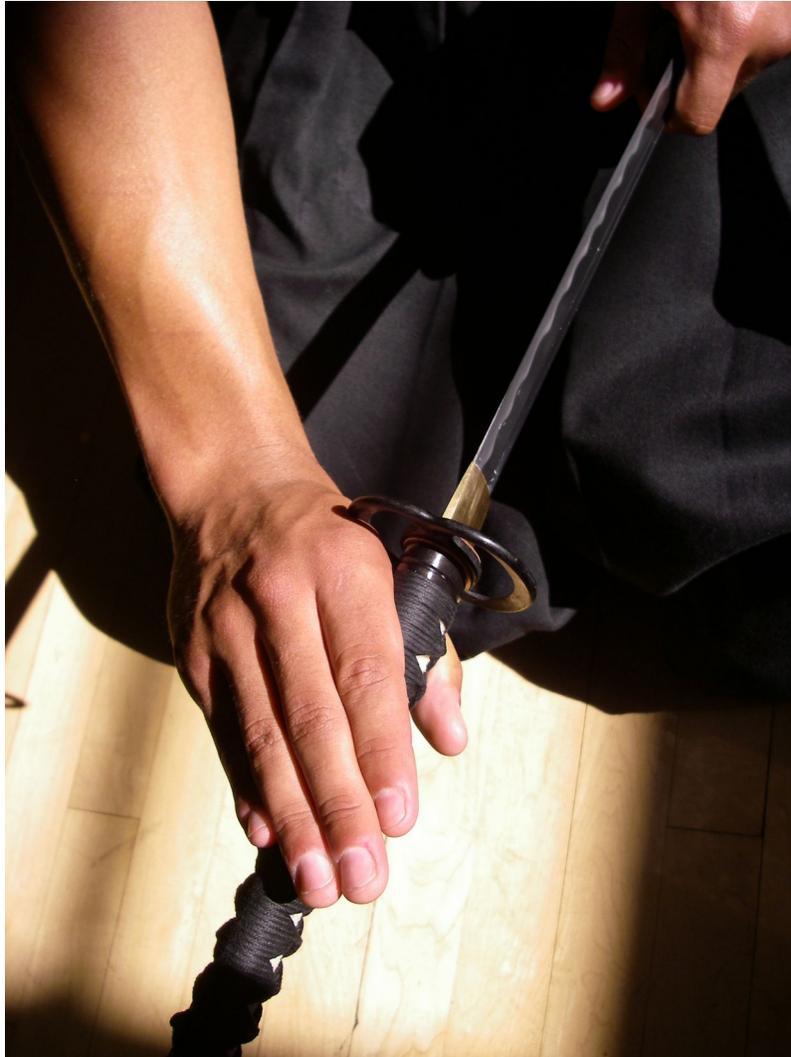


Half a Century V

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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Enlightenment

The function of the life long practice of budo is often assumed to be enlightenment.

I gotta tell you, it's a tricky subject. If we're talking about that wonderful feeling of being connected to the entire universe (non-drug induced) and the sure knowledge that the world and your self interpenetrate and all that jazz, I got that about 30 years ago. I was riding on a bus and received it as we were going around a corner. Cool rubber on hot pavement, the outward sway of movement, the smell of diesel exhaust, the warmth of the sun on our window, the vibration of the engine.

What did it do for me? Well I'm no longer bothered by religion, fear of death or the rest of that "big thing". I instantly knew the meaning of life and I haven't forgotten it.

Did it make me happy? A better person?

No. Unfortunately no on both counts.

The problem is that I live in the world. I have to deal with life in all its ugly, stupid, depressing, vindictive, petty glory. One of my students is living like a monk in my cottage up north. He chops wood, melts snow, reads good books and is alone with his thoughts. Oh how I envy him! Ah, yes, envy.

Enlightenment isn't a goal, being a good person isn't an achievement, it's something that we have to work at every day. Training is forever or the world sucks you right back down into the pointless bickering and argument of everyday life in an over-crowded world where most people figure they'll be happy with just a little bit more, where next week it's going to get done and next year we'll do that nice thing we have been meaning to do for.... is it ten years now?

Make a list for a day of all the selfish, petty, hurtful things that you notice.

Now make a list for all the same things you notice in other people.

It's easy to be enlightened if you're a hermit on a mountain. It's not so easy if you live in the world of ghosts, in that city of half-alive people who don't know they're half dead. In that place where the only way most people feel life is through self-inflicted pain and where their connection with others is through the infliction of more pain.

Mostly it's a fight against the anger that comes with the understanding of how happy people could be if they would just stop looking inward and nurturing, indulging that needy-greedy little child and look outward to the wonder of being alive.

To just stop and pay attention to the rest of their own self, the part that is beyond that bag of skin they think separates them from the rest of their life, their happiness.



Flavours

One of the truisms of the martial arts is that you have to stick with one instructor. Sometimes it works out that you can, but in the case of myself and many of my students it has not.

I have a student in Japan who has had an embarrassment of instruction. Due to his job he has moved to several locations in Japan and has practiced with many of the strongest iaido and jodo instructors.

Here in Canada we have been exposed to dozens of very strong instructors from Japan as a matter of course as seminars are presented and different people are invited.

This is both good and bad. As a beginner and for a couple of decades after that, being exposed to many different instructors means that you can be moulded into something very strong, something that, if you're lucky, is the best of each instructor. They all see different things and they all make tweaks in different ways which means a student can get some fine "fine tuning".

The flip side is that there can be conflicting instruction, which is where the flavour comes in. Even in a common set such as Zen Ken Ren Iai (seitei iaido) there is room for variation in the shape of a cut or the timing of a movement.

You can see why this multiple instruction isn't a problem until you've had ten or 15 years of practice, to change at will the shape of your cut or the path the tip of your sword takes, means that you are an advanced student to begin with. Instruction goes from the large to the small, from big movements to the details, and by the time you're working on those details you're very experienced. This is where there can be too many flavours in one dish. You are now at the stage where you can make these kinds of changes and so you will get nailed with contradictory advice.

Note that we're talking about Zen Ken Ren Iai and there is very little room for personal interpretation here. The set is designed for testing how closely students can come to a specified practice, and it is designed to be the same worldwide. In other words, multiple instructors should be able to teach the same student and come up with someone who is performing the techniques correctly. It is only at the advanced stages that the student needs consistent instruction, at about 5 or 6dan, certainly by 7dan.

Koryu is a different story. There is no common agreement on how to practice a koryu art, even very small arts such as Niten Ichiryu have multiple lines of instruction. Larger arts such as Muso Jikiden Eishin Ryu have hundreds of lines of practice which can look radically different and can have quite different interpretations of the kata. It is of great value for a student to learn from a single instructor for as much of their practice as possible, certainly from their fourth or fifth year of practice onward. Of course, each of these koryu have their own grading systems (or not) and so it would be downright impossible to consider advancing in any of the lines without being a student of that line and thus the student of one instructor. It is only in a common set such as Zen Ken Ren iai that the question even arises that you can have several instructors and advance in rank.

Bottom line, you either follow the instructor you're studying with or you insult him/her by second guessing their instruction and if you're second guessing the instruction you're wasting your time. Even if you can do it "two different ways" and keep them separated, what do you do when you grade? These are the origins of the "one teacher" rule. It has something to do with loyalty and instructors being reluctant to poach students, sure, but it has a lot more to do with having a clear voice of instruction at higher levels of study.

Finally, there is always the case of "politics" which, in the martial arts actually more often than not means "sponsorship". To achieve the very highest ranks in any organization you need to be known, and in a large organization that means you need to be sponsored by someone who can vouch for your character and abilities. Those at the top of a small organization may know everyone of interest below, but get into the thousands of members and you're looking at personal recommendations being very important and that means picking the right teacher and sticking with him.

Anything Breaks

A customer sent this to me today:

Sorry to be emailing you this but I broke my ebony bokken today on a rubber "Bob"...yes, broken...I will send you pics asap.....I am not asking for anything and just providing feedback for you and Kim....I cut ABOUT 4000 cuts minimum a week for about 15 years now so I'm starting to get it as far as cutting...Anyway, its sad to see my ebony break and just wanted to share that they all can break and sadly, all do when used....just an fyi, "bob" is the rubber guy who stands and is filled with water or sand..I put about 4 sweatshirts on him too and firehoods on his head to deaden the impacts.....(firehoods per I'm a firefighter in GA)... again, please let me know what you think....thank you!! (this bokken was the custom black ebony one made about 2 years ago now)

I'll be offering a deal to replace his bokuto but a couple of points to make here about using wood tools.

It's wood. It dries out, it suffers from repeated blows, it doesn't like hitting things that don't move out of the way once you hit them. In other words, hit something hard enough or long enough and it will break. I've broken the hickory handles of splitting mauls with a single mis-hit on a piece of pine. I've broken those indestructible plastic handles too.

