoring each other, which causes the kata to go off balance, move here and it wobbles in that direction, your partner then moves there and it wobbles back in the other direction. I've got bokuto and jo that are straight "on average". They have wobbles in them which is why I get to use them. The good ones get sold. A kata may wobble to a conclusion and the partners may say it's good "on average". Well, sensei may say that, the partners probably figure it's fine.

Kata have a centre, it's somewhere between the two partners and it moves as you do. If you move to one side when your partner cuts, the centre moves along with the attacking line. The trick in a kata is to get your partner to stay on the original attack line while you are now on the new attack line. He attacks nothing, you attack him. You are centred, he is off centre, unbalanced. This is what Musashi meant when he said move both feet when you move, right left, right left. Don't step off the line and leave your back foot on the original line. It's not that your partner's laser sword will cut off your heel, it's that you won't be aiming at him. Right left, now you're centred, hopefully within the maai, ready to cut. If you do this skillfully enough you don't have to cut him. That's budo.

Think of a kata as two objects orbiting each other. There's a centre of rotation of the pair. That centre moves around depending on what kata you are performing.

How about solo kata, how about iai? This idea of moving the centre can be very effective. I discovered a video of myself doing Seitei Gata a few months ago. It was awful. I know I asked for it to be filmed because I thought my knees were doing pretty well. They were not. I was off balance, body swaying around like Matsu Kaze, a pine tree in the wind. There was no connection to the floor. This was an excellent example of how not to perform iai.

Consider Mae. Sit in balance, nose over bellybutton, shoulders over hips. Now rise and draw the sword... wrong. That's what I was doing, trying to get off the screaming knees. You do not rise, you drive the centre forward, your upper body remains calm and quiet, and your hips drive forward. Because your femur, your thigh bone is not bendy, your upper body ends up rising due to the levering action at your knees. That upper body must rise as a unit, not fall forward, and this happens if your hip joint is free to rotate (your upper body is relaxed). "Soft above, strong below". You move into the draw and cut as a unit, your centre moves. At any point during the movement you should be able to rise up. Your foot, moving forward, should be able to hit the ground and you should be able to rise to your feet. The entire kata should be done centred, with your centre of mass between your feet. If you try to stand and end up shooting across the dojo off balance, you aren't moving the centre, you're moving from the centre. You're bending over.

Don't move from the centre, stay there in the centre and then move the centre.

Nov 2, 2018

Notable Seitei Iai

Is there any martial art out there that is more notable than Seitei Iai? Seriously, I must have six or seven hundred pages of notes hanging around. Every seminar I attend means another 10 or 20 pages.

I'm going from front to back in my current notebook, looking for tidbits, and came across a page that is labeled "Chile Iaido Notes". They are sparse, I was supposed to be teaching and helping. What happened, now that I think back on it, was that I got an hour or so to teach and at the end of it was told "great, now we'll go back to doing the stuff that will help these guys pass the grading". Yep, that's me, showing people stuff that will help them improve for the next year or three instead of telling them what's in the book. Ah well, I buggered off outside and taught impromptu jodo classes in the sunshine.

Go where you are of use, why would you not? Why hang around while someone else is teaching? "Oh you should walk around and help" you say? That doesn't work, first, you can help the guy on the edge of the forest of swinging metal, and when you help, he is not listening to what the other guy is saying. You don't need assistant teachers in an iaido class, you need safety monitors. So yes, for a couple years at these seminars I was the guy who snuck outside to teach jodo to anyone else who wanted to sneak out.

That's the nice thing about not caring about snarky remarks at dinner. I mean seriously, what would anyone be able to do to me that I would care about? I'll work on giving value for money, I was flown in, I ought to be doing more than standing around with my arms crossed watching people get read the manual.

Now there were a couple of times when the Japanese showed up and taught, so here are the remarks I wrote down. From Kamikokyuro sensei (hanshi iai, hachidan kendo from Kagoshima).

1. "Put the inside of the tsuba on the centre line". This must have meant the corner of the tsuba and fuchigane (saya), I think we were being mostly told at that moment that the rim of the tsuba was on the centre line, which would push the sword more forward toward the invisible enemy. If I remember right, the North American nanadans were all goggle-eyed and shaking their heads at this one, which is why I would have written it down. Obviously something new and shocking.
2. "Cut with the tip of the sword and use your wrist". Not that I've got any right to comment on a hanshi's instruction, but this seemed about right to me for the skill level of the crowd. Somewhere between nidan and yondan the wrists have to be unlocked from that death grip on the hilt that characterizes the first four or five years of practice.

