

Half a Century IX

About fifty pages of thoughts from Kim Taylor.

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Kim Taylor (that's me) is a long time martial artist living in Guelph Ontario. I've written a couple dozen books on the subject, several scholarly articles, edited several magazines and generally done what I can to spread the word.

Having tried all that, I also post short essays on the 'net and these have been collected here for your convenience. Since I'm only offering these in ebook form the formatting is pretty simple, one might even say "default".

Most of these will cover the martial arts that I am concerned with, Aikido, Iaido, Jodo, Niten Ichiryu and a couple more which will probably get mentioned along the way. If you don't know about them there are loads of resources available on the 'net.

You will also find a lot of martial arts jargon. Again I refer you to the 'net where you will find definitions of most of the words I use. I don't expect there will be many non-budo types reading this so I'm not going to worry about defining the foreign words or even identifying them as foreign by, for instance, putting them in italics. My book, my rules.

If someone out there figures this stuff could be edited into a proper book and published, get in touch if you've got the editor, I thought about it once but would rather write something new than edit something already written.

If you want to check out any of those books you can do so at <http://sdksupplies.com/> where you might also find more of these Half a Century ebooks.

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The Kendo Federation and Koryu

A couple times recently I've been asked about koryu and the Kendo Federation, so maybe I should say a bit about it.

For those who don't know the situation I'll start at the beginning. The Kendo Federation was, not surprisingly, set up for kendo, it has loads of members, lots of school kids practice and lots of adults carry on into later life. Something that can happen with a bit more ease than perhaps basketball, but may be similar to, say, running.

Around 1968 the federation decided that it should include iaido, mostly so that kendo people would have a way to learn how to handle a real blade which would help their shinai kendo practice. Now my opinion is that the kendo people had the kendo no kata for that, so there was little need for iaido, but several highly ranked kendo people also practiced iaido and I suspect they figured being part of the kendo federation would help them pick up some students. In other words it was a bit of a scam and it worked.

The same can be said for jodo which arrived in the kendo federation through the Tokyo Police who studied Shindo Muso Ryu jodo and kendo as part of their training. There is no doubt that jodo has benefitted in numbers by being associated with the kendo federation, but I'd be hard put to say the benefit goes equally the other way.

Regardless of why, the federation now contains three arts. Kendo is the whole of itself, but for iaido and jodo a set of "representative forms" (seitei gata) for each was created. It's worth mentioning that "Seitei Iaido" and "Seitei Jodo" are the "property" of the kendo federation, they were created, exist within, and are used by the Federation for its own purposes. Anyone else using the sets is "borrowing". Now the Seitei were not "invented" out of whole cloth, the iaido set was put together by a committee of instructors of various koryu. There are elements of many arts but mostly of Muso Jikiden Eishin Ryu and especially Muso Shinden Ryu which is the main iai form of the Tokyo area. The Jodo seitei are very clearly taken exclusively from the Shindo Muso Ryu, especially as it is practiced around Tokyo.

So to the questions.

1. What's the grading situation for koryu?

There isn't one.

The kendo federation offers grading through the seitei sets, and does not have anything to say about koryu arts. This is somewhat complicated in that sometimes a koryu kata is requested in a grading. This was started, I was told, because the kendo federation sensei who also teach koryu arts, wanted to point out to their students that the koryu are important and should be practiced along side the seitei set. In other words, if you want to improve in the art you should do a koryu. But the koryu kata that are demonstrated in a grading are not assessed the same as the seitei kata in that same grading. The panelists may be from different koryu, and the nature of the koryu is to be non-standard, so one is unlikely to fail due to a "mistake in the koryu kata". The exception is the iaido 8dan grading which has two parts, 7 seitei and if that is passed, 7 koryu. Failure for the koryu section is common but don't ask me about the technicalities of this, I'm not a hanshi.

To reiterate, while koryu may be taught by kendo federation instructors, it is neither owned nor licensed (as in graded) by the kendo federation. You are free to practice a koryu of any type, or none at all. On the other hand, there may be sensei in the kendo federation who also teach and perhaps even offer licensing in the koryu. This is done outside the kendo federation, it is simply that one person can belong to two organizations.

2. If we practice iaido or jodo but not kendo, why are we in the kendo federation?

Because our teachers are there.

I'm tempted to leave it at that, because it's that simple. I am a member of the CKF because my teachers were and are members. If my sensei were to leave the federation I would have no further reason to stay. Similarly, the sensei we are connected with in Japan are members of the kendo federation and we would lose access to them if we were to leave the federation. To clarify, our Japanese sensei are highly ranked and active in the kendo federation, they would not want or have time to visit a group that was outside the federation. Not all sensei are that closely tied to the federation, and some sensei have separate koryu organizations before and especially after they retire.

Because students like to grade.

They do, they expect to grade and grading helps keep them in the arts because it provides a goal and a reference that allows them to assess their progress. Gradings can be done in the koryu certainly, and would be if we were not in the federation, but we are, so we use the kendo federation grading system. It's handy, well thought out and the seitei are very well described and taught in a consistent manner. A rank in one country is recognized in many. This is a handy thing for most non-Japanese countries who may have a limited number of highly ranked instructors. Any high rank can teach you valuable things

in seitei.

Because students like to learn.

This means that you can learn from many instructors and that if your instructor were to retire or pass on leaving no successor, you still have access to another teacher. This happens in the kendo federation but, by definition, usually not in the koryu. Koryu arts are about the line of succession, not about the art itself. If I lose my Muso Jikiden Eishin Ryu instructor I don't shift to another, I start anew with a different sensei whose MJER may not be the same. Sure I'll be somewhat ahead but I would need to consider it a different art in order to do justice to my new teacher. With seitei I have the luxury of expecting that a new teacher will be showing me what my old teacher showed me.

3. So do we (the CKF or even Sei Do Kai) have a koryu grading system and organization outside the kendo federation?

No, we have our koryu teachers and we teach you koryu, we can tell you who taught us and you can tell your own students who taught you. There's no grading system because we already have one in the seitei. There's no great need for licensing to teach because it's already there in the seitei. For koryu you teach what you were taught if given permission to do so by your sensei. There's no particular need for a koryu organization because there's not much reason for any organization beyond keeping records on grades and collecting fees. The organization doesn't teach, your sensei teaches.

Hopefully that explains some of the relationship between the Kendo Federation and the koryu.

What's On the Test

There's a question that I get forever at seminars. What should I work on to pass the test?

Umm, everything?

No, let me put it another way. It's part of the test to figure out what's on the test. Seriously, there's multiple judges on the panel in our organization and none of them can tell you what the others will be looking for, which is why it's hard to say anything beyond, "everything".

In the kendo federation "The Book" (the technical manual for iaido or jodo) has a section of "things that judges should look at". That's a nice thing for students to read, but don't make it your study notes. You can hit every one of those points and still fail if the rest of your performance is bad. Those are points we're supposed to check, and we do, but they aren't "what you need to pass". Read the kata descriptions in the book and listen to your sensei.

The correct answer to ""what should I work on to pass" is "Ask your Sensei". It's the same answer as for "why didn't I pass?"

Bottom line is that you pass if you meet a certain minimum level of skill and knowledge. You can meet that level in many ways, blinding accuracy, loads of spirit, great effort, massive calmness, satisfying improvement, or any of a dozen other ways that convince the judges that you're "there". We don't have a document that tells us what specific things at which rank gets you a pass. I promise we don't, and I hope there are no judges out there who use the "judging points" as such a device, if they do they are being lazy.

So practice "everything" and stop trying to practice to the test. Learn as much as you can every class, practice on your own, read if you wish, watch video, talk with your fellow students and stop worrying about the test. You don't get anything for passing, no pay raise, no fewer duties around the dojo... in fact in the "old days" you may not even have received a certificate.

"Everything" includes finding out when the test is, where it is, what the deadline is, how to apply and what to pay. In the CKF all that administration stuff has been taken away from the instructors and lives with the administration so don't ask us, we're just as confused as you are. (On the other hand, you can now expect to get your certificate).

Well, let's be kinder to the instructors shall we? We don't need to know all that stuff any more, you do. We just need to show up and sit on the panel so we likely know when and where but seriously, we aren't involved in the paperwork so in a very real way, it's your job as a challenger to figure that stuff out, it really is part of the test.

What, you figure sensei should tell you that stuff? Why? We're not your mother, you're all big boys and girls. We also don't benefit in any way from you passing or failing grades so there's not even a crass monetary incentive for us to nursemaid you through the process. Go do it yourself, it's part of the test. Find your website, talk to your administrators.

See you at the test.



Chain Chain Chain

The chain of instruction is a nice multi-layered concept to examine. First, there is the passing of instruction from teacher to student down the generations. If you want to claim you have "founded a new school" you need to time travel into the future and show that you have students of students who are practicing. It's the chain of instruction that makes a school, not a declaration in a webpage or martial arts mag.

Next is a chain of instruction that says you need to "hold back secrets from beginners" which really isn't quite right. You need to instruct folks in what they are ready to learn. There's no sense talking about mushin or seme at the same time you're showing a student how to hold the sword. In fact you may even teach things like "do these two movements at the same time" because it's easy to learn, only to later say "don't do those things at the same time". Not a secret, just the chain of instruction.

Students should use the concept as well. Look at the instructor's feet first, the footwork is going to be the fastest, easiest thing to catch, so get that down when learning a new movement. I mean really, how fancy can footwork get? Once you've got the feet straight the hand and weapon movements will sit on the base comfortably and will be much easier to learn. Having the wrong foot forward while trying to work out a hand position will cause additional confusion because few people think to look at their legs when their arms are "wrong".

