

THE KIAI

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Newsletter of THE AIKIDO INSTITUTE

CONTRIBUTIONS

This being the end of the year, it's the time to remind you that the dojo is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization whose goal is to make Aikido accessible to the public.

Your contributions of time, effort, or money go towards providing aikido classes for adults and kids.

If you are considering a monetary donation, these contributions are tax-deductible as provided for by law.

Thank you.



YONDAN ESSAY

I started learning Aikido in 1987. For some aikidoka that may seem like a long time of training. Relative to other aikidoka, it is not so long. For what it is worth, I have picked up and pass along a few of the things that I believe are essential to good Aikido technique. Since I am only familiar with Iwama-style Aikido, I limit my comments to that style.

Contact – Proper contact creates effective technique. When we do hand warm-ups, good connection between our own hands not only means more effective stretches, it is also practice for creating good connection when we connect hand-to-hand with our partner. So, when you are doing your hand stretches at the beginning of class, really concentrate on maximizing the connection between your hands. Leave no gaps. Then when you do techniques such as kotegaeshi, shihonage, and sankyo, to name but a few, remember to maximize the contact between your hand with your partner's hand. Leave no gaps. I do not mean that your grip should be vise-like or bone-crunching. But

your grip should be firm; it should make a seamless connection between your hand and your partner's. You should become one with your partner. Your energy should flow from your hand to hers.

Good hand contact is not just limited to hand-to-hand techniques. The same principle applies to weapons work. When using a jo or bokken use a firm grip. Leave no gaps. Good contact translates into good weapons technique.

Contact is also important elsewhere. For example, when doing morote dori kokyuhō the throw comes from entering beside our partner then shifting our weight from our outside foot to our inside foot which is placed behind our partner. There is only a fixed range that one can comfortably shift. If as nage your hip is not yet in contact with your partner's hip when you begin the weight shift, some of your range is going to be wasted on closing the gap to reach your partner. Once connected you will only have what remains of your range to affect your partner. However, if when you begin your shift of weight you are already connected, your partner gets the effect of your full range of shifting weight. Your throw is more powerful with no more effort. For koshinage connect the flat of your back to your standing partner and in this

connected position lead her over and into the throw; avoid creating a table of your back, then loading your partner onto the table.

Clean Footwork – If you want to be fast at weapons you need to have clean footwork. It is not uncommon for aikidoka doing weapons training to fumble with their feet. By this I mean that in advancing, if their right foot is

forward and they are going to step with their left foot, they first move their right foot a little bit, then they move their left foot. They do the same thing with their left foot. This extra movement serves no purpose and wastes time. It slows

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them down. So in your weapons training try to be aware of what your feet are doing. Strive to take clean strides when advancing and retreating.

Go Slow To Go Fast – Some Aikido students have a tendency to rush through the technique in order to get to the throw. What they haven't yet learned is that the power of the technique is in the movements that precede the throw. By going at a slow but steady pace one discovers and learns what makes the technique work. One aspect of the technique may be as simple as taking the partner's balance and keeping her off balance, but just enough so that she does not take a step to recapture her balance. Another aspect may be an appreciation for how the technique affects your partner's joint(s) and the proper alignment or extension in order to affect her joint(s). Shihonage, kotegaeshi, and sankyo come to mind, just to name a few. When you discipline yourself to do the technique slowly enough to feel the efficacy of the technique through all of its parts, you will then be ready to speed up your movements and you will be able to perform effective techniques with a minimum amount of effort.

Train – Enough said. Get out on the mat. Have fun. Take good care of your partner. Take good care of yourself. Find yourself a good chiropractor to keep your joints moving and in alignment. Enjoy training with many different partners. Don't forget to ask black belts to train with you. Exploring the subtleties of Aikido can provide a lifetime of fascination.

KATHERINE A. MONTGOMERY



FEELING COMFORTABLE

I'm finally starting to feel comfortable with my Aikido again. It's been a long road and I've spent the last year trying to absorb and practice all the new things that I've learned at the Oakland Institute. My strength and energy was occupied with trying to mimic the techniques that were being taught. Coming from a different dojo and style, can make it extremely difficult. Or, at least it is for me. I am so self-conscious of my techniques and I find it so comforting to find out many people have had the same experience.

