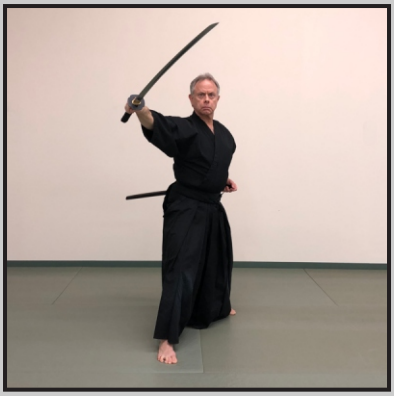
Sword and Spirit

The eJournal of Itten Dojo December 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.

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Why Iaido?

In the June 2018 issue of this journal, I presented an essay titled, "21st Century Kenjutsu," which discussed the significant and wide range of practical benefits to be derived by training in the seemingly anachronistic, even obsolete art of combative Japanese swordsmanship. Now that our kenjutsu-kai is one of the very few groups in the world authorized by the headquarters dojo in Japan to offer authentic training in Ono-ha Itto-ryu, the potential benefits to be gained are even greater. But, what about iaido, the other legitimate, *koryu* (old school) form of Japanese swordsmanship practiced at Itten Dojo? Compared to kenjutsu, the benefits are if anything less obvious. The reality, though, is the benefits of iaido are equally broad and deep—similar in some ways and different in others, but with unique attributes that can make iaido an ideal endeavor for persons that might otherwise never have considered training in martial arts.

Our iaido-kai trains in Muso Jikiden Eishin-ryu, an almost 450-year-old tradition and the source of most extant styles of iaido. We're especially fortunate to be studying under the guidance of Nicklaus Suino Sensei, Director of Training at the Japanese Martial Arts Center in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Suino Sensei was a personal student of Yamaguchi Katsuo, considered by many to be one of the greatest swordsmen of his generation. While living in Japan and training daily with Yamaguchi Sensei, Suino Sensei was All-Tokyo Champion for four consecutive years between 1989 and 1992, competing against hundreds of Japanese in their native art of iaido. He's written four books on Japanese martial arts and consults internationally on strategies for personal and professional growth using the principles of swordsmanship. Even more importantly from our perspective, Suino Sensei and his senior assistants at JMAC have developed a proprietary method of training in this ancient art that bestows on its modern practitioners challenges, opportunities, and insights that guarantee, with proper attitude and dedication, a transformative experience.

For those not familiar with iaido, this art of drawing the Japanese sword to an immediate, defensive technique, began as a subset of kenjutsu. The solo forms being practiced are codified answers to the problem of surprise attacks,

answers originally developed by Japanese warriors that experienced (and survived) such assaults. According to Kim Taylor, a prominent Canadian instructor of iaido, kenjutsu, and jodo, the term "iai" is derived from the phrase. "*tsune ni itte kyu ni awasu*." The meaning of this phrase is:

> "Always, whatever you are doing, whether sleeping, walking, running, or sitting (*tsune ni*)" and "wherever you are (*itte, iru*)" you must "be ready or be prepared to recreate harmony or balance (*awasu*)." *Iai* comes from *itte* and *awasu* and is a short way of remembering this phrase.[1]

It should be apparent that, once swords are drawn, to "recreate harmony or balance" is most likely a matter of cutting down an enemy. And, in fact, all but one of the more than 70 forms in Eishin-ryu involve a lethal resolution.[2] But not necessarily immediately. In many of the forms the draw is executed in such a way as to provide the "attacker" a moment to reconsider, while still assuring the ultimate victory of the "defender." This philosophical aspect is a reflection of the concept of *katsujin-no-ken* (the sword that gives life) and distinguishes iaido from schools of iaijutsu in which the overriding goal typically is putting steel into an enemy as quickly as possible. Suino Sensei elaborates on the philosophical aspect:

> In Japanese swordsmanship our highest goal is expressed in the phrase *saya no uchi* or *saya no uchi no kachi*, which means "victory with the sword still in the scabbard." It is an exhortation to the swordsperson to recognize that physical combat is a last resort, and a reminder that a master strategist will find a way to win without fighting.[3]

The philosophical foundation of iaido is one of the most important considerations for individuals that would like to train in martial arts but have no interest in overtly combative practice or direct competitions. The philosophy manifests as well in the *reishiki*, the ceremonial etiquette that is a very major focus of training.

