

SMAA JOURNAL



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ANNOUNCEMENTS

2015 SMAA DUES

Membership fees are due on January 1, 2016. Please be sure to pay your SMAA dues on time. You can either send a check to our headquarters or pay online at <http://www.smaa-hq.com/payments.php>. We accept Visa, MasterCard, and PayPal. This is a quick and safe way to make your annual SMAA membership payment.

We appreciate our members paying dues promptly. It makes life easier for the SMAA staff of volunteers, and it is representative of the type of self-discipline we are cultivating through the study of traditional Japanese martial arts.

DONATIONS & TAX DEDUCTIONS

The SMAA is a federally tax-exempt, nonprofit corporation. As such, your donations to our association are tax deductible. Send your donations, in the form of a check or money order (made out to SMAA), to our headquarters in Michigan. We'll send you a letter back acknowledging your contribution, which you can then use for tax purposes. We hope you'll support the SMAA in our goal to preserve and promote traditional budo and koryu bujutsu.

E-MAIL

Please make sure we have your correct e-mail address. Without this address, we can't e-mail you the *SMAA Journal*.

OBJECTIVES OF THE SMAA

1. To promote and aid in the growth of Japan's traditional arts and ways.
2. To assist the public in achieving spiritual growth and physical development through budo/bujutsu.
3. To further friendship and understanding between Asian and Western martial artists.
4. To establish goodwill and harmony among martial artists of various systems.
5. To offer Western martial artists access to legitimate budo/bujutsu organizations and teachers in Japan.
6. To give practitioners of authentic budo/bujutsu recognition for their years of devotion to these arts.

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修道館武道会

Do you have a new e-mail address? Have you sent it to hedavey@aol.com? If not, we also won't be able to send you SMAA publications, so please be sure to let us know if your e-mail address changes.

SMAA PATCHES

The SMAA HQ is selling official SMAA patches for your gi. They're great looking patches that embody the spirit and honor instilled in members of our group. They won't fade or bleed when you bleach them, and yet we've been able to keep the cost down. Each patch is basically a 3 ½ inch circle featuring our logo below:



Our patches were produced using state of the art digitizing and ultra-modern technology to create an accurate and attractive embroidered emblem. They feature tight stitches, sharp detail, clean lettering, and top quality craftsmanship. There's no jagged stitching, but we've still got plenty of stitches so that the background doesn't show through.

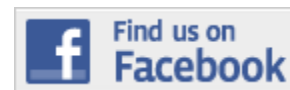
The patch should be worn on the left side of your gi jacket near your heart. SMAA policy mandates only one patch per uniform to maintain the sense of dignity associated with traditional budo.

These new patches are a great way to show your respect and enthusiasm for our group; we hope all of our members will order at least one. *And the best part is the patches are only \$5.00 (US) each!* (E-mail shudokan@smaa-hq.com about special shipping for international orders.)

To order, go to the "Payments" section of www.smaa-hq.com or send a check or money order made out to "SMAA" to:

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Have you been to the SMAA Facebook page? If not, you're missing out on the latest SMAA news, features, videos, photos, and information. It's easy and safe to join Facebook, and all you need to do is click the "Like" button to become a follower of our Facebook page. This is the fastest way to get SMAA news and updates, and we hope you'll drop by <http://www.facebook.com/ShudokanMartialArtsAssociation> and check it out. Once you're on Facebook, we hope you'll share our page with your friends and help us promote the SMAA.

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Did you know you can pay for your annual dues at our website using PayPal or a major credit card? You can, and you can also pay for gi patches and promotions in the same way. This is a much faster, and in some ways more secure, means of sending money to our headquarters. We hope more of our members will make use of this feature. Just drop by <http://smaa-hq.com/payments.php> for more information.

THE BEST OF THE SMAA JOURNAL CD-ROM

To celebrate its 15th anniversary in 2009, the SMAA created a special CD-ROM that contained a sampling of some of the best stories and articles to appear in the *SMAA Journal* since 1994. We mailed this free of

charge to everyone in the SMAA as a way of showing our appreciation to our members.

Although our anniversary has past, it's still not too late to get a copy of this CD-ROM, which is packed with hard to find information about budo and koryu bujutsu. For \$8.95, plus \$3.00 shipping and handling (\$5.00 outside the USA), we'll send you *The Best of the SMAA Journal*.

Send your check or money order to the SMAA HQ. Supplies are limited to the number of CDs remaining.

OTSUKA SOKE NEWS



Otsuka Soke

In September, Otsuka Yasuyuki Sensei visited Aomori, where he conducted a Meifu Shinkage Ryu seminar. Aomori is in the Tohoku region of Japan.

In October, Otsuka Sensei, Headmaster of Meifu Shinkage Ryu, taught a well-received seminar in Winnipeg, Canada. At both events, he focused on training with the shuriken and the fundo kusari.



Otsuka Soke holding a shuriken

Shuriken are metal throwing weapons, similar to a large dart, while the fundo kusari is a weighted chain.

Otsuka Sensei, the current Soke of Meifu Shinkage Ryu, is a member of the SMAA Board of Advisors. Meifu Shinkage Ryu is based on Katori Shinto Ryu, one of Japan's oldest forms of koryu bujutsu. Otsuka Sensei, a published author of budo books, is one of the highest-ranking martial artists in Japan and one of very few people in the world teaching an authentic system of shuriken-jutsu. He lives in Ichikawa-Shi, Chiba, Japan and teaches throughout Japan, Europe, and the USA.

