

Sword and Spirit

The Journal of Itten Dojo

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— Why Budo? —

Regardless of the times in which you live, or the circumstances of your life, success largely depends on things you can control:

- **Building a foundation of strong relationships in a community of mutual support and achievement.**
- **Forging a disciplined and positive mindset.**
- **Enhancing your physical health and capabilities.**

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The Sacred Legacy of Hayashizaki Myojin

With this issue, we begin a series of articles addressing the history and development of iaido. We'll start with a look at the shrine where the art that became iaido was first conceived. Next month, we'll dig much more deeply into what is known of the history of the founder of the iaido.

Nestled in the quiet Hayashizaki district of Murayama City, Yamagata Prefecture, Japan, the Hayashizaki Myojin Shrine—today officially known as Kumano Iairyo Shrine and commonly called the Iai Shrine—stands as a unique spiritual and martial landmark. It is the only shrine in Japan dedicated to Iaido, the art of drawing and cutting with the sword in a single fluid motion. Its history intertwines ancient Shinto origins with the legendary birth of Iaido, spanning over 1,200 years of divine movements, warrior pilgrimages, and modern preservation. This article explores the shrine's founding in the early Heian period, its multiple relocations, the pivotal role of Iaido founder Hayashizaki Jinsuke Shigenobu, and its transformation during the Meiji era—a period of national restoration that reshaped the identity of the shrine and ensured its survival to the present day.

Founding: Origins as *Kumano Gongen* (807 CE)

The story of the shrine begins in *Daido 2* (807), during the early Heian period, when Kumano Gongen—the local manifestation of the powerful Kumano deities—was first enshrined in a rock cave at *Daimyojinzawa* in *Ishikidake*, east of the Hayashizaki district. At this time, the site was known simply as *Kumano Myojin* or Kumano Shrine's inner sanctuary (*Okunoin*). This cave enshrinement reflects the syncretic Shinto-Buddhist practices of the era, where mountain ascetics and villagers sought protection from the formidable Kumano triad (often linked to *Izanagi-no-Mikoto*, *Izanami-no-Mikoto*, and *Susanoo-no-Mikoto*, the deities still honored today).

Initially a remote spiritual outpost tied to the rugged *Dewa* Province landscape, the shrine served as a village guardian. Its founding coincided with



the spread of Kumano worship across Japan, part of a broader movement of mountain reverence and divine protection for travelers and warriors. No grand halls existed yet; the deity resided in nature itself, emphasizing the raw, sacred power of the land. This humble beginning laid the foundation for what would become a martial arts pilgrimage site centuries later.

Relocations: From Cave to Village Shrine (807–1300)

Over the following centuries, the shrine underwent significant relocations that mirrored the region’s social and spiritual evolution. From the original cave at Ishikidake, Kumano Gongen was moved to the former *Arashuku* (or *Arajuku*) village near Hayashizaki, where it was temporarily housed as *Kumano-do*—a simple hall structure better suited for community worship.

The decisive relocation occurred between the *Eisho* era (1046–1053) and *Shoan 2* (1300), when the shrine was transferred to its present location in the heart of Hayashizaki. Here, it became known locally as *Hayashizaki Myojin*, functioning as the village shrine (*mura-sha*). This move, spanning the late Heian to early Kamakura periods, transformed the shrine from an isolated cave sanctuary into an accessible community center along travel routes. The name “Hayashizaki” (meaning “edge of the forest” or “forest promontory”) reflected its geographic position, while “Myojin” honored its divine status.

These relocations were not mere logistical shifts; they represented the shrine’s adaptation to growing local needs—protection from natural disasters, support for agriculture, and later, martial training. By the Muromachi period (1336–1573), the site had stabilized at its current grounds, setting the stage for its most transformative chapter.

The Divine Connection: Hayashizaki Jinsuke Shigenobu and the Birth of Iaido

Born in 1542 in Hayashizaki village (present-day Murayama) as Tamijimaru, Hayashizaki Jinsuke Shigenobu (also called Minamoto no Shigenobu) forever linked the shrine to Iaido. As a youth, after his father—a

samurai serving the lord of Tateoka Castle—was assassinated, the 14-year-old boy struggled with conventional sword training. In 1556, he undertook a 100-day seclusion at Hayashizaki Myojin Shrine, praying fervently for revenge.

Legend holds that during this intense period of meditation and ascetic practice, he entered a divine trance (*kamigakari*) and received the *Shinden* (divine transmission) of sword-drawing technique directly from the shrine’s deity. This inspiration birthed the *Shinmei Muso Ryu* that led to multiple styles of iaido, emphasizing drawing the blade from its scabbard in one seamless, lethal motion—ideal for sudden, unprepared combat.

After avenging his father in Kyoto in 1561 (at age 19), Jinsuke donated his prized long sword *Nobukuni* (nearly 100 cm) to the shrine as thanks. He continued training disciples nationwide until his disappearance around 1621. Villagers, recognizing his feats, later enshrined him as *Iai Daimyojin* in a dedicated corner of the precincts during the Edo period. The shrine thus became a pilgrimage site for swordsmen from across Dewa Province, including practitioners of *Hayashizaki Shinmuso Ryu* (*Shinjo* domain) and *Hayashizaki Tamiya Ryu* (*Shonai* domain). Edo-era visitors left offerings of swords, *ema* (plaques), mirrors, and stone monuments—many still visible today.



