

Ishido Sensei – Iaido shinsain no me

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Can you perform “Ni-ku, San-ke”? Devote yourself to acquiring Shu

Profile of Ishido Shizufumi Hanshi: Born in 1945 in Kawasaki City, Kanagawa Prefecture. On graduating from Nihon University, he joined Chiyoda Glass. Left the company in December 1976, after which he devoted himself to teaching at Shinbukan Ishido Dojo. Started practicing Iaido in 1955 with his father, Ishido Sadataro. Won the 7th dan division in the National Iaido Championship. Currently holds the positions of Deputy Head of the Kanagawa Prefecture Iaido Division and Head of the Shinbukan Ishido Dojo. Attained 8th dan in Iaido in 1994, and became Hanshi in 2006. Also holds Kyoshi 7th dan in Kendo, and Kyoshi 8th dan in Jodo.

I have decided to pick up my pen and write down my thoughts in order to help people who are currently practicing Iaido.

Firstly, I am going to state my thoughts on Iaido, that's because I approach gradings based on these thoughts. From long ago it has been said that “the innermost secret of Iaido is always being in the moment, wherever you are, so that you can respond to anything swiftly”. In other words, I think Iaido is about developing a mind in which you never become flustered and retain a calm presence of mind no matter what happens, dealing with things without becoming alarmed.

If you were to compare training to mountain climbing, everybody starts the climb to the top from a different environment and a different direction. There are a variety of motives for starting, be it for health reasons or because you want to become stronger; however, once you have started, you cannot stop. There are sure to be times when you hit a wall, times when you experience problems, but you have to aim for the top while overcoming these things. Although there is no knowing if you will ever be able to reach the top, it is nevertheless important to keep enjoying training with an intention to reach the top. I think that by persevering you are sure to gain something that will be of benefit to you.

Iaido was created as a way to attain techniques that allow you to defend yourself and attack others. Opinions about these goals differ according to the person and the era in which the practitioner lived. There are three main goals in Iaido: to cultivate the spirit, to train the body, and to master the techniques. These three have varying degrees of importance. The most important goal is to cultivate the spirit, followed by training the body. The last goal of mastering the techniques is a means that allows the other goals to be attained. In other words, Iaido is truly a path that cultivates a warrior-like character and enhances the Japanese spirit.

These three goals complement each other for them to be all achieved, thus you shouldn't aim for the first two goals and dismiss the third one. However, it is an unavoidable fact that their importance will vary according to the person and the times. When people in the past fought with a sword, their focus was on technique because this decided the outcome of a duel and hence was connected to their very survival. Back then mastery of technique was the ultimate goal.

Since culture has advanced and times have changed, the goals of current Iaido practitioners are not just confined to those previously mentioned. In terms of both technique and spirit that has developed over the past few hundred years, Iaido has reached a level of profound exquisiteness, incorporated a system of etiquette and finally, through its fusion with Confucianism, Shintoism and Buddhism, it has become a path that cultivates and builds the human character.

Everyday life is Iai

The following teaching explains the stages involved in martial arts training: Shu (protect); Ha (break); Ri (separate). I personally only believe in Shu. Although this is the stage in which you train to remain faithful to your Sensei's teachings, forms and techniques, making sure not to stray from them, I think it is a difficult stage that remains a perpetual goal.

The higher up the grading a person tests for, the clearer it is whether or not he or she has firm foundations. Namely, if you focus on and tackle Shu, this surely becomes Ha and then Ri.

Your own hard work is important for you to be certain to attain Shu, but so is learning from a good Sensei. You should listen to your Sensei's teachings with an open mind and then practice to make your body remember the techniques.

One of the organisations currently bearing the role of Shu in Iai is the Zen Nihon Kendo Renmei Iai. Gradings are becoming increasingly important. The manual written by the association takes great care in explaining the details of the essentials and movements, such as distance to opponents (Maai), as well as heights and angles, which are all correctly determined. It is easy to understand, but I think it is best to first receive instruction on the forms and then carefully read it. If you read it first, you will have preconceptions, meaning that you won't be able to work out what mistakes are.

