

Art of *Iai* Offers Clue to Japan's Soul

By Natsuko TOYODA

In Japan, the days of sword-wielding battles are a thing of the past. However, one of the techniques of wielding swords is being passed on from generation to generation. It is *iaido* (*iai* for short), the art of drawing a sword in one stroke to cut down the opponent or ward off an attack. "Why use a sword in this peaceful era?" you may ask. However, *iai* does not train people to kill one another. *Iai* is being handed down because one of its purposes is to train the soul – a world of great depth.

First Encounter with *Iai*

Recently, I had a chance to see a demonstration of *iai* for the first time. Even in Japan, not so many people watch *iai* demonstrations unless they are particularly interested. Even though I took some lessons in *kendo* (Japanese swordsmanship) when I was a child, I had nothing to do with *iai* except that my grandfather, Osamu Toyoda, was a master of *iai*. *Kendo* and *iai* are on the same line of Japanese martial arts featuring the use of swords, but a real sword is used in *iai* compared with a bamboo sword and protective gear in *kendo*. Moreover, *kendo* is practiced in a one-to-one match but *iai*, taking the form of a demonstration only, is more artistic and spiritual. However, the distance between *iai* and me has been dramatically shortened since my father took over the Araki Mujinsai School of *iai* as its headmaster from my grandfather after his death.

The first *iai* demonstration I saw was part of a *kenshibudo* (*kenbu* for short) festival. It is a dance with a traditional Japanese sword or fan, performed to the accompaniment of *shigin* (recitation of a poem), and is a form of art. On the other hand, *iai* by itself is a martial art.

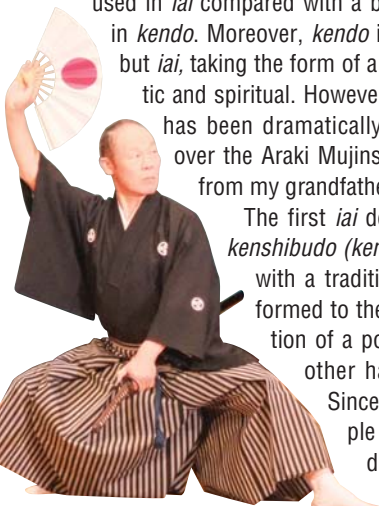
Since they both use a sword, many people study both *iai* and *kenbu*. In the demonstration, many *iai* students from five branches in the United

States also participated. I was filled with anticipation because it was hard to imagine how these people, so different in statures and looks, would perform with a Japanese sword, dressed in traditional formal Japanese attire – a *kimono* with a family crest and a full-length, pleated and divided skirt worn over it.

I learned that these people practice in five southwestern cities in the United States – Phoenix (Arizona), Lancaster and Austin (both California), Las Vegas (Nevada), and El Paso (Texas). And there are also many women practitioners. I had a lively chat with a young, cute woman called Cheryl, who said she very much likes Tokyo's Harajuku shopping streets and also dressing herself up. She said she had been studying *kendo* and *iai* for eight years. "When I am practicing them, it calms my soul," she added. Cheryl certainly understands the spirit of Japanese martial arts.

The American participants included a diver, an artist, and a tattoo artist, covering quite a variety of fields. In Japan, *iai* conjures up the image of something very traditional. But there is no such stereotype abroad, meaning *iai* is practiced freely there. Reasons for getting interested in *iai* are also varied. Some people have seen Japanese swords in movies while others have Japanese ancestors. Even if people live in different countries or speak different languages, sharing a hobby makes it easier for them to communicate.

During a party after the demonstration, an *iai* master was doing his best to convey to the foreign participants the message, "*iai* is something you do with your soul," with the help of gestures of his hands and body, but it seemed that everyone understood it and their conver-



Kenbu





sations were quite lively. It was good news indeed to learn that there are many people abroad seriously studying *iai* and really loving it.

Japanese Soul Remains Abroad

In Japan, we tend to forget good things about our country. The reason would be because they are too common for us to notice. On the other hand, people from abroad enjoy Japanese art or traditional lifestyle. They easily find the goodness of Japan. In the same way, Japanese living outside the country tend to keep national traditions. Therefore I felt a sort of unique sense when I visited the home of a Japanese immigrant family in the United States. I think they unconsciously keep the Japanese atmosphere seen a century ago that people in Japan today don't remember. Because they live far away, they try to keep the traditions. I greatly appreciate that such goodness has crossed the seas and remained unchanged all these years.

For example, Brazilian Jiu-jitsu (BJJ), known as Gracie Jiu-jitsu, is a *judo*-like martial art which Japanese *judo* master Mitsuyo Maeda took with him to South America about a century ago. Modeled on the *judo* of his time, it has been developed by his student Carlos Gracie and his younger brother Herio. In short, it is more practical, still keeping the essence of combat training that *judo* used to have. This was imported back to Japan about 13 years ago by Yuki Nakai, the first Japanese BJJ black-belt holder. Today, BJJ has gained a firm stand-

Photo: National Diet Library website



Mitsuyo Maeda: His *judo* was developed to Brazilian Jiu-jitsu.

ing among the physical fighting sports of the world.

Despite some changes (BJJ is interesting because it has absorbed the essence of Brazilians' cheerfulness), it has kept at its core the spirit of *budo* (martial arts), which is not just a sport but the training of one's spirit. With a variety of techniques, it maintains the vitality and freshness that are not seen in today's internationalized and standardized *judo*. As for *iai* spreading overseas, perhaps its spirit will live on unchanged because it is practiced abroad, even if the Japanese at home may forget that spirit.

Art of Mental Focus

Both in Japan and abroad, there are surprisingly many chances to watch *iai*. In Japan, in particular, there are many schools of *iai* in different parts of the country which stage demonstrations. If a foreign visitor to Japan finds a demonstration, it is advised that he or she feel free to visit it and watch performances. One can watch a performer slice a thick roll of the *goza* or *tatami* rush matting in one stroke with a real sword to try out the blade.

Upper-level players can perform more breathtaking feats. For example, two players can perform *sun-dome* (hairbreadth stop). They face each other, draw a real sword, swing it down and halt it only an inch from the opponent's forehead. Seeing the sword that can slice a *goza* roll come within a hairbreadth of the forehead can make spectators feel quite tense and staggered. It is also possible to watch *iai* overseas when there are such events as "Japan Week."

Needless to say, *iai* can be enjoyed as a sport, but it is also an art, thus packed with many elements, including mental training. **JS**

[Toyoda Ryu Kenshibudo/Araki Mujinsai Ryu Iaido](http://www1.winknet.ne.jp/~meirin/English/eindex.html)
<http://www1.winknet.ne.jp/~meirin/English/eindex.html>

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