Sword and Spirit

The Journal of Itten Dojo November 2026



— 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.

These are exactly the benefits membership in an authentic dojo provides.

Copyright 2026 Itten Dojo, Inc.
701 W Simpson Street, Suite C
Mechanicsburg, PA 17055-3716
www.ittendojo.org

Yoshioka Soryu

and the Nara Ryu Shin Kan

In the landscape of contemporary Muso Jikiden Eishin-ryu (無双直伝英信流) practice, where national federations, standardized seitei iai, and the proliferation of menkyo kaiden have reshaped transmission since the reforms of Oe Masaji (1852–1927), the Nara Ryu Shin Kan (奈良龍心館) stands as a deliberate counterpoint. Founded by Yoshioka Soryu (吉岡早龍, 1915–2018), this independent dojo in Nara Prefecture embodies a return to the classical model of loyalty to teacher and lineage rather than organizational affiliation. Its emphasis on precise body alignment, regular *tameshigiri* (test cutting), and decades of dedicatory *embu* (demonstrations) at Kasuga Taisha and Yasaka Shrine offers a window into how one of the great iai traditions continues to be cultivated outside the mainstream currents of postwar Japanese budo.

Muso Jikiden Eishin-ryu traces its origins to the late sixteenth-century innovations of Hayashizaki Jinsuke Minamoto no Shigenobu, conventionally regarded as the founder of formalized iai. The school's name, however, honors its seventh headmaster, Hasegawa Chikaranosuke Hidenobu (Eishin), who adapted earlier methods—originally developed for the longer tachi worn edge-down—to the shorter katana worn edge-up through the obi. This shift produced the characteristic tatehiza techniques that remain central to the Chuden curriculum.

By the early Edo period the art had entered the Tosa domain (modern Kochi), where it became an otome-ryu of the Yamauchi retainers. After the death of the eleventh headmaster Oguro Motoemon Kiyokatsu, the line divided into the Tanimura-ha (which developed into the modern Muso Jikiden Eishin-ryu) and the Shimomura-ha (which, through Nakayama Hakudo, became Muso Shinden-ryu). Oe Masaji, the seventeenth headmaster, studied both branches, rationalized a curriculum that had grown to well over a hundred *waza* (techniques) into the familiar Shoden (Omori-ryu seiza), Chuden (Hasegawa tatehiza), and Okuden (sitting and standing) sets, and taught publicly through the Dai Nippon Butokukai. After his death without a single designated successor, multiple lines—Hokiyama, Masaoka, Yamauchi,

and others—emerged from his senior students, each claiming legitimacy through menkyo kaiden.

Yoshioka Soryu's place in this history is that of a dedicated local transmitter rather than a national *soke* (headmaster). Born in 1915, he trained under Kageyama Danshi, a direct student of the twentieth headmaster Kono Hyakuren (河野百錬, 1899–1974) of the Hokiyama line. This connection placed him within a lineage that had received the full transmission from Oe through Hokiyama Namio and Fukui Harumasa. Yoshioka attained Hanshi, Eighth-dan in the All Japan Iaido Federation (Zen Nihon Iaido Renmei). In 2004 he was granted Ninth-dan and menkyo kaiden by the Japan Iaido Federation (Nihon Iaido Renmei), along with recognition of the Kongen no Maki. In 1981, already in his mid-sixties, he built a dojo attached to his home in a residential neighborhood roughly ten minutes 'walk from Kintetsu Gakuenmae Station in Nara. By 2011 the dojo had marked its thirtieth anniversary. He continued to teach into advanced age; extant video footage from when he was approximately seventy-three shows a practitioner whose movements are notable for spinal alignment in rei, simultaneous hand and foot action in nukitsuke, and an absence of residual tension after makko-uchi. Observers familiar with the school have remarked on the controlled, unforced quality of his iai—qualities that suggest long attention to the internal economy of the waza rather than external display.

