

# Half a Century X

About fifty pages of thoughts from Kim Taylor.

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*Sei Do Kai in Japan*

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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

Seminar Advice.....	4
Budo Self-Examination.....	6
The Teaching Bomb.....	8
Gradings Wrapup 2013.....	9
John Prough: 1940 - June 20, 2013.....	13
How Will You Be Remembered?.....	13
First is not always beginning.....	15
Shu Ha Ri.....	17
What's the New Footwork on Ushiro.....	19
Brutal Self Analysis.....	21
Responsibility Goes Both Ways.....	23
Another Country Heard From.....	24
Gremlins.....	26
Samurai vs SUV.....	27
My Kid Could Wave a Sword Around Like That.....	30
Favourite Seminar.....	32
Time to Start Teaching.....	33
Rules and Intents.....	37
Rules and Riai.....	39
Seitei and Koryu.....	41
Thoughts on Koryu.....	42
Function vs Value.....	45
Evolution and Budo.....	47
One Size Fits All.....	50

## Seminar Advice

The 2013 Guelph Spring Iaido and Jodo Seminar is about to start. Every Victoria Day weekend and for the last 22 or so years. I look forward to the same old problems and complaints from those who attend and those who teach.

The seminar starts on Friday evening and I look forward with somewhat negative eagerness to kicking out all the juniors who will be expecting to watch the senior class. It is somewhat mysterious what folks think they will see, it's just the dojo leaders getting their asses kicked by the Japanese sensei and a passing along of any new interpretations of the performance of seitei gata jodo and iaido. In other words the same thing that happens for the next three days.

I get that folks are eager to be in the class, after all it is "dojo leaders" so I suppose you could convince yourself that being there means you "made it" but I hate to disappoint, it's not by rank or invitation yet, it's a self-selecting group. Now this year I've tightened things up due to high numbers last year so I will be booting non-pre-registered folks out of the room but all that means is that those who are "in" managed to pre-register.

Every year I get told to get a bigger room but that's not going to happen, we want this small and quiet so the seniors can pay attention.

On Saturday morning I look forward to people turning up at 9am (the seminar start time) to register. Registration happens before the start of the seminar, not when everyone is to be on the floor for the opening talks, but hey, if you pay you get to come whenever right?

Speaking of paying, I don't mind dickering, I don't mind haggling or folks trying to combine one rebate with another until I'm paying for you to attend but do not, repeat, do not dicker and argue with Dave at the front door. He will just boot you to me and I will be too busy to indulge in the game. All dickering and haggling should be done before the end of the week OK. By the way, the fees cover the expenses, so be happy about paying a couple of hundred for 3 days solid training instead of a couple thousand to fly to Japan and train a couple of hours a day if you're lucky. We use the sensei quite cruelly as I've been informed in the past, they go home exhausted.

Lining up: The most difficult part of any seminar is lining up in a zigzag pattern at the start of the day so please folks, practice this at home, get the dojo to make three lines of students, the first line stands far enough apart not to hurt each other, then the second line stands in the spaces between (far enough back to avoid hitting the first line) and the third line goes in the spaces of the second, lined up with the

first line, and far enough back not to hit the second line. And So On.

If we have to go up and down the lines fixing you, do not, DO NOT resist me sending you where you need to go. I don't care that you want to stand right in front of the sensei and that you figure everyone else in the room should arrange themselves around you. I'm big and I'll be angry by then, I'll send you to the back line. I will, I swear I will. Fifteen minutes of lining up is excessive, we should not need that long.

Oh, and the seniors will be on your right hand side, find the last person on your row to the right and line up with them, not wherever you feel like it. If the seniors get it screwed up we'll have a chat with them I promise you. (Actually it's the seniors who have the hardest time with this stuff, the juniors pay attention and do what they're asked to do).

There will be a class timetable at the front desk, it rarely survives contact with the sensei so don't come complaining to me that you have arranged your day around a class that just shifted by two hours. I'll say I'm sorry, but I don't set the schedule (and I'm not telling who does because they'll just boot you back to me anyway).

Pay attention, go where you're told and relax Saturday evening at the auction where we'll feed you roast chicken (a tradition is a tradition) and by the end of the evening we'll all be settled down to the routine so we can start again the next day by spending fifteen minutes lining up in a zigzag yes?

I joke, 22 years along we've got this down, right?

## Budo Self-Examination

A couple of days ago someone commented "Many arts will feed the misguided student's ego through the art's inherent superiority complex".

Nothing is easier than believing your art is the best around, or your teacher is the best. To a very large degree this is a good thing, you can't fight well without believing that your skills are superior, there is no basic training program in any military anywhere that teaches its soldiers that their skills are at best equal to the enemy and their equipment average.

But the budo were never about creating cannon fodder, the martial arts are not basic training, and having enough blind faith in the system to plunge into the breach with a lot of other soldiers is not the goal of this training.

What is needed is enough faith to keep showing up for training, and a great big dose of self-examination. Those participating in duels, those who lead, and those who wish to improve as human beings need to watch themselves constantly to guard against false pride and the stupid acts that follow. Here are a couple of hints.

The Monitor: This is a small part of your mind that you detach and place just above, behind and to one side of your head. I'm right handed so it's over my right shoulder. (My family was superstitious so the spilled salt goes over the left shoulder.) The monitor watches, that's it. Sober or drunk, calm or angry the monitor watches what you are doing and what you are thinking and nothing else. What you do with the information is up to you but the benefit is simply the audience effect. Think of how you act with and without an audience.

Next is the Analyst: You can use the information from the monitor, or use thought experiments to examine what you would do in this or that situation. The analyst's job is to figure out why. Why did you say that? What were you trying to get done? You must be ruthless, it does more good to identify bad intent than good, beware of sainthood.

The Planner: No battle plan survives contact with the enemy, and no good intent either, but planning how to live your life well is the essential first step to improving. Planning how to get the most out of your next class (have I got my belt and my bokuto in the bag?) is the first step toward a fruitful class. Yes mushin is a good thing, yes you have no time to think about your next block and counterattack during the fight, but you're not fighting now are you?



I am constantly stunned by how little foresight people have. Look around you as you drive down the street, I watched a car in front of me yesterday, left him room to change lanes after he passed me because there was a big truck, unmissable, stopped in his lane. I watched this guy see the truck when the car in front of him moved over, watched him panic and swerve at the last minute, no blinker, into my lane as he prayed to his gods that I wouldn't rear end him. A tiny bit of foresight would have saved him an anxiety attack. Luckily I drive for everyone else on the road as well as for myself.

Monitor, analyse and plan your next six days and see how that goes.



*8dan challengers all lined up nicely*

## The Teaching Bomb

I'm writing a book for my students at the moment, and it includes quite a lot of advice on how to teach. Thinking about my own budo education, I wonder just how much I really need to say. In my case some of my biggest advances have come through a single "teaching bomb" dropped into a class by sensei.

About twenty years ago Haruna sensei took a few moments during a break and showed me two ways to swing the sword, one was the way I was swinging it, the other was the way he swung it. Up to that point I wasn't aware that there was a difference at all, but that single episode (and he made me swing until I managed one his way) set off a decades long journey that I'm still travelling.

Jump forward maybe ten years and Ohmi sensei (my shisho, main instructor) commented to a class that they were practicing a partner kata much too closely, "maai" he shouted, "you are inside the maai and already dead before you even start the kata". Although not aimed directly at me, I listen to all his instruction and this statement exploded in my head like a bomb and I have been happily searching for the meaning of maai ever since. Looking at the sword, at the distance from me to my partner (or my kasso teki if I'm doing iai) at posture, at my natural stride length, and at the energy I can summon from day to day has changed the way I practice.

This bomb has combined with all the previous bombs, including one from Ide sensei regarding what I call the "instant of furi kaburi" the moment you can begin attacking the opponent, the "decisive moment" to use a photography term from Henri Cartier-Bresson. All these more or less throwaway comments which have hit me at just the right time to trigger cascades of understanding make me wonder just how much special lesson planning anyone needs, to teach. After all, they were simply corrections that are given as a matter of routine to all students. They weren't anything special, they weren't secret knowledge passed along in a whisper in the corner of the dojo, they were just everyday corrections that seemed to explode.

This is what's meant by "when the student is ready, the teacher will appear". It's not so much meeting a teacher as priming an explosion and having someone toss a match at you. Could be anyone, but yes, it's often a special sort of instructor who can see that pile of gunpowder just waiting for the spark.



## Gradings Wrapup 2013

Well the summer grading season is over for me this year, with CKF gradings in iaido and jodo in the east (Guelph Spring Seminar) and jodo in the west (Vancouver).

There was the usual fuss and bother that you get with such things, but on the whole the gradings I attended went as well as they ever have. Here are some things currently on my mind which I've come to believe over the years, either through judging seminars or just paying attention, so I'll share them with you should you wish to keep reading.

It's a hobby folks:

Judges and challengers both have to understand this. There is no money involved for the students, you won't make more salary if you pass, you lose nothing (except some hefty grading and travel expences, granted) if you fail, don't sweat this stuff so much. Judges may get an honorarium but mine go into the CIJF fund. Judges don't get any benefit for failing or from passing people. They just get to watch and opine. Not the ego boost you might think, by the way.

Students want clear rules:

Not an unreasonable thing, but what does that mean? I know that it does NOT mean last minute changes. Any variation over what was announced, or what was past practice should be applied only after everyone has a chance to hear about the new deal. On any panel I've been regularly associated with, any changes have been applied carefully, and at least a year later. For instance, this year the start and finish line was clarified further and we could have failed 100% of the challengers in the Eastern iaido grading. Not one of them did it the way they will be doing it next year, but they did it the way they were taught. So they passed that bit.

