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Kanai Sensei discusses Iaido

By David Halprin and Joji Sawa

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What does the word "Iaido" mean?

Iai means "a place where you are". The "I" of Iai is a place where you live day after day. It also has the meaning of "sitting-down", so in that sense "Iai" is the opposite of "Tachiai". In another sense, Iai means the ability to immediately respond from one's current position, typically a sitting position.

How did Iaido evolve from older martial arts?

Iaido was practiced and developed secretly in each family and so it was not exposed to the public. It became public only at the beginning of the Meiji era (1868-1912). Therefore, nobody knows exactly which styles existed earlier, and where and how they were developed. In other words, Iaido was an "Otome Ryu", which means it was a style of martial arts hidden from the public, and teaching it was prohibited.

Historically speaking, some say there is evidence of Iaido practice ever since the time that the Bushi (Samurai) gained power about 500 years ago but Iaido as we know it now was started by Jinsuke Hayashizaki about 450 years ago. And it was the disciples of Jinsuke Hayashizaki who established the styles of Iaido that exist now, such as Tamiya Ryu and others.

Historically, how is Iaido related to Aikido?

As a historical matter, it is impossible to think there were direct technical exchanges, or mutual influences between them. However, there was a connection for us who were O-Sensei's uchideshi. Because O-Sensei was beloved by many of the leading practitioners of Kendo and Iaido, such as Haga Sensei and Kiyoshi Nakakura Sensei, we uchideshi had many opportunities to come in contact with these Iaido masters. I think that's how the relationship between the uchideshi and Iaido developed. The strength of the connection between O-Sensei and these Iaido masters is shown, for example, in the fact that O-Sensei adopted Kiyoshi Nakakura Sensei who was a disciple of Hakudo Nakayama Sensei.

How are Iaido techniques structured?

I believe that Iaido, as we practice it today, and as it has been practiced in modern times, was developed by combining two elements. The first is combat sword techniques -- more specifically, immediate-response sword techniques from a sitting position. The other is the manners of the Bushi, that is, correct etiquette and manners regarding the handling of swords as well as all aspects of behavior, which, during certain eras in the past, was the subject of strict practice and intense study.

What is the relationship of the different Iaido "sets"?

Over time Iaido (which was once called Hayashizaki Ryu or Shigenobu Ryu) branched off into many different Iaido styles each headed by a disciple of the founder, Jinsuke Hayashizaki. For example, a person named Tamiya created Tamiya Ryu, and similarly many other styles developed, such as Suio Ryu. I can say that many disciples of Jinsuke Hayashizaki took what they learned and created variations based on their individual sensibilities, and that these variations eventually became distinct styles.

Where did Muso Shinden-ryu come from?

Muso Shinden Ryu came from a person named Eishin Hasegawa. Eishin Hasegawa's Eishin Ryu was practiced in the Tosa region, so it was also known as Tosa Iai. For a long time, Eishin Ryu was kept secret in the domain of Tosa, and there was no way for outside people to find out about it. The Iai we practice now is called Muso Shinden Ryu in the Kanto Region (i.e. Tokyo and surroundings), but it is called

Jikiden Eishin Ryu in the Kansai region (i.e. Kyoto, Osaka, Kobe area). But both come from Tosa Iai.

As late as the Meiji era, Eishin Ryu was still kept secret in the domain of Tosa, but became known to the public through the teaching of Hakudo Nakayama Sensei, who was Kiyoshi Nakakura's teacher. This is how Iaido first became known to the general public.

Weren't Aikido's roots also secret?

Aikido was developed from Daito Ryu, also called Aiki Jujutsu, and practiced secretly in the Takeda family. This was also one of the Otome Ryu, and therefore kept secret from the public.

Was there an indirect connection between Aikido and Iaido in that both were Otome Ryu? Did they come from the same groups or social situations?

There is no relationship between Jujutsu and Iaido. But there were various Bujutsu which were practiced secretly in certain groups, such as Han (domains) or families (for example, the Takeda family). Those Bujutsu included practices such as Naginata (pole sword), Yari (spear) and Bujutsu practiced specifically by women. But in those days such Bujutsu were not known to the general public. Aikido was the same. What we are practicing now as Aikido was created largely because, while in Hokkaido, O-Sensei came across Sokaku Takeda who is said to be from the Takeda family.