The SMAA is active around the world and lead by both Western and Japanese martial arts experts. Otsuka Sensei is just one of a number of prominent martial arts teachers in Japan, who actively support our association and validate the ranks issued by the SMAA.

NIHON NO BI: NIHONTO (THE JAPANESE SWORD)

Nihon no Bi: Nihonto (The Japanese Sword) appeared September 28, 2015. This new book is from Gakken publishing, and it is a rare combination of sword eye candy and lots of information. Included are many



National Treasure and Juyo-Bunkazai swords, all reproduced in the full size. There is also a selection of top sword fittings and koshirae (sword mountings), with many magnified shots that really let you see the fine craftsmanship. And best of all, it is translated into English by Paul Martin Sensei, a member of the SMAA Board of Advisors. The price is 6,372 yen, and it is available for order from certain outlets including Amazon Japan.

Martin Sensei is one of the world's foremost scholars of the Japanese sword. A native of England, he has lived in Japan for many years, where he studies kendo, iaido, and several forms of ancient

swordsmanship, including Ono Ha Itto Ryu. But his main area of specialty is the study, history, and appraisal of the Japanese sword as an art object.

Martin Sensei has studied under top sword appraisal experts, sword smiths, and sword restorers in Japan for numerous years, and this is to say little of his



Martin Sensei

budo background. He is the author of *The Japanese Sword Guide to Nyusatsu Kantei*. He has been featured on the BBC, BBC Radio 4, the History Channel, Los Angeles JATV, and Japan's NHK TV. He has also been interviewed in *Tokyo Metropolis Magazine*, *The Daily Yomiuri* newspaper, and *Asahi Weekly* in Japan.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE JAPANESE SWORD

By Paul Martin

Jokoto are ancient straight blades with no curvature. They are usually constructed in the hira-zukuri and kiriha-zukuri styles. Hira-zukuri swords have no ridgelines, and they are flat on both sides, whereas the kiriha-zukuri swords have a ridgeline near the blade edge.

It is thought that the shift from straight blades to Japanese swords with curvature happened around the mid to late Heian period (794–1184). This was

during the mid-10th century: about the time Taira Masakado and Fujiwara Sumitomo rebelled against the government in the Johei (931–938) and Tengyo (938–947) eras. Blades before these are continental style blades called jokoto, and they were brought to Japan from the Asian continent. Examples of these blades have been excavated from Kofun period tombs, and some still reside in the Shosoin Imperial Repository in Nara.

LATE HEIAN TO EARLY KAMAKURA

From the late Heian period and the early Kamakura period (1185–1333) we can see the Japanese sword as we know it today: shinogi-zukuri (ridgeline) construction, with a wide base, narrowing acutely towards the small point section (ko-kissaki). They are quite slender blades with the curvature concentrated between the handle and base. This



Japanese sword tangs, temper lines, and engravings

shape is called koshi-zori. From midway towards the point there is very little curvature. These blades are usually around 2.5–6 shaku in length (75.8 cm–78.8 cm).

MID-KAMAKURA

At the zenith of the warrior class's power during the Kamakura period, the blade becomes thick, the mihaba (blade width) becomes wide, and they take on a magnificent tachi shape (deeply curved blades worn with the cutting edge down and suspended from a belt). There is not much difference between the size of the moto-haba (blade width near the sword collar) and the saki-haba (blade width at the yokote, a line between the body of the sword and the point of the blade). The blade still has koshi-zori, but the center of the curvature has moved further along the blade. The kissaki (sharp tip of the sword) has become a compact chu-kissaki (short, wide kissaki). The hamon (temper pattern along the blade edge) has developed into a flowing, gorgeous choji-midare (irregular clove shape). Also around this time tanto (dagger) production appears.

LATE KAMAKURA

Tachi at the end of the Kamakura period have developed into magnificent blades. There are two types: one is wide throughout its length and the point section is the same as mid-Kamakura period kissaki, but slightly extended. The other is quite slender and similar in appearance to the late Heian, early Kamakura shapes. However, when you look further along the blade the shape has changed; the curvature has moved further along the blade. During this period notare-gunome hamon (wave-like undulating temper lines) appeared. It is said that in Sagami province, Goro Nyudo Masamune perfected the production of swords with nie-deki (temper lines with bright crystals).

NANBOKUCHO

During the Nanbokucho period (1336–1392) many long blades of three shaku (90.9cm) and other long



The beauty of the Japanese sword

tachi were made. Tanto of large proportions were also produced. Tachi were majestic, wide, and proportionally long. Among these were some over 90 cm in length and worn over the back. These types of blade are called no-dachi and o-dachi. They were rather thin in construction to decrease the weight. Additionally, many have a bo-hi (groove) cut into the shinogi-ji (ridgeline-sword surface above the temper line) area in order to lighten the blade. Many tachi from this period are o-suriage (shortened in later periods as they were difficult to wield). Consequently, many extant blades from the Nanbokucho period are unsigned.



