Sword and Spirit

The Journal of Itten Dojo — September 2024

— Benefits of 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.

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Iaido Drills & Applications

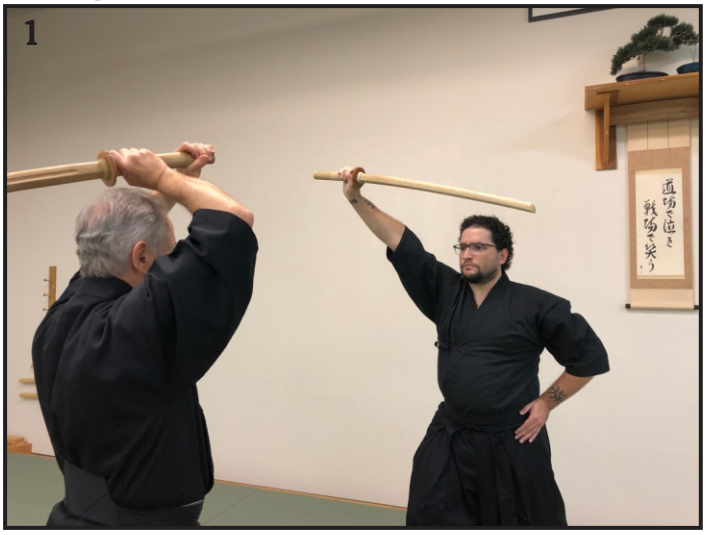
The solo practice within Muso Jikiden Eishin-ryu Iaido, referred to as the study of *waza* (techniques) rather than of *kata* (forms), is the component of this school of swordsmanship in which the majority of training time is invested. Because the waza are very strictly defined, it would be easy to assume the primary purpose of the practice is memorization of specific sequences to be utilized against a surprise attack. But that is not the case—even historically, in the times the art would have been employed in life-or-death circumstances. At an introductory seminar in Toronto, Canada, earlier this year, our teacher, Nicklaus Suino Sensei, explained to participants that the most important aspect and true purpose of the solo practice is the study of optimal physical structure for the generation and application of power. Interestingly, in an online post that same week, our friend Reg Sakamoto Sensei—also a very highly-ranked instructor of Eishin-ryu from a different line—said exactly the same thing. In my own training and for the benefit of students training at Itten Dojo, I've found that I can better understand the function of and pursue the goals of the solo waza through occasional use of supplemental, paired drills and applications of techniques.

A perfect example of insights that can be gained through supplemental study is our recent experimentation with the *uke-nagashi* ("flowing reception," illustrated in the photo at upper left) that we first learn in Sensei's "Big Five" and subsequently employ in multiple waza. Thanks to the lingering effects of previously absorbed misinformation, I had assumed this moment of blocking during the transition from a horizontal to a vertical cut was purely symbolic. I had thought, "Surely, it wouldn't likely be possible to deflect an incoming cut from that square-on, facing posture." What arrogance! As if generations of master swordsmen transmitting this astonishing art would have preserved an ineffective technique.

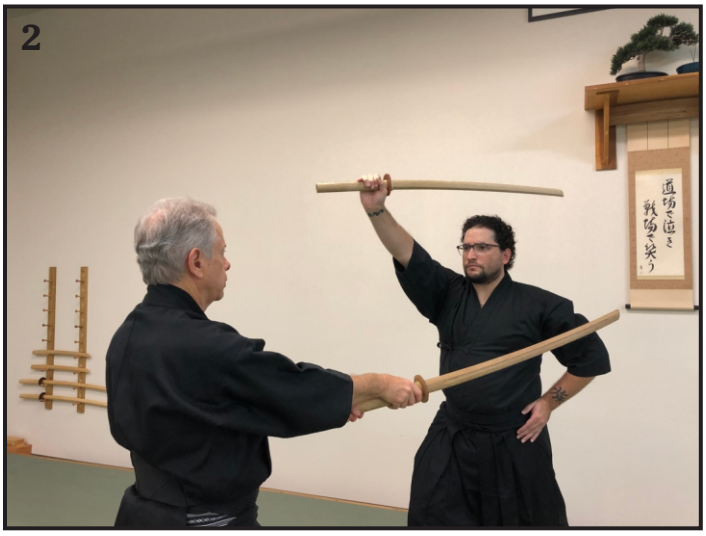
I don't recall what prompted me to experiment with this particular uke-nagashi (there are actually several variants in Eishin-ryu), but I remember very clearly the resulting revelation. Initially, I received the incoming cut from my training partner in an almost static configuration, and consequently was nearly bonked in the head. And then I recalled Sensei's oft-repeated

