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WAY OF THE SWORD

Draw, Cut and Kill!





The students are ready. The instructor sits in front of the class on the bright, varnished hardwood floor. The senior student intones the words used to begin and end class: "Shinza ni rei. To ni rei. Sensei ni rei." The Japanese words, spoken in a gruff military manner, echo throughout the long, narrow mirror-walled *dojo* (training hall). The students sit in *seiza* (kneeling posture), bodies relaxed, but both minds and bodies aware and instantly ready to jump at the instructor's command. On each student's right side, nestled between his *obi* (belt) and *hakama* (skirt-like trousers), is his sword, long and graceful, resting in its black-lacquered scabbard and literally sharp as a razor.

The instructor directs the students to perform the first *kata* (form), called *mae* (front). It consists of drawing the sword while in *seiza*; making a preliminary move to unbalance the imaginary opponent; attacking with a strong vertical cut to the head; *chiburi* (cleaning the sword of blood); and finally *noto* (returning the blade to its scabbard). The students will perform this, along with nine other *kata*, ten times each. By the end of the class, thoroughly exhausted, they all will have learned not only something about *iaido* (the way of the sword), but more importantly, something about themselves. For the *dojo* is a universe in itself, of

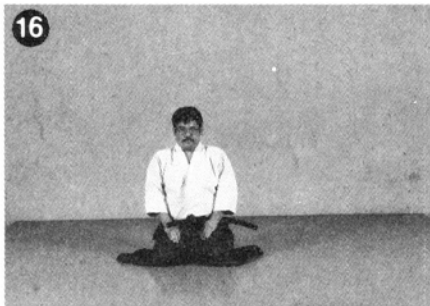
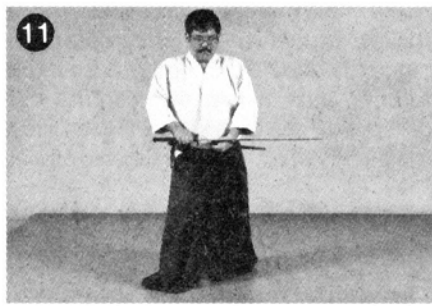
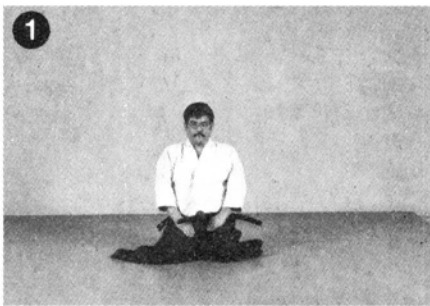
THE INNER MYSTERIES OF THE SWORD

**iaido From the Heart,
Not the Hand**

by Robert Elsasser

which the students are both a part and the whole. Here each student makes contact with his deepest self. By working his body, he opens up vistas of the unexplored mind. The *dojo* becomes an area of sublimated and controlled combat. Particularly in *iaido*, where, unlike karate, there is no physical opponent in front of you, you confront an opponent who is not an opponent, but rather yourself, a silent partner engaged in helping you understand the self more fully. The *dojo* thus becomes a type of magical space where ordinary rules are, for a time, suspended and superseded.

Much has been written about *iaido*, nearly all of which has dealt with technique—how to draw the sword, cut, and return the blade to the scabbard. But, more than any other martial art, *iaido* is based less on technique than on attitude and philosophy. Indeed, the movements of the sword are not technique; rather, they are something achingly beautiful and inevitable, an enactment in space and time of how the universe works and of our part in it. These movements, when done by a master, appear graceful and powerful because technique has been transcended and transformed and, unless the *iaido* student is aware of this, he will never attain true proficiency with the sword no matter



The first and most basic technique in iaido is shohatto (1-16), which consists of 16 separate movements. Aikido black belt and iaido expert Dan Furuya of Los Angeles demonstrates shohatto above. Notice how Furuya starts in a seated posture (1) and ends the technique in the identical posture after drawing, cutting and rescabbing the sword.

how many books or articles he may read.