Fair enough, but what about putting a time limit on the gradings just before you start? Time limits are a pet peeve for me, they are great in tournament where you have to move along, and maybe in gradings of several hundred challengers, but for 40? They aren't needed. They make for lazy judging (it's an auto-fail like doing the wrong kata or the kata out of order, so you don't have to look at anything else) and for the lower grades it should never be done because the easiest way to prevent an automatic fail is to rush like hell through the kata. Any teachers out there think it's a good idea for beginners to rush their techniques? So why force them to do it with a grading time limit?

The biggest problem though, is the "regional variation". There are things that are mandatory (read the books) and things that are allowed (theoretically, anything not in the book, practically, anything that doesn't make the judges' teeth hurt). If local panels are not experienced or trained enough to understand the difference, there are problems with challengers from outside that local area. This year the west coast jodo head came to Guelph on his own dime to make sure he knew what the east coast jodo folks were being taught. I also made sure that I attended a full day seminar with the west coast folks to understand what they were being taught. The book was respected on both sides but other things have a very distinct flavour. I like that, the world is full of fast food restaurants, who needs another generic burger?

Judging seminars are the answer, but when your country covers a quarter of the way around the earth, someone has to be willing to spend a lot to get the local panels on the same page. Not always easy without an independent source of funds.

You gotta trust:

It's all voluntary folks, I don't know if it's the requirement for drug testing rules on the kendo side of things, but there seems to be a lot of concern with injuries and disabilities starting to show up. "In Japan" they require a doctor's note if they can't do seiza. Should we do that here? I vote no to that. A note from a doctor is an extra expense for the challengers, and who reading this figures they can't talk their doctor into a note that says you are not allowed to bend your knee to the absolute maximum it will go and then drop your entire body weight onto it? (Personally, if we ever require doctor's notes I'll have one in a heartbeat and never try to do seiza again.) Seiza would be banned by labour law if employers ever tried to make their workers use it. I say trust the people you are willing to stand with in a small room while swinging sharp metal around. Trust them not to cheat, if they say they can't do seiza, they can't.

Judge and be Judged:

The judges on the panel are being judged just as much as they are judging. How the students are treated will reflect what the students feel about the organization since the gradings are pretty much their only contact with that organization. I can't tell you the contempt... not quite the right word... lack of respect?... I feel, looking at a grading panel covered with water bottles, judges lounging around in various arms folded or heads on hands poses with their eyes half shut. Not at my table, not if I'm in charge. The challengers work hard to get to the grading so that they can show you their best. You have to show them the best judging you can. No water bottles, no elbows on tables, and put a curtain on the

table so you can cross your legs once in a while to prevent cramps. Contempt breeds contempt, you want respect as a judge, respect your challengers, respect the position of judge.

What is the point of grading?

Challengers and judges need to ask this of themselves. There are several ways to approach grading, for challengers it can be an attempt to get a rank, a donation to the organization in the form of the grading fees, or maybe a thank you to your sensei through showing him that you have learned something. Most healthy though is to treat a grading as a chance to review the basics and clean up your act.

Judges can approach gradings in two broad ways, juniors tend to go in looking for mistakes, checking for the details (just as beginners to the art itself have to focus on the physical techniques). Senior judges tend to be more "easy" than junior panels because they look for reasons to pass the students. The function of a grading is not to see if students fall apart and make mistakes under pressure, it's to assess whether or not they are at the level they are challenging, so a look at the overall performance is best. Now the level of a shodan is nowhere near the level of an 8dan, and if an upper level challenger shows up on the day of the grading looking nervous, they may as well go home again. 6dan training is not 3dan training, and the grading requirements reflect this.

Fundamentally, a grading ought to be an assessment of your level of training. Are you at 5dan level or not? Everyone should be at the grading with this in mind, students should not be upset if the judges say they are not, after all your sensei said you were when he signed your form and who's more important? Just get on with it and come back next time. Judges had better not have anything other in mind than the requirements of that level. If we look for things beyond what the rest of the world requires, we are not being clever or strict, we are simply being unfair. The whole point of standards (requirements for rank) is that they are standard. The only reason to require more from your 3dans is to try and win the next 3dan tournament and that's a lousy reason to skew the system.

So why grade at all?

Good question and all I can say is that having your appropriate rank solves some problems. If you are ranked too lowly or too highly the powers that be don't know what to do with you. There are teachings that are aimed at certain knowledge bases, so you split up into ranks. If you are ranked too low or too high you're wasting your time.

One of our seniors in iai never graded for many years. One day he was in Japan at a big seminar and he ended up in the non-kyu group. The sensei of the group came over and said "the 6dans are over there"

but he said "I have no rank". This created a problem, he could not join the 6dans and he was an embarrassment to the beginners and their teacher. Better to have assigned him a fake rank or to have simply told him to test and be done with it.

How come you aren't sorted into knowledge level instead of rank? How come you can't simply join the group that is doing stuff at your level? ... Seriously? You're now the judge of your own rank? ... You want every seminar to start with an assessment by the teachers of your ability? That's a grading for every damned seminar!

You grade so that we can have fewer gradings, that's why you grade.



## John Prough: 1940 - June 20, 2013

John Prough, perhaps the most underappreciated man in North American Japanese Sword circles died today. I met John by letter in 1987 when I started the U. Guelph iaido club and was trying to find any and all iaido students in Canada and the USA. Through his help and encouragement I started the Iaido Newsletter which was a photocopied 'Zine that eventually grew into worldwide distribution, then the Journal of Japanese Sword Arts and finally the online Iaido Journal at EJMAS.com. The contacts from that magazine quickly grew into the Guelph Spring Seminar and the CKF iaido section, the structure under which most iaido students in Canada now practice. It was through John's introductions a few years later that the CKF jodo section also came into being, so students of both sections should pause and recognize one of our most vigorous supporters.

The following is an interview with John conducted in 2004. Take a few moments to read it.

[http://ejmas.com/tin/2004tin/tinart\\_morgan\\_0404.html](http://ejmas.com/tin/2004tin/tinart_morgan_0404.html)

### How Will You Be Remembered?

When I think of loss, specifically loss in the budo, the folks I remember right away are the ones who built. Matsuo Haruna, Peter Yodzis, Bill Mears, John Prough and many others in this generation. Along with those I know from previous generations, they were all promoters, builders of the arts. Those who have passed from my lifetime who were mean-spirited, selfish or jealous of their knowledge are much harder for me to remember, and those from previous generations who were the same, aren't much remembered at all.

Let's be honest, you don't usually get remembered for being the guy who kept the arts small and exclusive, for not teaching students, not sharing the arts. For being selfish, not growing your knowledge, not being open to new blood and new ideas. Or if you are remembered, it's for those things.

The builders get the memorials, the bean-counters who figure knowledge is money to be hoarded and denied or used to buy some sort of sham respect, get to put their signature on an audit report which may, perhaps, be looked at by some future historian who is doing research on the other guy.

Think about those you admire in the arts, what is it that you admire? This will tell you something about yourself.

Be a teacher. Haruna sensei was one of the best teachers of iaido I've ever met, and I've met a few. He was open, loved beginners, and would fix in a word or two what you had been struggling with for years. More than this, he welcomed non-Japanese students and more than once put his own career on the line for our young organization.

Be a facilitator. Peter Yodzis started an Aikido club at the University of Guelph in 1980 and brought Bruce Stiles from Toronto to teach every weekend. The club is still going strong 30 years later with one of the original students now instructing.

Be a populizer. Bill Mears was fond of saying he didn't advertise and made it very hard to find his club. He said this a lot on various forums and email lists on the newly minted WWW. It wasn't that hard to find him and iaido is still growing in the Niagara Peninsula under his students.

Be a student. John Prough had the chance to set himself up as a big sensei in the New York area, he had the early training, and was in on the "ground floor" of the koryu craze (if there ever was one). Instead he repeatedly brought in teachers and rebooted the arts.

Are you in it for yourself or are you willing to set your ego aside so the arts themselves can grow?

Small-minded or big-hearted? The answer will determine how you are remembered.

## First is not always beginning.

I notice on one of the forums that a student has once again commented on the zen ken ren iaido as being the beginning set. The set you begin with could, I suppose, be called the beginning set, but it isn't a set that was designed for beginners.

I recently spent some time in Calgary (before the floods hit, hope folks are going to get a chance to dry out soon) and managed to write a bit on the "riai of seitei iai" which has a nice ring to it. Here's an excerpt from what is supposed to be a seidokai resource, but of course I'll end up putting it out there for everyone else. The ego knows no bounds.

"The origin of the All Japan Kendo Federation Iai was as an introduction for kendoka to iaido. This was so kendo players could learn how to handle a live blade in a situation beyond the bokuto work of the kendo no kata, itself a set of techniques which intended to improve the use of the shinai by showing how a blade is properly used. Being for the benefit of kendo players, much of the fundamental movement of Seitei Iai agrees with that art. Such things as the importance of a correct furi kaburi (attacking position), square hips, and the ability to follow through after a strike are built into the bones of Seitei Gata iai and they remain there today, stronger perhaps than ever before.

While the intent in 1968 may have been to provide a training aide to kendoka, iaido under the kendo federation has become more than an adjunct to shinai practice and there are now many kendo federation members who practice only iaido. It should be remembered always that an introduction is not always introductory. By that I mean the Zen Ken Ren iai (usually called Seitei Gata Iai or representative forms of iai) was not a set intended for beginners to the sword, or to be used as an introduction to iaido. Those who developed the Seitei were senior practitioners of various koryu iaido schools, and anyone who practiced iai at that time, was similarly a member of a koryu. Seitei then, was a representative set of kata which demonstrated the variety of movements and the use of the live blade to kendoka who were likely quite senior in that art and wished to go deeper into the meaning of the sword. Seitei was not intended as a set of kata to teach beginners. Those who wished to learn iaido would have been expected to join a koryu.

