

## Classical Warrior Traditions of Japan: Part 6

Suio Ryu Iai Kenpo (c)

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The ability to quickly move a weapon from a neutral state into an aggressive or defense movement has always been of great interest to the warrior. Correspondingly, the arts of the fast draw, variously called Iaijutsu or Battojutsu, have held an important place in the curriculums of the comprehensive classical martial traditions of Japan.

The tradition that we focus on this time owes much of its fame and notoriety to the whim of an author of cartoon scripts, which have become famous the world over as the 'Lone Wolf and Cub' series. And yet the actual tradition is a realistic, practical and refined system of combat for on and off the battlefield that holds at its core the practice of Iaijutsu.

## Origins

Suio Ryu Iai Kenpo, the tradition's formal title, was founded by Mima Yoichizaemon Kagenobu (1577-1665) in around 1615. Yoichizaemon was born in the Dewa fiefdom to Mima Saigu a priest at the Junisha Gongen Shrine. Sadly, the actual sight of the shrine and the grave of the founder are no longer verifiable as they were both destroyed by landslide in the 18th century.

As a child Yoichizaemon studied the swordsmanship of the Bokuden Ryu, founded by Tsukahara Bokuden, as well as a form of jojutsu practiced by Yamabushi, mountain warrior priests, called Kongo Jo Joho.

It was in the Spring of Yoichizaemon's 18th year that he was to encounter a new and startling art, when his father's friend Sakurai Goroemon Naomitsu came to visit the family. Being renowned in the local area for his martial skills Yoichizaemon asked Naomitsu for a friendly duel, which would be presided over by the former's father, a challenge Naomitsu happily accepted.

At the appointed time Yoichizaemon faced his opponent in a chudan posture and Naomitsu in his Yamabushi like attire, strangely with his sword thrust through his belt, placed his hand on the sword's tsuka. Both competitors then advanced to the critical distance. Yoichizaemon, feeling suppressed by his opponents poise and unusual way of carrying the sword retreated one step to assume a jodan kamae. But, in that very moment Naomitsu loosed his blade sending it flying under Yoichizaemon's guard and stopping it sharply in front of his face. 'That's enough,' called Mima Saigu and the encounter was over. It was an exhibition of Iaijutsu that would change Yoichizaemon's life.

Naomitsu was actually a student of the iai innovator and founder of the Hayashizaki Ryu, Hayashizaki Jinsuke Shigenobu (1559-1604) and remained with the Mima family for the next 3 months in order to impart the outline of Hayashizaki's teachings to the eager young Yoichizaemon. Having gained a degree of understanding of the art from Naomitsu, Yoichizaemon vowed to develop his own system of iai by searching the deepest levels of this martial discipline. It is said that he spent his days drawing against a tree in the precincts of the shrine and in the evenings knelt before an altar and prayed for guidance from the deities.

To advance his studies further Yoichizaemon went on his first Musha Shugyo a traveling form of trial by combat in which warriors would voyage to different areas to test their martial skills against those of other traditions. He traveled to such places as Omine, Togakure, Ontake, Katsuragi and Tateyama. It was during this excursion that he met Sohei, warrior monks from Mt. Hiei who were fleeing the wrath of Oda Nobunaga, from whom Yoichizaemon learnt a system of battlefield naginata.

Twenty years had past since Yoichizaemon had sworn his oath to create a new system of iai, years in which he had polished himself by day and by night. It was in the middle of that twentieth night that Yoichizaemon gained enlightenment when, while kneeling in front of a shrine's altar, he had a vision of a sphere in which were the forms of white gulls floating without conscious thought on water. He ran out into the shrine's garden and grabbed a bokuto which he now found he could wield in any direction without fear or conscious thought.

Based on his vision Yoichizaemon created the traditions 64 core techniques, a figure taken from the 28 areas of heaven surrounded by 36 birds of earth represented in a mandala that Yoichizaemon drew immediately after his revelation. He named his tradition Suio Ryu Iai Kenpo, Suio utilizing the characters for water and gull, and placed within its teachings the arts of Iai, Kenpo (an alternate name for kenjutsu), Naginata, Kogusoku (a form of grappling) and jojutsu.

Even after achieving enlightenment and founding his own system Yoichizaemon continued to travel to test both his faith in the gods and his sword arm. It is believed though that this was not a voyage to gain victories and conquests, rather a test of his ability to achieve a state of selflessness. Yoichizaemon saw the practice of swordsmanship as a form of ablution to the gods and his own body as a vehicle to achieving a harmonization with the deities.