From Futogoishi sensei (hanshi kendo)

1. "Turn with the hips". You'll notice that hips are mentioned twice here, yet I'm not entirely sure they're mentioned in the book at all. They must be. Point your bellybutton at the opponent. This is kendo iai so just do it, the basis of Seitei iai is kendo. How can it not be? Somewhere I read that the riai of zen ken ren iai (seitei) is kendo no kata, so consider that. You don't "turn with the hips" in kendo because you never have multiple opponents, but you damned well aim the bellybutton at the opponent.

2. "On Sanpogiri, do a vertical cut". This has to be in reference to the first cut, the other two are vertical without question. I seem to remember a big discussion of at least 15 minutes and 15 people in Toronto a couple years back where the English translation and the Japanese books were hauled out of bags on this very point. If I remember, the English book says this cut is "almost" or "nearly" vertical or something like that. The Japanese book says vertical. Now there was, in fact, some discussion on the Japanese wording, whether it could mean "coming down from above" rather than "vertical" but our 9dan aikido sensei said "no way it means anything other than vertical".

So there you are, it's vertical. Honestly, it is, I've said this before, if a hanshi says it's so, it's so unless you can show him that the book says something else. The only way you can argue with a hanshi is with written proof. I'll refine that now to say "and it better be the Japanese language version of the book".

I love this stuff. I hope it didn't show on my face how much amusement I was getting from the argument in Toronto and the instruction in Chile, watching all the "slightly angled" folks' faces. After all, how do you cut vertically from the scabbard without making the cut two moves? How can this be done without cutting your left ear off? May I suggest you "Ask your sensei".

3. "On the turn in Morotezuki, there is a small delay on the hands". I have to be honest here and tell you I don't remember what the point was here, but I can guess. The move from the thrust to the cut behind is a constant problem. You do not pull the sword out of the opponent, but you must pull it out. You do not hesitate overhead. There are some who say the tip of the sword must be above the hilt always, and those who say the hilt can move above the tip when the sword is coming out of the opponent. And then of course, there is the question of how far into the opponent your tip is anyway.

So what is this delay? It's not overhead that's for sure. It has to be as you begin the turn toward the rear. Now is that delay in lifting it up, or is the delay in lifting it up and in the turn? If you delay your hands on the turn your left hand will come away from your centre-line and it will mean your arms are left behind as you turn toward the rear opponent. If you move your hands with your centre line but don't lift them at the same time, it will look like you're pulling the sword out of the body, which you're not supposed to do as a separate movement from the turn and cut. It's all supposed to happen together. If you lift and keep your hands on the centre line as you start the movement your tip will naturally become lower than the hilt as it comes out of the body.

Oh my, what to do? You figure it out. Or "ask your sensei".

4. "Turn sharply with the hips". I can't imagine a more concise statement of how to jump your iaido to the next level. Seriously, this is perfect. For example, all that talk about a small delay on the hands? Turn sharply with your hips, concentrate on that, keep your left hand on the centre line of your body and cut the fellow behind you immediately, the instant your bellybutton points at him. Any problem with the pull out and turn? Hah. Just because there are volumes and volumes of notes on Seitei Iai doesn't mean it's complicated. The fallacy of expanding time in kata. Didn't I call that Taylor's Fallacy at one time? Too much stuff being discussed for the actual time available.

Turn sharply with the hips.

5. "Cut flat and sharp". There are two general shapes of cut in the kendo federation. One is what I was taught and what Oda sensei said was the older, more common shape. This is the one where we "sweep the ceiling". It's large and circular, we reach upward as well as forward with the tip. The second is more recent and likely comes out of the 200 plus years of shinai geiko, it's a much more flat trajectory, one moves the tip of the sword toward the target rather than up and across the ceiling. At the target, both shapes are in the same position, both are moving at the same speed (to punch into the target) and both cuts finish the same way, with tenouchi and the hips moving into the target etc. etc. As long as you reach the target with the correct conditions it doesn't matter how you get there. Now you may think that a kendo cut is different from your iaido cut, especially if you do the big round one, but remember that a kendo cut is "taken off" the target, it isn't completed, at least it isn't completed by experienced kendoka. Beginners tend to give their partners headaches.