A few of my fellow bokuto-makers used to offer guarantees against breakage, one of them for "dymondwood" like material (ebony glued laminated wood) and another for verawood, but they don't any more. People break the unbreakable stuff. If I remember the story right, one verawood customer bought a bokuto (at a couple hundred dollars likely) and went out and broke it on a telephone pole.

After almost 30 years of making these things I can tell a lot of stories but here's my advice on hitting things with bokuto.

1. Hit lightly. You want accuracy not power, a bokuto represents a sword and you don't need to hit hard with a sword, the sharp edge takes care of the damage, you just have to deliver it.
2. Hit something springy. If you do want to hit things hard, make sure they give, like a bundle of small branches or a FLEXIBLE rubber tire, but not a heavy bag or a "bob", those things don't give way fast enough. They're OK for hitting with your fist or your foot since those things are moving relatively slowly and if you hit too hard you give... and eventually heal. Bokuto break.
3. Don't use your exotic wood weapons to smack things. They're expensive and they're not the most reliable grain in the world, but as I mentioned, even the epoxy-glued laminates don't stand up to some hitting. Buy a cheap hickory bokuto to break instead.
4. Make sure you hit with the sweet spot. If you hit too close to the end of a bokuto you run the risk of splitting the tip, if you hit too far down you put more weight into the front end which "folds over" the target and snaps. Of course if you hit far enough toward your hands you lose the speed and the leverage and so you reduce the risk.

5. Even weapons that are designed to hit hard don't actually hit hard. I'm thinking of the jo in Shindo Muso Ryu jodo. They are used to smack bokuto out of the way and the bokuto do go flying away fast, but the best strikes, the most correct strikes, don't meet at 90 degrees. The strikes are on an angle that puts the power into the bokuto over a distance and over a period of time so the damage is minimal while the motion is maximized. Even the few strikes that are more or less square on are mitigated by it being tip on tip, so the jo can flex and the bokuto can be driven sideways in the grip of the swordsman. There's never an edge to edge movie-style smacking going on.

6. Remember that you can break an ash (very flexible wood) baseball bat on a small ball so it should never be a surprise that you can break a bokuto on an immovable object, or on another bokuto swung at 90 degrees to hit edge to edge.

7. Experience is not a protection. At some point you will have to ease up even more when you hit things, because with experience comes the ability to put more and more power into the tip of the bokuto. Eventually you will be able to pick up just about any weapon and know how to snap it in half. I know karate guys who can break a bo by swinging it in the air.



People Is People

From the "everyone's the same" files: On an online forum recently it was suggested that the koryu in Japan do not badmouth each other. This response comes from Rennis Buchner

Not to be argumentative, but spend a little bit of time on various Japanese discussion boards where budo matters come up and you will readily find endless discussions of various ryu, various lines of ryua, etc that make some of the meanest and most vindictive arguments we have see on our English forums seem downright tame in comparison. Of course one major reason for this is that Japanese forums generally tend to lean towards anonymous posting, which really allows the gloves to come off. But in any case, the idea that most other ryuha don't have similar issues in the online (and real life) community and don't get bad-mouthed and aggressively attacked for any number of reasons in Japan is far from true. Most ryu do "put up with it" or more correctly, just try to ignore it.

Many western beginners do tend to have the idea that Japanese budo is some sort of monolithic, polite society dedicated to improving all humanity. It's always a good idea to remember that people is people at the end of the day.



This is the photo Ohmi sensei sometimes talks about, the very high stamp on nuki tsuke.

Still Learning

This example won't mean much to those who don't do jodo but the idea's the same.

I was working, the last couple of practices, on hiki otoshi uchi, the knocking aside of the sword by the jo. Mostly I'm trying to get the students to keep their hips underneath themselves, to keep their hands from crossing when they swing, to get the right angle on the strike, all sorts of things like that.

Yesterday I was talking about footwork, carrying over from the iaido class earlier in the day and mentioned the change in the foot between ma hanmi (fully sideways stance) where you start this technique, and ya ya hanmi (sort of sideways) where you finish. The front foot moves from 45 degrees away from the opponent to pointing directly at them.

Suddenly I said " OK turn your foot first, before you hit the sword" and lights appeared over heads all over the class.

Including mine.

And suddenly hips, angles, hands all fell into place.

I heard, down the line a little way, someone say "why didn't you mention this before?"

Hells bells, I just noticed it myself! Didn't say so of course, can't have the students know just how small the distance between us is, I said something like "well now you're ready to hear it".

Thankfully nobody challenged the little talk on hand angles and grip that popped into my head at the same time... fixed up the swing shape though.

The ages of Learning

(With apologies to Confucious)

I suspect I was one of the first folks on the net to point out that Shimizu sensei got a menkyo kaiden (full transmission of the school) in just 8 years http://ejmas.com/jnc/jncart_taylor_0900.htm and I'm usually the first to jump in on the debunking of the "ancient Japanese master" stuff but to be honest, at this stage in my martial arts career it looks about like this:

At 5 years I had learned all the kata.

At 10 years I had some idea that I knew what the kata were for.

At going on 30 years of martial arts practice now I'm just starting to figure out that it's got nothing to do with kata. The really juicy stuff is in the first twitch of your foot just as the opponent has reached a point in his attack where he's committed and can't prevent what you're about to do to him.

The first twitch of the foot.

And I'm still not there, I figure I need another ten years at least before I get what I'm working on now, by which time I'll be fascinated by something even more esoteric.

Look, there are guys out there who get "menkyo kaiden" in short periods of time... and I have a 7dan in iaido, but that stuff isn't what I'm talking about. Knowing the school and being able to teach it isn't the end of the road. The real secrets of the martial arts (and I've said this before too) are contained in the lessons you got on the very first day of your training. They aren't secrets at all, they're practical ways of moving that explode into all the kata of the school and then contract after years of training into a couple of basic motions. Back to what you learned the first day.

So for 5 years you learn kata like crazy, looking for the techniques.

For the next ten years you study the kata for the secret techniques contained within and between the techniques and maybe you get permission to start teaching.

Then for the next 20 years you slowly start to realize that the kata are only the textbooks, knowing them is knowing what the recipe for a chocolate cake is, they aren't the chocolate cake.

The good cooking comes after years of cooking, not after memorizing a few hundred recipes.

The Dojo Floor



We were talking about "the dojo" a couple of days ago. The dojo is the top floor of my cottage, it's a beautiful space of 24 by 36 feet with 13 foot high ceilings that has, for 16 years, been used as a junk accumulation area but now one of my students is determined he is going to make it a dojo before this spring is over.

We got thinking about the floor and it occurs to me that the best floor I've ever seen is in the dojo of Namitome sensei in Fukuoka. It has light coming in at floor level, it has red pine floors, and it has acquired, over the years, the surface texture of a golf ball.

It's beautiful.

It's like a practice top that is starting to fray around the collar, just the right amount of wear and tear to

let you know that someone works here. This floor has acquired its dents from years of jo and bokuto hits which have been worn in by regular washing.

Just thinking about it makes me happy.



Too Many Cooks

I picked my son up from his Judo class and he was not a very happy camper. He had a couple of complaints but they all came, more or less, down to the same problem.

First, he and his partner were told to practice slower by one sensei, and they did. Then another sensei came along and told them to practice faster, and they did. The first sensei came back and told them that if they didn't start listening to him he was going to kick them off the mat.

Eventually the second sensei came over and admitted he had told them to do something different.

Later, he was working carefully to get a good throw in, since he doesn't want to just try to muscle on the throws because he has no muscle to work with. A sensei announced to the class in general that if they weren't ready to come on the mat and try their hardest they should just stay home.

Now, as it turns out there is a tournament coming up but I wonder how much good this is doing anyone at that class.

The martial arts are not a democracy, there is room for only one voice in a class at any one time. I well remember Aikido classes where every senior I practiced with had his own contribution to my training, and I remember even more clearly wishing they would all just shut up and listen to what the instructor was saying because what he was saying had very little to do with what they thought he was saying... or perhaps they just knew better than their sensei.

It's been a while since I have actually run across this problem. Either I'm so senior nobody talks over my instruction, or those practicing the weapons arts are a bit more careful (confusion doesn't lead to a twisted wrist, it leads to blood on the scalp). I do know that I was always very careful, when in any class, to listen to whoever is teaching and to practice what they were teaching. I always tried very hard to do what they said, rather than to get into "well in my dojo we do it this way"... after all if my partner wanted to learn from me I'm sure he would have said so or turned up in my class.