When he faced an opponent Yoichizaemon would never attempt to win by trickery or fancy techniques, rather he always aimed to perform aiuchi (lit: mutual strike), which would force his opponents to retire or face certain death.

Yoichizaemon stated that

"Our swordsmanship comes from the mountain ascetics. The essence of our tradition, and the attainment of an unassailable position, comes from cutting down our opponents while the sword is still in the scabbard, stifling our opponent's actions and achieving victory through not

drawing the sword. While engaged in combat, detach yourself from all thoughts of winning or losing, achieve a pure and unfettered mind and attain unification with the gods.”

Yoichizaemon used his spacious dojo to teach not only martial techniques but also taught of the universe through a Heaven and Earth Mandala that he had hung on its wall. At the age of 67 he retired from active teaching, passing responsibility to his son and heir Yohachiro, living out another twenty years before peacefully passing away at the age of 87.

Very little has been written of the Suio Ryu in literature, however there is one story that is often referred to regarding the founder. In the book entitled ‘Gekiken Sodan’ published in 1843 the following story is told.

‘From the Eastern provinces the swordsman Mima came to Tsuyama in Misa no Kuni and gathered students there to teach iai. At this time a rival teacher called Asada Kurobei was already teaching in the area and a match was soon arranged between the two. One of Asada’s students asked of him ‘How are you going to beat (Mima’s) iai?’ To which Asada replied that to beat an iai exponent one must attack the man and not allow him to draw. Hearing of Asada’s reply Kagenobu realized his great skill and with only those words as his evidence realized the futility of a match and retired from the Tsuyama area’.

In all the records of the Suio Ryu, including those covering the periods of Yoichizaemon’s travels, there is no mention of his being in Tsuyama or of any proposed match with Asada. However it is admitted that Asada’s words strike right to the heart of iai and the story is often quoted by members of the tradition as proof of the founder’s existence.

Succeeding Yoichizaemon, his son Yohachiro Kagenaga added a further 10 techniques to the tradition which to this day represent the Shoden, or initiate level of technique. These are a set of 5 Yo, aggressive/positive techniques, and 5 In, passive/receiving techniques. Yohachiro believed that the techniques his father had created were too advanced for a beginner to comprehend and so added these ten techniques so that those less familiar with swordsmanship could develop their basic skills before attempting the more advanced central techniques.

The tradition passed down in relative obscurity until the time of the 9th Soke, Fukuhara Shinzaemon Kagenori. Shinzaemon was both a student of the 8th Soke of the Suio Ryu, Yoshino Yaichiro Sadatoshi, as well as a student of Yoshida Shigesaeon Sadatoshi, in turn a senior student of Masaki Taro Dayu Toshimitsu the founder of a system of manrikigusari (a chain with weights attached at both ends) called the Masaki Ryu.

Shinzaemon took what he had been taught of the Masaki Ryu weight and chain techniques and added a kama, or sickle, into the equation. He named his system Masaki Ryu Kusarigamajutsu and the system has been taught in conjunction with the Suio Ryu to this day, where it is more correctly referred to as Masaki Ryu Fukuhara Ha Kusarigamajutsu. The system itself contains 18 separate kata designed to be practiced on both sides of the body, i.e. alternating the chain swinging and sickle wielding hands. The shape of the sickle used in

the system is unique in that it is shaped so that it is able to cut whether being pushed, pulled or used to strike.

The Suio Ryu was introduced into the Katsuse family by the 13th Soke Mizuma Hanbei Kagetsugu. Hanbei was staying at an inn in Hamamatsu City, Shizuoka Prefecture, which was being run by the Katsuse family when the young Katsuse Mitsuyasu caught his eye and he remarked to Mitsuyasu's father that his son had great potential as a martial artist. Hanbei spent his entire extended stay teaching Mitsuyasu the techniques of the tradition until he finally passed over the seals and scrolls of the tradition in 1930, recognizing Katsuse Mitsuyasu as the 14th Soke of the Suio Ryu.

