

Half a Century VIII

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.

Table of Contents

Keep the Broom Handy.....	4
The Japanese Sword.....	6
Nobody is Untouchable, Especially Not Sensei.....	8
So How Long Before I Can Start My Own Budo?.....	10
Monk On the Mountain.....	11
Keep What You Got.....	14
How To Be Sensei.....	15
Passing It On.....	17
Kihon.....	19
What's Sensei For Anyway?.....	21
Seminar Translation.....	25
Representative Does Not Mean Introductory.....	29
Team Internet Budo Police.....	33
Muto.....	35
Bottom Up Teaching.....	37
REAL KENJUTSU TRAINING.....	39
HOW MANY BELTS DO YOU NEED?.....	41
Learning From Books.....	42
History, Growth and Splinters.....	43
I've Always Wanted to Study Your Koryu.....	46
Face Time.....	47
Welland Iaido Seminar Report.....	49

Keep the Broom Handy

I'd sweep the floor in my office more often if the broom was more handy than where it is in the kitchen closet which is buried behind boxes and plastic bags. I have to move all the junk and then open the door and hope the vacuum doesn't fall out while I try to dislodge the broom and then find the dustpan which always falls down behind the vacuum. By this time I've got a sore back and usually just close the door and go with using my sock feet to kick the broken potato chips on the floor around my chair under the couch.

I sweep the shop a lot more often since the broom is usually right next to the sawdust and the dustpan is hanging on the post over the dust bag.

In other words, make it easy to get a job started and you're much more likely to get it done. The same is true for your budo training.

I get a lot of questions about where to find Niten Ichiryu or some other specific koryu, always in the hope that there's a dojo next door but "never mind that, what's the nearest one, I'm willing to travel". Unfortunately I never get asked who the best, closest instructor of any type of martial art is, and where he lives.

The second one is much, much easier to answer than the first, even if I don't know. Just do some research on martial arts in general and then go visiting. Find the best instructor who is handy to you and practice whatever art he's teaching. Keep the broom handy, don't use the one that's a three hour drive away, it may actually be nicer looking and may even fit your hand a bit better, but the one that's handy is the one you're going to use regularly.

Looking for a specific budo to practice, without having practiced it, is not an efficient use of your time. The koryu aren't in competition with each other... not the arts at least. Of course individual instructors have as much ego as the next person and will extol the virtues of their art and the reasons for you to study at their feet, but at their core, the arts (and the instructors) really aren't that different. (Students are even worse for suggesting their art is the best but that's to be expected isn't it?)

Don't look to study Niten Ichiryu because Musashi was the baddest duelist ever, study it because it's across town. Don't look to study Katori Shinto Ryu because it's the oldest and it's famous, study it because you just met the local instructor who seems to be a solid, friendly guy who knows what he's talking about.

And who says you need to study a koryu anyway? Once you get past the history and a slightly different

teaching method you are likely going to get as much out of a judo class as a Tenshin Shinyo Ryu class.

Just start sweeping, do it well and often and if, after a few years you feel the need for a broom with a different shaped head or a special curve in the handle, then you can make a better decision about heading off to spend a tank of gas fetching it.

Of course one of the best brooms made is just down the road here in St. Jacobs. Look at the lush thickness of that head. Think of the dust you could shift with that baby.



Hamel Brooms, in the Blacksmith Shop.

The Japanese Sword...

Construction

Is the best sword ever made
Is the strongest sword ever made
Has a million folds
Is strong because it has a million layers
Is the only sword with a hamon
Has a blood groove which makes it stronger
Has a full same wrap

Magical thinking

Is quenched in blood or has blood forged in or must taste blood if it's drawn
Is the soul of the samurai

Sharpness

Is sharp enough to cut through cement
Can cut through a machine gun barrel
Will cut a silk hanky dropped on it
Can chop through a body from top to bottom
Can thrust through four bodies
Will never break
Only needs sharpening once every hundred years
Can only be polished by a licensed polisher

Using it

Was the primary weapon of the Samurai
Is easily defeated by a wooden stick
Can be taken away by a good fighter (Muto dori)

Ugh, I started writing a blog post concerning this stuff but made the mistake of heading off into the net to look for myths and now I'm all depressed.

OK after spending the afternoon in my shop working with the power tools it finally struck me what bothers me about all the noodling around about Japanese swords. They're tools that became fetish objects and now I use them as tools, but all the fetish thinking remains.

I don't go on about my table saw, where it was made and how old it is, I just use it... But there are those who do natter on about that stuff.

I don't really care what camera I'm using, but there are those who can tell you the exact specs of the one I use off of the top of their heads. For me it's enough that it does what I want it to do... mostly.

I can't tell you what fittings are on my sword... actually I can guess because I just cleaned the tsuka, there's catfish menuki and it likely has a sea cucumber tsuba (they almost all do). I can tell you about the balance and length of the thing.

I can tell you that my tablesaw works a treat but the blade needs sharpening and most of the safety things, like a magnetic switch, have gone away over the years. I can tell you of a bunch of things I'd like my camera to do (which would not be hard for the company to include but they won't) and a bunch of stuff I think is just useless (but it sells cameras to the punters so it will stay).

Tools should be useful and durable to the job they're designed for. There's no need to start talking about a band saw that can cut through a lamp post or a camera that can take a picture of the back side of the moon. Why even worry about the function of the "blood groove" on your sword if you don't plan on sticking it into a body any time soon.

Nobody is Untouchable, Especially Not Sensei

This is a response to comments on a youtube video which may or may not be at:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CepWtEO3RCE>

The question is whether or not a 7dan is untouchable, and cannot be criticised by those of more junior rank.

A 7dan is absolutely not untouchable. In fact, part of being that rank is the responsibility to put it out there any time you're asked, and you have to.... no you WANT and NEED to take any critique you receive to heart. (Unless you're really lucky, at 7dan here in the West you're pretty much on your own and need to get your corrections where you can.) I'm pretty far up the ladder in my country so I am one of the folks who must provide a model for the rest of the people in my federation. If you can't show it, it's very, very hard to teach it, so you have to show it and I have been doing that for a lot of years. I'd like to think that I have no more ego involved in my performance after all this time but I would be lying. I do, however, expect to be critiqued whenever I demonstrate and whenever anyone looks at my videos. I'm fine with that... the ego part comes in when I have to overcome some knee-jerk urge on my part to say to some snarky student "hey, I'm a 7dan whaddya you know?" That lasts for about ten seconds until I remind myself that anyone with even 3 years of training can tell me if I'm doing something wrong. If they can spot it, I need to work on it.

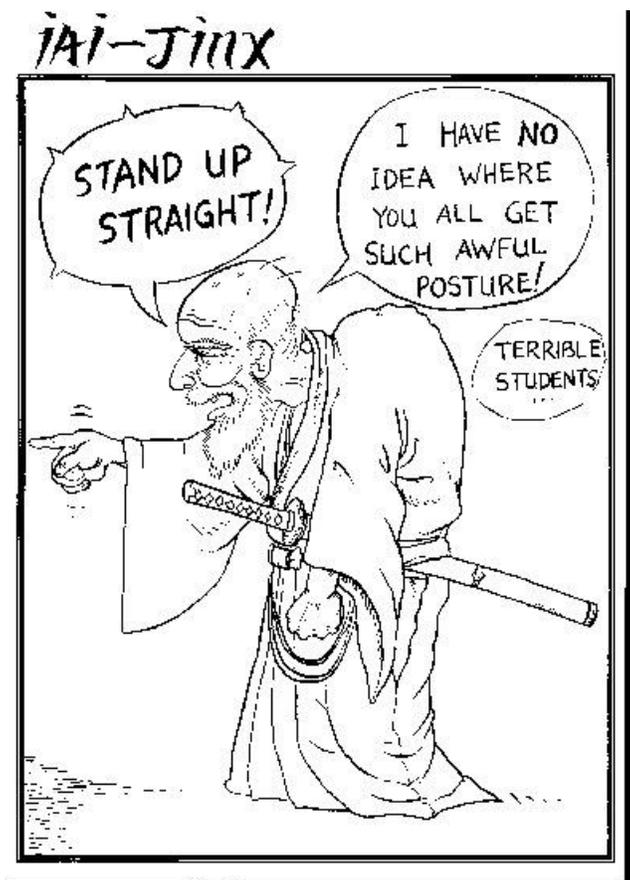
There are loads of people who don't want videos of themselves on the net because they are unsure of their abilities, I'm fully sure of my abilities and certainly sure of my shortcomings. Some specific comments on the circumstances of this video. This demonstration was one of the first times I had been able to get almost into seiza for 6 months, you'll notice I get up and stay up as fast as I can. As I mentioned in the video my knees and also my shoulders were recovering. They continue to be less than they once were, but I gave my best because I was beside my instructor and because I was in front of our students. If you look at the sequence of kata you'll see I mixed ZNKR and MJER incorrectly, and was generally not doing a good job. To put it bluntly, until the adrenalin kicked in near the end, I was in serious pain. No excuses, when I came off the floor I asked my student how bad, and was pleased when she said "I wouldn't have wanted to be under your sword". When I saw the video I was delighted I didn't look as bad on it as I knew I was.

So there is a lot there to criticise and I am delighted to invite anyone who views the video to include their critique in the comments. I did a job I'm happy with, that is nonetheless full of things that can be spotted and critiqued so please, ignore my rank, ignore the reason for the poor form, and get to work on what you think is less than ideal. This will help both me and yourselves because a big part of iaido and

similar arts is to look at your sensei and decide what's good and what you should be ignoring because he's injured or has bad habits or is hung over or whatever.

My students have no hesitation telling me what they think is wrong. For those who are not my students, you should feel free to critique a senior who has asked you to do so, knowing that you are showing no disrespect.

As to the comments on timing, I take them seriously and will be working on them so thanks.



So How Long Before I Can Start My Own Budo?

Less than you might think, actually. Less than ten years in the case of the "big 4" post-war Aikido folks, at least according to Stan Pranin who wrote an [article here](http://members.aikidojournal.com/public/towards-a-reform-of-aikido-technique-1-background-by-stanley-pranin/) (<http://members.aikidojournal.com/public/towards-a-reform-of-aikido-technique-1-background-by-stanley-pranin/>) concerning the practice and views of Kisshomaru Ueshiba (7-8 years), Koichi Tohei (2-3 years), Gozo Shioda (9 years), and Kenji Tomiki (8-9 years). All four of these instructors headed important and influential lines of aikido practice.

