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Do you embody the meaning of the Waza (technique/form)? by Kishimoto Chihiro Hanshi

The principal areas that judges evaluate during All Japan Kendo Federation gradings up until 3rd dan are, as specified in the Federation's Points to Observe, correct attire and manners, as well as accurate Nukitsuke and Kiritsuke. They also check to see if the examinees are correctly performing the movements in the way described in the All Japan Kendo Federation Iaido's instruction manual. From 4th dan and above, the ability to battle with your opponent's Kokoro (mind/spirit) is also required.

The ultimate secret to Iai is Saya no Uchi. Through battling with your opponent's spirit you are ideally able to make him say he will give up even before you have drawn your sword. However, in those situations where you are not able to achieve this no matter what you do and your opponent makes an attack for you, you have no choice but to release your sword from the Saya (Koiguchi wo kiru), start the draw and strike your opponent. This is where the foundation of spiritual Iai comes into play. Thus, victory is undecided until the point when the sword is released from the Saya.

For gradings for 4th dan and above, the judges watch to see if this battle is properly carried out. The way to check this is to observe if a person's navel is pointed at his opponent. When the navel is not pointing at the opponent a person's Koshi (hips) and, consequently, his spiritual vigour are lacking, meaning that the person is just physically facing his opponent but not actually attacking him.

To draw quickly without attacking is just a trick and thus is not Iai. There are people who say that striking should be so quick that there is no delay between the draw and the strike; however, this is Satsujinken (life-taking sword) and not Katsujinken (live-giving sword) that is in keeping with the spirit of Iai.

In other words, cutting in Iai does not mean striking an opponent down. Rather, it is the act of cutting out the evil in your opponent's Kokoro and prompting his rejuvenation. That is why, after you have drawn your sword you need to sufficiently find out your opponent's state before striking him down. If he displays an expression or gesture of having given up as you raise your sword above your head, then you decide not to strike down, and instead quietly place your sword back in its Saya.

However, as you cannot place your sword back in its Saya midway through a Waza, you perform the second cut, after which you execute the consequent movements as a warning to your opponent to not give rise to an evil Kokoro. Chiburi and Noto are both carried out in an effort to reconcile with your opponent. This is because the true objective of Iai is to let your opponent live.

During the 8th dan grading that took place in May I noticed that many people performed the Kata with great technical expertise that was lacking with the Kokoro of Iai. When this Kokoro does exist, the spirit of each and every Waza, including the individual components, is discernable, resulting in meaningful Iai.

In the first stage of the 8th dan grading you have to perform seven Waza from the All Japan Kendo Federation Iai, and in the second stage seven Waza from Koryu. Since examinees are told which out of the 12 All Japan Kendo Federation Iai Wazas they have to do on the day, they need to be able to do all of them. However, as they can choose the Koryu Wazas they want to do, it seems to me that many people just end up practicing only the seven Waza they will do for the grading. Each style has a different number of Waza. To be able to perform meaningful Iai in the case of Muso Shinden-Ryu, you have to be able to perform all 41 Wazas from Shoden, Chuden and Okuden. If you only practice seven Wazas for the grading, not only will this be unattractive to the judges, but they will also be able to see through this tactic.

From a person's facial expression it is possible to tell how they are feeling while they are performing a Waza. Those people who want to quickly strike their opponent somehow have a menacing demeanour about them that is discernable within the tenseness that they project. However, when people have practised with the intention of having others watch their performance, they convey a calm and relaxed impression.

Three years in the run-up to my 8th dan grading I practised all the Shoden, Chuden and Okuden Waza on a daily basis, in order to reaffirm my awareness of the spirit of Koryu (Muso Shinden-Ryu). At that time my job was really busy so I would go to the gymnasium when everybody was fast asleep and practice in complete darkness. I would position my opponent too far away from me to cut him and train while thinking how to not kill my opponent or be killed by him, and how I could overwhelm him with my spiritual vigour. Through this process I was able to grasp an understanding of the hidden meaning within each and every waza (form).

Are you moving before your body adopts the correct stance?

