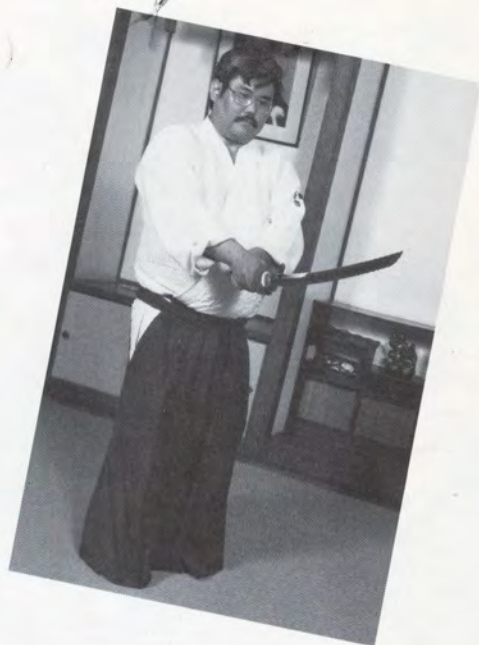


# Seitei iai

The Modern  
Sword Art  
With  
Ancient Roots

by Wayne Muromoto



Perhaps it's inevitable, this sudden surge of interest in the sword arts of the samurai. The martial arts in America are certainly not immune to fads, and when one media sensation fades, another is sure to take its place. And now it seems that everybody is suddenly a master of the *katana* (Japanese sword), whether they actually had training in it or not.

But brandishing a katana without knowing its proper use is foolish at best, and chillingly dangerous at worst.

What is the real background behind the budo arts called *iai*? Let's take a brief look at the origins of *iai* and its recent revitalization into a modern form, the *iaido* of the Zen Nihon Kendo Renmei (All Japan Kendo Federation), which oversees the standards for the *seitei iai* (standardized *iai*) forms.

## Early Origins

Like many martial arts methods, the origins of *iai* are lost in legend and antiquity. However, if we sift through the various legends, we stand a pretty good chance of reconstructing how it was developed. From the Heian Period up until the 1400s, the favorite weapon of the samurai class was the long, single-edged, curved sword. Although it





Beginning again in the formal sitting position (1) for the sixth form of *seitei iai*, Furuya deflects (2) the sword coming upon him and steps (3) to the side to evade the attack. He then brings the sword around to cut (4) through the opponent's side and withdraws (5) the sword from the adversary's body. Furuya performs (6) the characteristic cleaning of the blood from the sword, reaches (7) and returns (8) the sword to the scabbard, then stands (9) to finish (10) the sequence.



may have been practical to be versed in other weaponry, such as the spear, naginata, dagger and bow, the sword was considered the epitome of the warrior's strict code. It was at once beautiful and fearsome, hard yet yielding, sharp yet flexible.

Many martial arts schools, based on the sword and other weaponry, sprang up during this period. *Kenjitsu*, for instance, was a method used for battlefield action, when a swordsman had his sword drawn out and was ready to fight. However, as politics and warfare grew more chaotic, the warriors learned that an attack could occur almost anytime—in the streets, in one's own house, even in the privacy of a privy.

Specific methods of learning how to quickly draw out a sword and counter or attack an opponent were developed under different names: *batto*, *batto-iai*, *saya no uchi*, *tsuka no uchi*, *za-ai*, or *iai*, to name a few. They shared the characteristics of being practiced with a real sword, as opposed to the general usage of the *bokken* (wooden sword), *fukuro shinai* (wrapped bamboo sword) or *shinai* (bamboo sword) used in *kenjitsu*

or *kendo* schools. Within the curricula, the student learned specific ways of drawing a sword out quickly without cutting himself, how to cut with a real sword, how to shake off the blood and gore from the sword blade, how to care for the sword and the etiquette involved in handling the katana.

In the Muromachi Period (1392-1568), these methods became codified into specific and definable schools of warrior arts. *Izasa Choisai Ienao*, the founder of the *ten-shin sho katori shinto-ryu*, is credited with being one of the earliest verifiable masters of a specific martial ryu. Soon enough, other schools also sprang up, including the *kage-ryu*, *shinkage-ryu*, *kashima shinto-ryu* and the *takeuchi-ryu*.