Tsuba, "sword guard," by Hayashi Matashichi

EARLY MUROMACHI

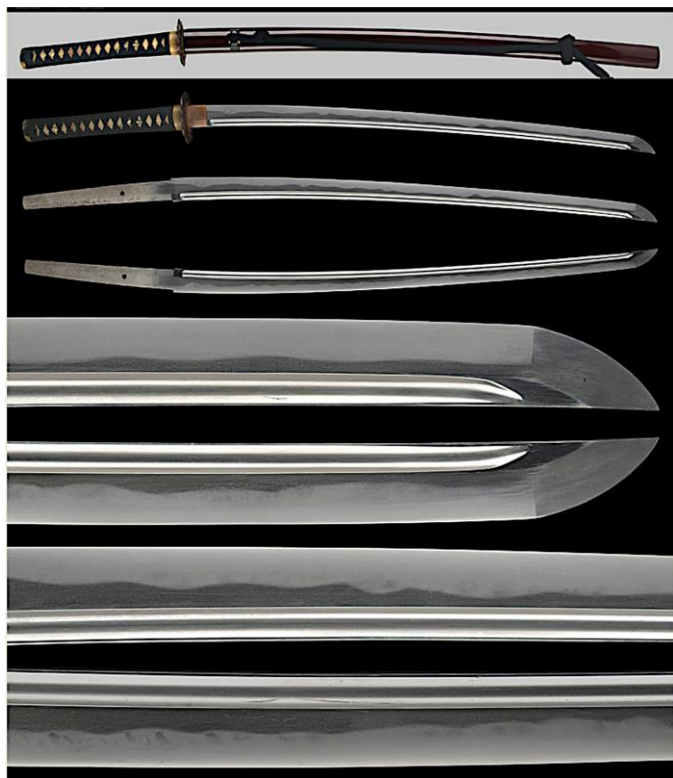
Blades of the early part of the Muromachi period (1392–1573) are reminiscent in construction to the blades of the early Kamakura period. When compared to the shape of the Nanbokucho period, the shape has completely changed and no longer includes o-kissaki (large sword point). At around 2.4–5 shaku (72.7 cm–75.7 cm) in length, they are quite narrow and deeply curved with a medium-sized point section. At first glance, they may appear somewhat similar to Kamakura period blades, but on closer inspection they are saki-zori (curvature in the top third of the blade).

LATE MUROMACHI

By the late Muromachi period, samurai fighting methods had changed from cavalry to mass infantry style warfare. Uchigatana (fighting katana), worn with the cutting edge uppermost and thrust through the sash, had become popular. After the Onin war, conflicts broke out in many places, and kazu-uchi mono began to appear (mass-produced blades inferior in quality to regular Japanese blades). However, specially ordered blades of excellent quality (chumon-uchi) were also produced at this time. Bizen (Okayama prefecture) and Mino (Gifu prefecture) were the major places of production. Many blades produced in this period are around 2.1 shaku (63.6 cm) in length. They are slightly wider than the standard width, with either a chu-kissaki (medium blade point) or an extended chu-kissaki and strong saki-zori. The nakago (tang) are short, intended for one-handed use.

AZUCHI-MOMOYAMA

Swords produced up to the Keicho era (1596–1614) are classified as koto (old blades). Blades made during and after this era are classified as shinto (new swords). When Japan entered the Azuchi-Momoyama period (1574–1600), many smiths moved to Edo or Kyoto, or gathered in castle towns of various influential daimyo (feudal lords). Additionally, developments in transportation



The soul of the samurai

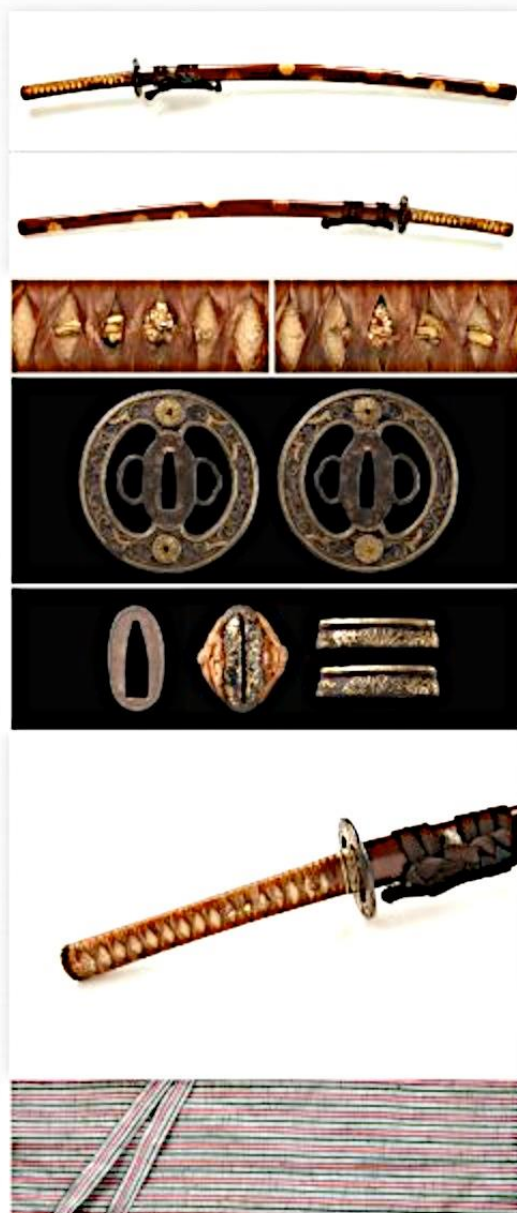
brought about experimentation with materials, and foreign-made steel (known as nanbantetsu) was utilized. The blade's shape from around this period mirrors that of shortened Nanbokucho blades. They are generally wide with little or no difference between the moto-haba and saki-haba. Many have an extended chu-kissaki, while some have o-kissaki, with a thick blade and are usually around 2.4-5 shaku (72.7 cm-75.8 cm) in length.