The reality today is that Seitei Gata has become, for many, their introduction to iaido. Iai clubs under the various kendo federations worldwide, use the Seitei set as their grading curriculum and so instruction in that set begins early if not immediately. There are, in fact, many clubs worldwide that practice only Seitei. The International Kendo Federation claims no authority over any koryu iai schools, and so when senior instructors are sent officially to teach they are required to focus on Seitei Gata exclusively. While many of the senior iaido sensei in the kendo federation may also teach koryu,



this is done on a private basis. All of this has created a situation where the Zen Ken Ren iai is in reality a school of iaido in itself, and should be considered as such by its students and instructors. Over the past several decades the iaido committee has interpreted, clarified and in some few cases, modified the original instructions so that the school has become more internally consistent. What was once almost an accumulation of kata from various old schools has become an entity in itself."

So there you have it, seitei is something you start early, but that's your introduction to seitei. Don't think of it as an introduction to koryu, that's something else altogether.



## Shu Ha Ri

The basic teaching method for kata based martial arts is "keep, break, leave" which is usually interpreted as memorize the movements, break them down (understand them) and leave them behind (to go beyond the kata). This is the typical Confucian "practice first, theory later" method of learning and it works well for us, although many western instructors tend to hand out the theory at the same time as the practical.

It really is OK to let beginners simply follow your example and copy the dance steps until they have the movements memorized. At that point you can introduce kasso teki and explain what is happening with targets and swords. Don't think that shu ha ri is a one-time process, it is more of a spiral as we use the "leave" phase to understand something more, something deeper in the kata which then requires more shu and ha. We dip into and out of the kata repeatedly as we practice over the decades, it would be a shame to assume that we know it all when we know the first layer.



*2010 Guelph Spring Seminar*



## What's the New Footwork on Ushiro

Got that question from someone recently, seems he's heard about an "advanced" way of turning in Ushiro and wants to know all about it.

Thing is, there isn't a new way of turning, but in the ZKR iai committee meeting of 2010 it was accepted that two ways of turning were acceptable. One is to rise and tuck the toes under then turn. The other way is to roll the left foot over somewhat as is done in MJER koryu. This rolling over of the foot was always introduced as an advanced way of turning, it being a problem for Zen Ken Ren iai beginners. Now... I teach it to MJER beginners in Seidokai because it really isn't hard when you are turning to face an opponent at ma ushiro, directly behind. One takes the right knee to the left, then moves forward with the right knee so that it moves in front of the left and receives the body weight, which means the left foot is very light and can roll over easily.

ZKR Seitei Gata Iai is different, an important point in this school is that you don't face an opponent directly behind, but instead, one to the right rear, and so you must explicitly to move the left foot to the left on the nuki tsuke cut. The right knee stays in one spot and it's hard to shift the body weight onto that knee without looking like a pine tree in the wind (matsu kaze as it were). To make this left foot movement clear, we teach beginners to tuck the toes under which makes the turn and the shift easier (clearer) than using the koryu way of turning. When students get to about 6dan we tell them they can do the turn MJER style and they can roll the foot if they wish. I should say here that I don't do ZKR iai this way unless I'm demonstrating it, I tuck the toes under because this makes the most sense to me, especially with my damaged knees.

Unfortunately, the word has got out and now the nidans want to do it the "advanced" way. Anyone with a little bit of experience, as in maybe a month, wants to do the "advanced" stuff, it's only natural. And now I'm going to have to start dinging grading challengers for not moving their feet since the rollover usually pushes the left foot out before it should go.

Folks, at 30 years worth of practice, I can tell you that you should be looking for the "basic" way to do things, not the "advanced". Resist the "advanced" way for as long as you can because that way you can show the best iaido. Let me explain this another way. At first kyu and shodan we allow students to pick any 5 kata they wish. There are some students who pick the 5 they are most confident with (and they are always the most basic kata, the "simplest") and some students who pick the most "advanced" kata, the ones with lots of moves.

The "basic" group get it. As a judge I want to see your basics, I want to see that you understand "free choice" means we want you to show us your best. The "advanced kata" group inevitably figures that we give bonus points for knowing the footwork to the complicated kata. Unfortunately, there are only 12 kata in total and I've seen all of them thousands of times, with some of those demonstrations coming from people who are really good. At shodan you are not going to impress me by knowing the dance steps to shihogiri, but if you do a really good nuki tsuke in ushiro, I'll give you your bonus points.

In the martial arts there is live or die. There is no percentage in learning a hundred kata if you aren't good enough at any of them to beat an opponent. Learn one thing well and do it with commitment, you might survive to learn another thing. Do the "advanced" ushiro in front of me with less than 5dan under your belt and I will look at your left foot. Really look at it. If your turn and shift isn't rock solid I'm going to be upset because you didn't have to use that turn. Impress me with solid basics, not esoteric theory.

I have a youtube channel somewhere and I think I uploaded a video on this "advanced" turn last night. If you're interested see if you can find it.



*Ushiro!*

## Brutal Self Analysis

These notes aren't so much the crabby natterings of Unka Grumpy, as a dialog with myself and those six readers who bother with them. As I write on this or that I find what I think about the topic. This may sound strange, after all, how can you not know how you think? Trust me, if you accept your first reaction to a question you are, by definition, not thinking, you're "going on instinct" which means you are using prejudice and dogma. Granted, it's easier to simply "stick to your principles" and repeat the beliefs by rote, but any opinion that can't be examined and defended, modified and amended is just that, a belief system. The world is not flat and DNA exists, I know that because I've seen the world from high up and I've made new things from DNA for a living.

You have to examine your "beliefs" as rigorously as you practice your martial arts. Your thoughts must be organized like you organize your kata or you will forever be a beginner, an uneducated child in the universe of knowledge. The first step is to accept that what you know may not be what is true. When you practice the sword, your first step to improving, to living through the next battle (let's assume you fall through the Alternate Universe Interface and need to fight the zombies) is to hand yourself to a teacher. What this means is that you simply listen with an open mind so that when your teacher says "your tip is low" you do not accept your first body impression and deny it, but you question your proprioception and accept the possibility that you may be mistaken about where you figure the tip is. Raise the tip and look at the mirror (not the other way around), or raise the tip until teacher says OK, then tell yourself the tip way up high like that isn't really way up high. Eventually, if you're a good student willing to question your own body sense, you will come to believe that feeling is the correct position. You will come, through questioning and an open mind, to a true feeling for the tip of the sword.

Who is the teacher in your mental journey to truth? Well it isn't a book, it isn't a teacher who makes you memorize the times tables or repeat historical dates. It isn't dogma we're looking for, it's truth, and while dogma may sometimes be true, it can't, by definition (dogma doesn't change), become true. Facts and figures are not truth, the search is truth, the question is truth the start and finish is theory. This is "science". The scientific method starts with an idea, just like religion, but science means you try to disprove that idea. You question, you experiment, you measure and you stress test. When your discussions and investigations show cracks in your idea, you change the idea and start the process once more. This continues for your whole life, the process being the important part, just like swinging the sword is the important part, not getting the grade or having the fancy title. You can self-award a rank and you can come up with amazing ideas, but both are delusion. Even coming up with a "true" idea is delusion until you test it, accidental truth isn't any more useful to your growth than thinking up fairies to explain mood swings. Being open to changing your mind, or changing your proprioception is not

"betraying your principles", it's having a student's mind (shoshin). Without shoshin, learning is impossible.

Without putting your beliefs and opinions out there so that someone can get in your face and call bullshit, you have no shoshin. It's a bit distressing that in the "age of the internet" where we can reach people all over the world, we seem not to be seeking conflict, but rather we create bubbles of confirmation. We split up into groups and subgroups who agree with us and stick there. It's rather like when the library got rid of the card catalogue and went digital, suddenly I wasn't seeing all these delightful titles that were close in spelling to what I wanted, but far away in topic. Computers meant a restriction of experience, a loss of the wild idea coming in from left field.

Next time you do something that doesn't make sense, do a little brutal self-analysis and figure out why you did it. Keep questioning, keep growing.

Let yourself be taught and you may survive the next zombie invasion.





## Responsibility Goes Both Ways

I hear so much about the responsibility of students to listen, have faith, follow, support and generally obey their teachers. What I don't hear so much is what the teachers owe the students. In fact, from some quarters you'd figure that teachers owe nothing at all to their students, who should feel damned lucky to be allowed to sit in front of sensei and bask in any tidbits of knowledge they wish to toss out.

Over and over I see gradings that are changed at the last minute, rules that are applied and adjusted at a whim and the only way that could happen is if the guys at the top (I include myself in that crowd, in my little pond) figure they have a divine right to rule. What we've got is time in and a bit more experience. Unfortunately for our own moral fabric, we aren't elected to these positions of power in the teaching hierarchy (and usually not on the administrative side of things either, but that's another story). Being unelected, it's easy to assume we're above considering the wishes of those "below", they didn't put us there and they can't remove us eh?

Except that they can remove themselves, they can vote with their feet, and what's a teacher without students?