Cut sharp. This ought to be clear but just in case, this does not mean "move the sword into the final position, the checkpoint position, as fast as you can". Cut (think about it) sharp (think about that).

I've got some other notes here, they must have been from the next day when I stayed indoors to see if I was wanted or needed to teach iai, and before I went back outside to do some more jodo. I have no idea who was teaching, I suspect Kamikokyuro sensei once more.

Uke Nagashi: "Ipyoshi" all at once, fast, quickly, without hesitation or delay. The exact translation has been worried over and chewed on for decades, but think instead, of the kata. You're sitting there minding your own business and someone attacks you, cutting down at your head, from the left side. How do you move? Clear now? Drifting around like you're getting ready to go to work isn't going to do it. Like the house is on fire? More like it.

"L/R hands on". Hmm, interesting, but it makes sense, this was at the time when we were being told to take the hilt upward, close to the chest and to draw to saya banari as we rise to the left foot forward position. To do this it makes sense to lift with the left hand and drive the right hand upward, close to the body, picking up the hilt on the rise. This makes Uke Nagashi and Nuki Uchi the same movement.

Tsuka Ate: "The tsuka kashira is on the opponent, draw with the left hand, not the right" Makes sense, even if the opponent has been "blown away" and is sitting on his butt five feet in front of you, your right hand is at full extension so the only way to draw is with the left hand pulling the saya off the sword. Oh, you can still use your right hand can you? Can you do it without pushing your right shoulder and pitching your weight/balance forward so that the guy behind only has to shove you onto your face before killing you? Draw with the left hand.

"Draw with the turn of the hip, like shihogiri". What we just discussed, don't lean forward, pull the left hand back and turn at the same time. Let your left elbow come behind your back so the sword stays on the same line.

"The turn of the hip turns the foot or leg". Don't cross your left leg from your knee, you will go off balance. Use your hips to turn, as you turn your leg will naturally come into that 90 degree position (or your foot if you're doing shihogiri). Concentrating on your hips rather than your right shoulder (to draw the sword) or your feet (to place them into the checkpoint positions), will mean you maintain your balance and your strength.

Lots of notes, but how much of all this did you really need? If you do what I call "functional iaido" you can avoid a lot of these words. What is happening? How can you deal with what is happening? Here's a kata, a way to deal with it, using some suggested movements. Now do it from your hips, sharply, with proper cuts and in balance.

You'll get there.

Dec 30, 2018

Jiki Tsu or The Value of Research

Nothing comes from nowhere might be another title for this one. A good friend sent me some of his translation yesterday and I'm happily going through it. According to my notebook I was intending to do an essay on "nothing comes from nowhere" in relation to koryu, new and old. An example might be Muso Shinden Ryu iai, that modern school of iaido that appeared sometime in the 1930s, founded by Nakayama Hakudo.

It is, as all you young internet researchers will know, a branch of Muso Jikiden Eishin Ryu, not new at all, just what Nakayama learned in Tosa and took back to Tokyo. Does it look different? Sure it does, because now we know it's actually the Shimomura ha of Muso Jikiden Eishin Ryu and the usual MJER (OK I'll use contractions, my shoulders hurt, what's your excuse?) is Tanimura ha. Only it doesn't look like Shimomura ha either, not the stuff I've seen at least. In fact it looks like something with bits of each, and in the case of the further development of Muso Shinden Ryu to Kendo Federation Seitei, specifically the first kata (Mae) it looks these days like folks have taken two movements from the two streams, smacked them together and come up with something that doesn't work. I've shown lots of my students so if you want to see my opinion on that, ask them. They ought to be able to demonstrate.

Reading, researching the lineage, can explain a lot of the strange bits in our arts because... Nothing comes from nowhere.

I really appreciate translations of Japanese works, the old documents continue to show up and be published, but the audience, even in Japan is tiny, so translations aren't a high priority for anyone. They do show up, and I try to find them. Recently some translations of the works of Musashi have appeared. We will all know about the Go Rin no Sho, the last book from Miyamoto Musashi. Except for the Dokkodo perhaps.

In the Go Rin no Sho we read that Musashi "had no oku level" no secret teachings, he laid it all out to see in the Go Rin. Very different than anyone else. Also different was the lack of menkyo scrolls, there seem to be none. And it's a tiny school, only a few folks under a single soke. This is stuff we all know.