Which is of course what a good instructor must do, look back down the movement chain of any student to see where they are actually going wrong. Correcting a striking angle at the end of a kata isn't of much use if the student went off the rails three steps ago. A good teacher may even ignore the final problem and just fix the cause, then watch the rest of the kata rattle into place. Students who notice the final problem will figure sensei is magical, fixing things at such a distance. Sensei is of course, magical. Few people have the special skill it takes to troubleshoot. It takes an understanding of the scientific method, of how to isolate and test specific factors in order to identify what causes which effect. This is "control of magic" as opposed to "magical thinking".

Kihon, the fundamental movements of a technique are the links in the chain that is the technique. Learn the kihon, you put a chain together one link at a time, you can't forge the rods, bend them and weld them to all the other links at the same time, you end up with a mess. The same with a kata, you can't be learning how to cut at the same time you are learning how to move from one attacker to another. Spend the time learning to cut, to turn, to relax and straighten the wrists before you take on four opponents at once. The chain of instruction says you learn the kihon, then put them together and you learn how to move against one opponent before you try to learn how to deal with several.

Finally there's Shu Ha Ri, our famous keep break and leave. It's really just a call to the chain of instruction. Copy, Practice and then Extrapolate, watch and do, then do it a lot, and the final step is to think about it, figure out why it works, why you were told to do it that way and not some other. If you are trying to figure out why sensei is punching instead of kicking when he's showing you a new kata you've got very little chance of remembering which foot goes in front of the other when he punches. Get the rationalizing brain out of the chain until you can actually apply it profitably.

What, How and Why. What should I be doing? How do I do it? Why do I do it (including where, when and to whom do I do it).



Mushin

"No thought" is how it's usually translated, but how does that help? No thought means just running on reaction, on instinct, whatever that means for humans, usually it means freezing with a big intake of breath.

No unnecessary rationalization, no excess deliberation, no conscious decision might be closer to it. Relaxed, immediate response is the goal of course, to be able to respond to any change in the situation with the correct action. No Thought should not mean Thoughtless.

That's the trick of course, to be able to spontaneously react in the correct way as opposed to simply reacting. (That "simply reacting" is of course a trained response, very few reactions are actually reflexes like the knee-jerk, we respond as we were taught, in ways that have been successful in the past, unfortunately, these may not apply to the present situation and so are "bad reactions"... think freezing is a bad reaction? Consider the benefit of freezing in the face of a motion predator, consider the benefit of taking some time to think it through if you come up against a situation you haven't encountered before and have no pre-analysis of a similar story.)

Paradoxically then, to be able to respond with mushin you need to anticipate as many possible situations as you can. You need to think of all the possible actions, reactions and chains of events that you can, and decide ahead of time how you will respond. In the martial arts world that means waza, kata and keiko.

Waza is the alphabet, the repertoire of actions (reactions) we learn. A reverse punch, a horizontal cut, a hip throw. Kata are the stories we tell ourselves, if he steps in and does this, we respond with this. Keiko is the repetition we need in order to be able to do the waza smoothly. Note I didn't say kata, I said waza. It's good to do a reverse punch instinctively as we see an opening. It is not good to make a reflex action out of doing a reverse punch every time we see the opponent attempt an overhead block. Reflexes like that are too complex, too "long". An opponent can use that upper block to draw a reverse punch out of us and when we do that he's got a side kick into our ribs.

Kata need to be done with our eyes wide open and our brains responding as if they were seeing the movements for the very first time. Kata are not for memorization, they are for telling. They are stories filled with call and response and as such should be done fresh every time. If you are telling a story to an audience as if you are reading it from a book each time, you will have very few coins in your hat at the end of the day.

Of course you can't make up a scenario for every possible future event, we must generalize from the story. The waza (the kihon) are drilled as reactions, the kata we hope will generalize to a new situation as needed. A few waza are drilled and then used in a wide array of kata so that we see several ways to use them. A reverse punch at an upper block, at a missed front kick, after a block of our own, or as we angle in suddenly. Then we see a front kick, a body slam or a sweep in response to that upper block. The waza become generalized reactions to many stimuli and it's the open, "no-thought" mushin of the brain that triggers the correct (we hope) reaction.

Mushin goes beyond budo of course, you use it every day when you drive. Certain waza cause your car to do certain things, breaks, steering, blinkers... these are the waza that we use with our mushin. Want daily proof of mushin? How about the amazing fact that there aren't vast numbers of accidents every morning as all the commuters head to work putting on their makeup, reading their papers or talking on their phones. Only mushin keeps as many of them alive as survive each day.

A better driver? One who looks several cars ahead and plans their moves by checking for empty space beside, breaking room in front and behind. One who pays attention and anticipates future events from present causes. One who has practiced skid control and violent steering and maximum breaking. Waza, kata and kihon.

My daughter is going to university. We worked for 18 years to accumulate the funds and make it possible for her to go without worry about finances. We even had a few fights and discussions about things like mortgage payments vs rent vs commuting. What happens? Well sometimes folks need to feel a bit of negative reinforcement, a poke in the nose to convince us that we should not step straight down the line into an attack. I'm afraid we're heading for student debt, anxiety about getting a job and empty bank accounts because we need to find out for ourselves that it's not a good idea to drive into the desert without a full tank of gas, no matter how many of our friends are in the car with us.

Well, it's not as if I don't have a crooked nose from a few lessons I had to learn myself, but mostly I did listen to the old farts and, amazingly, they were helpful. Come to think of it, I'm still listening to my teachers as they give me the kata and tell me to practice my waza.

Do you listen to your own teachers, learn their stories and turn your chattering monkey brains off while you turn your attention on?

The Degree Mill

I watched an episode of Poirot last evening, it happened to be Murder on the Orient Express and as it started I realized that I had no clue as to whodunit. Not after having watched at least six versions of the story. Of course I remembered well before the end of the story but the thing is, I don't watch a murder mystery in order to know who did it. It's not the destination it's the ride.

The same thing applies to the martial arts, it's a process, not a product to be aquired. My aikido sensei used to tell me about "black belt disease", that strange situation where students quit after getting one. Having watched it happen for a couple of decades now I can verify that it does indeed exist.

Why? I think mainly it's because those students figure that they can "get" an art, that they can "learn it" and be done with it, and in their heads the finish point is "black belt". To my mind, that's sort of like watching a detective movie so that you can find out whodunnit. Would be easier and much more efficient to go to Wikipedia and look it up. Would be much faster and cheaper to buy a black belt from a supply store and be done, time to move on and buy some cross-country skis to throw in the back of the closet.

Not that I mind the certificate collectors, I don't do private lessons so they're not wasting my time by attending class. On the other hand, I don't get paid for teaching either, so there's no benefit to me if they're present. It's mostly the waste of their own time that I'm concerned with, I could hand them a black belt after a couple of classes and save us both some time and effort.

Well why not? It's not like they are going to set themselves up as teachers and make a bundle of money off of unsuspecting students. That doesn't happen because there's no money in teaching what I teach. Trust me, I know. And beside that, if they wanted to set up as a teacher there's nothing I can do about it, they can buy that black belt online.

Yes.... OK there is a problem isn't there. If I certify them it means I'm responsible for them. It's me that says they are "black belt" level so that's why I don't do it.

But the next time you find yourself calculating how many more hours of class you need before you can challenge for your next belt, consider why you're in class. If it's the destination, and that destination is a black belt, there's a shortcut.

Why Have I Never Heard of Jodo? You mean Judo don't you?

More than one visitor to Japan has been politely corrected in their "mispronunciation of Judo" when asking about Jodo. Jodo simply isn't as popular in Japan as Kendo or even Iaido. In the West? Forget finding anyone who's ever heard about it. There is a very long history of Kendo in the USA and Canada beginning with the Japanese who migrated and continuing to this day, (but even then it's only recently that you see non-Japanese coming up in the ranks and hitting the 7dan levels).

Judo has a similar lengthy history and it's also an Olympic sport so no problem with recognition there. Karate got a massive jump in the West due to the occupation of Okinawa and the numbers of servicemen who brought it back to the States in the 1950s.

But Jodo has none of those advantages. It wasn't spread outside Fukuoka with any great success until Shimizu sensei went to Tokyo (although Uchida Ryogoro was there earlier and taught Nakayama Hakudo). Shimizu's instructor Shiriashi Hanjiro was, for all intents and purposes, the only instructor of jodo who made it through the Meiji era. Everything then, spreads from Shiriashi and then from Tokyo and Fukuoka so you're looking at an art that is essentially a post WWII reality. The instructors just weren't there before that time so it's not surprising that they aren't here in the West. Despite a 400 year history, Jodo really is a "new" Western art compared to Kendo, Judo and Karate.

We're talking about ZNKR Jodo and Shindo Muso Ryu Jodo, which are essentially the same thing (OK we can get into the "differences" between koryu and seitei but if it looks like a duck and walks like a duck... I don't see too much of Tendo-ryu staff or Muhi Muteki Ryu in seitei) There just aren't that many separate jodo arts to be had in Japan, let alone outside. The other Jodo we find in the west is associated with Aikido and despite its short history (a couple-three generations) it is better known here due to the much wider distribution of that art.

No conspiracy of silence, no super-selective secret sensei hiding out in the backstreets of Chicago waiting for students to stumble into their backyards, just a simple lack of numbers. All the Japanese Jodo sensei I've met so far have been quite willing to teach as many people as they can get gathered together to teach.

Oh, that's not to say there isn't the usual amount of sniping between the big guns as you see in any martial art, with varying degrees of secrecy for their koryu jodo lines, but the ones I've met and practiced with are all ZNKR and will all teach seitei to pretty much anyone regardless of their koryu lineage. So it is possible to find and learn Jodo in the West, you just have to be willing to hunt and maybe travel a bit. And avoid getting steered into the local Judo club of course.