Having moved to Tokyo to further his kendo training, Mitsuyasu enjoyed a strong relationship with Nakayama Hakudo, often referred to as 'Showa no Kensei' (lit: Divine Swordsman of the Showa Era) who provided the name and calligraphy for the dojo that Mitsuyasu created and which still acts as the headquarters of the Suio Ryu, the Hekiunkan (lit: Hall of the Blue Cloud). He also, interestingly, presented Mitsuyasu with a Menkyo license in Kendo. At his passing at the age of 88 in 1992, Katsuse Mitsuyasu Kagemasa held the 8th Dan Hanshi license in kendo and iaido, as well as a 7th Dan Kyoshi license in jodo.

The teachings of the Suio Ryu and its conjunctive systems have been passed down to the present day where the instruction and promulgation of its arts is overseen by the 15th Soke Katsuse Yoshimitsu Kagehiro. He is also recognized as the 12th Soke of the Masaki Ryu Fukuhara Ha.

## **Curriculum**

The Suio Ryu has a daunting range and number of techniques in its curriculum, the techniques of which illustrate time and again the remarkable unification of its principles and movements across weapon types.

In the iai portion of the curriculum there are 10 techniques at the initiate level developed by the 2nd Soke Mima Yohachiro. 9 kata in the Tachiiiai (lit: standing iai) and 9 techniques in the Kuyo kata, a series of forms that see the practitioner perform their techniques from seiza.

There are in addition a series of 18 Kage techniques, which were formerly taught only to the successor of the tradition but have recently been made available to all practitioners. These techniques offer counters and problem solving answers to the numerous variables that can be found in the practice of the Kuyo and Tachiai kata. Further, there are a series of passive and aggressive techniques outside of the main curriculum called the Yami series and further a set of 9 kumi iai (lit: paired iai) kata with a corresponding 9 kage variations. There is also a set of techniques that are only taught to the successor of the tradition which are supposed to represent the very essence of the Suio Ryu's teachings.

In addition to this central iai portion of the system there are 9 techniques of Kogusoku, (grappling performed from standing), 12 Wakizashi techniques performed from seiza, 18 Kenpo kata, 16 Omote and Ura jo versus ken forms and a further 10 Oku kata, as well as a set of 6 highly advanced jo techniques called Muso Gaeshi. There are also 3 tanto-dori (lit: knife taking) kata, 5 tanjo (short staff) kata and 10 jo versus jo kata, 9 Omote and Ura naginata versus sword kata, 9 Omote and Ura naginata versus naginata kata and a series of 3 remarkable solo naginata sequences referred to as the Yasen Okubi Kata, encompassing techniques designed to unhorse opposing cavalry.

The first techniques of the Suio Ryu tradition that are taught from the founder's original curriculum are the omote and ura techniques called Tatsunami, from the series of nine kata called the Kuyo. Tatsunami refers to a tidal wave that literally rises up before crashing down on the shore and this image is well represented in the movements of the kata. In fact many of the names of the tradition's iai kata make reference to different types of waves giving clues to the manner of their performance. There are also some forms whose precise explanations for performance are reserved for only the most senior of students and are transmitted in poem form.

In the omote version of Tatsunami the shidachi sits with their sword placed by their left side, blade facing in and with the tsuba in line with the knees. The uchidachi is seated at the optimum range for both sides, i.e. a distance that means that one side is unreachable for any strike that is made from one party only, but that is the optimum range when both parties are moving forward.

Unlike some systems the Suio Ryu teaches that all techniques that are performed from seiza, apart from the Tatsunami techniques, are purely for the development of the practitioner's carriage and cutting ability. It is felt that there would be no situation in which the warriors of the past would sit opposite each other in seiza with their long swords thrust through their belts. Practice of techniques is made from seiza precisely because of its difficulty. It is believed that if you are able to draw from this 'dead' position then you will certainly be able to draw from any other posture.

In performance the shidachi senses the opponent's aggressive intentions and grabs their sword, chambering it in front of them and, using the end of the tsuka, strikes forward, aiming to hit the opponent in the middle of the face. The uchidachi ducks back out of the way and quickly counter attacks by sweeping their right arm across their body to grab for the offending handle. Seeing his first attack has been foiled the shidachi pulls back his front foot and the sword to leave himself raised on both knees with the sword, still sheaved, across their body, but now with their right hand in place on the handle. Having missed their grab attempt, the uchidachi draws their own blade in a single-handed cut that aims to strike to the top of shidachi's head. The shidachi, who has been waiting for the opponent to initiate a counter, seizes the opportunity to jump forward into an upright crouch and simultaneously draws their blade at a rising angle from beneath the opponents arm, seriously damaging their striking limb.

