

Swords of Japan: History, Iconography, and Practice  
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Chapter 10 Excerpt

Teaching and Learning Swordsmanship Today

***Learning  
is finding out  
what you already know.***

***Doing is demonstrating that  
You know it.***

***Teaching is reminding others  
That they know just as well as you.***

***The  
Simplest questions  
Are the most profound.***

***Where were you born? Where is your Home?  
Where are you going?  
What are you doing?***

***Think about  
These once in a while, and  
Watch your answers  
Change.***

***-Richard Bach, Illusions***

Teachers who see their students as teachers embody the ideal of budo leadership. This also develops a critical trust between teacher and student. Without trust and meaningful guidelines, many budo students and teachers are left to wander the wastelands of stagnation. Very few who endeavor to learn iaido will reach a level where they are called to lead. For many who do, the most difficult aspect of teaching is building upon what has been learned personally by honoring the learning process of others.

The teacher of a martial art is expected to teach both technical and spiritual components of the art. Unfortunately, teaching is often done at a relatively high level of technical understanding and from the perspective of a relatively low level of cultural and historical insight. Even well-meaning teachers sometimes inadvertently misguide their students. This chapter will also examine some issues surrounding the role of the teacher, both historically and in the context of the modern Non-Japanese cultural matrix.

*Budo Teachers: A Historical Perspective:*

***Within these varied techniques there is deep meaning.***

***Cast off subject and object, function as one;***

***Abandon Self and others, form a single sword.***

***Use the piercing eyes of heaven and earth***

***To see through your opponents body.***

***-Yamaoka Tesshu<sup>1</sup>***

Historical and modern teachers, if they are great, share some important commonalities. First, they must have a very high degree of technical brilliance. Excellence in teaching martial arts requires that a teacher hold himself and his students to a very exacting standard. In terms of interaction, this signals a need to be demanding, explicit, and intolerant of deviation from the technical standard. The second, and equally important quality in a great teacher is charisma. The quality of the teacher-student relationship is variable depending on the level of allure that a teacher possesses. Charisma is the un-definable essence of a person that peaks the interest of others. It is a quality that leaders possess, which sets them apart.

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<sup>1</sup> Stevens, John. *Sword of No-Sword: The Life of Master Warrior Tesshu*

Charisma is evident to onlookers even when they can't define exactly what makes him or her exceptional. Martial arts teachers must be not only demanding but also compassionate and able to assist students along their path of self-discovery. Charisma often emanates from a state of self-awareness, assuredness, and highly refined spirituality. Therefore, it is no surprise that great teachers typify martial arts mastery and ethically refined and charismatic personalities.

It is true that in historical Japan, many of the famous teachers were harsh, judgmental and exclusionary, but the ones that were outstanding among their peers were also charismatic and deeply spiritual people. This peaked the interest of students, developed loyalty, and eventually preserved many styles for today's practitioners. Many, if not most of the martial arts lineages, died out with their headmasters. Many important martial arts styles faded into history due to an absence of students; no one to carry the tradition into the future.

It could be argued that with a Darwinian sort of selection process, only the historically significant and popular styles of swordsmanship remain for modern practitioners. Loyalists preserve and transmit them because they are able to find personal meaning from an otherwise obsolete art. Personal meaning and self-discovery must be practical within the modern context. How can modern students of martial arts achieve self-discovery from a martially obsolete art, particularly within the framework of western culture and modern society?

This question is so difficult to answer that most Western teachers and students have avoided broaching the subject altogether. Many other instructors teach ethical behaviors (such as respect), but stop short of delving into philosophy. Perhaps most

dangerous is the teacher who attempts to teach spirituality in the dojo. If done improperly, the student is left thinking the teacher is the guru, the spiritual center-point of their journey. In the context of Japanese culture, it is highly unseemly to elevate one's self to the status of guru. In Japanese society, personal philosophies are rarely shared openly... let alone taught. It is a misconception of many westerners, as a result of the publication of many preeminent Japanese teachers, that Martial arts teachers achieve guru status by teaching philosophy.

The reality of historical martial arts teachers' philosophical instruction is that it was rarely taught explicitly and directly. Spiritual instruction is usually withheld, specifically in hopes of allowing students to achieve their own understanding. In the modern and western setting however, our reality is based on our perspective; which of course is very different than that of historical Japanese students.