The Nara Ryu Shin Kan's present orientation reflects a conscious choice to step outside federation structures. As the dojo materials state, the traditional pattern of Japanese koryu was loyalty to the teacher and the school rather than to a national or international organization. After periods of affiliation with both the All Japan Iaido Federation and the Japan Iaido Federation, the dojo now maintains no organizational membership. Practice centers on the classical Muso Jikiden Eishin-ryu curriculum, including the partnered kumitachi sets such as Tachi Uchi no Kurai. Monthly or bi-monthly tameshigiri with live blades is incorporated specifically to refine *maai* (interval in distance and time), *hasuji* (trajectory), and the physical consequences of the forms—an approach that has not always been uncontroversial within the school. In the early 1990s a student who later founded an independent line reported internal resistance at the Ryu Shin Kan to an emphasis on decisive cutting; he left of his own accord to avoid placing his teacher in an awkward position.



30th Anniversary of the Nara Ryu Shin Kan. Yoshioka Sensei is seated fourth from the right.

The current dojo, however, treats test cutting as an essential complement to forms practice, warning that cutting without attention to body handling and etiquette produces little of value, while pure form work without the feedback of the live blade can leave essential principles untested.

A distinctive public expression of the dojo's practice has been its continuous dedicatory embu at two of Japan's most venerable shrines. For more than forty years the Nara Ryu Shin Kan has performed annually in June at Kyoto's Yasaka Shrine and in September at Nara's Kasuga Taisha. These outdoor demonstrations, conducted in front of the shrine halls before ordinary worshippers, are not open to just any group; the dojo's long relationship with these shrines is itself a mark of recognition. Participants have included instructors such as Saito Chiyoko and Kusano Kiyoshi Shihan, sometimes demonstrating paired Tachi Uchi. The act of offering a year's training to the *kami* (deity) is described by the dojo as both purifying and invigorating—an older religious dimension of budo that has largely receded from many modern dojo calendars.

The quiet independence of the Nara Ryu Shin Kan has also drawn the attention of practitioners beyond Japan who seek direct engagement with classical transmission. Among those who have trained at the dojo, in this case since 2010, is Reg Sakamoto, a Toronto-based student of several koryu. Sakamoto Sensei describes Yoshioka Sensei as "a quintessential *Kansai Jin* who spoke in rapid fire *Kansai Ben*. He was inviting, playful, and could be extremely severe in his criticism."

Sakamoto has long been active in Hozoin-ryu Takada-ha *sojutsu* (spearmanship) and Yamato-ha Hyoho Niten Ichi-ryu (the two-sword methods associated with Miyamoto Musashi), documenting training, tests, and embu through a personal YouTube channel and participating in discussions of koryu principles, the distinction between form and function, and the practical application of budo outside the dojo. In podcast conversations he has emphasized *shu-ha-ri** and the need for techniques to retain utility rather than remaining purely formal. Such an approach aligns with the Nara Ryu Shin Kan's own insistence on testing forms through tameshigiri and on loyalty to sensei rather than to organization. His training there forms part of the wider pattern by which individual Western practitioners have sought out independent Japanese dojos to experience Muso Jikiden Eishin-ryu closer to its pre-federation character.

*** Shu-ha-ri is the budo concept of the process of learning things over time. Shu is to keep; ha is to break; ri is to separate.**



Sakamoto Sensei, standing center at the rear, at his first Hatsu-geiko (初稽古, the first training of the New Year) with Nara Ryu Shin Kan.

In the broader context of postwar iai, the Nara Ryu Shin Kan illustrates a recurring tension. Oe Masaji's decision to teach publicly and to rationalize the curriculum made Eishin-ryu accessible far beyond the former Tosa retainers, but it also set in motion the multiplication of lines that continues today. Yoshioka's path—from direct study under a student of Kono Hyakuren, through high federation ranks, to the founding of a private dojo that ultimately withdrew from organizational life—represents one coherent response to that fragmentation.

The emphasis on the Kongen no Maki, on regular test cutting, and on the ritual of shrine embu keeps the art tethered to both its technical and its cultural roots. At the same time, the dojo's independence means that its particular expression of the waza remains tied to the judgment of successive teachers rather than to a central standardizing body. Practitioners such as Sakamoto further illustrate how such independent dojo continue to serve as points of transmission for those willing to travel and train under the classical model of personal allegiance.