MID-EDO

Swords of the Mid-Edo period are of standard width. The saki-haba is relatively narrow when compared to the moto-haba. The curvature is noticeably shallow with a small to medium-sized point section. They are usually around 2.3 shaku (69.7 cm) in length. This particular type of construction was generally produced around the middle of the Kanbun (1661-1673) and Enpo (1673-1681) eras, and is usually referred to as Kanbun shinto.

EDO PERIOD GENROKU ERA

The change in shape of Japanese swords between the Jokyo (1684-1688) and Genroku (1688-1704) eras reflects the transition of shape from Kanbun-shinto blades to the beginning of the shin-shinto (period of sword manufacture). As it was a very peaceful period in Japanese history, rather flamboyant hamon appear, and as opposed to that of Kanbun-shinto blades, the curvature is quite deep.



The Japanese sword is as much an art object as a weapon

EDO PERIOD BAKAMATSU ERA

Blades made after the Bunka (1804–1818) and Bunsei (1818–1830) eras are referred to as fukko-shinto (revival swords). Pioneers of the revival movement include Suishinshi Masahide and Nankai Taro Tomotaka. Taikei Naotane was among Masahide's students. Minamoto Kiyomaro led a revival aimed at Soshu-den (Soshu region) and Mino-Shizu (Shizu district in Mino province) workmanship. Bakumatsu (end of the Tokugawa Shogunate) swords are shallow in curvature, have a wide haba with not much difference in width between the saki and moto-haba, and are around 2.5–6 shaku (75.7cm–78.7 cm) in length, with an o-kissaki and thick blades.

MEIJI ONWARDS

Blades made from the ninth year of Meiji (1868–1912) until present day are referred to as gendaito (modern swords). As of the Hatorei decree in 1876 (banning civilians from wearing swords), the need for swords declined. However, in Meiji 39 (1906), the craft gained imperial patronage. The sword smiths Gassan Sadakazu and Miyamoto Kanenori were appointed Tei Shitsu Gi Gei In (craftsmen by imperial appointment—equivalent to National Living Treasure). Since then, the sword smith's craft has



The author

continued through the Meiji, Taisho (1912–1926), Showa (1926–1989), and Heisei (1989–) eras until today. Today's sword smiths try to recreate the workmanship of eminent smiths of every period, regardless of whether they are koto, shinto, or shin-shinto. In particular, recreations of tachi of the Kamakura period are a popular aim for many modern sword smiths.

About the Author: Paul Martin Sensei is a member of the SMAA Board of Advisors. He lives in Japan, where he studies Japanese swordsmanship and where he is a leading expert in the Japanese sword as an art object. He has a great website at www.thejapanesesword.com.

THE ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE OF KORYU AND SHIN BUDO

Article and Photos by Wayne Muromoto

(I wrote this for my students, and I hope this will clarify some differences between koryu and shin budo. I am not aiming to slight one system over another, but to point out the differences.)

As you, my dear students, are rising up in rank, there are some things that you should be aware of that are outside of the actual techniques of the

martial arts that we study. One of the things you should (by now) realize is that koryu ("ancient martial traditions") are not the same as modern budo, or what Donn Draeger and other writers call "shin budo" ("new budo"). Certainly this shows up in technical matters. But it also affects how things are organized.

Organizationally, the characteristics of a shin budo can be listed as (and I will admit to overgeneralizing):

-It is run by an umbrella organization, a -kai, or renmei. For example, modern iaido in Japan is separated into several renmei ("associations"), the largest of which is tied to the All Japan Kendo Federation. The All Japan Kendo Federation has a section for iaido, where the seitei iai forms are used for ranking purposes. *(Dojo that are affiliated with the All Japan Kendo Federation, usually begin practice with 12 modern seitei iaido forms, or seitei gata, before teaching any older forms of iaido that may also be included in their program. - Editor)* In aikido, the Aikikai is the largest organization, headed by the lineal descendant of aikido's founder. There can be other aikido organizations run by other heads, such as Yoshinkan aikido, Ki Society, etc.

-Such large organizations often rank members based on tests, or shinsa. It's inevitable that if an organization gets so large that there are hundreds or even thousands of members worldwide, the head of the organization will probably not know the abilities of each and every one of his followers. So a board of teachers will test students for ranking promotions regularly, based on accepted criteria.

-There may be less emphasis on cultural/literary/philosophical content. Ranking criteria in some instances are largely focused primarily on technical and physical ability.

-Mavericks happen in instances such as when a high level practitioner decides for some organizational, political, or personal reason that the group he belongs to no longer is appropriate. Hence, someone can go off and start his/her own judo, aikido, or karate-do club, with or without the consent of his teacher, and it will still be called judo, aikido, or karate-do. He can become his own teacher, with his own ranking system and method of remuneration for ranking.

Compared to this shortened list (and I'm not even talking about methodology or technique), koryu are like jumping down Alice in Wonderland's rabbit hole and finding that things are quite askew.