instruction that a "trademark" sequencing of body mechanics in this art is, "hand first; arm second." So, at the moment of impact from the incoming cut, I allowed my wrist to "release" while my arm overall stayed in place, which had the effect of carrying the incoming cut safely past and naturally moving my arm from the shoulder to alignment for my counter-cut. Duh. Just like in the waza.

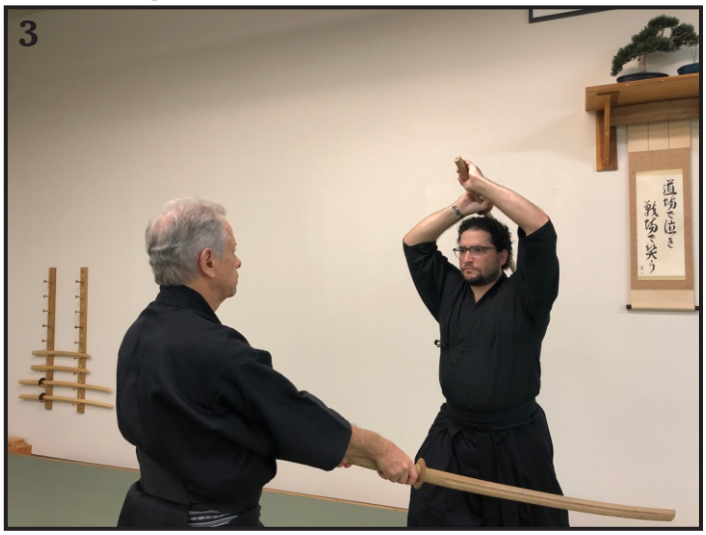
The drill we developed to emphasize the effectiveness of this sequence has the defender assume the proper configuration before the attacker advances and cuts. The defender cannot flinch or attempt to move out of line of the attack (photo 1).



If, with a calm and centered spirit providing the nerve to stand fast and let the deflection happen in the prescribed manner (photo 2),



the attacker is taken off-line and the defender is ready to strike back (photo 3).



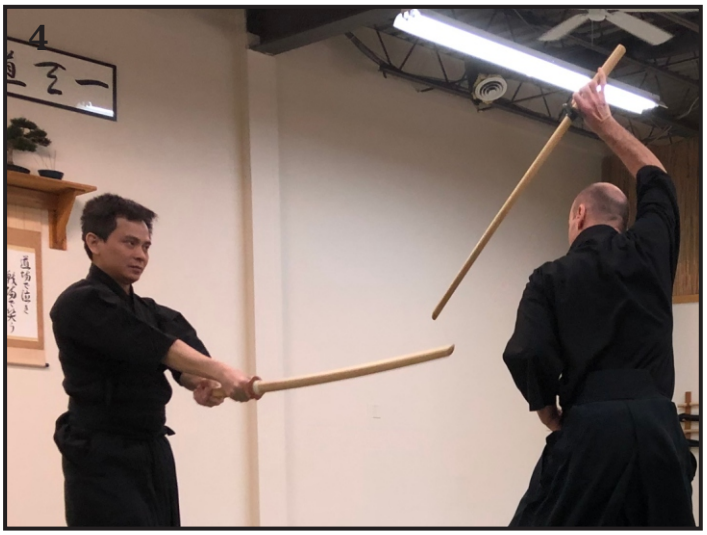
As competence in the drill is increased, the defender can start the sequence from earlier moments in "The Big Five," thereby needing to get into position as the attacker advances and cuts. With greater intentionality imparted to his cut, the attacker will often be taken off-balance by the uke-nagashi, further opening him to the defender's counter. In addition to illuminating the physical execution of the sequence, the dill has the added benefit of helping the student learn to trust the technique.