In the koryu, offhand I can think of Takaji Shimizu in the Shindo Muso Ryu jodo lineage who received Menkyo in 7 or 8 years practice. He went on to establish the jodo line in Tokyo after moving from Fukuoka.

I'm sure there are many people who have received "full transmission" or who established well-regarded lines of their art within ten years of practice, and many who have started their own art after less than ten years of practice, and have had that art passed along to further generations of students.

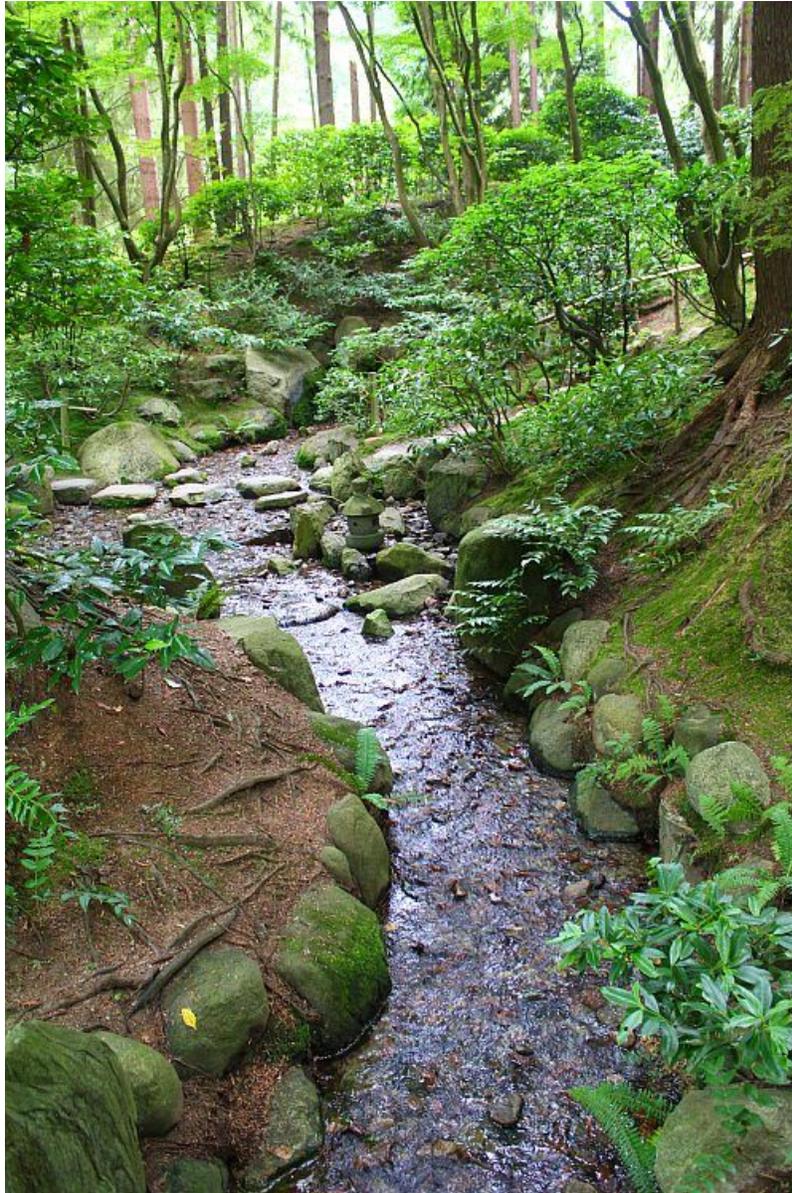
So what's all this hoey I keep hearing about needing 20 years practice just to be qualified to teach? Laziness I suspect, a way for students to explain why they haven't got it after ten years practice. After all, how many years study does it take for folks to allow a surgeon to root around in their bodies? I spent ten years in University but got two degrees and several years work done. No, ten years is plenty to learn the mechanics of any martial art, and certainly enough to be able to teach it competently.

What takes 20 years is something else, it's the time it takes to soak the techniques in far enough so that once age catches up with you, you can do all the tricky little things that let you keep hitting the youngsters over the head. "Old age and treachery will always beat youth and skill" or so they say. I dunno, I've met plenty of treacherous old men in my time and unless they were once young and skillful they aren't hard to beat. No, you need that ten years of practice to be good enough to start your own budo, then you can start working on the old age and treachery, that takes another ten I figure.

Now, if you want to know what it's like for a "ten year guy" to be standing beside a "20 year guy" consider this clip of [Keith Richards playing with Chuck Berry](http://www.openculture.com/2013/01/chuck_berry_takes_keith_richards_to_school_shows_him_how_to_rock_1987.html). You don't see the "conversation" in a partner kata from the outside but you can get the flavour here. Nothing wrong with Richards' skills but Berry owns that song like a senior sensei owns the art.

http://www.openculture.com/2013/01/chuck_berry_takes_keith_richards_to_school_shows_him_how_to_rock_1987.html

Monk On the Mountain



Nitobe Gardens, UBC Vancouver

It's easy to be a monk on the mountain. When you are away from women, the city, the internet, cell phones and movie theaters it's not too hard to meditate. It's when you get back down into the city amongst all the distractions provided by thousands of people, that things get hard. As an example, just think about how many times you have wished you were somewhere away from it all so you could get some work done, or just think about things for a while. Yet we figure it's too hard to get away, it's too

hard to go be an ascetic under the waterfall.

Seriously, we figure the guys on the mountain have it tough, but they are there because they know it's easier to be good while away from the rest of us.

My point? Admit it's hard and do it anyway. Find your time to meditate and improve yourself.

Make it as easy to do as you can.

How? Set a specific time, make an appointment. Sunday morning at the temple, Thursday evening at the yoga class, Monday evenings at the dojo. Do something that breaks you out of the city and puts you on the mountain, gets your mind quieted down, away from your cell phone and tablet and all the other calls upon your attention. It's not too late, you can still tell a boss in this day and age that your priest/guru/sensei won't let you leave your cell phone on while you're in class. Give it another ten years of slippage and you'll be able to work on your laptop while you're at the opera, but for now there are still a few places where you can be out of touch.

There are none so traditional in the budo as the young, and the retired. Those who don't have families and nine to five jobs are our equivalent of the monks on the mountain, they can spend hours a day practicing, reading, soaking up the culture of the Samurai, worrying through the internet looking for heresy. The rest of us are happy to get our two or three hours a week visiting our quiet places and trying to remember what it was like to hear nothing but our own breathing. The monks ought to cut us a break, and we ought to be tolerant of those who have nothing else to do but be virtuous.

Which brings me to the point of it all. Why all this work on the self, all this "improvement". You have an idea of where you're going? What you want to accomplish?

The guys who want to be kick-ass fighter dudes, what do they want? Freedom from their fears?

The sweetness and light angels, the flow-ery folk? What are they after? Drug-less bliss?

Me, I'm with a lot of the other long-timers who actually don't have an answer to this, we're in it because we've always done it. It's "what we do". I'm happy if I leave a class with a little bit of sweat, a little bit of bliss, and calm enough that I don't yell at the family the second I walk in the door. Having silenced the screams inside my head years ago, either by meditation, martial arts, or getting old, I've accomplished my original goal. I never strove toward perfection, I like my beer too much for that. Enlightenment sure, but not the kind where I float away on the universal sea of Jungian

subconsciousness and one-ness. Just a little understanding.

Balance... a quite senior instructor was talking with me over coffee a while ago and told me the story of the monk who wanted to be perfect. When he finally managed to get rid of everything negative this monk realized he was a bit of a bore and not a little bit smug, lazy and lopsided. It wasn't worth it, all that negating the negativity.

We shouldn't try to be perfect, it's a lousy goal because we won't make it. Instead we should accept our bad points, examine them for what they are, where they came from, what we do with them. Our actions ought to be understandable to us in retrospect if not in advance. Once we know why we're assholes we can come into some sort of balance with it.

If we're on the mountain we can commune with the bluebirds and beam en-light from our eyes to illumine the woods, but in the world we have to deal with the rest of us and that needs balance. A saint will try to fix everything and just bring it to a halt, a balanced man will realize that we need the jerks in the organization as much as we need the nice folks, we need them because they stand on the other side of the bus so the thing doesn't tip over the edge and go plunging down off the mountain.

If nothing else, we need the jerks so we can point at them and say "don't be (so much) like that". We need the monks on the mountain so we can say "be (a little) more like that".

Keep What You Got

When running a dojo, one of the greatest concerns is keeping students, especially kids. The inevitable complaint is that they're not happy with their slow advancement. Now it does you no good to tell them that they are advancing slowly because they aren't paying attention and they still don't understand the basics. They don't want to hear that, they just want to get to the good stuff and they want to get "better" faster.

So advance fast, don't spend so much time on the basics, get them into the stuff they joined for and make them feel that they are moving along. Keep them learning new steps so that you never hear "are we there yet"? Of course you want them to learn the basics, but hide the boring stuff like a cod liver oil pill in their ice cream, make sure you emphasize the parts of the kata that best demonstrate the basics and do exercises that "will help them get the kata" at least once a class. In other words, show them where they will use the basics, and then show them how learning the basics will help them learn the kata.

Next you have to give them red-punch-buggies along the way so they have landmarks that tell them they are going on down the road. I'm talking about tests, lots of tests, the lower the ranks, the more the tests. Kids like passing tests so let them do it. A big part of the tests will be demonstrating good basics of course, but put in some fun stuff too.

While we're on the subject of fun, make sure the lessons aren't too serious, make sure the kids can horse around a couple times a class. It shouldn't ALL be yelling and smacking across the legs with shinai.

How To Be Sensei

There's lots of ways to be a martial arts sensei. One of the easiest is just to call yourself a martial arts sensei. You know, invent a school, invent some moves and set up shop. Along with this is usually some self-awarded grades or even a self-invented lineage that, if you're lucky, you can watch grow back in time. One fellow I know started out as a 15th generation grandmaster and was a 23rd the last time I paid attention. I think that as lineages around became longer and longer the poor fellow had to grow more ancestors just to keep pace.

That's sort of cheating (and by cheating I mean easy to spot), because you aren't "named" a sensei by someone other than yourself. So you can join any one of a dozen organizations that will be happy to take on another club with students in return for naming you as a sensei. Joining various rival organizations has actually become a rather traditional way to advance in rank. When you jump from one group to another, one of the incentives is often not just to recognize your current rank, but to award a jump in rank. By switching organizations every few months I watched a fellow go from shodan to 7dan in just a couple of years.