None of this helps my son with his multiple sensei problem of course, and the only advice I ever came up with to solve the problem was to try and do it the way the last sensei told you to do it... although I have to admit, I really can't think of more than three classes I was ever in with more than one sensei walking around. If it's a training partner yapping away at you then smile, nod, say thank you, and then act stupid while you do the technique the way sensei told you to do it, rather than the way your partner told you. That goes for partners who outrank you as well as those who don't. If your partner outranks you by enough you may find (as I did once or twice) that they stop and ask "really, sensei said do it that way? Oops I guess I should look closer next time".

One cook in each kitchen folks, one sensei in each class.

Kiwanis Music Festival

I attended the first of four or five classes my violin-playing daughter has for this year's Kiwanis Music Festival. The participants play a piece and an adjudicator makes notes and comments at the end of the performances.

My daughter is the equivalent of a Kendo Federation 5th dan.

The adjudicator talked about "how soft is piano" "how fast is adagio" and about the feeling of the piece. She suggested different bowing techniques to achieve different emotions in the music.

I was reminded of the advice that 5dan iaido students get on how to pace the kata, how to make this part or that more hard, more soft.

Then as we were walking out my daughter commented that she had the same instructor for her master class and that this woman had torn her piece to bits, and berated her about not being up on the technical aspects of the playing. My daughter added she knew she was doing this to make her a better player and that her own instructor is just as harsh and unforgiving of technical mistakes.

My opinion that she is a 5dan was confirmed. This rank is the "last of the technical grades" in the Kendo Federation, it is the last grade where the physical ability to perform the kata is the main reason to pass. Beyond this all sorts of other things like the feeling of the kata and the timing within the technique become more important.

More interesting is that the visiting master class instructor felt free to rip her to pieces on her technical skills. She must have seen her level of skill and realized that she should simply be ready for class, the notes ready to hand, and be working on other things. Her comments on the Kiwanis class began with "it's a pleasure to see people come to class prepared", and then she proceeded to give instructions on how to go to the next level.

From now on my daughter will be asked to do more of her own work, to figure out her own phrasing and bowing, to have her own opinion on how a piece should be interpreted and eventually to develop her own style. This style will be something other than a gimmick, it will simply be how she plays, what is natural to her. She will be asked to make the art her own.

How Budo can you get?

News from the SDK front

Let's see, still waiting for enough registrations to come in for the seminar so that I can clear my credit cards and put the next chunk of expenses on there. This will be the 20th Guelph Spring Seminar for iaido and jodo, and we have 8 sensei coming from Japan including the chair of the Iaido committee, Kishimoto sensei. Should be a good seminar and I'm scrambling to get it all organized. It doesn't get any easier as the years go along, especially with coordinating this many instructors through the International Kendo Federation. The seminar is at: <http://seidokai.ca/iai.seminar.html>

This year we'll be doing a door prize, you will have to be at the free dinner on Saturday evening to collect... the nefarious plot of course is to get more people there bidding on the auction pieces so we can recover the price of the dinner and the door prize... wait a minute, let me go over that thinking again...

Other goodies include a free t-shirt that we still have to get ordered, you'll pick up your t-shirt when you put your ticket in for the door prize. (And how many does one order if there are only 30 people registered so far and no idea how many will eventually turn up? Oh the joys of the seminar organizer.) I've also got the students canvassing businesses to put up displays at the seminar and donate cool stuff to the auction so if anyone has any ideas just let me know. The deal is that the business sends items to display, and those are often donated to the auction. From Japan, Kendo World is sending some back issues along with subscription forms, and Chiba Budogu is sending some catalogues and bokuto. Jeff Broderick is sending a couple of items for the auction as well.

I was in Peterborough last weekend and am waiting on visuals for that seminar report. Good seminar, I did another run at abstracting timing from kata. I need to do an article on that for you guys, have to get the video out for it I think.

Speaking of video, I've managed to get a couple more done. The tanjo tape has been done for a while, and is available as a set with a tanjo. http://sdksupplies.com/cat_instructset.html We did a new one on Tachi Uchi no Kurai, I'm learning (I hope) how to do a decent instructional for partner sets. The solo iaido videos are so much easier, turn the tape on, talk for 2 hours, turn the tape off... but partner sets are a different story. Yesterday we did the tachi seiho from Niten Ichiryu and I have a good feeling for this one, although I haven't watched it yet.

I spent the afternoon yesterday uploading photos of the latest one of a kind weapons to that page. http://sdksupplies.com/cat_bokuto_singles.html Still waiting to get the prices and the buttons coded but if you're interested in anything the prices will be similar to others you see on the page and you can always email.

I hope to get an article or two uploaded to [EJMAS](http://ejmas.com) this morning before class, and I have a page full of notes on blog entries next to my left hand here.

In the meantime I'm trying to get my Mother's estate sorted away, my own house repaired and my

cottage finished after 16 years of half-finished drywall. You know, years ago folks used to ask to become my uchi-deshi for this or that art I teach. Maybe I should start saying yes, I'll teach you in return for carpentry, painting, yard-work, plumbing..... If I can only get you to pay for your own food as well...

Ah dear, I suppose one day all the tapes will be done, all the books written, all the kids established in their lives, all the students booted out the door and I'll go sit and think on the back porch. I'm half way to being a cranky old man now... yes only half way, it's going to get worse kids. Once I hit that porch everyone better stay off my lawn.



Kat and Ken doing a little tanjo

Start in the Corner

Looking over the post I just wrote, it makes me depressed and gives me the feeling that I don't have enough time in the day (left in my life) to do everything that needs doing.

This is pretty common, and something that can paralyze a person. You notice that the shower head is leaking, but that means opening up the wall to remove the fitting, and that means re-tiling and grouting, and that means fixing the backing board and that means rebuilding the studs and that means... before you know it you're rebuilding the house like some bad cable channel TV program.

You can't do this or that because of all the other things that you need to do... and it overwhelms you so that you just sit down and have a coffee on the couch and watch your kids play video games instead.

Two things to try.

First, turn off the radio, the computer, the TV and the your mp3 player. None of those things help get anything done, they are for distraction, not for productivity.

Second, for Musashi's sake don't think about all the things you have to get done. Just start in one corner of the house and start cleaning from there. Don't look around at the mess behind you, just work backwards out of that corner and keep looking at the nice clean area you've made so far.

It's a trick, but we need the tricks to get anything done. Multi-tasking is a myth, my computer can't do it and neither can I, the computer is just a lot faster at switching than I am.

OH, and if you're doing a job right now, do it Right, Now. Use the proper materials and do a proper job. That way you don't have to do it all over again in ten years (or three minutes).

OH, and don't even bother delegating stuff to someone you aren't sure will do the job. It's faster to do it yourself than to drive yourself insane trying to follow up all the delegation. This doesn't apply of course if you're paying folks to do this delegated job. Hey, you don't suppose that's why we invented jobs for pay do you?

OH, and if you are paying someone to do a job and they aren't doing it... fire them. Life's too short to treat employees like children.

OH, and if your kids don't do a job for you when they are asked, trade the neighbour for his kids. Kids will happily do work for the neighbour that they won't do for you. That way you can indulge your kids and still get the yardwork done. Just make sure your neighbour has kids the right age... damnit I knew there was a problem with that one.

OH and... this isn't getting EJMAS updated.

Standardization

In the past, by watching a *kata* performance one could say at first glance which master had guided the practice. In the last few years books and video tapes are increasingly used for karate teaching. That is why *kata* have become uniform even in detail, and lost individuality. Also at the big *kata* contests *kata* performances prove excellent training results but nearly no individuality; the *kata* always look the same. -Kenei Mabuni, *Empty Hand: The Essence of Budo Karate*, 2010.

Jeff Broderick made almost the same comment about iaido in Japan at the top levels of the Kendo Federation in his blog <http://jeffsbudoblog.blogspot.com/> He lamented the variety of practice that he saw even a few years earlier in the tournaments and demonstrations in Japan.

It's not just the martial arts that are becoming homogenized in this age of the internet, it's culture as a whole. Think about the reach of Youtube, of Wikipedia and the Google image search. No matter where you are on earth, if you type in a search term you'll get the same results as everyone else on the planet.

This is the blessing and the curse of the human world, one where we are losing hundreds of languages a year as the old speakers pass away, but one where we can preserve vast numbers of people from disaster by a world-wide network of transportation and information.

In the Kendo Federation we actually have "the solution" to this problem, if we would but use it. We have the Zen Ken Ren Iai and Jo sets which are commonly called "seitei gata iai/jo" or "representative/standard forms of iai/jo".

This means just what it says, it's a standard set of *kata* that are done world-wide in the same way, or at least they should be, and they are encouraged to be. These are our grading *kata*, our competition *kata*, our common language. All students practice these *kata* as closely to the current practice as they can.

But we also have the various *koryu* which are also practiced by people in the Kendo Federation. These *koryu* are supported by the federation in that the grading system requires a demonstration of them at the advanced ranks in order to pass.