Another variant of uke-nagashi manifests in the waza of the same name from the *Seiza no Bu* set. As described in Sensei's *The Art of Japanese Swordsmanship*,

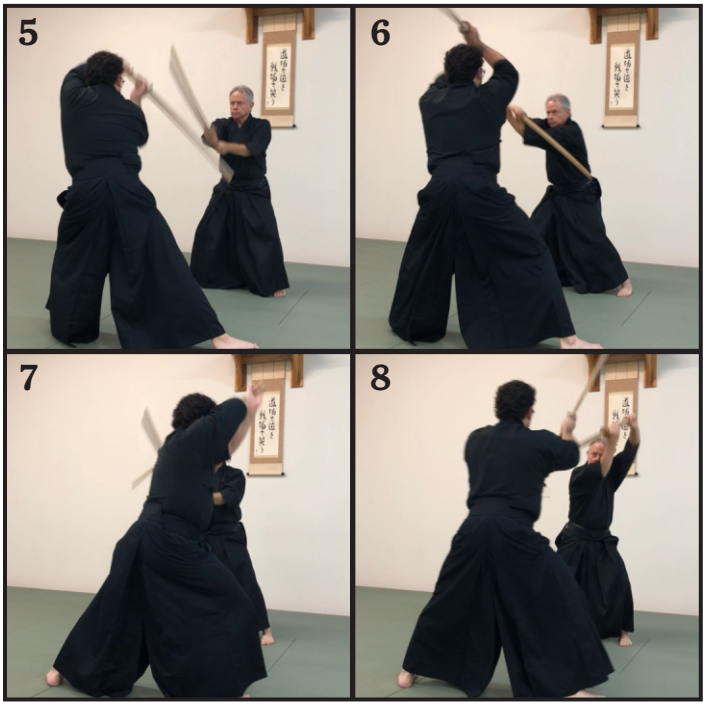
The swordsman is seated. An opponent begins to approach from the left front. The swordsman stands and draws, parrying a cut by the opponent, and turns to finish him. He then spins the sword to flip the blood off, resheathes it, and stands up with dignity.

In this variant, the "flow" in the uke-nagashi is along the line of the sword in space, timed with the impact of the attacker's cut (photo 4, next page).

We use a paired drill to understand the timing and "flow" of the reception. Note that, in the waza, the reception is performed one-handed, while in the drill both hands are kept on the hilt.



Partners stand, facing and close enough that their vertical cuts can reach. As one partner cuts, the other shifts to the side, pushing their sword into a deflection (photo 5). The partner that had just received the attack pivots to face the other and cuts, while the other partner, whose sword had moments before been deflected, allows that deflection to carry his sword into position for him to push into his own uke-nagashi (photo 6). The exchange is repeated (photos 7 and 8), alternating between partners and to both lateral sides. Advanced students can increase the speed of the exchanges, which makes for a very frisky drill.