*A Paradox of Interaction Modes:*

For Western practitioners of martial arts, a paradox emerges from the junction of didactic and technical elements of learning. The delivery of instruction is usually steeped with both Japanese customs and philosophy. This is particularly true within the framework of the traditional dojo, where rigid standards are the norm. Many techniques are believed to contain hidden spirituality, which is often an undercurrent (or overt component) of training. Students are often asked to consider the mystical and historical origins of their respective martial art. We are also given very spiritual role models such as Ueshiba Morihei (founder of aikido) Musashi Miyamoto and Yagyu Munenori to guide our spiritual development. Many mistake the main influences of the martial arts as being

simply, “Zen.” As we have seen, the true story of the Japanese sword and its symbolism is much more complicated.

Both instructors and students often misunderstand the role of the teacher, particularly in the modern martial arts setting. The lack of clarity in defining these roles is often confusing for students and puzzling for instructors. The technical, didactic, and exact nature of the martial arts requires specific instruction on exacting techniques. On the other hand, the martial arts also incorporate an expectation of internal development that is often characterized as spiritual. This social dynamic creates complicated and sometimes conflicting expectations for both teachers and students. The resulting interactions are often as misguided as they are unproductive. A critical dilemma emerges when the student, who is accustomed to receiving instruction in an exact manner, expects to receive direct instruction about the spiritual pursuits of the art.

When teachers share how they have drawn personal meaning from martial arts practice, many students experience the unspoken obligation to adopt the philosophy. After all, it is an expectation in most martial arts that students embrace the expert teachings of their instructor. These issues raise some critical questions: Is it the role of the martial arts teacher to provide spiritual instructions? What instructional models are most appropriate for increasing technical ability and personal development? There are as many answers to this question as there are instructors.

The “do,” or path in a martial art is a singular one, particular to the individual. And although there are many examples of guiding principles that can assist martial artists, in the end, they must make meaning for themselves. A teacher in the martial arts setting navigates tumultuous waters when broaching spirituality. The student’s personal

perspective must be respected in such matters. While this may not have been an absolute standard historically, in modern, and particularly with western students, extending respect for religious and spiritual predispositions is critical.

Sometimes students mistake the, “everyone is equal and should be respected” philosophy, thinking that everyone actually is equal in the dojo. Many martial artists dismiss this kind of inclusive philosophy as, “new-age hippie nonsense.” Others think it is a license to behave in an inappropriately casual manner. I have seen students struggle to honor the requirements to both, interact openly with teachers in self-discovery process while interacting in a strictly traditional manner. These two modes of interaction may seem contradictory.

We have established that the teacher is not the guru. But again, we can come to a point of confusion. The teacher may not have the perspective of the student, but he or she has been practicing the art for a longer period of time. In this sense, the teacher is both the, “spiritual and the technical senior” to the student. That does not mean the teacher’s insights are more meaningful, rather that the teacher has spent more time using the martial arts as a vehicle for self-discovery, and should be respected as such. Respect must be extended to the student also. Students are entitled to their own process of self-discovery and should feel empowered by a supportive teacher. Teachers honor their students by nurturing their individuality while striking a balance within the traditional framework of budo’s reiho.

### The Role of the Instructor

Teachers are responsible for preserving the traditions they have received. Instructional decisions must be concerned with preservation first and foremost. A good

instructor inspires students to charge up the mountain rather than pushing them from behind. Being a true instructor of budo is much more than teaching techniques. Gifted instructors can identify with and support students. Identifying areas of need, and offer instruction accordingly is a critical component of being an effective iaido instructor.

It is important to note that the relationship between a teacher of iaido and a student is often very close and meaningful. When students come to understand themselves in a deeper way they are called upon to confront their own shortcomings and “inner demons.” Problems in life have a way of manifesting themselves in the dojo. For example, if a student is too arrogant, his behavior and technique will reflect it. This will be dealt with immediately. If a student is too meek in life, it may show up in iaido practice, resulting in poor posture, execution of technique, and ki (spirit) extension. Both issues may be improved upon in the setting of meaningful iaido practice.

It is truly remarkable how the practice of iaido lays our spirit before us, calling us to improve ourselves by “cutting away” delusions. Such misconceptions and malevolent aspects of ourselves hang like a fog over the living of our lives. With every ten thousand cuts, an epiphany... we see into our own soul and quickly dispatch the blade of metaphor to cut that which is most difficult: the flaws within the self.

