

Sword and Spirit

The eJournal of Itten Dojo

September 2021



— 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 a dojo provides.

Copyright 2021 Itten Dojo, Inc.
701 W Simpson Street, Suite C
Mechanicsburg, PA 17055-3716
www.ittendojo.org

Long Stance Stepping

Muso Jikiden Eishin-ryu iaido is an art of incredible depth and complexity and, as we're discovering, an absolutely ideal training paradigm for developing certain attributes often associated with "internal" martial arts: very fine control of specific body alignment and structure, advanced means of sourcing and applying power, highly defined methods of moving, and sophisticated integration of breath. What is unique about the approach of Nicklaus Suino Sensei to instructing Eishin-ryu iaido is his creation of a series of stepping and bokken drills that greatly enhance the ability of neophyte students to grasp the fundamentals of the art while simultaneously providing advanced students a laboratory in which to experiment and expand their understanding. Moreover, the drills provide a rigorous workout that quickly develops the required leg and core strength needed to execute the *waza* (techniques) of Eishin-ryu—multiple members of our iaido-kai have reported elimination of previous, chronic knee pain after the first few weeks of training.

In his book, *Practice Drills for Japanese Swordsmanship*, Suino Sensei details 21 solo exercises; some are unarmed patterns focusing on movement skills, while others include use of a *bokken* (wooden sword) and combine movement with proper cutting. There are also 14 two-person exercises utilizing bokken that are designed to develop "distancing, timing, angles, and extension,"¹ leading eventually to free sparring with bokken (another aspect of the Suino approach not typically seen in schools of iaido). This article will explore just one drill, "Long Stance Forward Stepping," and present some of the lessons we've learned and insights we've discovered in the past year of training.

Between them, the authors have about 75 years of combined martial arts experience—much of it in swordsmanship (including another line of Eishin-ryu) and other, Japanese weapons arts—but we're constantly astonished by how much in this training is new to us. The benefits we're now deriving and the fresh understandings we're acquiring explain our enthusiasm for Suino Sensei's approach to iaido.



Several Important *Kuden*

Kuden are oral teachings, in this case verbal reminders of critical components applicable across a range of *kamae* (postures, or stances).

“Bow and Arrow Upper Body.” With the points of the hips and shoulders in alignment, the body is arched forward. This structure is maintained throughout most body configurations and movements, and has significant implications for storing and releasing power.

“Chin on a Shelf.” The head is held as though the chin were resting on a horizontal shelf, maintaining proper spinal alignment and aiding balance. Confident; not arrogant.

“Show the Thumbnails.” From the shoulders, rotate the arms so that the nails of the thumbs face directly forward. This will roll the shoulders back, opening the chest, and assuring proper posture.

“Horizontal Movement.” When moving, unless the movement specifically involves rising or lowering, the level of the hips and shoulders should stay consistent, with no dip or bounce.

Iaigoshi—the “Long Stance”

Iaigoshi comes in two varieties, the “long stance” (primarily utilized with vertical cuts), and the “open long stance” (primarily utilized with angled cuts). In the long stance, the hips and shoulders are square to the front, the feet are shoulder-width apart, and about twice shoulder-width front to back (Figure 1). The center lines of the feet are aligned straight ahead; the front foot is flat while the rear foot is heel-up, vertically (a very common error is allowing the rear heel to relax inward, off the vertical alignment—Figure 2). An easy way to determine the correct depth for the long stance is to assume *chugoshi* (literally, “middle-hip,” or the “h-stance” in Suino Sensei’s parlance—Figure 3). Note that the lower lead leg and upper rear leg are vertical. Without shifting the feet, press the rear leg back to raise the body, to the point the rear leg is all but locked-out.

The open long stance is assumed at the same depth, but the rear foot is flat and the foot, along with the hips and shoulders, is aligned on a 45-degree angle (Figure 4).



Long Stance — Forward Stepping

Ayumi-ashi is normal walking, in which the feet pass each other in an alternating manner. “Normal,” but not simple, especially not in the trained movement pattern of Eishin-ryu. From a right-leg-forward long stance, Suino Sensei describes the exercise as follows:

Slide the left foot forward on the ball of the foot until it is about two inches further back than the right foot, which is flat on the floor. The knees must remain bent far enough during this process to keep the hips from rising during the step.