The *katori shinto-ryu* and many of these early schools had methods of *iai*. But perhaps the greatest impetus

to *iai* came from a mysterious figure named Hayashizaki Jinsuke Shigenobu. We know that he really existed, but his wandering life left few traces, and we are left with many tall tales.

One legend says he was a descendant of the Hojo family, formerly powerful rulers in Kamakura. Another says his father was slain by a fellow samurai who served the Mogami clan in the north of Japan. Jinsuke changed his family name from Asano to Hayashizaki when, at the age of 18, he underwent ritual austerities at the Hayashizaki Myojin shrine in 1598 and received a divine vision. Jinsuke, armed with this new method of fighting, searched out his family's enemy and slew him in the streets of Kyoto.

Both tales, however, are unverifiable. What we do know of him that can be considered historically accu-



Dan Furuya, head of the Aikido Center of Los Angeles, demonstrates the first form from *seitei iai*. Beginning in the formal sitting position (1), Furuya comes up (2) on his hips as both hands reach for the sword simultaneously. Furuya draws (3) and cuts horizontally to the upper arm or eyes of the opponent. He then draws (4) the hips forward and thrusts the sword into the opponent's chest. Furuya raises (5) and cuts the sword above his head for the final cut (6). Then he draws (7) the sword back for *chiburi* (cleaning off the blood) and brings (8) it toward the head as he stands up (9) to cut diagonally. He shifts (10) his feet and returns (11) the sword to its scabbard.



1



2



3



4



5



6



7



8



9



10



11





4



5



6



9



10

rate is that he was a swordsman from Sagami (present-day Shinagawa prefecture), born circa 1546-48. He lived around Ichi-no-miya, near Sagami, from 1598, for about seven years. Based on Chinese metaphysical theories, he developed his own swordfighting style, which included grappling, swordfighting and iai. Jun-suke traveled about the country and attracted a number of disciples, who founded their own iai schools based on his teachings. The great majority of iai styles practiced today in Japan can be traced back to this figure, so it is no wonder that he is called "the founder of iai," even though there were swordmasters before him. Schools founded by him, influenced by him, or developed by his students include the *tamiya-ryu*, *ichi-no-miya-ryu*, *shinmei muso to-ryu*, *suio-ryu*, *muraku-ryu*, *kamiizumi-ryu*, *shin-ryu*, *hoki-ryu*, *sekiguchi-ryu*, *muso shin-*

*den-ryu*, and the *muso jikiden eishin-ryu*.

### Modern iaido

The impetus for modern iaido goes back to prewar days. Although sport swordfighting was standardized as kendo, no such uniform system existed long after Japan's modernization programs of the late 1800s. Iai seemed on the verge of dwindling away, its practical use superseded by modern bayonets and rifles.

Into this void stepped Nakayama Hakudo, a gifted swordsman respected in both the martial arts world and in upper-class society. Afraid that modern kendo students may forget how to handle a real sword, Hakudo diligently studied the Eishin style variations of iai and synthesized a short series of *kata* designed for the modern kendo enthu-

siast. He also helped spur interest in the older iai schools, called *ko-ryu*. Besides Hakudo, a great deal of interest was created by various iai and kendo masters who gathered together at the Butokuden in Kyoto, which was the national training center for Japanese martial artists before World War II.

The second World War and subsequent military orders banned martial arts for many years. When the ban was lifted in 1947, after General Douglas MacArthur's staff decided that budo in itself was no hindrance to democratic institutions, iai continued its development. The Zen Nihon Kendo Renmei chose a committee headed by Otani Kazuo to develop a national standardized set of iai *kata* so that various practitioners could be ranked and tested according to specific criteria, regardless of *ko-ryu* affiliation. These *kata* were called the *seitei gata*. After various incarnations, the basic form was set in 1967, when it was presented at the Kyoto Butokuden's annual martial arts demonstration.

