

My Sensei Says

The Martial Instructions of Goyo Ohmi



©2020 Sei Do Kai, all rights reserved

Introduction

I first met Goyo Ohmi sensei in 1987 and have been his student ever since. That means I have been with him for more than half my life. As far as budo is concerned, I have no doubt that he has been my greatest influence. I have had many teachers of many arts over the years, but only three sensei, one is retired and the second has died. I have only ever had one iaido sensei and have never wished for another. I hope to practise with Ohmi sensei for the rest of my life.

The Sei Do Kai was formed in 1987 as well, so it is in its 33rd year under the supervision of Ohmi sensei. In 1991 we organized the first Guelph Spring Seminar with Matsuo Haruna sensei as chief instructor. This was, and remains Ohmi sensei's seminar, a place where he could meet and practise with senior instructors from Japan and elsewhere. Over time it has become that place for many more people, including many of sensei's students who now teach in their own dojo.

This book is certainly not a complete outline of sensei's instruction, rather it is a few snapshots from recent years as I stepped back from practise to make more detailed notes during seminars. You can take every word here as from sensei, rather than from me. It is organized, if you can call it that, into a simple chronological order from 2013 or so. If you want to find sensei's instruction from earlier years, simply look at the books on iai that I have written. It's all there, it's all his.

This book is a big thank you to Ohmi sensei for his kindness, and his approach to the arts. What is that? I well recall a road trip in the late 1980s where it was agreed that we would not ever work selfishly. That we would instead, always work for the students of iaido.

Since those days I have watched as student after student, country after country have fallen under sensei's charm, which often consists of much yelling and stomping and claims of not liking the inattentive and fumbling students in the room. Always accompanied a little while later by a huge grin. I have met many people who have told me that Ohmi sensei terrified them "until I got to know him". My very first memory of sensei was of him saying "I won't teach you, go sit on the bench there, you can watch me". I have been watching him ever since.

Kim Taylor 2020
renshi nanadan, CKF iaido
Sei Do Kai

History, Growth and Splinters (introduction 2)

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

"SDK really started in 1983 when I learned some iaido for a week from Mitsuzuka Takeshi sensei at an Aikido seminar in Amhurst New Hampshire I think it was. I spent the next couple of years devouring everything I could in the form of books (there were no videos) on the subject and practicing what I knew (5 Shinden kata) with Bruce Morito, a fellow student. In 1987 that student found Ohmi sensei in Toronto and we actually did the "waiting at the gate" thing before he'd let us practise in the same room. He had stopped teaching because nobody hung around long enough to make the distraction from his own practise worth his while. When the two of us started showing up regularly Cruise sensei joined us from Etobicoke and we had the nucleus of a group.

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

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

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

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

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

Why? Because I always figured it would be a lot more benefit to the arts here if I spent the price of my ticket and stay in Japan on a sensei's ticket to Guelph where instead of one student learning, we could have 100 learn. I'm copying all my old VHS tapes to DVD at the moment and I'm looking at the Kyoto

seminar from 1997, I'm seeing a dozen or so of the senior Canadian students of iaido practicing in a gym in Kyoto, all of which practised at the summer seminar in Guelph, so I'm happy with my decision.

March 2, 2013



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 practise.

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.

June 9, 2013

Transmission

I was at one of my favourite seminars last weekend, the Welland iaido seminar which brings together the senior instructors in the area. This year it was Ohmi sensei, Criuse sensei and me for 7dans and Dave Green and Carole Galligan for the 6dans. A lovely time and great organization, both from an administration point of view, and from the structure of the seminar where the students break into levels and the instructors rotate between groups. You get to teach three different levels in a day and it's really quite a lot of fun. Not to mention educational for someone like me who has only small mixed classes. I seldom get the chance to teach to the level, sticking mostly with overall concepts and then individual help. It's actually easier to say only what the group needs to hear and much more satisfying for all I think. No distractions with instruction you can't use or don't need, more concentrated in other words.

At the seminar I was able to give Ohmi sensei the 5 new manuals I managed to get done. He made a comment about them later that I corrected in a hurry with the following story. Back in 1987 or so Ohmi sensei was teaching me the Muso Jikiden Eishin Ryu and I would occasionally show up with a book which I had written and my mother had illustrated. His comment at that time was "I teach you a set and a week later you turn up with a book".

Well, sure I suppose I did... probably not a week later but it didn't take long to produce them, simply because I wasn't really writing, Ohmi sensei was. They are nothing more or less than my notes on his teaching. (And as accurate as that sort of process is, so don't blame him for my mistakes).

As a result, I can't take credit, really, for the books, they aren't mine, they are my teacher's. Whatever is in them is a result of his learning, his research, his teaching and I've never thought of them otherwise.

Perhaps he would say that his knowledge is only what his teachers gave him, but it was he who gave to me so as far as I'm concerned, he's the man. Maybe some day my students will write something and say "I got it from Kim" and maybe then I'll feel as if it is mine, but somehow I doubt it. I may be speaking but mostly I'm "spoken through".

That's transmission, that's the lineage. If you go somewhere and get a certificate or some such qualification from a teacher who is not your own, it's really not transmission, it's certification. It's that teacher saying "sure, you know such and such". He may recognize it, but he didn't teach it so it's not really transmission, it's not teacher to student.

Transmission goes beyond technique. Any Muso Jikiden Eishin Ryu teacher can comment on my technical knowledge of the kata in the school. Those are pretty standardized, with style differences being easily recognized as such by anyone who's been around a couple decades. Transmission is certainly the kata, but it's also the background, the feeling and the style, the approach to those kata. The books I gave to my teacher last weekend were not, by and large, my notes of his teaching, much of what is in there is the result of my research into the school, of teachings received from other instructors, and inevitably of influences from my other arts, but the kata were from the MJER lineage and so my understanding of them is rooted firmly in the school, and the school as transmitted to me by my teacher.

In other words, even if my teacher does not know or practise some of the sets I have written about, in a very real way I learned them from him.

If someone feels that I've made a mistake, that's on me of course, but I'm betting the critique will be as much about style as about fundamental problems with the mechanics. I'm betting that my basis of understanding is pretty good, it came from a pretty good source.

Feb 3, 2014

Data Arashi

My sensei says that we aren't allowed to go out and test the techniques of our sword school any more against those of other sword schools. He says that those days have been over for a few generations now, and we are supposed to read and research instead.

He says that by reading what the old guys said, and researching into things with our own students we can preserve the sort of understanding that comes with trying this stuff out with sharp swords.

So that's what I do.

And while I'm reading I read about all these secret techniques that are only shown to the highest level students and I read about all these folks who are really mad that old videos of past sensei show up on the net, and it makes me wonder.

Are these secrets held back for the seniors because we may need them to use on a student who has turned evil, and needs to be defeated at the end of the movie with the super-duper-secret-screw-punch? Are we to keep our ancestors' swordwork secret in case we decide to go all dojo arashi on the school a block over?

Or does a secret make us feel special? Is an upper level technique simply a way of saying to a student "there, now you've got the special technique along with the certificate, the bokuto and the founder's special moustache cup so go forth and see if you can keep this damned school alive for one more generation".

Or is grampa a bit of an embarrassment with his wonky knee and busted elbow? What if some kid says his swordwork is crap? Oh no, what could we do? Well we could turn the comments off on the youtube channel I suppose, but leave gramps up there for those of us who are researching, to look at... please.

Same with your website, it may be out of date but that's exactly what us bookish types want, old information, stuff that isn't up to the current revisionist standards. You have no idea how comforting it is to see a hundred year old photo that shows folks doing the kata the same as we do it... or even better, showing them doing it differently. Combine that with a fifty year old video of their students doing it "all wrong" and we have something special. Now put that together with some writing from two hundred years ago, put some dates to names, figure out who taught who and you've got a much deeper appreciation for the school as a living, breathing thing rather than some glass wind-chime ready to be shattered at the first breath of cold winter wind.

Across the street is a mom with two toddlers, a stroller and a dog. The kids are trying to climb the ice to push the crosswalk button for themselves and mom is trying to juggle the lot of them, so that nobody gets hurt. It takes longer than mom slapping them back into the stroller and doing it herself, but those kids will do well I bet. Teach your kids how to cross the road, don't forbid them to do it without you.

What you earn is always deeper than what you're given, and since we can't go dojo arashi, go data arashi instead. Put your archive online and let someone else match it against theirs, that way both of you earn brownie points and learn things. I suspect that after all the trouble and sore legs that Grampa went to, to make that old super-8 film, he'd be well chuffed to know that it's had 4000 views in the last month. Tough old begger that he was, I bet he'd have something to say to the 15 year old kid who called his technique crap as well. Maybe even a good cuff around the earhole.

March 28, 2014

Don't correct other people's students

A while ago we had a seminar and "my sensei said" quite a bit about being a senior. Specifically he was talking about how to keep learning while being a teacher. One thing jumped into my mind just now, as I was looking at one of the old martial arts forums online where folks were obsequiously (my new favourite word) criticizing various videos online.

Ohmi sensei said "Do not correct (criticize) other people's students. Look at them, see their mistakes and look at yourself to make sure you are not making those same mistakes". Great advice indeed, I have never looked at any iai performance and not seen at least one "mistake" that I make myself. If that video is of a highly ranked sensei I take solice and if it's a lower ranked student I become inspired to correct myself before that student corrects it and passes me by.

I am pleased to say that I have no desire to correct either my betters or my juniors. I will offer advice if asked of course, but it has been a long time (about the equivalent of nidan in iai and about 3rd kyu in aikido) since I have felt compelled to demonstrate my knowledge. Best just to provide an example of your brilliance so that others can be inspired to follow.

As I think deeper about this, I don't think I criticize my own students all that much. What use is it to say "you're doing it wrong" (I'm usually a lot more snarky about it than that) if you've already told them once how to do it correctly. I figure if I tell them and they don't do it, I was unclear and I find another way to tell them. Mostly though, I prefer to build on what they are doing correctly than to correct what they are not. That way they move ahead while feeling that they are moving ahead. To teach by correction gives them the feeling that they are not improving at all.

Was I, just now, correcting other people's students who are teachers? Not my intention at all. This is what I do and how I feel about it, you are welcome to take what you wish from that. Remember, if you treat it like advice then it's worth what you paid for it.

After a grading I get students who come and ask for corrections. Apart from saying "ask your sensei" I try not to offer anything. I will to those who are especially persistent but then it's usually to question what they are asking, how to pass the next exam or how to improve their iaido. How to do stuff like I want to see it done, or how to get past the rest of the committee. By then their eyes usually glaze over and they wander away to ask the next guy. Gradings aren't the place to ask me for advice.

Seminars where we are both watching a senior sensei are also not the place to ask me for advice. Go ask the guy in charge, not me. Not unless the guy in charge (usually Ohmi sensei) looks at me and says "answer him". Then it's not you getting advice, it's me getting tested. Even if you're my student at that same seminar, go ask the big guy. Now, do I ask questions that someone has asked me but won't ask the big guy? Sure I do, I was told a very long time ago that one of the functions of a senior is to look stupid in front of sensei so the juniors don't. You think the big guys figure I'm asking that stupid question for myself?

Probably.

Some things I've seen at seminars: Senior students correcting others off in the corner (or even in the middle of the crowd) while sensei is speaking to that very same point up front. Classic. I especially like to watch the students try to ignore the senior and listen to the sensei. I've seen those senior students then move around in front of said junior, turning their back on sensei in the process, just to make sure they get their correction across. Magnificent. The best of all is watching a senior get bodily pulled away by his buddies as he begins to contradict the point just made, and clarified, by the sensei in charge of the seminar. Unforgettable.

Speaking of which, how about a student at a seminar who flat out tells a sensei that he is wrong because so and so other sensei said to do it this way. And proceeds to demonstrate the "correct" way. I kid you not, I've seen it more than once. All of these incidents get no mention from the sensei in charge at the time (don't correct other people's students). The biggest reaction might be a small smile and nod accompanied by a sort of hmm sound. That's at the seminar, consider what happens later that evening when sensei tracks down that student's teacher.

Don't correct other people's students.

If you are asked to do so, assume you are the one being tested or you're being used for the different pitch of your voice, maybe a different pitch will get through the buildup of wax in that student's ears.

July 8, 2014

Bill Mears Memorial Seminar

This past weekend was the Bill Mears 10 year memorial seminar in St. Catherines. This was a one day event which, for those who didn't make it, went as follows. First a memorial service for Bill, then warmups, followed by seitei gata for the rest of the morning. In the afternoon we did koryu, splitting into two groups, shinden and jikiden.

The morning class was as one would expect, but we had enough instructors to split into five groups so everyone got grade-specific instruction. I had the shodan group and tried to jump them over nidan by asking them to loosen up the hands and shoulders and focus instead on the hips. Never too early to start relaxing the hands apparently, as my student told me that my hands were too tense during my demonstration at the end of the day. Haven't improved a bit since my 6dan test it seems.

Bill would laugh.

Koryu in the afternoon was taught by Ohmi sensei and Cruise sensei. I shooed my student over to the shinden class so that she could get some experience for the day she begins to sit on panels. I'm not too worried that any student of mine would be dogmatic about style as we tend to do a lot of different arts and play with some different styles for each. However, watching me demonstrate is different than having instruction from a sensei in that tradition so I like to see my students stretch their experience when they can handle it. Some people never get to that stage, as we discussed in the after-seminar dinner.

Ohmi sensei began his Jikiden class with a discussion of the various styles that exist in our kendo organization. I was amused to hear him tell everyone that my style wasn't his style. Now whose fault is that? I learned his style only, for several years but then he began shifting my style toward that of Haruna sensei so that I eventually became the 'orrible mess I am now. Funny thing is, what he created suits me just fine and I have no complaints. Sensei explained some of his history to the class, the lineage to the Shumpukai in Osaka where he learned, and the lineage of Haruna sensei which is now the main influence on our local Jikiden. Along the way he mentioned the other influences.

Of course, just to make sure nobody got the wrong idea he then pointed out that we all have our sensei and that we had better do what sensei tells us to do until at least the equivalent of our kendo federation 4dan grade. Once we get toward 5dan we can start thinking about our own iai.

One thing he mentioned was the tendency of some sensei, some of them quite senior, to simply "act". I have heard the same thing from a hanshi who called certain movements "over-acting" and the idea fit quite nicely with a thought of my own while watching the opening ceremonies of the Pan Am games, as well as watching two "sports" shows at the bar last night. One was some Japanese game-show inspired "ninja contest" and another was a UFC fight. My thought was "my sports are not entertainment".

We went through Omori Ryu and discussed those things that are distinctive from seitei gata and those things that should be the same, the latter mostly mechanics and feeling. Speaking of seitei and koryu, one of our senior sensei just spent a month in Japan after being away for several decades. He noticed a pronounced drift of his koryu toward the style of seitei, not so much to lament the changes but in surprise that something that was originally seen as some sort of necessary bit of extra stuff had, through the grading and tournament systems, become central to the practise.

All in all I get the feeling that we here in Canada aren't too worried about moving our koryu toward seitei, we don't have the same focus on tournaments. Grading, while much more common than tournaments, is still only a maximum of twice yearly. We have the luxury of time to work on the koryu. (And of course there's none so Scots as the Scots abroad. We overseas folk are pretty conservative with our budo.)

Bill Mears would have approved. He hated tournaments and barely tolerated gradings as a necessary evil. He was a traditionalist and his nickname was "The Hard Bastard". I suspect this came partly from his insistence on proper iai (including etiquette), but also on his days as a biker in England. It was those days of riding hard-sprung motorcycles over poorly-paved road that did in his back. Bill had back problems, mostly he had too much back I think. He was a pain in my neck from me looking up at him.

One of his students asked me for a story about Bill so here it is. During one of his stays in hospital to get his back worked on he told me he had been visited by the tengu. Well actually he told me he was high on morphine for the pain and before he went under for the surgery he worked out an entire new school of iai. Unfortunately he didn't get it written down and could only remember part of one kata which was called "Ebi no Ashi". During this kata one poked repeatedly at the feet of one's opponent as if trying to skewer all the feet of a shrimp.

A lovely man, Canadian iaido wouldn't be where it is without him and it would be a lot further forward if he was still with us. I miss him.

July 16, 2014

Stuff my Sensei Said

My sensei said that some advice from Japanese Admiral Yamamoto on training went: Show them, explain it to them, make them sweat and then praise them.

My sensei said that he uses: Show them, explain it to them, make them sweat, then criticize them, tell them what's wrong.

If you praise students they think they understand it and stop improving. Just tell them "dame" (dah may) and make them do it again.

Nov 3, 2014



Saya no Uchi

On a recent seminar Ohmi sensei mentioned saya no uchi so I thought I'd write a bit on it. Among many things, Sensei said that his secret was in the scabbard, that one should win before drawing the sword, that to draw 100 times and win 100 times was just luck, to not draw was skill. Students frowned in confusion.

So a bit of background. Saya no uchi was one of the old names for iaido, and it would perhaps have originally meant exactly what it says. Stuff you do when your sword is in the scabbard.

Kono Hyakuren said that the secret of iai is in the scabbard, it would be masterful to defeat an opponent without drawing the sword but if forced, the crucial moment is when the sword leaves the scabbard. To win 100 times in 100 encounters is not the way of mortals, to win without drawing is the secret.

Yokoyama Hiromichi, in a letter from 1996 said that his teacher, Yamamoto Harusuke made this very clear. Iaijutsu is saya no uchi, iai exists until kenjutsu takes part. Iai exists in the saya. If you fail to kill without quick kiritsuke and nukitsuke he draws his sword and now it is kenjutsu against kenjutsu.

Ohmi sensei said that you must obtain victory while the sword is still in the saya. This is a familiar concept to kendo, hit the opponent, then swing your shinai. It means, in a very practical way, that you must put your opponent at a disadvantage before attacking or the outcome will certainly be in doubt. It can also mean having the correct attitude, you will not win if you don't see a victory in your mind. Sun Tsu stated that victorious warriors obtain the win before going to war. Losers go to war and then seek to win. Think about the past few "asian wars" to understand this. Think about Afganistan, what was the mission? What were the parameters of victory? The very mention of "mission creep" usually means a war is about to be lost, or at the least not won.

Saya no uchi no kachi is sometimes interpreted as a moral, spiritual victory by not drawing the sword and this is often contrasted with the more "battle ready" idea of winning before striking. The Kendo Federation states that those who practise iai will develop a well trained, indomitable soul where the morality and character of budo is calmly possessed and this will so overwhelm the enemy that one will win without drawing the sword. They also mention winning before drawing of course. This overwhelming of the opponent is expressed physically in iai in the concept of nuki tsuke in Omori Ryu or the first two kata of kendo federation iai, to suppress the opponent with the draw so that if he backs down before saya banari, the point where the sword leaves the scabbard, all is finished.

Up to now we have saya no uchi simply being the name for iaido. We have the idea of iaido being that stuff that happens when the sword is in the scabbard, that iaido "is" saya no uchi. Then we have the idea that iaido exists because the sword is in the saya, and that victory is already present in the saya. "The fight is yours to lose".

To extend this a bit further, the idea of saya no uchi can be considered as a metaphor. You have a sword in a saya, you have skill in the budo and can defeat any opponent, you have a strong army, a nuclear weapon. Big Dogs don't pay much attention to small dogs, so a man with skills in iaido doesn't need to

draw his sword out of fear. He can withhold it and thus defuse the fight. A small dog is scared and declares his willingness to fight the big dog, the big dog accepts or declines, only if he accepts will there be a fight. If you have no weakness, no openings in your kamae there can be no attacks that succeed and so no reason to attack (and thus open yourself up to a counterattack since no attack is ever without an opening).

It is fear that is the problem. Fear causes attack and there are many types of fear. There is much talk lately about the end of the American Empire and one of the main features of the end of any empire has been that series of small indecisive wars which occur as the empire tries to maintain its dominance and does nothing more than prove it no longer has the heart for a fight. The USA has a military which is stronger than the next five or six largest militaries combined, but it (thankfully) has no will to use it. I say thankfully because my country is, and has always been, a logical target for expansion. With the loss of the Soviet Union there is no challenge to the firepower of the USA and no reason to get into small proxy wars so all should be peaceful, a big, big dog sunning itself on the front steps. Yet this giant has gone into Iraq, Afganistan and who knows where else, expending old munitions, granted, but chasing whisps, bits and scraps of something called "terrorists" and creating far more of them than it has eliminated. There is nothing like a decades long war on the borders to prove that the old Roman Army hasn't got it any more. And why? Fear, fear from the leaders who won't commit to a major war of extermination and expansion (those days are over), fear that is cynically used to keep the leaders in power and distract the population with "dangerous enemies".

Better to keep the sword in the scabbard, better to simply ignore the little yapping dog nips around the heels. The little cur will run out of bravado and the fear will take over, or perhaps its owner will drag it away for fear that the sword will be drawn.

Saya no Uchi

Kim Taylor

I Don't Look Like My Sensei

A friend of mine in Japan expressed some sadness a few years ago when reporting on a national iaido championships, over the sameness of everyone's iai. This wasn't really all that surprising of course, with a set of judges who have a standardized idea of what they want to see, you will get a serious attempt by the competitors to show that to them. It is the same for any judged sport such as gymnastics or figure skating, a certain set of expectations that are going to be met by those who move through the rounds so that as you get closer to the finals the sameness increases.

In those western sports at least you will get kata (routines) that mix up the kihon (basic jumps and spins) but in iai there is not even this chance to innovate. The kata are selected from a small set and everyone will perform them. Closest to the ideal will win.

What does vary? When a koryu kata is requested, then it's your chance to show your individual stuff. Maybe.

You still have to get the approval of the judges and that means compromise. My sensei is considering challenging for 8dan and has been told that he will need to modify his koryu style because most of the judges practise another koryu style and expect to see things a certain way.