Except we don't. Musashi had lots of students and lots of lines of his Niten Ichiryu came through the generations. How many are still around? There are at least four or five that I know of, and if you search hard enough you'll find video on the interweb.

Menkyo scrolls? I recently wrote a book called Hyoho which brought together a translation (not mine, an academic paper) with my interpretations of a document called the Sanjugokajo, or 35 articles. This was a document that Musashi wrote before the Go Rin no Sho. It contains the roots of the Go Rin, it is "where it came from". There is also a pretty good argument that the Sanjugokajo is a (the) transmission document for the Niten Ichiryu. Copies are signed "to my student so and so who now knows all that I can teach him" and there is at least one copy that is signed by one of Musashi's students to a student in the third generation with a similar dedication.

The difference between the Sanjugokajo and the Go Rin is that the latter seems more a summation of a martial philosophy, rather than a technical description of a school. This may be because Musashi was summing up his knowledge for his patron Daimyo rather than speaking to a student.

And the 35 articles? Back in his 20s Musashi wrote something called the Heidokyo (Hyodokyo) which had 28 articles and seemed to reach back to the days of the Enmei Ryu. The what? That was the school Musashi developed before the Niten Ichiryu (Nito Ichiryu perhaps, before Niten Ichiryu?). The Enmei Ryu may have come after Musashi taught yet another school.... damn... Tori Ryu? One his father may have taught him, one he carried on for a while. Things come from somewhere.

The Heidokyo included articles on Jutte and on throwing Shuriken, something that dropped out of the 35 articles and the Go Rin. What also dropped out was the division into sections, the last of which was... wait for it... Oku. In fact, there are later copies of the Heidokyo that are split into two scrolls, the second of which is Oku.

So what's this no oku stuff? Maybe it's not Musashi being a modern fellow who is opposed to elitism in the arts. Maybe he just got to the point where he decided there actually weren't any secrets. No secret to winning, no secret technique that would defeat all other schools if only they didn't see it first, so don't show them.

The very last article of the Heidokyo (I'm calling it that because my friend transliterated it as that) is Jikitsu no kurai, the proper position of "direct communication". I discussed Jiki tsu (as I write it in my Hyoho book) in an absence of knowledge. In his later writings Musashi named it and said "this is directly transmitted from me to my student". I speculated that it might be nothing more than the oral instructions one gives, the stuff so obvious one doesn't bother writing it down. Or it might be a way of seeing a kamae in an opponent and knowing which to respond with, as an author in the Enmei Ryu suggested.

Keep reading, keep researching. Yesterday I was informed that the original article in the Heidokyo states that when facing an enemy, look at his kamae. Choose the correct kamae to respond, fix your attention on the target, go straight in without hesitation, without doubt in your own ability, and kill him.

It is indeed the final piece of advice from a teacher to a student. It's the final thing to learn in budo after 30 years practice. It's the thing all of us think we know but don't, not until a lifetime of study. It's what we think "sutemi" means, throw your life away. Musashi wasn't an ai uchi kind of guy, it's not that.

This jiki tsu is the final thing I want to pass along to my current senior students. One or three of my former students get it. They will pass it along to a few of theirs.

What is it, exactly? Not sure I can put it in words but I can give a hint. Think of your fellow martial artists, young and old. Now consider that you are "going out behind the barn" with two of them to face three enemies. There will be killing. Which two of your fellows will you take along with you?

Finally getting a more detailed explanation of that article didn't tell me anything new, but it did put my mind to rest that it wasn't something new, that it wasn't something that I was missing in order to understand what I understand. Sometimes that's what research does for you, it confirms that you have not, in fact, missed something.

Ever blurted out some bit of wisdom to sensei, something you'd just read and thought was incisive and clever, only to have sensei look at you sort of bored and wait for you to stop talking? You just told him something he's known for years, maybe in different words. This is what we call "teaching your grandma to suck eggs".

As a student, that's one of the final lessons you need to learn, one of the hardest. There does come a time where you know enough, where you know what you need to know, you know what you know. That's the time when you stop asking sensei for the next secret and you start learning.

That's the time when you stop chasing the next book, the next big sensei, the next seminar and you start reading those books, listening to those sensei and absorbing those seminars. When you get to that stage, research isn't to find something brand new because there's nothing new there. It's to see something in a new light, that light shows different shadows on the wall behind you, it reveals different striations on the side of the thing, it triggers cascades of connections.