Our *ema*, a watercolor depiction of the interior of Itten Dojo painted by Rosanne Wolfe, joins the more conventional offerings in the display hall by the shrine.



Restoration and Transformation in the Meiji Era (1868–1877)

The Meiji Restoration (1868 onward) brought sweeping changes to Shinto institutions nationwide, separating them from Buddhism and standardizing shrine rankings. For Hayashizaki Myojin, this era marked its formal restoration and modernization. In the early Meiji years, the original Hayashizaki Myojin (Kumano Shrine) was merged with the Iai Daimyojin enshrinement. This consolidation reflected the government’s push to streamline shrines while preserving local martial and spiritual heritage.

In Meiji 10 (1877), the unified site was officially registered with the Shrine Agency under the name *Kumano Iai Ryo Jinja*, literally “Kumano Sword-Drawing Twin Shrine.” The merger preserved both the ancient Kumano deities and the Iaido founder’s spirit, ensuring the site’s survival amid rapid modernization. No major physical demolitions occurred; instead, the shrine was “restored” in status—elevated from a humble village shrine to a recognized religious entity with national significance.

This Meiji-era reorganization prevented the fate of many lesser shrines and integrated Iaido’s legacy into Japan’s modern identity. Annual dedication performances of Iaido began drawing practitioners from across the country, a tradition that continues. The local elementary school even maintains an Iaido club, performing at the National All-Ryu Iaido Cherry Blossom Tournament each June.



An interior view of the Iai Shrine, as it appears today.

Enduring Significance Today

Today, Kumano Iaiyō Shrine remains a living testament to Japan’s martial-spiritual heritage. Visitors can experience Iaido demonstrations, view historical offerings including armor and swords, and feel the presence of Jinsuke’s spirit amid the wooden halls and lanterns inscribed with 居合神社.

Even more significantly, visitors may be invited—as members of Itten Dojo were last October—to train with the Iaido students at the Shinbukan Dojo, the affiliated dojo teaching Muso Shinden Ryu Iaido, located on the grounds of the shrine.

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From its founding in a remote cave, multiple significant relocations that anchored the shrine in community life, and Meiji-era restoration, Hayashizaki Myojin has endured across 1,200 years. More than simply a historical site, the shrine embodies the essence of Iaido: precise action born from stillness and divine inspiration.

For martial artists and pilgrims alike, a visit to this Yamagata treasure offers not just a glimpse of history, but the chance to experience a deep connection to Japan’s sword-soul. I came away from a special prayer and blessing ceremony conducted for Itten Dojo by the chief priest of the shrine with a profoundly altered (though still superficial) perspective on Shinto and native Japanese spirituality. We plan to return to the shrine in 2027. 🍵



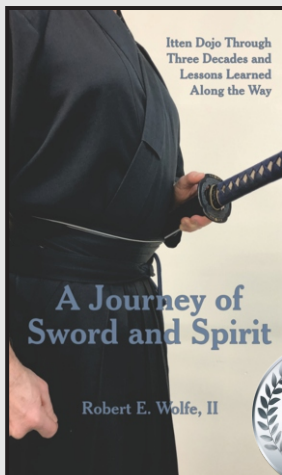
The chief priest during the prayer and blessing ceremony.



Robert Wolfe, chief instructor of Itten Dojo, began martial arts training in 1975 while attending Bucknell University, where he earned a degree in Japanese Studies. Mr. Wolfe has taught since 1985, and founded Itten Dojo in 1992. His articles on martial arts have been featured in publications such as the *Journal of Asian Martial Arts*, *Bugeisha*, *Aikido Today Magazine*, *Inside Karate*, *Martial Arts Training*, and *Martial Arts Professional*. He is the author of two books: *A Journey of Sword and Spirit — Itten Dojo Through Three Decades and Lessons Learned Along the Way* and *Budo Renaissance Man — The Martial Arts Journey of Nicklaus Suino*, and a 2025 inductee to the PA Karate Hall of Fame.



Available from Amazon.com



A Journey of Sword and Spirit

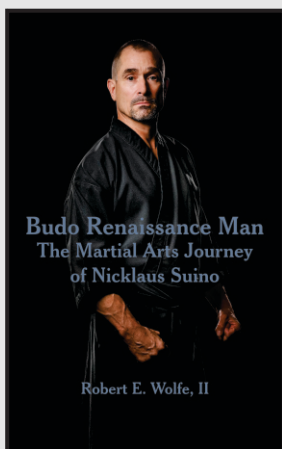
“In an age that has largely lost touch with many of the traditional values that built the world we all currently inhabit, this work (and the dojo from which it sprang) serve as a welcome oasis of wisdom, strength, and serenity.”



Winner of Second Place in the Fall 2025 BookFest® Awards, in the category of Nonfiction-Memoirs-Transformational



ŌKAMI
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Budo Renaissance Man

“For more than three decades, thousands of people have become more centered, happier, and more successful with Nicklaus Suino’s guidance. Suino has been called ‘one of the leading martial arts instructors in North America,’ but his influence radiates far beyond the dojo. This concise biography of Suino presents a profile of an inspirational leader whose accomplishments in martial arts were a springboard to success as an author, attorney, entrepreneur, life coach, husband, and father.”