You mentioned that Iai starts from a sitting position, or a natural state. Does that mean that suwariwaza techniques are more fundamental than tachiwaza techniques?

Iai is from a sitting position, that is, from Japanese style sitting (i.e. seiza or kugeza). In general Japanese language, Iai is the opposite of Tachiai. However, to avoid confusion in the context of martial arts terminology, we use the term Tachi-iai for Iaido's tachiwaza techniques. Of course, because nobody would fight in a battlefield from a sitting position, we have tachiwaza techniques. Again Iai is practiced from a sitting position, but we call Tachi-iai for Iai practiced from a standing position. Iaido includes both.

If a sitting position is a natural position, is there also a similar mental state, which is different from a fighting or battlefield mentality?

To develop a proper state of mind, to achieve unification of the mind, and to calm the mind I find it is more effective to hold a sword, a real sword, and concentrate on it, rather than to practice Zen. So when I train students, I tell them to stabilize their breathing and calm down their mind before drawing their sword.

You mentioned that many Iaido masters had connections with O-Sensei, and frequently visited him. It sounds like O-Sensei's unique character drew many different kinds of people to him. Iaido people came to him, Kano Sensei (Judo's founder) came and sent his students to train with him. It sounds like O-Sensei's world was quite fascinating.

It was not only martial arts people who came to him. Some were men of religion and others were health advocates such as Mr. Nishi of Nishi Shiki Kenko Ho or Mr. Nyoichi Sakurazawa ("George Osawa") whose health method has been inherited by Mr. Kushi's Seishoku Ho. So it is true that O-Sensei attracted many of people from many different fields, and this is something we witnessed with our own eyes.

How did you become interested in Iaido?

First and foremost, I really liked the sword. Another reason was that I had opportunities to meet masters of Kendo and Iaido while welcoming and serving them as guests of O-Sensei, and had direct contact with them. Although they sometimes scolded or yelled at me, they were my idols and it was great that they constantly visited the dojo. They were Samurai as in the old days. From them I had the chance to hear many good stories of Budo. I was interested in this and became increasingly drawn into it.

Many of these masters had deep connections with O-Sensei but it was especially Haga Sensei who greatly loved O-Sensei and visited the Dojo frequently. Haga Sensei was an idol of all of the Uchideshi. When the second Doshu, Kisshomaru Sensei, was young, I believe that O-Sensei sent him to Haga Sensei to learn Kendo. So in this environment, my interest in the sword was stimulated and I became increasingly interested in Iai and started Iaido. That's the story of how I began practicing Iaido.

When did you begin practicing Iaido?

It was about the same time I became interested in Iaido, so it was about 1960.

Who was your Iaido teacher?

I learned it my own way, but I cannot say I had no teachers; in fact I had several, and each taught me something different. One was the greatest technical influence, while another one taught me the introductory techniques, and another helped me in other ways. It is safe to say that I learned in my own way, because I most often practiced Iaido by myself outside behind the dojo or under a railroad underpass near my home.

Could you explain how you think about your lineage?

Although I practiced techniques from a number of schools and lineages, I believe my Iaido is Muso Shinden Ryu. Muso Shinden Ryu is Tosa Iai, and I think I belong to the school or lineage of Hakudo Nakayaya Sensei, Haga Sensei and Nakakura Sensei.

How did you fit your Iaido practice into your duties as uchideshi?

During the time I was an uchideshi, I used to practice with the sword or bokken in a little space between the dojo and the house next door at night after all the passersby were gone. So I worked to master Iaido during my free time, especially at night, after being released from my Aikido duties.

After finishing my time as uchideshi, when I got married, I moved out of Hombu Dojo. There was a railroad underpass just behind where we lived, and I would practice beneath this underpass. At night, this area would become pitch black. When practicing with a sword or bokken, you often hear the sound of cutting air. If you hear the sound, it means your blade is cutting straight. The sound of cutting air makes you feel good. But because trains were constantly going by above me, I couldn't hear the sound. Despite this, I still felt good when I did it properly. I could judge from the feeling of each cut whether or not I was swinging the sword properly. From this experience, I learned how to use the blade to cut straight through. This is something called "Te no uchi" (literally, "inside of the hand or palm").