Iaido is an aesthetic experience, but it consists of nothing more than drawing the sword, cutting, and returning the blade to the scabbard. An iaido kata lasts no longer than a minute. Nothing could be simpler—or more complex. For iaido movements contain a subtlety, one is tempted to say, typically Japanese. Japanese food, for example, despite its often pallid taste, is highly praised. Indeed, a meal served in a private room of a fine restaurant, where every detail from the color of the cushions on the *tatami* (straw mat) to the flower in the alcove has been carefully planned, tends to make the occasion an aesthetic rather than gustatory experience. For the Japanese, barely perceptible tastes are highly praised and the sophistication of the palate is tested by its ability to distinguish virtually tasteless dishes of the same type. The role played by aesthetic preferences goes far back in Japanese history. In *noh* plays, an ancient form of drama, lack of sets or lighting directs attention to the actor and demands a connoisseur to appreciate slight gestures and modulations in voice which distinguish a great actor from a merely competent one. There is no bold statement, merely something much more difficult—controlled simplicity.

Demonstrated by a true master, the simple movements of iaido take on a subtlety someone untrained would not see. Mitsuzuka Takeshi, eighth-degree black belt in iaido, has emphasized in his classes both here and in Japan what he terms “beautiful style,” which must be done correctly (*tadashika*) and practiced strictly (*kibishiku*). Mitsuzuka is very strict about fine details in his teaching—the exact placement of the hands on the handle of the sword, the

exact angle of the cut, the proper posture. It is this constant emphasis on subtle detail that distinguishes a true master from the beginner. Iaido is an art one can study for years and still remain a novice.

Whatever field of art the Japanese may study, they always emphasize the importance of the subjective side; technique is ultimately a secondary consideration. While technique is of importance, the Japanese make use of it by turning it into an opportunity for spiritual enhancement. The subtleties, therefore, extend into the proper mental attitude. For the purpose of iaido is not merely to make a good swordsman, but, through that activity, to become a different and, one hopes, better person. The sword contains within itself the power to change how we look and feel about ourselves, the world, and even the universe. An efficient cutting blade, when wielded by arrogant and brutal hands concerned only with technique, can be a weapon of considerable savagery. But it can also be benign, even life giving, in the hands of an adept swordsman who cherishes the concept of *bushi no nasake*, the warrior's sense of mercy and benevolence.

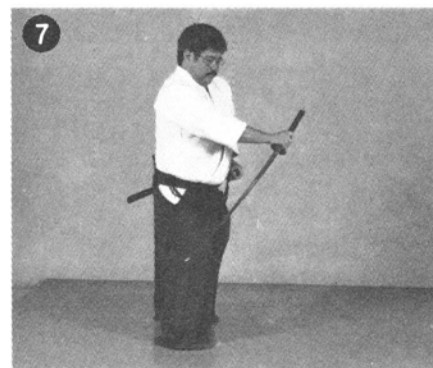
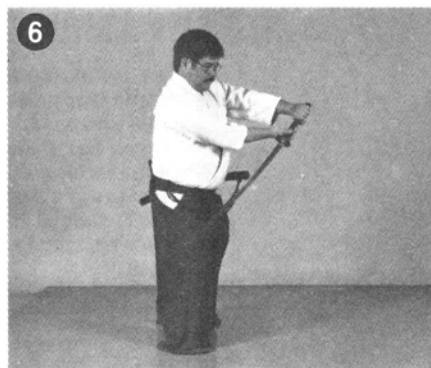
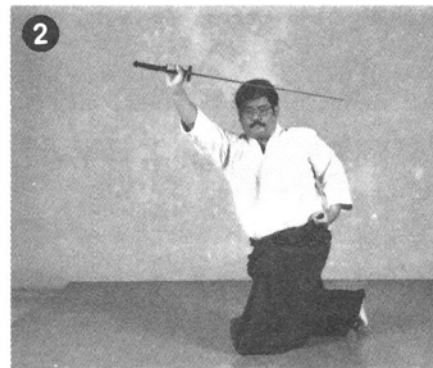
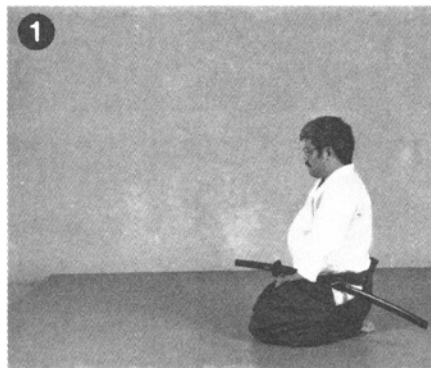
The following story may serve as an example. Muramasa, a brilliant but somewhat mentally unstable swordmaker, enjoyed a sinister reputation, since his superb blades always tended to bring their owners into conflict with others. An individual who wished to test the quality of a Muramasa sword placed