It shows you, perhaps, where something came from because, as we now know, nothing comes from nowhere.

Jiki tsu, direct communication, hara to hara. There's no pretending you "get it", there's nothing to do but go straight through.

Jan 25, 2019

The wrong word

"Don't drop your left hand!"

"Er, don't drop your hands, don't drop the right hand!" Damn, too late. I watched as the student struggled to do the movement while keeping that left hand up. It was the first thing heard, so it must be 1. correct and 2. important.

It was neither. It was sensei shouting from across the room, trying to say that if you don't keep your arms up the contact with your partner will be a shove sideways with the stick into his arm and not a thrust into his hip.

The Pamurai said to me later that "you have to know what sensei means to say even if he doesn't say it". Thanks a lot, I know I get all balled up between my head and my mouth once in a while but I didn't realize it was so often that we had to develop mechanisms to cope with it.

The point is that you need to listen to corrections carefully, especially brand new ones that you've never heard before. OK before we go further, you NEED TO LISTEN very, very carefully to corrections you've heard a thousand times before. You need to listen to them because you need to fix it. NOW. Sensei isn't going to be around forever to tell you to fix it, at some point you need to fix it.

But new ones? How do you think the old corrections got to be so old and familiar? Maybe you latched onto some part of the original correction and have been holding on to that forever. Something that wasn't right, that didn't fix the problem, something that you're doing over and over that isn't working. Maybe sensei is as sloppy about those repeated corrections as you are, telling you to fix it and looking away toward someone else while you attempt, yet again, to fix things by doing the wrong thing.

Sensei says "don't drop the left hand". You try to do it without dropping the left hand. It doesn't work. What do you do?

Do not change a dozen other things and make the movement even more awkward than it already is. In this case the instruction just before "left hand" was "rotate the stick vertically". (For jodo folks, we're talking about the second thrust of Rai Uchi, if you do it a different way don't pay too much attention to the specifics here. There are different ways but I want it done my way these days. Because reasons.) If you leave the left hand up over your head you can't rotate the stick vertically can you? Not unless you're Stretch Armstrong and can extend your right arm even higher. So, keeping that first (wrong) thing in your head firmly in mind, you rotate the stick horizontally, helicopter it, which is exactly what you have been told not to do, because it opens you up to an easy attack by tachi. How can that be right?

It can't, so stop, look at sensei like he's nuts and say "you're nuts, I can't do that". He will agree with you and say, no I meant your other left hand, don't drop your right hand, no, never mind the hands, don't drop the arms, no wait (he says desperately trying to get across what he really means) keep the stick high. Yeah, that's it, keep the stick high so that you can eventually thrust downward into the hip.

At which point some bright student takes pity on sensei and says quietly "like kaeshi tsuki". Knowing a lifeline when he hears it, sensei says "YES, rotate the stick just like kaeshi tsuki, no wait, it's even more like gyakute tsuki isn't it? Do gyakute tsuki".

"Don't drop the left hand" wasn't exactly wrong, in my defence, if the movement is done so that the left hand rises toward the end of the thrust, you're trying to shove the attacking arms sideways. Doesn't work. Keep the hands up, slam the jo "down the length of the jo" into the hip and you will collapse the posture, break the hip posture, and take all the energy out of the cut.

It's what works on me. Trying to stop my arms from swinging by blocking with the jo doesn't work, I just move the jo aside with the arms as I cut. A jo isn't a light sabre, it isn't even sharp, I can touch it. If you plant the end of the stick very firmly in my chest (first cut) or my hip (second), I rotate the body to dump it off and cut. Only if you slam it into my chest or hip hard enough to take my balance does it work. It's one of those "don't make me demonstrate this twice you guys, it hurts" things.

It's also one of those things that you experiment with, do until you can get it to work, when you don't have a sensei in front of you all the time to spoon feed you. Does this work? No? Why not? Let's try this. As opposed to "sensei this doesn't work". Do I make this stuff up? No I don't, it comes out of having a sensei say to me "this is a thrust". I usually have some reason to try the stuff I try. In fact I seem to recall being smacked in the hip several times by a hanshi as that point was being made.

The bottom line here is to be careful what you latch on to when you get a correction shouted across the dojo at you. Don't make a fetish of any corrections at all, but especially those that sensei got wrong. Make sure you both understand what, exactly, the correction is before you file it into the "now I'm going to have to work on this for the next five years until I get it right" drawer in your head. (Or just fix it now and forget it.)