Could you explain further about "Te no uchi"?

The term "Te no uchi" is often used in expressions like "Te no uchi no yawarakasa", or the "softness of inside of hand", but in short, it is the feeling of the grip, the feeling when you are correctly gripping a sword.

It is through the feeling one gets while gripping a sword that one knows whether or not one is properly swinging it.

What did O-Sensei think about Iaido?

Sometimes O-Sensei would suddenly appear in the dojo while we were doing free practice, and would do something similar to Iai. The fact that O-Sensei demonstrated it in front of us led me to believe that O-Sensei certainly did not have any negative feeling toward Iaido. Moreover, O-Sensei had close relationships with Haga Sensei and Nakakura Sensei. I think I can say that O-Sensei acknowledged Iai and Kendo as Budo.

At one time O-Sensei did not intend to have his son, Kisshomaru Sensei, inherit his own Aikido. I don't know exactly why this was; O-Sensei made that decision with his own reasoning, perhaps due to Kisshomaru-Sensei's health or character. At that time, O-Sensei adopted as his son a person from an entirely different martial art, a disciple of Hakudo Nakayama. O-Sensei mentioned to Hakudo Nakayama that he would like to adopt someone. I think, in O-Sensei's mind, there should be someone among the disciples of Hakudo Nakayama who could succeed O-Sensei in his path as a Budo-ka (martial artist). Hakudo Nakayama chose Kiyoshi Nakakura, and he consequently was adopted by O-Sensei.

The fact that O-Sensei chose someone from Kendo-ka to be his son and successor in his Aikido means O-Sensei had a considerable regard for Kendo. So as a result of these relationships, we had opportunities to meet Haga Sensei and Nakakura Sensei. Haga Sensei once told us "O-Sensei is so great that you will never be able to understand him!" and we came to realize that Haga Sensei sincerely loved O-Sensei.

One interesting story is about a time when Haga Sensei became doubtful about O-Sensei. At that time Haga Sensei was at his peak, and, especially after winning the Japan Kendo championship for several years in a row, he was very confident,. Haga Sensei told us that O-Sensei's sword technique was something "different", and he did not understand it well. He seemed to feel that O-sensei had something special but he didn't know what it was.

When Haga Sensei said he didn't understand O-Sensei's sword did he mean he had become doubtful about O-Sensei?

I think so. That's why he tried to challenge O-Sensei. Afterward, he told our group of uchideshi these stories and we really enjoyed them, and felt a real closeness to Haga Sensei, and Nakakura Sensei.

So did the challenge really happen?

Judging from what I heard directly from Haga Sensei, it did.

Haga Sensei loved O-Sensei and he visited O-Sensei at the Dojo often, and with some expectation that he could drink sake there. I assume that O-Sensei knew his real intentions regarding sake drinking. So when Haga Sensei visited the Dojo, sake would be served, and he and O-Sensei would talk together. In the middle of this, very often, all of a sudden O-Sensei would disappear. Haga Sensei would be left alone and he would drink a lot and eventually go back home. O-Sensei's wife would usually take care of him after O-Sensei left. Every time Haga Sensei would visit O-Sensei, he would end up drinking and going home. Anyway, this happened many times.

But one day when he visited O-Sensei, he decided that he wouldn't drink any sake. He first told O-Sensei "I won't drink today" and then he said "So please teach me". In other words, he challenged O-Sensei. O-Sensei said, "That's fine", and took him to the dojo. There were many bokken in the dojo, and O-sensei pointed at them and said to him, "Take anything from there".

Haga Sensei picked up one of the bokken and faced O-Sensei. Then O-Sensei quickly turned around and showed him his back and began to walk away. Because he was showing him his back, Haga Sensei thought he could hit O-Sensei, but at the same time, he feared what O-Sensei might do because no one knew for sure what response O-Sensei was capable of. So while chasing after O-Sensei's back, he became so confused he didn't know what to do. Finally he said to O-Sensei, "I surrender". This is the story I heard from Haga Sensei.