If you want to win competitions or pass gradings you will perform what the judges require of you. That may irritate some but you are free not to compete or grade. It's not up to you to set the standards, you accept the judgment of those who do when you stand in front of them. Otherwise don't stand in front of them.

You think a gymnast at an international level says to herself "I've got a better way to land a dismount and it involves running three steps forward"? Maybe a diver says "I think this dive calls for a giant splash at the end"? They aren't going to go very far are they? Yet what difference does sticking a landing make?

The complication comes when you add in the martial aspect of budo, when you start thinking that iai isn't a set of ideal physical techniques to be approached. I was once compared to a very talented Japanese iaido champion who has won the nationals at just about every rank. As I started puffing out my chest my sensei, who was translating at the moment, pointed a finger at me and said "That's not a compliment! The style is robotic, you hit every key point but you haven't developed any spirit".

At higher rank gradings the judges are instructed to start looking for this spirit in the challengers. By 5dan in my organization you are supposed to be technically perfect so what else do you differentiate on? This is something that you don't see in the three meter springboard. "OH his spirit was great for that last dive, you could see the intensity in his eyes. He ought to get high marks for that one". OK you got me, think back to sticking a landing in gymnastics. Think balance and poise.

The focus in koryu iai is something a little different, it has much less to do with standards and obtaining grades and winning tournaments. At least it should. In my opinion.

You see how much trouble I have making statements about koryu? It's not monolithic, it's individual and I don't even teach my koryu the way my sensei taught it to me. Well no, that's not accurate, my koryu doesn't look like his but I certainly teach it and perform it as he taught it to me. You see, I'm a different size, I weigh more and my injuries are different than his so he taught me to do things the way he figured I should do them, not necessarily the way he does them.

This includes the little style things, the twitches and bobs that juniors figure are so very important. Some things I was taught and maintain, some things I was taught and my sensei has moved away from, or back to, but where we differ makes no difference. If we can both show how the movement allows no opening, or permits a response to an unexpected attack, we're both correct. You can tell the same story in two different ways to an adult.

Don't try that with kids, I found that out, when I read mine bedtime stories and changed the words. I was instantly benched and mom put back in because they weren't interested in hearing a different story. You read it as it was written or you get out of the bedroom. So be it, different situations call for different actions. When in a grading you do what the judges want, when on your own practising your koryu you do what makes most sense to you at the time. In one case you have the feedback of the judges. In the other you have your sensei and if he's not there you have kasso teki.

With a grading you never have to ask why you passed or failed, you were close enough or you weren't. With the koryu it comes down to "I don't look like my sensei.... why?"

Nov 15, 2014

Show me what grade you are

My shoulders are screaming and my head is pounding this morning, but it was worth it. Our late-night jodo class turned into a basics-intensive drive to understand distance, timing and the correct application of power and softness to achieve the same. Sounds pretty basic doesn't it, but my two four/five dans who were there got something entirely different than your usual "take three steps and hit him in the head here".

I call them four/five dans because that's what they are in my head. I've never forgotten what my sensei said back in 1987 when we had no gradings to attend. He said "go out on the floor and show them what rank you are". Now, almost 30 years later, we're again at the stage where there are no gradings available for many of those in the federation. So I return to the beginning and treat my students according to what rank they are, not what paper they own.

These two are somewhere between four and five dan easily, even if they have topped out at third dan, according to the chances to take a test. What a ridiculous situation, one that has dropped our practicing jodo population to less than half what it was five years ago. But not these two, and that's good. If you're sweating and scared during a practise, if you're standing still, not able to move for fear of getting killed should you do the wrong thing, all without the spur of "practising for the test", you're my sort of student and I'll tear my shoulders apart to teach you what I know. Tear you apart to get you to put yourself back together in a better way.

Students who don't care about the paper on their wall deserve instructors who couldn't care less what you call them in class.

I have never had any patience with this ego-driven insistence on "respect" in the martial arts. Respect is what you earn by how you treat your students, not by what rank you've managed to purchase or by how long you've been hanging around the boss. By the way, that doesn't always mean being a nice guy, but it certainly doesn't mean being a puffed-up jerk. The same goes for students, their respect is earned by how hard they try to learn what I'm trying to teach, not by their skills at sucking up.

I've known "students" that make the word "sensei" sound like an insult. Mostly because they mean it like that. "I'm only calling you sensei because you have a higher rank than I do even though I am better than you". Social climbing, smarmy little twits. Oh, you've met?

Don't call me sensei unless you're my student. And if you were my student you probably wouldn't call me sensei. Last night I got told "Kim, you're not doing the kiai on maki otoshi in the right place". You'd think that I could fix that wouldn't you? This from a student who had been yelled at for an hour up to that point. Was there any feeling of "aha now I told you something" to it? Not at all, just a senior student reminding sensei that he needs to fix something that gets looked at during those non-existent gradings.

Jan 13, 2015

Riai and Research

Does my study of academic papers truly help with my understanding of budo, or should I simply get out to practise more often?

Being an academic, spending most of my working life in a University setting, I'm not likely to say that research is useless. Having written 20 plus books on the subject I'm also not likely to fall on the side of "just do what your sensei says". In fact my sensei says that I have to write a book which starts with "My sensei says" because he read one from the past where the author did just that.

Every book I've written should be read with "my sensei says" at the start of each paragraph. It's father's day and all my budo fathers are being thanked for their teaching. Not with cards, but if I see one today I'll buy him a beer.

I'm going through research abstracts at the moment, all from the same journal, and making comments that force me to read the abstracts closely. These are all papers written in Japanese so no hope of my reading the whole thing to come to the meaning. Makes you appreciate a good abstract writer. In fact, with five companies controlling access to research these days, abstract-driven research is going to become more common. There's no way under the sun that I'm going to pay \$35 for a reprint of a non-scientific paper. I'm not going to be replicating methods in this type of research, but I do need more than a glance over the abstract and a note in my head that "I've read it". If for no other reason than to put it out there to my students, along with the reference, so that when I say "kendo is as old as most koryu" they don't call BS at me. Did you really just say to yourself "depends on your definition"? Hah, you relativistic lefty academic you.

Back to the point, (hey, it's Sunday morning and this dad was never going to get breakfast in bed but he can take his time over coffee). Does my reading of abstracts increase my ability to hit someone else on the head with a stick?

Yeah, it does. Understanding the historical roots of techniques means I know the rationale behind them. Sure I could continue on, the way I did when I was a beginner, and have trust in my sensei, I still have trust in my sensei, but some of them are no longer with me. Do I simply stop here? Repeat what they told me until I die, hoping that the kata will teach me instead?

It's not a bad plan, the kata do teach me, but if I want to figure out what the original meaning was, I need to get things in context and the only way to do that is to understand the history. Take the idea that square hips and control of the centerline is a kendo thing. Not exclusive to kendo of course, but central to the art as practised now. Where did that come from? How does it flavour the iaido of the kendo federation? How would it influence koryu done by the sensei who are in the kendo federation? How does knowing that hips were not always so square help my practise of koryu?

You see what I mean. It's not that I didn't know that kendo is square hips and other arts like Aikido are not, I have known that since the beginning, having done both. But to read the history of how hips got where they are, gives me some extra comfort as I experiment with my own. Knowing some history lets

me understand where my Aikido teacher's teacher came up with that marvellous straight line at the end of his circular techniques. That line that cut the motion of balance right out from under you and launched you into the air. I knew it was there as a beginner but I used to grow doubt when other folks told me with massive authority that there were no straight lines in Aikido.

Part of becoming a senior is being able to pat a beginner on the head and say "yes indeed son, there is only one way to do this and you must learn that way".

As a "30 year man" should I still believe that? Well I could, and I could probably get the highest ranks available in any organization by simply doing things "the right way" but what fun would that be? And what chance would I have of advancing the art? My buddy Jeff in Japan has lamented for years about the homogenization of iaido and I sympathize. When all the teachers are interchangeable how do we ever get to the point where we figure we can use our special understanding to drop the other guy? Part of the special, advanced teachings of budo is "the edge". That's a belief that you have something that will give you the advantage in a real fight. If you're all clones of the top guy (wow I can't even get myself to say "the right way") then it's all just a crapshoot as to who walks away from the swordfight. Except for the top guy of course since he gets to use a variant of a technique to beat you, which variant then becomes "the right way".

Part of the confidence that lets you toe the line in a fight is the belief that you have a chance, and often that comes from a belief that your teacher has trained you well and distinctively. If your teacher is all about "doing it the right way" or "doing it the way it's supposed to be done" you are going to have to hope your teacher is a better mimic than the other guy's teacher. Me, I like my iconoclastic sensei, none of them were ever worried about a grading or a competition, they were going to show their art and the hell with the judges.

That's a hard lesson, it's a major change in attitude from the blindly following beginner. You must believe, you must trust, you must follow to learn, but if you don't break away from that, you'll never do your sensei the pride of passing him by.

Reading the academic papers is part of that, if only to demonstrate to yourself that the old guys in the old days were not inclined to sit at the feet of the master forever. In fact, the master gave them some paper to remind them what the names of the kata were, and booted them out the door to go find their own way. Hopefully while they were still young enough to learn something.

June 21, 2015

Peterborough Koryu Seminar

My sensei says...

Before that, I'd like to say many thanks to Jim Wilson and his crew in Peterborough for their work with yet another lovely Muso Jikiden Eishin Ryu seminar. I think this is the fourth, may there be many more. I'm impressed that so many students will attend a koryu seminar with an instructor who is not their direct teacher. It's nice to see that they have faith that they will be made welcome and their particular lineage will be respected.

I'm not, however, surprised. Ohmi sensei said, during his introductory comments, that you follow your sensei, even if you're not here in front of him, you follow your sensei because that's the way of koryu. Ohmi sensei has always been welcoming and has always given his best for the students in front of him. That's the arrangement we made when our group started way back when, that it would be about the students and not about us. So if you're in front of my sensei he will do his best to teach you. He's not interested in being a big shot, and he leads reluctantly to say the least, but we won't let him quit. The result is that there were students from at least a dozen different instructors at the seminar. I heard not one word of disagreement with anything he said, not one sigh of frustration that he "was doing it wrong". Sure it was a self-selecting group but I'd like to believe that we are perhaps growing out of the attitude that we have nothing to learn from anyone except our own sensei who has all the secrets in his head.

I happened to be passing one of my own students who said "I'm waiting to see which section Ohmi sensei is teaching and I'm going there". Good. That's as it should be, even if I'm teaching on the other side of the room. Go where it's going to do you the most good.

My sensei also said, and I quote, "If you're 7dan seitei you better show me 7dan koryu". I'm pretty sure I know who that was aimed at, I'm going to take it that way regardless. I need those boots to the butt in order to keep my ego in check. (OK don't spray your coffee all over.) If you don't have a little pounding down once in a while your head can get all pointy so thanks sensei.

His meaning is pretty clear, you can concentrate on the technical movements of iaido and get to a pretty high grade without learning much about the "mindly" aspects of budo. From my point of view, seitei is amazing for learning body control. It's a defined (standard) practise that you can be taught by dozens and hundreds of instructors. One mountain, many viewpoints. Those same instructors, and this is my sensei's point, can also give you insights to the mental aspects of the art if you are willing to listen.

That can be good and bad. It can be a great breadth of understanding or it can be a confusing jabber of voices. That's where you need a pure stream of knowledge, a steady frame to contain all that other information. You need your koryu teacher, the one who has a unified understanding, a straight line, a single path up the mountain for you to follow.

You can't climb two paths at the same time, but it can be a tremendous help if someone on the path beside yours can look ahead and tell you about that cliff to the left. Seitei is the "Grouse Grind" a

stairway up a mountain in Vancouver that has dozens of people on it at any one time, climbing all day long. Koryu is the pathway around the other side with you and your guide. Both are ways up. On your sensei's path you see his backside and not much else, on the Grind it's wider (I imagine, my daughter told me about it, I've never been), there's room for you, your sensei, his buddies and their sensei so you can listen in on the gossip as you learn how to put one foot in front of the other.

To further bend the metaphor, there can be cross-linking paths between the two of them and now I've told you that you can't climb two paths at the same time but that you can climb two paths. When I first started my iai practise my sensei had to tell us to at least go through seitei once every practise. Thirty years later he has to remind us to work on koryu as much as on seitei.

Thanks for the reminder sensei. And thanks for the chance to get the reminder Peterborough Iaido.

Nov 9, 2015

The devil is in the details

My sensei says he uses seitei to research his iai. Me too. It's grading season and the students say they want to practise seitei when I ask them what we're doing in class. So we do.

I like working on seitei because it is a nice platform to work on the details, the finicky bits of body movement that make iai look good. It's all about looking good of course, because what looks good to us budo types is something that's centered, balanced, comes from the hips, and is powerful.

I use seitei for that because it's the place where the devil is in the details. It's only 12 kata so you learn the shapes pretty fast and from then on it's all fiddly bits around the fiords. Working on how to make a movement of half an inch forward with the tip of the sword before curving it up over your head, or switching the driving foot from back to "front becomes back" instead of falling forward is easily and naturally done in seitei. This leaves koryu for other things, like variation and exploration, something best left out of seitei.

Not that you don't find interesting things in familiar places. Yesterday I got tired of tripping over a box of tanto blanks so I started to process them. I found a couple from Brazillian Rosewood which must have been from that single flat of wood my supplier got many years ago when a dead-fall log was uncovered by a fire.

Seitei is the same, there are little gems to be found while practising it. Not "all grading points all the time". In amongst the frequent statements from my students along the lines of "Ohmi sensei told me that same thing last weekend" I usually find a few nuggets for myself. Just small things like a way to show micro-movements of the sword tip or how looking under your arm rather than over it can let a cut from Uke Nagashi fall to pieces.

What I find a lot though, which doesn't please me, is that I've not told these guys something that I am certain I told them twelve times. Sure I've said a lot of things over the years but some things seem more fundamental than others and to find that I haven't mentioned it (likely because I've heard myself saying it a thousand times) is a bit upsetting. "What do you mean I've never told you to do furi kaburi as if you are hooking the back of your opponent's neck and pulling him toward you. Of course I have... haven't I? Aargh!" And they dive for their notebooks.

Good thing it's all written down in my books.

Too bad they don't read them...

Nov 14, 2015

Metsuke

Yesterday was the seventh annual Welland iaido seminar and one of my favourite seminars in the year. This year was a gathering of forty people, a bit less than usual due to a conflicting kendo tournament and an iaido seminar in the United States. Those who attended the Welland seminar were noted and thanked (he said ominously) by the instructors and the "originals" as I like to put it. While there were many beginners the seminar had a real feel of being populated by those who agree with the original principles of our iaido. Those being the ideals of our two founders of iaido in this area, Goyo Ohmi sensei and Stephen Cruise sensei. As usual the structure was to rotate the instructors amongst the students, grouped by rank. Four instructors (Ohmi, Cruise, Carole Galligan and myself, Dave Green was tickled to be a student this year and watched each of the instructors with a critical eye I suspect).

This is Cruise sensei's seminar, his students being the organizers, and each year he gives a small talk which, for me at least, sets the tone of the instruction. His topic for yesterday was "Metsuke" which was highly appropriate considering I for one, was looking around at who was there and who was missing (he said, ominously again). I kid, I'm sure those who were at the kendo tournament (several from my own club I must admit) and those who were at the American seminar had a good time as well, but probably not as good a time as we had catching up with our old friends.

Back to the topic and never mind the gossip. Let's see what metsuke lessons I pulled from the seminar. First was the original mention by Cruise sensei, to watch what you are being taught and try that, rather than simply assume what you know what you are seeing and do what you always do even when told to do something else. Did he say all that? Those who know him will perhaps accuse me of embellishing a bit and they'd be right. I suspect what he really said was "watch carefully". And so I told my groups to watch carefully.

Extending this idea, I also reminded people that there are hundreds of hours of iaido video online these days, and there are "mirror neurons" in your brain that pick up and rehearse (mentally) what you are watching. This has been well known for a long time and you can read up about psycho-cybernetics and visualization and mental rehearsal if you wish. The effect is real and very useful so my question to everyone is "do you want to watch hours worth of people making mistakes so that you can laugh at them or do you want to watch the top people do what they do"? Those hours of fun might just be teaching you how to be funny for other people.

Yet we instructors have to watch our beginners endlessly don't we? I heard Ohmi sensei from across the room thundering at the senior group, accusing them of being little better than their students and saying "for every hour that you teach you must spend two hours practising". Wow, in my day it was an hour for an hour, it seems that inflation has caught up here too. His point is valid though, we really do need to spend some time on our own practising iaido if we want to improve. Still, there's no excuse for not learning while teaching and Cruise sensei mentioned this in his final comments by thanking the students for letting us "steal things" from them. I steal stuff from my students all the time, I'm not ashamed to admit that, I'm a lousy self-teacher, ego is way too big, I figure I know it all. It's good to be cracked over the head regularly by my students, metaphorically and literally. Every time I'm knocked down I learn something.

"Get knocked down six times, get up seven". (I still don't understand that math).

When you are teaching, look at your students and see your bad habits come to life multiple times. Listen to students ask you "should we be leaning forward as we draw the sword"? Ouch "Umm, err, my sword is really long and my knees hurt and...".

Better yet, look into your students and see the way the power moves through their body, get into their posture in your own head and figure out where their problem arises and then fix it. By doing this (use your mirror neurons) you are teaching yourself how to read others and this is something that you really need to work on if you only do iaido. How do you learn how to read the balance in an opponent if your opponent is imaginary? Metsuke, look hard at real people, see their strength and their weakness.

Finally, I asked the seniors to start thinking about riai, it's never too early to start working on your 8dan test, and the difference between the requirements for 7dan and 8dan is that single item. We were looking at a three-opponent kata at the time (Sanpogiri) and I said "what's the riai". A couple of people said "there's three opponents". Cue the rant about iaido vs any partner practise out there, where the partner practise starts from "here's your opponent, aim at him". Iaido isn't a puzzle, some crime novel where the position of the bodies is revealed on the last page, it really ought to start with a knowledge of where the opponents are. The kata says you cut there, there's an opponent there.

So not the position of the opponents then. Maybe, he said, since we've been talking about metsuke, maybe the riai of this kata is how to control multiple opponents with your metsuke. Metsuke as a tool, a weapon to create confusion and doubt. They all looked at me expectantly and I yelled at them "I don't know, I'm not an 8dan, you figure it out".

And come back and teach it to me.

Mar 13, 2016

My Summer Vacation

What I did on my summer vacation. I left a cold Ontario and twelve hours later landed in Sao Paulo for the Latin American Kendo Federation iaido and jodo seminar. Goyo Ohmi, my iaido sensei was along, and we eventually met up with four more iaido nanadan from the USA.

You haven't read about this before now because somewhere between the Toronto airport (pretty sure it was there) and Sao Paulo my tablet disappeared leaving me with my ebook reader as a communication device. Not a chance I was going to use it to write, so a few essays will probably never see the outside of my head. No cloud is without a silver lining is it?

The Thursday was spent doing that special sightseeing that happens around Ohmi sensei. A wander through the streets looking at trees, flowers, people, cars, dogs... in other words, just soaking in everyday life in a new place. Many thanks to Kojima sensei (President of CLAK) for wandering with us and treating us to a lunch of rice, beans, salad and steak, along with one of the dozen or so (it seems to me) Brazilian juices that start with G, and of course a bottle of beer. A typical lunch in a typical fast food joint. So nice to see an almost complete absence of our local burger joints.

In any case, if you are wondering what Sao Paulo looked like to me, it was Tokyo with graffiti. Lots of graffiti, some of it just scribbles (tags?) but some quite surreal artwork and much of it done by people who must be absolutely without fear. There was graffiti two or three stories up which must have been done by dangling on ropes or renting a hydraulic hoist because there was no other way to get there. Serious respect.

And respect for the drivers who somehow manage to merge and flow with their cars inches apart, their tempers under control, hands and blinkers in constant use. Not to mention horns that are for information instead of an invitation to fight. Oh and the "mad dogs", the hundreds of motorcycles screaming through any small gap in the traffic, peep peep - zoom. Now I was told that at least one dies each day and side mirrors are destroyed regularly but luckily we saw nothing of that. For my friends in Montevideo of four years ago, your traffic is a bit crazier but your motorcyclists a bit less "mad" I think. (Although that might be a horsepower thing).

Friday to Monday was the seminar. The first day was at the old Japanese Cultural Centre. A funky place with a corrugated steel roof, aircraft hanger style. I love buildings like this, they wear their history in a way that you would rarely see in Canada, I suspect lawyers would not permit it. The building will see some renovation soon I think someone told me. Regardless, if swordmen can't avoid a hump in a floor or a hole, they don't deserve the name. The surface grip was good, the goodwill was excellent and the practise happened.

Ah yes the practise, nothing wrong with the learning skills of South America, they managed to squeeze massive amounts of information out of the sensei while soaking it up like a sponge. None of this "oh I'm tired I wish we could have a break" talk that I could tell. More like "can we practise through lunch?".

The jodo classes started in the afternoon of the first day as far as I can recall, and I never saw my iaito after that. The first jodo class was in another room off the main floor and we worked through the afternoon with a five minute break to find me some water as my throat had gone completely dry. Did I mention these guys were good at squeezing it out of you? Notebooks and sharp attention will pull a lot more explanation than one might have given ordinarily.

And that's as it should be. If a group has few chances to practise with senior ranks (if you can call a godan a senior rank, which you can in the Americas) they ought to be given enough to work on until the next seminar. That's how we learned, a big bolus of information that took months to digest, sort of like an Anaconda with a goat. For myself I tried to give a feel for the inside of the kihon rather than sticking with the dance steps. Stuff that will help with self learning for the next few weeks rather than stuff you can get out of the book or from videos. I tried, I hope it was helpful.