Continue to slide the left foot forward to assume the long stance again, with the checkpoints the same as the right side stance, above. Pay strict attention to the position of the body during this step; a common mistake is to lean forward during this stepping process. To develop balance and power during this step, focus on pushing off the back foot to drive the hips forward. Control the amount of weight on each foot so that the forward foot may slide, and avoid dropping the majority of the body's weight onto the forward leg. Do not turn the back heel inward; keep is pointed straight back.²

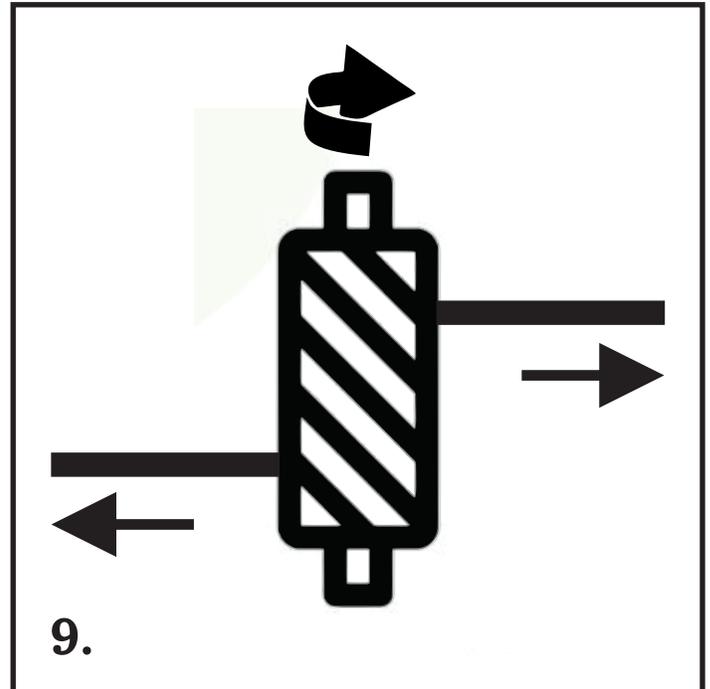
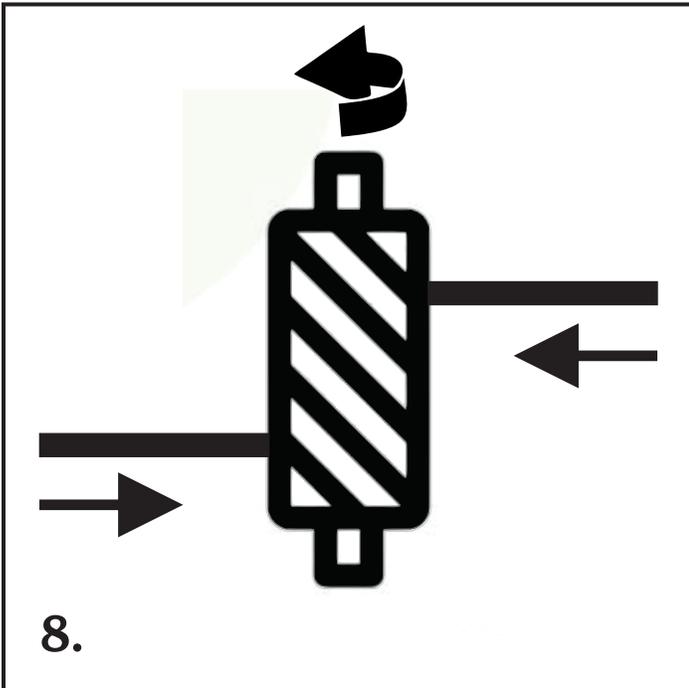
This sequence is illustrated in Figures 5 through 7.

Things We’re Learning (So Far)

In addition to meeting in person with Suino Sensei multiple times per year, at our dojo or in Michigan at his Japanese Martial Arts Center, we enjoy monthly online sessions that have proven to be immensely valuable. During one such session, Sensei instructed us to try a simple, stationary exercise. While in a long stance, we were directed to exert muscular force outward, simultaneously through both legs, and then draw simultaneously inward toward our centers, all the while without shifting the alignment of the hips and shoulders. We understood this to be a key to movement in the long stance, and the exercise inspired Mr. Orcutt to use the metaphor of a spindle when instructing juniors.