I could understand why Haga sensei got confused, because I had a similar experience. One time I was facing O-Sensei with a jo, and O-Sensei said, "Come and attack with tsuki". Since O-Sensei was standing in front of me with only his empty hands, in one way I felt I could hit him easily. At the same time, I felt very confused, and I hesitated. I had to do something, so I finally attacked O-Sensei with my eyes closed. The next thing that happened was he threw me. At that moment I really understand what had gone through Haga Sensei's mind.

There is another version of the story of Haga Sensei that comes from Kiyoshi Nakakura. Before the second Doshu passed away, there was an interview with him and Kiyoshi Nakakura. In this interview, they talked about the days after Kiyoshi Nakakura was adopted and was practicing at Hombu Dojo. This is around the time that Haga Sensei was having his doubts about O-Sensei, and I think Kiyoshi Nakakura may have shared the same feeling.

In those days Haga Sensei belonged to Nakayama Sensei's dojo and Kiyoshi Nakakura was usually practicing Aikido at Hombu Dojo. Haga Sensei and Kiyoshi Nakakura wanted to know how capable of O-Sensei really was, and so they made a plan to challenge O-Sensei together. Prior to this episode, Haga Sensei had already visited O-Sensei several times intending to challenge him, but every time he got together with O-Sensei, he ended up drunk and lost his chance.

This time Haga Sensei wanted to challenge him before he got drunk, so he told Kiyoshi Nakakura to give him a call when O-Sensei was alone. But they knew it wouldn't work if they challenged O-Sensei one on one, so instead they made a plan to attack O-Sensei simultaneously.

As they planned, one day when O-Sensei was alone Kiyoshi Nakakura called Haga Sensei. Haga Sensei came to the Dojo right away, and he said to O-Sensei, "Let me challenge you. Please let me try". O-Sensei replied, "That's fine with me". The plan they made earlier was that both Haga Sensei and Nakakura Sensei would attack together. But somehow Haga Sensei lost control of himself and suddenly attacked O-Sensei. O-Sensei threw him down with kotegaeshi or a similar technique. Immediately, Haga Sensei said to O-Sensei, "I surrender". That is the story as told by Kiyoshi Nakakura.

Sensei, you met so many great martial artists. I'm sure they all had different personalities, but did they have any common characteristics?

They were all innocent and pure-hearted, I think. They all had confidence and a fighting spirit that they developed through their experiences, and you could see that in each of them. But one thing that consistently existed deep down inside them was a pure-hearted quality. So whatever they would do, you would never feel it was unpleasant or offensive.

What advice would you give to someone interested in starting Iaido?

I will tell you what I expect from my students rather than express it as general advice to those who wish to begin Iaido. I don't want my students to take Iaido lightly or think of it too easily. I am always prepared to open a path for students of Iaido, but only to those who will pursue it seriously. In the past, many students started Iaido out of curiosity and most of them lost their interest quickly. So I now select Iaido students only from among those who have practiced Aikido seriously for a period of time. And I select only those in whom I see a sufficiently serious attitude towards Aikido, and who I believe are up to this additional task.

What should one look for in an Iaito (practice sword)?

One should choose a well-balanced sword. You cannot concentrate yourself if you use a poorly balanced, improper sword. You should choose a sword that gives a pleasant feeling when you cut with it. The length of the sword depends on the style of Iaido you want to practice. Different styles require different lengths.

For practicing Muso Shinden Ryu, how long should the sword be?

It depends on your height, but in our dojo, we use a sword with an average length of 2 Shaku 4 Sun (about 72.7 cm or 28.6 inches). A taller person needs a longer sword.

Is there a way to determine the right sword length by measuring one's height or arm length?

The height and arm length are in direct proportion in many cases. (Sensei demonstrates) Stand up straight and hold your sword with one hand using a natural grip, and then lower the sword tip so it is not perpendicular to the ground but rather at about a 45 degree angle to the ground. If the tip of the sword barely touches the ground, that is the right length for you.

To practice Iaido properly, is it necessary to study Japanese swords?