Understand that Iai is a combination of logical reasoning and truths, and that you cannot alter the specifics of the theory. In other words, the facts and the truths are consistent with each other.

I firmly believe that the way that you behave and move in Iai does not specially change from the way that you behave and move in your daily life. This applies to when you sit down, stand up, change direction, walk and anything else that you do when a guest comes to your house – the only difference is that you have a sword in your belt and that you draw and re-sheathe your sword. You have to be sufficiently aware that the way you are in your everyday life will manifest itself in an Embu. If you are not aware of this, no matter how good your forms are at an Embu, the Embu

itself will lack appeal if your training in everyday life is insufficient. The examiners will be able to see through this immediately.

The three ways to train your mind in Iai are based on wisdom, benevolence and courage, which are the three aspects of sincerity. Through wisdom you can distinguish the nature of things; through benevolence you realize your path; and through courage you carry out that path. The root of these aspects comes from the five cardinal virtues that people have received from the heavens: benevolence, justice, courtesy, wisdom and fidelity. Since the path has not changed since the ancient times, it is based on these virtues. Other manifestations of these virtues exist in the relationships between father and child, subject and lord, married couples, siblings and between friends.

Those people who conduct themselves in accordance with these five virtues are said to be on the path. The source of this conduct comes solely from sincerity. The path's driving force comes from sincerity, which is fair and pure. It is said that "sincerity is the path of the heavens, so that those people who strive to be sincere become the path". Thus, this is naturally the path that people should proceed along. If one considers that Iai is a path in which you achieve mastery over yourself and others, you learn the forms in which the spirit is displayed, so you learn the virtues. You have to focus on benevolence, sincerity, endurance, justice, courage, compassion, honour and shame, and develop a sense of gratitude.

Are you aware of distance (Maai) when you are drawing your sword?

Attire and etiquette are important points during a grading. This is something else that you also need to attain from your daily life. Thus, when etiquette is neglected you cannot have true Iai. Etiquette is explained in detail in the clauses about manners in the manual produced by the Zen Nihon Kendo Renmei Iai. Even though the manual goes into how to use the fingers, I have seen people confuse this to old styles' etiquette, so the utmost care must be taken.

A Dojo is a tranquil area where Buddhist training is carried out, and it is a place that is sacred and inviolable. Even if the facilities of your dojo are lacking, when you practice Iai there you must regard the area as a Dojo. Therefore, you should conduct your entire daily lifestyle based on strict rules of etiquette.

In Iai there are three subjects to which you bow. The first is bowing to the deity (or Shinzen), which helps to develop feelings of reverence towards the emperor. Bowing to your Sensei is similar to bowing to your parents; hence it cultivates a feeling of filial piety. Lastly, bowing to each other is the same as bowing between siblings, so it cultivates a feeling of trust. If you carry out etiquette with this mindset, it will be sincere.

My father considered the phrase "Ni-ku, San-ke" important and would tell me to never forget it. Ni-ku refers to calming down (Ochitsu-ku) early on (Hya-ku), while San-ke refers to Metsuke, Nukitsuke and Kiritsuke (translator's note: this is a play on words that is close to the idiom created by the author's father.) These are truly the words that are right on the mark in terms of identifying the key points one should focus on when practicing Iai. In fact, they are also the key points that I focus on during a grading.

A manual is important to understand the context of “Ni-ku, San-ke”. The way to improve is to get rid of your preconceptions and always approach the manual with an open mind, as if you are reading it for the first time. Even then there will be times when you will not notice things.

It is important that, even after you have carefully read the manual and are shown the correct techniques by your Sensei, you get rid of your preconceptions. Take for example the phrase “Kisen wo seishite (to get a jump ahead of)”. What condition does this refer to? How would you like to deal with your opponent? What will you do when you become aware of your opponent’s ill intent? Will you draw before your opponent starts to move? What does it mean to draw with Jo-Ha-Kyu? This refers to the draw starting slowly, gradually increasing in speed, then finally reaching its fastest speed the moment the sword leaves the scabbard. It is not good to blindly draw quickly, but rather to draw in accordance to your imaginary opponent’s movement. I am sure that everybody knows this, but it is still important to repeatedly read the manual and confirm this point.

