

Train Driver and Master *Iaido* Swordsman

I*aido* is a martial art based on use of the Japanese sword (*nihonto*), said by many to comprise the origin of all martial arts in Japan. During the samurai era, members of the warrior class trained in this discipline as a means of developing their fencing skills. But today, it is referred to as, 'The path for spiritual strength through training in sword lore'. In other words, *iaido* has come to be pursued as a means of self-refinement and self-development.

Kendo (Japanese fencing), one of the traditional arts passed on from generation-to-generation in Japan, is now enjoyed by large numbers of followers around the world. Although the roots of *kendo* clearly lie in the art of fencing, from the mid-Edo Era (1600–1867) protective gear such as masks and body armour, as well as largely non-lethal bamboo swords were devised to make it safer and more enjoyable. With this change, *kendo* shifted to favour competition between participants in protective gear, and this basic trend has continued to the present day. In sharp contrast, in *iaido*, the enemy is an imagined attacker.

Takeshi Kawaguchi, chief driver in the Narashino Train Crew Depot of the JR East Chiba Branch Office is one of many avid followers of *iaido* in Japan today.

Kawaguchi was raised in a rural district of Ibaraki Prefecture. Growing up in a rich natural environment, he was active in sports, and trained hard in baseball, his first love. At graduation from senior high school, he joined the Chiba Railway Operating Division of the former JNR. One of the key reasons for choosing this job was the chance to continue to pursue his love of baseball. For over 10 years, he was an excellent catcher on the baseball squad fielded by the Division.

However at 32, his doctor advised him to give up baseball due to heart problems. He followed this recommendation but his love of sports made him yearn to continue to be active, and after some thought he selected *iaido* as a replacement for his days on the baseball diamond. Fortunately, there was an *iaido dojo* (training hall) in his neighborhood. Today, 22 years later, Kawaguchi has attained eighth *dan* (grade) in the art, and instructs 13 pupils once a week at the local community centre.

The founder of *iaido* is believed to be Jinsukeshigenobu Hayashizaki, a retainer of the Mogami feudal clan in Oshu (current-day Yamagata Prefecture in northern Honshu) during the Eiroku Era (1558–69) whose school of fencing came to be known as the Hayashizakimuso School, or the Shigenobu School. Nearly two centuries later during the Kyoho Era (1716–36), Shuze Hasegawa, a swordsman of unprecedented prowess, fused his unique technique into the art, and changed the name of the school to the Musojikiden Shigenobu School. He established a following in his native district of Tosa (current-day Kochi Prefecture in Shikoku). From then, the art has been passed on as a school of fencing originating in Tosa. In 1926, the Japan Martial Arts Association at last recognized the true value of *iaido*, with appeals to the Japanese people to practise it with the same enthusiasm devoted to *kendo* and *judo*. While producing various different schools, *iaido* has been cultivated as a full-fledged Japanese martial art. Takeshi Kawaguchi belongs to the All-Japan *Iaido* Federation, which has 20,000 registered members.

The essence of *iaido* occurs at the instant the sword is unsheathed. Simply stated, it is the discipline of drawing on an imaginary enemy, and preparing for a single critical instant in time. According to Kawaguchi, it requires some 3 years to learn to handle the sword with natural ease, and no less than 10 years to tentatively master all aspects of the art. The initial training begins with etiquette and the method of folding the *hakama* (skirt) worn during the activity, with the first year consisting of practice with a bladeless sword. Kawaguchi explains, 'Once you learn to handle the sword well enough to move it according to your own will, it becomes far more invigorating.' People take up *iaido* for various reasons, including a love of Japanese swords, because they did *kendo* in the past and now want to try their hand at a related martial art.



Mr Kawaguchi checking a signal while driving

(EJRCF)

However, many have their motivation sapped when they discover that iaido demands far more concentration and physical exertion than first imagined. Kawaguchi has been teaching the art for about 7 years, with about 50 pupils signing up during that time. In retrospect, he says he is satisfied if one out of 10 of his students sticks to the discipline.

He reckons that the reason he has remained so devoted to iaido for well over two decades is the charisma linked to the sheer depth of the pursuit. To take part in iaido, one wears a white quilted coat and black hakama, with the session beginning with a bow to a *Shinto* altar. Participants then bow to their swords, and turn silently to the drill. Unlike judo, kendo, and other Japanese martial arts, iaido is not practiced in pairs. Rather, the training is advanced by pretending to fend off attacks from an imaginary adversary. In reality, this invisible enemy is none other than oneself.

According to Kawaguchi, the concentration of one's entire physical and mental being into the perfection of this technique is tantamount to battling oneself. During



Facing an imaginary enemy

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Meditating before practising iaido

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the training, the presence of any undisciplined thoughts will almost always result in failure. Kawaguchi says that among the lessons he has learned from iaido is the wisdom that, 'Those who triumph over their own desires are destined to become truly strong people. To triumph over oneself, it is vital to endure all things, with this fortitude bringing greater depth and breadth to the human spirit and fostering the aptitude needed to truly excel in the future'. As far as Kawaguchi is concerned, his 29-year accident-free career as a railway driver is due in great part to his love of iaido. In the words of Agaku Yamamura, the master under whom Kawaguchi studied, 'Iaido is the classroom of life'. Kawaguchi says that he continues to sense the shining truth behind these words even after practising the art for over 22 years.

He was promoted with flying colours to eighth dan this May in Kyoto. Last October, he completed a dojo in his home, where he now trains daily in preparation for his Master's Test, 5 years from now.

Rubbing a thick callus that has formed on his foot over years of training, Kawaguchi smiles as he says, 'I am determined to keep

up iaido as long as my body can move, and I welcome anyone who chooses to knock on the door of this martial art. Indeed, I look forward to continuing to work through the vehicle of iaido to interact with people from all walks of life'.

In another two-and-a-half years, he will reach the mandatory retirement age at JR East. After he leaves the company, he intends to devote even more time to the instruction of iaido, as he strives to expand the knowledge of this tough discipline to a greater circle of followers than ever before. ■