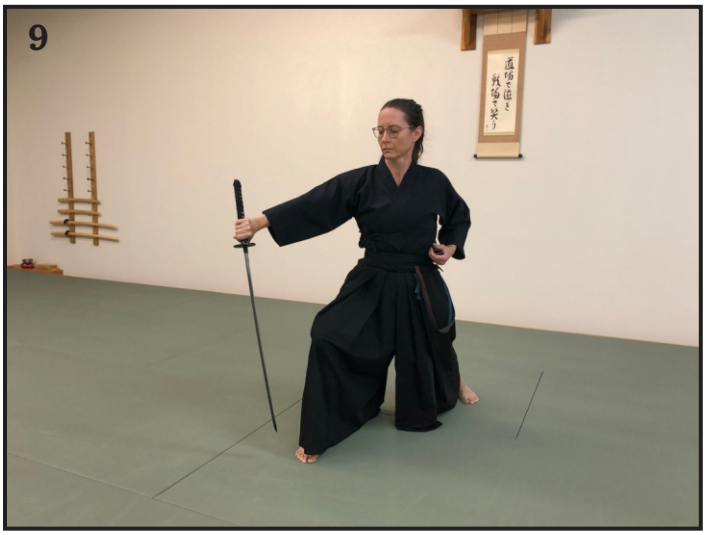


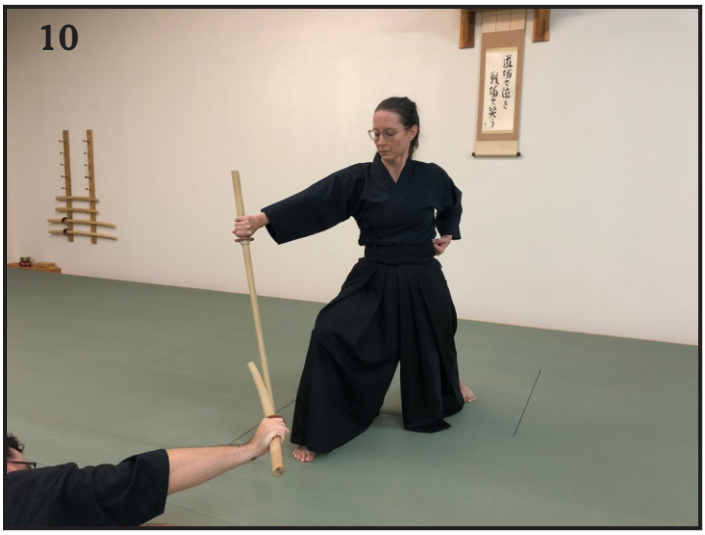
It's critically important for both partners to provide "true" attacks, targeting the partner's head, rather than cutting to the side of his head. It's also important to understand that the impetus for execution of the uke-nagashi comes from the hips rather than from the arms. If the geometry and timing are correct, the impact of the wooden swords will sound more like a swish than a smack. A harsh "*Clack!*" at impact indicates an incorrect angle of the reception, a static position in space of the receiving sword, trepidation on the part of the receiving swordsman…or all three conditions.

Another form of paired practice that can very positively assist in the study of structure in the solo waza is *bunkai*. The term means "to take apart" and, in the context of martial arts training, means to isolate a specific portion of a waza or kata and execute against a live opponent. A recent use of this training method was our examination of the middle-third portion of the fifth waza in the Seiza no Bu set, *Yaegaki* ("Eightfold Fences"). The first and third sections of the waza are essentially the same as in *Mae* ("Forward," the first waza in the set). As described by Suino Sensei, in Yaegaki:

The swordsman faces his opponent. Both are seated. As the opponent prepares to attack, the swordsman quickly draws and cuts him across the throat, then attempts to finish him. The opponent fades back to avoid the oncoming cut, so the swordsman moves forward while cutting. Flipping the blade to remove any blood from it, the swordsman begins to resheath his sword, but the opponent strikes at his leg. The swordsman blocks the cut and, this time, finishes his opponent. He then flips the blood off the sword, resheathes it, and stands up with dignity.

The execution of blocking the strike to the leg requires a complex combination sourcing and sequencing of power to stop this last-ditch effort by (what would be) a dying opponent. There are three components involved: flexing the blade of the sword prior to releasing the block, thereby generating a spring effect; correctly driving the hips to snap back into an open long stance; and finally adding the crisp extension of the arm to align the sword (photo 9, next page).





To achieve understanding of all that's involved in a successful blocking effort, we bunkai that middle portion of the waza (photo 10), in stages. Initially, the attacker on the mat places his sword against the leg of the defender, just below her knee. The defender is already in an open long stance, but still facing a bit more forward in hips and shoulders than would be proper, and with her sword fully drawn and ready to released by her left hand. The defender practices adding a bit of tension to her sword and then snapping her hips to the proper alignment and executing her block into the attacker's sword. Once the correct, finishing position is consistently achieved, the partners can "back-up" the sequence bit by bit, until they are replicating exactly that middle portion of the waza.

Paired drills and applications are both a highly useful and engaging form or training, and can a be a lot of fun. But never forget that these practices are supplemental, intended to illuminate what must be the primary focus of training and help ensure that the solo waza never devolve into empty gestures and mere theater.

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 with his senior student Alan Starner founded Itten Dojo in 1992. His articles on martial arts have been featured in numerous publications, including the *Journal of Asian Martial Arts* and *Bugeisha*.