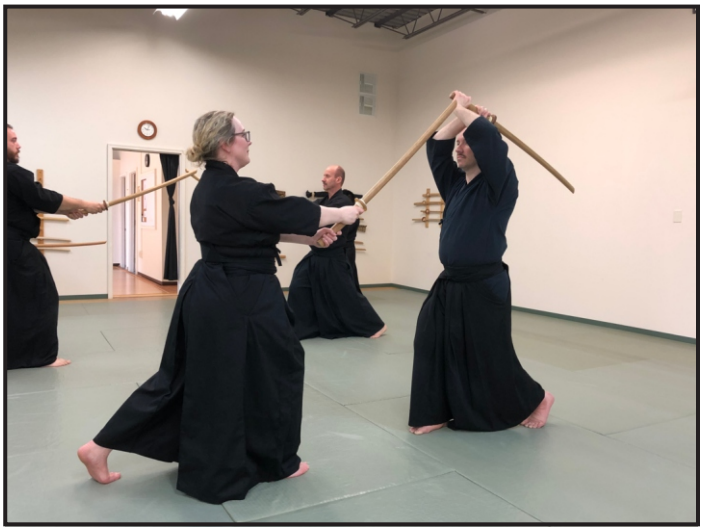
It is in the *kihon*, the physical fundamentals of the Suino Sensei's approach to iaido that the strengths of the JMAC methodology become most apparent. Not part of the traditional curriculum, Suino Sensei's stepping and bokken drills nonetheless are built from very specific, physical components of heritage Eishin-ryu, distilled and amplified to illuminate for the sword student proper posture, body structure, generation and application of power, and correct form—and provide the tools/exercises to enable the student to achieve those ideals. An example of just one of the drills, "Long Stance Stepping," was presented in the September 2021 issue of this journal.

The stepping drills in particular have proven to hold very personal significance for me. Early in 2021, I suffered a torn medial meniscus in my left knee (not from iaido, by the way). The tear was at the root of the meniscus which, I was informed, is about the worst place for such an injury. I undertook the recommended physical therapy but it quickly became apparent that surgical repair would be required. The options were an extensive procedure that would have wired everything back into position but would have entailed a more than six-month recovery and promised only mixed results at best, or an arthroscopic procedure that would clean things up and (hopefully) be good enough. I chose the latter option. Two weeks post-surgery, I was told I could plan to do, within reason, whatever was comfortable. Very quickly, I resumed doing the stepping and bokken drills, at least in a limited range of motion.

At the six-week, follow-up appointment with my surgeon, we discussed whether I should start another round of physical therapy. I showed her what I was able to do, in both range of motion and strength, and her reaction was, "Wow. You're already way ahead of the game. Just keep doing what you're doing." Looking back, I think the "Seiza: Stepping In and Out" drill—sitting down, Japanese-style, and then rising again in a strictly-defined sequence—contributed the most toward my recovery. Detailed instructions can be found in Suino Sensei's *Practice Drills for Japanese Swordsmanship*. It wasn't my favorite drill prior to my injury, but now I love it. It's amazing how delightful an uncomfortable and physically challenging exercise can be, when one is simply grateful to be able to do it!

The solo bokken drills take many of the stepping sequences and add the weapon (these could also be practiced with an iaito rather than a bokken). Now, in addition to having to deal with configuration of the body,

students must incorporate all the aspects that define proper cutting, as well as a significant element of timing. The solo drills lay the foundation for the paired bokken drills...