Teachers of traditional iaido encounter a demanding task in building such awareness while teaching physical movements essentially concerned with cutting an implied opponent. The whole process can seem confusing. Beginning students are often unclear about why certain concepts are important, why an instructor might give different instruction to one student than another. Policies can seem arbitrary, and etiquette seems marginally useful in an academic sense. An observant teacher can see an opening, a

point where the student lacks understanding, and assert him or herself into the training in a meaningful way. This teaching prowess is the same skill used by swordsmen to seek an opening in an opponent's stance and cut decisively with good results. Such connective examples abound in iaido. The art of swordsmanship runs parallel to the art of living. Teaching iaido often includes helping students to draw such connections for themselves. In this way every policy, every formality, every movement, breath and emotion all offer lessons. No stone is left unturned in the pursuit for self-awareness. Over time, students' misconceptions about formalities and dojo policies fade away revealing new understanding and new action in living.

Despite the spiritual scope of iaido practice, there are constraints dictating what should be taught. While iaido is often thought of as a "Zen art," the modern practice of iaido is in fact non-denominational in nature. Students of iaido come from all walks of life and represent all major religions. Iaido is a method of self-discovery and self-improvement, something most religions agree amounts to good practice in living. Consequently, the issues that arise between teacher and student are extremely complex and are discussed again, in more depth, later in this book. In this paradigm, however, it is sufficient to examine the roles of teacher and student in terms of graphical representations.

The teacher's relationship to the student is best envisioned as a facilitator. Here the teacher guides the hand and spirit of the student until he or she is prepared to become a true practitioner of iaido- one who has achieved a high degree of standardization and has gained spirit-shaping insights. Whatever stage a student may be working through, or particular skill he or she is developing, the instructor's input must match the skill-level

and energy of the student. Just as an adept aikido practitioner unbalances the attacker by agreeing with the energy of the attack, the iaido instructor can best guide the spiritual development of a student by leading by guiding, rather than opposing and stopping the flow of the student's energy.

### The Role of the Student

The process of learning iaido usually isn't easy, comfortable, or pretty. Students often complete thousands of repetitions of a single movement in an attempt to perfect it. Inevitably, a student will reach a point in their development where they become frustrated, feeling that his or her progress has slowed or even declined!

In these cases it is common for a student to feel overwhelmed and disillusioned. The joy of practice can seem tarnished as a student forces themselves into the dojo... for yet another frustrating and humiliating session. Often students feel as though they should quit. Feelings of inadequacy and frustration can drive extreme and ill-advised actions. Remember, emotion clouds judgment. Do not fall into the trap of complacency, self-doubt, and excuse making. It offers an easy way out for students but holds no reward. Instead, see the "rocky times" as beneficial, as an actual part of the journey and not a sidetrack.

In iaido, profound realizations come out of the blue... never when one is hoping for new insight. It is important to note here that knowing what will transpire does not make it easier, quicker or more readily accessible to students as they travel down the path. This paradigm is simply one way to think about what actually happens over the course of extended practice in iaido.

Iaido students should train without expectations of outcome. Having expectations only slows one's progress. The instruction a teacher offers should be received and cherished as a gift. Iaidoka train hoping that someday their practice will lead to insight-development. It is sometimes difficult to train for months or years on end waiting and looking for insight. Many students become discouraged and quit their practice because they expect particular result within a particular time frame. Such expectations are absurd and do not reflect an appreciation of the vast differences in humankind. Through the singular practice of iaido, we all learn differently, at different rates, and (hopefully) different things about ourselves. We should train when tired, hungry, sick, cold, and hurt. The idea here is the same as the old saying, "A watched pot never boils." Students' duty is just to train, train, train.

If a student should stop training, great epiphanies may go unrealized. A student's journey in iaido, often due to uncertainty, can come to a screeching halt. Students sometimes question whether or not it is worth it to continue practice. It is worth it. Five hundred years of tradition say so. Often it is when one considers quitting, but continues on just past a hurdle, that the most profound insights are earned. Train, train, train.

Knowing what the developmental process of iaido entails may actually make this phenomenon worse. When we think we know something we become attached to what we think should be the outcome. Most students experience frustration, but have not been given a framework like this one. Therefore, they have no expectation of outcome. Those uninformed students just trudge on, through the difficult times, holding no expectations of profound self-realization.

## Medieval Practice and Modern Practitioners

Iaido offers one of the most profound systems of self-discovery within the martial arts. Its implications for ethical living are every bit as applicable as those of aikido, one of the martial arts that is well known for its spiritual dimension. The way of the sword is very subtle, but draws on generations of symbolism to find meaning. For example, unlike other martial arts such as aikido, iaido's techniques are designed to be lethal and instantaneous. Therefore iaido teaches its lessons without the benefit of safe practical examples of how to apply its ethical strategy. Yet this art continues to be practiced in a time where handguns are readily available. When people come to iaido they usually do so for one of two reasons.