There are notable exceptions, and not all koryu reject all of the above organizational characteristics. Some koryu have moved into the modern era, they have actually taken on some of the above characteristics out of sheer necessity. For example, within our own koryu (Bitchuden Takeuchi Ryu jujutsu), we apply the dan-kyu colored belt ranking alongside the traditional mokuroku ranking (teaching licenses).

Modern iaido groups that do koryu iaido as well, such as the Muso Jikiden Eishin Ryu and Hoki Ryu groups we are aligning ourselves with, belong to a modern budo organization. Hence, they have a series of modern iaido kata to be performed at promotion tests run by a board of senior teachers. So you do have koryu fitting into modern organization-type testing. Nevertheless, the content of their koryu iaido remain distinctly koryu.

But within our main koryu, Bitchuden Takeuchi Ryu, very traditional organizational aspects remain. First, we don't have an organization like modern budo, with a board of examiners. We have a pyramidal structure in which the headmaster, the inheritor of the tradition, is the sole arbiter of ranking and promotion. The soke (head, or protector of the house) is the head of everything. As a senior teacher, he has given me permission to grade my own students up to a certain rank, but it is based on his discretion and permission, not from a board of directors or examining body. Other teachers are also given various levels of permission, but they are all based on his decisions alone.

Comparatively speaking, koryu are really small in numbers, so there used to be no need for cattle-call shinsa tests. Ono Sensei (the soke of Bitchuden Takeuchi Ryu) once told me, "I see you training all

*Takeuchi Ryu*

the time. If I didn't know your abilities and had to test you, then I'm a lousy teacher, because that means I couldn't assess your skills simply from seeing you all the time."

Embu ("demonstrations"), such as at the Ryusosai, or at year's end, are the closest we get to a test, but it's more of a display of your skills, which we are already cognizant of. You do embu to rise up to the level we expect of you. As any koryu grows in numbers, I wonder how it will address this issue. Once you go beyond a certain number of students, testing may be necessary, because such intimate awareness of each and every student by the ranking senior teachers may be lost, so testing may be inevitable with the growth in enrollment.

I was once in a different koryu that also didn't do shinsa. After training for several months with a teacher from Japan, who frequented Hawaii quite a bit, we lined up one day and then the teacher announced that each of us had obtained a certain kyu ranking. No testing happened. He just said, "Okay, you got ikkyu (first kyu). You got sankyu (third kyu). You and you got nikyu (second kyu). Now go back to training."

It was no big deal. Perhaps if we had been ready for a "real" jump, to sho-mokuroku (the first level of

"mastery"; like a black belt), then there might have been more pomp and circumstances. But for that sensei, the training was more important. Ranking was not an end in itself. It was simply a marker of your training level.

In a koryu, physical and technical capabilities are, of course, important. But as one continues on in training, it is imperative that the student learns the lore, concepts, and mental framework of what is also contained in a koryu. A koryu is a compilation not just of techniques, but also of a particular tradition, of a history of a system. What does that have to do with "martial arts self-defense"? Perhaps not much. Perhaps everything. (The argument pro and con can take up a whole other article.)

Where did your art come from? How was it developed? What are its principles, its theoretical underpinnings, its literature and its sayings?

Perhaps a modern practitioner may say that much of that stuff is irrelevant. For example, what

*Ono Sensei*

relevance does learning kogusoku (short sword) as if done in full yoroi (samurai armor) have for “street fighting?” Perhaps none. But when I put armor on for the first time, I realized how the constrictions and weight of it matched that of contemporary body armor and gear carried by modern US military personnel. Learning to fight in full gear with close quarter grappling and bladed weapons are extremely similar to kogusoku methods, and are vastly different from what is taught in most modern budo, MMA, or other relatively modern martial arts. So detractors shouldn’t cast out the “baby with the bathwater,” so to speak. The koryu were developed to retain lessons learned from actual combat, passed on generation after generation. The technology of warfare may have changed drastically. But when it comes to close quarter combat, not much really changes over time.

There are no “mavericks” in koryu. Certainly, there is a caveat for this statement. Some koryu have foregone a soke system. Muso Shinden Ryu and Muso Jikiden Eishin Ryu have been allied with modern iaido organizations for so long, and have become so popular, that there are many iterations of them, many different teachers teaching different variations, and several different modern organizations that contain their styles. You can even see the techniques, all the way to the okuden advanced level, in books and on Internet videos. Technically, all the kata are publicized and relatively easy to access. So those koryu have long ago escaped containment, so to speak, and “gone wild.”

However, with very old koryu that are still not allied to a modern organization, you cannot go off and “do your own thing.” If I were to break with my teacher in Bitchuden Takeuchi Ryu and teach my own version of it, I wouldn’t be teaching Takeuchi Ryu, period. There is no variation. I need permission to teach it, and if I stray from the fold, I cannot teach even a similar method and call it such.

To overgeneralize, a modern budo tends to be an “organization,” with a structure much like a

corporate or business entity. A koryu tends to be organized more like a family structure, with a “head” of the household tending his children, who will always be part of the family even if they go off and start their own dojo. They will still carry on the family name.

This may seem like I’m dissing modern budo systems. Well, I tend to prefer small and personal interactions over large and impersonal relationships. But modern budo were organized differently because they had to address a different situation. Modern budo has organizations with members in the hundreds and thousands. A headmaster can’t possibly know each and every person’s abilities and grade them based on such intimate knowledge. Ranking based on a board of examiners will also be perceived as less arbitrary and biased. So, the way modern budo groups are organized is based on the necessity of running a large organization.