From self-appointed to appointed by a rival organization, we'll now talk about three ways to be named a sensei by your own organization. First is to know more than your sensei. I know of a couple of guys who learned for quite a while from their local sensei before going overseas to visit another sensei. When they came back they informed their sensei that the art had changed in the 30 years since he started teaching and that he now had to change a bunch of things. That local sensei's response was "no I don't" and the two fellows are now the sensei of their very own dojo with whatever rank the overseas sensei has given them.

The most boring of all ways to be a sensei is to go through all the years of training and organizational hoops, not to mention payment of fees to your organization, and eventually be named a sensei. Takes a long time and seriously, way too much hassle.

My personal favourite, and the one I recommend to everyone who is serious about learning the martial art is to lose the tontine. You end up as sensei when everyone who practiced the art in front of you has died or quit. I say lose rather than win the tontine because to someone who is in this stream of sensei development, making it to the top is not a reward.

How Not To Be Sensei

While this is sort of like death and taxes, very hard to avoid if you hang around long enough, there are

some things you can do to prevent being a sensei. The first is to keep the incumbent around as long as possible. This means providing him with reasons not to retire (attentive and enthusiastic students tend to help) and not to pretend he's 18 when he's 68 (encouragement, for instance, by subtle hints not to do flying spinning back kicks off of high walls once he hits 50). It also means keeping an eye on him as he gets up there in years and helping out when necessary. After dealing with the rent, advertising, zoning bylaws and administration at the local community center for 20 years, sensei might be getting a bit sick and tired and a little help might be accepted. Trust me when I say that at least as many sensei quit the business out of frustration as out of bone fractures.

If the inevitable happens and your sensei quits (by getting frustrated, married, dead or bored) you do not necessarily have to step in. You can find another sensei, it's allowed and even encouraged in this case, especially if you're less than 70 years old (if you're older than that you might be told to "grow up" and start teaching whether you like it or not, but it's worth a try).

In your quest not to teach, you should not only consider those older and more highly ranked than you are. If there's some bright young thing who isn't too obnoxious and is more highly ranked than you are, give him a shot. It's usually considered acceptable to avoid the work in this way, after all if he was silly enough to accumulate the rank, you can hardly be blamed for taking advantage of him. It's even more acceptable to go with a sensei who may have less rank than you do, but is older and more experienced. These guys are often around and they have earned their chops by figuring out how to avoid rank. Of course in either of these cases you should be looking at their ability to teach, rather than their ability to climb the corporate ladder or their inability to pass gradings. Remember if you're in this situation you're likely choosing for your whole dojo, not just yourself.

If you have a large organization, finding another sensei isn't all that hard. If you have to switch organizations it might be a bit tough to find someone who does exactly like you do, but try your best and continue to pay attention as you change your way of doing jumping spinning back kicks off walls.

If you don't like the guy who is just behind you, and you're getting a bit long in the tooth yourself, you could do the junshi thing and retire when your sensei does. This will force your junior to step in as sensei thus saving you from the job and screwing him at the same time. Double bonus.

If you have tried all the above and you still can't avoid the job, take comfort in the probability that you won't have to do it for very long.

Passing It On

Today I really feel it. All my instructors who have had to retire or who have passed on, and now I'm starting to feel that some of my longest-practicing students are having to back off. I looked in the mirror tonight and an old man looked back at me.

Sure I've got some new students, I always have new students and some of them are keen as mustard, but how much time do I have. I don't know, but I certainly don't have another twenty in me, not at the level I'd like to offer. I've got maybe six or seven I figure, and that doesn't seem like enough to produce the kind of students I am happy to say I produced a decade ago.

OK, old men get depressed, it's true, but damn it, I can't lead from the front any more, I can't take more punishment than my students, and thus shame them into following me. I have to stand behind them and push.

It's not the same. Look I'll admit it, it hurts not to be able to show it, to know that I physically, that is, according to the laws of physics as applied to joints, can't show it any more.

To be specific, if I'm showing the class how to do an iaido technique, a new exercise, I have maybe two or three reps in me, then I have to use the seniors in the class to demonstrate. This is fine for the beginners, but the seniors, who are really middle level students who would never have been asked to demonstrate ten years ago, are not being treated well. They can't help but feel that they are exemplars, demonstrators..... teachers. They can't help but feel they've "got it" since I'm asking them to demonstrate it.

It's not fair to them. Sure they are fine examples, as good as most of the folks out there practicing today, but that's not what I used to aim for.... better than most. I used to aim for the best and I used to get it.

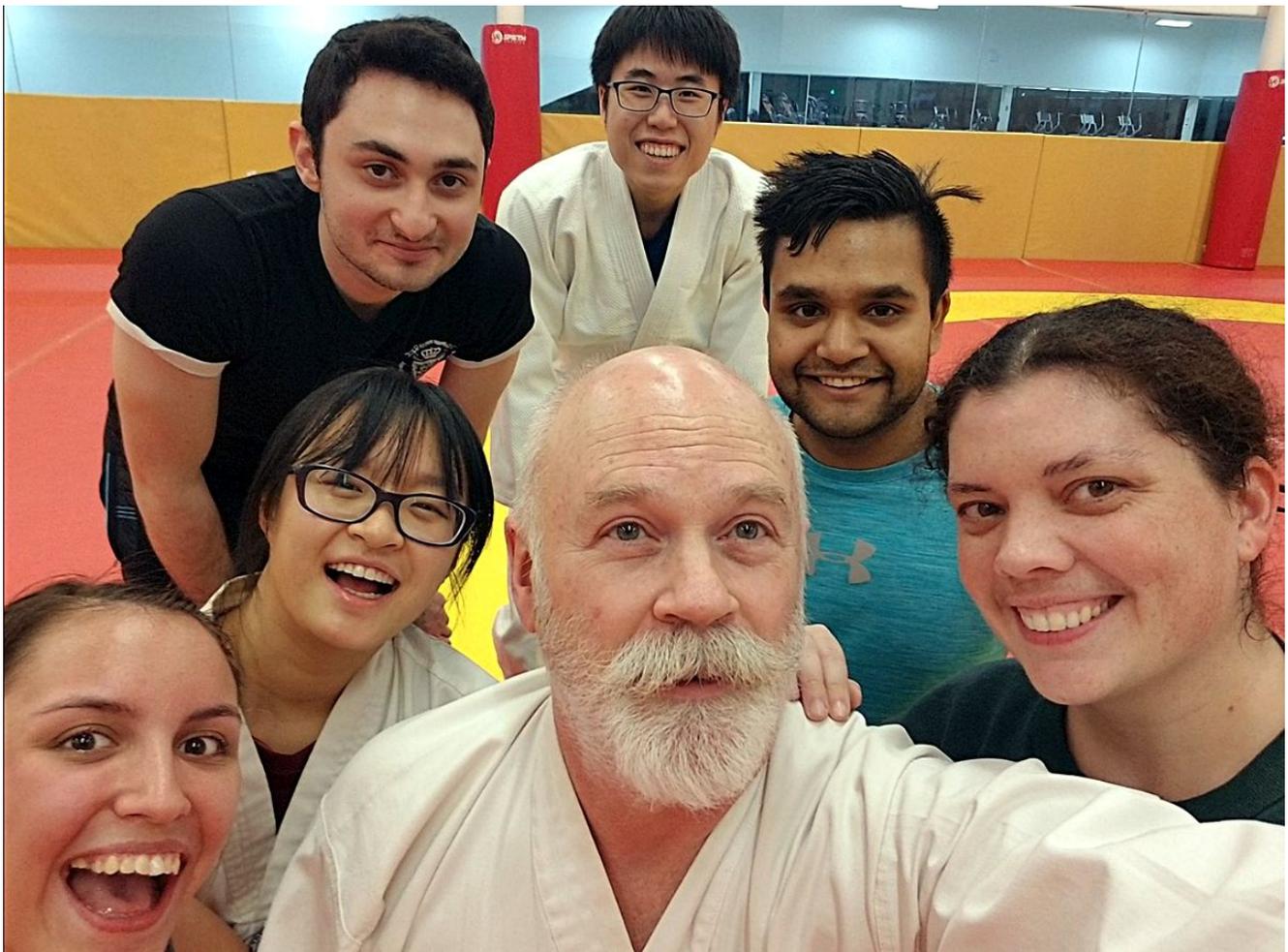
I used to get it without pushing, without verbally thrashing them, I used to get it by showing them what was possible, giving them an example. Now I give them a headache with my whining about how they should do it instead of showing them how it can be done.

I probably need to just stop teaching and go work on my own stuff, hell these kids I'm complaining about are better at 4 years than I was at 14, the only thing they really lack is the instinct to drive through anything. What I can't.... no, be honest, what I don't dare show them any more. I used to go until something gave out, and then it would heal and they would acquire faith.

Now I've got one left, one drive through the limits, and then it's done. Is it the time? Do I do it to show these kids or do I wait until it's life or death for someone? Hmm, not much of a choice when it comes down to that.

My biggest hope now is that I've turned into a grumpy old man wingeing away about the old days when giants roamed the land, that my students will find that spark of insanity, of berserker rage that I found, to carry them through. That they will find it without me, like each generation of crazy people who rise to the top of the budo world find it despite their doddering old teachers... My biggest hope is that my ego is so big I figure they won't find it without me, and that I'm wrong.

Then again, maybe all I need is some dye for my grey hairs.



Kihon

Yesterday at practice we worked for a while on the iaido kihon I'm formalizing. Then we went to some kodachi seiho from Niten Ichiryu before we did a little jodo. All through the class I was raging on about posture, distance, timing and it dawned on me that it's the same as ever. It comes down to basics, always.

I prefer Niten Ichiryu to Katori Shinto Ryu because Niten is simple, a single move.

I prefer slow short and precise kata to long fast ones.

I prefer seitei jodo to koryu jo because it cuts out most of the kata.

I would rather do kihon than kata.

In fact, I'd rather stand in front of a student and have them swing a bokuto at me while I step back and let it whoosh by a centimeter from my nose than just about anything else. It's just a pure rush of distance and timing.

We finished class with a discussion of ... hell I don't know what started it but it got around to kata, kihon and randori. To explain, think of iaido, kendo and jodo kihon. You can't use a live sword in anything but solo practice, so you do kihon and solo kata. The first kata in my school is Mae, horizontal cut to the eyes followed by a vertical cut. Partner practice is with wooden weapons, think Jodo. Randori is kendo, full speed and freestyle, no preset moves.