The jodo students came from all over South America. There is a "hotspot" in Rio and another in Santiago, Chile with other, scattered folks who have been doing well learning from books and video. I mean that, I have no problem with people who learn on their own, they are generally motivated and hungry for information from a warm body.

The Chileans have been coming to the May seminar here in Guelph for a while now, and the Brazilians have been heading to Europe. Both, I will say once more, are in synch with each other and Kendo federation jodo so I say, don't worry and carry on as you have been doing. I suppose my biggest job was to reassure, I certainly didn't need to do a lot of "this foot here not here" correction.

The Brazilian group was started by Endo sensei, a wonderful teacher who learned his jodo in 1940s Japan. I was fascinated to see his demonstration of seitei and I am jealous of his students. If anyone has video of this demo I'd love to have a copy. I hope his students are taking serious note of his style because it is well worth preserving. As I mentioned at the seminar, the seitei jo I was teaching is the style you use to get your grades, it's fine, powerful, elegant, but it's not the only way. Endo sensei's way is lovely, all the more so for being distinct and I managed to steal a small thing, a hiki otoshi, that just delights me. DO NOT make the mistake of thinking what I was teaching is "correct", it is the current fashion (way of movement), it will get you your next rank, but it is not "correct".

The next day, Saturday, caught me a bit by surprise, I had on my grey uwagi thinking it was going to be the heavy lifting day, but in fact, we moved to a larger venue and had the official opening. Sore thumb, nail sticking up much? Oh well, I should know better by now. I hid down the end of the official photo but I suspect not well enough.

On the other hand, a light uwagi helped a lot as we took the jodo class outdoors to allow more room for iaido. The organizers were quite concerned about us being outside but I pointed out that the most critical of all dojo in jodo was what we'd call a deck attached to the side of a house. Jodo is for the ashigaru not the samurai. We went out and got our feet dirty and that's where I find myself quite a bit at seminars. The city of Calgary in Alberta is not a stranger to folks in dresses and hats hitting each other with sticks in the park.

The third day started with a grading and I was quite happy when we finished the 5dan tests... until someone told me that we still had 50 or 60 nidans to go through. OMG. That took us the rest of the way to noon.

Since quite a few folks left for home after the grading there was more room inside for our jodo group so we tried not to make too much noise and finished off our classes in the shade. My shiny red head thanked me. Of course when the kendo folk started their godo keiko we headed out once more and had one of those strange classes where you switch partners a lot as people bow out to catch buses and planes back home. Review, relaxed discussions and a slower pace which was good because I'd run out of things to say. Hah, right.

So a sayonara party that evening featuring more kinds of bbq meat than I knew existed, some formal sightseeing the next day (big buildings, statues, shopping) and off to the airport for an overnight trip home where I arrived dizzy, groggy, and much in need of the two naps I had until the 10pm to midnight jodo class at my own dojo.

Hmm, no wonder I'm a bit confused this morning, even after three cups of coffee.

To all who were so very kind to us, I thank you. You made my five day summer (freezing to 34C back to freezing) a joy.

March 23, 2016

Be Yourself

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

One thing that is different between Canada and Japan has been identified by my sensei. Canada is a multicultural society and has that mindset. The USA is a "melting pot" which means you'd better turn

into an American within a generation or else, and Japan is, well, unicultural. My sensei has been told that he is no longer Japanese, "good" he says. He really isn't, he is one of the most multicultural people I know. I very much doubt he'd be happy back in Japan.

What's the difference between Multicultural, Melting pot and Unicultural? One way to think about it is to look at the way we define our tribe. If you look for signs of inclusion, and those signs can expand, you're multicultural. If you look for signs of exclusion, for "the other" but you will accept strangers into the tribe as long as they assimilate, you are a melting pot, and if you simply look for signs of exclusion you're unicultural. OK that's pretty digital, nothing is black and white, but it might provide a starting point for thinking about culture.

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

Be yourself.

Then try to understand another culture.

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

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

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

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

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

I almost wrote "so why would you stay with such a sensei" but then I remembered my answer to my sensei on that plane flight 30 years ago. "I'm not interested in being Japanese or even learning Japanese culture, I do iaido because the practise of iaido is useful to me personally. The practise is the thing, not the culture of the Edo period or the culture of Japan today. Iaido is my meditation practise and it is the

place where I study posture and the transfer of power from the floor to the tip of the sword." If you are not trying to be Japanese you can comfortably agree with the comments of a sensei who says "you're not Japanese" as being a true, if irrelevant statement.

First, be yourself.

Oct 18, 2016



My Sensei Said: in October 2016

We have finished the fifth annual Peterborough Koryu seminar with Goyo Ohmi sensei, who taught a wonderful seminar. What follows are my notes of his comments during the two days of class. They are not particularly well organized, just what I wrote down when I got the chance so the usual warning that all confusion is my fault applies. I am simply going to repeat the notes in chronological order.

Muso Jikiden Eishin Ryu is a relatively old school of iai. Muso Shinden Ryu is younger, but they are brother schools. You must understand the lineage.

A Tamiya Ryu sensei once wrote that in Iai we should not cut deep, we should cut shallow. Kendo cuts can be deep but in iaido we are facing multiple enemies and we should not cut deeply.

Don't look at bad iaido! You can look at many different people who are doing iaido of many different skill levels, make sure you look at those with good skill. If you look at bad iaido you may begin to copy that.

In iaido we cut with one hand, this gives us a one inch advantage in reach.

Compared to Zen Ken Ren iai, the vertical cuts of Muso Jikiden Eishin Ryu are slightly deeper. Where ZKR iai stops at the belly button, MJER stops at the tanden, about two inches lower.

Once in a class, Yamamoto Harusuke (a MJER sensei) saw Kamimoto Eichi (a Muso Shinden Ryu sensei) doing saya biki and told him not to do that. Kamimoto Eichi became a very famous sensei and later said that saya biki is necessary as it gives a strong cut. The point is not whether or not to do saya biki, but to make a strong cut. Don't lose sight of the goal, which is to have strong iai.

Make sure your thumbs are aimed at the floor when you grip the sword, not aimed out to the sides. My grip is, from the little finger to the thumb 10, 8, 6, 4, 4. The root of the thumb has a strength of 8. The same distribution of power exists in my left hand as well, but the 10 of the little finger of the left hand is a bit more firm than the 10 of the little finger of my right hand.

When you finish your nuki tsuke your right hand should be at the same height as your right armpit. The sword should be horizontal, but because the sword is thinner at the tip than at the tsuba, a drop of water would run down the sword from tsuba to tip. Do not angle the sword down or up, it should be horizontal. Additionally, Matsuo Haruna sensei taught that the lower surface of the sword should be parallel with the floor during the nuki tsuke. If your blade has the edge parallel with the mune, in other words if it is a wedge shape instead of a chisel shape as you cut, the blade can deflect upward when you hit a target.

Win first, then cut. This is done by having a very strong foundation in the art. Your fundamentals must be solid or you will have weak iai.

The practise of iai from seiza allows us to practise indoors. For this reason we take our long swords into the house.

You must learn and demonstrate strong basics. This reveals your depth of training, the number of years you have practised correctly. If you do not show strong basics throughout your career, when you reach 4 or 5 dan you may have become skilful but nobody will look at you. Nobody will watch you to learn iai.

Kendo people say that iaido is just playing with a sword, just waving it around because we like to swing it.

Iaido people say that kendo is just hitting each other with bamboo sticks because it is fun.

Both arts are serious, both have good sensei and we in iai must strive to show that our sword practise is more than just swinging a sword around in a pretty way.

Matsuo Haruna sensei once told me “don’t be happy if someone tells you your iaido is good” He said “be happy if they say ‘wow’”. I want people to say “wow”, not tell me that my iaido is beautiful.

Your wrist must be gentle as you move your sword, then squeeze your grip. When doing the matawari exercise you should imagine that your sword meets an attacking blade squarely just as it moves above your head. Don’t just lift the sword and cut in a sloppy manner. There should be tenouchi as you receive the strike, then cut down the center. You must make your sword live, it is dead if there is no tenouchi.

Reiho

Why does reiho exist? It is part of your mind training. All parts of your etiquette practise with the sword have meaning.

A large part of our iai training is to spend time with our friends. This is true. Iaido is also expensive, a sword is not just a large knife, and what we do is not just an artform, not just a pretty dance with a sword. I remember watching Alan Ladd in the movie Shane and he said “a gun is just a tool, like a shovel or a hoe”. It is the person using the tool that makes your sword what it is. If a bad person uses a sword it is a weapon.

Reiho is part of your mindset, how are you using that tool in your hand, that sword? What is your mindset? Recently I was told that Canadian ikkyu student’s etiquette was not good enough because it lacked the proper external form that was expected. I do not agree with this. Canadians have their own culture, their own etiquette, reiho must reflect the situation, the people, the culture. It will change depending on the circumstances. Canadians stand up straight and shake hands. Japanese bow. Neither of these are better, both are reiho.

Omori Ryu

The original way to teach is for sensei to demonstrate and then the students copy this. There was little talking.

But a student must put into their mind what is happening in the kata and use that to make the kata come alive. I have an old book here from Yamamoto Harusuke which has very little text and just a few pencil

drawings. There is almost no explanation. Now books are much more detailed and we have pictures. This gives you students a big advantage.

When I first started iaido I went out and bought a book from the store. I was lucky because that book was my school. I used that book to learn faster than the other students in class who just watched sensei and copied him. Use the books and videos available to you.

Testing and koryu

I was told that if I challenge 8dan in Japan I must change my koryu because most of the judges are Muso Shinden Ryu. I must move my tsuba to the center and similar things to make them comfortable. This is fine for a test, but when you are doing your koryu in practise, do it properly.

There are many differences between Muso Jikiden and Zen Ken Ren iai. Our nuki tsuke is to a different target, our cuts are BIG. You must know these differences and show them.

As a beginner I was taught to aim my tsuka kashira at my opponent's right shoulder so that my nuki tsuke was big. Now I aim at his center.

Our two hands go onto the tsuka left-right, not both at the same time.

We use jo ha kyu, so does Zen Ken Ren iai, but in our Oku iai that jo ha kyu is very short. In other words, some things are done differently for different kata.

Our draw and noto are done with tate ha, with the edge "standing up". They are also done with the tsuka kashira inside our body line. Iwata sensei said that Oe Masamichi taught the noto with the tsuka kashira on the body's centerline with no shaking of the hips. Mori Shigeki was a student of Oe and he returned to Tosa for a visit when he borrowed Oe sensei's sword. It is from Mori Shigeki that we know Oe's sword was quite short. So he could do his noto in this way. Kim Taylor once turned his hips quite a lot when he did noto. Haruna sensei told him "don't do that".

We follow Oe sensei in this school. Oe fixed the kata into their order and numbers. He got rid of many duplicated kata. Once the school contained kata for shoto and for things like assassination. Now we only know the names for many of these.

Our noto should be flat, the tsuka kashira should not rise upward as we move the mune across the left hand.

The sageo used to just hang down over the saya but it was decided that this was sloppy, that you would lose face if the sageo came loose and hung down on either side of the saya, even if you did a wonderful noto. So we now tuck it up under the himo. But do not tie a knot like is done in Zen Ken Ren iai.

Your uniform and your etiquette should be good so that students ask you for help when you are 5dan.

When you are in seiza your knees should be 2 fist widths apart, not closer but not further apart either.

Speaking of etiquette once more, your etiquette should fit the place, the time and the occasion correctly. There are different manners for different situations. There is an etiquette for Muso Jikiden, there is a

different etiquette for Zen Ken Ren iai, and again different for tea. On the inside all of these are the same, on the outside there are different forms.

When standing up from chiburi for MJER keep iai goshi. You should not stand up high and then drop down again when you step back after the foot switch. On the other hand, in Zen Ken Ren I rise up as I bring my feet together and then keep my head at that height as I step back. This is because I am short and I must make an effort to look bigger.

For MJER, iai goshi means to keep the knees flexed, some people say this looks like the position for a “washroom break”.

Seme

Yes, seme involves your shoulder, your eyes, your tsuka kashira but most important is to use your hips. You must understand this, don't exaggerate any movements in an attempt to show seme.

Haruna sensei once commented that at chiburi we should not slide the back foot up to the front, but instead pick up the foot and hit the ground with our heel as it reaches the other foot.

Don't mix up what your sensei is telling you, or do a little bit of what you understand from each sensei, follow one and do things one way. It is important not to try to go in too many directions at once.

Tsuki Kage

The story is that you are indoors near a doorway which is open to the moonlight. An enemy steps through the door and so casts a shadow on the floor.

This kata has four ways to cut, the most usual is to cut across both wrists. One can use the same movement to meet one wrist, then fold the sword into an uke nagashi position so that the edge cuts into the wrists as you keep them from dropping. One can cut downward into the opponent's right wrist only, or cut upward into the left wrist only. Practice all these ways.

Is that iai?

In the 1960s the 8dan iaido demonstration in Kyoto prompted a watching sensei to say “Is that iai? There is nobody under the sword!” Beware of “acting”, of making your iai just a kabuki performance. Know where your opponent is, cut him, demonstrate zanshin.

When you cut, make sure you use the tip of the sword correctly.

Your noto is to your stomach, not to your hip. This means that your koiguchi should meet your habaki when both hands are in front of your hips.

In the past there was a stamp on the nuki tsuke of Mae. This was not to just make a noise, the noise came as a result of you moving forward forcefully to reach your opponent. Now we tend to tell beginners to stamp but we don't stamp once we are more experienced. In the past, 100 years ago they stamped all the time. Why? If you had a choice to make a big noise on a stamp or to cut with the tip, which would you choose? Cut! Reach the target!

When you do noto for Omori Ryu, it is from the habaki, for Eishin Ryu the mune touches the left hand half way down the blade and for Oku iai haya noto it is the last third of the blade. Do not make noise in the saya when doing haya noto.

The blade moves above the ear when taking the blade overhead for kiri tsuke. Near the ear, further upward or almost vertical is fine.

On noto, the blade may be taken back to the koiguchi on a flat trajectory, parallel to the floor, or it may be taken back on an angle parallel to the left forearm.

When standing up from chiburi move the rear foot so that the heel touches the floor, rather than slide it along on the toes.

Timing

If you are young, your timing should be faster than those who are older. There is no single timing, it depends on the kata, the age, the situation.

Goto Miki sensei said that the kata Yoko Gumo is the most basic practise of Muso Jikiden. Most of the fundamental movements of the school are in this kata. Therefore practise it often and put lots of focus on the hara.

A kendo sensei said that his personal practise involved sleeping with a bokuto beside the bed. As soon as you wake up do nuki tsuke and kiri tsuke 200 times, then go for breakfast.

To improve your grip you can squeeze a tennis ball. You should also do push-ups, run, lift weights and other exercises. You should build your physical self up.

The kata which feature cutting the wrists of an attacking enemy should be done from a low position. Tsuki Kage is low, but it is a bit higher than Ina Zuma which should be done with the back knee barely off the floor.

Haya Nuki

When doing this practise there is haya noto and no zanshin between the kata, but you must not perform the kata quickly. This practise is not for exercise, it is for when you have little time to practise. Practice at the correct speed for each kata.

One way to practise is to have sensei do a kata, the students copy it, then the students do a kata and sensei shows it, then sensei does the next and the students copy. This pattern goes through the set. Practising in this way is to demonstrate and learn, to attempt and be corrected through watching. Today we tend to talk too much and don't know how to watch.

Iaido is not acting, do not just watch the movements, understand the spirit underneath a kata. The kata should be performed with three parts. First, you detect the intent to attack in the mind of your attacker, using this anticipation, stop the attack. Second, your attack is like a spark from a flint (sekka no kurai). Then third, after the attack you must pay attention, your attitude must be bon no kurai, like the reverberations of a bell after it has been struck.

There is a person in front of you. You must win with your mind, your spirit first, you must be ready before you sit down. Your techniques must not be kosei kosei, fidgety like a chipmunk, but they must not be too slow either. You should demonstrate strong and soft, slow and quick where these are appropriate.

Yae gaki

Do not just pull out your sword as you begin, cut! Finish it! But the second attack happens, show the power of the block in the tip of your blade.

You have an opponent! So you must control your mind, your footwork, control him with your mind and your footwork, don't just act! Don't stand up any old way! Show no openings in your movements, show perfect posture.

Ushiro

With a teki in front of you, see him with your eyes. For an opponent behind you, see him with your mind. If you are a fifth dan you must show power from your tsuka kashira on the turn. If you are a second dan you can't do this yet.

Sei and Do

Iai is sei and do, just like the name I gave to the Guelph school, Sei Do Kai. Sei is quiet, Do is action.

Ma and Maai

Maai is timing and space. You and your opponent are ready, how can you get close enough to cut him? Between the two of us, when we are tip to tip, one step from cutting distance, we have energy. If we both understand this I can apply pressure through this energy. But if an opponent doesn't know about this energy, if a young student is facing me and I apply this same he just jumps in and hits me on the head.

Zaemi was a Noh sensei. He wrote that you should make the space around you full of energy. I thought he was speaking of the relationship between the actor and the audience so I am using this idea in my own practise. It turns out he was speaking of the relationship between the small drum and the actor, where the drum amplifies the feeling as the actor makes an action. Nevertheless, I use my interpretation, to create an energy between me and those watching, between me and my opponent.

If you face an 8dan kendoka you may feel no energy from him, but if you try to attack, he is there before you are.

Maai, how do you get in to the distance without being stabbed? That is your problem. You must manipulate time and distance to get in. Sen Dan Zan, anticipate, attack, zanshin.

Don't just act with your iai, make it look real. Make it real. Know what's happening and act like you know it!

Later in the seminar Ohmi sensei asked the class to tell him how they made their initial strike in Morote Zuki (Zen Ken Ren iai) real.

Oct 31, 2016



My sensei is: Fudoshin

My sensei is the guy I chose to practise with. He wants good people to do good iaido and that's what I'm interested in as well. He isn't much interested in pretty, in fact, if you were to tell him that his iaido is pretty he'd be hurt. Mechanics who do perfect technical sword dance don't much interest him.

He's interested in the philosophy of budo, and so am I.

He was my second iaido instructor, the first being Mitsuzuka Takeshi sensei who I met in 1983 or so. My sensei was one of the only people around at the time (the later 1980s) who was practising iaido. He wasn't teaching. A fellow student and I had to do the "sit at the gate in the rain" thing for a while before he sort of got sucked back into teaching. It was worth the sit which, to be honest, wasn't all that long.

Lest you think that because he was the only game in town I settled for him, I assure you that I have had plenty of chances to go with "high powered" Japanese sensei, even had some sincere requests to practise other koryu. I have never, ever said "my Japanese sensei". Maybe "the Japanese sensei", because you can learn from many people but I have a single iaido maestro that I consider myself apprenticed to.

You pick your sensei and that choice tells a lot about your mindset and your intentions.

If you are in a large organization you can also pick your grading panel. You can go here or there and chose the panel that you figure will like your iaido. If one doesn't pass you, perhaps another will.

It used to be pretty easy when I was in the grading stream for Aikido, you would go to the big seminar on the pass year and get your dan grade. This was many decades ago and I'm sure it has changed, but the pattern then was everyone passes for two years and then on the third year everyone would fail and the shihan would give us a speech about how standards were not being maintained and we all sucked and we ought to work harder. I say we, in a limited sense, I never graded at the seminar. In fact I waited about six extra years before grading for shodan at a seminar in my home dojo because the opinions of strangers were never a thing for me.

My gradings have always been local because I'm interested in the opinions of my teachers and my peers. I'm proud of the people in the local aikido dojo, all of them, of all organizations. I am also proud of the Canadian Kendo Federation and the grading systems of the three arts that we have built over many decades. I support that system and I grade under that system. I graded to 7dan iaido under the CKF and would not wish to go elsewhere. I could have graded anywhere but I am not interested in "anywhere". Does that mean that I haven't been vetted by anyone but my own sensei? Not in the least. My gradings were done here, in front of my peers, by panels that included senior sensei from other countries, mostly Japan. My sensei happens to be the head of the iaido section in Canada and he always insisted that those foreign panels grade Canadian students to the same standards as in their home countries.

He wanted no part of "polite" gradings where the panel passes a student "for the good of the art", for the "spread of the art". Did this happen? I haven't a clue, the panels made their decisions for their own reasons and that is the end of it.

I have been told "MY grades were done in Japan, your grade isn't as good as mine because you invited sensei to come and visit and so they felt obligated to pass you". Or "your panel is local and therefore not as good as the panels in Japan".

Maybe, but even if that is so, I am uninterested because as I said, I'm interested in the opinion of my own sensei and of my peers. I have no plans to move to Japan or elsewhere and make a living teaching budo, so they are safe from my "poor skills". I value my reputation with regard to my sensei and my students. Anyone else is none of my business. If that brands me as a bit of a traditionalist, a bit of a lineage hound, so be it. Iaido reputations are either seen on the floor, seen in one's students, or are a matter of gossip. We are not going to go out behind the barn and "put it out there once and for all".

I have listened to those who have gone to Japan or elsewhere and then come back with a pass "to prove to their sensei and the local folks that they were wrong" about something or other. I give those folks the respect they deserve, especially those who go away, grade, and return to the same club to tell their sensei what's what.

Wow, every time I think about that my mind boggles. Why would anyone stay in a dojo where they believe they know better than their sensei? Oh wait, space to practise and somebody else is doing the work. No, the mind-boggle is why that sensei doesn't just open the door and help that student pack up their keikogi.

Or the other way around. I know a sensei who left his well-established dojo to the students who knew more than he, rather than boot out 80 percent of the club. He simply moved to another dojo. Now that's my kind of sensei, one who looks out for his students even if they don't deserve it.