If it only worked that way for everyone. It's Canada Day (or as I will always call it, Dominion Day) and I just read a newspaper article about a US Marine Corps flag detail who carried the Canadian flag at a World Series game in Toronto. I don't care about the Marines, Baseball, the flag (I liked the old one), Patriotism, or Toronto (that's another story going back to 1837), but I found myself at age 57 getting all choked up. I remember that at age 18 I wanted something to belong to, something to follow, a cause to work and maybe die for. In other words, I was a pretty normal young guy. At that time my feelings got focused on the martial arts which provided me with the place to exercise my loyalty muscles. I ran across some mildly abusive instructors that I did nothing about (my Gran was nastier than any of my teachers) but I saw a lot more who could have used a visit from the police, whose students still stuck with them. These teachers figured that they were "good to go" since their students didn't leave.

Self-deluded ego-monsters is what they were/are. The thing that will stop this is not the loss of students (that misplaced loyalty will make many stay) or the law (although in the more extreme cases that certainly works) but teachers who recognize that they are nothing special with no super powers beyond knowing the art they are teaching. What will stop the abuse of trusting students, who want very much to devote themselves to the art, is for their teachers to remember that it's the art and not the man. The man up front has a responsibility to make sure the students fixate on the art and not the artist. Teach what you should, treat the students as adults worthy of their own opinions, respect their rights to fair treatment at gradings, be professional and keep the personal feelings and failings out of it. Give them more respect than they give to you, and always remember that respect is earned and not owed.

## Another Country Heard From

About once a year (around grading time when our attention is drawn to it) the upper levels of the iaido section wonder what we're doing in our organization. The discussion is usually the same each time, we start with why and end up with "because we want access to our sensei". It has always been that easy for me, as long as my sensei wants a sensei I'll do what I need to do to get him one.

What's this? Sensei have sensei? Can you have more than one sensei, is that word plural? Yes, you can have more than one sensei, and I hear it all the time from students around here, "my Japanese sensei says... " Nothing wrong with that, I can't imagine how much less I would know if I hadn't had the chance to study with many high ranked sensei who were all teaching the same thing. The different points of view are like walking around a statue, you get the depth of the thing, the three dimensionality, and you get the proper shape of the thing. The arts are like an elephant and a sensei is like one of the three blind men, each with his own way of describing the animal. Combine the views and you come up with a more complete picture that doesn't have as much exaggeration of one aspect.

But who guides all this? What does the student do when one sensei says do it this way and another says do it that? The answer is quite simple actually, ask shisho. Shisho is your sensei, YOUR sensei, not a sensei, not one of many, but the one you follow. This is what concerns me when I hear students saying "my Japanese sensei says we should do....". Unless a student is certain they are smarter than all the sensei out there they shouldn't be saying "my this or that sensei" at all, they should be having a quiet talk with their shisho and asking what they should do, then they should do that. Never pick and choose amongst many, rather do what your shisho tells you.

Usually a student doesn't get the chance to pick and choose between sensei, you find one and you follow. But in a large organization with a common practice like the Kendo Federations, you can stand in front of many sensei. You can even, for a few years, pick and choose from all of them and make your own decisions on how to do the waza, but at around 4dan comes a big decision. You can't cobble a style together from a bunch of different sensei, you have to pick one and start to follow your shisho.

Now, once you've done this for a decade or three you can start investigating once more amongst the other sensei out there and see what you can learn about the deep roots of the art, but your style, your basis for understanding will be set by your shisho. You can visit other countries and learn lots, but you're learning about your own home-country culture, you'll never become a native of some other place.

So, I stick around in the Kendo Federations (all of which are a lot more concerned with kendo than iaido or jodo by sheer weight of numbers, if nothing else) because my shisho wants to learn from the sensei in the federation. I don't need these other sensei but I also enjoy the blazes out of seeing them. All I really need is my shisho.

How does it actually go around here? The beginners all want to see lots of sensei, especially those from Japan so they vote "stick with the Federation". The intermediate ranks, who have picked their shisho, can't see much value in an organization beyond their dojo. The guys at the top, the ones who are the shisho, want to do their best for their students, so they want to stay in touch with the art as much as possible, and so we stay.



2009 jodo seminar

## Gremlins

Waiting for coffee, and heading for the computer store so I can buy a new desktop. A month of almost zero connection, followed by strange and weird error messages has convinced me that after ten years it's time to jump over three operating systems and upgrade a computer once more. I went from DOS to 95 to XP and now 8 I guess, doubt there's any 7 systems around. Of course I'd be using Linux if I had my 'druthers but I'm set up for a few windows programs that I use to create the webpages.

Oh yeah, the four web hosting plans that I ended up with over the years are supposed to be getting consolidated to save us a few dollars a month but ... did I mention the crap connectivity.

I've had similar problems with the martial arts through the years, one injury leading into another and another, one problem compounding onto others so that I often wonder why I do it. Why do I put out a monthly photo magazine ([180mag.ca](http://180mag.ca)) that earns me nothing and irritates me as I try to find the time to produce it? Why do I keep working on [EJMAS.com](http://EJMAS.com)? I'm pretty much the sole editor and producer these days... well OK that one is the main source of advertising for my business ( [sdksupplies.com](http://sdksupplies.com) ) so I'm good with that, but I could spend more time on it.

Why keep doing the martial arts through all the little gremlin times, and after 30 years? Well one answer is that it eventually turns from "what you do" to "who you are", but the other is that I actually am still learning stuff that makes me happy. To be able to tell a student from across the room that the shoulder is a bit too angled, and then to be able to demonstrate that for them is actually a lot of fun. Again, I'll never really have a use for that sort of thing, but it's worth waiting out the gremlins and upgrading old equipment (I upgraded the knees by a couple of tonnes of weight last night and sure paid for it around 3am with the shooting pains in the kneecap) just to keep figuring stuff out.

Upgraded the bluetooth keyboard I use to write this stuff on my tablet each morning. Went from a double fold to a single when the old one ripped some connection skin. Really like this one as it doesn't double tap but the right shift key is the up arrow instead. Not so much a gremlin as yet another keyboard to get used to I guess.

Learn from the gremlins, use the problems to explore the systems that are affected (and learn from the nice grad student who drops his thesis work for an afternoon and an evening to help). If you learn absolutely nothing else, you'll learn a bit of patience as you wait the little beggars out. Ah the William Shatner episode with him on a plane and the gremlin on the wing... I saw that on a black and white TV with an arial that turned by a hatchet handle bolted onto a pipe by my gramps.

## Samurai vs SUV

Yesterday at the seminar we were talking riai and the various stages of such a thing during the ages from 1600 to 2013, and during the years of a swordsman's training.

Your Riai:

When you begin your iaido you are told to move your foot here and do this with the sword. There's no particular meaning to your motions, you just do them because you're told to do them. After a while you might ask, or sensei may offer, the information that there's someone sitting in front of you and you're cutting their face and then splitting them in half. As Dave Green says, you now have the reason (you're learning how to swing the sword) and the excuse (your imaginary enemy wants to hurt you, so you hurt him). It's self defence, "he drew first Marshal". If you're good, if your reflexes are on a hair trigger and you're faster, you win, if not, at least you both die (ai uchi or mutually assured destruction).

A bit later you may get out the bokuto with a partner and realize that your imaginary enemy is not so much attacking you as just sitting there, so now you have to figure out why you are cutting down someone who hasn't even got his sword out of the scabbard. (He had a gun in his pocket and wasn't happy to see you?) The three timings of sen sen no sen, sen no sen and go no sen are introduced and now you're killing someone because they intend to do you harm. At a certain stage of training that makes sense, hell even governments use that one with the principle of "preemptive self defence" (at a distance). I think this is the one where gamer boys in Nevada drop missiles from drones on bad guys in central asia or some such thing.

Long after it seems important to look cool with the samurai duds, those who are still practicing iai may be getting something a bit deeper out of their hobby, after all, as my TKD instructor used to say, "nobody does this for 10 years on the off chance they're going to get into a bar fight". What do the long-timers understand? Well they may discover saya no uchi no kachi, or the concept of winning in the scabbard, of not being killed, not killing the opponent, not both being killed, but both living. The riai of iaido may change the way you do things, with the most important part of the practice shifting from the cuts to the draw, or even to the opening bow as you use the implied power of the sword and your skill with it to prevent the opponent from even considering an attack. At first glance it looks like we have discovered peace through power, nobody would attack you if you have the ability to bomb them into the stone age would they? Show them that pair of swords in your belt and they will stay respectful and quiet on the other side of the inn.

Or perhaps it's more about being prepared, having no openings for an attack. That would, of course, require complete knowledge of everything, you can't be prepared for everything that could happen if you don't know about everything, so you work on everything. With complete information you can make plans that won't have unknown-unknowns. If only we had some way to gather that kind of information and analyse it, some sort of remote data collecting method so that we know what all our potential enemies are planning, and who they might be, come to that. If only.

Instead of a single defined "riai", I seem to have discovered a shifting set of meanings in my iaido over the past 30 years. The stuff my teachers told me has changed, so it's not really just me inventing stuff. In fact the things I've been told to teach about the meaning of iai to beginners is different than what I'm supposed to tell the more advanced folk.

Riai through the years:

That's as far as I've been taught, but I'm pretty sure there's more to come. Not to invent my own spoilers, but I think there's a clue to be had on the open road. After all, what's that giant SUV but the nuclear option of the personal transportation vehicle? So what can an SUV teach me about the sword?

Think about your 1650 samurai learning his sword school and think about maai, the mutual combat distance of the day. That would, on your usual city street, be about two sword lengths. We all know this right, the distance of one step to the cut is the combative distance, one beat as the western folks say. Go through that distance and you're in the fight, someone is bleeding on the ground.