Make sure you file the right word at least.

Jan 17, 2019

Be Yourself

My iaido sensei was asked what the one piece of advice he had for anyone at any grade level. His answer was be yourself first, then try to understand Japanese culture.

I remember a plane trip to England back at the beginning of my iaido career where sensei kept me up for the entire flight talking about this very thing. "I'm Japanese so I have to walk around on my knees doing tea ceremony but why would you want to do that?" It's a good question, and if I was trying to be Japanese, or trying to understand Japanese culture I would have a very hard time answering it.

There's no way I'm ever going to be Japanese. I'm not Japanese. Even if I were to marry a Japanese girl and live in Japan I'm not going to be Japanese, ever. It's not that kind of place, it's not that kind of culture.

That doesn't mean I will never understand the Japanese, I'm Canadian, I figure we're pretty well set up to understand the Japanese. Canadians have been under the shadow of two of the greatest empires ever known, the British and then the American. Japan has been under the shadow of a third, the Chinese. This mouse beside an elephant situation gives a certain world outlook and a certain tendency toward bellybutton gazing in a search of "what makes us Canapanese?"

Usually when we are not simply defining ourselves as "not them", we look to superficial things, to signs, like you have to like hockey to be Canadian. This can be used to create a certain "us versus them" attitude, where we no longer look for signs of "our tribe" but for shibboliths to identify "them". We've all heard of the Japanese kids who go overseas for a couple years and come back only to be called gaijin because they haven't kept up with the latest slang.

Hockey = Canadian? Stupid isn't it? Correct etiquette (as per this month in Tokyo) = iaido? Or you're a gaijin like those poor kids who follow their parents to the overseas job? Thing is, you can fake a liking for hockey but that won't make you Canadian, the signs and symbols are just so much kneeling and standing in the Latin Mass I used to watch with Granny from the organ loft. You know when, you have no idea why.

I don't like hockey, I don't dislike it, I'm just not interested, never had the money to play it. But I know I had family who were hung just down the road as rebels in the Rebellion of 1837 against the Family Compact in Toronto. (Which rebellion is the reason nobody likes Toronto by the way.) I know I have family of a generation earlier who were shot or hung as British spies during the American rebellion (they weren't spies, they were just Quakers who had some nice farmland) which is why they were in Canada in time for the Rebellion. The youngest part of my ancestors was my Granny's grandfather who left Saxony for Canada in 1863 because he didn't like the "damned Prussians" trying to unify the Germanys. Does that background make me Canadian? No. I was born here and grew up here that makes me Canadian.

One thing that is different between Canada and Japan has been identified by my sensei. Canada is a multicultural society and has that mindset. The USA is a "melting pot" which means you'd better turn into an American within a generation or else, and Japan is, well, unicultural. My

sensei has been told that he is no longer Japanese, "good" he says. He really isn't, he is one of the most multicultural people I know. I very much doubt he'd be happy back in Japan.

What's the difference between Multicultural, Melting pot and Unicultural? One way to think about it is to look at the way we define our tribe. If you look for signs of inclusion, and those signs can expand, you're multicultural. If you look for signs of exclusion, for "the other" but you will accept strangers into the tribe as long as they assimilate, you are a melting pot, and if you simply look for signs of exclusion you're unicultural. OK that's pretty digital, nothing is black and white, but it might provide a starting point for thinking about culture. (By the way, for those who have trouble with "melting pot" think of Donald Trump, a kid of immigrants who is basing his campaign on banning immigration and whipping up fears of "the other".)

How strong is a culture that depends on up to the minute symbols for inclusion? How strong is a culture that relies on you being the arse-end of a family tree that has been in one spot for seven generations?

Be yourself.

Then try to understand another culture.

You cannot flip from one culture to another, that's like trying to go from air-breathing to water-breathing. Culture is the medium through which you walk or swim. Do you notice air? Culture is what you don't notice.

Be yourself, be who you are, be comfortable in that. If you grew up in one place, you're part of that culture. If you grew up split between two places, that is you. Your culture is one foot in one place, one in another. Be comfortable with that.

The very strongest cultures are ones that are accepting of others. Look at the greatest empires that ever existed, the ones that lasted more than a few years. Look at China, it is not unicultural. To have a big empire is to be multicultural by definition. Unicultural urges tear empires apart.