You know, grading in front of a panel that isn't your local, is a crap shoot at the best of times if you're interested in a true assessment of your skills. Your panel will assess according to their own opinions. I have heard it said of those who go to Japan to grade, that the Japanese panel won't have to deal with their decision after the grading, so they may just be inclined to pass a marginal student "for the good of the foreigners". You know the airport promotion that puts you on the plane at 3rd kyu in Japan and off back home at shodan or better? Well there's also the promotion that gets conferred just before you get on the plane. "Sensei I need an 8dan because the foreigners don't respect anything less". Sure kid, here it is, bye bye.

If going elsewhere to be graded by strangers is problematical, disrespectful, prone to create ego problems, prone to promote cultural snobbery or otherwise, why would any organization allow it? The internationally-minded ones do it to allow the local branches to obtain the rank they need to do their local gradings. The business-minded ones, the ones who make money off the gradings, may create a system to collect fees by not allowing enough local rank to be independent. The students must "come to the source" to be ranked. The self-centric ones will do it to maintain control, often through arbitrary changes to the rules to prevent the foreigners from getting too independent. This, as I have seen many

times in the last 30 years never works for long, the locals eventually figure out the scam and leave to form their own organization. If there is no external reason to be in an organization what is the incentive to stay? An external reason? World and Olympic championships come to mind.

This is why I stick with my local panel. It's my peers, it's my organization that the grading fees go to, and that's not trivial. Others may choose to grade at other panels for entirely good reasons and I'm fine with that. If you are living abroad, if you spend time in another country and it's convenient (and your sensei is good with that), or if you have no other choice. No problem.

Personally, my sensei is a single person and my gradings are in front of a local panel. Just my preference. One can argue for picking and choosing both sensei and panels. I just have little time for those who argue from prejudice or egotism or similar, in an art where one can't really "put it on the floor or out behind the barn".

Ultimately, one needs to be honest with oneself and my greatest respect is for my sensei and for my local gradings.

That's just me. To you, it's just an opinion.

Fudoshin

Now let me explain my reason for being a lineage hound, for sticking with my local sensei rather than latching on to the coat-tails that can get me to my next rank. Even assuming that next rank is useful.

Remember I said my sensei is interested in the philosophy of budo. I started my budo career in search of philosophy, not because I needed to know how to fight, not because I wanted to be a samurai, not even because I liked anime. In 1980 I'd never seen anime, I might have seen a Kurosawa movie or two but my favourite was Dodeskaden rather than Seven Samurai.

Back to the paper I'm working through on Takuan Soho. Back to his thoughts on mushin in relation to fushin and fudoshin.

A sword fight (or a kata in our case, an aikido technique, a judo or kendo match) requires concentration on our opponent. It requires us to focus our attention on the details, his breathing, his hands, his eyes, all the things we are taught to concentrate on. But that's a frozen mind isn't it? That's not the free-flowing process of consciousness that we must have in order to deal with the sudden unknown changes of combat and life in general. Takuan suggests that the solution to that koan, that juxtaposition of two seemingly exclusive things is mushin. Mushin being the state of no-mind, the state of spontaneous response to challenge.

- Master, please teach me

Have you eaten your breakfast

- Yes

Go wash your bowl

Upon which the student attained enlightenment. Clever yes? What is enlightenment? It is the spontaneous realization of the nature of the world. You can get it spontaneously, that's sort of the

meaning of Zen. I once experienced the one-ness of the universe while riding the city bus. We went around the corner and suddenly the entirety of existence flowed through me and I through it.

I recovered.

Which is the problem. Realization isn't a one-time thing... well it can be, and that's the problem. Experience it once and ignore it and it will cease to bother you. It will go away.

How do you keep it? (Assuming you would want to keep it.) By continuous effort, by daily training, by careful preparation in some practise or other (why not budo?) under a master, a sensei. You may experience satori at a seminar with some other teacher, but you are unlikely to do that if you have not been prepared beforehand. Yes, your teacher will sometimes send you elsewhere for a good smack on the head with a stick, but only when he sees that you are "stuck".

This is why I have one teacher. That teacher is in charge of my progress, and only by having one teacher looking after your one path up the mountain are you likely to get to the top. Switching teachers means sliding down to the bottom and starting again.

Before satori, chop wood, carry water.

After satori, chop wood, carry water.

So what we need is a process, not a single event. You need many koan, you need a practise, which is where zen latches onto the arts. You've heard of the zen of tea, the zen of flower arranging, the zen of running, the zen of swordsmanship and you have been told to laugh at such things. The samurai were Confucians, they were esoteric Buddhists, zen is a later imagination by westerners. Zennists supported the ultra-nationalists every bit as much as did State Shinto.

Sure. All that is true. It is also true that Takuan wrote to Yagyu, that Takuan used swordsmanship as a vehicle to teach Zen. It is true that Takuan explained mushin in terms of fudoshin and fushin, frozen mind and immovable mind using the koan of a real, an actual life and death practise. The monk on the hill is supposed to eventually get to the point where his koan feels like it is life and death. The swordsman faces life and death every time he grasps the hilt.

Takuan was lazy.

His students were already at life and death. He pointed to the functioning of mushin, something a swordsman understands, Musashi's "strike from the void". Takuan pointed to it and said "here's the name for it".

Lazy, lazy.

So now you know why I'm a lineage hound, why I follow my sensei and why I don't much care about such things as reputation and opinion and gossip. Why I don't chase after powerful people.

Is my sensei a zen master? I doubt anyone, including my sensei would say so. But he is a caring man, a man of good will who tries to do the best for his students. He teaches me that budo is not a dance, a set of movements that you learn (and then get a gold star for learning), but instead that it is a process.

A process through which you can learn.

Nov 10, 2016



Give a man a fish

And he'll eat for a day, teach him how to fish and he'll spend all month at the river when he ought to be out in the garden growing stuff to eat.

Or something like that. Me, I always figured fishing was heading out at 4am in a boat to haul up nets so I never got the attraction of catching them one at a time.

At the seminar this weekend Ohmi sensei didn't do much teaching, but he did say something that relates to how one teaches. He reminded us that for 300 plus years we've been told that this stuff has three components, to learn, to think and to practise. In that order. One may be tempted to assume that the teacher's role in that is only in the first case, to teach the kata. Then it's up to the student to think and practise. But how does that work? And why should the student hang around after being shown the shape of the kata. In fact, with video and books these days, why a teacher at all? I've seen some people get pretty close to the kata without a sensei at all. Why do we need them then?

Perhaps to show the "latest fashions from Paris"? To be up to date on the latest angles and timings? Despite what we may think as beginners, these arts don't so much progress toward a perfect ideal as wander around like dress hem lengths depending on who is in charge.

Perhaps you need a teacher if you want to go through the grading process. Most associations are set up to require registration through a teacher and it never hurts to have a sponsor so that the other people on the panel (assuming there is one, instead of just being judged by your teacher) can lean over and say "who's that guy?" and get an answer.

I can think of a dozen more reasons to have a teacher, but the main one I think, and it's just my opinion mind you, is that he will teach you how to think. Learn, think, practise. You can learn how to make the shapes of the kata any way you wish, but how do you think about that? I didn't know when I was a beginner. I just copied what I was told to do. It was all equally important, every movement, every breath was memorized and copied as exactly as I could copy it.

Everything was different, new, unique to every kata. I'm talking about aikido here, so there were, as far as I was concerned, infinite kata. Every single class held at least 30 different kata. Show and do was the method. Sensei didn't spend much time explaining what was happening, you grabbed a wrist, the other guy moved this way and that, you fell down. "COOL, do it again"! Eventually though, through a few comments from sensei, mostly over beers after class, I started to develop a way of looking at the art. With that I could read the books and get something more out of them than "this foot there". I started reading the introduction and the text beside the pictures with a hunger, the pictures sort of dropped away and I started buying books depending on how few photos there were, rather than how many.

In other words, sensei taught me how to think about the art. I began to realize that you learn, then you think, then you practise what you have thought about to see if it works. You are with a sensei for all three levels, which is why you stick around. The third level? Sensei practices for you? Some people seem to think so, judging by how they stand around when sensei is not looking, and how they wait for

the next instruction, as if they are robots (another image from Ohmi sensei, "you move like a robot!") No, sensei doesn't, shouldn't, practise for you. Instead, he provides feedback on what you are thinking. He teaches you the kata, you copy it, you go think about it, then you try it out and sensei says (usually) "what are you thinking? You're wide open!" And hits you with a stick and you are enlightened just like some zen monk on a mountain.

Yesterday I had a couple of high school students try out the class. They are considering which university to attend and they will pick depending on how cool the extracurricular activities are... I don't actually know if that's what they were doing, but it's as good a way to pick as most. We were ripping through kata, they did Oku Iai Tachi Waza of Muso Jikiden Eishin Ryu and then they did Tachi Seiho of Hyoho Niten Ichiryu. I told you we were ripping through stuff, and it was a three hour class so not so frenzied really. At any rate, we got to Tora Buri of Niten and one of them said "It's just the same as the first one".

Nice.

Sensei teaches the kata (Learn), sensei teaches you how to think about the kata, how to learn (how to fish), then sensei provides a space for you to practise with feedback. Learn, think, practise, or as we sometimes say, shu ha ri which we often translate as keep, break, leave, but I like better maybe, copy, understand, use.

Seriously, is there anyone out there that thinks you can use a kata in a fight? About the only pure use of a kata is to grade, or to compete in a tournament, neither of which are the original intent. A kata is to be used to learn the principles (ri).

I was just trying to think of an analogy in sports to the kata tournament. I can't. Not even gymnastics.... I lie, I have it, figures in figure skating. To be assigned a figure 8 or some other shape that you have to carve into the ice with your skates using specified footwork, and you win depending on how close to a single line you get after 20 times around the circle or whatever it is. Oh go look it up, it used to be a thing, there's probably some "traditional figure skating association" that still does it.

The reason for figures? It's the kihon, the place where you learn the edge, the balance, the control. It's deadly boring and since it isn't used in the actual competition (as far as I know from what's broadcast), it's glossed over. Do you like watching it? I used to, actually.

At any rate, learn, think, practise. Ohmi sensei mentioned that if you practise something "wrong" for years you're wasting your time. He wasn't talking about a specific movement at the time, he was talking about waving the sword around with no idea why behind it, thoughtless practise.

Something I need to think about.

March 6, 2017

Be a teaching moment

Every seminar contains the teaching moment. My iaido sensei will pull someone out of the class, throw them up front and say "do what you just did".

If he's pulled a senior, or one of his students out onto the floor they will faithfully repeat whatever they just did and sensei can then point it out to the rest of us, and tell us not to do it that way.

For me, no problem. Thirty years I've been on the floor, sensei says "do that" I do it, he says "fix this", I fix it. I learn something, the rest of the class learns something. It's not punishment, it's a teaching moment.

But I'm not everyone I guess. Over the years I've noticed many different reactions to this. The first is what I described, and I think it's the best, you are helping to teach the art so be the bad example. I find that those who take this treatment well, tend to be the better at the art in later years. You can't learn if you aren't open to correction and (this is important) actually make the corrections.

Then there are those who resist. "Who me? You can't mean me, you must mean the guy next to me. I can't possibly demonstrate, I'm much too modest, pick someone else". I'm not sure what that is, actually. Ashamed of what you're doing? Afraid of getting caught out as a fraud? Just pathologically shy? Whatever is going on, just be quiet, nod and get out there to demonstrate whatever it is you were doing.

Again, it's not punishment, it's a teaching moment, help teach. Still? Look, you're in a martial art, if you can't demonstrate your technique in front of your friends and peers, for your sensei, you're not going to be able to do it on the battlefield are you? "Oh, I'll do it when I need to do it?" Doesn't work that way. Regardless, it's not punishment, it's not sensei trying to embarrass you or show you up as a fraud.

Now, I do understand that sometimes people really do need a kick in the arse and you are being called out to demonstrate that you are just... not.... listening! Personally, I don't recall ever doing that to anyone, despite what you may have thought. Mostly because I don't mind if you don't listen to me. I do wonder why you are standing in front of me if you're not interested in what I'm saying but hey, it's a free country. I have said I will teach whoever is in front of me but really, I'd rather not waste my time and energy on those who think I'm wrong. I won't notice if you aren't in class, I hardly notice if you are, so please feel free not to be where I am. Hence, no extraordinary efforts to force you to learn something. Maybe it was a teaching moment?

The folks that truly mystify me are those who get called out by sensei to show some problem or other, and fix it. What is that? First, if you know what sensei is going to tell you to fix, why didn't you fix it before he called you? And second, if you know what he's going to show the class, why would you waste everyone's time by not showing that to everyone?

Again, this stuff is not punishment for making a mistake, this is a teaching moment. Not everything is about you. Really. Be the bad example with good cheer. You may even learn how to fix it for good this

time, and your fellow students will laugh at you. Be a good sport and laugh with them, life is too short to be Mr. Po Face.

Who knows, you may even become an attention junky. You know those guys, the ones that volunteer for every demonstration they can, and have fun screwing up in public. But that's another bushel of apples.

March 21, 2017



Koryu Iai Seminar Report I

Hobbling into the cafe this morning I was reminded that I haven't spent two days on my knees in a long time. The JCCC held a Muso Jikiden Eishin Ryu seminar with Goyo Ohmi sensei. There was a full dojo for both days and we went straight through the solo curriculum. That's umm, I'd have to look up the numbers of kata per set... gee I've only been doing this stuff for 34 years, you'd think I could remember the names and numbers. Maybe it's because I'm talking to my daughter as well.

No problem remembering the kata, it was great to see that I had not wandered too far from my sensei over the years. A bit jarring to see the varieties of practise from some of his seniors but sensei has never been a stickler for doing it his way, and I know there are several other instructors teaching koryu to them.

Which, now I think about it, was sort of my case as well. I had my sensei and then his sensei (Haruna sensei) teaching me, so I ended up a bit of a different mix of styles than my sensei ended up. Small things that would only be important if this stuff was standardized, written up in books and tested. Good thing it's not. Ohmi sensei did mention that when he was a beginner in Osaka, there was no ZKR Seitei Iai practiced in his dojo. You passed Omori ryu with shodan, Eishin ryu got you nidan and so on. So we all got promoted as the weekend went along.

Omori Ryu the first morning, Eishin Ryu in the afternoon, Oku Iai iwaza next morning and tachi waza in the afternoon. I joked about going overtime to do the "other stuff" and got told to do it, so the class got a little extra from yet another instructor. One of these essays I'll take up multiple koryu instructor instruction but for now just a thank you to the organizers of the seminar and especially to Ohmi sensei for teaching.

Lots of things to think about.

August 28, 2017

The fashion around here (My Sensei Says "catch him") II

Lately the iaido fashion, it seems, in Europe and around here, is to make sure you have an opponent. Now that's something you've heard before I'm sure, but you've seen most fashion before too. Skirts go up and down, ties get skinny and fat and in iaido, instruction gets detailed and then real. Detailed being "stop the tip of the sword exactly this far above the floor, to the millimetre" and real being "Why did you cut there? There's nobody there, why would you do that?"

A few years of "it has to be exactly this" is always enough to roll student's eyeballs into their heads, and so a few years of "look this is a sword, just hit him" must follow. To a certain extent this reflects who is up at the top, the preferences of the head guy trickle down to the big seminars in Japan and from there to the rest of the world. You can tell there was a change about a year ago when you start seeing the beginners frown and say "but that's not the way we were told to do it last year". Not so long ago we were being told "you can't do iaido too slowly, be slow, be precise, show us how correct you are". These days it's "you're going too slow, you won't catch your opponent going that slowly, practise faster".

A long time ago we figured out that if you don't like how it's being done these days just wait a decade and the old way will come back around.

One thing that hasn't gone around and around is my sensei's iai. This weekend we had a koryu seminar and it wasn't too far into the first day when Ohmi sensei said "kan kyu kyo jaku" Slow, fast, strong, soft you guys are just dancing through the steps, 1-2-3-4-5 is boring and you'll never catch your opponent. My sensei has never wavered in his teaching that you must "catch him".

Maybe I'll go through some of the things he talked about during the seminar. I say some, because he covered much more than I wrote down in my notebook.

Ohmi sensei quoted a swordsman from the past (someone out there will know who I'm sure, I didn't write it down) who said that in kenjutsu we don't aim to cut deeply, just deep enough. Sensei said that iai is not like kendo. In kendo we must have the attitude that "you cut my skin I cut your flesh, you cut my flesh I cut your bone". In other words, don't scratch the kote, cut the wrist off.

What this means is for the iaidoka we must use the tip of the sword, we must know how to cut with the kissaki, to reach while being out of reach, to hit in the right time. He mentioned that we can't tell our audience this when demonstrating iaido (or we shouldn't need to) but we should show it. How do we do that? By having an opponent.

This opponent we call kasso teki and without him we end up doing iaido which is full of openings (suki). Ohmi sensei told a story about Haruna sensei, perhaps his main instructor. It seems that a senior instructor once told Haruna sensei that he would "see his kasso teki soon". Haruna sensei told Ohmi sensei that after several years, he still didn't see him.

At dinner one of the students asked me if I believed that and I said I did. I don't see kasso teki either. "How can you do proper iaido then?" Well, I do a lot of partner practise. Ohmi sensei and Haruna

sensei did kendo. Distance is distance, I know where my opponent will be when I do a technique and so that's where I cut. I know where my imaginary opponent will be because I practise with a real opponent. When sensei comes around in Eishin Ryu and readjusts your sword back toward yourself, dropping your hand and lifting your tip he isn't doing it because that's what looks nice, he's doing it because that's where your opponent is. Where he has to be to have the kata make sense. In fact, as we went along in the seminar he began demonstrating where the opponents were and what they were doing. This isn't a secret, or some deep meaning to be discovered, it's the starting place for iaido, just as being at awase (mutual distance) with your partner is the starting place for partner practise. There he is, that far away and he's doing what you can see him doing.

The sensei who tell us to "have an opponent" tend to be sensei who know where that opponent will be by having seen him there in partner practise. It is irritating to them to see cuts being made into thin air. I don't know how to see kasso teki, but I don't need to, by my own body perception I know where I need to have him, to cut properly. If I only did iaido (I had done many years of aikido and tae kwon do before I started) I would have to see kasso teki at some point or other, or my iai would go dead before my knees did.

Frankly, iai was never intended to be a stand-alone art. Even in Muso Jikiden Eishin Ryu as reorganized by Oe Masaji (Masamichi), the partner kata were retained. That we don't do them often is no indication that they are not important, just that our next grading is in solo iai.

Ohmi sensei reminded me of a way to do one of the Eishin Ryu kata (tsuke komi) that involved inviting a strike to your head while kneeling on the ground, then simply standing up while drawing through uke nagashi (a deflection) and cutting without moving the body back. I couldn't see that, not when I first saw it (and, frankly, dismissed it) and not when I tried it at the seminar. I didn't see kasso teki missing me, so during a break I had a student take a bokuto and put it over my head just before I would be cut. I stood and realized that I had one inch. Ohmi sensei had talked about that one inch earlier in the day and there it was. We did the kata a few times at full speed and now I see it, not because I could see a kasso teki but because I saw a live partner.

There are kata that benefit from getting out the bokuto, mostly to correct exaggerations that creep into the practise because "we have no partner".

You must catch him. If you don't, be assured that he will catch you.

Aug 29, 2017

Koryu Seminar III: I've got a habit

Ohmi sensei mentioned, at one point in the seminar, that if you are trying to pass a 7dan test you ought to do parts of your koryu the same as your seitei. Specifically, you should start your cuts with your tip above your hilt. That's the specified way of cutting in Zen Ken Ren iai (seitei) and if your habit is to cut from a different position in your koryu, the habit could trip you up at your grading.

This advice is for seniors. Habits are funny things, you can't have one until you have been doing something for quite a while, and if you're still in the phase of "learning how to do it" or "fixing stuff" then habits aren't really a concern. If you're doing things incorrectly, you are doing things incorrectly. That's not habit, that's a mistake.

A habit is a correct way of doing something that you can "fire and forget". This is desirable for students who are going for 6dan and up in our organization. You need to be demonstrating something other than prescribed form to pass these grades. Your prescribed form therefore, needs to be a habit, it needs to be automatic. Hence, don't practise an incorrect cut in your koryu. The cut can be called incorrect, because it is prescribed, and the purpose of challenging your 7dan test is to pass your 7dan test. Therefore you make sure your habit does not interfere with that goal.

Once you have your grade you can go back to having two correct ways to cut and make a tiny mental tick to show one or the other while teaching.

Let me put this another way, it is not incorrect to begin your koryu cut with the tip above the hilt, but it is incorrect to start your seitei cut with the tip below the hilt.

Habits are not bad things to have, so long as they are correct. In fact, they are very good things, they are the purpose of practise. We want to develop habits of movement so we can then focus on the big picture. This is because we can't see the big picture if we are "correcting" stuff.

The biggest barrier for the move from 5dan to 6dan is exactly this "fixing" attitude that has taken you from beginner to 5dan. If you are following every stray piece of instruction that comes your way, if you are still changing the angle of your sword at the end of your cut, you can't move on.

Mind you, if you're still cutting from the side of your head, or "dropping your tip" at your 6dan test, I've got to wonder what it is you've been "fixing" for the last ten or fifteen years. How do you know which things to fix and which are just "fashions from Paris"? Is it written down in the book?

