

Sword and Spirit

The Journal of Itten Dojo

November 2025



— 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.

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Iaido Pilgrimage

Photos Courtesy of Alton Whittle

Early in our planning for a dojo trip to Japan, it was decided that we would visit the *Hayashizaki Jinja*, the Shinto “Iai Shrine” in Murayama City, Yamagata Prefecture, to experience training at the birthplace of iaido. Bailey Sensei, during a visit late last year to her home in Sendai, visited the shrine to establish a connection and start to make arrangements. We anticipated that our options would be limited to one of the “Iaido Experience” offerings (en.iaidoexperience.com) that are tourist-oriented training sessions that provide financial support for the shrine and the associated dojo, the Murayama Iai Shinbukan (村山居合振武館). Throughout 2025, Bailey Sensei stayed in contact with Ms. Abe, an Officer of the Murayama City Tourism and Product Association (Ms. Abe was the person that shipped to us copies of the book that Reg Sakamoto Sensei is translating, *Hayashizaki Myojin and Hayashizaki Jinsuke Shigenobu*).

As our plans solidified, Bailey Sensei contacted the Iai Shinbukan through Ms. Abe to inform the dojo that we would visit on Saturday, October 25th. A response came back stating that the tourist-oriented sessions are not offered on Saturdays, because that is the day reserved for the members of the Shinbukan to do their “real” training, and would we like to join the regular practice? This offer was doubtless the result of Bailey Sensei having charmed everyone associated with the shrine and dojo, as is purely typical when she interacts with anyone. And the offer to train was accompanied by another question, would I be interested in participating in a prayer and blessing ceremony with the chief priest of the shrine? Of course, we immediately accepted both invitations.

To emphasize the significance of these invitations, please understand that the tourist experience is priced at about \$300 per person, while we were asked instead for just \$6.67 each to rent an *iaito* (training sword) for the practice. We decided to provide more than that and added an appropriate “mat fee” to show our appreciation (we also made a separate contribution to the shrine).

During this portion of our trip, we were staying at the *Ryokan Onuma* (a traditional Japanese inn, www.ohnuma.co.jp/en/). Travel from the inn to the





Iai Shrine was about a two-hour drive, so we needed to get up and get ready especially early, in order to arrive at the dojo by 8:15 a.m. to dress and warm up for the formal practice starting at 9:00 a.m. Fortunately, another amazing aspect of our trip was the transportation we enjoyed while in Sendai and surrounding areas. Bailey Sensei's brother, Hashimoto Ryuichi, holds a commercial driver's license aside from his regular work as an engineer, so we rented our own bus and Ryuichi took a few days of vacation time to drive us around. This was especially great because we were afforded an opportunity to get off the regular routes and see things tourists wouldn't ordinarily see.

Because of the early departure time, the kitchen staff at Ryokan Onuma was not able to provide breakfast, so we stopped at the local Lawson Station, a chain of Japanese convenience stores, to purchase food (and coffee!) to consume on the bus. Ryuichi-san had to help me open the packaging for the chicken, egg, and rice meal that I'd chosen—having to figure out how to open food packaging was something I experienced more than once on this trip.

During the two-hour drive I had plenty of time to think about the training we would be doing. I wasn't nervous, exactly. It was more like I was hyper-focused on making a good impression and not embarrassing our dojo or Suino Sensei. Especially not Suino Sensei.

When we arrived at the shrine/dojo, we were met in the parking lot by Ito Seiichi Sensei, the chief instructor, and Ms. Abe. Following brief introductions, we were led to the separate, second floor section of the dojo building housing the dressing rooms and restrooms. Because shoes would be removed in the entrance to the building, I made certain that everyone took a pair of *setta* (sandals) to wear while



anywhere needed, outside, or in between the dojo and the shrine.



After getting into uniform, stepping into the dojo was accompanied by one of those surreal, "I can't believe this is actually happening" feelings. We stowed our extra gear along the wall behind chairs for observers and Ms. Abe helped us select the (very nice) *iaito* that we would use for the class.

I had a chance to speak with Ito Sensei prior to starting practice. I was able to explain (in Japanese) that we were Muso Jikiden Eishin-ryu students and that we don't know the Muso Shinden-ryu versions of the techniques, but I needed Bailey Sensei's help to add that



we would do our best to follow along. Ito Sensei said that it wouldn't be a problem. He said that the class currently was focusing on the Zen Nippon Kendo Renmei Iaido Seiteigata, and since some members of the class were not themselves familiar with those waza, the topic would be beneficial for everyone.

We had about 15 minutes to warm up prior to the class, with the Shinbukan and Itten Dojo members kind of mutually observing each other. At that point I realized our group, thanks to the quality of our training from Suino Sensei, would fit right in. In addition to me, our group included Alan Starner, Charles Hudson, Freddy Lebron, Aidan Drahm, Jon Drahm, and Paul Roundy. Alton Whittle has only a bit of a start in iaido, so he observed along with the family members present and shot photos.

Ito Sensei called the class to attention and we bowed in. With Bailey Sensei translating, Ito Sensei presented the plan for the morning.