It always amuses me that people mix up these two types of practice. There are non-federation groups out there which practice "seitei iai" as if it's a school that can be learned and passed along outside the Kendo Federation. There are also federation people who wish to practice the *seitei* "as I was taught it several years ago before they started messing around with it." *Seitei* is a standardized set of practice *kata* which the Kendo Federation uses to discuss and demonstrate its current thoughts on practice, to instruct and assess students, and to ensure minimum levels of skill across multiple countries. It is also, perhaps unintentionally, a way of identifying who has been paying attention and who's been out of the loop for the last few years.

On the other hand, there are people who practice *koryu* who will look at the practice of other groups and say "they are doing it wrong", as if there were a standard, correct/representative way of practicing

any koryu. This is an artifact of a world-wide ability to transfer video, photography and books, and an understanding that there are seitei sets out there which are standardized.

In fact, without the birth of Youtube just five years ago this sort of assumption would never have been made, and comments on how one group does something as compared to another would have been almost impossible, at least at the level of those who have not had long years of watching performances with their own eyes.

Seitei is designed to look the same for everyone. It's for judging and grading purposes, it's a level playing field on which to perform. The seitei gata are like a cross country race-course, they are a set of challenges that everyone experiences the same way, all the runners going over the same field, up the same hill and across the same marsh.

Koryu are, by their very nature, individual. You can indeed see which teacher taught which student when you are talking about the old schools. Koryu is taught from instructor to student, usually without reference to books, videos, photos or even other instructors. This daisy-chain of personal instruction from one generation to the next will naturally produce some drifting apart of lines. If two of my students teach in different cities, their grand-students will naturally look somewhat different from each other. Somewhat, as those things that I emphasize as being "very important" will likely be preserved as "very important" through the line.

But there is another way that the koryu become individualized, and that is the very correct and proper way that a teacher will shape an art for each student. This is a simple and practical matter of matching the art to the student, giving a large student large and strong technique and a small, wiry student fast technique. It may require actual modifications of the technique to fit a student with a weak arm, or a damaged knee. All of this also tends to move the koryu away from a standard way of practice.

With the seitei sets the student tries as hard as possible to match the body to the art. With the koryu sets the student has the art matched to the body. One tends toward a common practice, the other tends away from the common practice.

Of course all this is in balance, seitei is not rigid, just standardized; koryu is not deliberately changed, just molded.

If practice is looked at like this, there should be no reason to lament the loss of unique flavours in the martial arts. The koryu must be cherished by the seitei, the seitei must be understood by the koryu.

In our larger world, if our mass culture cherishes and values the esoteric, there is no reason why the languages of the Amazon basin need be lost to us while those peoples acquire laptops and the internet along with Coke, Nike and McDonalds.

Kim in Japan

I'm updating and backing things up, and I discovered this shot from Doug Martin of me on our trip to Japan almost exactly a year ago.

I have no idea why it catches my interest, it doesn't particularly look like me, at least not the me I have in my head, that guy is still 18.

Something about the expression I think, and the Christmas themed red and green repeated in the background.



You know, I think it's just that I don't seem to be worried about anything. I'm present, but not involved.

I have no real budo point about this, except that even for those of us who pay attention to ourselves, and to who we are, why we do things and so on, there are times when we are simply unknown to ourselves. We just have to accept our ability to surprise ourselves.

Girls!

According to the All Japan Kendo Federation (AJKF), as of 2009 there were 1,270 newly registered members, and 30 percent of them were female. AJKF representative Chihiro Kishimoto, 76, says, "Even at colleges, many girls are choosing to join the iaido club, something that would have been unimaginable in the old times." --- <http://search.japantimes.co.jp/cgi-bin/fd20100307a2.html>

Wow, if we had 300 new folks (let alone new women) sign up for iaido this year in Canada I'd be over the moon. I recently heard that historical action figures are all the rage in Japan right now. Must be part of the same trend.

In other news, the sensei are arriving on Wednesday which means that I'm out of contact until they leave the Tuesday after.

For years we have had a pre-registration fee and an "at the door" fee and for years people have been leaving their registration later and later. Guys, Dave is telling me we need a cutoff date of, like, two weeks ago because all those mailed in registrations from next week will land while I'm driving the sensei around the countryside sightseeing and I'll be up until 2am doing paperwork.

The vast majority are in and registered, but for those of you who are just too busy... remember that when you see Dave "at the door" he might just say "it's in the mail and You're At The Door". You see if I can't get the paperwork done before the seminar, he has to do it during.

For those attending other seminars this summer... mix a little thinking with your swinging and get that paperwork done! Make an organizer happy.

Asked his opinion on why there was a history/sword boom among women all of sudden, the AJKF's Kishimoto says, "Modern women are not weak. They are ready to defend themselves, and maybe that kind of psychology is reflected in iaido or combat classes."

Take Those Notes

Yesterday we spent the day going over "what we did on our summer seminar". In this case my visit to the Oda sensei seminar in Vancouver. I tried to go through all the things that I picked up from sensei so that we could reinforce them and so that those who were not at the seminar would hear them.

Two other students who attended the seminar were present, and I asked them repeatedly if there was anything I was forgetting or that they had heard that I had not.

This can be like pulling teeth.

Just because I'm a high rank and I'm in front of the class doesn't mean that I am omnipotent... much as students would like to think that of their teachers. We need help too folks, help to remember the details, help to remember the timelines, and help to see the things we can't see because we're not there in class.

So as a student, even if your sensei is in the same class as you are, make notes and don't hesitate to speak up in the review class (we all DO have review classes after every seminar don't we???) when asked.



Kat and Ken, tachi uchi no kurai

Who's your Daddy

It suddenly occurs to me that even though I have a lineage (or two) that goes back to before 1600 (according to the records) I have trained with the last two generations and that's it. I have not trained with all those teachers back to 1600 so what's the point of claiming them as progenitors?

Really, we train with the last guy in the line, not the first, so lineage or not, our training depends on the abilities of our teachers.

The value of having a long-winded school? I'm now not sure. Due to the effects of telephone tag I'm not sure I'm learning what the founder taught. In one of my schools I have actually traced a lot of the additions that have happened over the years through later teachers.

The value of having some really good fighters in the lineage? Fighting ability isn't something that passes all that easily down through the years as far as I know.

Bragging rights? Really.

No, obsessing about the lineage is mostly idle thought, not really conducive to good training at all, except perhaps for the stories about how hard the guys trained back then... and how I should get back to it.



Generations

Tomorrow I am heading to Toronto for the appreciation dinner with Roy Asa sensei, president of the CKF for almost 30 years and recently retired.

I've been involved with the CKF since 1987 and have heard, for much of the time from then until now, the usual complaints about what the federation should do about this or that. Always, always with the full intent that someone else other than the complainer should be doing something because said complainer had paid their \$15, later \$20 annual membership fee.

Well I have been involved at or near the top of the iaido and jodo sections since they were organized within the federation and so I have been privileged to have worked closely on occasion with Asa sensei. I may speak another time about volunteer organizations and the workings of such entities, but for now I'd like to relate a small personal story about Asa sensei and how he got things done.

Several years after the iaido section was organized and running nicely, the CKF realized that there were enough folks around to organize a jodo section. There were 5 or 6 active dojo with instructors and a well established history of instruction from Japan so it became time to create the section and provide gradings in Canada, allowing the art to grow.

At one of the summer seminars, which I "organize" I ended up sitting in the middle of the gym floor discussing the first grading with Asa sensei and with the head of the jodo committee of the ZNKR. It became apparent during the discussions that I was about to become the head of the section. I spoke up saying that there were three or four jodo folks experienced enough and talented enough to do the job, and that it didn't have to be me. The Japanese sensei laughed and Asa sensei simply looked at me like I was slightly slow-witted and said "I know you".

With those words I was both tapped and trapped. There was no way that I could avoid the job or do less than my very best at it. You see, I had watched Asa sensei put his heart, soul and a huge chunk of his life into the CKF and when he turned to me I could do no less than as much as I could to repay that work. I know how hard he worked to make the CKF work, how personal it was to him. By that single statement "I know you" he made it clear that the organization was now a personal concern of mine as well. How could it not be?

We have our teachers of budo and we owe them for those teachings. We also have our sensei in the organization we belong to, and we owe them the same debt when asked.

Editing

I don't watch TV news, absolutely never tune into a 24 hour news station and rarely listen to radio news.

I'm reasonably informed about world events, and I mean reasonably in every sense of that word, by reading a national newspaper once a day.

I want edited news, and I want background to that news, I don't have time to do that myself so I delegate it to the newspaper and it has worked for years.