Ohmi sensei also mentioned that he had been advised to move his tsuba position when demonstrating his koryu for an 8dan test because most of the panel will be Muso Shinden and won't be used to seeing the sword in a different place in the obi. The koryu are not specified in the tests, there is nothing in the book at all, but the advice is valuable for someone wishing to pass a test in Tokyo. It might be noted that most of the panel in Canada is Muso Jikiden Eishin Ryu and they will be unused to seeing a sword in the Muso Shinden position while doing Jikiden kata. In other words, "know your panel" in the same way that you ought to know your enemy.

You might think that this cutting from above or below the hilt is just so much argument about angels (angles?) on pinheads but you get to the two positions in very different ways. There is not much more fundamental to iai than how you cut. It might not be a surprise to learn that I think my koryu method is the better way to swing a sword for iai, but that I understand the "kendo" reasons for the other way.

To sum this up, your training to senior status is to develop correct habits. This allows you to go beyond the shape of your kata into the other stuff that you have heard about but may not know how to achieve. The first step is to correct the shape of the cut but you cannot get beyond that if you don't think there is anything beyond correcting your form.

What's beyond? Well, having an opponent for one.

Aug 30, 2017



Koryu seminar IV: One Step Ahead

Ohmi sensei spoke of what Sensei is. He is not some sort of mystical master, he's not a drill sergeant, he's one step ahead of you. Sensei shouldn't say the tip needs to finish at a certain height, that's terrible advice, he should instead say that cut was not good, try again. That way the student can discover the cut for themselves. You guys think I make up the things I say?

So how do we continue with the attempt to get an opponent in iai? Sensei talked about Sen Dan Zan. I wrote quite a bit about this after the last Peterborough seminar, these are the three parts of a strike. Sen, before the strike, tsuyu no kurai, the swelling of a dew drop on a leaf. Dan, the actual strike, sekka no ki, the appearance of a spark after the flint hits the steel, and Zan, zanshin, the lingering awareness, bonsho no kurai, the reverberation of a bell.

You can actually find this on the CKF website

<https://www.kendo-canada.com/iaido/IaiJudgingOhmi.htm> if you want to check it out, it is a list of judging guidelines given by Ohmi sensei in 2008.

These concepts are not unique to iai, but are found throughout the Japanese sword arts. With respect to iaido, sensei said you must win, then strike, just as in kendo. How to do this? Sen must be shown when doing a kata, this is very difficult in iai, you must show the preparation, the rising potential, the dewdrop swelling until it drops. Dan, the actual strike must be real, it must be correctly and effectively done to the target. Zan, it is possible that a student could act this out rather than actually be alert.

Again we are confronted with the basic difficulty of iai, the lack of a partner. In partner practise one can feel the Sen as one waits for the partner to attack, responding to their gathering of energy with our own. Dan is simple, react (sekka no ki, like a spark) or be hit. Zan is also easier to understand, if you are simply standing still, simply acting, your partner might just reach out and touch you with his bokuto. Zan is the disengagement of the partners, that slow, boring stuff that follows the kata as you back up to get ready for another.

The connection of sword to Noh was made clear by Ohmi sensei at this point when he spoke about the four directions of seeing. Zeami Motokio, who died in 1443 wrote extensively on the methods of acting. He stated that there were four ways of seeing, Mae, Migi, Hidari and Ushiro. Front, right and left sides and back. To see to the front is simple, look with your eyes. To see to the sides is not so hard, you must learn to use your peripheral vision, but to see to the rear, this is the question every beginner has when doing a kata to the rear, here you must see with your body. Ohmi sensei suggested opening your ears, using your senses in a dark room, closing your eyes and paying attention.

This is Sen, to look and really see what is going on around you.

Moving on to Dan, when exactly can we hit? Ohmi sensei went through the possibilities, when your opponent starts his cut, when he finishes his cut, when the sword is stopped (at a block for instance), when your opponent freezes and can't move, when he is backing up, when he is "full of illness" that is, when he's afraid, in doubt, puzzled or surprised. All these are moments for you to strike.

Woah, not only are we being asked to see our opponent, now we have to see these opportunities in someone who is not there. Difficult! Do your best.

To sum up, sensei spoke of the transition from Sen to Dan, from stillness to the first cut. To do this we must show Shin Ki Gyoku ichi, mind, spirit and skill/power united. At the moment of Dan we must show Ki Ken Tai ichi, I don't have to explain that one do I? Spirit, sword and body united.

Again we meet the fundamental problem of solo kata, we must go from Sen to Dan with no openings, no suki. How do we do that?

Kasso Teki, can you see your imaginary opponent yet? Are you one step ahead of him?

Aug 31, 2017

Koryu Seminar V: More thinking with our swinging.

The second day of the seminar began with Ohmi sensei speaking of Takashima Tomiyoshi (don't quote me on this author, he may be circa 1710 but I didn't find him at the Sauble Dunes bar with the wifi access and the loudly live music this evening) who spoke on saya no uchi. We have heard this before usually as "saya no uchi no kachi" meaning "winning in the scabbard". We could take this to mean "win, then strike", that is, don't draw until you know you have won over your imaginary opponent. Other interpretations are that your potential, your life, is there in your scabbard.

Ohmi sensei explained that Takashima said once the sword is drawn, swordsmanship is diminished. If you draw one hundred times and lose one hundred times, this is obviously not a good thing. But if you draw 100 times and win 100 times, your art is diminished. The best is not to use the sword 100 times, this means you have won 100 times while the sword is still in the scabbard. Your swordsmanship is wonderful.

The idea is to know how to use the sword, but not to use it. In other words, don't be a bully.

This reminds me of yugen, to have the sword but not use it, is like the moon mostly hidden by clouds, it is so much bigger, so much more beautiful that way. Or to put it the other way, if the moon is withdrawn from it's scabbard of clouds so we can see it against a bare, dark sky, it is reduced.

Another swordsman who advocated similar ideas was Harigaya Sekiun who stated that swordsmanship of his era (roughly the same years as Musashi) was rough (bullying) with a swordsman beating those who were less skilled, being defeated by those who were more skilled and mutual destruction (Ai Uchi) with those who were equals. If you pass by without drawing your swords you have found a fourth way, Ai Nuki.

Ohmi sensei went on to write the following on the whiteboard. Me (eye), Ashi (foot), Tan (spirit), Riki (technique) (again, I may have this written down incorrectly, I was taking notes!). This is the order of occurrence for an attack by a senior. See, move the foot, move the spirit too, then strike with technique.

But for beginners, the sequence is reversed. You must develop the technique, then add spirit, then learn the footwork and finally, learn to see the opening.

Learn from the shape, be brave, step in and during this learning phase, start to see. Once you can see, once you have learned, the sequence is reversed. You see an opening and you are moving toward it, your spirit united with the technique you perform.

Are we not speaking of learning and then mushin here? Mushin is not just flailing mindlessly, it is hitting without trying to decide anything. The body sees the opening and the body attacks. You do not make the attack, the attack happens to you.

Ohmi sensei spoke at length of making a big cut, not a big motion. Do not shove your shoulders upward as you slam your biceps into your ears when you cut. This creates a massive opening (suki) in your cut. On the other hand, you cannot cut with small flicking movements.

Sensei mentioned there was a difference between correcting a technique and changing it. This reminded me instantly of the way that Seitei Gata iai is practised in many places, an endless sequence of changes long after the corrections ought to be finished. "What angle is this sensei?" "You're a 5dan, pick one". "But which angle do you want us to use sensei?" Changes, not corrections.

Sensei asked what Jo Ha Kyu meant, and was told "slow, faster, fastest". Not unexpected, but he went on to explain that Jo is to fill yourself with spirit, it is leading the opponent, it is to display kigurai, a noble spirit. In budo we must, before the start of the technique, control his "before the start". Our calmness must be able to read our opponent. Part of this is Ki Sen O Seisuru, to control the moment when the attack begins.

Ha, is the time for the technique to speed up, it is moving, it is developing.

Kyu is the place of ki ken tai ichi. Try comparing Jo Ha Kyu with Sen Dan Zan.

Hei Jo Shin, this is the ordinary mind, the everyday mind, which is one of calmness. Tsune ni Itte Kyu ni Awasu, the full name for I Ai, means to be ready, to adapt. It is not that one isn't surprised, one is. But it's the time between the surprise and the return to the everyday mind that is important. Ohmi sensei mentioned a WWII pilot who in later life commented on young pilots. Their skills were better than older pilots, but in an emergency the older pilots returned to their normal, everyday mind much more quickly. This return to heijoshin is largely the result of experience, of long practise, one doesn't "learn" it.

Fudoshin is the immovable mind, a mind that doesn't get dragged around by events. We ought to understand this if we want to be good budoka. Part of heijoshin is fudoshin, if our mind is dragged about as we panic about event after event, we are not in our ordinary mind. Or if we are, we really need to adjust that ordinary mind.

If we are working on the Oku Iai (which we were doing) then we are done with the basics. No more acting in your kata. This assumes that one has mastered the Omori and Eishin ryu sets and the lessons contained within them. If one simply memorizes the kata then they will all be equally "acting". Omori is to learn the basics, Eishin is to learn tate hiza and to understand a single opponent who is close, Oku iai is to learn how to deal with multiple opponents, a situation where just "dancing" the kata will not be good enough. The lessons of the first two levels must be learned before Oku iai makes sense.

Shu Ha Ri is this sequence of learning. Shu is the basic, from, say, 1-3 dan. Ha is probably from 4 to 8 dan. Ri? Ohmi sensei wonders if there is anyone today who is at this level. He mentioned that perhaps Harigaya or Musashi might have been there.

Shin Ki Ryoku. Mind, spirit, killing/power. This is the gathering of energy and the cut. Note the number of concepts that deal with the transition from ordinary mind (heijoshin) to the cut. The move from sen to dan, jo to ha. Elsewhere Ohmi sensei has compared shin to still water (calmness), ki to the wind over the water and ryoku to the wave, the result of the wind passing over the water.

During the kata Kabe Zoe, sensei mentioned that the noto of this kata is called Donden gaeshi. As an aside, this is a term that is used in Kabuki and it means a sudden turn leading to an unexpected conclusion.

As a final comment, Ohmi sensei said that we can think about our koryu. It is not all written down for us, and because it is not "written in stone" we can learn from that process of thought.

September 2, 2017

Gone before

Not so long ago at a seminar Ohmi sensei mentioned that Sensei means gone before, not master or some such. Really though, it means "keep ahead", as in try to have things to teach your students, even the senior ones who are getting close to your ability, either by them getting better or (hopefully not) by you getting older and/or injured.

Ohmi sensei is rarely without a book in his hand, and in many seminars he gives a master-level class in budo concepts complete with demonstrations and exercises for the class. I'm not sure how many folks catch this, I suspect there's a certain amount of "oh lord he's at it again, can't we just practise".

Unfortunate for those who aren't listening to what he's saying. It will help in the future should you get past the "this foot there" stage. Almost as bad are the folks who say "oh I know that, I read that too" and don't see the applications they are being taught, don't see the chance to go beyond memorizing cute phrases.

There seems to be a great desire amongst some students who have a few years training under their belts, to teach. This is a fun thing if you're in your home dojo and you've got sensei there to keep an eye on you. Not particularly while you're teaching, but to back you up if you need it and to take care of all the other stuff you need to do around a dojo, like get the space, get the students, make sure someone is there to teach every class, and keep you ahead of the students you are teaching.

Training wheels. Consider if you will, what happens if you are teaching on your own. You have to do all those things above, you have to get the space and the students and collect the fees and do the paperwork. Now you have to show up for every single class. No phoning sensei and saying "oh I feel sick today so I can't come to class" or even just not showing up for class. After all sensei can just give your beginners to someone else right? None of that any more, and then, on top of all that, you have to start answering questions.

If you don't train yourself, if you don't keep ahead of the seniors, you will be "making stuff up". You WILL be asked questions that you've never thought about before. Can you say "I don't know, I've never thought about that"? If you can't you WILL make stuff up to defend your ego. After all, you're the teacher, the master, right?

Gone before really does mean keep ahead. If you don't study, if you don't read those books or look for those papers or go to every meaningful seminar you can get to, you won't stay ahead.

Of course you could just change your attitude to teaching, you could accept that you're just the guy who's gone before and take pleasure in your student's achievements rather than desperately finding ways to knock them down. Oh, and keep ahead of them for as long as you can, not because of your ego, but because staying ahead of them is your way of helping them ultimately become better than you.

You pull them up the ladder for as long as you can and then you boost them up as high above you as you are able.

Or, if they tick you off bad enough and long enough, just hand them the ladder. They usually think it's all about the ladder anyway.

Sept 9, 2017



Peterborough Koryu Seminar 1: (My sensei says)

This past weekend, November 28-29, 2017 was the Peterborough Muso Jikiden Eishin Ryu seminar. This is largely a family affair with 40 participants who are all students of Goyo Ohmi sensei. Seven years this year I believe, and it is a great source of renewal to me every time. Simply put, I remember why I am doing this stuff. The weekend went something like this. Opening remarks by Ohmi sensei, Omori Ryu with Carole Galligan sensei, Remarks by Ohmi sensei in the afternoon, tate hiza no bu by Kim Taylor in the afternoon. Evening discussions over a great meal, then on Sunday, opening remarks by Ohmi sensei, Oku iai tachi waza led by Galligan, Taylor and David Green sensei, then the mid-afternoon remarks and to finish the day, the class was split between free practise of Zen Ken Ren iai for those who are grading in a month, and a mix of Tachi Uchi no Kurai and Tsumi Ai no Kurai taught by Taylor.

It is getting toward the time when I should gather up all my notes from Ohmi sensei. He once joked that I should write a book entitled "my sensei said" like a student did during the Edo (he was reading it at the time). Thing is, all the books I've written have been that book, my sensei said. This is another chapter.

My sensei said:

This is a seminar, I am here as a seminar teacher, so I will be teaching you as a group. You don't come to a seminar for individual attention, you get that at your dojo. Here we are not going to be giving it to you, you must take it, steal it from us.

Here I would like you to consider your mindset, your spirit and your posture. The small details are something you can do with your own teachers but here you should look for different things. I see that some of you have been warming up while we get ready, others have not. I don't care, it's up to you but when you line up you must be completely ready to start. We will go through Zen Ken Ren iai to warm up and get the muscles working.

Seitei and Jikiden are the same, you should practise them with the same mind, spirit and posture. It is only the angles and other small details that are different. There are two things that you must pay attention to.

1. Is your grip correct? From the little finger to the thumb your strength should be 10, 8, 6, 4, 4, and at the base of your index finger, 8.
2. You must have someone in front of you. If you are not cutting someone, if you do not have correct footwork, posture, spirit, and breathing, you are not doing Oku iai, you are just acting. Some of you are beginners and will not be able to do Oku iai correctly but go ahead and try this weekend.

We will split up into two groups, 4dan and up, 3dan and below, face each other and compare as we do Seitei.

A seminar is not for learning the details, it is for other things like working on your spirit and your mind. There are many who may not be ready to come to a seminar because they are still learning the details. You are here, so try. Remember that a cut is done with the hand, then not with the hand but the foot, then with the hip, then with the tanden.

When you cut you must understand the sword. Your tip must be keen, sharp, crisp. Your monouchi must be heavy. Remember Kan Kyu Kyo Jaku. Slow, quick, strong, soft.

This is iai, the nuki tsuke, the initial cut must be from the saya. This is the most important difference between iai and kendo.

When you are younger, your iai should be a little bit faster, this will help you. When you are older you must use your mind power and your spirit.

When we are doing a kata, for instance Sanpo Giri of Seitei, you can choose from several timings. You can cut the first and second opponents quickly, then the third more slowly, more deliberately. This is how Haruna sensei did it. You can also do all three cuts at the same tempo, like Namitome sensei. If you choose this your seme must be perfect, you must hold all three. Yamazaki sensei put more time between the first and second cut than between the second and third. I like this way too. Regardless of which timing you choose, you must use correct metsuke to control your opponents.

From your opening etiquette, you must show your superiority. From the moment you sit in seiza you should show you are ready, you should show your quality.

From fourth dan and up you should be showing seme. You must have an opponent and you must control him, you must push him.

When you take your kamae your tip must be alive, it must be keen. All your kamae must be alive, your body and your sword must be alive. If you are in waki gamae you are ready, you are not waiting. If you are on your back heel you are waiting and you are not ready.

Saya no uchi does not mean "do not draw your sword" it means you are ready. For 1-2 dan you cut and then win. From 4dan up you must win and then cut. Saya no uchi means that if you draw your sword you diminish your sword, but if you draw it 100 times and lose, this is not the way either. As you learn to draw and kill others, you are conquering yourself. Self defeat (to defeat your desires, self control) is more important than defeating others. You must learn self denial.

We say that kendo is just hitting each other with sticks and the kendoka say that we are just fooling around with swords. Both should be serious. Kendo is ki ken tai ichi, the kendoka gathers his spirit, and cuts as he goes in. He catches his opponent. The iai is ki tai ken, we move into the correct distance and then cut. Tameshi giri is also ki tai ken, you step into distance and then cut the target. There is a difference between tameshigiri and iai of course, if you do not have a teki you are not doing iai.

Oct 30, 2017

Peterborough Koryu Seminar 2: (My sensei says)

Continuing with comments from Ohmi sensei at the 2017 Peterborough koryu seminar.

Regarding the sword, at the kissaki (tip) we call it the sankaku, the triangle neck. This is very important for iaido. Next is the monouchi, the cutting area of the blade. The edge of the blade is the strongest part, the back is the weakest, if you hit something with the mune (the back) you are likely to break the sword. The next strongest part of the blade is the shinogi, the area on the side of the blade, although this is far less strong than the edge. When a smith makes a sword he will slap the side of the blade on the quenching water and if there is a flaw the blade will break. Only after checking for these flaws will the smith sign the blade. You should always use the edge of the blade to strike, not the side or the back. When I learned Yae Gaki I was taught to block using the edge, you may chip it but your blade will still be useable. Today we are sometimes instructed to use the side of the blade, so we do. In the Uke Nagashi movement I sometimes see people blocking the other blade at right angles using the side or back of the blade. This will result in your own blade edge being driven into your face. If you use the shinogi or the mine (back) as the contact surface in uke nagashi your tip must be angled well back and above your shoulder. It is this angle that prevents the blade from being damaged. Remember that in tachi uchi no kurai (a partner set) we block with the edge.

Ken sabaki is the movement of the sword, this must be efficient and it must make sense.

Tai sabaki is the movement of the body. It is the body that expresses seme (pressure) not the sword. The sword just cuts. In iai, we step into the cutting distance with our body, or he steps into our distance. Kendo has the idea of a "chance of hitting" so we jump in, iaido can be the same but with iai we must have no openings (suki) at all so that our opponent has no chance of hitting us. During nuki tsuke (the draw and cut) there must be no opening for counter attack and there must also be no bullying spirit. During furi kaburi there must be no openings as we take the sword overhead and cut.

Tempo, spirit, and power must coordinate properly. If you show your intake of breath you will lose. If you move backward you will lose. In the technique Yae Gaki we move forward from the hip and backward from the shoulder, if you do the opposite you are not practicing iai, your movement will be full of openings. For Oku iai it is this type of training.

Metsuke. Your gaze must be enzan no metsuke, you look in one direction but you must see widely. You must also catch your opponent's attacking mind before he starts. You must "read the air". You use your eyes to see the front, you must use your mind to see behind. You can't see behind you, so you must read the air.

Musashi famously spoke of Kan Ken no Metsuke. Kan and Ken both mean to look, Kan means to look with the mind, Ken means to look with the eye. Both are important.

Calmness will help you to catch your opponent's attacking mind. In the west you say "the eyes are the window to the soul", to avoid giving away our intention we look at the obi or we look at the feet. Don't

show your eyes. As we begin nuki tsuke we look at his eyes. When he is on the floor at the end of the kata, we look three meters in front rather than directly at him. This is the metsuke of zanshin.

In the Itto ryu they speak of kigurai, fukaku and hin i. These are important. For 1-2 dan students you should concentrate on correct movement and posture. At 4-5 dan you must show your spirit, your fighting technique, and correct ma (timing).

Ki ken tai ichi is important, the spirit, sword and body must work together as one. You must understand tempo changes as we discussed in Sanpogiri, your spirit, your sword, your body, your metsuke must be correct for the tempo you have chosen. Kan kyu kyo jaku, kihaku, metsuke, calmness all come from and indicate your depth of training. At 6-7 dan you must have kigurai and fukaku, a presence. David Green sensei shows presence always. Hin i is easy for someone who is tall and handsome but for the rest of us we can achieve it by dressing well, and walking beautifully.

Kigurai. The Itto ryu describes this as, before the start you must control your opponent. To do this you must catch his attacking mind and through this you must control his actions. One tool for this is your breathing. Sit down and exhale, then inhale then stop breathing, listen carefully, try to feel what your opponent is doing. Then as you begin to move, push (seme) with your breath. So to catch his move you must stop your own breath.

Tanden. When we do hiki taoshi during a kata we must not just wave our sword or try to pull him down with our arms, we must pull him down with our tanden.

I can give you a lot of theory here at the seminar but you must practise in your dojo. Just acting does not work, you must show your understanding without using words to describe what you are doing. Today you may experience a sekka, a spark, train to catch this chance.

Our school began with Hayashizaki Jinsuke. There were many schools that came from his early students. Later a man named Hasagawa Eishin was headmaster and developed the Tatehiza no bu. After that Omori Rokurozaemon was hamon, kicked out. He developed seiza no bu from his study of Shinkage ryu and Ogasawara ryu. Later still, Hayashi went to Edo and then took our school back to Tosa. Many generations after this Oe Masamichi (Masaji) put the school together in its current form. Where there were once something like 170 kata we now have 42 plus some kaewaza. So the ryu has three levels Omori ryu (seiza no bu), Hasagawa Eishin Ryu (tate hiza no bu) and Muso Jikiden Eishin Ryu (Oku iai).