Carrying out the techniques simultaneously with your Sensei’s correct techniques will allow your body to naturally remember them. This will then become apparent during a grading.

It is surprising how seldom the supplementary parts of the manual are read. The preface and the parts on Metsuke and etiquette need to be read particularly carefully. Take, for example, the 3rd Waza, Ukenagashi. The sword is drawn so that it ends up above the head and close to the chest. In this case, how close is the sword to the chest and how far above the head is it? At gradings, I check to see if people sufficiently understand that the parry (Ukenagashi) occurs when the sword leaves the scabbard at the time that the right foot is planted on the inside of the left foot.

The correct technique is to “utilize the energy of parrying (Ukenagasu) your opponent’s sword to bring the Kissaki upwards and to the right”. Have you swung your sword? Did the Kissaki swing right and upwards as a result of you just bringing your sword up? The fact that you have to change to face your opponent the instant that you parry you will not be facing your opponent square on. The form that you take when you cut down at a Kesa angle is no different from the fifth Waza, although the angle of your opponent is different.

I would like you to review once more how the twelve Waza of the Zen Nihon Kendo Renmei Iai are connected to each other. Pay particular attention to studying the importance of Ma and Maai – especially Maai. If somebody were to ask me if I can visualise my imaginary opponents, I would reply no, but whether it be sitting or standing forms, my Maai is correct so that I cut with my Monouchi. If possible, I would like you and the members of your Dojo to work in pairs using Bokuto to determine Maai.

10 points to bear in mind for 8th dan grading

In May 1976, I failed my 7th dan grading in Kyoto. However, I subsequently passed it on November 1, 1976 in Fukushima. At the national tournament that took place the day before the grading I saw Kawaguchi Toshihiko Sensei's Iai and that is when I finally saw the light. Up until then I had focused mainly on Kendo and looked down upon Iai. Upon seeing Kawaguchi Sensei's Iai I felt ashamed that I had achieved 6th dan by just training for one hour a month (translator's note: this is exactly what it says in Japanese). But at the same time I was moved so much by his amazing Iai that I could not describe it in words.

The next day at the 7th dan grading I was in position 1A, Kawaguchi Sensei in 1B and Tamaki Sensei in 1C. Please try to picture what it was like. Luckily, since I had practiced two hours a month (translator's note: this is exactly what it says in Japanese), and riding on my father's coat-tails, I was able to pass. But deep down I felt so ashamed.

After the grading when I went to get criticism from an old acquaintance of my father's, Sakamoto Kichiro Sensei from Osaka, he said, "I reckon that you were more or less even with Kawaguchi Sensei." I had the nerve to not even recognise this as flattery. I asked Kawaguchi Sensei how much he practiced, to which he candidly replied two to three hours a day. I went back to my house and based on some simple calculations I practiced 6 hours a day for the next 18 months. This I believe is what has made me what I am today.

I can firmly state that I would not be who I am if I had not met Kawaguchi Sensei or not been flattered by Sakamoto Sensei. I am always grateful from the bottom of my heart for the instruction and support from my seniors and Senseis, the cooperation and friendship of my peers, and the support and consideration from my family that has allowed to me practice. I am determined to make sure that what I have received will benefit as many people as possible.

Finally, I will list the points that I have selected for those people who are taking the 8th dan grading. I would be happy if you use them as a reference.

- Get rid of your preconceptions and learn with a beginner's mind.
- Study and practice at the same time.
- Persevere.
- Strengthen your body; do not abuse it.
- Be logical in your questioning if you are going to ask for instruction.
- There is a beginning to training, but no end.
- Only Shu exists in training, not Ha or Ri.
- Try to make sure that logical reasoning and truth are always the same.

- Make sure that your Iai displays humility and politeness.
- Make sure that your Iai displays proper behavior.

If you have a desire to learn Budo, particularly Iai, you must first learn about the mind (Kokoro). The mind determines your actions, which become habits, and habits create a person's character, which in turn determines your destiny. My training is still in progress, so I would be happy to forge friendships with everyone and contribute to the development of Iaido.

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