Think about 24 hour news stations for a moment. Is there really that much going on in the world? Of course not, or rather, there is not that much going on that the folks who watch 24 hour news stations would be interested in seeing, or that the producers would be willing to pay to produce, or that the advertisers would be willing to bankroll. After all, I'm sure there are fascinating things going on in the neighbourhoods of Shanghai, Durban and Mozambique but I doubt your average CNN watcher would want to watch it.

The internet is another place I don't get news. I tend not to get a lot from the net but I am as caught up in it as anyone when it comes to certain topics. Photography goes past my eyes in vast amounts. I regularly attend a couple of martial arts discussion groups, but my facebook account sits neglected for weeks at a time since I haven't a clue what facebook is (for).

These tiny infusions of data into our brains which burst constantly all day long may actually be changing the way we think. I know it takes me a couple of days at the cottage before I can actually read a book again. The brain likes it's jumpy information flow, our history as a species likely designed us to be that way... after all you don't want to miss the lion in the grass while you are chasing away the buzzards and hyenas from that carcass.

It has been suggested that the ability to concentrate on one thing for a long time came about with books. Perhaps, but I wouldn't be surprised if a shepherd didn't have long thoughts while watching the sheep day by day (which may in fact explain the large numbers of religions that come out of the pasture and desert regions). I do know that without concentration you don't get the great philosophers and you certainly don't get to understand how they make their arguments toward their philosophies by jumping from wikipedia to about.com to philosophy.com to Stanford University to... Nothing is a substitute to a careful reading of their writings, except perhaps a very good philosophy instructor who has edited it down for you.

Which brings me to my martial arts point. Like with my news, I want my budo in quality not quantity, I want it edited, not now and certainly not in fragments and half-understood bursts of enthusiasm.

In short, I want to listen to an 8dan and not a 4dan. Not that a 4dan isn't a useful person to have around, they tend to be the repository of "how it's done", they know the "right" way to do it and let's face it,

they're the Wikipedia of our world. Think about it, how often have you watched a 7dan turn to a 4dan and say "what's the next technique?" Trust me, they aren't asking to test knowledge or to provide experience in teaching... they really can't remember what the next technique is. But the 4dan will know.

A 4dan knows the next technique in their own art and are likely to know the next technique in three more. They know the name of all the teachers in the lineage, where they lived and what they had for breakfast on Tuesdays. In fact they are like the 24 hour news channel or like the internet, they are a vast and unending sea of information bites, much of it repeated at regular intervals and all of it seemingly disconnected from all the rest.

What they aren't, these 4dans, and why, despite their usefulness, I would rather sit in front of an 8dan, is experienced. They haven't digested all that information, they haven't lived with it and used it for so long that they have forgotten where the information came from. They haven't edited it yet. Eventually they will get longer in tooth and ear-hair, they will get so old they start to forget the details and they'll have to start asking their own students what technique comes next... but they'll be able to "do it". They'll know how the weight shifts, how the hip twists, how the little finger squeezes just so here and here and ... really it goes that way? well in that case how the little finger squeezes HERE.

I want the newspaper, not the 24 hour news channel.



The 2008 Japanese sensei and visitors.

Thread Closed

And that, folks, is why the martial art forums die. There are a couple of them out there that used to be pretty lively but I rarely am inspired to post any more on them simply because they are becoming less and less populated.

The argument for moderation on a forum is to keep things civil, to cut down on the nonsense and to stop this endless repetition of answering the same old questions and arguments that have already been answered a thousand times before... in other words, to simply refer folks to the archives.

Case in point this morning is a note I got about a thread that was started by a somewhat old question "Why is lineage so important". It's one of my hot buttons so I answered, as did several other folks and a reasonable discussion ensued. This morning Karl Friday made a summary of the arguments and I was inspired to take up a point with him...

At least I wanted to, but a hall monitor 'er moderator decided that was the definitive argument and closed the thread... a not particularly active thread, a rather mild mannered thread, one of the very few going on in that forum, but it seems the moderator is a bit pissed at the original poster because he seems to ask stupid and provocative questions.....

Ones that provoke responses... in a discussion forum.... Hmmmm.

Well there is a reason why "freedom of speech" was seen as a good thing after the Enlightenment (ask me about it if you're interested, or check the archives). "Thread closed" is a discussion killer and a forum killer. It's curious that the most heavily monitored budo forums are in the USA, land of free speech. I guess you can have too much of a good thing?

Questions, even stupid and provocative ones, are not a bad thing folks, even in budo. You are not there to shut up and copy, you're there to learn and questions are a part of that process.

Really. I've sat in front of many hanshi during my career and every one of them.... EVERY ONE has said at some point or other, "any questions?". I say it regularly myself when I am teaching, and I expect questions. ANY questions. I am delighted to get them because they bring out the nuance in what we are learning. Sure we go over things that the seniors in the class have gone over a thousand times and it's fun to watch their eyes glass over when a beginner asks something they know all about... and even more fun, (a bit annoying I have to admit) to watch their attention snap back into place as they realize I've said something they haven't heard before... and then ask me to explain it all again for them because they weren't paying attention.

All us iaido types know all about uchiko right? It's that powder in the little puff ball that we tap onto our blades to clean them. Well a beginner didn't know last Thursday, so I told her that it's an abrasive made up of what's left over from the sword polishing process. You scoop the crumbled stone powder out of the bottom of the tray, filter it, dry it, seive it and put it into a silk bag so that only a certain grit

comes out onto the sword where it literally polishes away any rust on the blade after a practice.

I then noted that sometimes that isn't enough, that some folks have very acidic skin and that the acid can get down into the pores of the metal where the abrasive can't get it and it can't be soaked out..... I was going to go on to describe sword water (ask me about it some time if you want to know) when suddenly I thought of something I had never thought of before.

When a sword is polished many togishi (polishers) put washing soda in the water to keep the blades from rusting. Washing soda is basic, it's also a powder that goes into solution and will return to a powder when it is dried... Do you see where I am going with this?

Without that question, which I've answered many times before, I might never have had that thought myself.

None of my threads are ever closed.



Hell

Is often said to be other people, and it usually is, but it's also our own forgetfulness.

My life would be so much simpler without other people in the world. There is a reason why monks go away from society and live a simple life on their own, it is conducive to thought, understanding, forgiveness, love and all that other stuff that's good in life.

Other people complicate things, they knock you off balance, irritate and deliberately poke and prod until you have forgotten the lessons learned in silence.

Our own life can also be a problem, the lessons we learned well in our youth can be forgotten. The sureness of step, the confidence of the body can be lost with age and injury, and that of course means the mind loses its balance.

I noticed and took the time to read this article http://ejmas.com/pt/2010pt/ptart_taylor_1005.html over again this morning. It is something I wrote in 1998 and I was amazed at how much I knew then, and how much I have forgotten. Not the things I was saying, I've believed that since the early '70s and I haven't had any reason to change my mind. I'm talking about the way I understood it then, the way that I apparently slept well at night, and didn't get upset at things, and seemed to "have it together".

I suppose our lives are like mountains, lots of fuss and bother as they get created by continents banging together, lots of rough edges, then the rain and wind smooths things out and for a long time they sit there, massive, impressive, imperturbable, but eventually that same wind and rain wears them down until they're just hills, subject to a lot of disturbance from a little rain.

It's too bad my little mountain peak, bare and windswept for so long, isn't going to get worn down enough to have a nice coat of grass on it any more.

Tools

The sword you hold in your hands is a tool, with a single purpose. The only use for a sword is to cut people.

Sure we can talk about symbols of rank and power, but where does that rank and power come from? If the symbol is a sword, the power is derived from the threat of death and dismemberment.

Yet, at some time in history, likely when the sword was headed toward uselessness and conversion to a farm implement, someone got the idea that the sword could be a method of enlightenment. Well I suppose it wasn't the sword specifically, but the method of training with the sword that could be used for enlightenment.

The sword itself? Some folks seem to think that going to Japan somehow makes you understand the samurai, studying with a ranked Japanese master somehow makes you understand the samurai arts and that a real Japanese sword has to be made by some little old guy and two apprentices up in the mountains and that said sword will then contain someone's soul... but we speak not of these things. Nor do we speak of ploughboys suddenly becoming gentlemen because some king whacks them on the shoulders with the flat of his sword.

We speak of the long, continuing practice of the sword, the training that requires concentration and the elimination of excess thought, the "meditation on the sword" as I think I read a book title long ago. We speak of the idea of katsujin no ken as vs. satsujin no ken, of life-affirming swords as opposed to tools for taking life. The tool remains the same, it's the use, the intent, the reason for training that differs.

There are those who are fascinated with "effective" sword technique. Those who eagerly want to know all about the use of the sword in the Second World War and want to speculate about cuts to the inside of the joints where the armour is weakest. I call these the fantasy boys, the ones who will be ready when they fall through the alternate universe interface (AUI), or when the apocalypse arrives. These are the boys who, having the blood of heroes in their veins (see Japan, visits to) will somehow know how to use the sword effectively when they need it, because they have the blood and know all the stories.