Some of the characteristics of our school. Once we used to simply throw the sageo over the saya, nobody does this any more, now we tuck the sageo in the himo so that it doesn't flop around. We use tate ha, on the draw and the noto our edge is facing upward, we do not move it to the attacking angle until saya banari. Our chinagui in Oku iai is yoko, to the side. When we do furi kaburi the tip moves directly upward as if cutting up the opponent's face. Our zenshin while doing noto in tate hiza includes a sweep around with the right foot. When we draw the sword we close the space over the koiguchi. When we do chiburi our hand comes directly to the koiguchi.

Saya biki was not done originally in our school, you will see old photos where the nuki tsuke is done with the left hand on the obi, not at the koiguchi. Kamimoto Eichi said that saya biki gives more power to the opening cut. When Harusuke sensei saw this he became angry and said not to move the sword like this. Today we do saya biki but it is different from zen ken ren iai.

It is important that you understand the movements of both Muso Jikiden Eishin Ryu and Zen Ken Ren iai and do not mix them up. Watch as I demonstrate mae from our school while Pam Morgan does seitei mae.

Thank you for attending this seminar. Please remember what you have seen and go back to your dojo to practise it.

Oct 31, 2017

Practice from the back

In the recent Jodo seminar, Kurogo sensei told us to practise from the back. He was speaking of two different but related things. First, you should always practise as if there is a panel of judges at your back. Pay attention to what is behind, your behind, as much as you pay attention to your front. Ohmi sensei made the same comment at the seminar when he said you must have a friend look at you, don't just use the mirror, if you want to improve your iai.

Posture, don't lean forward, don't forget your back.

Kurogo sensei told us to "see from the back of your head". Don't look from your eyes, see through your body, see from deeper, be aware from one side to the other, which would mean that you are not only looking at your partner or your opponent in front, but you have also, at the very same time, checked your posture. Is he ready? Am I ready?

By being aware of our backside, we are also aware of what is going on behind us. This might seem like "baby talk", we all know we have to see everything on the battlefield, but quite often this, like much else we "know" is only known in our head. I've seen as many seniors as I have beginners, step back into a table or hit a wall with their sword. Somewhere in your body should be radar to keep a map of what's around you in the dojo.

A few months ago we worked a bit on this. We looked at a blank wall, backed up and stopped when we figured we were just at the wall behind us. It doesn't take long to get pretty good at this because we are already, most of us, good at this. If we aren't getting in our own way by thinking about it, we have a pretty good sense of where we are. Most of the time.

Kurogo sensei also reminded us that there is one more "practise behind", and that is the beginners that share the class with us. They are usually behind the seniors so that they can "learn from behind" or "learn from the back". The back of the person in front of them. When you practise you should be aware that you are teaching anyone who stands behind you. Pay attention, be a good example.

This was sensei's comment on what qualities we look for in a 5dan, someone who is classy, who looks like an example to those watching. Five dan is the official point we have chosen for students to begin teaching, the minimum grade, so it's not surprising that we should be looking for teaching qualities. In a growing section, such as jodo in Canada, of course we have teachers with less than 5 dan, it's inevitable, but we also have a specific, assigned 5dan or higher for these teachers. More than responsibility or blame, this system is to remind the junior instructors that they must continue learning.

The seniors, of any rank, in a dojo should teach by example, not by mouth. Leave the kuchi waza, the mouth techniques to sensei and just show good technique for the beginners to follow.

Pam Morgan told me she was in Mansfield sensei's class when he had students checking each other. He said to her "you can tell him or you can show him but not both". She remembers that well, and is quite proud that she showed her partner and he "got it".

Ohmi sensei says "show them, make them sweat, then tell them".

Do you think that all these things are to make you a better student? All of them have been instructions on how to be a better teacher. I have heard, many times, students complain that we do not teach our people how to teach. This shows a lack of attention from those students. We teach our students how to teach just like we teach them how to do the techniques. We show how to teach by teaching. Students who attend the May seminar are being taught how to teach. Do you really think that the Hanshi Hachidan from Japan, or the senior instructors from other countries are there to teach the beginners? They are teaching our very most senior people how to teach you. You, as beginners, are being taught, along with the seniors, how to teach. Trust me, you don't need a senior 7 or 8dan to tell you which foot goes where in kata number six.

If you want to be told that you need to schedule 15 minutes of warmup, 10 of stretching, 20 of basic drills, 10 of advanced skills and 5 of stretching per class, feel free to look up that information online. Or make a note.

In budo, you must continue to practise and improve to become a better teacher. The moment you feel you have "got it" is the moment you become useless to your most senior students. Information on class structure may be the sort of thing that leads you to think you have "got it". Especially if you have a coaching certificate on your wall. Remember that most coaches are concerned with a very short time in an athlete's life. Budo teachers are concerned with something that lasts a lifetime, our concerns go far beyond physical skills for incredibly fit people.

Mansfield sensei, in his judging seminar asked his class if they would pass a 77 year old who could not quite perform the test with technical perfection. Many in the class said they would fail him. The response from sensei was that senior judges might pass such a person. Please consider what this means.

Kurogo sensei mentioned several times that to be a good judge you must be constantly practising. To judge a certain level you must be beyond that level. This was pointed out by Ohmi sensei in one of the iaido classes. The juniors were judging the seniors and they voted one way for a pair of demonstrators. Ohmi sensei said "no, I vote the other way". He was looking at the feeling, the seme, the metsuke, the presence of kasso teki. The juniors were looking at the technique. After saying this he asked the two to demonstrate once more and he said "Now I vote the other way", the winner had now begun to "over-act" because of the explanation.

You can only judge on what you know. If you are working on technique, that is what you must judge by. If you have a measuring tape you can judge distance, but volume and mass are beyond your ability because you don't have the tools.

Start with practising from the back.

May 27, 2018

My Sensei Said: It's all Bull-puckies

That's not exactly what Ohmi sensei told us at the May seminar, but I'm afraid that writing the whole word will get me on a list somewhere.

He said that he had not done much practise in the last few months but had read a lot of books and his own notes. His conclusion? He burned a lot of his notes, saying that they were bull-puckies, and so were the books written by famous people.

You have to practise, you can't just read about this stuff. Similarly, listening to sensei is useless, you have to practise. If you don't practise it all starts to, "stink of budo", not "smell like budo", as in a 4dan is starting to smell like budo, but to stink as in the "stink of zen". Or bull-puckies.

Try stuff for yourself, don't read about it and assume it's right because some famous dude wrote it. Who knows if he knew what he was talking about, who knows if he practised or spent his time writing. If you practise you'll find out.

And then Ohmi sensei told the class about the three swords. There is a place for discussion, just as long as it doesn't substitute for practise. I'm sorry I didn't catch the Japanese terms, but they are:

Useless movement, forced movement and movement that doesn't follow the principles.

Useless movements are ones that are not necessary, like the fidgeting you do with your fingers at the top of your cut, or just before you start your chiburi. Or to push your sword up before you cut down with it.

Forced movement is where you "over-act", where you put too much muscle into it, squeezing the life out of your hilt perhaps. It's unnatural movement, not smooth.

Movement that doesn't follow riai is also unnatural. It's movement that goes against the natural rhythm and timing of your sword. To lift, turn and cut, rather than fold the sword in an uke nagashi movement, for instance, as you cut someone behind or at 90 degrees.

Now you have heard about that, are you going to file it in your head or are you going to look for it in your practice, or check your friend's technique?

If you read it and don't practise, it's just so much bull-puckie.

My sensei said that seminars are not for personal corrections, you need to watch the instructors and find the things that you will work on for the rest of the year. You will see proper technique that you should pay attention to. This will let you know where you need to be heading. It will give you an image in your head to compare with what you are doing.

My sensei also said that you should not watch bad people. What he means is not to watch people who do poor iaido. Watch enough of this and you may start to accept it as normal, rather than bad iai. Only watch those who do good iai so that you improve.

Similarly, when you are watching people, criticize them. Not to be mean, but so that you separate the good technique from the bad. Look for the bad technique in yourself and steal the good technique. It's all pretty simple isn't it? Unless you don't know what's good and what's bad. How do you figure that out?

Practise.

May 28, 2018

In the midst of it all

Peterborough

Sunday morning hotel breakfast

oatmeal

juice

tiny muffin

green tea

Here's hoping the girls get up soon enough to get a box of dark roast coffee.

Yesterday morning began with some good lecturing from Ohmi sensei, I took notes and will probably write them up this coming week for those who were there. Those who didn't attend will have to make of them what you can. Along with the lecture was some practise for Omori Ryu. At the end of the class, Galligan sensei made some excellent comments which I also wrote down.

After a good lunch at the college cafeteria we were back for the afternoon where Galligan sensei taught Tate Hiza (Eishin Ryu). I was down at the end of the room working with the 5-6 dan challengers, trying to avoid looking for secret handshakes in the quest to unlock the secrets of passing a grading. Instead we worked on getting better at what we're doing. What technical aspects we did cover won't be written down here because beginners won't be able to do them anyway. (All those who get upset when I say that there is stuff you can't do, note I said beginners and you certainly aren't a beginner.) Most of what we were doing was keyed specifically to the participants. What I can say is that once past 5dan the work is mostly mental with a big emphasis on hips.

Remember the great secret class I once wrote about from a May seminar when we seniors spirited away the head teacher? I heard a lot of complaining from the junior ranks (up to about 5dan) that we 6 and 7 dans were getting special treatment. Yep, it was a not to be missed set of secrets. We were working mostly on grip.

Yesterday we were working mostly on the hips, the very stuff we instructors tell you guys all about, every day of your practise. Move with the hips, cut with the hips. Another thing we were working on was relaxing the shoulders "Strong below, soft above".

We talked about teaching-timing and "showing your own iaido" and lots of other things that will sound trite to write down. I'm hoping that several dojo will have some seriously neglected students from now until December as sensei wanders over to a corner to practise by himself. I don't expect it though, these guys aren't selfish enough to ignore their students.

Today we carry on with some Tate Hiza, maybe moving on to Oku Iai. Ohmi sensei ended the day with some comments on the importance of Tate Hiza, reminding us that it is the core of the practise. If you don't understand tate hiza you don't understand Muso Jikiden Eishin Ryu.

Despite the pain in my left knee all night and this morning, I'm looking forward to the classes. -Nov 4, 2018

Peterborough koryu iai seminar report 2018

This was the 6th annual seminar and as per usual, there are calls for another one in the spring. Holy doodlebug, can I think of another way to damage myself? Demonstrating the relationship of seiza and tate hiza I managed to fire myself backward faster than my little feets could keep up. Before slamming into the tables at the wall I figured I'd better fall down, which I did on my right hip, avoiding a smashed sword and a smashed head. I slid under the tables instead of into them but tile on cement and not much padding on the hips any more. Ouchie, ouchie this morning.

Well it's comforting to know I can still fall down, which is a very martial arts thing to say I suppose.

Ohmi sensei was in excellent form this weekend, there were a few students grinning ear to ear while being yelled at for being " 'orrible little students who don't know anything". I swear, martial artist is an alternate term for masochist. We just love being yelled at, at least if it's by someone who cares about us. There were a few stories over beer about supposed big shots who lose it and yell because their delicate little egos have been bruised. The jerks will always be with us but fortunately, we don't need to stick around those guys.

This seminar finished up with the usual number of attendees, which was a great relief to Jim Wilson who is the head sensei for the Kenshokan group. I guess the seminar has been accorded the honour of "of course it will happen" because a goodly chunk of registration came in over the last two days. Really guys, stop teasing the old men, register for these things a bit earlier please, our hearts aren't getting any healthier.

Ohmi sensei's final comments to the seminar included a request that we practise the koryu a bit more often than we do. There is so much to be learned, so much that we neglect if we constantly train toward tournaments and gradings. These sentiments were echoed by Galligan sensei and myself. Your koryu is yours, you own it. Seitei iai feels sometimes like you just rent it. There are good things about Seitei, wonderful things, like being able to practise with sensei and fellow students from all over the world, but the grading bits sort of feel like renting a tuxedo to go to your graduation dinner.

Sunday began with everyone showing Omori and Eishin Ryu. The lessons of Saturday seemed to have been absorbed overnight as Ohmi sensei was happy and split the group into two section so that everyone could go on to Oku Iai. As is traditional, we skipped the seated kata to stand up for a while. Some koryu practise must be going on somewhere, because we went through the standing and then the seated oku kata by lunch. That included a lot of generalized instruction on my side of the room because we weren't spending a lot of time trying to figure out which foot went where.

Again, Ohmi sensei was pleased that we got through all three levels because "now they can start going into the deeper learning". Participants, you should feel good about your efforts this weekend.

In the afternoon Ohmi sensei and Galligan sensei did a bit of grading practise, with the latest tweaks from Europe being examined. For those who were not grading, we went through (on request) about half of the Tachi Uchi no Kurai kata with lots of yelling about distance and timing and "OMG what are you

doing you're dead! Dead! Dead!" Of course the drama wasn't all that, the techniques we got through were mostly fine by the end of the day.

At 5pm on Sunday, I don't think anyone was too sad that it was time to quit. There was a rubbing of the feet and stretching of the back in general.

As promised, and perhaps expected, I will be writing up another edition of "My Sensei Said" tomorrow. I hope that folks were taking their own notes during the seminar because I was sometimes out of earshot of Ohmi sensei's instruction. I very much hope that you all appreciate what a wonderful, hard working, talented resource you have available to you in Ohmi sensei. I know how much he studies, how much he reads and practises and watches. Long may he yell at us.

It's time also, to recognize the Kenshokan students for their hard work at these seminars. We do notice that several of you who are injured (back problems, heart bypass surgery, that sort of thing) are there, setting up snacks, repairing the facility, making sure the seminar runs smoothly. Eyes open, something needs to be done, it's being done.

Lovely.

Nov 5, 2018

My Sensei Said 2018 - 1

These teachings are from the Peterborough Muso Jikiden Eishin Ryu seminar, as given by Goyo Ohmi sensei to the classes. As always any mis-spellings or misunderstandings are mine.

All Japanese Ryu teach the same things, and that includes the Zen Ken Ren sets of practise. They include:

1. An opponent.
2. The use of the sword
3. The meaning of budo to the swordsman.

The Seiza set of practise for Muso Jikiden Eishin Ryu has a single opponent, the same as Kendo. The Tate Hiza (Eishin Ryu) level also deals with a single person.

Kendo teaches the use of the sword against a single person in front of you. Iaido teaches how to deal with opponents in many different places, in front, to the sides or behind.

Oku Iai includes kata that consider multiple opponents.

When considering the use of the sword, the chudan kamae is usually taught to beginners. This stance is both defensive and offensive. When jodan kamae is considered, it is offensive, it is very aggressive, but it is also wide open. Therefore, when using jodan the swordsman must use his spirit strongly so that it is hard to attack him.

In iaido we have the sword in the saya and our stance is a natural one, but inside we must have a very strong spirit.

Learn about this spirit. You must push against your opponent, you must use your metsuke.

I practiced Niten Ichiryu last weekend with Kajiya sensei, the Soke of the school. He showed how to focus, how to push the opponent. Not like a bully, not aggressively or roughly, but with a calm, controlled mind and spirit. All schools use this, all schools teach this. I practise with other schools so that I can use their teachings in my own iai.

Today we will practise Omori Ryu, the seiza set of kata. I want us to focus on the one person facing us. Remember that Seitei iai and Muso Jikiden Eishin Ryu look different on the outside, but inside they are the same.

All schools have rules of practise. You can learn things from many schools and even in the old days, people recommended broad study. However, in one discussion on this topic many years ago, an 8dan stated that you should not practise another school if you cannot perform your own school properly. Once you understand your own school you can benefit from practising others. I would like you to understand your iai school.

Omori Ryu

Here are some of the characteristics of our iai ryu.

1. I was first taught to put the tsuka kashira in front of my belly button. In the ZNKR iai (seitei) they teach that the koiguchi is in the center. Today, I put the inside of the tsuba on the centerline.
2. We use tate ha, the edge up, when we draw the sword. The edge is up until about 3 inches of the kissaki are left inside the saya, then we turn the blade flat to perform the opening cut. The edge is also up, tate ha, for furi kaburi (lifting the sword overhead) and noto (returning the sword to the saya).
3. The noto was originally done with a forward motion, (identical to the draw) and with no twist of the hips or big movement of the saya. This was possible because the sword used was quite short, the standardized length for a blade in the Edo period. Today we use a longer sword so we concentrate on keeping the tsuka in front of and between the hips, but it does not need to be aimed directly forward for the noto.
4. We sit in seiza so that there are two fist widths between our knees.
5. When we draw, we place the left then right hand onto the sword. As the right hand reaches the tsuka we open (cut) the koiguchi with uchigiri. There are three ways to open the scabbard mouth (koiguchi giri). The normal method that you use in Seitei gata is called soto giri. The thumb is on top of the tsuba (soto, outside) and everyone can see that the sword has been opened. The next is uchi giri (inside cut) which means that the thumb is kept behind (inside) the tsuba and the sword is opened as your right hand touches the tsuka. This means that others cannot see that you have broken the seal at the scabbard mouth. The sword is opened into the right hand as it reaches the hilt. The last way to open the koiguchi is hikai giri. This is a thumb and forefinger grip on the rim of the tsuba. One would use this grip when in a crowd to prevent someone from pulling out your sword. We use uchi giri in our practise.

The rules of Muso Jikiden Eishin Ryu are over three hundred years old, we should use them.

Nov 6, 2018

My Sensei Said 2018 - 2

These are notes taken from Goyo Ohmi sensei's instructions on Muso Jikiden Eishin Ryu, given at the Peterborough seminar of November 3-4 2018. All mistakes and misinterpretations are mine.

Omori Ryu: Kata

Mae to Ushiro

I first learned to aim the tsuka kashira at teki's right shoulder rather than at his center. This was an instruction given to beginners to encourage them to make a big cut. In Seitei iai we cut across the eyes, in Muso Jikiden Eishin Ryu we may aim at the neck, but our opponent is also rising so perhaps we are cutting across the shoulders. For this reason we finish the horizontal cut more widely than we do for ZNKR iai.

This opening cut is "gama uchi" it has a slight curve outward from your body toward the target. This makes a big cut. Gama uchi can mean a frog's mouth, which has this sort of curve.

On saya biki, Kamimoto Eichi was practicing with Yamamoto Harusuke many years ago. Harusuke sensei asked why he did such a big saya biki, saying that it was not necessary. Eichi sensei, in some notes he made later, noted that a big saya biki looks stronger. In Muso Jikiden Eishin Ryu we move the saya back to clear the blade, but the more important thing is what is happening at the tip of the blade.

When raising the blade overhead from the first cut (furi kaburi), you should feel as if you are sticking the tip of the blade up the opponent's nose.

When the blade is over your head the tip may be down, but don't cut your heel. Don't mix this position with Seitei iai, they are not the same.

On the downward cut (kiri tsuke), the tip finishes a little down. In standing cuts if the blade is horizontal we call it "unfinished". The tip must exit the body of your opponent.

On chiburi the tip finishes down, lower than the knee and your right hand is outside your shoulder. At this point your feet are together and you should be in iai goshi. In the old days they commented that iai goshi is not "hepiri goshi" (farting hips), don't squat too deep or stick your rear end out.

We may start our noto at different lengths along the mune (back of the sword) depending on the level of practice. For Omori Ryu we meet the left hand at about 10 cm from the tsuba.

Use your left hand on the saya to draw and to do noto. Beginners will usually do their noto to the saya but you should try to do your noto to your stomach.

Uke Nagashi

Learn the footwork of the kata, then work on timing, distance, and the mind. You can practise this kata at 45 degrees to shomen, then try 90 degrees which is more difficult.

You may make the first move of the draw downward, the tsuka lower than the obi. I was told that Oe sensei drew his sword horizontally on this movement so that is what I do. Stay low and lift the sword overhead to catch your opponent's blade, now step to your right front to turn and face him. At the same time you dump his blade off to your left side (uke nagashi).

The cut is one handed, and your footwork should be tan-TAN.

Kaeshaku

I was taught that there were three levels from which to begin the kata, depending on the rank of the person committing seppuku. Jodan was above the shoulder as we do it today. Chudan was in the chudan (seigan) position and gedan was a one handed gedan, the right hand lower than your hip and the sword tip downward. Haruna sensei taught us that these three heights were all above the shoulder but at different heights.

The cut angle depends on what you have arranged with the seppukunin. If you are cutting in a horizontal motion, as you would be if he is sitting upright, you should use "daki komi". This is a cut that feels like you are hugging someone.

One sensei from Mugai Ryu said that for practise, one should set up a tameshi giri roll of one year old bamboo (still soft and green) inside a tatami mat. You should focus on the bamboo inside so that you don't cut completely through the mat but sever the bamboo.

Other sensei used specially sharpened swords and hanging silk threads to practise cutting precisely to marks made on the thread. Without correct technique the thread will just wrap around the sword.

Tsuke Komi

There are several places where you have a "chance" in an encounter.

1. At the beginning of his attack
2. When he freezes
3. When he tries to run away
4. When uke is done, at the end of a block
5. At the end of a cut

Timing is important in this kata to find your chance. The second cut of this kata should be like dotanuki (cutting several mats piled up). The iai goshi should be deep.

At the zanshin I use chudan, the tip upward, but it is also written that the tip can be downward at this point.

At the initial drawing of the sword you can draw downward to invite the opponent to attack.

Mitani sensei, who will be here in December, has shown this initial avoidance of the attack with no pulling back of the foot. There are many different ways to do the kata.

Tsuki Kage

Practice this kata at 45 degrees as a beginner, and later you can try 90 degrees to the front. The first cut is done with your right hand at the same height as for Mae and the tip upward. Otherwise you can't cut his wrists.