In place of the vertical axis of the body running through the center of mass, imagine the axis of a spindle with a stout cord wound around it, with both ends of the cord





free. Rotated in one direction, the ends of the cord are drawn in (Figure 8); rotated the opposite direction, the ends of the cord are pushed out (Figure 9). The interesting thing about this metaphor is the fact in physical application in either stationary or stepping drills, the rotation of the “spindle” must be purely mental, because the square-to-the-front alignment of the hips and shoulders must not change. Nevertheless, the metaphor works in helping new students create equally opposing forces, outward from or inward toward their centers.

Sensei’s stationary exercise and Mr. Orcutt’s metaphor have greatly assisted the most experienced members of our iaido-kai in overcoming a “legacy” movement paradigm. One consistent (and highly-trained) factor in the experience of most of us across multiple martial arts has been moving with what can be called “C-steps,” moving the feet in arcs rather than in straight lines. The intent is to ensure the feet transition nearly directly under the center of mass of the body when stepping, and body weight can to varying degrees shift between the feet in order to facilitate movement.

In Eishin-ryu, stepping is very linear, with precise control of nearly-even weighting of the feet. This has been very challenging for many of us to figure out and incorporate to drills and waza, the greatest difficulty being

accomplishing linear steps without any consequent sideways leaning or dipping/bobbing. But once a basic understanding has been gained, movement even over the surface of the tatami-style mats in our dojo is greatly enhanced.

Another layer of understanding involves the contact of the feet with the mat, the “grip” of the toes in engaging the surface, and degree/direction of push and/or pull to generate and control movement. There is also the matter of sequencing properly component portions of all these factors to achieve optimal efficiency and effectiveness. And we can’t forget maintaining the correct “frame” of hips and shoulders and the “bow and arrow upper body.”

Conclusion

In a superficial examination, Suino Sensei’s stepping drills might appear simple. More accurately, the drills are deceptively deep. Only after sufficient, dedicated practice over an extended period of time will the true value of the drills begin to be revealed. Once the student has achieved consistent ability to execute the drills with correct, fundamental form, the door opens to extensive opportunities for experimentation and an unending process of inward examination in pursuit of the highest ideals of iaido. 🌀

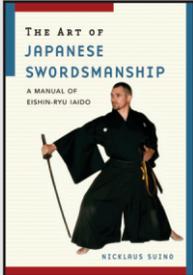


Notes

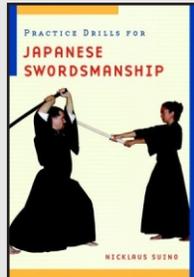
1. Nicklaus Suino, *Practice Drills for Japanese Swordsmanship*, (Boulder: Weatherhill, 2008), 55.

2. *Ibid.*, 18–19.

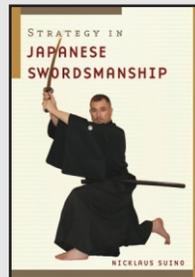
Suino Sensei's Essential Library for Iaido — Available from Amazon and Other Booksellers



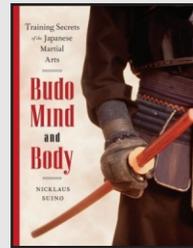
The Art of Japanese Swordsmanship — A Manual of Eishin-ryu Iaido



Practice Drills for Japanese Swordsmanship



Strategy in Japanese Swordsmanship



Budo Mind and Body

A member of Itten Dojo since 2002, Jevin Orcutt started training in martial arts in 1985, holds black-belt grades in Tae Kwon Do and aikido, and is a licensed instructor of Taikyoku Budo. He has been training in Japanese swordsmanship for more than 10 years and cross trains in Brazilian jujutsu. Mr. Orcutt holds a B.A. in history from Shippensburg University and works for a nonprofit organization supporting a Smithsonian-affiliated museum.



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 Bujin*, *Budo Shinbun*, the *Journal of Asian Martial Arts*, *Bugeisha*, *Aikido Today Magazine*, *Inside Karate*, *Martial Arts Training*, and *Martial Arts Professional*.