...which in turn lay the foundation for eventual bokken fencing, free-sparring with wooden swords, something that is very unusual to see in schools of iaido, but that ultimately takes training from the realm of pretend to actual application and results in the creation of much more complete swordsmen and women.

Another of the unique and overwhelmingly important exercises in the JMAC repertoire is the "Big Five," an inexhaustible exploration of the major components of many Eishin-ryu *waza* (techniques—in Eishin-ryu, solo forms are referred to as waza rather than kata). The term "inexhaustible" applies because although the drill is relatively simple in its earliest iteration, as the student becomes more experienced and layers of complexity are

introduced, the elements demanding exacting attention to detail multiply rapidly. The exercise focuses on the following, five components, and is practiced standing in place, with the feet a bit wider than shoulder-width, and the knees flexed:

1. *Nukitsuke* (Drawing the sword to a horizontal cut)
2. *Furikaburi* (Swinging the sword up, through a defensive transition, in preparation to cut)
3. *Kiri-oroshi* (A vertical cut, considered the most difficult cut to execute entirely properly)
4. *O-chiburi* (Symbolically removing blood from the blade)
5. *Noto* (Sheathing the sword)

Initially, the exercise is performed with attention to the fundamental movements, then with fundamental movements and the proper sequencing of breathing (generally, inhaling on "opening" movements; exhaling on "closing" movements), and then with fundamental movements, proper breathing, and appropriate cadencing of the movements. There are many layers of focus beyond those basic three.

On Suino Sensei's *Permission* website, there's an excellent, free video addressing the Big Five. The video was shot using Zoom, so the image is backwards, but I've found this to be a real asset: You can train along with the video and it's like looking in the mirror, making imitating and correcting much easier. Access the video at:

https://permission.thinkific.com/courses/take/jmac-iaido-the-big-five/lessons/20889138-the-big-five