Having finished the encounter the shidachi raises the sword overhead in a single-handed jodan kamae, while returning the loose scabbard to a position against the hip. The sword is then lowered into gedan and chiburi (lit: blood shake) is performed. The noto, or sheathing of the sword, is then executed and the forward right leg is retired. This action clears the practitioner's body from the critical distance that the opponent may be able to utilize if still capable of any kind of action. The practitioner then reassumes seiza finishing the form.

The Ura version of Tatsunami sees the pair assume the same relative positions as in the omote version. The difference being in this case that the sword is placed on the right side of their bodies. It has been suggested that the difference in placing the sword on one side of the body over the other would depend on the circumstances of the meeting and the level of trust between the two principals. The lesser the trust the more likely the sword would be placed on the practitioners left side were it could be more easily brought into use.

As in the omote version the shidachi reads his opponents intentions and picks up his sword, although this time with his right hand. He then chambers and strikes with the butt to uchidachi's face. Uchidachi again ducks back and attempts to grab the handle, which is quickly retracted by the shidachi. Unlike in the previously described version the shidachi does not wait for his opponent's next attack but draws the sword with his left hand across his body, with the blade edge facing up, and thrusts the blade into his opponent's solar plexus. The chiburi and the noto actions are the same as in the omote version except that they are performed using the opposite hands.

This technique develops strong physical coordination and dexterity while also training the practitioner in how to both observe and respond to his opponent's movements and counters. It also teaches the practitioner how to bait the opponent into movement that draws them into a position where they are vulnerable.

Suio Ryu practitioners are always made strongly aware of the need to draw the opponent into cutting range through the use of trickery and feigned weakness. They also learn distancing through paired practice of all iai techniques from the central curriculum. However, practitioners are also constantly reminded of the simple truth that if they are able to reach their opponent with their blade then the opponent must be able to reach them.

Throughout the practice of techniques in the Suio Ryu, practitioners are made aware of the difference between practicing on level wooden floorboards and the reality of more natural ground. Thus when a cut is made the practitioner is expected to coincide their impact on the visualized opponent with the planting of the forward foot, ensuring body weight is driven through the target and so even if the foot were to slide this would only be after impact had been achieved. Similarly, the degree of lighting and available space for movement is also considered and the affect of these environmental factors practiced and experimented with for each technique.

## Philosophy

The essence of training in the iai of the Suio Ryu has been stated by the 14th Soke as follows. They are words of interest and resonance for any practitioner of iai arts.

*'The essence of iai lies in the moment when the blade leaves the scabbard. If we err in the mechanism of the draw we will not be able to influence the moment in which life or death is decided. Speed, correctness of form and strength, these are the objectives of iai training.'*

*Having said this, for the initiate to begin with speed will cause their body's form to be incorrect, their cutting lines to be unclean, their application of kiai will be mistimed and their iai form will not develop. By firstly calmly and slowly drawing the blade and observing the form dictated by the tradition, polish your grip, cutting line, body posture and kiai. In this manner you will prepare the tradition's structure, your own and other's kiai will become clearer and speed will be added to your draw. At length you will also understand when to move with speed and when to move more slowly and through this understanding reach a state of universal movement.*

*Many iai practitioners of today go no further than the most basic practice form of slowly drawing the sword. This is not the way to achieve improvement. Believing this is truly a great misconception. To reach the highest level of understanding takes more than one day, it must take the form of endless practice of the basic techniques.*

*iai that has not been fully explored and studied can only ever be a dance performed with a sword.'*

## Conclusion

The vibrancy and energy of the Suio Ryu under Katsuse Soke can be matched by few koryu traditions. A visit to the Hekiunkan dojo will see a remarkable number of young men and women practicing its varied arts. It is certainly a testament to the generations of Suio Ryu masters that so many young people can find meaning and inspiration in the teachings of a tradition whose patterns were first laid down in the early part of the 17th century.

As many traditions of iai in the present day fragment into opposing factions and in many cases lose their original martial intent the Suio Ryu stands as a stark example of the harsh reality and effectiveness of iaijutsu. It is this practical efficacy and the insistence on maintaining combative reality through harsh paired practice and experimentation that marks the Suio Ryu as a truly living martial tradition.

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