Now consider the maai as that distance which makes you nervous, the spot where the inside of your eyelid starts to vibrate as you want to close your eyes against the bogey-man. When I've got a bokuto in my hand that's about two sword lengths. If I have a shoto in my hand, or maybe nothing at all, the distance gets a little wider, yet I have to get a little closer in order to make a strike with my shorter weapon. If my opponent is much less skilled than me, the distance where I'm comfortable gets a little smaller. If it's a complete beginner, it widens out again. Give my opponent a shinken and it gets wider yet.

Maai isn't a distance, it's the combination of distance and time, speed and reflex, and perception. Samurai vs samurai, there are the swords, there is the distance. Samurai vs SUV? Consider the meaning of a sword hobby become something more. What can it teach you, what meaning can it have beyond the obvious stuff we talked about above. Consider a vehicle as a tool which can cause death and destruction, consider an SUV as a weapon. What does your sword practice teach you about the maai of driving? Oh obvious boy, you say, this is simplistic. OK perhaps, but I would ask you to consider how



you learned to drive, was it in an SUV? In a vehicle that is silent, distant from the wind? Was it in something that looks like your x-box screen? Like the game screens the boys use to drive the drones? What's your comfort level at 140 km/h? Consider if you had learned your maa in a dune buggy? Think about driving down a 4-lane highway with nothing between you and the wind, nothing between you and the transport beside you, the road flashing past under your feet.

Learning something about dangerous distances with bokuto or jo might just apply, given enough time and thought, to driving in your SUV four feet from the bumper in front of you while eating your breakfast and texting.

Our samurai from 1650, for all his "throw your life away" training would probably wet his hakama if we took him onto a modern superhighway and drove like we usually drive.

The meaning of his sword art may not be the same as our meaning of our sword art.





## My Kid Could Wave a Sword Around Like That

When people look at fine art it's the story that gives it value, not the intrinsic properties of colour, composition and brushwork. For a painting to be valuable it has to have provenance, it has to be valued by other people (collectors or critics) and it helps if it's hand made (as opposed to remotely created by computer or apprentice).

If you doubt this, look at the relative value of a genuine Vermeer as vs a forgery good enough to fool the experts.

Think of this in terms of your budo practice. A genuine school, with a proven lineage is going to be more valued than the stuff made up by the guy three streets over, even if students of the two schools are equally likely to win a fight. We will create (assume) some sort of essential difference between the two of them and will call one real and one fraud. The intrinsic combat value of both may be similar but the stories are vastly different. To explain these differences we may posit some sort of esoteric teachings in the old school, and assume there are none in the new. But that's not a given, the teacher of the "old school" may know nothing of secret inner teachings, while the new fellow may have a perfectly good working principle for his new art, one every bit as sophisticated as the mysterious diagrams of the italian sword schools or the shinto practices of a Japanese koryu.

We may assume the old school is "battle tested", born and forged in the fires of war, but of course a bit of historical research will point out that most schools originated in peacetime when folks had the leisure time to spend formalizing and categorizing complicated movements. The battlefield is no place for fancy footwork and pretty manners, just get the job done fast. If you're talking efficiency in war an "old school" is almost by definition obsolete. How many times do the military historians have to remind us that we can't fight the last war. You know, the guy three streets over may have a budo that is better adapted to a world where dangerously religious people are walking around with high-powered firearms. A modern budo might better be teaching quick-draw gunfighting rather than how to deal with a samurai in armour.

The old school simply has a better story and a long history which we assume means it has value. After all, if it has survived for many generations it must have been valued enough in the past to preserve it. It's very age is proof of worth.

If a painting is admired by lots of people around us, we tend to agree. Same with critics who tell us it's good. Think celebrity endorsement for running shoes, you don't pay Michael that much to flog your basketball shoes if it doesn't work. Same for budo, the one with the press, the one with the stories in the

mags and the TV deal is the one with worth. For the old schools there are guys like me yammering away on the internet.

So, think of abstract expressionism and all those folks who looked at it and said "my kid could do that". Thing is, that kid doesn't have critics and art galleries explaining it in terms of art history and telling folks it's good stuff worth buying. The kid's got no story. What's your story? Are you in it because you want to paint (or because you really like that painting by an unknown you just discovered), because you find some value in creating your budo, or did you buy (into) it because you like the story?

Nothing wrong with the story, it's a function of our brains, and it's damned handy to be able to do the group-think stuff when the tigers are sniffing around, but it's best to know we're set up that way so that we don't end up with a closet full of shoes.



## Favourite Seminar

This last weekend in Ottawa was one of my favourite seminars. This year was the 15th anniversary of the Tateyama kendo, iaido and jodo club and I'm glad to have been invited. The club, under the direction of Dave Green (6dan iaido), hosted 20 or 25 students and all three 7dan iaido sensei from the east, which means I got to go hang out with my two seniors and what was, in my opinion, just the right amount of students. We started out with a morning of iaido, Ohmi sensei demonstrating kihon to most of the class with Cruise sensei taking care of the beginners. I just hung around and listened to my sensei. Later we split into three groups and I tried to explain differences in skill and instruction to a group ranging from nidan to godan. Splitting them at 3dan I tried to demonstrate that for a nidan you might talk about squaring up the feet and keeping the hip facing forward, while for a 5dan you can expand into how to work inside the hip to generate power in the back foot. I got a good question on the rear foot turning over in ushiro which let me show why beginners should flip the toes under and why instructors should leave the foot rolling explanations to a word in the shell-like of the more advanced.

In the afternoon we started with a combined class of all three arts with Mike Arai sensei (Ottawa kendo instructor) teaching kendo bokuto kihon with the assistance of senior kendoka from Kingston and Ottawa. Personally, I love that set like I love all kihon, and I hope the iaido and jodo students got as much out of it as I did. We then split into a jodo and kendo group with lots of new folks being forced to flounder through the jodo kihon and first few kata all in two hours. If that doesn't convince them to stay out of jodo they're a tough bunch of beginners. (Actually, they picked it up pretty fast.)

Sunday morning classes began with a couple hours of kendo (I had a nice long breakfast) followed by a couple hours of iaido during which Ohmi sensei pulled many students forward and gave them their homework for the next year or so. His ability to zero in on what they need to do next to improve is quite impressive and so much deeper than the usual nattering about how you have to hit this or that checkpoint. While I suspect some folks were hearing "this is what you do wrong" I hope most understand that sensei's comments are "how to go forward" and work hard before they forget the instructions.

Thanks to the Tateyama club in Ottawa for the organization and hosting. I hope that all the beginners find one of the clubs in Ottawa and keep up their studies (both Ottawa clubs, Tateyama and Takahashi, practice kendo, iaido and jodo).

## Time to Start Teaching

When you know more than your sensei, it's time to start teaching.

That seems obvious to me, but of course it's hard to tell when you know more than your sensei isn't it? If it's kendo or some other competitive sport you may start to whack your teacher once in a while when he's not just letting you do it... but that may be because he's an old fart rather than because you now know more than him. It would be a shame to go teach if you haven't wrung him completely dry... yes I just suggested that your teacher is an old mostly used-up and wrung out sponge. Trust me, the metaphore is often accurate.

So what else can we use to know when we need to leave? Let me tell you about a few of the dojo I've come across in my journey. One of the first situations was a club that one of my early teachers had somewhere else. This one was full of high ranked students, hardly a beginner around. Everyone had been together for ten or fifteen years and it was just like a family full of teenagers, full of rebellion and opinion with no "kids" around to mellow anyone out. I think the sensei was teaching us because we were little fresh sponges, ready to be filled up, much more fun than the "full of piss and vinager" (as my gran used to say) bunch in the other place. The end result was that sensei left the dojo to the students. Now I didn't think that was a good idea then and I don't now. Sensei should have booted the most senior folks out one by one to start their own clubs "promoted them sideways" as it were, which would have made a stronger art and relieved some of the pressures in the dojo.

First way to know you should go teach... sensei boots your ass out the door and says you know more than him, go teach.

The club I started my budo career in was started by a lovely fellow who had a middling rank. a desire to keep practicing, and a town with no instructor. He started teaching because there was nobody else to do it, and he brought his teacher in once a week.

Likely the most usual way any of us started to teach... so we'd have someone to practice with. We know more than our students at least, and if we can bring sensei in once in a while we may even keep learning.

Funny thing is, I was apparently one of those obnoxious students I am talking about who knows more than his teacher. At one point this lovely fellow was going to quit. All the other seniors said they would quit too, me, I said "the art is bigger than my personal feelings so I'll stay" which is so pompous and self-important I can't believe I didn't know it then. Well it turns out that's not all I didn't know since my

teacher was going to quit because I was a pain in his ass. Somehow it worked out but don't think I don't know the short-sightedness "a little knowledge" can cause.

The art is still bigger than I am, but for different reasons these days I hope. Mind you, I'm still a pompous windbag with a gigantic self-image, just not as many (the same?) illusions.

One of the clubs here in town had a fellow who liked his rank, and liked as much of it as he could get, so he would, each few years, leave one organization (and sensei) and join another where he would get another rank. He made it to a pretty high number before he finally quit trying to make a go of it as a commercial dojo. I don't know much about his students but I'm pretty sure they weren't too fussed about leaving him since he wasn't fussed about leaving his own teachers.

Leave and teach because that's the easiest way to get rank. You know other ways to do this don't you, the old "airport promotion" where you get on the plane from the mysterious orient as a shodan and you arrive as a godan (well, they rhyme, maybe you misheard). Or the fellow who phones back home and says "hey teach, they don't respect a sandan around here, I need a hachidan to get respect, how about it?"

OK not really "when to leave to start teaching" but more "start teaching to get some rank".