Do we use ayumi ashi (left foot in front of right) or tsugi ashi (left foot up to right, right foot forward) when closing the distance to do the second cut? Muso Jikiden Eishin Ryu assumes a closer distance to our opponent than does Muso Shinden Ryu. In Kendo we chase our opponent, but in our school we let him come into our distance, this means that in our school we are a sword's distance from our opponent so don't over-run him.

A few years ago in Japan a police officer who stopped a car was stabbed. There was an investigation about this, and it was concluded that the officer was a judoka, so was comfortable an arm's length away. We must be careful of our "comfortable distance".

I choose to use tsugi ashi for this technique. One should be careful of "muteki hyosha", if you shoot an arrow without a target it isn't hard to do. If you have a target that you are trying to hit it becomes much more difficult. You should do your iai the hard way, with a target (kasso teki) in front of you.

If you use a walking movement in this kata be careful you don't use "chidori ashi". This is a bird walk, a drunken walk. You must not move in a sloppy way, but instead control your posture at all times. This is important, you must use kime.

Ask yourself "am I cutting correctly?", you must ask yourself about many subjects. Before the Edo period swordsmen did "kage uchi geiko", they practiced in the shadows of the forest by themselves and had to think hard about what they were doing. Today we have dojo, you should ask your friends to help with your practise.

Oi Kaze

This is a difficult kata, we have to catch our opponent on the run. Lean forward and do two longer steps, then shorter steps.

You must demonstrate correct ki ken tai ichi.

Nuki Uchi

Compared to Makko of tate hiza, this kata is different. On the draw we move to the side, then upward in an uke nagashi movement. We can also do tsuki age to draw, thrust the sword back to the left side and then move upward and cut.

I finish this kata by returning the blade to about 10cm and then as I place the rest of the sword in the saya I pull my knees back together.

Nov 7, 2018

My Sensei Said 2018 - 3

These notes are from Goyo Ohmi sensei and Carole Galligan sensei at the Peterborough Koryu iai seminar of November 3-4 2018. All mistakes and misinterpretations are of course, mine.

Continuing the notes from the Saturday morning Omori Ryu class.

Learning the movements of the kata is the first step. Then you must go on to the situation, the meaning, you must catch what is written about the kata. You must also learn the correct kigamae, the spirit. It is necessary to think about the mind, the spirit and the posture.

Your zanshin (lingering mind, the period at the end of the kata) must not be rushed, it should be slow but strong. There must be no suki (opening) in your movements. The kata ends back at the starting line, not after the last cut.

At the end of the kata you can exhale but you should not show that you are breathing.

Kigamae is the aspect of the spirit.

Migamae is the aspect of your posture

Kokorogamae is the aspect of your mind.

You must consider your footwork, your body movement. You must control gravity by your movements. You must consider the metsuke, your gaze, how you look at things. You must control your breath so that you can use it correctly.

Most importantly, you must control the sword. Consider your left and right hand control. In practise, you must lift the sword with your right hand from nuki tsuke (the opening one handed cut) and then you must switch to your left hand to cut. Use an exercise to practise this, lift the sword up with your right hand, let go as you take it with your left, then cut with the left and catch the hilt at the end of the cut with your right hand.

Practice your spirit power, your breath power. I stand facing a corner of the room and feel my exhalation because the two walls reflect the sound back. You should try this and see if you can feel your spirit power reflected back at yourself. If you turn around and face the room the spirit is dispersed into the space and is hard to feel.

Mind, body and spirit. You must consider these.

Noto should be done with jo ha kyu on the draw outward along your left hand, then you should do noto to your stomach not to the saya.

The most important part of an iai kata is the first cut. Always keep this in mind.

Ryu Kan, Run and sweat, this is the way to learn what you are doing, but consider: A kendo 5dan challenger failed his exam and was told he didn't have enough practise. He complained that he practised very hard, every day he worked until the sweat poured down. He asked why someone would

say he didn't practise enough. An 8dan sensei said "sweat is not enough for 5dan, you must also think about what you are doing".

But most important is to sweat.

Tate Hiza

The tate hiza techniques (one knee raised) are the most important kata of the Muso Jikiden Eishin Ryu. There are 16 (17) techniques and lots of variations. One variation of Yae Gaki is to chase and cut, then sink to your knee rather than sinking while cutting.

When I began my iaido training in Osaka at the Shum Phu Kai my shodan test was 5 Omori Ryu kata. I was then allowed to join the Eishin Ryu class and my nidan test was based on those kata. When I left Japan I had not learned Seitei Gata iai or the standing Oku Iai. I learned those later. Sometimes in your practise you may get stuck. Look at a book, or ask someone to help. You can also go outside your own lineage, this is OK.

The following are additional comments from Carole Galligan sensei to the class.

As Ohmi sensei often says, you should win first, then move. In the case of iaido this means you must take over the centreline during your kata. Your movements must be smooth and continuous.

Don't rush, each kata should be done to your ability. Jo Ha Kyu doesn't imply any specific speed, it is an acceleration.

Your teki is you, that means that each time you win it is by a very slim margin. Teki is one meter away, each move, any movement takes you into his cutting range so you must have correct posture.

When performing saya biki, your left hand must have as much power as your right.

Timing: It is hard to end faster (jo ha kyu) if you start fast. Consider this. You must think about timing, jo ha kyu, the centre and your posture.

The most important part of the kata is the first cut. In Ushiro the turn "brings you to" the cut, but the turn itself is not as important as the cut. Do the turn in your own ability, slow down if you have to.

In the block of Yae Gaki you should consider your posture. Stand and then block, don't try to do too many things at once.

In Tsuki Kage you must take over the centreline as you draw, the same as for Mae.

Nov 8, 2018

My Sensei Said 2018 - 4

These notes are from Goyo Ohmi sensei and Carole Galligan sensei at the Peterborough Koryu iai seminar of November 3-4 2018. All mistakes and misinterpretations are of course, mine.

Sunday warmup was done by Galligan sensei: Don't lose focus when you are warming up. If you move without paying attention it is easy to develop bad habits.

We went through Omori Ryu and when asked, my comments were to follow Galligan sensei's timing. If there is a senior in front of you who is practising at the same time, don't waste the chance to "steal their timing".

Ohmi sensei: Muso Jikiden Eishin Ryu requires a big motion and a big cut. It should be gokai, robust, exquisite. Once some swordsmen visited Oe sensei's daughter in Alberta and on seeing their demonstration she said "My father didn't do kosei kosei iai. Kosei kosei means jittery, (like a chipmunk). If you watch Kono sensei's video tape you will see that his movements are very large.

A Mugai Ryu sensei I know once remarked that Muso Jikiden Eishin Ryu was indeed robust, but it would lose in a fight. This is not important. The lord of Tosa (where both styles of iai existed) protected Muso Jikiden Eishin Ryu and I believe he did this because of the mind training that comes with our style. Sit, gather your spirit, your energy, then go. This training is more important than training how to cut with the sword. This is why our school was protected. Make your iai big, don't rush. Seitei has its own timing.

Next, you must have an opponent, there must be someone under the sword. An older sensei watched the Kyoto Taikai and asked "is this iai? There is no person under the sword, is this iai?" You may practise hard but if you don't have a teki you are just acting.

Jo Ha Kyu, consider the kata Mae. Jo means to gather your energy, Ha means to go forward, Kyu is sekka (a spark struck from flint), it is ki ken tai (body, spirit and sword together). This is uchi, the strike. Finally, zanshin (lingering awareness).

In doing Haya Nuki practise we do the kata continuously, leaving out the zanshin at the end. You must not do this kosei kosei. Each kata is done in the proper timing, we simply leave out the zanshin and other bits between the kata. If you wish to finish at the same place on the floor, switch katas number 6 and 7. Perform Uke Nagashi from Omori Ryu at 45 degrees for the last kata.

We do haya noto, a quick noto between kata, but only that, is faster than normal. I was told that Oe sensei did Uke Nagashi to finish this practise and so I do it. You can do Uke Nagashi or Nuki Uchi as you wish.

We can also do Katate Haya Nuki, a one handed practise. Use two hands to do the hiki taoshi (pulling down) movements and then go back to one hand.

This is the end of my notes for the weekend, again a reminder that any mistakes are mine alone. I hope the participants were making their own notes for those sections of the seminar where I was not writing.

Again, I would like to remind those attending a seminar that you have a chance to watch senior sensei practise in front of you. If you are doing kihon or kata in your own timing, without watching sensei and matching their movements, you are missing a chance to learn. You are doing what my sensei said is "selfish practise".

Nov 9, 2018



The beatings will continue

Until moral improves. I had a request to tell the story of my beating at the hands of Haruna sensei and Ohmi sensei about 20 years ago in England. So while I'm having coffee here at the cabin, before we change the oil in the new generator, clear out all the mouse-vulnerable food, all the liquid cans, turn off the water and maybe, maybe have a practise, I'll tell it.

You know how I don't like travelling? How I always try to get a bag carrier to come along? Well this was back when I was Ohmi sensei's bag carrier. What a treat. We were just faces in the crowd back then, nobody special, so I booked the flights and didn't think too much more about it. I think this was Ohmi sensei's second visit, we had sent him over the year before to meet Haruna sensei on the recommendation of Bill Mears who had met him the year before. Hopping on the plane I expected to sleep but was, instead, kept up all night by sensei who wanted me to explain why us round-eyes would spend time at a Japanese martial art. "I mean, I'm Japanese, I have to spent time on my knees doing tea ceremony, but it's not your culture, you don't have to, so why?"

Trying to explain the difference between an Japanophile, a samurai wannabe (they call them otaku these days I think) and someone who finds value in the practise of budo without worrying about the "cultural thang", took a while. I'm the last type by the way, there are a few of us around who are in it more for the practise than the culture.

The result was that I got no sleep at all, but we ended up in a Northern airport somewhere around Rochdale I think. It was early in the morning and I saw nobody I recognized. I also had no contact numbers or any idea where we were supposed to go. Did I mention I'm not a good traveller? Eventually we spotted a sign saying Goyo Ohmi being held by a cab driver.

We got to his car and he said "where to?" Did I mention I'm not a good traveller? I had no idea but the man said "well they said Rochdale" so off we went. We explained why we were there (martial arts) and he said "I know a place that does that" so he dropped us off. We knocked, and knocked, and no answer. Seeing a breakfast place we went to try the local delicacies of fried, canned tomato, beans, bangers, fried bread, and thick bacon.

Back to the dojo where Alan Tattersall answered this time. He and Haruna sensei had been up late the night before, apparently.

So, as I recall (and all this stuff is hazy, hell last week is hazy to me these days) three days of hanging around waiting for the seminar to start. Ohmi sensei had stopped smoking years before but Haruna sensei had not yet, so thick clouds of smoke and lots of conversation in Japanese. Me, I hung around for two and a half days before I gathered up my bags and my sword and snuck behind the two of them. They were watching Dances with Wolves.

I went downstairs and changed, started swinging my sword and ten minutes later, clomp clomp clomp, (I remember the sound) down they came. For the next four hours (as I remember it), Haruna sensei went through all my techniques with Ohmi sensei translating and howling with laughter as I was, like I

said, beaten up. At one point Haruna sensei demonstrated the hiki taoshi movement from Eishin Ryu to me. Now I was young, big, strong and had been doing Aikido for ten years or more, but when sensei put a bokuto on my shoulder and moved, I ended up skidding across a tatami floor.

As for specifics, if you want to know what I was taught that day just come practise. I was taught what I know now. My seitei is Haruna sensei's seitei, modified as necessary to keep up with the "fashions from Paris". My koryu is a combination of what I was originally taught by Ohmi sensei, plus what he told me to do "Haruna sensei's way". I never had any understanding that there was a "right way" to do budo, Seitei was more or less brand new to everyone and my various sensei up to then had the idea that everyone ends up with "their own" budo. Being of that opinion myself, I did things the way my sensei (Ohmi sensei) did them until he told me to do them some other way. This is how my koryu ended up looking a little bit different from Ohmi sensei's and a little different than Haruna sensei's. Haruna sensei was my sensei's sensei.

I have never had anyone I called "my Japanese sensei" for the simple reason that I don't live in Japan. Someone you see once or twice a year, or even for a couple of weeks every year can, I suppose, be your sensei, but if you're practising with a teacher every week otherwise, it's pretty obvious to me (although not to some) who your sensei is.

For those who have heard stories about Haruna sensei and want to know what he taught, practise with your sensei who was taught by him and be content that you are learning what you would have learned if you were 20 years older and in front of him.

The beatings will continue until your budo improves.

Nov 18, 2018

Fredericton 2019 seminar report.

Ohmi sensei said, a while ago, "I want to go down east to have a seminar" so a seminar happened. Bill Anderson opened his town and his heart (not to mention his wallet) and invited everyone to the practise. He ended up with two 7dans, three 6dans and a host of lower ranks driving and flying into town. There were many locals as well, but honestly, "preaching in the wilderness" wasn't the point. We weren't there to teach, we were there to see each other, and drink beer and talk, talk, talk. It felt more like a family reunion than a martial arts seminar.

Still, three days of practise and a couple of gradings did happen, so without going into too much detail (didn't take notes I'm afraid, so I'm wondering why I'm writing this instead of those of you who did take notes), here's what we did.

Saturday morning started with iaido and Ohmi sensei asked Galligan sensei to do the warmup. I stepped out of line at one point, to watch what people were doing and the main thing that struck me was just how similar the cuts were for every single person there. It wasn't all that surprising if we consider that every person attending was in a single lineage, from Ohmi sensei. Some at one degree of separation, but many at four.

This lineage sets high store by the shape of our cuts apparently, and sure enough, shortly after the opening swings Galligan sensei was into details about how to swing. Not by walking around and poking people's swords into line, but by providing a series of exercises to allowed us all to find, for ourselves, the best way to cut. Most of those exercises involved what turned out to be the main theme of the weekend. To relax, to ease up on the stone hands, to let the sword move naturally, to stop trying so darned hard.

It was interesting to hear Ohmi sensei say "you must control the sword" while Galligan sensei was saying "stop trying to control the sword". Shall I presume to explain? When you try to control the sword, you actually end up losing control of it's main purpose, you lose control of it's cutting ability. To control the sword you must stop trying to control the sword.

Oooo, Zennish that is.

Half way through the first class Galligan sensei stopped and tried to turn the class over to Ohmi sensei who said "do that thing you do moving across the room". So we continued until the break. I have been attending the Port Credit classes and so I am familiar with Galligan sensei's exercises, which is why I made an extra special effort to listen as if I had never seen them before. Dudes, if sensei says something you've "heard before" you have to make an effort to "unhear" those earlier instructions. The biggest block to learning are the words "I know", on many different levels.

After the break I was up for jodo and I asked the iaido-only people to stick around and practise because I continued the work on grip and swing without getting into the jodo kihon or kata. Would you like to know what I did? Me too, but it was coming out of my rear end so I haven't a clue what we did. I don't try to remember the stuff I make up and neither should you. That seemed to be another theme of the

seminar, for the jodo part at least. Maybe one could summarize by saying the more you want to learn, the more you have to forget. Oh go look up the story about the sensei and the tea-cup.

After lunch Ohmi sensei worked on Seitei Iai, with the many seniors wandering around making suggestions as those challenging were lined up on one side of the room and everyone else on the other. At some point we did a mock grading and Tribe sensei said to me "now I have to unsee that". Just so. Good judge there.

After the break it was back to jodo and we went through the kihon. Some of the iaido folks took a miss, which was fine, I understand that I'm not going to convert every single iaido person in the CKF to jodo, but you can't blame a guy for trying. The solo kihon are pretty standard, and not very hard to learn, so we tried to keep the principles in mind and keep the instructions to a minimum. In other words, we tried to present a situation where discovery took place rather than memorization. Integration rather than accumulation. As Tribe sensei mentioned on Monday, you can have a pile of bricks or you can build a wall, and sometimes you have to knock over the pile to make the wall. One thing I do remember saying during Saturday's class was that the jo moves by sliding the hand. When the hand is sliding the jo is accelerating, when you grip, it stops. Last evening at class I mentioned that if you lift the jo, grip it and then swing, you tend to control it, you become careful about swinging it (especially at a partner). The Pamurai suddenly said "if you stop the jo by gripping it after sliding, the early grip means you have a hard time stopping it". You see why I always listen to what my students say? It's a rare class that I don't hear something worth stealing.

The evening was... umm... ah, we had a meeting room at the hotel set aside so we went there after the dinner and continued the discussions, technical, spiritual and political. Also a lot of "do you remember that time when you..." These things can be embarrassing. I think there was some discussion of who started when and was around for longest, which would absolutely terrify those who weren't even born when some of the middling-old farts started.

Sunday is a bit foggy (I don't drink any more, but staying up late messes this old man up). I think we may have started with jodo? I know we went through the first six partner kihon because we needed them for the 4kyu gradings. We also went through the kata 1, 2, 4 Seitei jo, because we used the ikkyu test to do the nikyu test. These were the first examples of a national jodo kyu grading system and they may be modified. In a quick vote of available members (those within 10 feet of the discussion in the middle of practise) it was decided that Eric Tribe would be president of this national kyu grading organization (Jodo Canada), Maya Wilson would be vice president (over her objections which were squashed when the role of a VP was explained) and Pam Morgan would be secretary/treasurer. This ought to get us started. The first gradings were done and we now have 3 new 4kyu and one new 2kyu.

On the iaido side, there were 2 ikkyu, 2 shodan, and one nidan added to the East Coast roster. Dave Green sensei and I watched the grading through the gym windows and invented new drinking games based on spotting minus points.

Dinner that evening was at a whisky bar with an impressive number of bottles lining the walls, which probably brought on the thoughts of shots. We adjourned to Green sensei's room (always the de facto

hospitality suite at these things) and continued the discussions of the previous night, including the surprise latin "ex post facto" that I heard coming out of my own mouth. You had to be there. Ohmi sensei and I eventually did our usual shushing of everyone else and took over the discussion by about 1am.

The official end of the seminar was the Sunday, but Galligan sensei and Tribe sensei were assigned to babysit me on the flight back to Ontario so we stayed for Monday where we did a morning and afternoon class with the Fredericton club. The morning was devoted to Tachi Uchi no Kurai of Muso Jikiden Eishin Ryu, and the afternoon to the Tachi Seiho of Niten Ichiryu. Technically, we continued to work on softening up the stone hands but also discussed distance (maai), something that is often a mysterious thing in the solo iai kata. If you have been reading these essays you will be familiar with the discussion of teki and kasso teki, which we spent some time on.

The quick flight down to Fredericton turned out to be not so quick and I was tempted to resurrect the adventures of Sam Pie, but that pleasure ought to go to someone else. And if you know who Sam Pie is, you are older than you will want to admit. A third lovely dinner and a trip to the airport completed the seminar. Yesterday for me consisted of four or five naps, the regular Tuesday class and a solid night's sleep. Today I feel I've got a bit of energy back, but I'll use it up in the shop I'm sure. And that's my fall vacation story.

I'd like to send my best wishes to the Fredericton crew who work so hard on these seminars, and to the folks from Halifax, Antigonish, and some other place I can't remember but is an hour or so outside Halifax, who also attended. It was a lot of fun. Thanks also to the CKF iaido development fund for providing some financial assistance.

Kim Taylor

Process and Goal

Are you process oriented or goal oriented? This was, apparently, the theme of the drive back from New Brunswick as Ohmi sensei quizzed his fellow riders. With me the evening before, we had a large discussion on rank and the stuff that isn't included in rank.

When you have been at the top of the chain, building up an art, being an early adopter for decades, these discussions are probably a monthly happening, if only with yourself. It's important.

The usual answer for me when talking about rank is "I don't care". For my own practise, I really don't care about rank at all. I've taught Niten Ichiryu and Muso Jikiden Eishin Ryu for almost 30 years without any rank at all. None. It wasn't ever a problem for me or for my students. My teachers said teach, so I taught. I must admit however, that rank is useful to me in those two arts. A student that doesn't want to study with me because I have no rank, is a student I will not miss in my class. I don't need to make people sit at the gate in the rain, I just have to tell them I have no paper on my wall. So much more efficient.

For much of the history of seitei iaido and jodo in the Canadian Kendo Federation, from the beginnings to quite a way in, there was also no rank around. Again, it made no difference to students or teachers. The process was learning and practising, the goal was to have learned and practised, and to be better than we were the month before.

Eventually, grading systems began in both iai and jo under the CKF and, while one would think it would make no difference, it does. Those who were there at the beginning were suddenly charged with "getting students ranked", something that some of us consider a necessary pain in the butt. Necessary because it perpetuates the framework within which we practise, a pain in the butt because suddenly a different goal has appeared. Something more than learning, suddenly rank is the goal.

For some of the kids who have never known anything but the ranking system, rank can become all important, and rank within rank for that matter. I recently heard that one of our pioneers had been told by one of these kids that he (this kid) was "the best x-dan in Canada". This is an excellent example of goal oriented budo, one where the process only exists to serve the goal.

This goal-orientation can go quite far, farther than claiming top rank within rank. It can reach as far as attempts (sometimes successful) to prevent others from grading, while said rank-chippy catches up.

Now, as one of those pioneers, and despite saying that "I don't care", I have graded through several ranks. I understand the need for rank to run a grading system. I understand the use for rank in a ranking organization. When there is no rank available, rank is "who is up front teaching". Once rank exists, you get preferred seating in the dojo, higher ranks up there, beginners down here. I've been told it's so that the beginners know who to watch, I've been told it's so that competitions can be set up fairly, I've been told we need rank so that other countries will respect us. I've been told that it's important when going to other countries to sit panels, that one sits closer to the centre than out at the wings.