The ability to be able to have the correct Ma is an important factor in being able to specifically perform the spirit of Iai. In fact, it is something that I look at carefully. This is because you can tell by looking at somebody's Waza the degree they have practised acquiring the correct Ma.

However, until 3rd dan I think it is important to be able to perform movements accurately in the way specified in the manual. Once you have learned these, you are ready to study how to acquire the correct Ma. If you don't do this, your movements will be hurried, leading to an incorrect body posture, or movements that are too slow. Learning movements that are faithful to the basics will always come in useful in the future. I think that if you slack off in this regard you will hit a wall and struggle.

At 4th and 5th dan you perform movements with a Ma that takes into account your imaginary opponent's movements. When your movements are not carried out in coordination to your opponent's, then you are just doing them for your own self-satisfaction. The opponents in Iai are invisible. However, from 6th dan the judges should be able to see your opponent's movements during your performance. If you are able to do this, your movements should naturally become void of any waste.

My instructor Danzaki Sensei would sternly tell me, "Don't let up on attacking with spiritual vigour; don't move onto the next movement before your body is in the correct posture." He said this because such hasty movement exposes a gap in your defence. He also taught me the importance of correct Ma. Not letting up on attacking the opponent with spiritual vigour allows one to control him, thereby giving rise to relaxed movements and a higher level of Iai. This is what is required of high-graded practitioners.

One effective way of not loosening your spiritual vigour is to breathe through your abdomen. Up until now I focused on making the area below my navel expand during both inhaling and exhaling. This is something that I can now do naturally.

By doing this your tailbone (sacrum) tightens up, strengthening the abdominal muscles and thereby tightening one's spiritual vigour naturally. What's more, it relieves tension in the shoulders and improves one's balance. Since the lower body is more stable, it allows Saya-Biki, an important factor in the proficient movement of the Kissaki, to be carried out more smoothly. Those people who do not have a tension in their abdominal muscles end up having a weaker Saya-Biki, which means that the Kissaki does not move proficiently.

Proficient Kissaki movement is one of the points that judges pay particular focus on for 6th dan and above gradings. When the movement of the left hand that carries out Saya-Biki is well-coordinated with the right hand, the Kissaki moves more proficiently and this raises the technical proficiency of Nukitsuke, which is vital in Iai.

Despite the fact that Nukitsuke is performed with the right hand, the Kissaki will move less proficiently if you grip too hard with this hand. It is important to make sure that your left hand, which carries out Saya-Biki, is the stronger one and that it is in unison with your Koshi (hips). Placing 30% of your strength in your right hand and 70% in your left hand will convey the greatest amount of power to the Kissaki. In my experience I have found that increasing or decreasing this ratio results in the Kissaki moving in a non-proficient manner.

Jo-Ha-Kyu is one of the factors that leads to proficient Kissaki movement during Nukitsuke. There are some people who change their grip in order to give momentum to the Kissaki, but this is wrong. You do have to change your Tenouchi but you must not change your grip itself. As an example I would like to explain about the right hand's grip during Nukitsuke. In the beginning your grip should be gentle as if you are gripping an egg, and the moment when the sword leaves the Saya you tighten, in order, your little finger, ring finger and middle finger. Then when you shift to the next movement you loosen, in order, your middle finger, ring finger and little finger. It is most important to exert force in these three fingers.

In this way the movement of the fingers changes but the grip itself does not. A change in the grip will alter the Tenouchi, which will result in an interruption in the sword's movement and thus the Waza. Out of the above mentioned three fingers the work of the small finger is the most important. If this finger works properly, then the other fingers will naturally do so too. When a person's Tenouchi is effective then the Kissaki makes a dry swooshing "shu" sound the moment the Kissaki begins to move. However, for those people whose Tenouchi is not effective and they cut with the part of the sword closer to the Tsuba (a cut known as Motogiri), a dull "byu" sound can be heard all the way through to the end of Nukitsuke. In reality, this takes place in tenths of a second, but judges are able to discern it.

The same thing can be said of the function of the left hand that grips the Saya. In Muso Shinden-Ryu people are taught not to remove their left hand's little finger from their Obi (belt). By pulling back the left hand while making sure that the little finger slides against the Obi, the practitioner ensures an increased momentum of the sword and a more powerful Kissaki, thus bringing his Koshi and Nukitsuke into the correct state.