First kata in seitei jo (partner practice) is Tsuki Zue, avoid on a backward diagonal, strike the wrist, cock a strike aimed at the eyes, strike to the head (hit the forearm again). This is where the discussion started. There are spaces, places where you pause so the opponent could get in right? He could do something else if you don't do the next move fast enough yes?

So what's a kata? It's a way to demonstrate kihon. Kihon is a technique, cut down with sword, poke with jo, simple. A kata is a way to demonstrate how these kihon work. So Mae is a kata, it's not a technique it's a story with a big mistake in it, or a cruel person. Mae says you cut from the scabbard across the eyes of your opponent and then you cut vertically from head to groin. Think about this, to cut the eyes he has to be in seiza, he's the same height as you and you're cutting at your nipple height. The guy still has his sword in the scabbard and you've cut his eyes. You need the second cut??? Only if you missed the first one or you're determined to kill him.

So a kata is an artificial construct to allow you to demonstrate more than one kihon in a row.

But it isn't freestyle, it isn't a mimic of real combat. For another attempt at that we go to the 400 year old practice of using armour and boffers so we can work on the timing and distance of working a real fight... we do kendo.

Where does kendo go over 400 years? To a very small set of techniques, to 4 or 5 strikes. To a full point for a single hit on the target... it goes to kihon.

Let's go back to the jodo kata. It's a big avoid and stop, strike to the wrist and stop, aim at the eyes and stop, hit the head/forearm and done. Now I could see where one might think all that stuff should be done without the stops, but kata isn't freestyle. The stops in seitei are there for two people, the student and the teacher. Both of them better be seeing proper kihon at all times or the attacker will indeed be able to "get in". How fast to get in? Go do some kendo to find that out. A twitch of a couple cm will let your opponent get inside your defence. Don't talk at me about how shinai are lighter than shinken, if you touch that shinai with your own light shinai it's not a point, yet points get scored. Now reaction times vs weapon movement times we can argue about but simply put, an opening is a bad thing.

In Tsuki Zue all those stops are potential openings, we need to close them up. If your posture and distance is right, if your timing of movement from one posture to another is in the right timing, if your kihon is correct, the opening isn't there and your opponent can't get in before you react.

Want reality in your kata, not this artificially prolonged set of moves (if you break your swordsman's wrist after tearing the skin from his face from forehead to chin and slamming his solar plexus at the same time with the jo, he's not going to be moving back to jodan is he?) go to a simple school like Niten Ichiryu. First kata there (Sasen) is to walk up and stab the opponent in the throat as he's trying to cut you down. What's the kihon for that kata? The kihon IS the kata. You work on distance and timing and there's no need to dance around off balance, floating all over the dojo while you speed through crappy postures doing long kata, you do this kata really slow except for the place where he's swinging full speed for your head and you're moving out of the way while stabbing him.

It's all kihon. The dozens of kata, the long kata, the hours and hours of kote men and kiri kaeshi, it's all kihon. It all comes down to being able to hit a target at the right time in the right place with the right power. Even tameshigiri is just kihon.

So get excited the next time sensei says "OK kihon practice" and be disappointed when he says "today we learn another set of kata".

What's Sensei For Anyway?



[2012 Guelph Spring Iaido/Jodo Seminar](#)

Photo by Heather Dunning

I'm not sure why that popped into my head but let's look at it. Now I want to start out with "sensei just means gone before" but when I give definitions like that I get feedback on how wrong I am, so translate it as "some guy who is up front teaching" or don't translate it at all.

Before I get into a post on the difference between jargon, language and etymology let's make a list of what a sensei is for.

- To teach me stuff
- To organize a place where I learn stuff
- To entertain me because I'm bored

Don't laugh at that last one. OK let's take them one at a time.

Did you blink at the idea that it's sensei's job to organize a place for me to learn? I did as I was writing it down, but consider:

- To organize a place where I learn stuff
 - Find and rent a room

- Build the dojo
- Argue with the administration
- Keep the financial books
- Keep the student records
- Keep up with current standards
- Clean the toilets
- Fix the windows
- Install weapon racks
- Unclog the shower drains
- Kick out the dance class at 7:04pm
- Remind the kids about the test next Saturday
- Remind the kids again about the test next Saturday
- Remind the parents about the test next Saturday
- Explain to the parents why their kid can't test on Sunday
- Sell me weapons, uniforms, bags, t-shirts and keychains
 - at wholesale

Martial arts instructors are rarely part of a larger body that pays for the organization of the learning. There aren't any dojo boards like the local school boards, at least that I've heard of. There are some franchises out there with operating manuals and there are some largish organizations that try to keep standards standard but at the working edge of things sensei is supposed to organize a place where I can learn stuff.

- To teach me stuff
 - Go through the curriculum
 - Get me past the test
 - Get me past the next test
 - Tell me not to get mad when I fail
 - Explain what he did wrong when I fail

Sure a sensei is supposed to take you through a curriculum, or several if you're in a dojo that teaches multiple arts, but what about all that test taking stuff? Your local school board has a hard time trying to figure out if their job is to teach to the test or teach to creative thinking. What's the right way to teach? The three Rs certainly, but so that Johnny can Read, Rite and Rithmatic or so that Johnny can pass a test? Simplest is passing the test, and most folks like simple. It's measurable, (he passed the test) and so we can tell that "it's working". Tests, in budo or in Rithmatic, are there to show that minimum standards have been achieved. That's nice but I've argued before that tests don't measure where you actually are,

or whether you are achieving your own goals. There's a whole other possibility here.

- To teach me stuff
 - To be a better person
 - To be in control of my body and emotions
 - To handle crisis situations
 - To handle unexpected variations in training
 - To be creative
 - To achieve enlightenment

In other words, what sensei is for depends entirely on why you are standing in front of him. What's your reason for being in class? To gratify the old ego by passing that black belt test? To understand the one-ness of the universe by experiencing the one-ness of the dance between two people engaged in potentially lethal combat? I see a lot of argument from folks about what the budo are and what they're supposed to teach but the arguments say more about the speaker than they do about the arts themselves. Even sensei gets little say in what you are learning. Sensei just puts it out there and you take what you can from it, according to your receptiveness, reasons for being there, assumptions about the art and stage of development. There are kids who become theoretical mathematicians after being taught Rithmatic in school, and there are kids who never understand that calling heads after a coin has gone tails 20 times in a row is no better than calling tails. We often learn despite, rather than because of, our educations.

It's easy to fall into thinking that once you pass one test you head toward the next, it's a direction, a goal, and let's face it, training in the martial arts is pretty directionless and pointless without those goals. The goals can also be "the next match" now that I remember that some martial arts are competitive. You can train for the championship. What happens to those who "get there", who pass that last test, who win (or lose) that championship? What then? There it is, we've arrived at the goal, what has been accomplished?

Which brings us to the final reason for a sensei:

- To entertain me because I'm bored
 - I'm trying it out
 - I need some exercise
 - I need a distraction from my job
 - my wife
 - my kids
 - my dog

- I like anime but my butt hurts from sitting too much
- I want to preserve the ancient ways
 - even if the originating culture doesn't
- To meet guys
- To kick ass at school

OK fill in every other lame excuse you've made or heard for being in class, including "my parents put me in here because it's cheaper than a babysitter". The martial arts are, in fact, best described as hobbies, those things we do which are not directly involved in feeding, clothing and sheltering ourselves and our families. All hobbies are done in the time that we have left over after doing the feed, clothe and shelter stuff, so they're done by choice as ways to pass the time. They're called pastimes for a reason yes?

Self defence? I've forgotten the one thing that brings most folks into the dojo? Not likely, but seriously, who needs a martial art for self defence and who thinks they're efficient ways to protect ourselves? From what? No, a couple weeks of training will do for any self defence benefits you get from budo, and self defence comes under "feed clothe shelter" anyway. Martial arts training goes way beyond self defence or basic training in the military, it goes past all that into hobbyland.

So what, at the end of the day, is the purpose of sensei?

One more reason to consider? Look at that photo again, there's Furukawa sensei from Tokyo teaching Brian from British Columbia and Guillermo from Chile at last year's seminar in Guelph.

Seminar Translation



The subject of translation came up the other day, as in we always need translators for the seminar along with the instructors. But what if you don't have one available?

One of the most distressing experiences for me at a seminar is to look around while sensei is explaining a point and seeing how many people are looking at the translator rather than at sensei. Not only that, but if the translator doesn't seem to be providing every single syllable back to the students they start to look angry, like they're missing something.

They are.

They're missing 90 percent of the instruction because they're listening to the translation of the verbal explanations. Or as they more often are, the verbal noises that any instructor makes while showing the correct way to do something. The vast majority of verbal instruction goes something like "this, not this, like this, don't do this, do it this way, if you don't do it this way it's wrong. This is wrong, do this, not

this"

You want some poor fellow to provide instantaneous translation of that stuff for three days?

Then there are the seniors in the class who look for ten seconds and decide they know what sensei is talking about and go to sleep. However, those guys don't annoy me so much as the ones who turn to some junior and start telling them what sensei really means.

1. Pay Attention

2. Don't Assume

I can't emphasize those two points enough, and as you will realize, they're the same point. Look at sensei, assume he's not just waving his arms around to provide you with a soothing breeze on a hot day. If you don't "hear" what he's saying you won't learn anything new.

So here are a few ideas on how to provide translation for yourself at a seminar, rather than rely on someone else to do it for you.

First, watch sensei unless the translator starts to go on for more than a few seconds. Watch sensei because that's where the real communication is happening. Second, listen to the translation with half of one ear. Only actually pay attention when your brain says "pay attention because this is helping with the explanation you're watching" or "this has gone on more than a sentence or three so maybe it's an actual translation of a point". You can get the hang of this. Third, if you can't hear the translation or see the explanation, get closer. If the room is very large and you are with a bunch of people who can't find their places in a gym after wandering off (so have been told not to wander) then stick your arm in the air and wave it and say "speak up please" to the translator.

But never mind that, don't rely on the translation, that's third hand information you're getting. Once in the translating, second in the speaking and hearing, third in your own translation in your head from words to actions. Look/Do instead, look at what sensei is doing and then do it. Don't translate it, don't interpret it, don't compare it to what you've done before, just look and do.