What to Look for in a Sensei.

A good person. Someone who can teach you how to develop yourself as a human being. The school, the art, whatever, is irrelevant. "Permission to teach" is largely irrelevant (you can be a lousy instructor with permission to teach). Rank is largely irrelevant for similar reasons.

"Connections" and rank can be a positive distraction for many students. A low ranking instructor who has a good heart and a solid grasp of the basics can be better for many beginners than a high ranked instructor who may be a distracted and erratic teacher. And students of high ranked or connected instructors may believe they are better than they are simply through their own ego. (My teacher is great so I'm great... my dad is bigger than your dad...)

You need someone who can teach you to see your faults, not blind you to them.

And if you want to learn how to kill folks (ie "find someone who knows genuine battlefield techniques"), join any military on the planet rather than look for the most kickass teacher with the most trophies in the window.

Teaching and making money are not particularly connected. If one wants to talk about the sword arts, you are likely talking about unpaid instructors, simply because there aren't enough students around to support a teacher of iaido, and kendo does not have the habit of professional instructors.

Arts that are popular, those at which one can make a living, do not equate with bad teachers, in fact, the presence of lots of students and lots of teachers should increase the chance of finding a good one because the pool is larger.

A professional karate instructor who makes a living as a martial arts teacher may be a very good sword instructor too. Why not? In fact, since the sword likely has very little to do with his bottom dollar, it may be that he's practicing and teaching out of pure love for the art... as much as the guy down the street renting the community centre. On the other hand, there are those who figure you get what you pay for, so a teacher who doesn't charge must be a poor teacher. After all if your students won't pay to study you can't be very good can you? Again, money has nothing to do with teaching skill. There are very good instructors who can't or won't charge due to tradition, training location or personal convictions. There are also horrible instructors who won't charge for the same reasons.

It's your money (or if not money, your free time being used up) so treat your search for budo training as if it's an interview process for the dad you never had.

Office Politics

There have been zero, none, nada, organizations that I have been part of in over 50 years on the planet that did not suffer from office politics.

Not even a tiny koryu with maybe 150 students worldwide. Certainly not any of the kendo, or aikido groups I was or am a member of, not the photo studios I've been part of (with as few as 4 members), not the places I've worked, not even in my own family.

Office politics are a fact of life. If there are three people doing one thing, one of them is going to want most to be the leader, one is going to want most to just get on with the job and one is going to complain about the office politics.

You would figure that the budo, with our strict heirarchy, would avoid this stuff. It's not hard to identify the top dog, he's the highest ranked, the one everyone else in the organization says is the top dog, so where's the problem?

In number 2 of course. Everyone agrees on number one because they're still in the organization. Those who didn't like him, left when he took over. The thing is, when it's getting time to step down there's another struggle for the new top dog. Always. Even if it doesn't look like there should be. Number 2 is the highest ranked? But he doesn't practice much any more. Number 2 is the longest serving student? But he's old. Number 2 is the best technician? But he's a crappy teacher. Number 2 is the best teacher? But his technique is crap. Number 2 is universally liked? He's just a politician.

Even when there's an agreement from most folks that number 2 is the best for the job, there can be a problem. After all as number 2 starts to take a stronger role, it may be number 1 who starts to feel slighted at this upstart who doesn't respect his teacher any more.

Best way to avoid the politics of a budo organization is from the top down.

Make the chain of leadership clear, however you do it, and don't change the rules every third Sunday. Just because number 2 wasn't there for your birthday last week doesn't mean he's unfit to take over when you die.

Be responsive to the membership and make one decision per issue. If you decide four times on every question depending on the next four people who talk to you, the race is on for whoever gets your ear. This is a big chunk of what causes office politics, the idea that you can manipulate and whine to get

your ideas implemented.

Be advisable. Involve the next generation in the decisions, listen carefully to them, take minutes of meetings and pay attention to the decisions, that is, READ THE MINUTES to remind yourself what you decided. This gets even more important as you get older, pops. Get someone accurate and reliable to take the minutes and don't rely on your memory, we all remember what we wanted to hear, that's why minutes are read back and approved at the next meeting.

If you set up a committee to decide something, do what they decide. Nothing burns out the next generation faster than wasting their time on stuff that isn't core to the group. Sitting in a meeting is not as much fun as throwing each other around on the mats. I think this is the one that annoys me the most, it's so hard to find people willing to help, to watch them being wasted like this really pushes my buttons.

Support your people. Wow is this one hard, especially if all your students are stupid, but you have to do it. The guy at the top has to back up all the folks he's picked to do a job. They get the praise for well done, and number 1 gets the blame if it goes bad. Seriously! If you're sitting on the top of the pack what in the world would ever suggest that you get to blame someone else for a problem? Who are you trying to protect yourself from? You're at the top so who's to impress? Taking the blame is going to get you more juice from those under you than passing the buck back down the ladder. Blaming other people only works while you're jockeying for that top position.

Find the folks who don't want the job and give them the job. Plato had this figured out a long time ago, the people who want the job most aren't the ones who are best for the job, they're simply the ones who want it. The best person for a job is the one who's going to do the job well. Sometimes, especially in volunteer organizations, you may have to settle for the one who will just do the job period.

That goes for the top dog as well. Pick that number 2 on the basis of more than the guy who's the best suck-up or the guy who's the best technician; the one who pays you the most or the one who's been hanging around most lately. Pick someone who can carry on and improve things, the guy who will keep most of the seniors around, who will bring in more students, who will keep learning and teaching. This guy is usually a compromise, often not the best anything, just the best for the job.

Just like good old number 1 was.

Just What Is Good Anyway?



Kim Taylor, seitei mistakes, too square, not enough saya biki... oh wait, we were doing koryu!

I just read an interview with some kendo federation teachers in Japan. They said it's important to find a good teacher and stick with them, that it's important to maintain contact with Japan in order to do good iaido.

I just watched a video of a kendo federation 8dan sensei demonstrating the kendo federation iaido set.

I picked out at least five "mistakes" in his etiquette and first kata, things that our Japanese teachers have told us are bad to do over the years. In the rest of the set I'd be surprised if I could not pick out 40 more.

Sounds a bit arrogant? This non-Japanese 7dan saying he's spotting mistakes in an 8dan? OK sure, call me arrogant, you don't spend three decades doing anything without getting a bit of a "know-it" on you, but the mistakes I'm talking about are those that beginners (less than ten years of practice) would spot and fuss about. I'm actually quite satisfied with the performance and would be happy to practice with this instructor. Let me explain.

Some of these mistakes are things that can be explained by bad knees or sore shoulders. They are not correct due to "the book" but they are as close as this guy can make them. If your knees don't bend, they don't bend. Should you stop practicing and teaching because you can't demonstrate a fully bent knee? A healthy iaidoka may say yes, if you can't demonstrate you should not teach. I think it's a pretty stupid reason to waste 40 or 50 years of experience. Point to someone else and say "bend your knee like him, not like me" and you've got it covered.

If the knees will bend, but wear out so that you spend the last 20 years of your life in a wheelchair instead of walking, but you bend them anyway because you figure you should demonstrate to the beginners, I call stupid again. If that bent knee will get your 7dan student to 8dan... maybe. If you ruin your knees to show a bunch of 4dans who may not be around to take 5dan... it's just stupid.

You do not do seiza with replacement knees!

Some of the mistakes this hachidan was making were things our set of teachers did or do that are outside "the book". The fellow was doing shinden-influenced movements, his "koryu was leaking" into his seitei. My beginners would call mistake, I call choice. He can do it that way and I know it because I've been around for long enough to know that's a choice point instead of a check point.

Now we come to it. The set of mistakes he was doing that were mistakes according to the book as told to us by our teachers in the past... (see where I'm going yet?) He was doing some things my students would call me on, and do, regularly, because they are things we have drilled into them like steel into rock. Seeing those things would make my 4dan student's teeth hurt.

They are wrong, but they are not "mistakes" today. They are things the 8dans are not looking for these days, and they are things that, if you read the book closely, you will find are, technically, allowed. This is why we need Japanese sensei to come each year and tell us about the "latest fashions in Paris". In close to 30 years I have seen the waves of instruction come, sometimes a crest and sometimes a trough on many of the movements of the ZNKR iai. Sometimes we are paying attention to this or that... and sometimes not. It's that "sometimes not" that beginners haven't seen yet.

"Good" iaido can be defined several ways, but the most important way is "this is how we're doing it in Tokyo now", it's "the current fashions from Paris". I don't care if you figure that's a bad way to define good, if you do ZNKR Iaido you care about this. If you do a koryu iai you care about how the soke is doing it now. If you're in a lineage that isn't straight from the soke, you still do it the way your sensei does it.

If you care deeply about iai, and do it long enough you have other definitions of good and you can appreciate those who do it in a different way, but baseline is "the latest fashions from Paris".

Finally, this hachidan I was watching made a few mistakes that were straight out, no fooling around mistakes. They are specifically forbidden by "the book" and they are against the latest instructions from our teachers from Japan. They are things this sensei would likely forbid his students do. They were mistakes.

Surprise, iaido is done by people and not by robots.

Deal with it.



Just What Is Good Anyway? II

I thought I'd think a bit on what the other "good iaido" stuff is, but to do it I think I have to open it up a bit to include partner practice so that we can look more simply at what good iaido looks like. Partner practice is of course, kendo, or what folks call kenjutsu nowadays, a person to person practice using kata.

A list of some things that might define good iaido:

Accurate cuts that hit the target. Right away you see how much easier this is to discuss with partner practice rather than with solo iaido forms, but iaido "has a partner" so we have to look at the invisible opponent in order to work out the correct shape and distance on the cuts. This is very difficult for beginners, who stretch their arms, lean their bodies or shorten their swings because they don't know what the kata means and they don't know where their opponent is. In fact one of the more interesting effects of iaido seems to be that the opponent gets closer when the student swings faster, and further away when the student slows down.