When I used to do tai no henko, I tended to curve my hands inward and my arms had a slight curve to them. We use to say we were carrying a ball, or when I was teaching, a bowl full of chocolate chip cookies. Kids especially didn't want to drop their cookies on the mat. I've been doing tai no henko one way for over ten years. Trying to teach an old dog a new trick is quite a challenge, especially a person with such a strong personality.

When I started training in the adults class I was surprised to have Kim Sensei looking at me with puzzlement the first few times I was attempting tai no henko. It's the first technique to start the class. It's the basic blend that we are all taught from our first day on the mat. You'd think someone with my level of training would know how to do it.

I was so self-conscious of him staring at me. I'm sure my heart rate went up and my breathing became a little more erratic. I could see, out of the corner of my eye, him practicing it to himself and looking directly at his hands and their position. What was he doing? Am I doing something wrong? Not me! That's never happened (chuckle). I checked my hamni, I checked the position of my hands, and I checked my center. Is my back straight? Yes. Are my eyes looking forward? Yes. Are they looking at my hands? No. Am I looking down? No. Am I looking at my partner? No.

Immediately, he came over and started to level out my hands and tried to get the bend out of my arms. I learned that energy should flow out your fingers forward and not towards the ceiling like hot air. There is a famous picture of O'Sensei doing tai no henko. His back is straight, his eyes are looking forward, and his hands are extending his energy forward.

My arms aren't bending so much anymore and my hands are a lot straighter than before. I really focus on keeping my hands extending forward. It is becoming more natural now and I'm not as self-conscious as in the beginning. I guess this is why people have been practicing this art their entire lives. In order to master anything, you must do it everyday. The more rolls you do the better they are going to be. The more tai no henko you do the better they will become.

MARTHA EVANS-HOLM



One of the mothers of one of the kids told me the following story:

They were recently out shopping at a department store, and her child stopped and bowed before stepping over the threshold of the entrance to the store. His mother was bemused, and asked him why he did that. His reply: "Oh – I want to make sure I practice my Aikido wherever I go."

LARS ERIC HOLM



AIKIDO

Aikido is a martial arts class where you have to pay attention when you're against the wall. The more you pay attention the more you learn, and the more you learn the better you are, and the better you are, the safer you are on the streets walking home or playing in the park, or even in your own room. That's why you should pay attention if you want to be extra safe in your life. It's always good to be extra careful no matter what.

That's why I take Aikido — to be extra careful and I think I'm pretty good, but I might need some help, but otherwise I'm good.

There are some other students that are really good too. There's a red belt that's really good, or at least to me even though sometimes he can be really silly. There's also a brown belt named Girma. If you want a clown, ask him, he's a pro. I forgot to say the red belt's name: it is Forest.

One of my friend's names is Zoe. She can be quiet but if you can get her to talk you'll find that there's a great personality. As the saying goes, you can't judge a book by its cover. Sometimes I'm just like her. I have trouble talking to someone I don't know. Everyone is different in their own way. Sometimes it's hard to find out, so it takes time because you have to make sure you can trust them, otherwise everybody will be mad at each other because they're really not friends.

That's what Aikido is all about. You can make friends while you learn to protect yourself. Your training partner is not your total enemy. What I mean is that you have to move out of the way or do a technique but make sure you don't hurt them too. Besides, it could be one of your best Aikido friends that you have to do your technique on and you don't want to hurt them.

Aikido teaches you to protect yourself, but you have to protect your opponent so you don't really hurt them a lot. I mean you want to hurt them a little bit so you can get away quick enough to hide so they don't hurt you.

Remember, respect others and treat people the way you want to be treated so the person who wants to hurt you should learn that before you get really mad. Because to say it in my own words: don't get me angry, you will pay that price when you do. Seriously, if you get me mad — I don't want to tell you what I do when you get me mad. But if you get my good side, no worries, instead you can think of me as a cuddly kitten. On the bright side of me: kitten's, flowers and hearts; on my dark side: anger, death and destruction. My bright side would say "sunshine and flowers", my dark side would say "horror and lights out". Bright side: "Hello, how are you? Don't forget to smile!" Dark side: "You shall all die! I said die!"