Since that time, master swordsmen have met every year to refine the *seitei iai* and make them technically more efficient, more like the *ko-ryu kata* in their integrity and meaning.

### Ten Forms

*Seitei iai* consists of ten forms. Three begin in *seiza*, the formal sitting position. One begins in *tate-hiza*, another sitting position, and six start from a standing position. Kendo students who also practice iai or iai stu-



dents who solely practice the art are graded on the basis of their performance of these ten kata.

Grades are given in terms of *kyu* and *dan* ranks. Ranks up to first *kyu*, as long as they are recorded and sanctioned by the kendo renmei, can be given by one's own teacher. *Shodan* to *yondan* dan ranks are given at yearly tests in various prefectures. A board of the area's top-ranking instructors must agree on all decisions for promotion. Beyond *godan* (fifth dan), rankings are given at a national ranking test. Only students beyond *godan* are able to receive teaching licenses, and even at that, there are certain age and experience requirements.

The test is rigorous. Students must demonstrate knowledge of proper etiquette and kata. As they progress in ranks, they must show a mastery of a ko-ryu style as well as knowledge of the *seitei iai* kata.

Even for a *shodan* rank, students must also undergo a written examination. For *shodan*, it is as basic as correctly writing out the name of one's ko-ryu school and its founder in Japanese. As the ranks get higher, students must write about the theories of *ma-ai* (distancing), *mettsuki* (where to place one's gaze), *te no uchi* (how and why a sword is held a certain way), and so on.

Thousands of practitioners, from all walks of life, both sexes and of all ages now participate in *seitei iai*, or *iaido*, as it is called. It is considered the most disciplined, most traditional and technically most challenging of the modern budo. Because of its close relationship to ko-ryu and the arts of the samurai, *iaido* is well respected and its practitioners are expected to display great dignity and etiquette while practicing.

### Meaning of *iaido*

In one of my last training sessions at the Butokuden, I asked my teacher what the purpose of *iai* was, and the answer went something like this:

In this day and age, learning how to instantly kill someone with a sword is senseless and murderous. So the purpose of *iai* as a form of *bato* (instantly drawing and cutting with a sword) alone is not worth much. But the methods of *iai* were never restricted to simply the mechanics

of sword-drawing. In the first kata of the *seitei iai* and many other ko-ryu kata, for example, the initial drawing of the sword is done slowly. The reasoning is that one is carefully watching the opponent, sizing him up and trying to see if he is really going to attack or not. You want to give him the benefit of the doubt before committing the act of destruction.



In order to sense what the opponent will do, you must be sensitive and in tune with yourself, the opponent and the environment. So, as in the name *iai*, you are joining your spirit with those around you. Thus, besides a healthy physical discipline and a martial art, *iai* training is supposed to develop a "sixth sense" in the practitioner. *Iai* goes beyond the training hall when the student is able to use this sensitivity and strength to deal properly with relationships and people outside the *dojo*.

One teacher demonstrated this by saying: "Now, suppose you were talking to someone you trusted; you would stand a certain way and talk to him a certain way, quite openly. But what if you weren't sure about someone? He might disagree with you on something, for example. Without being paranoid, you would stand another way, and with the proper training, use things such as distancing, timing and psychology to avoid entering into a senseless conflict which might end up in a violent disagreement. If you can walk away without being hurt or hurting the other person, that's half the battle right there, although, as in *iai*, that may not always be the case."

Another instructor had even more lofty goals. Noticing that he had a small but devoted number of foreign students now training under him, he once said that *iai* is now for *sekai no heiwa*, or world peace. By having non-Japanese nationals train in this most traditional of martial arts alongside his Japanese students, he reasoned that both would come to understand a little more about each other. From that experience, friendships and understanding could grow that might supersede prejudice, racism and political and economic competition. If only nations could learn to sheathe their swords instead of pulling them out and waving them, then the lessons of *iai* would have taken root in the world.

In this scenario, the sword that once meted out death in the hands of the samurai is now a discipline that tries to give meaningful life to its modern-day practitioner. And each of us must now choose how to structure our lives, as swords of death or as swords of life. The choice is ours.