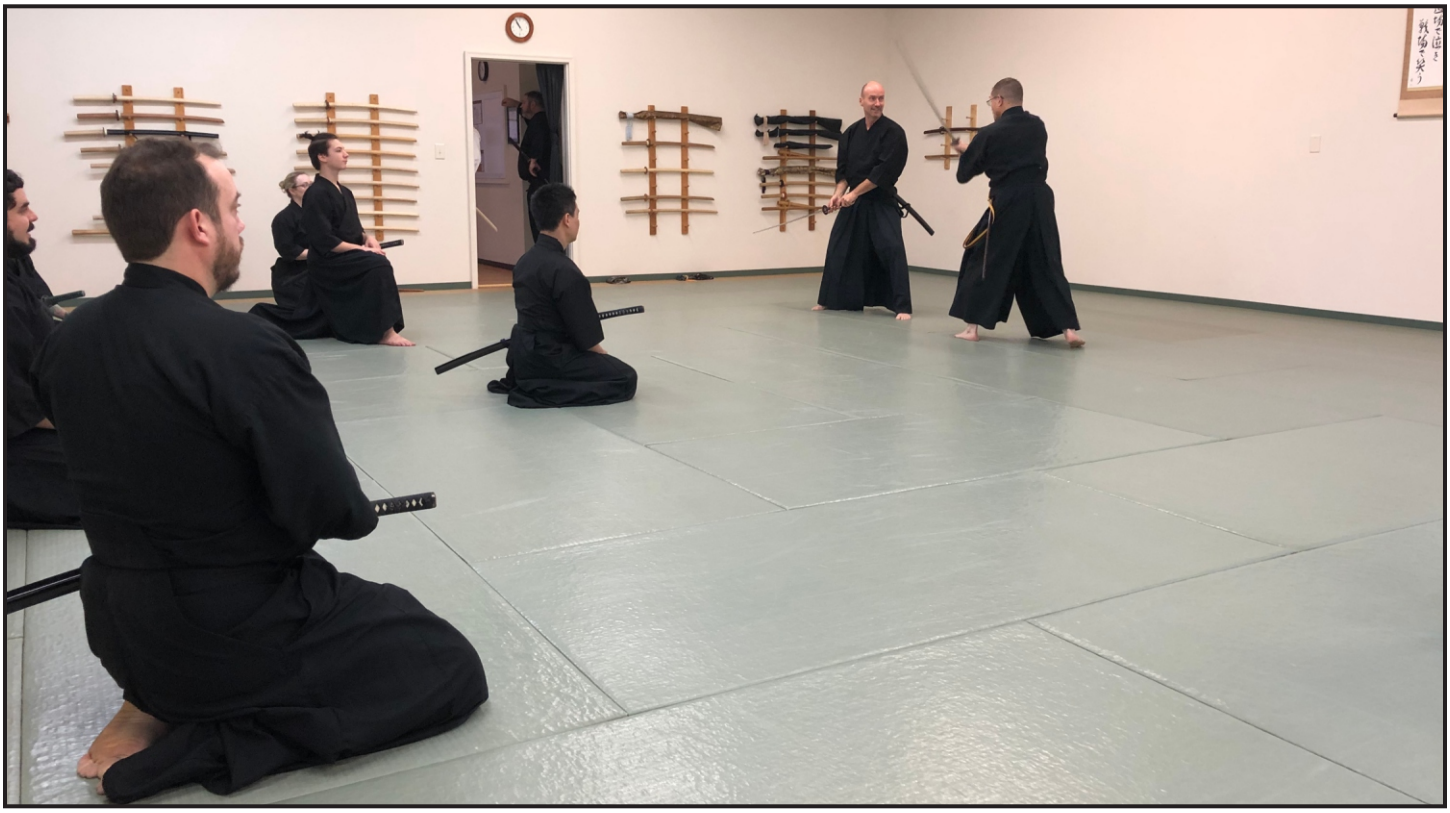
The largest portion of training time is devoted to the sets of waza that comprise the overall, formal curriculum of Eishin-ryu. Suino Sensei's *The Art of Japanese Swordsmanship* is the master-text describing the solo forms, and there are multiple reference videos available on the *Permission* website. Historically, the creation of the various sets is known, both in terms of the dates of creation and the persons responsible, in a range from the late 1500s to early 1900s. Even at the introductory levels, I have discovered the solo forms in the line of Eishin-ryu we're privileged to study with Suino Sensei are far more nuanced and richer than any other tradition of iaido I (along with several other senior members of Itten Dojo) have experienced. Our experience has been gained over decades and has included training in a modern, classically-styled system of kenjutsu and iaijutsu, in a different line of Eishin-ryu, and in the All-Japan Kendo Federation standard iaido forms.

The Eishin-ryu waza are also pure fun. The forms are not easy, and can in fact be pretty frustrating, but for anyone able to enjoy the journey instead of focusing on the destination, training is a joy. There's nothing quite like hitting a just-so cut and listening to the searing slice of the blade through the air. That sound, or the lack thereof, is an immediate source of feedback during every moment of training. Because of the ready availability of such feedback, combined with the way focus on maintaining a proper *tenouchi* (the grip on the hilt of the sword) tends to help tie things together, I've noticed beginners training in the Suino methodology are developing key aspects of proper form far more quickly than I've seen to be the case in other martial arts. Including other forms of swordsmanship.

There are still more components to training within the JMAC approach to iaido, including the traditional sets of paired, combative kata—*Tachiuchi no Kurai* and *Tsumeai no Kurai*—along with requirements for *tameshigiri* (test-cutting). Tameshigiri involves the use of a *shinken*, a "live," sharpened steel katana to cut targets consisting of rolled, straw mats. The mats are soaked overnight and then drained and bound, and provide a resistance closely similar to flesh. Given the mystique associated with Japanese swords, many people might assume cutting a straw mat to be simple, but such is absolutely not the case. Japanese swords *are* incredibly strong—in very exact planes and lines. I've seen someone transform a katana into an "L-shaped" club, just by slightly (and sloppily) altering the trajectory of his cut while midway through the target. Cutting cleanly, without damaging a blade, is a very demanding and highly technical endeavor, and quickly separates the swordsmen and women from the wannabes. Suino Sensei's emphasis on tameshigiri is another factor ensuring JMAC and Itten Dojo iaido students are based in reality rather than fantasy. And after achieving black-belt rank, students are permitted to use shinken in their own practice of the solo waza.