Wow! My dark side can be grumpy, but I like that small

bright one. Don't forget Aikido is good, not bad, and don't forget to smile while you practice, unless you're like my dark one. But remember, smile anyway, you could help someone else smile. Come on 'dark' I know you have to have a smile somewhere. Come on!

All right — bye everybody!

MEAGAN HOLM



THE JAPANESE SWORD

Training with a *bokken* (wooden sword; or *shinai*, bamboo sword) is a fundamental practice of Aikido. Our basic stance of centered feet in perpendicular or triangular formation¹ — *hanmi* (half body) or *ken komi* (sword stance) — is derived from classical Japanese sword technique, as is the hand technique *kokyu* (breathing) used in *tai jitsu* (hand "warfare"— through body manipulation) as well as the *shomen* (front mask or facial area) and *yokomen* (side mask or facial area) strikes.²

Practicing with a *bokken* teaches us to work with centered hands with an emphasis on *kokyu* movements. Centered hands on top of centered feet—with or without a sword— is the beginning, middle, and end of many, if not most of our techniques. So it is worth taking a moment to examine this weapon, for it provides a window into the vast sweep of Japanese martial arts and cultural history.



Osensei was born on December 14, 1883 in the midst of a momentous period of change in Japanese society known as the *Meiji* Restoration, which dated from 1868 to 1912. In 1868, pro-imperial radicals overthrew the Tokugawa *shogun* (great general) and restored the Emperor to supreme power. The ultimate ruin of the *samurai* class over several years — with all their privileges and power — was bitter and fatal. This period is the subject of the movie *The Last Samurai* ("now playing in a theater near you").

The Emperor adopted the term *Meiji* (enlightened rule or bright government) as his reign name. The *shogunate* feudal system was first established in 1185, ultimately evolving into a rigid social system composed of the *samurai* or warrior class, merchants, artisans, and peasants or farmers. The goal of the Meiji rulers was to transform Japan from a largely agricultural feudal society into a modern industrial one. In pursuit of this goal, the class system was abolished, including especially the special rights of the samurai class, and in 1876 the wearing of swords in public — a privilege held by

the samurai class alone – was banned. *Wakizashis* could be worn by all members of society, both in- and out-of-doors. Peasants, with the rare exception of a possible gift, could not afford one.

The history and development of the Japanese sword spans the period from approximately 645 to the present. Many scholarly volumes have been written on this voluminous subject, an estimated 10,000 in Japanese, and about 100 or so in English. We will look briefly at some of the more salient historical highlights a little later below.



How Do I Find and Buy an Authentic Hand-Forged Japanese Sword?

Do not attempt to buy a sword unless you have studied them for at least six months to a year. There are nine sheet-stamped steel swords for every “real” hand forged sword currently on the market. (There is brisk traffic on Ebay, for instance, or Manions.com, where very fine items can be obtained for a good price by a knowledgeable buyer)³ There was a huge demand in WWII for swords for Japanese officers in all service branches, estimated at 200,000 or more. It was obviously impossible to hand-forge this number of swords in the very brief period leading up to and during the great war. GIs, who brought them home as war trophies, liked the precision of the stamped steel, and felt they were “newer and stronger.” (A stamped number anywhere on the steel is one dead giveaway of an inferior sword). Worse, an authentic blade could have one of over 40 potential *kizu* (flaws) that render the blade worthless on the resale market. However, they could still look great on the mantle, and would still work quite effectively as self-defense weapons in a pinch!

When examining a sword, it is first categorized according to: (1) size and shape, then (2) approximate age, and finally, (3) style or school. Master examiners can then pinpoint the place of manufacture and the family of the maker, for unsigned swords. (For signed swords, the maker’s name itself would sometimes, though not always, appear.⁴) The *tanto* and *katana* we are familiar with because of our training in the dojo: a *wakizashi* is sized between these two.