Some points to help you do your own translation

1. Japanese body language and facial expressions are the same as yours. Head up and down means yes, back and forth means no. Frowny face means nnnnooooo, smiley face means yes! Shrug means "I have no idea what you're doing but it isn't what I just told you to do". Hands waved

back and forth means "you're not seeing through this foggy windshield". Forearms crossed or index fingers crossed means you failed, circle of finger and thumb means you pass, thumbs up means thumbs up.

2. Ko means "this" "here" "look"
3. Ko da nai means "not this" "not here" "look, this is wrong"
4. Dame means "you are still stupid, that is still wrong"
5. Iie means no
6. Yosh means "finally, you got it"!
7. What sensei is doing without talking is the correct way to do it. Pay attention. If he's speaking with a lot of short, sharp, downward inflected words and waving his hand back and forth or crossing his arms or shaking his head back and forth, that's the wrong way to do it. If sensei is too old or injured to show you the right way he'll say so and have someone else do it. If that someone else is the second or third most highly ranked person around, he's likely a good example. Especially if the demonstrator is another instructor or came with sensei from Japan. If it's the third dan next to you, it may be a good example or a bad example, watch sensei and he'll tell you which.
8. If it's a junior level class you're not likely to be getting any secret oral instructions or philosophy, you're likely getting "this, not this".
9. If it's a senior level class you might get some nice pointers verbally, it's likely that someone who speaks Japanese will translate this for you either at the time or later on so don't panic and get distracted from the next bit of instruction. Chances are that if you aren't the most senior student in the room you've heard it already anyway.

If none of this helps and you still don't get what sensei is talking about, ask a senior.

- If they tell you to shut up, you're right, it is important, and hard to understand, and you should shut up and let the seniors try to understand it now so they can tell you later.
- If the senior explains it in a couple of words, then it's done.
- If the senior thinks it's a good question that deserves a longer answer he may ask sensei for you.
- If the senior realizes it's something he's been telling you for months and you still won't believe it, he may actually ask sensei the question. Sensei may pause to frown at the senior and then proceed to explain things painfully slowly. This is not your senior being stupid, it's him taking some flack so that you can hear it from the big guy so pay attention. Seniors have been known to ask some pretty stupid questions just so you get a chance to hear the answer from someone you might actually believe.

Of course you can always ask sensei when he says "any questions"? But strangely, in my experience the guys who frown most at translators and pay the least attention to the sensei are also those who fail to ask a question when they are called for.

So there you have it, a crash course in translation without speaking a word of Japanese. If you want the actual translations or Japanese words of the few small sounds I've given you above, go to a dictionary such as this one: <http://www.romajidesu.com/> or take a course in basic Japanese. I've always preferred watching rather than translating so my translations above are doubtless "wrong".

Hey, if you get really good at it, we are always in need of translators.



Japanese-Canadian sensei speaking English being translated into Spanish and Portuguese in Uruguay.

Representative Does Not Mean Introductory

The Kendo Federation iaido set which we usually call Seitei Gata keeps getting called an "introductory set" and there are groups even outside the Kendo Federation which claim to teach it before they teach their koryu because it's a good way to introduce students to iaido.

It's a lousy way to introduce iaido. It may be the first thing that folks get taught but that's got nothing to do with seitei being easy to learn or suitable as an introduction. From a teaching point of view, you want an introduction to any art which presents a more or less basic idea and that builds on that in a methodical way so the students can more or less anticipate but certainly can accommodate the new information. Adult Learning Principles 101.

You want something like the first set of Muso Jikiden Eishin Ryu (Omori-ryu) or Muso Shinden Ryu (Shoden). Something that presents Mae/Shohatto and then follows up with four more variations on that theme and that returns to it several more times. (Call these schools MJER and MSR so I don't have to type so much.)

Let's look at the setup of those two koryu carefully. First level you get taught the fundamental cuts, noto and footwork of the school in kata that assume a single opponent and mostly arise from a fairly easy way to sit. The second set (Eishin-ryu or Chuden) introduces a more difficult way to sit and some more complex ideas like working inside the sword distance using some basic ju-jutsu. It isn't until the final sets of kata (Okuden) that you see more than one attacker. (For a detailed account of the teaching methodology and meanings behind the kata check out my upcoming (as in I've got to get around to finishing it) new book on the riai of MJER at sdksupplies.com)

Let's go back to seitei gata and see what we can find there. Firstly we get the same introductory kata as in the two koryu mentioned, Mae (Shohatto). Then we get a variation, Ushiro (Atarito) for the second. So far so good. The specific style of practice is sort of Muso Shinden-ish but that's not much of a problem for someone who has done MJER. And number three? It's also from the beginning level of practice, but it's a rather difficult go no sen technique. It is a defence against a standing attacker who is cutting down on your head while you are still on your knees and still have the blade in the scabbard. Not an easy kata at the best of times. Then we come to number four, a multiple attacker kata from tate hiza. In other words, it's Okuden. We have jumped right past the middle level of practice and gone for the top.

After that we stand up and do six more Oku-iai kata which involve multiple attackers, multiple

directions, and finish up with one that requires we stand under an attacking blade that we have more or less invited and step back (without even using the blade to protect ourselves) at the last moment to avoid being cut.

This is not simple stuff, this is not an introductory set of iai, not unless you want to convince your students that koryu is some sort of dumbed down, slower to teach, version of Seitei Gata.



Of course it's not. What we need to explain to our students is that Seitei Gata is a representative set of kata that samples across the entire koryu, all three levels, plus some bits and pieces from schools other than MJER and MSR, and then, that it stuffs some other things in there like four different chiburi in the first five kata (6 chiburi overall) as well as an opening etiquette from MSR vs. a closing rei from MJER just to mess everyone up.

In fact, we need to explain to our new students that Seitei Gata originally assumed a knowledge of koryu before starting it. Seitei Gata is something that should be done after learning koryu, after getting a good grounding in the techniques of one school or the other (MJER and MSR are big schools, the others which contributed bits to Seitei are much less populous). We need to apologize for forcing our

students to first learn a set of kata that are not consistent, not simple and not easily learned because the way that testing happens is that they have to learn them first and fast to advance in rank. The students have 4 years or less between kyu and sandan to learn the techniques of Seitei Gata. From sandan to yondan they have another three years to start showing some more advanced ideas about iaido and I'd bet that most folks start learning koryu at about this same time. Up to then there's just no time to do anything more than learn the "dance steps", the raw movements of Seitei Gata, of some very difficult techniques.

Why consider testing in how we structure the teaching? Because new students like testing. They expect it, it helps them to learn and from the instructor's side, it keeps them in the class. If students didn't want to test, we wouldn't be offering tests. I certainly wouldn't at any rate.

So we've thought of tests as a reason why students learn Seitei first, any others?

Instruction, as in more than one instructor available to the students and the dojo instructors. Seitei Gata is representative, but it's also standardized, and any instructor in the Kendo Federation is supposed to be teaching the same things with the same principles underneath. Don't get me wrong, I'm not against a single sensei for anyone, and I have studied under the same iaido sensei since 1987 with no desire to change, but I have also outlived several other sensei during my career. They were lost to me well before I felt myself capable of carrying on their budo and I was most grateful to have had access to other instructors in the same organization. That sort of transfer is not always easy in a small koryu lineage outside an organization. For the koryu within a larger organization, it's easier to switch, the sensei know each other, know you, and know the importance of not letting students go flying off on their own, out of the lineage. Seitei allows everyone to work together before and/or without the complications of koryu lineage.

OK so why is seitei not set up with a more gradual teaching curve, or at least with a more consistent set of chiburi and etiquette? History comes into play here. The Kendo Federation had teachers from several koryu lines of iai when the techniques were formed, and accommodation (inclusion) was considered a good thing I imagine. It was also likely thought that if one was starting Seitei it would not be all that hard to learn, for instance, another way of bowing to the sword. At the beginning the idea that students would be starting iaido with seitei may not have been at the front of anyone's mind.

In 1968 Seitei Gata had 7 techniques, the first 7. So a mix of 3 intro level, one tate hiza (even if high level) and three standing high level kata would be quite reasonable. In 1982 three more kata were added to bring it to 10 total, the same as kendo no kata. (I have no inside information on what the committees were thinking by the way, I'm speculating here). Of course it's best to add to the end rather

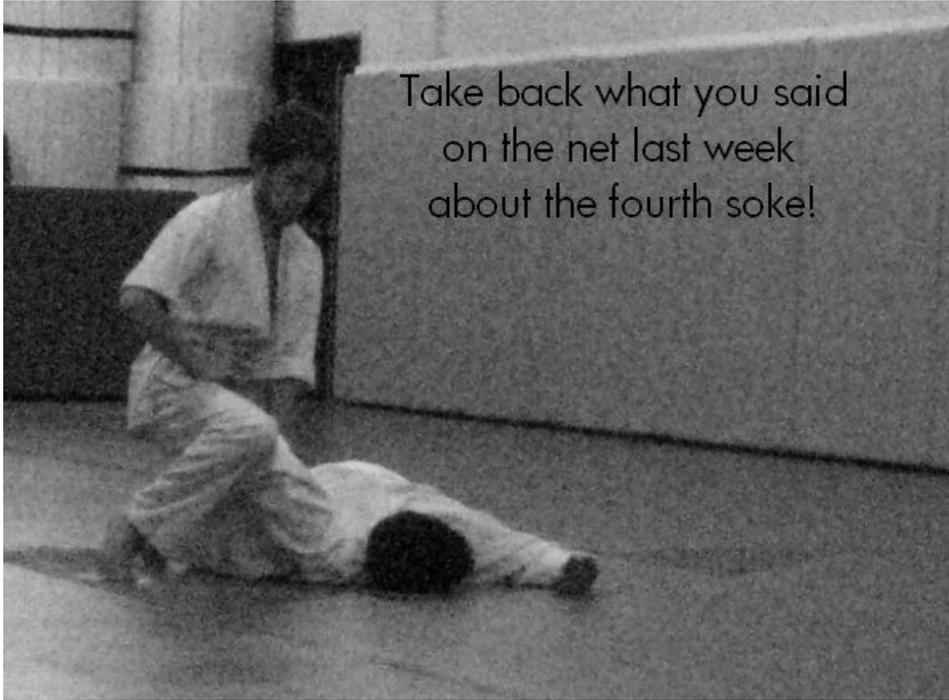
than try to insert kata in a set, and convention says that one does not go back to lower level practice once one has moved up the scale in a demonstration, so the added kata were from Okuden. When the last two kata were added a few years ago to bring the techniques to 12 they were also easiest added to the end, and also Okuden kata. Thus we now have a Seitei Gata with 3 shoden, one tate hiza and 6 okuden techniques.