I hope this overview has provided you some insights to the way we train in iaido. Now I want to address the "Why?" by sharing my enthusiasm for the Suino/JMAC methodology and listing the very personal benefits I have already experienced. Bear in mind, please, that I have at this point more than 45 years of intense and in-depth training in both *gendai* (modern) and koryu budo, and multiple black-belts. If training in this methodology can be so fresh and empowering for me, with my background, just imagine what it can mean for you.

Let's start with the more purely physical lessons. Soon after I'd become comfortable with the basic patterns of the stepping drills, I realized what an incredible laboratory the exercises actually are. Every single practice I learn something new or refine an existing understanding of how best to compose my body for optimal effectiveness, and I take those lessons learned out of the dojo and into everyday life. Posture deserves constant attention, and Suino Sensei's concept of "bow and arrow upper body" has implications that extend far beyond cutting with a sword. Normal walking and moving, which for me have long been a way of all-the-time training, have been illuminated by the stepping drills. I've become more alert



to and able to control increasingly subtle generation and application of power, through skeletal alignment, sequencing the exact areas of the feet contacting the mat, how that contact is used, what is for me an entirely new way of looking at hip power, and the constantly varying weighting of the feet. The things I'm learning are also enabling me to punch and kick even more powerfully than I'd previously been able.

The mental benefits of iaido training are also proving to be quite significant. Because training is so substantially a process of configuring and controlling the body in accordance with an idealized form that can be pursued but never fully attained, the mental and intellectual involvement required for progress is huge. Development within the art requires a very high level of self-reflection, analysis, and honesty — essentially the ability to identify, consider, and correct what might be substantial or very subtle divergences from the idealized form.

Additionally, in iaido practice, the imaginary "attackers" must be visualized in great detail. Otherwise, practice becomes little more than going through the motions, or simply dance. Visualizing the opponents during kata practice was not something at which I was successful in previous arts, going all the way back to my time in karate, but is an interesting phenomenon I am increasingly able to experience. All of the mental demands of iaido practice are, in a very literal sense, exercise for the brain, something that will pay dividends to any students but most especially to those practitioners (like me) that are older.

The most surprising consequence, to me, of the unique physical and mental attributes of iaido practice has been the spiritual effects of training. Most surprising, because the same effect has been noted by several very different members of our iaido-kai, ranging in experience from a few months to many decades and in age from 15 to 65. After an iaido practice, many of us have noticed that we feel as though we've worked out, but rather than being charged up we feel particularly calm and focused. It's a very different feeling than I've experienced in any other forms of martial arts training—it's an especially pleasant sensation—and it's a feeling that persists long after the actual practice session.

That, all by itself, is a great reason to train!

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At Thanksgiving dinner a few weeks ago, my brother-in-law was talking about not knowing what to do with himself now that he's retired. I suggested, "You should learn how to swing a sword."

His response was a kind of disdainfully toned, "Why would I want to do that?"

I started to say, "Well, for one thing, you'll never, ever be bored," but I ended up just shrugging, thinking, "How could anybody *not* want to do that?"

Maybe I'll send him a copy of this journal…

Notes

1. Kim Taylor, "An Interview with Japanese Sword Instructor Haruna Matsuo," *Journal of Asian Martial Arts*, Vol. 5 No. 2, 1996.

2. Nicklaus Suino, "How to Watch Iaido," *Journal of Asian Martial Arts*, Vol. 3 No. 3, 1994.

3. Nicklaus Suino, *Strategy in Japanese Swordsmanship* (Boston: Weatherhill, 2007).

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*.