How about you know you know more than sensei when you find yourself telling other students how other teachers do this or that technique? What's that say except "time to leave" since you can now, obviously, teach yourself with your multiple sensei, so you may as well be out there on your own passing on your broad knowledge.

Note the word broad, it's not the same as deep.

Or maybe you realize that you have already left your sensei even though your ass is still on the same dojo floor. This is the dojo where the students have "our sensei in the home country" which the students are always quoting to their local sensei. The idea is that the students have some sort of access to sensei's superior, so they've jumped up the heirarchy and can now tell sensei how to do things. If that isn't a hint to go out and teach I have never heard one. You've just put yourself on the same level as sensei because you both have the same boss. Staying with the original teacher is just lazy, be a man and go get your own students in your own dojo, I'm sure that upper level sensei will support you, since he hasn't smacked your nose with a rolled up newspaper and told you to go back to your old sensei and leave him alone.

You know, I don't really mind any of this nonsense from my students, and I know of few sensei who do, but it isn't very good for the students. The know-it-mores tend to give up the art (after all what's left to learn) or go and open their own dojo, often without asking permission, so the problem solves itself. Sometimes though, I wish some of my fellow teachers would just tell these guys to "get a life" and go teach somewhere else. Not my place to say of course, but as a "blogger" I got a right don't I?

For those who just don't know how to do things properly, here are a few thoughts.

You've only got one sensei. I don't care how many people you go stand in front of, or whose books you read, you've only got one sensei and everything goes through him. If he says go practice with another guy, go do it, but don't come back and tell everyone what you learned, show it to your sensei and then go back to how sensei told you to do it. If he decides the other guy gave you a better way to do things, your sensei will tell you. You don't get to decide.

You don't talk about any other teacher in front of any teacher. Your various teachers all know each other and have practiced, watched or talked together. What makes you think you have anything to contribute? Just do what you're told to do by the guy up front and check back with your sensei later.

If you don't like what dad is doing, get a job and an apartment. Seriously, why would you stay in a dojo if you don't agree with how sensei is teaching? And why in the world would you try to change the way he does things? I've got a couple of teenagers at home and I'm happy to listen to them since they know more than I do, but I'm paying the mortgage so I get the last word, right or wrong.

Defend your sensei. If you don't want to defend him when other sensei are telling you he's wrong, think very carefully about whether or not he's your sensei. I'm not talking about blind loyalty, nobody is owed that, any more than "my country right or wrong" is a healthy attitude, but if you don't want to at least go calmly quiet when he's being slagged, you probably agree that it's a mistake to be his student. Move in with the other guy or go teach on your own, don't be an enabler of your sensei's bad habits.

Incidentally, when you do go out and teach have the following things in mind.

Say "ask your sensei" a lot. My personal inclination is to teach anyone who is standing in front of me (I assume they have asked permission to be there) but I'm damned if I'm going to suggest that a sensei is wrong about anything except what I'm supposed to be the authority on. I'm speaking about seitei gata iaido and jodo here just to be clear, I'm one of the senior judges so I will say "that's wrong" if it's written in the book. On things that are allowed to be in flux my answer is "ask your sensei". Mind you, I'm also not going to waste a lot of time comparing what I do to what your sensei does, I'm going to

show you my art and you are going to listen and then do what your sensei tells you to do. He sent you for a reason, it's your job to figure that out for yourself.

Do not comment on other sensei either in or out of the room. I have heard of one situation where some senior sensei asked another sensei whether or not the guy up in front was doing it right. Seriously? The guy up front was asked to teach so shut up and listen. You can either do what he says or not, later, but while he's there shut up and do it his way.

Oh those lovely lost days at seminars when I was younger and the senior students would look briefly at what the sensei was showing, assume they knew what was happening, and then turn around and tell me how to do something else altogether. Yes I paid attention to what the guy up front was saying and yes I did whatever my seniors ended up telling me to do but I never lost sight of who I was actually there to see. Any sensei in a room who tells me different from what's being taught goes right into that gang of "seniors" from my youth who couldn't be bothered to think there might be something else to learn.

When do you know when you are ready to go teach? When you finally decide you never want to teach, when all you want to do is wring out that used up old sponge until there's not a drop left to fall out.

When do you go teach? When your ass has been booted out the door (or you can't get there from there and sensei says "teach").



## Rules and Intent

Recently a train full of what was supposed to be crude oil rolled down a hill in Quebec and blew up, killing several people. As a result someone is going to "look into the rules" surrounding the situation. I very much suspect we will see a change something like "If you are going to leave a train parked on a hill set some manual brakes" to "Set more manual brakes".

The problem is, rules don't ever work for everything, only for the last problem of the type we're trying to fix. What we really need to look at is the intent behind the rule. An engineer that reads the current rules on leaving a train on a hill might just follow them exactly and still have a train roll down the hill. The intent behind whatever rule exists is something like "if you leave a train parked on a hill make sure you set enough brakes so that it doesn't go anywhere." Now if you look at it like that, it seems blazingly obvious, but that sort of thing takes time and maybe the bosses who make the rules don't want to pay you to take that time, maybe they figure their rules are good enough...

OK that's a rather unfortunate story to get into my point, but it's the one that prompted my thoughts on iaido, specifically on zen ken ren iai (seitei) and koryu.

Seitei iai is chock full of rules, what isn't in the book is made up and shared and assumed to be "rules" anyway. There's nothing that we don't "rulify" about it. For instance, the book says "the tip (kissaki) should be above the hilt (tsuka) when the sword is over your head just ready to cut (furi kaburi)" Over the years we've extended that rule to say "the tip never drops below the hilt" which was of course always nonsense because there are places where the book says it does. In any case, the big wigs have spent the last several years going around the world trying to get us to stop performing awkward and inefficient movements to try and keep that tip up while moving from a thrust into another movement (pull it out keeping the tip up, now move it back and then lift it over the head always keeping the tip up... oops took too long trying to keep the tip up and my opponent just smacked me.

Seitei gata (standardized forms) are a very nice thing for a large organization to have. They allow lots of people to practice and "talk" together with a common language which can also be used to assess levels of skill and all that good stuff. But too many rules can create a legalistic view of life, where the rules become more important than the intent.

Just now outside the window of the cafe where I'm writing this I watched four people in a truck pull up to the light beside a bicyclist. The biker was going straight, the truck turning right. You guessed it, the light changed and both vehicles started to move.

The truck had to stop after damned near hitting the bike. Now I am watching as the guys in the truck are throwing up their hands in a WTF gesture at the "stupid biker".

OK rules. You don't pass on the right at an intersection (or anywhere else actually). So the worst happens and the biker is dead on the ground. The driver of the truck is not at fault because the biker broke the rules. OH, wait, the truck pulled up past the biker so now the truck passed on the left and turned right into the biker so now the biker is OK (legally) and the truck driver is at fault.

PLEASE. No matter what happens the truck driver, as the guy in control of the bigger weapon, is at fault no matter what. The biker has no chance no matter what rules he follows, right or wrong, and a life is at stake. The INTENT of the rules are to prevent loss of life. Only a lawyer of the particularly legalistic bent (or being paid I suppose) would argue this case on the rules of the road for the truck driver. Am I saying the biker was in his rights to ignore the truck? Sure he was but rights have little to do with life in this case.

Union negotiator here for a couple of contracts. If you've been there you know the legalism that goes on when either side gets hold of some language in the contract that is ambiguous. It doesn't matter what the original intent was, if you can twist the language to your advantage you do it.

A couple cents an hour in salary gained or lost isn't life and death. Trucks and bicycles, trains and towns are. This is why we should not consider iaido as cosplay or even as a sport, if we do, it doesn't have much to teach us. We need to consider iai as life and death, as something that needs to be thought about seriously. There is no second round in the tournament in a real sword fight, no round robin, no loser's side of the score sheet, only bleeding out on the ground. If we think this way we may start paying attention when riding on our bike in traffic... those people in metal armour all around us can grind us to a smear on the pavement and all we've got is a pocket knife to their howitzers.

Consequences of actions, predicting the future, if I make three moves just to keep the tip up so that I am following some sort of rule, I lose my life. If I play grand theft Otto I don't have any hesitation crashing my car into the pedestrians and the wall, I get another life. No consequences. I want to see a video game where if you die, the game erases itself and you don't get to buy it to play it ever again. Call it "LIFE" or "biking on the road".

If you want to get something beyond your next rank out of Seitei Gata iai, look for the intent behind the rules. You've got the book, you've got videos, you can work at it by yourself, figure out what the rules mean instead of memorizing and dancing them.

## Rules and Riai

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

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

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

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

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

As I mentioned, this is a bit more difficult when we're thinking about the riai of koryu as we don't usually get a book of rules. For koryu (and a more subtle appreciation of Seitei come to that) we have to understand the kihon of the art, when we put the sword at this angle and move it in this way what is

it that we are doing? More plainly, if we draw and move the tip across horizontally what are we cutting? We all know that one, so now we know roughly what our opponent is doing and what our target is. Is he back on his heels or up at your height? Do we have to move in now or can we cut him vertically without moving?

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

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



*Where, exactly, is kasso teki?*

## Seitei and Koryu

Why do we use Seitei as an introduction to Iaido when it contaminates the koryu?

This question comes up a lot, and so I'll go after it once more in the interest of teasing the lines apart just a bit more. A beginner will do what he's first taught, as a default mode, so if he's taught koryu first his Seitei (of whatever flavour, ZNIR, ZNKR or any standard set from any other organization) will show a lot of koryu. If he's taught Seitei first his koryu will show that by default until he can separate them. No big problem, just a fact of how one learns. How could it possibly be otherwise? You do what you were taught until you're taught otherwise. I know of no example of a line of koryu that was "Seitei-ized" and no example where a Seitei was "koryu-ized" to any meaningful extent.