Yet as I laugh at these boys, I realize that practice without expertise, that using the sword without effectiveness, without reality, is untruthful. No matter why we practice, we must recognize the sword in our hand as a tool for killing men. We must recognize what it is, and then refuse to use it.

Is this so strange? A shovel is used to dig, to turn over dirt, yet eventually food may come from that garden to nourish us. Is this not quite the same as the sword? OK but digging is a quiet, solitary activity that, through its repetition encourages the mind to the same quiet state which may indeed lead to enlightenment.

Practicing "real" iaido may be the only way to actually become enlightened by using the sword. To

practice blindly (sensei says so), or sloppily (we won't have a sword with us in the alleyway), or in a flashy manner (the chicks love it) is to feed the fantasy. There is no flash, no trash, no blindness in serious practice, there is only the search for the fastest way to end a man's life, and in the visualization, the realization of that potential ending of a life, we may just give life to ourselves.



Iwami Soke at the Heritage Warplane Museum in Hamilton, 2005

Don't Bother Me

I see that Wayne Muramoto <http://classicbudoka.wordpress.com/2010/08/05/12-dont-be-a-dumbass/> has published another list of "what not to's" about koryu and starting its practice. Basically, if you are a dumbass don't show up.

I sympathize, I really do, I don't want to deal with dumbasses either, and I do have to deal with them. Like the other day I hit the crosswalk button and was just about to step out to cross the street when some dumbass blew through the red light in front of me. Or the other day my teenage son told me he was chased down the street by some other teenagers with a baseball bat. On further discussion it turns out he and his friend had told the other guys to... well you get the picture. Dumbasses all around.

So sure, I get it, people don't understand that koryu is a terribly elitist thing and that in order to sit in front of me to get some learnin' you have to meet my approval because you don't pay me to learn this stuff and I don't have to teach anyone. But I've never really had much of a problem with the koryu classes. Maybe it's because I teach at a University and the students self select for polite, intelligent, well-read youngsters, but I think it's mostly because I let folks watch or try a class. This stuff is boring, and anyone who isn't suited for it goes away real fast. I usually don't have more than 7 or 8 folks in a class and there really isn't a waiting list to get in. Sure I get the curious folks tromping in with running shoes or socks on, or wearing hats in class but none of that really bothers me, I'm not well dressed myself. I don't consider them to be rude to me or offending the ancients in my lineage. I consider them folks who are curious and haven't been told by me to take their socks off... in fact I often just let them slide around on the floor for a while until they take them off for a better grip.

In other words, this stuff makes sense. The etiquette makes sense, the uniform makes sense, and students will "get it" on their own soon enough. "What do you call me? Anything that gets my attention"... they go away and look it up and call me sensei next class. What's the opening etiquette? They look around and do what everyone else is doing. I don't have to get stressed about it, social and peer pressure shapes them all sooner or later.

It's interesting, I'm really a rather slack, accommodating fellow when it comes to teaching, certainly it seems, compared to some of the other writers about koryu, yet I would be willing to bet that I don't have any more or any worse students than those guys. Teachers get the students they are suited for, and nobody, or at least not the vast majority of folks out there, likes the koryu that much. The numbers will be low no matter what we do, how we act or what we demand in the way of etiquette, introductions and hoops-through-jumping of new students.

I see Wayne has calmed down a bit by the end of his post. Sometimes we just have to rant a bit. Sometimes we feel like we're speaking into the wind. Sometimes a really nice person walks through the front door and stays for years. In the end, the arts seem to tick over generation to generation and that's just fine. In the end there's no need to get stressed about it.

Half my life

Yeaow! I just realized that I have now been practicing iaido for half my life. I started in 1983 if anyone wants to calculate the depressing bits out of that.

Well... maybe not so depressing.

When I was born there were just about 3 billion people on the earth and we thought that too many. There are now 6.5 billion and since most of those are under 25, there is going to be about 9 billion of our little hides on this dried crust of rock by 2050. I might just live to see that, not that I'm looking forward to it.

Yet we were supposed to be dying by now. Of course, the Green Revolution relies on oil, fertilizer, mechanization and genetic manipulation of crops for yield (be it breeding or, now, direct modification) so I suppose I can still be pessimistic there as the oil gets expensive and the backlash against "GM food" starts to cut into research.

I grew up learning how to "duck and cover" I know what an air-raid siren sounds like since we had one in our town that was tested every Thursday evening at 7pm, and I was convinced that the world would end in thermonuclear flames. Certain of it actually. Well the USSR and the USA aren't going to go at it, but I suppose I can still worry about terrorists... No, on second thought I'm not going to worry about some whacko getting a little bomb and blowing up half a city. I'm going to worry about the reaction to that event, which will be much more damaging.

I grew up hungry, I remember my cousin and I hunting through the house one morning for something to eat for breakfast, there was nothing, not even flour and water, no relish, no catsup, no oil, until my mother got home from work. She was back in the tobacco fields, along with my step-father, because there were no other jobs. I wasn't working because there weren't any McJobs back then, it was all manufacturing, mining, fishing and farming and you didn't do that stuff part time. I was in the fields the next year.

Now I'm over fed and I pay money to go to a gym to lose weight. I drink diet pop... as a student I looked around for calorie rich, cheap foods. (I still miss chicken-heart fry-ups.) Now I pay extra for calorie free food.

I heard some snot-nosed economist on the radio yesterday say that consumers were as afraid of debt today as they were in the '30s. I'm sorry, my grandparents lived through the '30s, and my parents saw some of them. Neither 30 year old economists nor consumers today have a clue what fear of debt is, although they may yet learn. My grandmother worried herself sick over my University debt, and I must admit, with bank interest rates approaching 20% (That's right BANK interest rates, not credit card rates) I saw her point. Shortly after that came wage and price control and my step-father telling me that he was sorry I would never see mortgage rates at 6 or 8 percent in my lifetime so I would never be able to own a house.

Now I've got a household line of credit at less than 4 percent.

I've got kids, and students, who don't know how good they've got it.

And I wouldn't want it any other way.



Antigonish seminar

The Secret Seminars

With the amount of traffic on the internet about Japanese sword and the more esoteric schools of practice, one would think that a seminar with one of the top people in the field would be well attended.

Not the case.

I have attended two seminars so far this year with less than 20 people attending, and both were led by top folks in their field.

The first was in Vancouver in July and featured Oda sensei, a hanshi hachidan instructor. Who attended? Well there were 5 folks from the East, freshly off of the May seminar in Guelph (which was attended by 120 plus students who long ago learned the value of practicing with the 8dans).

There were less than 20 people in attendance, likely because Western Canadian students have yet to understand what they are missing, so what's not to love about attending.

I mean really? A hanshi hachidan instructor, in Steveston BC (a fishing village with a terrific Japanese heritage) at a marvellous intimate dojo that is one of the prettiest in Canada.

Hello? I'm there. I'm also somewhat reluctant to write about this seminar since it will certainly get better attended, which means I'll get less personal instruction.

Let me explain this a bit. In Japan I would have few chances to get this close to a hanshi instructor, and I'm a seven dan. I have a 5dan friend in Tokyo who can't remember the last time he got to practice with a hanshi.

You just don't get this level of instruction very often so you take advantage of it while you can.

The seminar actually started Thursday evening at the Japanese language school in downtown Vancouver. I got there Friday and didn't hesitate to get to the practice rather than explore the town. That evening (an extra practice to the seminar proper) was attended by less than 10 folks and I got some real close attention. Of course I pushed my way right to the front of the class, pulling rank and having little trouble anyway as students always seem to think that they get better attention the further from the front they stand. Trust me, it's better at the front.

I had not practiced with Oda sensei before, but it was a pleasure and he reiterated what we had learned in May with Kishimoto sensei, as well as what had been reported by another student who attended the AUSKF seminar in Texas in June with Kishimoto sensei and Yamazaki sensei. Yes those of us who go to these things do exchange notes with each other. Oda sensei reiterated the points and added to them as everyone has their own way of teaching. All I can say is that multiple views always give a more complete picture.

I am still working on what I obtained from these three seminars and will likely have lots to chew on for the next year or so.

The second secret seminar was in August at the annual Calgary seminar where I was invited to teach jodo and iaido. With me at that seminar was Colin Watkin sensei, who is Menkyo in the Hyoho Niten Ichiryu as well as Shihan and one of the few people left practicing the Kage ryu, a prefectural art that features drawing very long swords. And I mean very long.

Colin has been visiting Calgary for a while, since the students there were introduced to him and to the Niten Ichiryu at the Guelph May seminar, but this was the very first time Colin has taught the Kage ryu, and the 10 or 11 people in the seminar all learned some lovely new things, including how to give up our notions of drawing a sword with perfect upright posture. When the sword is as long as you are tall it's time to stretch those legs and lean into it.