Sizes

Tanto < 12 inches

Wakizashi > 12 inches < 24 inches

Katana > 24 inches (usually up to 30 inches maximum, which a 26-28 inch average)



The entire period of Japanese sword history is divided into five broad eras: (1) The *JoKoto* (early Koto) period, from roughly 645 to the 1100’s (prior to the two Mongol invasions around 1270); (2) the *Koto* (old) period from approximately 1185 to 1596; (3) the *Shinto* (new) period, 1596-1781; the (4) *Shin-Shinto* (new, new) period, 1781-1876, and finally the *Gendaito* era, which extends to the present day. There are five schools, the *Gokaden*, originated in the Koto period and copied or used as models to this day. The following are current estimations of swords that are still in existence:

- (1) *Bizen-den* (Bizen tradition⁵); 60%, more or less;
- (2) *Mino-den* (Mino school): 30%, more or less;
- (3) *Yamato-den* (Yamato): 2-3%;
- (4) *Soshuden* (Soshu): 2-3%;
- (5) *Yamashiro-den* (Yamashiro): 2-3%.

The earliest swords found in Japan are from tombs dating from the 4th or 5th century, and were single-edged straight blades, called *chokuto*, technology which had probably entered Japan from China by way of Korea. By the *Heian* period (794-1185), when the capitol was established at Kyoto, swords had evolved their distinctly Japanese curvature, and single edge. The warriors who used them fought from horseback, and so had a need for a slashing, rather than a thrusting weapon. In addition, the curvature also added to the strength, since the blades were required to be quite slender and long – sometimes 3 to 4 feet in length – to be effectively wielded from horseback. These longer style swords are generally referred to as *tachi* (as in *kumi-tachi*). (*Tachi* are worn edge side down, and are depicted in Kurosawa’s film *Ran*.)

The Kamakura period (1185-1333) is generally considered the golden age of the Japanese sword. It was during this period, spurred in no small part by two Mongol invasions in the late 1200’s (1274 and 1281) that the fundamental methodology of swordmaking still used to this day was developed.

For more on the Mongol invasion, check:

<http://www.emory.edu/COLLEGE/CULPEPER/RAVINA/PROJECT/Maps/Mongols/Mongolinvasion3.html>

Steel is made by combining various quantities of carbon (charcoal) with molten iron. It is a quirk of geography that the precious “iron sand,” called *tamahangane*, can be found in various parts throughout Japan – the most precious in the mountains, and the most worthless near the sea (contaminated by salt). *Tamahangane* is then smelted with charcoal in an ingenious furnace developed by Japanese sword makers – one that has continuous air flow, unlike our bellows – until it is ready to be pounded by the *Kaji* (smith)

and his apprentices. Japanese smiths also developed the technique of wrapping a layer of softer, low-carbon steel around a core of high-carbon, rigid steel. The rigid steel can hold a razor-sharp edge, but is brittle, since it lacks the give and strength of the soft(er) backing. The hardness of the steel is manipulated by the number of folds that the *tamahangane* is subjected to: the greater the number of folds, the higher the strength of the steel, up to a maximum of 15 to 20 or so.

By the Nanbokucho period (1333-92) swordmaking had coalesced into five basic schools – named after the provinces where they were located – called the *Gokaden* or Five Traditions. Swords made to this day are identified as belonging to these styles or their influences.



The intensity of warfare in the *Muromachi* period (1392-1568) led to the development of the *uchigatana* (striking sword), which were about 24 inches long and were worn edge-side up so as to combine the drawing and slashing actions into a single stroke. The *uchigatana* in turn evolved into a pair of blades that could be worn at the waist. The *katana* (our bokken) was anywhere from 24 to 30 inches in length (usually about 27), and could be worn outdoors only. The *wakizashi* was about 18 to 23 inches in length, and could be worn indoors as well. (It was the famous and tall swordsman Musashi Miyamoto (1584-1645), author of the book *The Five Rings*, (*Gorin no sho*) that formulated a style of 2 sword fighting, the *katana* in the right and the *wakizashi* in the left. He was also famous for his long, 30 inch blade (made especially for him because of his height). [Ask JR how many duels to the death he won before becoming famous as an author and calligrapher!] One could also imagine that two *wakizashi*'s could present a formidable array of deadly striking combinations; the *wakizashi* being best for speed and the *katana* for strength, power and reach).