For practitioners outside Japan, the example is instructive. The existence of such a dojo reminds us that the living transmission of Muso Jikiden Eishin-ryu has never been solely the property of the most visible soke lines or the largest federations. In the residential streets of Nara, within walking distance of the ancient capital's deer park and its great shrine, a teacher who had already reached advanced age when he established his dojo continued to refine and pass on an art whose central principle remains the capacity to respond immediately and appropriately from a state of readiness. Yoshioka Soryu died in 2018 at the age of 103, having spent the greater part of a long life inside that principle. The Nara Ryu Shin Kan continues as one of the more quiet, more localized expressions of the same tradition.

Notes

1. Overview of Muso Jikiden Eishin-ryu history, lineage divisions after Oe Masaji, and the role of Hasegawa Eishin drawn from standard accounts including the English Wikipedia entry "Muso Jikiden Eishin-ryu" and related lineage summaries. See also discussions of the Tanimura-ha / Shimomura-ha split and Oe's curriculum reforms.
2. Nara Ryu Shin Kan dojo materials (sites.google.com/view/nararyusinkan/), "About This Dojo" section: founding of the attached dojo in 1981, location near Kintetsu Gakuenmae, instruction under the line of Kono Hyakuren via Kageyama Danshi, Hanshi, 8-dan (All Japan Iaido Federation), 9-dan and menkyo kaiden (Japan Iaido Federation, 2004), and decision to remain unaffiliated. Parallel description in iai-dojo.jp listing for 奈良龍心館.
3. YouTube video description and commentary for "Yoshioka Soryu - Muso Jikiden Eishin Ryu Iai Heiho" (and related uploads): birth 1915, death 2018, 9th-dan Hanshi, Kongen no Maki, performance at approximately age 73; observer comments on spinal alignment, nukitsuke timing, and residual tension.
4. Isao Machii's account of training at the Ryu Shin Kan under Yoshioka Soryu beginning around 1993, internal disagreements concerning emphasis on tameshigiri, voluntary departure, and the dojo's later shift between federations. See "修心流居合術兵法誕生の経緯" series on isao-machii.org and related biographical notes.
5. Nara Ryu Shin Kan "奉納演武" page: annual dedicatory performances at Yasaka Shrine (June) and Kasuga Taisha (September) for more than forty years; named instructors; rationale for regular tameshigiri.
6. Reg Sakamoto's public activity in Toronto koryu circles (Hozoin-ryu Takada-ha, Yamato-ha Hyoho Niten Ichi-ryu), YouTube channel documenting training and tests, and podcast discussions of koryu principles (e.g., Modern Aikidoist Podcast, Ep. 127).

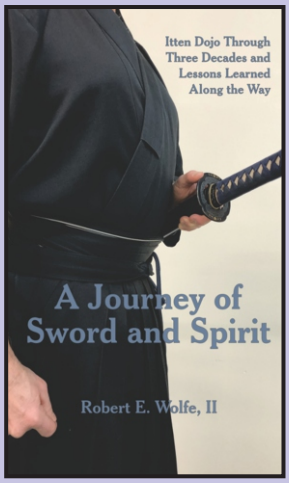


Sakamoto Sensei's Kongen no Maki (Scroll of the Source) documenting receipt of the complete transmission of the ryu.

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.



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."

"It's a journey to integrity and truth; Mr. Wolfe's truth and the truth of Itten Dojo. It's a refreshing read in it's honesty...I recommend those on a journey to integrity and truth read it as well."

"A joyous read! Wolfe's writing skills result in a textual clarity of rich, engaging content useful to all martial artists. His quest to continually evolve and improve over the decades will deeply resonate with serious practitioners. While recording a vital evolution of Japanese budo in the USA, the text illuminates methods for progressing in a martial discipline fostered by an appropriate attitude. Wolfe's story inspires by example."

Available on Amazon in hardcover, paperback, and Kindle editions.

ŌKAMI
Publications

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