You can tell the amount that a person has practised by looking at the angle of his right knee after he has performed the first draw in the Waza known as Mae in the All Japan Kendo Federation Iai and Shohatto in Muso Shinden-Ryu. For highly proficient practitioners their Koshi is in the correct state and thus their right knee is naturally at a right angle. Since such a person is in a ready stance he can respond to any kind of movement from his opponent. When the knee is bent, the upper body leans backwards and the Koshi is in the incorrect state, which means the Kissaki is not effective and you cannot smoothly move to the next movement.

Your attitude to daily life manifests itself to the judges

You can train your Kokoro (mind/spirit) through repeatedly carrying out the simple movements that make up Iai: drawing, cutting and re-sheathing. The sword is drawn based on ways that our predecessors devised to deal with a variety of attacks from imaginary opponents. However, just drawing the sword is not real Iai. When I practise I draw my sword while incorporating my own thoughts into the Waza, such as imagining that my opponent is targeting my weak points. Devising your own ideas and researching the Waza leads to the development of Iai that differs from individual to individual.

Danzaki Sensei would often say this: "Iai is not for killing others, but for allowing them to live. Try to achieve the kind of Iai that a Daimyo (lord) would do". This Daimyo-style Iai is what is required of high-graded practitioners. This is what individual Iai is like, and I feel that it is connected to the reasoning, presence and grace that are the judges set as criteria for 6th dan and above.

A person has to naturally exude a presence and grace. Of course this can be achieved through continued practice, but how you conduct yourself in your workplace and at home also affect this. Surely it is also important on a daily basis to take the lead in things that you can do, as well as help and cooperate with others.

When I was a company employee I would try my best to get to work early and wipe everybody's desks. When my subordinates found out what I did they ended up taking the initiative in anything they did, resulting in everybody's work progressing. Work would happily let me go out to Iai-related events, even when my company was busy. I think that one of the basics for a martial artist is not to forget appreciating those around them, or not to forget to repay somebody's kindness. This considerate attitude and doing natural things, forges the way a person is, which manifests itself in a person's presence and grace.

When a person's performance has no allure even when their Kata is of a high level, surely this is a sign that this person has not trained with a focus on these aspects. That's why I think such people have no leeway to relax and hence their desire to kill their opponent as quickly as possible shows in their performance. I would like these people to more strongly try to capture the Kokoro (mind/spirit) of Iai.

Finally, I would like to talk about different ways of practicing. Many people think that they cannot practise if they do not go to the Dojo, but this is incorrect. Even during everyday conversations you can practise breathing methods. For example, by focusing on expanding your belly while talking you are actually performing abdominal breathing.

Holding the strap (of your bag or sword case) while on the train is a way to practise Tenouchi. You repeatedly grip, in order, with your little, ring and middle fingers, and then relax them in the opposite order. When you can't hold the strap you plant your feet down and utilize your Koshi in such a way that you have a stable posture even if the train shakes. Devising such small ways to practise transforms your everyday lifestyle into a Dojo. Hence, you should consider your time in the Dojo as the time to make minor refinements to your Iai.

Even to this day I continue to reflect upon the following words that Danzaki Sensei said to me when I was at the end of my twenties: "There is a limit to physical strength, but there is no limit to your courage or spirit; in the end it depends on how much you want them".

Profile of Kishimoto Chihiro Hanshi: Born 1933 in Yamanashi Prefecture. Learned Kendo during his childhood. In 1958 joined the Dainippon Iaido Kenshukai Kenshukan Dojo (Dojo Head: Danzaki Tomoaki Hanshi), and started to learn Iaido and Jodo. In 1975 established an Iaido division in the Chiba Prefectural Kendo Federation under the instruction of Danzaki Tomoaki Hanshi. In 1997 became vice-president of the same association, and from 1999 has also been the representative director. In his roles has worked hard to strengthen the foundations of the organization and develop it further. Currently holds the positions of council member of the All Japan Kendo Federation, Iaido committee head, and instructor of the Chiba University Iaido club. Attained 8th dan in 1984, and Hanshi in 1992.

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