If you want to make an empire of the mind, be accepting of many cultures, starting with your own, and then go on to accept others. To try to switch from one to another is a bit dysfunctional, wishful thinking at best.

If you want to understand Japanese culture through iaido, start from being yourself and then you have a place to stand. This project will be more likely to succeed if you have a sensei like mine, who will allow you to be both yourself and a samurai of the Edo period (the root culture of iaido). If your sensei is a Japanese who believes that you will never be a Japanese, that you can't understand iaido without being Japanese.... wait, you wouldn't have a sensei who thinks that, would you? Umm, maybe? "There's none so Scots as the Scots abroad."

I almost wrote "so why would you stay with such a sensei" but then I remembered my answer to my sensei on that plane flight 30 years ago. "I'm not interested in being Japanese or even learning Japanese culture, I do iaido because the practice of iaido is useful to me personally. The practice is the thing, not the culture of the Edo period or the culture of Japan today. Iaido is my meditation practice and it is the place where I study posture and the transfer of power from the floor to the tip of the sword." If you are not trying to be Japanese you can comfortably agree with the comments of a sensei who says "you're not Japanese" as being a true, if irrelevant statement.

First, be yourself.

Oct 18, 2016

Family vs Koryu

I suspect the vast majority of those who get involved in a koryu happened to stumble over it in their back yards. Long distance travel and moving to another country is a romantic idea and a focused way to practice, but probably best reserved for the young, enthusiastic and dedicated since it means not having much of a life otherwise. Unfortunately due to the realities of koryu, it's still one of the few ways you can do things if you insist on studying some specific arts.

For anybody "with a life" the best advice might be to look around your area and find the best teacher you can, then do that art no matter what it is. 60 hours a week supporting a family doesn't leave much time for practice so having something close-by is the practical solution until the kids are up and out of the house and the wife wants you to do the same.

Of course it's best to do the combative sports when you are young, that's a career arc that usually happens before the family. The weapons arts (barring competitive kendo of course) can wait until you're older, most of the koryu can actually wait until after the family, and one can even blend into the other. Start kendo when you're ten, work hard and build up the fitness and the reactions for fifteen years while having fun on the tournament circuit. Have the kids and the work career while changing from competitor to sensei and start a new art like iaido or jodo. Then, after the family and after the coaching is done you can concentrate on the koryu for yourself.

In fact, the contacts you make through your kendo will allow you to find any koryu nearby, and if you still want to go to Japan for that specific koryu, you'll find someone.

At ten you want to jump around and smack each other. At 30 you want to sleep after a long day at the office, and at 50 you want to swing that sword without blowing that achilles tendon. We live a long time these days, you actually can have it all so have patience, it will all be there waiting.

October 3, 2013

Don't Presume

To speak for your elders, your sensei, your granny or anyone else if they can still speak for themselves. Or even after they are dead, unless you include the words "I think" somewhere in that speech.

I've seen much too much assumption in my life that I later checked and found was totally off base and it irritates me to no end. If you are asked to speak for someone, speak in that person's voice, not your own, not even through the filter of your own wishes and desires. You don't pick and choose when you're a spokesman or an interpreter, you speak for and you translate. Don't edit, censor or explain.

This can apply to objects and a great example is the photograph by Ruth Orkin entitled "An American Girl in Italy" 1951. Go ahead and look it up. This photo is being used right now as an example of "harassment of women by men on the street". I dunno why, easy to get hold of I suppose, assumption that it's out of copyright? Regardless, it's a great example of speaking for your granny, of putting your own agenda atop the life experience of previous generations and it shouldn't be done.

You see, this particular granny is still alive and living in Toronto Ontario right now at 87 and her name is Ninalee (Jinx) Craig. I know this because she wrote a letter to the Globe and Mail and said "... as long as I breath, I will maintain I was not being harassed in Italy. I was young, free and having the time of my life." If you're not old enough to have heard that nickname, it was usually given to someone who sounds just like Ms. Craig.

Now look at that photograph again.