Hips are also something that beginners don't understand, the use of them in developing power in a cut, and the aiming of them at the opponent. Good iaido means good use of the hips. Of course, "hips" is a shortcut for a whole way of interacting with the weapon and the earth and gravity and...

Good timing. Seems a bit silly to worry about timing in a solo kata, don't we get to decide how fast or slow our invisible opponent is? Well yes, to an extent, but only in a general way. If we have stepped back to avoid being cut and are relying on the opponent's sword being down so that we can step back in to cut him, we don't have all day. The kata can be slow or fast but the rhythms inside that kata must make combative sense. Good iaido shows a rhythm that works. A bit of partner practice with a senior who can gently suggest weak timing will demonstrate this point.

Good distance. In a simple way, this is the same as hitting the target, but in a more sophisticated way it means covering the proper distance in the correct timing. If you cut while stepping in you will miss the opponent. If you step in and then cut with too much time between those actions you will be cut. The correct distance must be taken at the correct time. If you are stepping forward from seiza while drawing the blade to cut the opponent's shoulder you must have both feet on the floor at the point of contact or your cut will be weak. If you put that forward foot down too soon you will lose all the momentum from your body surge and you will be cutting with your shoulder only, again a weak cut.

To go back to the timing of partner practice, a good kata is done when shidachi (the winner) moves and

counter-cuts after uchidachi (the attacker) begins his cut and so is committed to a single movement. Good iai shows this sort of movement, a good iaidoist imagines his opponent's blade moving toward his head before he makes his move, and then makes it effectively.

Unflappable attitude. A good iaidoist is calm, dignified, unruffled by anything going on around him. He can appear confident to the point of arrogance. If he does an incorrect movement you won't know it by his actions or facial expressions. If you don't know what he is supposed to be doing you won't know it at all. The good iaidoist can perform without warming up in any situation. He won't blame the weather, an injury, poor information or lousy instruction for his performance, he will simply do his best. Not "do his best" in the sense of getting a participation ribbon in lower school, but actually do the best iai he is capable of doing. There is no room for any other performance when we talk of practicing sword in a realistic way. Every performance represents the risk of death and must be done so as to respect this. There are no "do-overs" and no excuses that will do any good in this world, the attitude must be survive or no, rather than "do I look cool in my Inuyasha duds?".

Iron fist in a velvet glove. A good iaidoist looks soft, the shoulders are soft, the hands are soft, the cut is soft but those with eyes will see the iron fist under that softness. Put a bokuto under the soft swing of an 8dan and the bokuto will shatter. Be partner to the soft swing of a hanshi and you feel the power of a movement that is totally directed into a centimeter of blade. A centimeter through which moves every gram of weight and all the power of a body trained for 50 years.

Kindness and generosity. A good iaidoka will have open arms for everyone, regardless of skill or style. Everyone shares the art, all are to be cherished and embraced. Only a beginner thinks in terms of better or worse, higher or lower. A good iaidoist thinks only of performing the art. In partner practice or a life and death match, one embraces the chance to do one's best, as a teacher or a student, a winner or a loser. In this world there is no room for talk, no gossip or back-biting, no idle comparisons, simply get on the floor and swing the sword.

When talking about grading and tournaments we can talk about "the book" and many technical aspects of the art, but these are only one measure of good. There are many others.

The Hardest Learning

I was watching a video of a famous teacher as he taught a class to a bunch of seniors in his art. This teacher has a bit of an attitude and while teaching a movement that he felt was more accurately reflective of the true art than what the rest of the organization was doing, said so repeatedly.

So he was teaching the correct version to his own students. Pretty simple I would have thought.

Parenthetically, with teachers who say "everyone else is wrong" it's not hard to understand how their students end up being obnoxious in their conviction that their way of doing things is the best. This happens a lot more in the non-competitive arts than in kendo or judo I suspect, since in those arts someone can say "show me" and it works or it doesn't.

Regardless, these students ought to be especially sensitive to instruction that is couched in terms of "this is the real way" with examples of the poor other way given as well... You would think.

What happened in this tape is not a surprise, but continually shocking to me. The same small technique was introduced, tape jumps to next bit of instruction (after practice presumably) and sensei repeats himself, next, sensei repeats it again with another student, then sensei names someone specifically and corrects, then sensei gets a book out and says "even though it's in here it's wrong, this is the right way" and shows it again, and again. I gave up watching, it was a little thing, put the foot here and not here, a simple thing.

But they could not see it, could not bring themselves to watch or to listen. You see, these were seniors, folks who teach their own students, so by definition they knew the technique. I have watched this all my budo life, the guys who vaguely look at sensei and nod after the first demonstration and then drift off into their own heads or worse, start explaining how to do the technique to people around them even while sensei is still speaking. Then they do what they assumed they saw.

I've been there, I've pulled those students up in front of the class and explained with pushing of legs and pulling of arms how to do it the way I want them to do it... and watched them do it their way.

Such a waste of time on both our parts, but there is nothing so conservative as a student who has some understanding and is teaching. There is ONE way to do it, and no need to look at any other. In the world of technique simple is better and what we learn first is simple. To learn more deeply is the hardest learning of all. To give up what we know we know, and look with the mind of a beginner (shoshin) is humiliating, a betrayal of the hours and years spent learning what we know.

I'm not much better, I've assumed and been wrong. I've taken years sometimes to hear a correction but in my defence I get really angry at myself for not hearing it sooner, rather than at sensei for wasting my time talking or showing rather than letting me practice. And sometimes I was just not able to hear what he was saying. Shu Ha Ri isn't a one time thing. Sometimes we have to learn one thing before we can learn another, and then we have to start over again with that simple knowledge tucked away but tucked aside while we get the next bit.

It's hard, I know, but try not to be too obnoxious about ignoring what sensei is teaching. Don't correct the students around you and for heaven's sake, don't correct sensei! Seriously, I've seen it happen and the assumption that sensei doesn't know he's "doing it wrong" is breathtaking.



The Three Blind Men and the Elephant

I have for years been raging on about various aspects of "difference" between various lines of koryu or between seitei and koryu and whatnot. Here are a few points to consider.

To the "koryu" guys (or better yet, those who don't practice jo or iai at all) who pronounce on seitei but aren't in the ZNKR and have never practiced seitei... What in the world are you thinking?

Vast differences between koryu and seitei? If you say it often enough it becomes true? We've had several menkyo kaiden here in Guelph from Fukuoka and from Tokyo, all teaching Zen Ken Ren jo. What I've noticed with my own beady little eyes is that the difference between Fukuoka and Tokyo koryu is greater than the difference between seitei and Tokyo koryu.

This May we will have another two hachidan jodo instructors in Guelph at the Spring Seminar <http://seidokai.ca/iai.seminar.html> Anybody who wants to come and investigate the differences between seitei and koryu for themselves is welcome to come and do so, you don't have to be a kendo federation member to attend the seminar.

As for the general concept that seitei is a newly developed, vastly different animal from koryu that must be taught differently and isn't "serious"... Does anyone truly believe that a menkyo/hachidan is going to radically change their approach to jo or iai depending on whether or not they're teaching koryu or seitei? Why would they?

The IKF is a large organization with many hachidan and many menkyo members, all with their own lines of koryu. Seitei is intended to provide a common standard worldwide so that we can all speak from the same page during gradings or tournaments. Note that in the ZNKR seitei is NOT a watered down "introductory" set to see if you pass the test for koryu instruction, nor is it for the kendo guys to "dabble" in jo or iai every second Saturday afternoon. The fact that most iai and jo students do not practice kendo is proof enough for this. Seitei is done in a common way so that everyone can get together to train without adjusting your kata every time someone new stands up in front of the room. Anyone in the ZNKR can see this.

I've been reading about how this or that art is "better than" the ZNKR/IKF version for 20 years now. Guys if your art is better, then good for you, but yammering away about it simply sounds like comparison marketing to me. Please, no more "well I heard that seitei was created for..." look for yourself, I invite all the koryu only folks to come to the seminar and try Seitei.

If you want to see differences, if difference is important to you, you'll see differences.

We do mainly seitei jo here in Guelph because I've actively, and somewhat successfully, resisted doing koryu jodo since I started practicing it many years ago. I had two koryu already, MJER iai and Niten Ichiryu, and I've spent decades of time on both but am happy with my skills in neither... eventually I ended up with the third koryu (jodo) but there's plenty to practice in seitei jo and I'm as happy doing that as koryu. I don't assume, create or see a difference between them, not a meaningful one beyond a few simple movements.

To give you an example of "different" vs "no difference", I trained for several years in MJER iai and learned that there were dozens and dozens of little differences in form, as well as major differences in timing and attitude between Omori, Eishin and Oku iai. I can demonstrate them to you. I then met and practiced with the senior western instructor in a different line of MJER in a different organization and asked him what the differences were between the three levels and his reply was "there aren't any". Both ideas are entirely correct and the reason is that I practice things one way and he practiced them another. There's more to this but I'm not going into it now except to say that if you are "advanced" in your handling of the sword because you've practiced for years, are you going to "dumb down" your ability when you do a beginner set?

Differences can depend on experience (have you actually got the experience, in the two things compared, to have an opinion that is worth giving), point of view (if you consider hitting one target or another an inch away a difference, than it's different, if you figure you can hit either at will, it's not), experience in the art (a beginner "KNOWS" what's what, his sensei will have some sort of vague idea that maybe it goes this way but can think of a dozen reasons why it could go the other way), marketing (to be blunt, the ZNKR is huge, koryu organizations are usually tiny, so how do you get the students...), and which way the wind is blowing (sensei may teach differences one day, similarities the next).