Ito Sensei explained that the ZNKR Seiteigata are 12 forms chosen by a committee to represent major koryu styles of swordsmanship, and that the forms provide a common ground for members of different ryu to be able to train together. Ito Sensei said that we would start with a short demonstration of Muso Shinden-ryu waza by the members of the Shinbukan, and asked that the Itten Dojo members follow with a demonstration of our forms. The Shinbukan members performed a half-dozen or so forms but because I (selfishly) wanted as much time as possible to be devoted to learning I directed our group to demo just

three forms. We would all start with *Mae* (in unison) and then individually choose two waza—mine were *Shinobu* from *Tachiwaza no Bu* and *Oroshi* from *Tatehiza no Bu*.

As we demonstrated, Bailey Sensei was standing closely enough to Ito Sensei to overhear his comments to his senior student, Higuchi Kenichi Sensei. As she related to me later, Ito Sensei said something like, “These guys are pretty sharp. We can work with this.”



And then the training began in earnest. Higuchi Sensei demonstrated the entire 12-waza set, with opening and closing *reishiki* (ceremonial etiquette). The combined group started with the Seiteigata version of *Mae*, and we immediately saw significant differences in execution of the form, particularly with regard to *furikaburi* (swinging the sword to the upper-level position), the manner of executing *kiri-oroshi* (the vertical cut—this was too complex a difference to imitate successfully), and *chiburi* (literally “blood swing,” symbolic of removing blood from the blade).



Initially, we were separated by dojo, with the two groups facing each other across an open center section of the floor. Ito Sensei or Higuchi Sensei would present a form, calling attention to important details, and then we



would practice. For some forms, Ito Sensei and Higuchi Sensei would demonstrate the application of the form against an opponent. For these lessons, Higuchi Sensei would use a *bokken* (wooden sword) and Ito Sensei would often invert his sword so that he was not presenting the *ha* (edge) toward Higuchi Sensei. Eventually I began to suspect that they were both using *shinken* (“live,” i.e., sharpened steel blades) for their forms.



After just a form or two, Ito Sensei reconsidered the arrangement and had the two groups intermix, all facing the same direction. He also assigned a Shinbukan senior to each member of our group, for extra help as we trained. We would cover as many as four forms, and then we would run that number, consecutively as a set. In that way, over the course of three hours, we built up to the point of running the entire set of 12 techniques all the way through. Twice. Obviously, we needed to keep an eye on our Shinbukan hosts in order for us to stay on the same page, but we managed.





The three hours just flew past, far too quickly. In closing remarks, Ito Sensei said that we've now received the 12 forms and instructed us to take the forms home and share them with others. Fortunately, Bailey Sensei had shot video of Higuchi Sensei's entire demonstration, so we do have a reliable reference to work from. After bowing-out, we had a chance to discuss with our Shinbukan hosts everything we'd experienced, and to ask some technical questions. Ito Sensei presented me with a manual for the Seiteigata—in Japanese, but Bailey Sensei can help.

I asked Ito Sensei if we could help with cleaning the iaito we'd used. Ms. Abe, standing close by, reacted with

mock outrage and said, "What!?! Are you trying to take my job?"



There were many other conversations, some of them significant, but rather than share everything I'm going to hold onto those interactions as private treasures for the members of our dojo that stepped up to make this trip. I'm also going to hold back the details of the prayer and blessing ceremony we attended in the actual Hayashizaki Shrine. This Shinto experience affected me more deeply than I anticipated, in a very profound way, and I'm still processing.

But I will share what was for me the crowning incident of the day. As we were stowing gear and preparing for the prayer and blessing ceremony, Ryuichi-san had the chance to ask Ito Sensei for his impressions of our visit. Ito Sensei said this:

"This group is very unusual. When we invite foreign groups to train with us, they don't seem to take the opportunity seriously. They might work for 20 minutes or so, and then they spend the rest of the time just chatting amongst themselves and taking selfies. This group didn't do that. They just trained and trained intensely. We're very impressed."

Mission accomplished. And, even better, we've been invited to return. 🌀





This Saturday morning practice was not just the primary weekly class for members of the Shinbukan, my understanding is that it was the sole class for the people actually training in iaido—and we were almost half the number of people there.





Entering through the torii gate to the Hayashizaki Jinja. The shrine had different names in the past but has been associated with iaijutsu/iaido since the Muromachi era.



Aidan Drahm, with the assistance of Ms. Abe, performs a ritual purification in preparation for entering the shrine.



The interior of the Hayashizaki Jinja—the Iai Shrine.



*Exiting the inner sanctuary of the shrine after making the offering of a branch of the Sakaki tree (*Cleyera japonica*), a plant considered sacred in Shinto.*



After our pilgrimage, soba lunch at a fantastic restaurant.



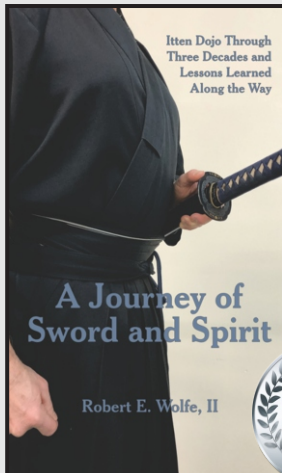
Robert Wolfe, chief instructor of Itten Dojo, began martial arts training in 1975 while attending Bucknell University, where he earned a degree in Japanese Studies. Mr. Wolfe has taught since 1985, and founded Itten Dojo in 1992. His articles on martial arts have been featured in publications such as *The Bujin*, *Budo Shinbun*, the *Journal of Asian Martial Arts*, *Bugeisha*, *Aikido Today Magazine*, *Inside Karate*, *Martial Arts Training*, and *Martial Arts Professional*. 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*.



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

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.”