This seminar always amazes me. What sword geek hasn't heard about Miyamoto Musashi and the Go Rin no Sho? How many hundreds of folks have told me they wished to learn his sword style over the last two decades? And yet the seminar is attended by a loyal core of students from Calgary and one or three other folks from widely varied places... and no more.

People wonder why I simply wave my hand and say "come visit me" when they start talking about practicing one of the arts I teach. I really don't have the energy any more to chase them down and find a good time for them to practice, or to find them a teacher just down the block (there isn't one, trust me).

No, there are a couple of places where you can start learning this stuff, where you can stand in front of some of the top folks in the world and get it directly. They are the secret seminars and I really, from an entirely selfish point of view, hope that the rest of the world doesn't find out about them.

Ya Ya

On the net, one of the jabs the koryu types send toward the ZNKR iaido set, otherwise known as "seitei" is that it is too exact, it's set in stone, the angles are prescribed and cannot be varied, that the instructors and judges want you to do it "like it's written in the book" and don't care about your performance otherwise.

To a certain extent, this is justified because I've heard a lot of ZNKR people say the same thing. A small problem might be the English translations that we have available to us, which tend to be rather precise.

I would like to introduce a phrase into our iaido lexicon which has been used by some of the hanshi in recent seminars. It is "ya ya". Ya ya is usually paired with "ma" as anyone who does jodo will be able to tell you, and it is used in iaido thus.

In Ushiro, the opponent is behind us. We turn 180 degrees on the right knee and cut the opponent horizontally. We have been told not to move the right knee and to sweep the left foot across at the same time as we cut. Now, for all the jailhouse lawyers or (as I was) union negotiators out there, you will quite quickly realize that "you miss the opponent" because when you turn this way your body is one width to the side of your original position. You might catch him on the horizontal cut but you will miss his right shoulder if your vertical cut is good and he's the same size as you.

I spent half an hour in front of a hanshi recently where he very patiently explained that everything from the line of your shoulders back is "behind" you and that, for Ushiro, the opponent is "ushiro" and not "ma ushiro" or "directly behind".

In other words, ya ya. He is roughly behind you, or somewhere behind you or...

A too literal, too strict interpretation of the language is sometimes not helpful.

Another hanshi recently explained that the Japanese version of the manual often contains the phrase "ya ya" when talking of such things as the angle at which a movement finishes. The correct translation is perhaps not "45 degrees" but "around 45 degrees" depending on the body shape of the student.

Ya ya, around, sort of, roughly...

Of course the problem now becomes worse not better, as students will now compete to make their practice as different as possible from each other and from the book. Already I hear students speculating on the angles one turns in a kata, or the distance from that 45 degree angle one can drift before being "wrong".

I caution everyone, the meaning of ya ya is not "do what you want" but "deviate from the strict angle only to the extent that your body type forces you to deviate from that strict angle".

In other words, ya ya is an invisible word to those who are not teaching or judging, the angles are exact, the timings are precise and the students will try to hit them bang on. The secret teaching is that some people can't do it, and that's OK, the ultimate goal is for iaido to make sense, not to “look sort of like this”. There is no “ya ya iai”.



Jeff Broderick and Kim at a Fredericton seminar

Seitei Keeps Changing

“Every year the sensei come from Japan and tell us all the changes for that year. Every time I see them they explain that I can't do it the way I have been doing it and now I have to change to a different way of doing the techniques.”

Umm, OK except that I haven't noticed any changes in several years.

Here's a secret for all the students out there moving through their ranks. There are some things that you can do as a beginner and some things that you can't. There are other things that you should not be trying to do because it will prevent you from doing other things that you should be doing.

When you have enough practice under your belt, some sensei or another is going to tell you to do some things differently than you have been taught to do them.

In other words, seitai keeps changing “for you” but that doesn't mean the kata themselves are changing anywhere near as often as you are being told to change.



Stay away from the Hanshi

A few posts ago I was complaining about the lack of students at some seminars featuring hanshi instructors. In no way was I saying that these instructors should be teaching more lower-ranked students, just that I am gobsmacked that the lower ranks are not jumping at the chance to be there.

In fact, a hanshi can't say much to a nidan that his own godan instructor won't say. In fact (and here is the difference between a hanshi 8dan and a 5dan teacher), the hanshi will likely have a lot less to say. He will not be trying to give the nidan all the information, he will only be giving him as much information as he needs at the moment.

But what he says to the godan will be so much further on than where that godan is, and the rokudan will get more, and the nanadan will get so much more...

In other words, the higher the rank, the more necessary it is to sit in front of those who are higher still, and the more that advanced teacher can teach. I once heard the ranks explained like this. Take the wall facing you. The hanshi hachidan is in the top corner. The hachidan is half way down the wall, the nanadan is half way down from there, the 6dan half way down from that... and so on down to the kyu. Now check out the distance between a 2dan and a 5dan... 5-4 is $\frac{1}{2}$, 4-3 is $\frac{1}{2}$, 3-2 is $\frac{1}{2}$ so your 5dan is 8 times higher than your 2dan. On the other hand your hanshi is 16 times higher than your 5dan. A 5dan can talk understandably to a 2dan, and a hanshi can talk understandably to a 5dan but can a hanshi talk understandably to a 2dan? At 128 times further down the wall, can the nidan understand the hanshi? Of course they can because the hanshi can edit what he says. Can the nidan even hope to understand all that the hanshi could say to him? Probably not. And a kyu? He's 512 times removed from the hanshi, does he need to be taught by that hanshi?

Of course not.

Should he get his rear end in front of a hanshi if he has the chance? Is that even a question?

But what about those 5, 6, and 7dan who are in range of a seminar featuring a hanshi? That's not even a question, it is absolutely, totally, one hundred percent necessary that they get to that seminar. At least it's necessary unless they have decided that they are done with learning, and happy with their current rank.

So, nidan, get thee to a godan and godan, get thee to a nanadan and nanadan, get thee to a hanshi... unless the seminars are attended by only 20 people, in which case everyone ought to pile in before the rest of them find out and they restrict the registration.

Your True Face

We all have a public face. Even those who try only to present their true selves will edit once in a while, or choose not to speak.

But one place where you have the best chance to catch your true feelings is when you are alone, when you are by yourself for more than a couple of hours. If you find yourself in this situation (and in the wired world this is very difficult to achieve) you must first allow some time for the mask to fade. We will "keep up appearances" for quite a while since it is a habit.

But it is only that, a habit, and it can be suspended, if not broken. When you are alone and you want to do some work on yourself begin by watching for double impressions. Look for places in your thinking, or places where you are reacting to something you read or watch, where you have two different feelings very close together. One will be your public face and the other will be something closer to what you really feel. Go down the path toward what you really feel.

How will you know which path? The one you want will be the "wrong" one, the one you feel is unworthy of a good person, or the one your mother would disapprove.

You can also check your thinking for blank spots, places where you "have no opinion" or where you "really don't care". Look carefully there and see what you can find in the empty spot. You may just catch something that you didn't expect to find.

Eventually this sort of letting go of the self-editing, and removal of the mask will become easier and you can begin your work.

First, don't assume that what you believe privately, what you are covering over with your public face, is actually something bad. Look at it seriously, if it's an unworthy thought, or a prejudice against someone, or simply something that isn't very prettily thought out, you must look at it dispassionately and decide rationally if it is something that you should get rid of. It may be a useful, but ugly trait, it is for you to decide, not for anyone else. This is your private self, the place where the moralists and the theorists and the idealists of the world cannot intrude, where they cannot impose their opinions.

Honesty is the key here. Look for the crutches that you need to discard. Look for the fears that are groundless, look very hard for the ignorance out of which delusion grows. Find the places where you need to change, where you can improve, and then think hard about how you can change and improve yourself.

This is a life-long process so don't try to do it all at once. Pick something key, something that is as far back in the chain of events that you can discover and change that. You will find that the earlier in the process you adjust, the more change you make.

This is not unlike correcting a martial arts kata. Look for the source of the problem, not the effects. Sometimes the problem starts much earlier in the chain of movement than you would suspect, and a small change early will fix a cascade of problems afterward.



True face?

Better-Than

On an internet forum I am trying (and trying is certainly the word, I've been at it for a week) to read yet another discussion of lineage, false claims of lineage, re-construction, resurrection and legitimacy in the martial arts.

I don't know why I bother, because it always seems to come down to a simple formula.

If you are not in an unbroken lineage at least a couple hundred years old, you are deluded.

There isn't any simpler way to put it, but it comes down to that eventually, every time the discussion takes place.