Ultimately, it's not the art, or the style or the subset that's important, it's how you practice. I do Niten Ichiryu and for everyone who seems so interested in it (where are you guys when we do a seminar?) I can assure you that you can learn the entire school in two days (I know, I've taught it in two days and the students actually knew the steps at the end). It's no big hardship to learn the steps... but that's NOT the point. It's not the technique it's the method of practice and that, my friend, is the key. The secret isn't in the way you slide to the side it's in what happens in your brain when you practice Sasen a certain way, with a certain attitude.

Or Mae, or Shohatto, or Tsuki Zue, or Tachi Otoshi.

And that's why you'll see the old farts practicing the kihon over and over and over and over. It's not that they're hiding the "good stuff" from you, it's that they're **SHOWING IT TO YOU RIGHT NOW**, the secret stuff is something you do once or twice a year just so you don't forget the dance steps. It's not a reward handed out for good conduct and long practice, it's something sensei hands over to someone so that they can worry about remembering the damned stupid stuff that got handed down somehow, and clutters up your head while you're trying to figure out how to do the basic kata you learned your first week in the dojo. The important one.

Less is more. An Elephant is long and skinny, like a snake.



Real Sword

"I am looking for a place that will teach me the workings of the sword, in it's original, unadulterated form, which is to say, for combat, not sport, or inner well being, or whatever else they use to pitch the new seitei forms."

Ah-ha, well that would of course be the UWFC, the ultimate weapons fighting championships that you're looking for. I'm afraid all the older Japanese weapon arts have some sort of self improvement tacked onto them, the theory being that nobody fights with swords any more so the only reason you'd want to mess with them is as a hobby or some sort of self improvement thing.

The UWFC guys though, are taking it back to the real deal. No sissy stuff, just what works in full contact.

They can be hard to find, dueling being illegal and all that rubbish, but if you do (and it's a personal introduction sort of thing), be sure that you get a battle-ready sword if you join, there's a lot of inferior blades out there. Broken blades flying across the field can injure spectators and fellow competitors.

"But I really want to learn a genuine old style sword art, one that is proven by history".

Look, here's the thing, folks who go into the arts looking for something specific generally don't find it. The students who have stayed the longest in my classes tend to be the ones that wander in the door without any idea of what they're in for. (And there's a good reason for that).

But my best advice to anyone who wants to get into the martial arts is really quite simple.

Find the best instructor you can, and study whatever he is teaching. Period.

This applies to ANYTHING not just the martial arts, if you run across a great yoga instructor, GO DO THAT because great instructors are not common. Ever, in any era, in any art.

Now "best" means many things, but most important amongst all of them is availability and the ability to teach you. You won't learn from someone who isn't in the same province and you won't learn from someone who can't connect with you, can't figure out how to knock the stuffing out of you, and insert what's needed.

Get out and look at what's around, go to a kendo class, go to an iaido class, go to a jodo class, check out

the instructors. One of them will appeal to you, go do that.

These things aren't secret, at least not around here, and if they are, move on... unless secret appeals to you. Then you sign the blood oath, pay the dues and sit in the rain outside the gate for a week. Hope it's worth it.



Kukri-do at Tombo dojo

Healthy Disrespect and Understanding the Roots

I for one think it's extremely healthy to open yourself up to ridicule once in a while. (Other people must too, since internet discussion forums are still popular, and blogs even more so.)

For instance there's a photo of me not cutting an empty pop bottle at <http://www.uoguelph.ca/~iaido/iai.oldpictures.html>

I thought we had a photo or two of some pumpkin cutting we used to do each fall at the Bonsai show but I don't see it there. Oh well, we used to cut pumpkins. I've also cut styrofoam pool noodles with my iaito, and newspaper sheets with shinai.

Should have seen some of the email I used to get about that bottle shot, one fellow actually suggested that I was bringing all of ancient Japan into disrepute by having such a terrible photo up online. Went on to tell me I should quit. Wonder if he's still practicing?

Come to think of it, I was on national TV science show around the time of "The Last Samurai" knocking a mat off a stage, stand and all. OK it was a little plastic camera tripod that was barely enough to hold the mat upright and it was the third cut on that mat but hey, if I was any good I'd have been able to cut it right?

Seriously though, one should expect at least a passing acknowledgement of what cutting represents. All well and good to cut vegetables but I remember the day 25 years or so ago when my sensei and I were at a Jiu Jitsu tournament doing the demonstration with all the musical kata (my favourite was the guys that did the movie self defence thing, then did it backward in slow motion) and the inevitable "cut the apple on the student's stomach" demo showed up. The look on sensei's face as he stood up and looked, hands on hips... one he didn't even try to hide, Japanese as he is... priceless. I honestly think he'd never even imagined that sort of thing happened.

I remember another sensei who had to decline an invite to demonstrate at the Legion... he gently reminded the social director that some of the members may have served in the far east and might not appreciate the memories of Japanese swordsmanship. This same guy had an anthropologist show up on his doorstep one day with a whole pig in her trunk she wanted him to hack up so she could study the bone marks. He declined that one too.

The problem is, and this worries me as much as it worried my father, every generation seems to have to figure out for itself, the seriousness and stupidity behind death. Young men seem to want to argue about

the minutia of manners and the seriousness of "battlefield tested" this or that silliness, while never considering the total idiocy and terrible mundanity of death in war. It ain't glorious, no matter what the monuments say, and I've had the relatives die and almost die to teach me just what it's all worth.

Being the first kid after an unbroken chain of at least 5 generations in my family that hasn't had to volunteer to go get injured (the ones that got killed didn't leave any offspring and NONE of the silly alcoholic bastards who came back, came back whole) in some war somewhere or other, I'm quite happy to pass on the old man's advice to "run like hell for the North if asked to serve", to my son... and daughter now, thanks so much for equal opportunities to die in the military.

In other words, I'd rather the kids chop up pumpkins as pumpkins than talk to me about relative comparisons of this or that thickness of mat and bamboo compared to an arm or a leg. That sort of romanticism and fantasy gets kids murdered by us old men who send them out to fight our wars.

So I try to explain and demonstrate the absurdity of "martial arts" while teaching budo. I try to teach a healthy disrespect of authority and reliance on one's own intellect while being your typical dictatorial sensei.

And I probably fail miserably.



Why The Sword?

When you begin researching what sword art to practice, it's often helpful to come in with a somewhat different viewpoint. I would suggest that you forget the Anglicized Japanese terms that tend to get thrown around on the net, they can be more of a distraction than a help. I'm talking about such terms as koryu/gendai, jutsu/do, iaido/kenjutsu/kendo and others.

Instead I'd ask myself:

How is it possible to train in any sword art? What methods would one reasonably and efficiently use or create to train?

Full contact with sharp swords and no protection? Obviously not, so one starts modifying the equipment or the method of practice.

Possible schema to classify the various arts.

1. Solo with real sword.
2. Partner practice with blunted, buttoned, or ersatz sword and choreographed exercises.
3. Full contact random or freestyle practice with safety equipment.

Next I'd ask:

What is the purpose of this training and how does the end purpose affect the training methodology?

One might train for

1. Warfare (conventional or otherwise)
2. Dueling
3. Civilian combat (police)
4. Sport
5. Cultural reasons (tradition within a culture, ethnological study)
6. Spiritual reasons (self-discipline, perceived religious connections)

1. Warfare. This is a bit impractical these days, as is 2. Dueling and 3. Civilian Combat, although the Japanese police do use the martial arts for fitness training at least. These three seem to more historical than current reasons. I know of nobody anywhere that is doing the Japanese sword arts with the intent

to kill or injure another, and I hope I never do, or we will all be in trouble.

4. Sport. Kendo, Chambara, Tameshigiri, Iaido, and Jodo all have sport aspects to their training. There may be others that I'm forgetting, I'm on my first coffee of the day. Sport is a pretty common way for folks to get into sword, and for some the thrill of competition continues through their lives. Another thing I include in the sport area is fitness, although I am beginning to think that fitness is becoming less connected with sport and more connected to cosmetic medicine.

5. Cultural reasons. Here I'd include an interest in conserving and investigating your own culture (if you are Japanese) or someone else's (if you're not). I'd also include the less benign aspects of cultural activity, such as promoting ultranationalism as was seen in the past. I suppose I would also include being involved in a cultural pursuit which is supported by the sword arts. I'm talking about anime, star wars and cosplay type activities.

6. Spiritual reasons. This is what we are all supposed to be in the arts for isn't it? To become better people? That's the common line anyway, even for those who point out that it's a cover (with the sport argument) that allowed the resumption of the arts after the Second World War. The argument is without function today, the arts are in no danger of being banned and the old ultranationalist danger is past. This leaves us with a question whether the present arts are good for self-improvement or not. To that end I would point to any physical art anywhere and you'll find someone saying that it "builds character". Go from there.

With that structure you may now be able to decide what you're looking for, and that will give you an idea of which art to examine but here's one more item we have to consider about the Japanese sword arts, and that's the availability of a class. It's no use deciding that you want to study something like Niten Ichiryu without considering who is teaching and where. The internet creates a general feeling that everything is available everywhere, and cheap fuel for transport has helped, but in this case there is a problem of supply.

I've really got to say that given the choice of doing a Niten class once a month and doing kendo three times a week, you go with kendo. If you practice Niten at Guelph you'll do it once a week max. If you're absolutely convinced that this koryu holds some secret or special teaching... well no, you're still not any better off practicing with me because after 30 years of sword I still don't know any secrets or special unbeatable techniques. I just know that time in equals skill out. It's all about breathing (the more you do it the better you get at it).