I think so. For a long time, the Japanese sword has been regarded as a Bushi's soul and has therefore requires extremely careful handling. It is not an overstatement to say that the Bushi treats the Japanese sword as if it were actually the soul itself. The ultimate basis of Iaido is this mindset in which one treats a sword as something as precious as one's own soul. Thus, a sword is a tool to polish oneself. Therefore, I

would like people to know how to treat a Japanese sword. Without learning this, I don't think that one can understand the refinement of Iaido.

What is the relationship between Iaido and Aikido's weapons techniques and body techniques?

In Aikido, when you advance to higher grades, i.e. second-kyu and above, you learn Buki Tori (techniques to take away weapons). However, generally speaking, students do not actually learn how to handle weapons. Students are not taught how to attack correctly with a weapon or how to cut with a sword. So in that sense, it is good for students to experience using a real sword. If you actually practice with a real sword, and understand how to cut with a sword, you know how to attack with a sword. Unless you know how to attack with a weapon you cannot, in a real sense, do Buki Dori, especially Tachi Dori. In this context, I think there is a relationship between Iaido and Aikido.

Is there any relationship between them mentally or spiritually?

It is easier to concentrate your mind when doing suburi with a real sword. In this sense, Iaido is really good. To do suburi with a real sword is very healthy for the mind. I really like it. Similarly, it is easier to concentrate your mind, or unify your body and mind, when you are holding a real sword. You concentrate your mind in the tip of the sword.

There is a difference between doing suburi with a real sword and with a bokken. When doing suburi with a real sword you become aware of the cutting line of the sword edge. This sharpness makes your concentration much more sharp.

When we practice Iaido, should we usually concentrate on the tip of the sword?

Yes. You should concentrate on about the last 4 inches of the sword (about 3 Sun, i.e. 9.1 cm or 3.57 inches).

Do you think Iaido helps students improve their Aikido practice?

Iaido can provide a good opportunity to see your posture and movement in a new light. But at the same time, I think there is a case that practicing Iaido will lead one to understand the real virtue and true depth of Aikido.

Conversely, does Aikido practice change the way one practices Iaido?

I think the degree of understanding Iaido will change. Knowledge obtained through Aikido practice develops one's eyes to see things. So those who develop their eyes in this way will discover both the virtue of Iaido and its real limitations. I think practicing Iaido only is not enough to get that. I also think only those who have a real, comprehensive understanding of Aikido can realize the virtue of Iaido. In this sense, it also creates the opportunity to realize the virtue of Aikido.

What is the significance of Iaido's "kata" practice style as opposed to Aikido's "partner practice" style?

You can practice Iaido by yourself, but nonetheless you always have an opponent in mind. Based on what assumption you make about how your opponent is moving or attacking, you change your handling of your sword and your movement. So you do not practice Iaido with one fixed idea. Except at the beginning stages of practice, Iaido can be free and flexible depending on what assumptions one makes about the situation.

As you look back over all your Aikido and Iaido practice and teaching for over 40 years...

Has it been that long? (Laughs)

...what are your thoughts about the development of Iaido and Aikido, their relationship and evolution?

In the past, I viewed other Budo such as Judo, Karate or Kendo as entirely different from Aikido. And I used to feel that it was odd or not proper to do them together in the context of Aikido. That was how I used to look at them. But once I better understood the theory of Aikido, I did not feel so reluctant. For example, if I apply a Judo technique, I apply it based on the theory of Aikido. To me, it is an Aikido technique. And when I use a sword, I do not feel I am doing Kendo. Rather, I feel it is a part of Aikido and, moreover, that it is already contained in Aikido. Recently, I increasingly have felt that kind of freedom and flexibility about Aikido. So in this sense, I think you can say Aikido is the total Budo.

I hesitate to say this because I mean it in a very specific way, and this idea can be easily misunderstood. Before one really understands what Aikido is, one should never mix it together with other Budo such as Kendo or Judo. This idea has nothing to do with mixing different martial arts together.

A correct understanding of Aikido's fundamental principle, how it includes everything and transforms everything, requires great subtlety to appreciate and long and hard work to achieve.

One should never take such an idea lightly. It does not mean, for example, that because Aikido is the "total Budo" you can do anything you want, for example mixing it together with other martial arts in a superficial way, or thinking that you are superior to other martial arts or martial artists.