Representative, yes, standardized, yes, but not introductory and certainly not simple.



Team Internet Budo Police

It's late at night but I can't go to bed yet, someone is wrong on the internet



It's human nature to want to be an iconoclast, I remember a physiology prof who told us undergrads all about the stupidity of other researchers in the field. We loved it and bought the fellow beer in the bar every night. Yes every night and he died of it eventually, but that's not the point.

It was a delight to know that we knew something special, that someone else was wrong. That was 1975, before the internet and certainly before discussion forums and facespace. Not much has changed except the vastly increased numbers of people who are privy to "special knowledge".

So it has never surprised me that there are dozens and hundreds of folk out there ready to defend the honour of this or that koryu from the fakes and frauds real and imagined. What does surprise me is that some folks never seem to grow out of it, even those who eventually find koryu of their own to play with. They still seem to want to go on patrol for other schools and other lines of practice.

No idea why really, you'd think they would find lots to bitch and fight about in their own lineage (that

being almost the definition of a koryu some days). The thing is, no school needs anyone outside its own ranks to defend it from anyone. Most headmasters who have been around a few years have seen people come and go, the line splinter and perhaps even heal, and the outright fakes flare up and die away.

And they do die away. In the old days we had a few 'zines, letters and books to spread the light of knowledge. Today I think it would sometimes be a good idea to hide some of that light under a few bushel baskets. (Wow, I wonder how many folks, including my own students, have ever seen a bushel basket? It's a thing to be old enough that your "common sayings" are in an obsolete measuring system... well, supposedly obsolete in Canada at any rate.)

With the glare of knowledge that is Wikipedia and Facebook and Google Search I can't imagine that anyone would actually be in need of defenders of the many faiths who will search out fakes and frauds to expose. Ten minutes typing should be enough to expose all but the most recent pretenders, and ten minutes wait will probably serve for them.

OK you say, someone has to find the frauds in the first place so they can be exposed right?

Well, no. You see the prof up above there soon lost his appeal to me, right after I realized that opinion and speculation is not a substitute for research in the sciences. If I had a question about the textbook I could look up the original research in the library. I didn't need a guru to tell me about the folks who were wrong, I could look up the research and see for myself.

Same with the koryu, you don't need to be informed of all the fakes and frauds, you don't need to be warned away by third party folks, you can now look up the school itself on the net, or email an actual member, you can get it "straight from the horse's mouth". (Never could figure out what you got straight from a horse's mouth.)

So, be aware that there are plenty of folks who know all about the many koryu and also about the frauds, popular and sparcely listened to. Those folks have, over the years, learned to keep their own council and speak rarely of those who are pretenders. The pretenders rarely do any harm to the schools they (mis)represent, and if they do become annoying, the school itself has a huge stick it can use to smack them down. The internet is a mighty big stick and if someone needs denouncing, a notice on the website will be found within the next Google indexing cycle.

Go get a decent night's sleep and don't worry that someone on the internet is wrong. Have a good practice tomorrow.

Muto



That's a BIG stick

I began my martial arts career in Aikido and we started with weapons from day one. I've been around sticks and swords since that day over 30 years ago and I've got no problem standing in front of one of my students to take away a sword they've swung at me.

And therein lies the problem.

There's always a discussion bubbling along in the martial arts world about empty hand vs weapons. The kata exist out there, but with grave faces and great authority everyone says "oh it's a last ditch thing, desperation etc. etc." Then I flip the channel to utube and watch aikido demonstrations where some big sensei repeatedly takes weapons from his students and gives them back again, I watch giants of the koryu twitch their swords this way and that and come inside to throw their students. I watch karate guys boot sword-holding karate guys in the knee. It looks damned easy.

It is damned easy. With enough practice and a bit of "go ahead, try to hit me" attitude it's pretty easy to take swords away from your students. I do it all the time.

It's so easy that I'm tempted to say it can be done, and that's where sensei-itis needs to get a good shot of "really??"

So my advice to anyone who starts to think they can take a sword from a hostile opponent is this. Take a foam boffer, give it to someone who is not your student and ask them to stand in chudan in front of you. Now go take the sword away.

Problem? Of course. First, they aren't your student so they aren't trained to do what you want them to do, they aren't going to move in predictable ways. Secondly, they aren't going to move period, and because of that, they aren't actively attacking so there isn't an opening. It's pathetically hard to move past a sword held in chudan to get to the hands, let along the body in order to take the sword away.

Next, the person in front of you isn't afraid of you, you haven't hurt them repeatedly while taking swords away from them and they are holding a foam sword so they aren't afraid they are going to hurt you. They will jab you and hit you with abandon and a great big grin.

If you can take a foam boffer away from someone who is simply aiming the tip at your throat, waiting to cut or stab you as you try to move past that tip, you are a truly talented budoka.

So why do those kata exist? If it's impossible to take a boffer away how would you be able to take a real sword away? Are the old guys fooling themselves?

Budo isn't about more and more fancy techniques to do more and more tricky things to other people.

Give a live blade to someone who more or less knows how to swing it. Tell them that they have to wound or kill you. Now stand in front of them and wait for their attack. Oh, be absolutely uncaring whether you live or die, whether you lose a hand or an eye taking the sword away from them.

Now see if you can do it. If you're not there yet, you need more practice in paying attention to the fellow with the sword. Is he really as ready to kill you as you are to die trying?

A big part of being able to take a stick off your students is your student's reluctance to smack you in the head with a stick. Don't ever forget that.

Bottom Up Teaching



Everyone wants to know stuff, and everyone wants to share the knowledge that they know stuff. Some, usually the older teachers, even want to share the stuff they know.

This means that we get a lot of unwritten rules in the martial arts about just doing what you're told without asking too many questions. Shu Ha Ri, keep, break, leave... it means copy what you're shown or do what you're told, then break it down (maybe not the very instant you're shown it, maybe try copying stuff for a class or two before you start explaining how it works) and leave (not leave and start your own martial art, but leave the copying behind since you have now broken it down into its basics and principles).

All these rules boil down to "shut up and do what sensei says", and we all know them. But why are they there in the first place? Isn't that sort of obvious? You're in class to learn, you may even have paid to be there, and there's the guy up there teaching. Seems to me the bright thing to do is to pay attention.

But it ain't so. Students gotta teach, they gotta say things like "you should do it this way" and "in my club we do it this way" or "and then you can do it this way", or even "but if you do that I can do this".

Oh yes, bottom up teaching, where the lower ranks tell the upper ranks how to do it. I love it. It's especially common in arts where the belts aren't coloured so folks don't know what rank they're practicing with... what, you thought the coloured belts were to help sensei sort out who knew what? He has eyes, he can see, the belts are to keep bottom up teaching from happening... and it does, it keeps it to "sideways" teaching.

Aikido is famous for bottom up teaching, I've been in classes where the room erupts in chatter the moment sensei bows and says "dozo". The students don't even bother to try it once before they're all telling each other how to do it. In any art the senior fellow should let the junior fellow do it first without too much trouble, that is, to attack at a level that's just a bit beyond what the student can handle easily. (Theoretically this lets him do it while sensei's demonstration is fresh in his mind). Of course this also results in disguising just how far ahead the senior is before the junior starts teaching. My usual response to kids telling me how to do the technique is to smile and nod and then do it like sensei just showed it. Just because I outrank the fellow there's no reason to slap his nose, he may be ADD and have to talk constantly, but I certainly don't have to listen. For those partners who outrank me and want to explain how sensei got it wrong, I smile and nod and do it the way sensei says to do it. If they stop me from practicing to explain some more I smile and nod and try to do it the way sensei said to do it once more, then they get to do it to me the better way and then I get to change partners.

Iaido is a bit tough for teaching upward, you have to talk really quietly because the art itself is quiet, sensei will catch your enlightenment of other students if you're not careful. Partner weapons classes like jodo, niten ichiryu and whatnot are a bit easier to chatter once you've got within earshot of your partner. Kendo is great, there's so much noise you can shout at your partner to tell him how wrong his last move was.

Fortunately, most folks only teach from the bottom while they're on the bottom. Once they start moving up the ladder they understand that quietly practicing is a better learning technique than cross-teaching something else. It's actually very very difficult to learn two techniques at once, remember that "in my club we do it this way" means "we'll try to do this two different ways at once shall we?".

Maybe Shu Ha Ri should be translated more like "copy it", "break it down and explain it to everyone else if you want...", "but leave if you start doing that".

REAL KENJUTSU TRAINING

(From somewhere in the early 2000's when folks were worried about the combat effectiveness of iaido... unlike now in our more enlightened age.)

Getting rather interested in the idea of training with the intent to kill without actually killing, sort of reminds me of when I was 17 and used to say to the girls "let's go all the way but we won't get you pregnant OK?"

Here's one possible way to train in such a way, it's a comment on a session of sharps swordplay in England in 1710 as quoted from Terry Brown's "English Martial Arts" page 52 (Anglo Saxon Books, 1997)

"They began the fight with broadswords. The Moor got the first wound, above the breast, which bled not a little. Then the onlookers began to cheer and call for Wood; they threw down vast quantities of shilling and crowns, which were picked up by his second... In the second round the Englishman, Wood, took a blow above the loins of such force that, not only did his shirt hang in tatters, but his sword was knocked out of his hand, and all the buttons on one side of his open breeches he wore were cut away.

"Then they went for each other with sword and dagger, and the Moor got a nasty wound in the hand, which bled freely. It was probably due to this that, when they attacked each other twice with "sword and buckler", that is to say with broadsword and shield, the good Moor received such a dreadful blow that he could not fight any longer. He was slashed from the left eye right down his cheek to his chin and jaw with such force that one could hear the sword grating against his teeth. Straightaway not only the whole of his shirt front but the platform too was covered with blood. the wound gaped open as wide as a thumb, and I cannot tell you how ghastly it looked on the black face. A barber-surgeon immediately sprang towards him and sewed up the wound, while the moor stood there without flinching. When this had been done and a cloth bound round his head, the Moor would have liked to continue the fight, but since he had bled so profusely, neither the surgeon nor the seconds, who act as umpires, would allow this. So the combatants shook hands (as they did after each round) and prepared to get down. "

Brown includes a similar passage on female combatants with like results. Another bout, on the previous page ended when one master had his "sinues split" and could not hold his blade any longer. Granted these were theatre displays and not normal everyday training (which was done with dull blades so you got bruises and broken bones but usually not maimed or dead) but they do show the logical result of training for "reality" and effectiveness. How else could one possibly know if what one is learning is effective without such full-bore tests of skill. All else is just play-fighting.