To avoid a bigger post here, see the following for my arguments:

http://ejmas.com/jalt/jaltart_taylor_0301.htm (compared to smelly old diesel-powered kendo, koryu is "new and improved" to the western eye)

http://ejmas.com/pt/ptart_taylor_0802.htm (written a couple years ago but relevant to the topic at hand).

Good luck with the search.



The guys from Calgary up to teach iai to the guys in Edmonton.

Sometimes sensei comes to you.

Who Gets to be Sensei

A senior in one of my arts said: "Amazing how 'You guys are welcome to practice on your own with what you have learned' can be translated as 'you are the leader of your group!'"

But that IS a certification, you may as well put it in writing and give it a fancy name... and charge money for it. You say "go practice" or "go teach" and you've certified that person to do something. You can't get away from it.

The only thing to be done with students who want to be teachers is to take up the Groucho Marx theory. "Any club that would have me as a member, I don't want to join". In other words (and to twist the hell out of it) if the students want a rank, give them a great big whopping one and say "OK you've got it all, go away and teach". Then get down to practicing with the ones who don't give a crap for rank.

There's really only one (sometimes two) grades in any martial art anyway. The first is "you can teach" and the (sometimes) second is "you can tell people they can teach". The rank that says "you own the art" isn't really a rank, soke isn't really something to be challenged and earned like the other ranks.

This goes for the "gendai" arts as well as the "koryu" whether they have formal certificates or not, there are two levels that mean something. Yes these can be split to finer distinctions (like teaching beginners and sitting a grading only up to X rank) but they are degrees of the same thing.

Lessee, I have no formal (but teaching) rank in 3 koryu and teaching rank in 3 gendai (all formal) and grading rank in 2 gendai. That make me anything I wasn't yesterday? That get me any more students than yesterday? Rank has little meaning to me, never have really needed it for anything, no powers that be, have ever actually asked me what rank I was, or required a peek at the certificate, except for the organizations that have ranked me. I'll take permission to practice and permission to teach over paper tucked in the drawer.

What about the headmaster?

I've had it argued to me many times that often the best person for the job of headmaster isn't the most skilled or the best teacher, it's the one who can best hold the school together. Case in point was the succession in MJER, I hear time and again that the successor to Oe Masamichi should have been this or that person because of skill. (Inevitably by someone of the line that follows from the "successor" of course.) The school is still growing, proof enough that the official choices of successors were just fine.

But Oe Masamichi himself may not have been the most skilled person in his generation, in fact there's considerable agreement that he wasn't.

There are all sorts of reasons to promote teachers and name successors, some of them may even involve skill.



Looks like a "left hand on centerline" sort of class.

Iaido and Disability

I'm not sure why this topic keeps coming up but in the run-up to the summer gradings I am being asked by my students whether or not it's worth them grading or even continuing their study of iaido due to bad knees, nerve damage or other disability.

We went over all this 20 years ago, but here it is again, so here again is my take on the topic.

I'll teach anyone who is in front of me because I don't think iaido is a matter of copying a book or copying what I was taught. Iaido is the use of the sword in a way that is appropriate to the situation and to the person holding the sword.

So having stated my bias, here are my arguments.

If we were creating fighting men, bad knees would be a problem. Bad knees in the current military are indeed a problem, as are bad backs and other damage caused by humping loads that are too heavy over broken ground. The infantry is being asked to carry everything it needs and to do it with body armour on. If we were trying to turn out warriors that had to fight from seiza then we, like the military, should indeed discard our people when they can no longer do the job. But we're not. Iaido is not practiced as a method of fighting in defence of the country, never was.

Iaido from seiza was done because people sat in seiza. There's nothing magical about the position, there's just a bunch of kata that start from there, so we practice from there. What happened the last time the Japanese sword was used in war? Nakayama Hakudo and Kono Hyakuren took the seiza and tate hiza techniques of iai and stood them up to create the iai that was taught at the army and navy officer schools. They taught standing iai because the modern Japanese army officer wasn't going to be sitting around in seiza or even tate hiza with their gunto strapped on.

How about tradition? It's traditional for iaido to be done from seiza! Well it has been since Omori Rokurozaemon invented the techniques and they were adopted into the school, but seiza wasn't there before that time. The Omori ryu (seiza) showed up when people started sitting in seiza a lot. Now we sit on chairs, and to my mind, it's about time a chair set was developed (not my job). Seiza is traditional but not necessary, it's useful but not indispensable, you can learn all the lessons of seiza by using tate hiza or standing, it may take a bit longer but again, we're not training a military, we've got time. We can stand up all the seiza techniques, all the tate hiza techniques, because most of them are already there in the standing set, and for what few are not there, we have good hints.

Tradition is respected exactly as much as the teachers say it is respected. I'm all for tradition, I figure we should follow it in the absence of understanding because we need to trust the teachers of our teachers, but let's use common sense, if someone can't sit in seiza, they can't sit in seiza. It's a choice by their teachers to say they can't do iaido.

But the rules say they have to sit in seiza to pass an exam. Do they? Looking through the book I see that you're supposed to sit seiza for 1-3 of Zen Ken Ren iai, and tate hiza for number 4. Looking through some of the advice to judges I see it says we should refer to the book so OK maybe. But I don't see anywhere that it says we cannot accommodate disability. For a kyu test we forgive a lot of stuff that isn't "in the book", we don't require the precision we require for a 5dan... perhaps we should, if what the book says is iaido, what kyu challengers do isn't iaido so perhaps they should fail. They don't, we accommodate.

As for the grading standards of each country, well there we have it. There is nothing in the CKF grading policy that says we can not accommodate bad knees or other problems. What is not specifically forbidden falls under the jurisdiction of the chief examiner, so the bottom line comes down to what he says. If the chief examiner says it's fine to accommodate in a grading, it's fine. If he says no, you don't pass if you do your seiza techniques while standing. The head judge at any particular grading can give direction on any such grey areas to the panel in his pre-grading talk. On this topic though, it's pretty cut and dried, you pass or fail by doing seiza or not, so unless the organization needs the test fee money, the chief examiner should make a public decision and then those who can't sit seiza will not be allowed to challenge a grade. It's pretty simple. Now, to my mind, if the chief examiner does not forbid, head judges should also not forbid. In the absence of a negative decision, accommodation should be made.

No matter what, however, the head judge does not get to review or change the decisions of the panel, and it comes down to each judge. If the majority of judges want to fail someone for standing rather than sitting, it's a fail. If they decide to pass even if the head judge says they must fail.... well the student should pass but the head judge will have some things to say to the panel.

But people will cheat and not sit in seiza to make it easier to pass or win a tournament. Really? Do we mistrust our students? For what reason? If they "cheat" in a tournament what do they gain? Not money, not lands, not fame and fortune. About the worst we can say is that it's not fair to the opponent. But when I could sit seiza (and I cannot... no, will not... now) I had no more trouble doing the kata than when I stood. To make someone with bad knees sit seiza against a person who has good knees is more fair? Not in my opinion. Stand the bad knees up and judge the iaido not the health of the competitor's knees.

Same goes for gradings, judge the iaido, not the knees, or the nerve damage, or the stroke, or the missing limb (all of which we have accommodated in the past). And as far as someone passing a grading without seiza, what harm is that to the art if their iai is good and their teaching skills are unimpaired? What harm to the organization? None at all, in fact it's more fees into the bank account!

So what does Japan do? Ah, the ultimate argument yes? Well Japan allows for disability with a doctor's note, and the disability is noted on the grading sheets available to the panel. While this seems a good idea, and it obviously works for Japan, there are some things to consider in the West. First, we don't have huge numbers of anonymous students lined up in front of us. It's pretty clear to us who has a problem without consulting doctors. Next, not all people have access to doctors notes for free, and remember these notes must be obtained for every test. Health changes from test to test. Who puts all this medical information on the grading sheets? It has to go in there before the grading? And a doctor's note? "Hey doc give me a note that says I can't fold my legs past the place where you would consider it smart to fold them and then drop my entire body weight onto them" "umm OK". What's the note prove?

Bottom line, it's no big deal not to grade in iaido, so the organization should decide whether accomodation is allowed or not, and then put a mechanism in place to accomodate, if it does. My favourite mechanism is "benefit of the doubt" where I assume if someone is not in seiza there's a reason for that beyond "I'm tired and don't feel like it". I can usually tell if they've got knee problems anyway, they look like they have knee problems. So grade or don't grade, simple one.

What about practicing iaido at all? Well that's up to the instructor and all the points above are relevent. Here's one final argument: Folks should be tough, it's a martial art after all.

When I was young I believed this. I was tough, I used to exercise until I threw up, I did Aikido with dislocated shoulders, I did Tae Kwon Do with broken fingers and toes, I played football with damaged knees. I still do very stupid things in a similar manner but now it takes me years instead of months or weeks to recover and it never comes back all the way. It Never Did, but I didn't know that.

My point is that it is unfair to a student's future life for us to demand they try to do seiza when they can't or shouldn't. Broken knees mean a poor old age. Replaced knees do NOT bend to seiza. We are not allowed to ask people to sacrifice their future independance for what amounts to our amusement. In fact, as one of the damaged, supposedly smarter, certainly older, folks who have "gone before" I figure it's my job to watch my young students and when they start to do something that might damage their old age say "get off your damned knees and do it standing!" But that's just me.

Where Can I Find a College With Koryu to Attend?

With all my heart I'd recommend that you pick your college for what's most suitable for you, for what's going to educate you best for what you want to do with the rest of your life.

Then look around and see if you can find a koryu nearby.