Really? I've been put out on the wing while more junior judges sit closer to the centre so that must be true. The problem is, "I don't care". I really and truly don't. Where I sit at the table? Seriously? That only hurts if I have my self-esteem tied up in where I sit, or if I start thinking about such things as the dignity of my country and the insult just received.

You do know you can leverage insults like that into international politics right? Should you care enough about it to do so. Fortunately I don't.

In my dojo we tend to mix the beginners in with the seniors so that they can actually see the people they are supposed to be watching as they practise. Think about that the next time you are stuck down at the other end of the room from those seniors you are supposed to be watching.

As Ohmi sensei once said, when we had no rank at all, "if someone wants to know your rank, get on the floor and show them your rank". He did NOT mean tournaments. Those are only as good as the judging. Show your rank, demonstrate. Those who can see, will see, those who can't see don't matter, and you should not care what they think. I was once sitting at a head table and watching a demonstration. I was told "that fellow founded the art here, perhaps you could give him some pointers". I outranked the fellow who was demonstrating, who had been practising since before I was born. My response was "he should teach me" and sure enough, I stole things from him. (Don't demonstrate if you don't want others to steal your stuff. We now call that move "the Brazillian".)

Process or goal? Which are you most concerned with? I would expect all of you to say "process" instantly. That's what we're supposed to say, but consider. Do you say things like mileposts, and respect, and dignity, and useful, and teacher, when talking about rank? Are you happy when you pass a grading or do you feel just a little bit soiled? A little bit ashamed that you just spent so much time, effort and money for a piece of paper? Maybe you're a bit more goal oriented than you think you are, than you would like to admit to yourself.

"Oh, I do it for my sensei!" Not for me dude, not for me. If you're going to chase rank, do it for yourself, do it because you want it, or because you have a use for it, but not for me. Be honest about it.

I graded because I needed rank to establish the system, and, honestly, because I wanted CKF iaido and jodo to be independent. I would very much like to be replaced by those who come up after me. Now. Not because it's a goal to replace me, but because it's part of the process.

If you get to the maximum useful rank and are still chasing after more rank, I very much want you to consider why you are practising. That desire for rank is a weakness, a suki, an opening that allows you to be controlled by someone else. If someone says "do what I say or you can't get your next grade", what is your answer? You know mine.

What process? Which goal? Define the terms and then have the argument.

Oct 10, 2019

My Sensei Said: Peterborough seminar 2019

My sensei said a lot over the two days of the Peterborough Koryu Seminar for 2019. This was a rather smaller seminar than usual, with a lot of the American visitors being at the New York seminar instead, and a couple of ours being at the Niten Ichiryu seminar with Kajiya soke.

It used to be the May Seminar three decades ago, and pretty much nothing else so, while it's a good thing that there are lots of seminars, a consequence of the small number of weekends available means double bookings are inevitable. It's not such a bad problem to have, and one should pick according to what's most important to you.

As a result of the smaller numbers, this seminar felt very much like a family gathering. Ohmi sensei is of course the patriarch of the clan and he was in fine form, teaching about half the classes. The other instructors were Eric Tribe, Carole Galligan and yours truly.

The seminar began with Ohmi sensei commenting that if you have a CKF dan rank, your koryu should be at that same level. For many, that will mean they better get at the koryu. On Saturday morning we went through the Seiza no bu, (the Omori Ryu), and I made notes of what Ohmi sensei said, which I will type up for you later. I did notice some notebooks and video taping which made me happy.

We went on to the Tate Hiza no bu, or the Eishin Ryu set before breaking for lunch. It was somewhere in there, (not from Ohmi Sensei) that I heard "seitei sickness" which is my favourite phrase for the week. Koryu is about function, it's about getting the job done, rather than looking pretty. Koryu has set (defined) kata of course, but it is "seitei sickness" to assume there is a single, correct way to do that kata. Once that was pointed out a few times by the instructors, a certain class of questions dropped off. I will write of this in a moment.

In the afternoon we went through the Oku Iai seated kata under Tribe sensei and Galligan sensei who had also done the Eishin Ryu, trading kata for kata. Apparently there was some horse trading and trickery going on as each tried to "get the easiest kata" to teach. If this seems to be a case of "ripping through the kata" it was not, remember that we are all of the same lineage. There were probably close to ten dojo represented at the seminar, but we all look to Ohmi sensei as our source, and so we all know the kata in similar ways. What is standard, is agreed upon by four or five generations of instructors and I was quite astonished to see just how well the instruction has been passed along, how faithful it is to the origins, but without the rigidity, the reliance on "form" that might happen if we held gradings in the style. Instead our gradings are done in the CKF with the Zen Ken Ren iai kata. As a personal note, I like it that way, the rank stuff is useful but the fussing around with "fail points" and other things is kept away from the koryu practise. With the CKF gradings we can keep multiple koryu lineages somewhat together, practising Seitei, while being able to work on the essence of our lineage.

The essence of a kata was mentioned several times during the day, and sometimes questions were answered by questions. "Is it this angle?" was answered with "what do you think?" This was certainly the case when this old man was given the Oku Iai standing kata to teach at the end of the day. I started by mentioning that the Oku are the last kata taught in the school, under many listings of the sets, after

all the solo and partner sets. As such, it is certainly assumed that those being introduced to the kata have all the bits and pieces in order, all the instruction on how to cut, the distances, the timing that get taught in the partner sets. It's all there, and the final topic is how to deal with multiple opponents.

As a result I spent most of my words on asking what story the students had for each kata. I asked what was happening, and why that was how it was, and "really, does that work?" In other words, I was trying to pull out what Ohmi sensei has always asked of us. "Show me YOUR iaido". Without knowing why you are doing a kata the way you do it, the art hasn't been passed fully to the next generation. The senior students know what their own stories are, but that "seitei sickness" distracts them into trying to do it like the fellow up front, as if there could be a single correct way to shape a kata, to tell a story, to respond to a fighting situation. I suppose what I'm saying is that "seitei" is memorizing and repeating poems for school, and "not-seitei" is doing improv, or perhaps telling a story to an audience night after night, refining the cadence and perhaps even the wording each time. So much more interesting than the eyes rolled up and the monotone of reciting from memory.

The second day happened at another venue and, as happens because the gradings are coming up, we had a session of Seitei in the morning. The thing is, Ohmi sensei taught as he always teaches, and the instructional points had much less to do with "this angle, that twitch" than one might be used to. As an example, the instructions to the 4dan challengers mostly came down to "get out of your head", to the 5dan challengers "your teki is now better than you are" to the 6dan challengers "forget the details, solidify your hips" and the 7dan challengers "I'm not scared, scare me".

In the afternoon the class split into more Seitei practise for those challenging and some kenjutsu, which I was assigned. For the kenjutsu portion (paired bokuto work) I invented a couple of exercises to try and bring out some of the points we were working on during the solo practise. For instance, this sort of flat back foot "it goes there" chiburi was addressed by having to deal with a cut to the head from that position. For o-chiburi it was a shift back out of range and suriage men. Not particularly original, but it did get folks to keep that front foot loaded, rather than sinking the weight back onto the rear foot. For yoko chiburi there was a shift to the right front and a thrust to suigetsu that matched the thrust in seitei number 8. This promoted loading the back foot so that the drive to the right front could be done without hesitation. Back or forward, which? Keep the loading done so either is possible without delay. We discussed kamae and the importance of re-establishing it after a movement. We went on to the first four kata of tachi uchi no kurai with variations and as we were going through distances, timing and all the other basic stuff, I mentioned that it was a 400 year line of instructors who had set the wrapping inside which we were having that discussion. A kata isn't something that you "do correctly" it's a story you tell, over and over, refining the wording, the cadence, the intonation, and sometimes, even the moral.

It's not a dead fish to describe to your class, it's a living, breathing coat to put on for a cold, windy day.

Or some such image that should be refined a bit.

Tomorrow I will probably start the transcription. Many thanks to the Peterborough folks for their pulling together this seminar each year. I certainly look forward to it.

Oct 28, 2019

My Sensei Said: Peterborough 2019 -2

I will be transcribing my notes for the most part, rather than trying to make things pretty. [square brackets are my comments]

Saturday morning

Ohmi sensei started by asking who knows Omori Ryu. [Nobody, apparently. If sensei asks, and you know the kata, put your hand up, he's not testing your humility, he wants to know how basic the instruction has to be].

-If you are a 3dan kendo federation iai, you should have 3dan ability in the koryu. [Ohmi sensei says this often and others do too, but if you don't teach your class koryu, you can't expect them to know koryu].

-You need to understand and use Ki Ken Tai Ichi. [Not going to explain all terms, look them up on the web]. On Chiburi at the finish and the step up to feet together, that move should be almost the same time, not separate movements. This is different than Shinden/Seitei.

-For Jikiden, you must understand the use of the sageo. Your movements should be Gokai, they should be robust, big. You must have Saimyo [?], a correct cut, rather than just acting. You must have Yubi, you must be beautiful, artistic in your movements, but not just pretty, not trying to be beautiful.

[Ohmi sensei, Tribe sensei and Galligan sensei demonstrated Yae Gaki, how many in the room watched them? I suspect everyone will say they did, but I felt obliged at this point to ask that people watch rather than get ready to do something they think they know how to do. Watch your seniors, in ten years you may regret standing around and chatting today.]

-On the nuki tsuke, use Jo Ha Kyu with strong power, not weakly while going slowly. During the sune gakoi (shin guard) cover his sword well. Yes he is wounded but you will lose your leg, so block with kime, powerfully.

Uke Nagashi demonstration

-Koryu uses the hip, not just footwork. The timing of the block is that it is up overhead on the first step out with the left foot, not when the right foot plants. Thus on the hip turn, you dump the attacking sword to the side. Make a ton-TON sound with your two feet as you cut. I don't make a stamping sound on most of the kata in Omori Ryu, but you should make a sound here. Is it a big noise? A small one? What is important? The important thing is the power in the sword, not the noise.

-On chiburi, take the blade over to one inch above your knee, there is blood on the blade so you would not touch your hakama with it.

-This is a one handed cut, your left hand receives the tsuka in front of your chest.

Kaeshaku demonstration.

-Yamada Asaemon was a man whose job was to do kaeshaku. He said that to leave a bit of skin on the neck as you cut is not possible. You must remove the pain from the man who has stabbed himself so chop through without trying to leave the skin. I learned to keep the skin. You can practise with straw wrapped around bamboo. Cut the bamboo but keep some straw uncut.

-Musō Shinden uses two hands on kaeshaku but we use one.

-Omori Ryu faces one person, Oku iai faces two or more, so in this set, done is done. Don't rush, be calm, slow, not quick-quick.

-Haruna sensei told me that most bodies fall backward in this situation, so hold him forward with the kiragi, the back of the sword so he doesn't fall backward.

Tsuke Komi demonstration

-The first cut is to the forehead, you won't cut very deeply. Use iai goshi, drop your hips as you make the second cut. The final movement is simply chinagui, we don't stab or cut the neck like Shinden.

-Sekien Harigaya said that the opponent is standing up, you avoid his cut and immediately perform kirikomi. In Kendo you have seven chances to cut your opponent. The first is at the beginning of his motion, the second is when he is frozen, like a target. The fourth is when he has just cut, you return cut before he can recover.

-Avoid his cut and hit his head, show me!

-First, honshin itto, full body and swing.

Yushin itto, think about what you are doing

Isshin itto, one mind, one sword

Mushin itto, no mind, no sword.

You can see from this, that acting is not good enough.

-On the final movement, the tip of the blade may stay up, but some sensei mention that you can follow the opponent down toward the floor so the tip is down.

-Chinagui: Shinden sensei may cut the neck or stab, but for Jikiden, just wipe off the blood.

Tsuki Kage demonstration

-The target is the wrists which are in front of your face. You can cut one wrist or the other, or both. [This is the same position that we intercept the wrists when doing kuri tsuke in Jo]

Oi Kaze demonstration

-Maybe you cut the chinodo [?] if he is running away, just above the hip bones. If you are facing him, maybe you cut suigetsu. In both cases your body should be long and low. There must be no pause before the first cut or he will escape.

-In ZNKR shinai, you must not open the left hand over your head or you will lose the match. In Jikiden we perform a big furi kaburi and the tip is down.

Nuki Uchi demonstration

-Goto Miki said that nuki uchi was a tome waza, a last technique, as Mae is the first, so when doing a demonstration start with Mae and end with Nuki Uchi. In the middle you can do any other techniques.

-This technique is FINAL, make it so.

-Control your breath.

Footwork

-In kendo the footwork is short. In iai, just walk and stop to see how far apart they should be in the stance, but when you cut, the feet should be further apart, the stance longer. Haga sensei always said that you should make your koryu longer.

This ends the morning session and my notes on Ohmi sensei. Tomorrow I will go on to the Eishin Ryu with Tribe sensei and Galligan sensei.

Nov 2, 2019

My Sensei Said: Peterborough 3

Later in the morning, Ohmi sensei turned the class over to Carole Galligan sensei (CG) and Eric Tribe sensei (ET) to do the Eishin Ryu (tate hiza no bu) and the Oku Iwaza (seated, tate hiza set).

There was a bit of horse trading about who taught which kata and ET claimed he got the worst of the deal.

CG: Sit in tate hiza. Remember that for our koryu you step back with the left leg. Be ready with the right toes placed even with the left knee. The right leg is about 45 degrees from forward. Find the position that works for you.

Yokogumo

The chiburi is done with about 1/3 of the blade taken to the left hand. As you do noto, circle the right foot back from knee to heel of the left foot. For Chiburi keep the power in the tip of the blade, cut sideways rather than whip the blade. When you move back your right foot, keep your posture, shoulders over hips.

Timing - the sword and the body should all finish moving together during noto.

When doing tate hiza you should learn how to shift your weight so that you can stand up on one leg.

ET: Toro no Issoku

Your opponent's target is your knee. Keep the kata alive, move the blade out of the saya, block, recover and cut. The blocking hand becomes the cutting hand. Make sure you have the correct grip for both.

CG: Inazuma

Lift your body straight up as you cut the wrists. You can cut as you drop to your knee, or drop to your knee and cut.

If you have a problem with your posture and it's hard to get up without leaning forward, correct this. Never let the opponent have a second chance to attack you, keep your posture and push him.

ET: Uki Gumo

You have a buddy beside you and an enemy beyond him. Your technique should reflect this. Your posture as you remove your sword is very important, pay attention.

When you cut, the hilt should be below and behind your butt.

Keep low to do hiki taoshi (pull down).

CG: Oroshi

Strike down between his eyes when you strike with the tsuka kashira. Hit onto his shoulder, move yourself to the sword and punch the edge into his shoulder, then pull him down (hiki taoshi).

A variation of this technique is to cut horizontally into his shoulder. This changes the hiki taoshi and hane age angles.

Start the technique by avoiding his grab to your hilt, move it down, around and into the strike to ganmen (between the eyes) This is not a big movement. Make a strong hit to the eyes.

Drag him over with your hips. Your two hands and your hip form a triangle, keep this triangle as you turn to pull him down.

Don't blow your knee on this technique, the distance is close. If you reach too far you can't pull him over. The horizontal cut variation tends to be way too far out so that you can't pull your opponent down. Show us your depth of practise, show us that you can hit and pull the opponent down.

The flip up of the sword after the pull (hane age) should be strong, you should hear the hilt slap into the left hand. The angle should be about 45 degrees.

ET: Iwa Nami.

Check the rotation of the tip through your fingers, does it clear the web of your hand?

There are two variations of this technique. Draw behind your opponent, turn, stamp and thrust into him.

1. then cut through the inside of his suigetsu as you pull him down.
2. pull the sword out, move the edge to his shoulder or neck and pull him down.

After a question, Tribe sensei explained that his opponent is sitting slightly forward, if your opponent is sitting directly beside you, the turn is done differently. The key is to draw without showing him you are drawing. Your turn will reveal where he is [invisible opponent, so it may not be obvious].

Ohmi Sensei: Iaido is not Kabuki, but your hiki otoshi and hane age should be done like kabuki. Please note that these three kata using hiki otoshi are done at three angles as you pull him down.

ET: In the Seitei kata Tsuka Ate, we put the mune onto the chest to make sure we are safe. The same is true for Iwa Nami, put the left hand on the knee just before you thrust.

CG: Uroko Gaeshi

This is a 90 degree turn to the left, it is basically Migi from tate hiza. If you have bad knees or can't understand the turn, start in sonkyo, already on your toes. From tate hiza you must move up onto your toes to turn.

Posture: your shoulders must be over your toes so you can turn. [Like you are in sonkyo].

CG: Nami Gaeshi

This kata is the same as Uroko Gaeshi but the turn is 180 degrees. Stay low as you do this turn. For both of these, use timing and balance to finish the turn at saya banari.

Ohmi sensei had Tribe sensei demonstrate: See how he turned and cut, and then cut again?

ET: Taki Otoshi:

Look, step back, dropping the hilt, step forward, hilt up, draw as you step away to keep your saya free from being grabbed again, turn and stab, pull the sword out, and cut down.

You can do a variation on this linear form by putting in a twist as you draw.

Ohmi sensei: If your opponent grabs your kojiri (end of saya) he can prevent you from drawing. Look first to see how his hand is on your saya.

ET: On the turn and step-step to re-establish your body position, wrap your sword around your hips like an obi.

CG: Makko

There is no uke nagashi on this kata as in Nuki Uchi of Omori Ryu. Draw the blade upward and cut directly down.

[This is the end of the Tate Hiza (Eishin Ryu) set and the end of the morning session. It might seem that we moved through the kata quickly but remember that most of those present had practiced the koryu for a few years, and, being koryu, a detailed instruction is not necessary. Reminders on what is happening during the kata are the most important thing in a seminar with all of us together, details can be left to the students or sensei in the dojo.]

Next time we will move on to Oku Iai Iwaza.

Nov 3, 2019

My Sensei Said: Peterborough 2019 - 4

On Saturday afternoon Tribe sensei (ET) and Galligan sensei (CG) led practise in Oku Iai Iwaza, the seated kata of the Oku Iai set.

ET: Kasumi

This is more or less Mae. The cut is to the shoulder and knee, or both cuts are to the shoulder. Don't turn the cut within the body, we will use this exercise to prevent this. Cut, pause, cut, pause. Normally there is no pause between these cuts.

The noto is done by placing the last 1/3 of the blade onto the left hand, all you really need to do is bend the wrist to do this.

The turn between cuts is the same as you do it for Kesa Giri of Seitei Iai.

CG: Sune Gakoi

There are two versions of this, block, then through uke nagashi. Variations are allowed but the instructions for Oku are to "cut and kill your opponents" so as long as you are winning, it's OK. The second variation is to drive the tip up the midline as you raise it overhead.

In all chiburi of our koryu the left hand goes directly to the koiguchi.

ET: Tozume

Cut to behind your right hip on the first cut to 45 degrees right, then cut to 45 degrees left of the original line.

Oku Iai is "cut those guys". Your metsuke should start with a look at the first guy and then use a "hard metsuke" on the second guy. To make it technically correct, cut and kill the man on the right, then cut and kill the man on the left. Now switch so that you are not waiting to see the guy on the right die before killing the guy on the left.

Towaki

This kata is on a 45 degree line but you can do it at any angle. First, draw toward the right front, thrust the left rear guy and then cut the right front guy.

The thrust to the rear is at the obi, not the chest as in Seitei so be careful here.

The kata of Oku are becoming more functional than those of the lower sets, so treat them as such. This has the same general shape as Seitei Tsuka Ate but there is no strike with the hilt. The targets are otherwise the same.

You should "cut and kill both opponents" but if you are moving faster you must make sure each movement is correct.

CG: Shiho Giri

There are two variations of this kata, the first is an X shape and is more difficult because on the second cut you must twist around to the right rear. Begin like To Waki but the cut is done to the right rear, then cut the left front and right front.

Don't move the back foot until the final cut, there is no time to shift around with four opponents.

The second version is with three people lined up across the front and one to the left rear. You can have four people at whatever angles you wish.

With the second version there is not as much of a twist of the back on the first cut, it is to the right front, exactly as per To Waki. Then the left front and finally the man directly in front. You can shift the back foot a bit more for this version.

ET: Tanashita

You are under the porch. Now sneak out and kill a passerby. The story may work, when we were in Japan we got photographs of our group under the porch of Nijojo in Kyoto.

The meaning of this kata is that you are under a ceiling so the cut must be modified to reflect this.

CG: Ryojume

Both side walls are close to you, stab, cut and do a tight chiburi to avoid hitting the wall.

Kim Taylor: The sequence of moves are important, and they must feel right to you. Don't slide up as you pull the sword out after the stab or you will not be able to lift your sword for the cut.

CG: Think what is happening with every kata you do. Each time you practise, make the kata work.

CG: Tora Bashiri

Roll your feet inward as you move forward, try it.

This is basically Mae while moving to the target. Make sure you are under control, walking more quietly and move together please.

Try keeping the knees together as you do this kata.

Stay low, don't stand completely up.

CG: Itomagoi

We have a few minutes left before the break so we will do Itomagoi. There are three versions, all from Seiza:

1. Start to bow and as the right hand touches the floor draw and do Makko.
2. Both hands touch the floor
3. Make a full bow and then cut.

Ohmi sensei: The noto on the first and second are fast, haya noto. The noto on the third is quiet and slow like Omori Ryu.

Kim Taylor: This finishes my notes, I taught the Oku Iai tachi waza, the standing kata. Like the rest of the day, the functional aspects of the kata were emphasized, with minimal discussion of the details of each kata. There were many in the room who have been practising for 20 years and to focus on technical matters was a bit "late in the day". Instead we tried to work from the outside in, from what the opponents were doing, so that our kata were accordingly correct.

I did not take notes the next day as I was actively participating in the classes, but I have mentioned these classes in the first part of this report.

Nov 4, 2019