A successful koryu can be said to have perhaps thirty or forty people worldwide. The head teacher and a few of his designated senior members can thus rank members they know quite intimately in this small group, but it is true that in a worst case scenario, favoritism and bias may enter in and color the ranking. And if you are dissatisfied with your teacher, you can’t very well pack up and join another organization. There are many different karate-do leagues, organizations, and styles you can affiliate yourself. Or you can go independent and form your own organization. In a koryu, like Bitchuden Takeuchi Ryu, there is only one group. If you don’t like how things are done, there are not a lot of other alternatives to choose from other than to leave and not do it anymore. So therefore, you have very different organizational scenarios between modern budo, very old koryu, and a kind of gray area in between when some koryu have become part of a larger semi-modern organization.

Is a particular characteristic of a koryu or modern budo good? Is it bad? Organizationally, I’m just

saying these are the characteristics, and you need to be cognizant of them and deal with them as they are.

About the Reviewer: Wayne Muromoto lives in Hawaii, where he teaches authentic and traditional

forms of Japanese jujutsu and iaido. Trained in Japan in martial arts, fine arts, and tea ceremony, Mr. Muromoto is a frequent contributor to the *SMAA Journal*, the editor of *The Classic Budoka*, and a member of the SMAA Board of Advisors.

AN EXCERPT FROM *THE EXCEPTIONAL MARTIAL ARTIST*

By Nicklaus Suino

Copyright Nicklaus Suino

This is a preview of Suino Sensei's upcoming book The Exceptional Martial Artist, which should be available from Amazon in the near future. We'll let you know more soon, and if you need additional information right way, contact n.suino@japanesemartialartscenter.com. – Editor

INTRODUCTION: THEY WALK AMONG US!

Have you noticed how some people just seem to be better at martial arts than the rest of us? If you've been training for a few months, a few years, or a few decades, you've already met people like this. On the other hand, if you're new to the arts, you'll soon meet them! They're the people who seem to learn new skills faster, get better at those skills, and whose top level—the point when they've mastered a move or a kata—is simply better than most of the others in class.

They really stand out because of their success. They're usually the ones everybody hopes to get paired with for practice. They get selected to lead class or get chosen for instructors class a lot sooner than we do—if we get chosen at all. If you've been in the martial arts long enough, you've seen a few of these people go on to become top competitors, instructors, or, in some cases, leaders in their field.

What do they have that you and I don't? I've spent over 47 years studying, training, competing in, and teaching martial arts. I've paid a LOT of attention to what it takes to get better, learn faster, and more

effectively deepen your understanding and ability in the martial arts. I've trained side by side with hundreds—if not thousands—of martial arts students, and competed against many hundreds of swords people and judo players, some of whom have been national, world, or Olympic level competitors. I've taught hundreds and hundreds more. When you pay enough attention, certain patterns begin to emerge. I'll share more about those patterns in a moment.

I didn't start out as a capable martial artist. I was a skinny kid with a big mouth who became fascinated with judo, stuck to it in spite of being pretty crappy at first, and eventually went on to do well. As you may know, I've earned high-level black belts in several Japanese arts. I won the All Tokyo iaido Tournament at my rank level for four consecutive



The author (right) teaching Muso Jikiden Eishin Ryu iaido

years. I've written numerous books. I run a successful dojo, and I'm the managing director of the Shudokan Martial Arts Association. I'm proud of those things, but the reason I mentioned them isn't to sing my own praises, it's to point out that I definitely wasn't born with talent. I learned how to get better at things because I fell in love with the martial arts, found great teachers, trained extremely hard, and never, ever quit. Along the way, I unearthed some "secrets" that set apart the truly exceptional among us.

PERCEIVE THAT WHICH CANNOT BE SEEN WITH THE EYE

Are you ready to get started learning about what it takes to be a much, much better martial artist? If so, I'd like to suggest to you that one point people don't focus on enough is that, when you learn a martial art, you're not only learning the techniques of the art, you're also *learning how to learn*. You're not just getting better . . . if you're paying attention, *you're learning how to get better at getting better*. The people who do better than we do, who seem to learn faster and get more skilled than we do in the same amount of time and with the same instruction, have figured this out—consciously or unconsciously—and not only pursue their martial art with conviction, they also apply what they've learned about learning and use it to keep improving.

What I've figured out after decades in the martial arts is that the people who learn faster and get better than you and me really *are* different. Sure, many of them have real talent. Some are just wired better—they're faster or more coordinated or naturally stronger. Some are smarter or somehow have a better ability to see the essence of a technique and be able to do it more easily than we do. But what's really different about most of them—and those who become like them through hard work and truly paying attention—is that they have a completely different attitude. They view martial arts training through an exceptional lens, and because



Suino Sensei, iaido hachidan, giving a demonstration

they see things differently, they make exceptional decisions. Those decisions lead them to form different habits.

We tend to see their skills and think, "Wow, that person has talent!" We may focus on their training methods and try to adopt them. If the best person in the dojo does a lot of pushups, we may start doing a lot of pushups, hoping that will help us get stronger, faster, or somehow more skillful. But if we're really paying attention, we should be focusing on something that's a bit harder to see. We should be paying attention to their attitudes, and how those attitudes affect both their view of training *and* their training habits.