Koryu isn't secret, it doesn't require sitting outside the gate in the rain for days, there aren't blood oaths and secret handshakes and you don't need an introduction letter. Some schools may require all those things, and if you're the type that likes to do something "exclusive" by all means go for it but "Koryu" isn't some monolithic cultural-appreciation club with rules laid down by some conclave of Daimyo in the 1540s.

The vast majority of people in the west who are teaching koryu (and there's a lot of them) require that you get your butt onto the floor to practice and not much else.

But "Koryu" is as much a fad as anything else that's come along in the last couple decades, with the possible exception that it's a fad without much in the way of numbers.

Folks love to talk about it, and dream of moving away to learn it but they rarely actually turn up on the floor when they get the chance to practice.

For instance, we had the Guelph School of Japanese Sword Arts going for over 10 years here, and we rarely got more than 30 people during the school. That's with soke/fuku soke, hachidan, and menkyo kaiden instructors from several different koryu coming to hang out and chat with each other. They were never bothered by hoards of students desperate to learn koryu.

Frankly, the school continued as long as it did because the instructors liked to get together and chat with each other, not because there's a demand for koryu instruction in the West. There isn't.

Want to learn Niten Ichiryu? We had Imai soke and Iwami soke as well as Colin Watkin (Hyaku) sensei here annually for 4 years. We got about 40 people total. You'd think with all this desperation to learn koryu, folks would spend a couple hundred Canadian plus the gas to drive to Guelph to learn some.

Nah, life gets in the way, easier to dream about one day going to Japan to learn on a mountain than to take a week off and sweat blood with the top guy.

Koryu isn't a lifestyle and you can't make a living at it, even in Japan. Find a good college and attend, if you've got some extra time during your studies, look around for a koryu school. If you don't find one go practice kendo or judo. You'll get as much or more out of either of those as you would from any of the koryu, despite fantasies of secret teachings to the contrary.

And if you're wanting to be a full time martial artist, I strongly suggest you get hooked up with a good commercial karate organization that has a solid business plan and put your time in. Concentrate on learning how to teach kids!

Don't make life decisions around learning a koryu, especially if you've never had the chance to practice one. Imagine finding an instructor on the net, moving to the town and registering at a college then finding out the guy's a know-nothing jerk and the college is at best fourth rate...

The one thing I've noticed over the years is that before folks know anything about a koryu they're dead keen to learn it and convinced it's exactly what they want to do with the rest of their lives. Unfortunately, the more certain they are the faster they quit when they find out what it's really all about.

The ones who stay are the ones who wander in and say "whatcha doing". They live close, they don't have any pre-conceived ideas about what's happening (so aren't disillusioned that there's no "secret learning").

Did I mention that they live close?

Busy Busy

My daughter was born 19 years ago, just around the time of our December Grading weekend. I was there at her birth and it sort of bothered me that I was letting the organization down, but that's OK I have made every grading since. In the process I missed pretty much every birthday party for my daughter along the way, but you know, priorities, the organization is important, budo is important. Part of martial arts is personal responsibility and putting the welfare of the group ahead of your own selfish wants. It's the warrior way.

Right?

So now I'm looking at ways to convince her that commuting to university from home is a good idea rather than moving away. I hardly know this kid, and it's only yesterday that she was born it seems. There are big gaps in my experience of both her and her brother and I'm wondering why that is.

I can't begin to tell you how many times over the last 19 years I have had a student say that they can't make this or that budo event due to some family commitment. What about their commitment to budo? I mean I make all the events, and most of these are really important, visiting instructors, special classes that sort of thing. It seems like we just get a promising teenager started on the arts and then they get married and get a job and poof, they disappear.

Me, I always looked for jobs that let me take time off for seminars, I had a wife that didn't mind that I was gone, I had kids that said they understood when I had to go away for the weekends.

Now it seems that they are busy when I get the occasional weekend and want to do something family-oriented. They've got their friends and just can't be bothered to be away from them long enough to go on a drive or to the cottage!

Folks, listen to one of the old men for a change (it is never popular but I always benefitted by listening to them when I did), figure out what's important. Your kids are with you for about twelve minutes so put your budo on slow-cook for the time they are growing up, put your golf, your gambling, your boozing and your banking on hold and enjoy these little people while you can, they grow up in a blink but they remember everything that happens during that blink, for the rest of their lives. Do you remember growing up? Remember how long that took? You as a kid were on one time scale, you as a parent are on another, and they don't match. At four it takes your entire lifetime to get to eight. At thirty four years is no time at all. Don't judge the time you have with your kids by what you remember of kid-time, you'll miss way too much.

I'm sitting with my daughter right now, writing this of course, rather than talking to her, but we do notice the old men in the coffee bar. They've got time for each other now, too bad they were too busy for their kids, too bad they had a job and maybe a hobby and they always had "next week" to do something with the family. Next week isn't the same to my daughter now as it was twelve years ago. Her time-scale is getting closer to mine and she's learned well, she puts things off like a pro.

Do you ever wonder why Gramps doesn't mind babysitting the kids? Wonder why they get along so well?

If you don't make it to the next grading because your kids are having a party, I promise won't mind.



Possibly one of the few panels I wasn't missing a birthday party.

How Long to be a Big Shot

Let's say we want to be a big wheel in your organization. No idea why you'd want to be, but here's the times required in the Kendo federation. You can put people forward for grading at 5dan in the CKF, you can sit on a panel to any grade up to 7dan at 7dan. There are two grading streams, the dan and the shogo which are renshi, kyoshi and hanshi. For Canada we don't really use shogo for anything so think of them as 6.5, 7.5 and 8.5 dan. They aren't technical grades, so that's really not accurate but like I said, they don't have much of a function in the CKF. In Japan the shogo have much more meaning and a hanshi is in fact a Big Shot.

So for timing, it's about a year to shodan, 1 to nidan, 2 to sandan, 3 to yondan and 4 to godan so 11 years minimum to 5dan. Another 5 to rokudan and 6 to nanadan for 22 years all at max speed and no failures... ridiculous if you think about it, who needs 20 years to get good enough to judge something? 11 to godan seems plenty to me. How long does it take to become a surgeon and muck about in someone's innerds?

Hanshi... hmm, another 10 years to 8dan is 33 years... then a few more before you can challenge hanshi. That's it though, nothing more above that at the moment in the federation.

But are you ever a big shot here in the West? There's 7 and 8dan sword instructors in the west, why are all these young-uns wanting to go to Japan? Nice place I'm sure, but if the goal is training it's a lot more practical to do it where you live... maybe move 300 miles instead of 3000? Just thinking out loud here... I mean of course you have to go to Japan to become a samurai, either that or find some funky old gardener on the back street of your local town who teaches you in 3 months.

20 years... and how many failed relationships due to the obsession? Ridiculous.

For all those who are currently teaching a class somewhere in Canada with a 3 or 4 dan because you're the only teacher available... good on you. With 4 to 7 years of training (around the time it takes to get, say, an MSc in University) I'd say you have a good chance of being able to teach something useful to your students.

As far as I'm concerned, you're already a big shot.

Just How Senior Does Your Teacher Need to Be

This is a perpetual question for students and the usual answer is "your teacher should be as senior as you can find".

But over the years I have come to wonder about this. Do you really need to study with a hanshi when you are a beginner in iai? Is it a good idea?

There is no doubt that a hanshi "knows things" but in any physical art there's a large amount of "shows things" at the beginning. As I am well aware, even a 50 something 7dan (a position where you are, supposedly, as strong and technically able as you will ever be) can, as in my case, be losing the edge, or at least the knees, to be able to demonstrate really top-level iaido. I can't imagine the frustration of some of the hanshi who have come to the end of their joints, who know exactly what's needed to demonstrate a point, but can't do it.

Sure they can ask some of those 50 year old nanadans to demonstrate, but watch carefully and you'll see the pain behind the eyes when their point doesn't get made.

A few private words to a nanadan and whole worlds can open up for them, but what does this hanshi offer to a first kyu? Perhaps not as much as you might think.

The first kyu.... never mind that.... the iaido and jodo students all the way to fifth dan are learning how to dance, how to perform technically perfect kata. This involves the correct footwork, the correct movement of the sword, the correct timing, pressure, strength, posture... things that can take decades to learn. For all of that the best teacher will be someone who can demonstrate all those things in the correct sequence for the students to take them on board. It doesn't require a hanshi and for my money, one should not be provided. The best teacher for a strong young man is a stronger young man. Someone who is ahead, but not so far ahead as to be past the things needed to be learned by a beginner.

Three years ago I stood in front of a hanshi and he showed a grip on the sword that moved my hands a centimeter. The 6 and 7dan people in that class were delighted and we are still talking about it. I of course showed all my students and one or two yondan sort of got it. Nobody below that level of experience even came close to getting excited like I did, probably because they didn't feel what that grip did to the little toes or the shape of the sword as it dropped. Their skill level wasn't high enough for the correction to make any difference.

So what use would it have been for a yondan to sit in on that class? None at all, they would have looked and said "big deal, I know how to hold the sword, how to sit, how to breath, what's this old man doing?" (Or even worse, speak up and ask him to teach them some sort of lost or secret kata they read about on the internet).

Be careful what you are trying to learn and from whom, the best sensei is one who can take you to the next step, not one who is so far down the road he never saw the pothole you are about to drop into.

Never saw it because it wasn't there when he went past.



Just how Senior Does Your Teacher Need to Be II

Thomas Groendal wrote: "Another purely practical concern: if the hachidan hanshi is a one in a thousand or one in ten thousand genius, but only has time to really teach a few hundred students at best from beginner to the end of their potential, the math is not good. The art will die. If his intermediate level students are out there cycling through another thousand or ten thousand students though, someone brilliant will answer the call. That hachidan hanshi will know her when he sees her."