Here's why I don't defend iaido's "combative effectiveness". I would very much prefer that any potential student who wants to learn how to kill people go to a "Real Kenjutsu school" where he will learn such things. Far from contradicting the idea that iaido is combatively ineffective, I would encourage this belief wherever it occurs and I thank those who repeat it... it's not a new thought to me by the way, I just tripped over something I wrote in 1990 or so which is on the exact same topic.

In any case, please, if you want to learn how to kill and maim people, avoid my sissy Seitei Iai sword school and go to a place where they are willing to teach you such things, let them worry about the liability and insurance problems. If, after you've learned how to kill people effectively on the battlefield and off, you then want to study iaido, by all means give me a call. I'll be here next week, year, decade, and so will the other sissy Seitei senseis.

I'd be interested to hear from those who have participated in armed combat with sharps such as described by Mr. Brown to test their battlefield-effective sword skills. If you'd like to do an article on the bouts I'd be happy to publish it in JJSA or on EJMAS. Photos would also be good.

I'm afraid I don't know anybody who fights with sharps though, sorry, but I can put you in touch with some guys who are using metal blades with dull edges who fight full contact and not infrequently manage concussions, broken and split fingers etc etc. It looks like a lot of fun and if I were 20 years younger I'd be right in there.

HOW MANY BELTS DO YOU NEED?

As far as I can remember when I was in the grading pool of the Aikikai there were two ranks, 1. When you could teach (shodan), and 2. when you could award rank (shihan). Everything else is just placeholder and an encouragement to the kids to keep moving along in their practice.

In other arts those two ranks happen at different times, for instance in the kendo federation you can't teach independantly (put people forward for rank) until 5dan and you can't ever award rank by yourself.

I can't actually think of any other "real" grades in the arts aside from "teaching rank" and "licensing rank", although I can think of lots of combinations of the above, you can teach, you can teach and put someone up for a rank from someone else, you can give out rank up to X levels below yours...

So what are the uses of all the other dan ranks, shogo (renshi kyoshi hanshi), instructor levels (fukushidoin, shidoin), and koryu papers like oku iri and mokuroku and menkyo and meister and provost and all that other stuff? Well, Ego boosting, student bragging (my sensei's belt is scruffier than yours), and advertising value (who wouldn't want to study with a soke rather than a sensei?).

It's also a good way to do a fast check on where people's priorities lie, just like in academia. If someone is a full professor and insists on being called "Professor Jones", while another full professor says, "call me Jimmy"... or if one guy in the department is constantly angling for that "assistant professor" title (which carries absolutely no extra administrative weight or money at all) while another is simply working away in the office at his grant applications so that his techs and grad students can do good work for him...

In other words confusing the title with the man, or on the personal level, confusing the title for the accomplishment.

As my Aikido sensei used to say, "rank is a measure of how long you've been hanging around".

Learning From Books

It's a popular argument that you can't learn from a book, here's my take:

http://ejmas.com/pt/2006pt/ptart_taylor_0406.html

Now, before you go too far with what I wrote please consider that most of my sensei have been with their sensei for decades, and they keep searching for new instructors (if they lose one) for their whole lives. There must be some reason for that.

Indeed I now very rarely look at books or other instructional materials, but I'm always listening to my instructors and anyone else I can find to teach me.

Books will take you to and beyond where most people get in the martial arts, but there are miles to go beyond that point. At a rough guess I'd say that after 5-6 years of training you're going to be beyond any books I've seen out there, but you'll come to the realization by then yourself, that it's really the hours you put in that are teaching you, rather than the books and videos.

Here's a couple more articles that try to explain what a teacher does,

http://ejmas.com/pt/2006pt/ptart_taylorb_0206.html

and what it feels like to lose a teacher

http://ejmas.com/tin/2005tin/tinart_taylor_0705.html

While there are stories of folks who have had a realization (been enlightened) by reading a book, and book learning has been highly respected in the ethical and philosophical community since forever, there is some really juicy stuff to be learned by being in the arts for 20 years. I'm not pulling one of those "old sensei" schticks when I say that I feel like I'm just now starting to understand this stuff. I really am, even while my physical abilities are starting to show some crumbling around the edges.

History, Growth and Splinters

Here's another tidbit of a forum post from the early 2000s I think, mostly about the history of Seidokai and growth of iaido around here.

SDK (Sei Do Kai) really started in 1983 when I learned some iaido for a week from Mitsuzuka Takeshi sensei at an Aikido seminar in Amhurst Mass. I think it was. I spent the next couple of years devouring everything I could in the form of books (there were no videos) on the subject and practicing what I knew (5 Muso Shinden Ryu kata) with a fellow student. That student eventually found Ohmi sensei in Toronto and we actually did the "waiting at the gate" thing before he'd let us practice in the same room. He had stopped teaching because nobody hung around long enough to make the distraction from his own practice worth his while. When the two of us started showing up regularly, Cruise sensei joined us from Etobicoke and we had the nucleus of a group.

Around that time I started a photocopied "Zine" called The Iaido Newsletter which had an anti-copyright notice on it, it said "photocopy and share this newsletter" and that's what happened, folks acted as nodes and it went all over the world to anybody with any interest. This was all in the interest of getting any information at all, and also to gather up all the individuals and groups I could find.

During this time we practiced a few more times with Mitsuzuka sensei, and I also invited Kanai sensei to do an Aikido and Iaido seminar in Guelph with the two clubs, that must have been in 1987 when SDK was officially formed.

Eventually Bill Mears found us in Canada after moving here from Britain, and through him we found the BKA and Haruna sensei. We sent Ohmi sensei over to practice one year, I joined him the next, and in 1991 we invited Haruna sensei to come to Canada (with Trevor Jones, Mano sensei, a Japanese sensei from Sweden whose name escapes me (Komaki?)... was Onno sensei there that year?) At any rate, the seminar was held yearly after that, and we had many visitors who were readers of The Iaido Newsletter (TIN).

Along the way I picked up Niten Ichiryu and Jodo as arts and TIN morphed into the JJSA and eventually into EJMAS.com and Iaido-L. All ways to get in touch with people, spread information and serve as a place where folks of different factions can discuss the arts.

I have yet to make it to Japan. (Have since made it there once).

Why? Because I always figured it would be a lot more benefit to the arts here if I spent the price of my

ticket and stay in Japan, on a sensei's ticket to Guelph where instead of one student learning, we could have 100 learn. I'm copying all my old VHS tapes to DVD at the moment and I'm looking at the Kyoto seminar from 1997, I'm seeing a dozen or so of the senior Canadian students of iaido practicing in a gym in Kyoto, all of which practiced at the summer seminar in Guelph, so I'm happy with my decision.

A funny thing has happened over the last 5 or 6 years of the world wide web. More and more discussion forums have appeared, which, contrary to common opinion, have actually shattered and scattered the information flow. Each forum develops with 10-20 people who come to be the experts and to dominate the discussion, and we're back to separate little dojo struggling in isolation.

I'm also seeing more and more splintering over here in the West, into the same factions that have happened in Japan. Instead of a neutral area where there were too few students for divisions (where we all studied under various sensei because we had to) we've now got all the ego posturing of a maturing art where it seems we have so many students we can afford to slag other folks and boycott their events.

So be it. I'm glad I came before that era because I got to meet a hell of a lot of great folks from all these squabbling factions. "The grannies all know each other" I suppose would be the idea.

So what's happened since that post?

Well the splintering of groups has continued, and now the discussion forums have started to be abandoned for the new Compuserves and AOLs of facebook, linkedin and google plus. There are fewer folks discussing less and less. The number of koryu sword arts starting up in North America multiply like karate organizations, and there are so many seminars in our small area that we're finding it hard to choose a time to hold a Canadian National Championships of iaido without stomping on some other event. (Wherever it goes it will rob another event of people, perhaps something will need to be cancelled for a year.)

Yet the more things change... The Guelph Spring Iaido and Jodo seminar <http://seidokai.ca/iai.seminar.html> continues to welcome everyone, I continue to finance it instead of going to Japan, iaido-I continues to exist, if in a sleepy state, and EJMAS.com is still slowly growing in size. So basically I'm doing the same things I was doing in 1987. Not a huge surprise to me I suppose.

You'd think with all that, there would be a healthy growth of students, and I suppose there are more around than were here in 2006, but not that many more. Not only that, but the 20 or so who supported iaido then with their pocketbooks have only grown to about 35 who support both iaido and jodo in this country. We do OK, having raised upwards of 5000 dollars in the last year and a half and spending

almost 4000 on our various needs, but it would be nice to be able to leave the arts to the next generation with a stronger base. Well I've got a couple more decades to see that I hope, and some of that next generation will certainly kick up the growth once they are "let loose" by the old guard.

One of the problems with this mindset of "splintering" is that it assumes there's only one pie of a certain size. That ain't so, and healthy examples of how the pie as a whole can be made bigger, giving everyone larger slices, do exist. One example is the Thunder Bay martial arts community which got together to create enough of a base to get sports insurance for everyone. Another nice example is Peterborough where I was teaching last weekend. The arts in that area get together for demonstrations and events, and in the group at our practice I think there were at least 5 different dojo of various arts represented, all coming together to practice the Japanese sword arts. A few weeks ago I was in Calgary and Edmonton where folks from four or five small sword groups came together to practice, once again showing that it's possible to support everyone without worrying about "us and them". They send potential students to each other and sharing one teacher for a weekend across two cities (three hours plus drive apart) makes it an affordable community effort.

There isn't any slicing up of a finite pie, out of the pioneering group effort and mutual support of a few folks in the early 90s came this blooming of multiple arts we see today. If we resist the urge to go for exclusivity we will all benefit from a larger and larger pool of folks with similar interests. You don't have to convert from one koryu to another to support a seminar in your town, just go and swing swords together, have beers together, and send students to your crosstown "rivals" if they don't or can't stick at your place.

Seems simple to me, and it seems to have worked around here. Why not give it a try?