By the way, I'm not just talking about their physical training habits. What I'm talking about are their mindset habits—how they view and think about their training (and about life) and what they do as a result. There are probably some specific training habits you could emulate—like the pushup example I mentioned above—but to make the deep personal changes you and I probably need to make, we need to understand their mindset habits. In other words, if we understand how the best people think about their training—what attitudes they develop, the way they view their training, and what they think about in order to get better—then we can develop our own habits based on very effective information.

TO KNOW AND TO ACT ARE ONE AND THE SAME

And finally, here's the real key to successfully applying the attitudes of the best martial artists to your own life—you must do more than simply *understand* the mindset habits of the experts. You need to find a way to make those mindset habits your own.

To do that, you can read and absorb what I talk about in this book. That's not too hard—I'll try to keep the chapters short and to the point so you can read them and then get on with your training. But unless you take a few steps to really *own* these habits, this will just be an entertaining way to spend a few minutes of your day. To understand and preserve the habits, to make them habits of your own, you'll need to write them down, practice them, and find ways to keep yourself accountable until they're second nature and you carry them out without thinking.

To help, I've developed a program you can use to organize your thoughts and keep track of your progress. It helps remind you about the attitudes and activities we'll be talking about in this book. It gives you a way to write down your notes in an organized fashion. It helps keep you accountable for revisiting the things you need to revisit. And it provides resources so you can learn more and deepen your own understanding of the things you find really important.

But more about that later. Are you ready to learn faster, understand better, and get more focused on what's really going to make a difference in your training life? Great! Let's get started reading the first chapter. I promise not to waste your time! The chapter is only about four pages long. Even though the subject—complete commitment—is deep enough that I could probably talk (or write) for hours about it, I'll focus on the highlights. You'll be able to dig a lot deeper in the future, and we can explore the ideas together later if you decide to take a look at some of the other materials I recommend.

Let's get started!

CHAPTER ONE: Commit completely

“There are only two options regarding commitment, you're either in or you're out. There's no such thing as life in between.” – Anonymous

If you want to become a really exceptional martial artist—or if you simply want to be the best you can possibly be—you have to commit completely. As the quote above states, there are only two options regarding commitment, either you're in or you're out. There's no room for life in between on the quest for greatness in the martial arts. Those who go on to become truly exceptional are the ones who commit completely to their martial art.

DO choose a martial art and resolve to stick to it for at least one year. I realize that, after some time, you may discover you aren't passionate about it and decide to switch to a different art down the road, or even leave the martial arts altogether. We learn things about ourselves over time, and our tastes and opinions change. I get that. The art you choose today may not turn out to be your final martial art. But here's the thing—how you commit to your first art will set the tone for your training for years to come. I know this . . . your best gains NEVER come from cynicism. They ALWAYS come from fully embracing what you do. Make it your mission to give yourself completely to your first martial art, for at least one year.

COMPLETE COMMITMENT

Let me share a quick story with you. A moment ago, I mentioned that I was able to win the All Tokyo Iaido Tournament at my rank level for four years in a row. That's no small accomplishment—no foreigner had ever done that before, and as far as I know, none have done it since. Don't get me wrong; I worked very, very hard at Iaido to be able to accomplish that. But a huge part of the reason I was able to do so well was my total commitment.



Yamaguchi Sensei, iaido judan

I got introduced to my mentor, the late Yamaguchi Katsuo Sensei, through my teachers in the Shudokan Martial Arts Association. At the time, I needed that personal introduction to be accepted into his private dojo. Yamaguchi Sensei was without a doubt the most incredible swordsman of his generation. His iaido could silence an auditorium full of people. He was a demon at kendo and could easily dominate much bigger, younger fencers. Training one on one with him in his home dojo was a very intense experience. I idolized him. I wanted to move like him, look like him, and be able to perform swordsmanship at the same incredible level. I had truly “emptied my cup,” as they say. If he told me that I had to jump off a bridge or play in traffic to get good at iaido, I would have done it without question. Thank goodness he never did!

But because of my total commitment, his teachings poured into my soul without any barriers. I learned very, very fast. I practiced with total intensity, total focus, and with joy and passion. I was double promoted at my first grading, won my first tournament, and never looked back. Back then, I didn’t understand the learning process the way I do

now, but I succeeded because of my total, all encompassing commitment to my teacher, and to the art.

ROW YOUR BOAT TO SHORE AND SET IT ON FIRE!

When you decide to pursue your own martial art (or recommit to the one you’re already practicing) remember that the most valuable aspects of that art can only be discovered if you bring a very high level of commitment to your practice. There will be times when you struggle, days when you have to drag yourself to the dojo, even days when you’ll wrestle with the commitment you’ve made, but I’m telling you, I’ve seen it many, many times—those who make the commitment are the ones who outperform the others, again and again. They don’t “wait and see” if they like the art. They give all of themselves to the art first, and the rewards they get from practice are many times greater than those gotten by the folks who treat their martial art as a casual hobby.

It’s no coincidence that those who completely immerse themselves in their martial art also tend to be the ones who enjoy them the most. It may be a “chicken and egg” problem, but I’ve seen it so many times I have absolutely no doubt that it’s true—if you dabble in your martial art or constantly second guess your involvement, you’re going to have less fun with it and get less of its essence. The very act of approaching your martial art with reserve means you’re dooming yourself to miss out on many of its most profound, valuable aspects.