If we're talking ZNKR and you're in the ZNKR I'd be happy to expound privately on comments about where ZNKR Seitei came from and the idea of Seitei contaminating koryu. If you're not in the ZNKR the discussion is meaningless and pointless.

To those who can't figure out why one would do Seitei if one does a koryu, the answer is equally simple. Because you're in the ZNKR or the ZNIR. No other reason makes any sense at all. If you're not in an organization that has a Seitei set, you ought not be doing it (because there's no sense doing it if you don't have to do it... the LESS you do the better for you) and, more importantly, you don't have to discuss it or worry about it. It's not your problem is it?

Finally, Zen Ken Ren iai or Zen I Ren Iai as "starter kata". Are you kidding? Both these sets are extremely difficult to do, and a pain in the butt to teach beginners. Omori (Shoden) is designed to teach beginners in a consistent and sensible way using correct adult learning principles (building on acquired skills to create more advanced skills, repetition etc.) I repeat, Seitei is a monster to try to teach and to learn and the only reason it is taught first is that it's used as the basis of testing in the ZNKR, so you start with it.

A Seitei gata is "owned" by the organization that creates it and discussing its merits or faults when you're not a member of that organization is pointless... one would just as fruitfully discuss the merits of "pick koryu name and insert here" and its influence on some other koryu if one practices them together... or the influence of judo on aikido practice. Finally, if you ARE in an organization that has a Seitei gata, and you're not at the top of that organization, you can certainly have your opinion on the value of the practice, but you aren't going to have any meaningful input unless you're debating with the top guys.

Put in a nutshell, beginners (and armchair punters I suppose) worry about contamination, seniors don't.

## Thoughts on Koryu

In the Japanese sword world that I inhabit the big thing is koryu, to get some training in an old school. But of course you have to have an old school around to join. It's a bit of a paradox really, what to do with the koryu. For those that have attached themselves to a large group of students to recruit from, for instance those iaido and jodo lines in the Kendo Federation, you get lots of students but little respect, at least in the West. While there's lots of lines and lots of students but it's all somehow "influenced". Yet for those koryu which are independent, they are also tiny, 10-12 students maybe, and constantly on the verge of extinction, due to the members dying off, or to exploding from internal stresses.

It's really an old problem I suppose, you can't be exclusive and inclusive at the same time. There's no such thing as "secret techniques" if there's 3000 students.

But really, what is it that we're losing if a koryu disappears? Is there any real unique knowledge that is in danger of passing? There's only so many ways to hit someone with a stick, cut someone with a sword, or twist someone's wrist. If we lose the jujutsu from MJER does that mean some unique way of folding someone in half is gone? Other than that, if MJER exists only in the iai, but the "intangible" teachings are still carried on has anything actually been lost?

If a headmaster somewhere finds some old scrolls and revives the MJER jujutsu practices, is that OK or has something been lost because they weren't passed down person to person? It really comes down to what you personally think, doesn't it? If it's important to have an unbroken line, then it's important. Just don't look too closely or you may find your line has a bit of a bump in a coach-house somewhere on the road to Paris in 1643.

I think the bottom line is summed up by one "last survivor" of an old school who commented to me "if the Japanese can't be bothered to save their own heritage, why should I worry about it?"

I practice Niten Ichiryu. It's a koryu with some history and a lot of story. At any given time there may be 2 people in my dojo who are practicing or asking to practice. Not the sort of numbers that are realistically going to carry on the tradition, but that's not why I teach it. The school is of great use to teach certain principles and attitudes that I have decided are important for my students to learn.

Evolution works, culturally as well as physiologically, and for anything to survive and thrive, it has to be of some value. Sentiment is a cultural value, and can preserve a lot of traditional ways, think "multicultural festival", but it is usually someone of the culture who's sentimental, or wishing to impart the tribal ways to the kids, or promote the "true spirit of the samurai" to the new generation of Japanese

kids who will be in the new army after the constitution gets changed... Not someone from outside (ie us westerners who practice koryu). Realistically, for Westerners to want to preserve the koryu we have to have some reason other than saving Japan's heritage.

So why DO us westerners do it? 1. Romance, we wanna be samyoureyes... perhaps, but this is a shallow hobby, not a lifetime commitment and anyone who teaches the cosplay folks is inevitably dissappointed when they drift off. 2. We get something out of it... that something, I've always argued, is culturally independant (if you had to be Japanese to get it, we wouldn't be getting it and so wouldn't be doing it).

Which comes down to "best teacher" rather than "coolest specific techniques". I'm assuming whatever we get, has to do with the method of training rather than the techniques since all koryu techniques are equally ineffective on a modern battlefield.

It has to be understood that I will eat just about anything put in front of me, I seem to look at food as fuel rather than as an aesthetic experience, but I will admit that there are certain meals I like better than others. Same with koryu, to be honest I prefer Niten Ichiru to Katori Shinto ryu, I like simple, I like short. I have some appreciation for the idea that certain arts are taught differently than others in some aspects, after all that's what makes them different in the first place. Katori has long kata, Niten has short, different teaching methods mean different koryu right?

I seem to be the "everything is the same" guy, I realize, but once again, I think the assumption behind the question is inaccurate. I don't think the training methods are different from one ryu to another, any more than I think that the root assumptions about how to move the body differ from one Japanese art to another. All are concerned with breathing, moving from the centre, dealing with (controlling, avoiding) the centreline, etc. etc.

The outside appearance, prayers used, and overall building decoration of the various Christian/buddhist/islamic shrines may differ, but at the core, it's the same basis for each one. The core teachings remain constant while the external trappings vary (and are often argued over to the point of religious wars within each religion).

So once again I propose that it doesn't really matter what colour the pews are, it matters more that the preacher can get the message across to you.

Empirically, every Japanese martial art I've ever practiced, koryu, gendai, or fake as hell, was passed along using the same training methodology. You copy kata until you start to understand the principles



beneath the kata. All the instructors told/showed me the same things, and some of them seemed to actually understand those things.

For me it comes down to finding the best teacher and be damned with what he's teaching, so, in the West where we have maybe one teacher and two students for a koryu, what do we do?

If you're young, **START WITH KENDO**. No question about it. Simple reason why, you can start iaido or jodo later when you're an old fart...

If you stick around long enough you may find someone who does a koryu and then you can do that.





## Function vs Value

It has been noted that people value originals over copies when talking about artwork. Even when the original and the copy are the same monetary value, the original is preferred.

This has been studied, but we already know it's true, or premium fashion brands would not exist. Here we come to the concept of function vs value, the place where we all say "a handbag from Wallget will carry your lipstick just as well as the LV bag. (If you know what LV stands for in this sentence you know the mechanics and effects of branding.)

Same with the budo of course, the best known koryu are perceived to have the most value, more so if they are promoted by people we consider to be authorities (Madison Avenue Scientists\* or celebrity endorsement) and more so if the information has been available "from the beginning" (old brands are good brands). Think of the early writings in English on Katori Shinto Ryu by Donn Draeger. That rather small school was instantly established as the "it art" of budo. Nothing wrong with that of course, but things may have been different if Draeger had studied Jigen Ryu instead.

Along the way other high-fashion-like koryu have been added to the pantheon, those who are similar to the prototype, the ones that hand-stitch their bags in small shops in Milan are at the top of the value chain as much or more for their rarity and exclusivity (order an Hermes bag and wait five years for delivery) as for their functionality.

Just as we have the median level fashion lines like Michael Kors or Ralph Lauren with their mass produced upscale lines, so we have our standardized budo in the various seitei gata sword arts from the ZNKR, ZNIR or DNIR. As you might figure a Michael Kors dress as an introduction to Dior, you could consider the seitei as a gateway drug to the koryu.

Some have mentioned kendo as similar to seitei iai because both are compared to the koryu sword arts, but I beg to differ. Kendo is a different animal altogether, simply because it has a sport aspect and there is a world championship. You will do kendo in the kendo federation or you will never have a shot at the world championships. For this reason alone, it is outside the value chain, there is no alternative to that brand if you wish to compete.

Finally we come to the hipsters who are using vintage canvas messenger bags they found in second hand shops, or are making their own. You can't get more exclusive than making your own bag, but of course nobody else has to admit that your bag is of infinite value (you can't buy it no matter how rich you are, you can only make it yourself) since you haven't spent a lot of money or word of mouth

establishing your bag as the very highest in value. Think "one of a kind" as vs. "home made", what's the difference if not advertising, or a good artist's statement. <http://www.artybollocks.com/>

Our sword guys who make their own arts, usually based, if based on anything, on cutting practice, are the hipsters of the budo world. They proclaim their own value based on the exclusivity of their invention, and they defend it on the functionality.

I made this bag and it's as good as a Lagerfeld because it will carry a lipstick.

Again, nothing wrong with all that, if you can cut wet mats and get the thing in and out of the scabbard without taking your thumb off, you are probably as well off as our koryu fellow with the same experience. The functionality is the same, it's the perceived value that separates the two in the minds of the rest of the world.

So, what will all the non-initiated folk out there do when they decide they want a handbag? Chances are they will look around, maybe do a bit of research, find themselves at the local mall and choose the mass produced bag of known quality. Yes you can get a bag at the dollar store and yes it may be made in the same Chinese factory as the one in H&M, but your chances of it not falling apart in a week are better at H&M.

Our sword customer will probably find one of the big organizations and start off with Seitei Gata... or Kendo.

Kendo is the mass market chain of sword schools that owns the upscale iaido and jodo brands? The Tata to its Jaguar and Land Rover? Perhaps, you think about it and let me know.