I've Always Wanted to Study Your Koryu

Ever notice that folks on the net talk a good game but don't practice? T'was always so. I can't tell you how many requests to take on an uchi-deshi I've had over the years (no I'm not going to feed you and clothe you while I teach you! I've got a family already.) I've had people become angry that I wouldn't tell them where their neighbourhood Niten Ichi dojo was. I had one fellow (one only mind you) return one of my instructional videos because "The production values aren't up to my standards" Hey my videos are me setting up a camera, starting it, standing in front of it and spitting out everything I know for two hours. You want pretty, go to a movie.

You want pitiful? For several years we hosted the soke of Niten Ichiryu here in Guelph. The seminars were 4 days of solid training, cost a couple hundred Canadian dollars with a hostel that was \$30 a night. In other words for a grand you could work your butt off with "the man" himself.

I lost a LOT of money on those. We're talking the sword school of Musashi, the Go Rin no Sho, what every kid wants to learn.

No, there isn't any real interest in koryu which is why I recommend finding a good sensei down the block and practicing whatever he's teaching. Stop researching the history of old sword schools and start researching the man himself.

Face Time

There is a seminar coming up this weekend in Welland that anyone in the CKF iaido section who is planning to grade 4dan and above ought to attend. All three of the local 7dans will be there and you'll be in front of every one of them at some point in the day.

Busy?

Consider that one successful 8dan candidate spent every weekend for the last ten years going to seminars around Japan getting some face time with potential panelists and other senior instructors.

Still too busy?

That's fine, maybe you are, or maybe you don't want to play the political game of being in front of the panelists, of "sucking up" to get a rank that you should get by merit alone.

OK let's talk about senior grades in any volunteer organization as a view from the top shall we? Why is it that the folks making the decisions might want a little sucking up, a little face time from the challengers to those top positions? It's not from a desire for ego stroking I can assure you. If you want doe-eyed admiration you teach beginners who can't believe they will ever be able to do what you do. Those who are long-term technicians aren't impressed with an old man's iaido, at least not in that sort of OMG way.

No, the challengers to the higher ranks are a bunch of hard-to-impress skeptics but we want to see them at seminars anyway. We want to see them for a couple of reasons:

First, we are at all these seminars we want you to attend. We have to be there for the art to grow and we want to see the art grow. If you're too busy to attend, who is going to be at the seminars when we're gone? Not you, so what's the percentage to give you the rank?

Because you're technically up to it? Sure, and for everything up to 5dan, technique is what it mostly is. Beyond that you get into other, more complex things like knowing what the movements mean. That's the outside of the test. The inside, or should I say the bottom line, is that those at the higher ranks, 6-7 dan, are those who run/"own" the organization around here and even if that's not part of the "requirements" to pass, it's a reality. So we are supposed to hand over the art to someone we don't know? Someone who shows up at the test and does nice iaido?

If we have to... but be nice willya, show up and let us know you're a good guy, that you actually care and we'll feel better about giving you the rank.

But consider just a little bit further, how are we going to know if you understand the inner workings of the art, those deeper meanings that are part of the 6-7-8 dan ranks if we see you for 6 minutes and 5 kata at the grading? You may be an absolute wiz at the outside form but what do you KNOW? Can you teach it? Can you adapt it? Can you defend your iaido to us? We won't know any of that if you don't give us some face time.

Finally, think about whether or not you really want your next rank. I mean sure you want it, that certificate looks good on the wall and knowing you're that rank is a nice warm-fuzzy and you've put your time in, but what's it worth to you? Financially the rank costs quite a bit in Canada, highest grade fees in the kendo federation world in fact. (Amortized on a per-year basis, it's still not all that much by the way, think golf fees.) Thing is, the senior ranks don't get that money so don't talk grading fees at us, you can't "buy" the grade from us. In fact we likely spent money to be wherever you're grading, and we certainly spent money to get to the seminar you're not attending, (perhaps because you can't afford it).

Which is my point. We aren't paid and we very often don't have our expenses covered. Are you sure you want to, are you sure you can afford to, join our ranks? Passing into the 6-7 dan level means spending a lot of money, not spending time with your family, letting the housework and repairs slide, for many weekends a year.

If you can't afford to show up at all the seminars for the year before you grade for your 6dan, maybe you should consider why you are challenging for the grade. We want you to challenge and pass, we want you to come share some of the work and expense. Show us that you are willing to chip in on the work and expense by showing up to the seminars.

If you can't afford the time and money, or don't want to suck up, what's wrong with staying at your current grade? Seriously, your iaido doesn't improve with your rank, it improves with your effort. Your iaido is going to be the same a year after your non-grading, as it will be a year after your grading. We don't get anything out of your rank if you pass and disappear again until the next one, we don't get the grading fees and we don't get your help so we aren't going to be upset if you don't challenge. In fact, without some face time we quite likely won't even know you're out there.

See you this weekend.

Welland Iaido Seminar Report



Someone's gonna get it! Carole Galligan, 6dan CKF in full flight.

This last weekend was the fourth annual Welland Iaido seminar and it has become one of my favourites. First, there's lots of students from S. Ontario and the Northern US states, second, all I have to do is show up, and third, it's organized in a rather fun way. Students are split to three groups, this year it was beginners, 1-2dan and 3dan up. The three nanadan instructors rotate between the groups during the day.

The most important thing about this seminar is that the kata studied are also split into three sections, the first instructor teaches 1-4, the second 5-8 and the third 9-12. The instructors can concentrate, and the students don't hear different instructions (note that the instructors may not be saying different things but we all have our own "language".)

I think my favourite seminar was the first year when the three groups were in different buildings and the instructors walked from one dojo to another to teach. It was a sunny day and it was refreshing to see a new room with different students. Of course with that arrangement I couldn't eavesdrop on the other two sensei, something that is always fun to do.

This weekend I had the pleasure of working down the grade ladder, doing the senior group then the 1-2dan and finally the beginners. I started the day by asking the seniors to raise their hands if they were instructors. Only two or three were not. This is a factor of a young art growing, where a 4dan rank more or less means you're teaching somewhere.

It's too bad because that's a bit early to teach, but they caught hell from me anyway and I notice it continued through the day. The seniors were the winners of the "most yelled at group" award because they are the teachers of the next generation. The three instructors had different ways of teaching but we seemed to have the same message, knowing the dance steps wasn't enough but it was the absolute minimum. My focus was on standardization, I wanted them to understand that even if they were now skillful enough to do things like sageo control or kata in a unique way, it was their job to do it the same way that everyone else was doing it. Kendo federation iai is "standardized" and there are multiple judges on the grading panel, we do not want to see a dozen ways to move the sageo, even if a dozen are allowed. For my class then, we went through examples of kata and while I pointed out the odd bit of improvement in posture or power here and there, I tried to pull as many questions from the group as possible so that we could clear up any questions and expose any arguments between ways of practice. I think it was a good session that resulted in some understanding of what is "standard" and what is allowed between the two koryu lines (Shinden and Jikiden) that dominate our region.

Cruise sensei had the group next and my spies report he concentrated on the details of the kata. I needed no spies to hear Ohmi sensei chewing them out in the third session, trying to get them to move their practice up a notch, to get some scary into their dance steps. At one point I heard him saying "don't copy my iaido, steal my IAIDO!!" I could just feel their eyes crossing as they tried to understand.

Three very different ways of teaching, but three voices singing the same song. (We three have been together a very long time, longer than some of the students have been alive now that I think of it).

I moved to the 1-2 dan group after this and had them go through the first four kata before moving on. It became apparent to me that this group needed only one thing, to repeat and repeat the kata. My way of moving them through the next four kata was to go into Broadway Musical mode. We did 5-6-7-8, now say that as if you're about to start a number in a production of "All That Jazz". Why? Because I had to take a bunch of people who all knew the steps and get them to do those steps in the same time. First, it's dangerous for a crowded class to be turning this way and that swinging swords and walking forward and back. Inevitably the slow ones turn and meet the fast ones coming the other way. Next, iaido is a solo practice, and it's very hard to understand that you're working with (against) another

person when that person is invisible. (This was painfully obvious in an impromptu tachi uchi no kurai class at the end of the day). Timing and distance are the last things to appear in an iaido kata, so we tried to put them into our musical number. Everyone tried to catch everyone's timing, and everyone tried to maintain the same distance from each other. When you can catch an opponent's timing, you can break it. When you know when you're outside his range and when you're not, you have a chance to win.

Finally, after a couple of times through the four kata I asked them if they thought they had improved, many heads nodded. I explained that while all of them had many holes in their technique, taken as a group of 20 or so, they were pretty good. The majority of the group were doing every movement correctly at all times so if they were together in their timing, peer pressure was correcting movements better than I could, by repeating endlessly what they've already heard. Post learning the dance steps and pre learning the theory and power, you just have to wear it into the bones.

The final thing I had to say to the group was that they had to cut harder. 2-dan is the peak of muscular cutting and you need to have that before you can get to the effortless cutting of higher ranks. I notice that I wasn't the only one to tell them to get some oomph into their cuts that day.

Moving to the junior group I wasn't really aware just how junior they were. Some of them had been practicing for a whole two weeks before coming to the seminar. Good for them! During the seminar they bumped their way through all 12 kata and I suspect most of them will remember most of the dance steps.

Yes I talked about dance steps again, and we made the last 4 kata into a memorization exercise without talking about all the little stuff that so delights me, put your hip here, now move it half a cm this way, see how much more power you have... Not for this group. We did a kata three times, waving our metal sticks around, then the next, went back and did both, then added a third, went back to pick up all three, then added a fourth... you know the drill. It gets you into the order of the kata and by the end of the class you're saying to yourself "yay I know this one" when you go back to pick up that first one... by pushing forward to new kata, the old ones "get easier". Stay with one and it never seems to get easier, especially if sensei keeps introducing new ideas just as you start to "get" the old ones.

The instructional day ended for me with a truly frightening introduction to Tachi Uchi no Kurai. Fortunately nobody lost an eye. Those who noticed got some personal koryu instruction from the other two instructors while I tried to ride herd on the guys running with sharp sticks.

The day ended with a nice iaido demonstration from Ohmi, Cruise and Carol Galligan sensei, and Pam Morgan and I did our usual promo for jodo.

Many thanks to the Hayakawa Kendo and Iaido club and especially Ron Mattie for organizing and also to the 50 plus participants, I hope you all had as much fun as I did.

4th WELLAND MARTIAL ARTS CENTRE IAIDO CLINIC



Hosted by Hayakawa Kendo/Iaido Club 13.03.16

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.