First, and most common, is their fascination with the sword as an instrument of power. This type of applicant usually wants to just learn the techniques. They see the beauty and grace, combined with the deadly speed and exact control, and want it for themselves. Their need for power and their misconceptions of what true power really is draws them to the jewel-like sword techniques. This is the desire to elevate one's self-image and self-esteem by superficial means.

These types of students rarely last more than a couple of months. After students have gone to considerable expense to purchase their hakama, kimono, juban, obi, and iaito, their iaido equipment, they strut into the practice area swelling with pride. Seeking self-aggrandizement, such students are in for a shrewd awakening. When such students realize how difficult the techniques are, and what little tolerance for "Jedi Knight" nonsense there is, they usually quit -and are never heard from again. Sadly, this type of student is not ready for the level for self-mastery iaido can provide. Simply put, they

usually need to spend more time meeting the more basic human needs of safety, love, and self-esteem before they are ready for iaido.

The second type of student that comes to iaido usually finds himself or herself committing a lifetime to its study. This is the type of student that has already experienced profound and life-changing events that lead him to understand the true nature of power. For many people with this background, iaido becomes an esoteric pursuit. When studying iaido, I feel it is essential that such students understand the metaphoric nature of the sword.

Many times, people who begin training in iaido do so after mastering other martial arts. Through their journey, they have come to understand the importance of training the spirit. Oftentimes they are mature both in age and as martial artists. These are often people that realize the value of such a technically complex and lengthy system as iaido.

They are also the types of people drawn to iaido's emphasis on spiritual composure. By learning to calm emotions and the mind's voice, we can master our minds, and this is appealing to many long-term followers of iaido. When one sees the universe as a giant expression of the same thing, it has profound implications on the mind, especially that of the swordsman. And more than one famed Japanese swordsman in the past indicated that via martial training, he had come to see the universe in this way.

Yet, the beginner's mind swims with thoughts, which are mostly concerned with angles and stances and not injuring one's self. Through thousands of repetitions, the kata, or "formal exercises," are internalized. Performing the kata at a beginner's level (due to the danger and structure involved) requires extreme focus. During this stage, the student

is so focused on swordsmanship that he or she is not thinking about their mortgage, love life, or other concerns. The mental voice quiets down because of the demanding nature of iaido practice. With several years of practice, the kata can then be done without mental chatter. Something magical happens: the mind remains quiet, while the body performs the movements that comprise the kata. Even at a high level of mastery, the kata require so much focus that there is no way to allow the mind to stray from the task. Over time, the mental voice quiets down, and then you are really doing iaido.

An example of this process can be found in how we learn the initial kata, Mae. First, students think, "I draw the sword and cut the throat of the opponent." Then, as our fluency builds, we think, "I draw and cut." At this stage, we have let go of our attachments to the idea that we must be cutting something. Then, after we let the kata stand alone as an entity in and of itself, we remove the "I." The mind says, "Draw and cut." By removing both the "I" and the "opponent," we arrive at a more profound sense of what the kata really is.

For swordsmen inclined in this direction, by going beyond the idea of an individual self and others, they arrive a state beyond duality, a state of absolute oneness. To put this idea more simply, we are all just part of the same big cosmic soup, variations of the same great expression that is our world. Yasutani Roshi, a teacher of Zen meditation, indicated the same mental state that can be found in iaido when he said, "The greatest misconception of man is that I am in here, and you are out there." When we arrive at the truth of iaido technique, there is no "you" or "I." There is just breath and motion. And only the cut remains. To clarify the cut that remains is only that which cuts away the practitioner's delusional mind.

The opponent is no longer separate from oneself. In reference to the delusion and attachment that our ego creates, the opponent is our concept of a truly separate and individual self. The sword is a powerful metaphor for how we can cut away our misunderstandings of the universe. Yet, each of our journeys is our own. What my sword training has taught me may be different from what your training will teach you. For this reason, I am always excited for each of my students to go through their own process of self-discovery.

Strip away extraneous elements, and simple truths are revealed. The state of everything in our universe is interrelated and is precisely as it should be. Our minds and egos tell us otherwise, but we can choose not to be deceived. We can become true masters of ourselves through budo practice. The process of learning iaido over a lifetime can yield great insights and clarity of mind.