My question, and that of others nowadays, is motive. Why would someone who believes that reconstruction or invention or illicitly extended lineage is a bad thing bother to repeatedly state such a belief. Is it to educate those who are fooled? Certainly that is the claimed reason, but honestly, folks are not stupid, and argument from authority (inasmuch as the claimants have any authority beyond being published authors) is as legitimate as any claimed lineage which is not backed up with old paper.

I would like to suggest that a deeper reason for such an obsession is ego. One will note that those who are most vocal in denouncing the false claims, reconstructionists and resurrectionists are those in relatively small (self-described as elite) groups which claim long and "proven" lineage. The superiority of such a group and of those training in such a group is assumed, and thus we have folks who are "better-than".

Of course to be "better-than" we need someone who is not, and this is the reason the misguided must be constantly in our thoughts, and constantly informed of their misguidedness.

Let's look at the claims from the legitimate for the need of an unbroken lineage. You need to be taught the oral secrets in order to have the correct feeling and timing and ...

And I call bullshit. I've been teaching agreed-upon "legitimate" arts for long enough to have teachers that have taught teachers and I have never once, in all that time passed on any such ability as feeling or timing. The kata do that, the repeated, years-long practice of patterned skill-sets is what gives a feeling for timing, a feeling for distance, a feeling for finding an opening and moving into it. I can't teach that, I can only create the conditions for the student to find that.

Do I think it's a good thing to be in an art with a verifiable lineage going back a couple hundred years? I'm in a couple-three aren't I? And I'm not in a search for documents to help resurrect anything. Yet I'm also in an art that is generally accepted as absolutely legit, yet I've been hit (years ago by one of the "truly-legitimate I might add) in a hopefully hurtful way with the information that the lineage has a bit of a question before my teacher's teacher. I say hopefully hurtful because I know (and knew) what the kata teach and I have no problem with the lineage whether 400 or 40 years old. The school is historically extant for 400, one can find instructors for each generation since year one, but perhaps there was a "reinvention" or at least a "re-invigoration" somewhere around two generations ago. I've tried out another couple of the "big legitimates" which have also had some questions about the generation before last and they seemed OK from what I experienced. In fact, every single koryu art I practice (three in regular rotation) seems to come down to a single man two or three generations ago. How do we know he's legit? How do we know he learned it all, all the secrets, how do we know he had a single, un-sullied by other voices, instructor? We don't... in fact we can be pretty sure, based on the shape of the Japanese martial arts at that time, that the instruction was from multiple people, in multiple lines, and of a "grab-bag" nature since these single men tended to be the ones who "systematized" and "reformed" the instruction into the shape we have it today.

What that means of course is that what we know and how we know it, comes from them and the way they chose to teach it, so that's "what it is".

What knowing this does, is to keep me honest about what I'm learning, and to be a bit less "better-than" about those who are seriously trying to reconstruct martial arts from source material, or those who are in arts that have questionable lineage. It's ALL QUESTIONABLE. The martial arts is not an important topic for historical research, never has been, so the records tend to be created "in house" with some few mentions in temple or tax records etc. What's "in house" is subject to, how shall I put it, "interpretation". It may be mythologically accurate to accord a divine origin to the art, but I doubt we'll ever get a Tengu database included in Wikipedia that we can check for corroboration.

While I laugh as hard as anyone else at claims of a 4000 year old lineage for something invented last week, I feel no great urge to denounce it monthly, but then again, my ego is just fine thanks, I don't need the jolt of "better-than", I've got a new thing I learned/discovered while doing one of my kata last night. A Tengu whispered it in my ear just before I called one of my students over and demonstrated it for her, causing her to have an "a-ha" moment and get just that little bit better.

My ego does better in the building-up than it does in the tearing-down.

Seitei and Koryu yet again.

A constant remark about the difference between the ZNKR seitei iai and koryu iai is that "seitei gata changes every year depending on who's in charge, while koryu (being battlefield tested) never changes".

Leaving aside those assumptions about koryu iai, I honestly don't care what those outside the Kendo Federation believe, they really have no say in what seitei is or is not, and their concern, while touching, is irrelevant to my practice.

But I hear the same thing from those within the kendo federation who obviously heard it from somewhere. Just for the record (for those in the kendo federation, as anyone else can believe what they wish), Seitei Gata has not changed since I began practicing iaido some 27 years ago. Neither, for that matter, have the koryu that I have practiced for just as long.

Again, I will state that seitei has not changed, there have been additions but those additions have not changed since they were made. Consider that Mae is a horizontal cut and then a vertical cut followed by a circular chiburi and then noto. That has never changed.

But seitei is a standard of practice throughout the world and there are periodic clarifications as to what is currently required. These are not changes in the kata, they are instructions and they are not hard to do. At least they should not be hard to do for those beyond five or six years practice.

To change kesa giri from two cut angles to one is not a change to the kata, it is a choice of a way to do the kata, it is a way to standardize everyone in the world on one way of doing it, and if you, as a student, have to "change" the way you're doing it, go ahead and "change". The kata remains the same as always, a diagonal rising cut followed immediately by a descending diagonal cut. Does anyone really believe that there is a difference between practicing two angles or one when one is "on the battlefield". One will cut whatever one can reach on the way up, and then on the way down, adjusting the angles as necessary to avoid the armour, the ruffles or the bling.

Similarly the change in the hiki nuki of Morote Zuki. Some folks were moving off the line and some were staying on the line during practice. The word came down that we will now stay on the line. Some folks have been doing that since the early '80s. I myself started on the line, moved off the line, and now am back on the line. Big deal, this is not a "change" in the kata, it is a difference in how you are instructed to do the kata and you will make the necessary adjustments to your technique to keep up with the current discussion of the seitei kata. If you do not, you are not doing seitei and you are not in the FIK stream of instruction, you are copying something someone did several years ago. (Perhaps that makes it a koryu.)

A very close second to questions about changes to seitei (and of course, "will this be on the exam" or "do I have to know these changes to seitei on my next grading") is "can a kendo federation grading panel judge the koryu of a student who is grading since the koryu are so varied in their techniques with

all the variations being correct?"

The problem here is the same problem as saying that "seitei changes".

As for koryu, of course we can judge a koryu kata. The mistake is in assuming that the most important point of a demonstration of your skill is the placement of this foot here or that finishing position of the hand there. In your seitei kata during a grading this is taken into account and we absolutely do want to know if you can handle a sword with precision and accuracy, but it is only a part of what is judged. In your koryu, precision is less of a part but it must still be part, a bad grip is a bad grip, a cut with the flat of the blade is still a cut with the flat of the blade. What is different about the koryu portion of your grading is that we do not expect it to be done to an FIK standard, otherwise it must be done as well as your seitei, and this is where a lot of folks can fail. Just ask the 8dan challengers who pass the seitei portion of their gradings easily year after year, yet fail their koryu grading. If you have neglected your koryu it will eventually show, often at a much earlier stage than 8dan.

We have students in Canada who have started practicing Kage ryu with Colin Watkin, and one turned to me at that first seminar in Calgary and asked if he could do Kage for his koryu at an iaido grading.

First, the panel would have to decide if Kage ryu was iai or not (a question of saya banari, but I suspect we'd allow it if the student wanted to use it) then we'd have to figure out the etiquette of how to change swords in the middle of a grading, from a 3.7 with a maezashi to a 2.45 or similar length katana, and finally, we'd have to decide if the Kage performance was up to the level of the seitei performance (which it likely would not be if the student has just started practice) and if it were at the level of the grade being challenged. A special consideration for the student is that Kage ryu practice is to demonstrate alternate techniques in public demonstration. Is a ZNKR grading a public demonstration or should the core techniques be shown? This would not be a problem for the panel since we are not usually judging "waza machigai" or "wrong technique" during the koryu proportion of a grading.

The situation has in fact, been encountered before with other koryu switches, and it doubtless will be again. We can and we do judge the koryu simply because iaido is more than the memorization of a sequence of dance steps. This is why we can say that the kata have not changed while at the same time telling you to move your foot here instead of here and to cut on this angle instead of the other angle we were having you cut last week.

If, as a judge on a grading panel, you encounter a koryu you have never seen, these questions are considered.

1. Is it a koryu?
2. Is it iaido?
3. Is it done with internal consistency if it is done in a manner different from seitei?
4. Is it done with the appropriate confidence and assurance to the grade being challenged?
5. Are the mechanics correct and well executed?

As a student you should simply make your best effort to show both koryu and seitei as you have been taught. Worrying about "changes" to either is not in your best interest, but resisting instruction in current practice (again in both seitei and koryu) is also not consistent with applying for a grading. If you are going to grade, be up to date on both your seitei and your koryu. It is entirely possible that your koryu instructor (or his teacher) will be sitting on your grading panel and then precision and all those other fussy dance-step type points will become a lot more important.



*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.*