\*This is of course the origin of the term "Mad Scientist" but the economy needs consumerism to survive so the term has been manipulated to mean "all scientists are insane and their research that indicates our glucosamine pills don't help your knees, is of no value".

## Evolution and Budo

Since I have recently been talking about economics and budo (the mechanism of perceived value of koryu schools being compared to the mechanism of perceived value of upscale fashion handbags), perhaps I will move to biological science as a mechanism to analyse budo. I may lately be giving budo more of a central role in the world than some might figure it deserves, but tough, this is what I'm (not) paid to do eh! And besides, if the universe of ideas is infinite, ideas about budo are at the center of the universe right?

As one of those who has heard that the fundamental concept of evolution is "survival of the fittest", it seems tempting to use the idea for looking at older schools of the martial art (koryu). After all, we have a unit, the school, and a mechanism of selection (everyone dies in a battle and the school dies out) so why not?

Let's quickly examine the hypothesis. It seems obvious even as I'm typing this that the death of a swordsman (or spearman or what have you) isn't based on what he knows of a school, but on what he's doing at the time he dies. This might mean we have to make the unit of selection the kata... or the waza (the specific movement of or from a kata he's using to attack or defend). That means we can't explain the survival of schools, only of specific waza through selection. But even worse, we need to question our mechanism of selection. Is warfare reasonable as a factor in the selection of schools? Schools are most common through the Edo period, rather than in the period of wars before that. Very few schools stretch back to the wars... maybe those are the "winners" and after that the selection was lifted?

Wow I'm getting hammered by myself before I even get started here. Let's change our hypothesis, make the unit of selection popularity rather than death on the battlefield or by a duel. So the most popular schools are those that survived and those which died out were not popular.

Rather a useless line of enquiry I'm afraid, the argument is circular, the popular schools are popular because they are popular. While I believe that, after all it's a tautology, to discuss reasons for popularity we are back in the realms of economics and ad campaigns. To get away from that we have to find a selection pressure that works to distinguish a dead school from one that is still here. Effectiveness at combat seems not to work, not enough combat. Backing by the authorities, word of mouth, catering to the kiddy classes, all that is likely effective but hardly Darwinian.

The core of the problem might be my assumption that there is a selective pressure on the budo at all. "Survival of the fittest" only works if we have something meaningful to be fittest at. Evolution doesn't work to improve anything, there is no drive to perfection, it only works on the basis of "good enough".

If there's a problem, and some units can survive that problem long enough to reproduce, that's good enough. Those who don't survive long enough do not reproduce. The "fittest" only means "reproducer".

In the absence of a selective pressure there's no particular nudge to keep or to lose any trait. It's a random thing. Green eyes, unless they cause you to see tigers better at night, are likely to remain at their current numbers in the next generation, or may go up, or may go down depending on random genetic recombination. If they aren't being pressured they won't be selected. If they're linked closely to something being pressured, maybe they will be selected but what are the buds linked to that's under pressure? Spare time?

Ah, but we all know that green eyes are NOT in any way a neutral thing. They are actually very influential to reproduction because they are damned attractive. Green Eyed Ladies and all that. "Survival of the fittest" is only one aspect of evolution, "Sexual Selection" is also involved and in the first world, sexual selection is likely our driving evolutionary force since things like mass famine aren't operating.

If something isn't being pressured, it may still be favoured.

I don't think the buds are under any serious selective pressure at this time. They are not improving or degrading due to the fitness of their techniques at all. Students don't determine which schools survive to the next generation based on their effectiveness as a fighting system, it's more along the lines of those green eyes, the peacock's tail, the nice song of that attractive wren next door. In other words, in a world where basic needs are sufficient, where the population isn't competing to survive physically to reproductive age, where there's enough of the basics to have spare time for other things, there is time for the buds and a chance to favour one over the other.

In a time of war, survival in the next few months, techniques of efficient death will be favoured over things that take forever to learn. You get basic training rather than complicated kata. Machines to assist this become selected over antique and less efficient machines like swords or spears. Guns trump blades and for warfare today the buds have been mostly out-evolved.

Two less dramatic examples of the need for peace and plenty, the absence of selective pressure, for the buds to survive. In times of recession and tough job markets we get less students in the martial arts than when money is less tight. In places where there is more population to draw students from, we have more students. Soooo low spare time and money is a selective pressure and schools can out-compete by offering short cheap classes? Or low population is a pressure so we can compete by... encouraging folks already in the school to have more kids?

Wait, you argue, the arts do survive tough job markets and the changing whims of society. Yes they do. There is something in the budo that is of value to some people, which make them worth keeping around even when times are tough. I don't think it's the efficiency of the arts as methods of fighting, but I think the fighting has something to do with it.

While "survival of the fittest" isn't a likely model for analyzing the budo, and while "sexual selection" may offer some insights similar to our previous economic analysis, let's face it, we're looking for some other reason than mechanistic evolution to explain the survival and growth of the old schools.

Finding that is my koan of the day.



*Looks sexy?*

*Maybe Tanjojutsu (cane techniques) have modern fighting value?*

## One Size Fits All

Over the years I've done a lot of defending of the idea of seitei gata, standard forms, but I am not without an appreciation for the problems that standardization can cause. Although many folks have complained that Seitei contaminates the old schools, I've never had much of a concern about that. Koryu is broad, it can take care of itself, and those who confuse seitei and koryu are generally beginners. The differences between seitei gata iaido and koryu iai are largely superficial.

But it's that superficiality that concerns me, the idea that form tops function because there is one, correct, way to do things. With a standardized form there is a tendency to assume that it is the correct way of doing things... well OK if you want to win a tournament or pass a grading there is indeed an acceptable way of performing a movement. But I'm going to argue that doesn't mean one size fits all, and I'm going to argue that doesn't mean there's A correct way to do a similar koryu kata.

Last first, the very fact that there is a noticeable difference between a seitei kata and a koryu kata should be proof enough that there is not a single way to do a movement. To be specific, for the ZNKR iai (seitei) kata called Mae, we cut horizontally, shift the rear knee forward and cut vertically as we move the front foot forward. For the ZNIR iai (toho) kata of the same name we do not shift the knees or feet at all. For the MJER line that I study the usual way to perform Mae is to shift the front foot and follow with the rear knee as we cut vertically. Three lines, same kata, three different distances... which one is correct?

I hope that it's fairly obvious that there isn't a correct distance and a moment's thought would give us that answer regardless of examples. So why do we have to move the knee and then the foot to pass a grading in ZNKR iai? Why can't we have our opponent be at some other distance and do some other move with the feet? On a simple level, if we allow that, we make it very difficult for the judges to know whether or not you've made a mistake or deliberately chosen an alternate distance. On the next level, it makes it very difficult for you, the challenger, to prove to the judges that you have deliberately chosen a different distance. We don't actually require our students to demonstrate that sort of thing until 4-5dan or so, allowing variation like that from the beginning is not reasonable. Finally, the seitei is a bit different than everyone's koryu, so everyone has the same opportunity to show the judges that they can control their sword and body in order to perform what they're asked to perform. If everyone used their koryu movements we would see habit and not skill.

Standardization has a use, but it's not to teach THE correct way of doing a technique, your opponent may not move the way the standard kata says he moves, so you must use skill and not habit. This brings me back to the first concern, one size fits all. To some, the standard can become a fetish. If Mae is done

from seiza and you can fail for not moving the rear knee then the front foot, surely you can fail for not doing the kata from seiza! This seems obvious, the book says it is done from seiza so it is done from seiza.

Here is where I will point out there is teki (the opponent, in this case imaginary but standardized, defined) and there is the swordsman who is performing his half of the dance. Just as the opponent may be doing slightly different things in different lines, and it is unreasonable for us to assume that we can do one single movement to match all possible opponents, it is also unreasonable for us to assume that all swordsmen are identical. A person with a replacement knee or hip, a person with a missing foot or withered thigh may not physically be able to sit in seiza. Is it reasonable to tell them that they cannot pass a grading? Actually it's perfectly reasonable, an organization may do as it wishes with their ranking standards so why not refuse these people the chance to grade. But is it reasonable to say these people cannot do iaido? To me it's a matter of what is correct as opposed to what is standard. A person who cannot sit in seiza may not be able to do what is described in the book, but that same person would never be in seiza in the first place. Correct iaido is as much about what the swordsman does as it is about what the opponent does, and to teach that you should be in seiza when you can not be there, or even when you should not be there, is bad teaching. It is not our job as teachers to encourage our older or injured students to get into seiza if this will shorten the lifetime of their knees. To be blunt, it is irresponsible for us to demand that our students risk their future mobility for our whims today. It is irresponsible for us to demand it of ourselves, iaido is about being prepared, training that prevents us from doing our job in the future is bad training.

We need to be honest about the demands we put on our students. If we say "you can't grade because you can't do seiza" that's one thing, but if we say "you can't do iaido because you can't do seiza" that's another thing entirely. The seitei gata tend to encourage the idea that one size fits all, and the koryu, at least as I teach it, does exactly the opposite, the student and the teacher must adapt the art to the man not the other way around.

One size fits one.

By all means, try to be as standard in your seitei gata as you can, do it as close to the book as possible, and leave the worries about whether or not you can pass for that attempt, to the judging committee. If they decide it's close enough you'll pass, but never think that they are passing judgement on your iai, just your approach to their standard. In fact, a panel passes judgement on how close they believe you approached the standard, established by the head of your organization, in my case the iaido section of the CKF. You do your kata as closely to the standard as you understand it, and the panel judges you according to their understanding of that standard. It's a wonder anyone passes.

*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.*