An excellent point. I have seen more than a few clubs in this area with top-rank-loaded students and very few beginners during times of decreasing enrollment. Lots of rank that could be out teaching but they stay "at home" because, so they say, they haven't learned enough to go teach. Over the years some of the more honest have confided to me that it's more usually laziness than insecurity, it's just easier to stay and practice than go out and teach.

Indeed it is. It's also a lot more fun for a bunch of high ranks to play with each other at their high level rather than teach beginners. Let's face it, beginners are a drag. One of the super-rank clubs I was involved with practiced Aikido and I can tell you that as a young, fit student with enough years of practice to protect myself, it was a blast to practice there. As soon as the students found out you weren't going to break when you fell, it was spin city for the entire class. You could almost hear the thoughts of "fresh meat!"

It was of course small wonder that there were few beginners and those that wandered in didn't last long. This was not a unique situation, most of the clubs filled with high ranks taught only by the headmaster tend to chase out beginners. Now, there are some super-rank clubs who make provision for beginners and these often give the beginner classes to these same middle ranks that Thomas suggests could be out teaching their own clubs. In fact there are clubs within clubs in these dojo, with beginners picking their instructors if they can, and avoiding others.

Needless to say this usually happens in a big city with a very highly respected and ranked instructor in a private club. It doesn't happen so much in small towns where the teenaged prodigy leaves for a career, or University settings where you have an inherently transient pool of students. I know that the lament of every sensei here in Guelph is just the same as the parental lament heard just before we get the students walking in the door... "they just start to get interesting and they leave!" Thank goodness for grad school and those students who stay around more than four years.

Back to the super-rank clubs and what happens to them eventually. Firstly, no matter how many people start in that magical cohort that turns into the upper-rank stay-at-homes, the numbers in the club

eventually start to shrink. No matter how good sensei is in these clubs, eventually the students catch up, at least physically if not altogether. Sometimes sensei takes this well, sometimes not. Sometimes sensei adapts and becomes softer and/or sneakier and sometimes he just becomes grumpy and hard to get along with. Regardless, the seniors eventually start to leave, and this time the opening up of new dojo may be used as an excuse not to practice "back home" much.

Once I noted that a head sensei chose to leave the club at the height of its power and skill. The students were starting to challenge sensei and rather than booting them all out, he left. This interesting experiment didn't result in anything different really, a new top dog emerged and eventually the rest of the upper ranks drifted off to start their own clubs.

The problem with this model is that by the time the super-rank club fissions off its instructors, they are past their evangelical fever. They are usually looking for some place to practice in peace rather than looking to spread the good word. The original club isn't much better off, it's not easy to remember how to recruit new beginners after 20 years of ignoring them. There is a window of youth and experience that makes a great beginning instructor, go through either of those and you lose a lot of potential new students.

So how does a head sensei avoid the super-rank club syndrome? Some have no interest in avoiding it at all, they like the fact that they've got all this talent under them. They may encourage students to stay by hinting that they haven't the skills or experience to go teach. Fortunately this is rarely the case in my experience, most super-rank clubs are a function of their situation as I mentioned above. Big cities mean expensive practice space and lots of students at those spaces which do exist. A large initial pool of students will produce lots of rank in very short order and it's only gradually, and if sensei isn't paying attention, that the rank eventually starts chasing out the beginners. By the time anyone notices, it's a super-rank club.

It takes effort to avoid this. First step may be to set up beginner classes within the club and keep that cohort together under one or two of the lower ranking people. Eventually the ranked survivors get transferred to the senior class and the senior sensei. If a chance does come up to start a new club in a nice location, the head sensei ought to have a senior student in mind and push him or her out the door with many promises of lots of help with the new club and the chance to come on back for special high level practices so that the new teacher can keep learning.

I'm sure there are lots of other ways to deal with the super-rank dojo, but most of them will come down to sensei paying attention to what's going on around him. Sort of like everything else in the arts, it's all about noticing the tiger in the bushes.

Martial Arts and Career

Driving the wife to work I happened to hear on the radio that having a dog is a good career move. The daily walks give your brain a chance to rest, and the daily timing of feeding and walking gives structure to the day. So if you are self employed, get a dog and your business will improve.

I figured that out while attending University, where I used my martial arts classes to structure my week. All my classes and all my daytime free time (devoted to running, lifting weights or practicing budo on my own) were arranged around those evening practices. I never had less than 5 sessions of budo a week, and often twice that.

It worked out well, the practices themselves meant I couldn't be thinking about the current girlfriend, exams, or essays, and getting out of the apartment to go to class was enough to get other things going. Most of the effort is expended getting off the couch, the rest is just momentum. Strangely enough, filling my week with things to do gave me more time to get my schoolwork done. With only a couple hours to work, I made the best of it and worked, rather than procrastinated.

Ever wonder why office buildings still exist in this era of home computing? The act of getting from one place to another has value to the working process.

Over the years I've had folks say "when I'm working I don't have time for martial arts and when I'm unemployed I can't afford martial arts". Fair enough, but my classes don't cost a penny, just show up in class, and perhaps a break of a couple hours three times a week might do some good to the old brain cells. Consultants make more money the faster they work, it's only pieceworkers who make more the longer they work.

Got a kid heading to College? Consider telling them to take up some activity that wastes their time on a regular basis.

More on What To Study

I have no inspiration this morning as Lauren is having her breakfast and I'm being the usual guilt-driven workaholic, writing while drinking my coffee. It gets worse in the runup to the May seminar <http://seidokai.ca/iai.seminar.html> as I obsess about all the setup that still needs to be done. A bit over 40 people signed up so far, almost got the air tickets paid off, double the numbers and I may be able to pay for the hotel rooms!

Here's a bit from a past forum post on what you should study. I sense a definite trend in what students want to know and what their seniors tell them to do, often not the same thing. T'was always the way with the young and old yes?

What to study? I want to study a koryu, a nice rare one, what do you suggest? And I don't want to learn it at a seminar because that's just seminar learning.

Do what's in your back yard! Go do Kendo or Judo. People eventually "get a life" and so stop doing the long distance commute to learn a martial art. Especially when they find out what "koryu" is.

Now please, if someone wants to move to learn Niten Ichiryu, and are dead keen to learn it than don't you think it would be a really really really good idea to meet the headmaster of the style in a place where you could show him just how serious you are? Like when he's in North America for a week? No letters of introduction needed, no need to fly to Japan, just drive to Guelph (a couple hours north of Buffalo NY) and step on the mat. No need to even have your own bokuto, we loan them out!

(Incidentally, we DO get people from all over Europe and North America at the seminars. Just damned few of them in total and I think it's because koryu is not in demand any more than it's ever been, it's just in style as the next "cool secret martial art").

It has been suggested that people don't attend seminars because they don't know if they'll get the instruction when they go back home. This makes no sense at all to me, you train when and where you can. If I didn't invite sensei to Guelph, I'd be flying to Japan and Europe to train. If "future training" were a factor then potential students would email me and ask if they can learn this stuff elsewhere than the seminars. They don't. They want to learn a secret Japanese martial art that's really really exclusive... and that's just around the corner from their house. Surely you know the story, a little old Japanese fellow sees you walking by one day and calls you into his back yard to pass on the wisdom of the ages through some obscure branch of a martial art nobody's ever heard of. That's what folks want, not to hear "make an effort, come to me and I'll teach you".

'No', you say, 'there's a demand for koryu, I feel it in my bones'.

I figure there's a demand for koryu that's just around the corner where the local karate club is. There's no real demand for koryu per se. If there were we'd have folks coming to the seminars to meet the people who could teach them.

It's as simple as that.

Major seminars have been happening in Guelph since 1991. They aren't a secret or hard to find out about. They're even pretty well known in Japan since they are often written up in the martial arts magazines. Google Iaido, google Niten Ichiryu, there we are.

I started The Iaido Newsletter in 1987 before there was a WWW, back when we hunted mastadon and mailed stuff with stamps, just to connect all the North American folks who had an interest in iaido so we could get enough people together to invite a sensei from Japan for a seminar. Now you type 5 letters into google and hit return.

Not hard to find, just not around the corner.

But, someone said, "You're correct in asserting that the demands of koryu training can dissuade some from joining, or the teacher sees deficiencies or potential problems and doesn't accept the candidate."

I absolutely do not assert that the demands of koryu training prevent students from joining, or that teachers will not accept students. In no way do I say that. I said that most teachers simply demand that you show up on the floor. I know of damned few martial arts teachers of koryu, or any other art, that demand students do anything special beyond showing up to join.

Some do, and more power to them since they attract the folks that want that sort of thing... and some folks do want that sort of thing.

I maintain, as always, that my way is the absolute most rigid "test" of a student of all. I get people asking to train with me (who assure me that they want to do my martial art for the rest of their lives), who wonder what sort of introduction letter or special training or money they have to give to me to be allowed the rare and amazing honour of training with me. The task I set them is to "show up on the floor".

They never ever do. Not once have I had someone who's expecting a "test" pass my test. Zero percent pass rate.

Pretty tough test.

Incidentally, we're talking about people who say they will "move anywhere to study koryu" not about the vast majority of people who want to find Mr. Miyagi the next block over, and I reiterate, get your life in order and then see if there's some koryu around. Do NOT move somewhere simply because you figure you want to learn some martial art you've never actually tried.

DO go to a seminar that offers koryu and see if it's what you want to chase for the rest of your life. They exist, you don't need to jump through hoops, you just need to show up.

There are more seminars on the Olde Japanese martial arts than ever in North America, take a week off and see if you want to spend thousands of dollars and dozens of years chasing the rabbit.



Secret koryu kata taught only in Guelph.

*If you want to check out any of Kim's instructional books you can do so at <http://sdksupplies.com/> where you might also find more of these *Half a Century* ebooks.*