Rescabbarding of the sword is an art form in itself. Notice how the iaido stylist slides (1) the blade, edge outward, between his thumb and forefinger until the tip reaches the scabbard opening. He then guides it (2) into the scabbard.

it in a stream to see how it would react to dead leaves floating with the current. Each leaf that touched the blade was cut in two. A sword made by the greatest of swordmasters, Masamune, was then placed in the stream. The leaves avoided the blade. This was said to reflect Masamune's own character, which had in it a measure of nobility.

The way of the sword distinguishes,




Perhaps the most difficult and unique iaido technique is ryuto (1-10), a deflection and oblique cut consisting of ten movements. Japanese sword expert and historian Dan Furuya demonstrates the technique at right.



The physical techniques of iaido are learned to cut our minds. For the swordsman, this condition is known as *munen* (no thought) or *mushin* (no mind). In the beginning of his iaido study, the student, quite naturally, tries to do his best when physically wielding his weapon. Technique, after all, has to be mastered. But the student soon learns that as long as he *tries* to learn technique, and consciously attempts to concentrate on doing well, he is sure to make many more mistakes than are necessary. Why? Because if a student's self-consciousness is too obviously present over the entire range of his attention, it will interfere with a free display of whatever proficiency he has acquired. He must therefore rid his mind of this obtrusive self-consciousness and apply himself to his kata as if nothing particular were taking place at the moment. This is *mushin*, the total absence of the swordsman's consciousness of himself not only as a swordsman, but also of himself as a self at all. The iaido student then attains perfect freedom; nothing inhibits and nothing thwarts his movements. He has no feeling of doing anything specifically good or bad; he just is. And because of this absence of thoughts about doing a technique correctly, the technique becomes perfect. There are no thoughts of perfection to interfere with the execution of perfection. When there is no obstruction in the mind, the swordsman's movements are like flashes of lightning or, to use a famous analogy, like the lake reflecting the image of the moon. There

is not a hairbreadth interval between one movement and the other; each flows into the next in a stream of connectivity, where there are no individual parts.

When the sword is in the hands of a technician skilled in its use, it is no more than an instrument with no mind of its own. The sword and the student are two separate entities, alienated from each other. When movements are done, they are done mechanically. However, when the sword is held by a swordsman whose spiritual attainment is such that he holds it as though he were not holding it, it is identified with the man himself, it acquires a soul, and it moves with all the subtleties which have been imbedded in him as a student of iaido. There is a wonderful beauty in the movements of the person who has been fortunate enough to acquire this discipline, a discipline that leads to freedom.

The man emptied of all thoughts, all emotions originating from fear, all sense of insecurity, all desire to win, is a man not at all conscious of using the sword. This is a level where both man and sword have turned into instruments of the unconscious, and it is here that this unconscious achieves wonders of creativity by touching something rich and strange. It is here that iaido has become an art. 

About the Author: Robert Elsasser is a freelance writer and martial artist in Hackensack, New Jersey.

then, between the sword that kills and the sword that allows life to continue. The sword used in iaido is a life-giving one. By learning iaido we fence, not with a separate opponent, but with ourselves. We learn to control the blade and, as a result, learn to control our inner selves. Paradoxically, in learning iaido, we do not train to cut down any person with our weapon. What the sword becomes is an instrument to cut our ego—the root of all discord, quarrels and fighting. An instrument originally designed for violence becomes one of peace, designed not to perpetuate violence, but to overcome it.