I was raised by working women. Both my grandmothers worked and contributed at least half the income to their families. My paternal granny was a single mother. My mother worked her entire life and was a single mother. My girlfriends and my current wife all worked and continue to work I presume. None of them felt downtrodden or glass ceiled or victimized any more than the men in their lives, or any less. I think you need to be at least upper middle class (able to survive as a family on one salary) before you can start talking about being oppressed as opposed to having to work for a living. The 50s were five minutes and some folks didn't have those union jobs at the car factory. My mother would have loved to stay at home and paint instead of working as an X-ray technician. I know because she told me so. Harassed? Sure, harass me right onto the sofa to watch the soaps she might have said.

I suspect there are a great many women out there who might not appreciate having their lives spoken for. I know my mother had little time for what my daughter now calls "first world problems". Like being looked at while walking down the street in Italy. Several years ago a Spanish grad student working in my department angrily cornered me and demanded to know why Canadian men wouldn't look at her. "She was good looking, she dressed well, she did her makeup well and these jerks wouldn't even acknowledge that, let alone appreciate just how good

looking she was." It took me a while to calm her down and explain that in Canada if we did what she asked of us we might just get fired.

One woman's joy in life is another's harassment. Which has the right to speak for the other?

If you must speak, speak for yourself, not your elders, not your sensei. They have their own voices and their own life experience which is greater than yours. They know where the closets are buried and what's hidden away from the kids in the back of the skeleton. When you've been around long enough to have built the world you live in, comment on that one. Don't presume to understand the world you've been handed, you weren't there on the street having a blast in Italy. Riding a Vespa in a short dress. Flipping off the boys as you stride by on your way somewhere exciting and, if you're lucky, maybe a bit scandalous.

I bet my daughter just smiled.

Dec 13, 2014

Rules and Riai

When we talk about riai (the principles behind the art) in iaido we generally talk about what the invisible opponent is doing (the meaning of/in the kata), and of course this is the first step. So how, being good students, do we figure out what's going on without having sensei take us by the hand and tell us?

With Seitei Gata this is a lot more easy than with most koryu. In Seitei we have the book which contains checkpoints of where the sword and body is at various times during the kata, and how we are to move between these points. From this we can figure out where our opponent is, and what he's doing.

Take Tsuka Ate, the instructions are to rise up onto our right foot from tate hiza, thrust the tsuka into the suigetsu of the opponent in front (slam the hilt into his solar plexus) and then draw to thrust back at the rear opponent before returning to cut down the one in front. So get a couple of fellow students and go to the end points of each strike. Thrust and have your friend put his suigetsu at that point, now relax as he moves in a couple of inches, that's him arranged, he sits down. Now thrust to the rear and have your second friend put his suigetsu on the tip of your bokuto. A couple of inches forward and he's set, everyone sit down. Now go through the kata slowly, in order to hit the front opponent at the correct height according to the book, he has to be upright and damned close, he collapses back onto his heel while you turn and thrust the fellow behind. (We know he collapses allowing you the space to draw because if he doesn't the final cut doesn't work.) And the fellow behind... oh, so he's got to be upright too, so he'd better be upright as you're hitting the front fellow which means he's.... grabbing your shoulders. So both of these guys are grabbing for you rather than trying to draw their swords, and it's only the final cut to the front fellow who has fallen backward that is a full sword technique as we usually think about it. Up to then it's what I call the jujutsu of sword, you're inside the range of the usual swing trying to shake off attackers who are grabbing at you while you draw and deal with them.

Let your buddies lay hands on you and then do the kata, see what that does to your posture and your use of the hip turn and all that other stuff sensei is always nagging you about. Does his instruction make a bit more sense now?

The riai of iaido has to start with figuring out what teki is doing because otherwise we are waving our blades in the air with no real feeling of what's happening.

As I mentioned, this is a bit more difficult when we're thinking about the riai of koryu as we don't usually get a book of rules. For koryu (and a more subtle appreciation of Seitei come to that) we have to understand the kihon of the art, when we put the sword at this angle and move it in this way what is it that we are doing? More plainly, if we draw and move the tip across horizontally what are we cutting? We all know that one, so now we know roughly what our opponent is doing and what our target is. Is he back on his heels or up at your height? Do we have to move in now or can we cut him vertically without moving?

All this understanding of what your opponent is doing gives your iaido more feeling, more presence. It gets your iaido to the level of a beginner in any of the arts of kenjutsu or jodo that work with partners... oops did I say that out loud?

Now you know why sensei keeps telling you to roll your eyeballs out of your head, look at teki and stop dancing. Only then can you start getting to the good stuff.

Aug 5, 2013

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Kim Taylor