On the other hand, if you commit fully at the outset, you’ll bring much more of yourself to your training, be more immersed, have more fun, perceive more, and learn faster. To those of you who are cynics, I say, don’t worry about finding out later that the art isn’t the one you want to spend the rest of your life pursuing. If you throw yourself into it, you’ll really find out what it’s all about, and if that turns out not to suit you, then you can move on with confidence. Otherwise, a huge part of the reason the art doesn’t

seem amazing is probably because you really don't understand it in all its glory. But be careful . . . the very fact that you're thinking about your exit strategy when you first start—or anytime—*is keeping you from realizing your full potential.*

CATCH, KILL AND EAT ONE RABBIT AT A TIME!

And here's another point you should get very clear about as you consider your future as an extraordinary martial artist. Whatever you do, **DON'T** join more than one dojo at first. **DON'T** pick two martial arts and dabble at both. If you've spent any time at all reading, you've heard the old cliché that goes something like this: "The fox who chases two rabbits is likely to catch neither one." Like a lot of stereotypes and clichés, there's a lot of truth to this one.

I see it over and over again with my students who get involved in multiple martial arts too early in their careers. Sure, they're having fun doing both the arts they like. Some do pretty well in both martial arts at first, but the vast majority of them stagnate after a while. There's just too much information coming in, and it's too difficult for the nervous system to absorb the core thematic movements of two or more arts. Unless they're incredibly gifted or have time to practice far more than 90% of martial arts students (they're likely to need at least four to six hours a day, five or six days a week), the interference from one martial art is too great, and their progress slows. Even those who seem to think they're getting a lot done because they're training so many hours each week end up making very little progress. There's a real difference between working hard and working effectively.

Choosing a single martial art for your first six months and committing to it completely greatly simplifies things. You're exposed to the core thematic movements of your chosen art—and no others—so you can really study them, practice like crazy, and get them into your nervous system. You're not distracted by a lot of detours. Even the

most highly focused among us occasionally gets sidetracked, and the more arts you're trying to learn, the more dead end paths you're going to end up on. Don't worry about missing out; if you achieve greatly in one martial art, you'll learn many essential keys to greatness that can be applied to others.

Instead of saying, "Hey, I dabble in a few martial arts. I do kung fu on Thursdays, karate on Saturdays, and jujutsu on Mondays," you'll simply be able to say, "I do karate!" or "I am a judo player!" As simple as that sounds, it's part of the joy of truly focusing on one art, and it will make a lot of difference to your psyche as you train.

THE SENSEI MIKE RULE

You've no doubt heard that it's necessary to "empty your cup"—to truly approach your training with an open mind so you soak up every nuance of your art with a minimum of interference from your intellect. Training in several martial arts tends to give rise to the opposite of "emptying your cup." Those who jump into multiple martial arts (or multiple versions of a single martial art) often engage in a lot of comparing and contrasting—"My teacher at x dojo does it this way, but my teacher at y dojo does it this other way." When you have a sufficient body of knowledge that you can compare and contrast wisely, that approach makes sense, but judging the quality or usefulness of a technique or method when you don't truly understand the fundamentals is a classic case of the blind leading the stupid. Don't be either.

At my dojo in Ann Arbor, we have something we call the "Sensei Mike Rule." It's affectionately named after a former student who started trying to give advice to others in his first days at the dojo, yet he still had to ask for help in the locker room when it came to tying the pants of his uniform. As you can probably guess, the rule goes something like this: "If you haven't figured out how to tie your pants, it's too soon to teach martial arts to others."



Suino Sensei teaching classic judo

A corollary to the Sensei Mike Rule is that you shouldn't make judgments about the purpose or effectiveness of martial arts techniques when you're a beginner, or when you first encounter the techniques. The really profound aspects of a technique or a method can't be seen in just a few days or week of practice. The most advanced martial artists I've met all continue to deepen their knowledge after years and years of study and practice. Most admit that they're just starting to understand their art. I know I still feel like I'm just opening the door to truly great basics after forty-seven years. There's a lot to learn in even the most fundamental movements, and totally committing means setting aside the desire to compare and contrast until you really do have enough information to make valid judgments. We'll talk

more about this when we get to the chapter called Trust the Process.

For now, just remember that to truly get the best out of your martial art and yourself, you have to completely commit, commit to one art, and train without judgment or comparison until you truly understand enough to evaluate what you see. It's very rare to get that understanding in less than a year or two.

CHAPTER ONE SUMMARY

- To become a really exceptional martial artist, commit completely.
- DO choose a martial art and resolve to stick to it for at least one year.
- Your best gains NEVER come from cynicism. They ALWAYS come from fully embracing what you do.
- DON'T join more than one dojo at first. DON'T pick two martial arts you like and dabble at both.
- Training in several martial arts tends to give rise to comparing and contrasting.
- The Sensei Mike Rule: "If you haven't figured out how to tie your pants, it's too soon to teach martial arts to others."
- A corollary to the Sensei Mike Rule is that you shouldn't make judgments about the purpose or effectiveness of martial arts techniques when you're a beginner, when you first encounter the techniques, or anytime before you really learn how to evaluate techniques.

About the Author: Nicklaus Suino Sensei has decades of training in budo in Japan and the USA. He is the author of *The Art of Japanese Swordsmanship*, *Budo Mind and Body*, and other acclaimed works. He is also one of the founding members of the SMAA.

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