It is in this period, also called the *Sengoku* (Warring Provinces or Japanese Civil Wartime: 1467-1591) era, that the first documentary evidence emerges showing that swordsmanship began to be practiced in a systematic manner, accompanied by a set of stringent ethics that came to be generally known as the *Samurai* code (the subject for another article).

In the late 1500's, the leader *Toyotomi Hideyoshi* effectively unified the country. In 1588, in an effort to consolidate his rule and establish a more permanent peace, he forbid the owning of swords by any other than the samurai class, thus solidifying the political and class system that dominated

Japan until the coming of Commodore Perry in 1853 (with muskets and cannon) and the *Meiji* Restoration 15 years later. The WWII confiscation marked the third occasion during which thousands of these great works of art have been systematically collected and destroyed during *katana-gari* (sword hunts):

- (1) The 1st by Lord Akechi-Mitsuhide in the early 1580's;
- (2) The 2nd by Hideyoshi Toyotomi in 1588, and;
- (3) The 3rd by General MacArthur and the victorious American armies.



Today, the craft of swordmaking remains highly regulated in Japan. Each swordsmith is allowed to make a maximum of two blades (any size) per month. And in order to become a swordsmith, an apprentice is required to serve a minimum of five years under a master. Many current masters are no longer taking students because they feel it is too difficult to make a living as a swordsmith in today's market. The price of manufacture of a new sword is approximately \$6,000, meaning a buyer must be willing to pay at least \$10,000. There are literally thousands of swords on the market, especially in America, that are priced well below \$2,000. Beyond these obstacles is the more daunting challenge of the annual sword contest sponsored by *Nihon Bijutsu Token Hozon Kyokai* (NBTHK), Society for the Preservation of Japanese Sword Arts (founded in 1960). Every year the NBTHK organizes a sword contest that allows up to 300 entries. Blades are judged and ranked from first to last, with the premier group being the top 10, with a second tier consisting of the top 30. Earnings and standing of swordsmiths are directly tied to their ranking in this contest. There are also a number of prestigious prizes. The upper class of Japanese Swordsmiths are beyond even this level, having won so many contests that they are elevated to a rank (National Treasure) where they are not even required to enter competitions in order to establish their worth. New blades from these smiths can cost anywhere from \$20,000 to \$50,000, or more.



If you are interested in more information, you can begin with what is still considered the classic primer in the field, *The Samurai Sword*, by John Yamamoto, written in English in the 1950's by one of the founders of the NBTHK, a copy of which is available at the dojo. Any local public library will

have many books available through inter- or intra- library loan as well. A good general web site for more information is:

<http://www.geocities.com/alchemy/nihonto.htm>

There are many fine illustrations, articles and references there.

For those interested in studying through classwork and hands-on training, I would recommend going to the San Francisco Nipponto Society homepage to find out more about classes, schedules and sale items. In the future, we can look forward to the San Francisco Society opening a museum devoted to Japanese weapons of all kinds. SF Japanese Sword Society - Classes and Activities:

(<http://hometown.aol.com/jpswks/myhomepage/business.html>)



(I would like to extend a special thanks to Sensei Harunaka Hoshino whose kind spirit and knowledge continues to guide me through many discoveries in the world of Japanese swords.)

SAMURAI (MARK) GUY

Footnotes

¹Our other “centered” stance is *tsuski komi* (trust stance) with parallel feet (pronounced “ski”).

²The suffix “-do” generally refers to a “path” or “way”; “-jitsu”, generally refers to “war” or “fighting” technique).

³The author currently owns: (1) an unsigned *Shin-Shinto tanto* (approximately 150 years old); (2) an authentically signed *Koto wakizashi*, approximately 450-480 years old, and; (3) an authentically signed *Gendaito katana*, forged in 1937. All were appraised at anywhere from double to 10 times the actual purchase price paid at pawn and gun shops in my native Missouri!

⁴Buyer beware, approximately 80% of signed swords are forgeries of either ancient or recent origin.

⁵The majority of the Kokuho (National Treasure) type swords were made by the Bizen-den Kaji (Swordsmiths)

Sources

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