

Samurai fighting arts (bujutsu)

Buying a iaito

Congratulations! After several months of training with a bokken you just received permission from your sensei to look out for a iaito. This article has been written specially for you to help you with your quest.

The Samurai Workshop is a well known supplier of numerous iaido dojo under the (Dutch) Kendo Renmei. Chances are that one of your dojo mates - or someone they know - is already training with a iaito of The Samurai Workshop / Kaneie Sword Art!

The first tip we can give you is to not make this decision alone. Talk with your teacher and co-students. Afterall, they are the ones who've seen you stumble around with your bokken and often have a good idea what your strengths and weaknesses are.

However, before you can choose a proper sword you will first need to find out what suits you best. This concerns the length and weight but also the balance. This may seem a bit vague but trust me, it's one of the most important features of a Japanese sword!

The Samurai Workshop can often be found on events held by the Dutch Kendo Renmei (ishido cup or national championships) so if you have the possibility, stop by and try some swords. We're sure that with the help of a co-student or sensei we can find out pretty easy which type of sword would fit you best. You can also make an appointment to visit us in Eindhoven, The Netherlands. We would happily welcome you with a cup of tea, coffee and a buttload of swords!

The second tip is not to make any hasty decisions. In any case, do not order a sword before you gathered enough knowledge to be able to recognize quality (and bad quality). On the world wide web, probably over 90% of the offered swords are absolutely rubbish and surely not suitable for serious Japanese martial arts as iaido, iaijutsu and kenjutsu. Though they can seem nice and pretty at first, in terms of Japanese swords there is more than meets the eye.

There is of course always the chance your teacher will not even allow you into the dojo with your freshly bought sword.

The third and last tip before we really get started is to put aesthetics always last. Of the numerous quality aspects (overall quality, balance, weight, length and safety), visual appearance should always come last.

A good looking sword which you can't use for training is definitely a waste of money. Unfortunately this also goes for ordering custom iaito online. You may have the choice to determine the tsuba, fuchi & kashira saya and tsuka-ito, you will not be able to select a specific weight (20-50 grams is actually a huge difference). Any advanced iaidoka will confirm that the weight and balance is extremely important and that 50 grams may be the difference between a great sword and a muscle injury

Once ordered, it's difficult to return to the maker because a) it's been made specially for you, and b) chances are they are on the other side of the planet.

The nagasa

The effective length of the cutting part of a Japanese sword is known as the nagasa. Usually this is measured in the Japanese standard shaku and bu which is also a metric system. A single shaku is 30.3 cm and one bu is 3.03 cm.

Your ideal sword length (we mean the nagasa) is influenced by different factors. The length (and width) of the upper body and the lengths of the arms are probably more important than your total body length.

The most important is that the nukitsuke or nuki-uchi (the initial draw) can be executed without too much probably and additional hip movements. In the beginning the sword blade may touch

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and scrape against the wood of the saya but your striving towards a completely silent draw. Also note that any contact of the sword blade with the saya makes clear that your technique isn't what it's supposed to be. After all, a sharpened sword can cut through the wood of the saya without any problems, something you really can't afford to do, given the position of your left hand.

If nukitsuke seems impossible and the kissaki cannot exit the saya properly then the sword is most likely too long for you. Otherwise the sword is too short if the sword can be drawn without any efforts of the left hand (saya-biki). Performing a sitting kata can be a good test to determine whether the sword is good for you.

With the above kept in mind, also try noto (returning the saya into the sheath). Note that probably the flexibility of your right wrist is still in development and that your left hand doesn't have that great control over the saya. This really takes time to learn and you shouldn't worry about it too much.

Hold the swords very lightly and try to keep the blade more or less horizontal. If you can return the sword without raising your right arm and changing your body position (hip remains in the same position) then you are most likely have the correct length.

A lesser reliable method is to hold the sword loosely next to your body. The kissaki can't touch the floor but instead should hover max 5 centimeters (2 inches) above the ground.

However if your body proportions differ a bit from the average this trick may not work. For instance: long legs but short arms result in a long sword which is surely too long for you.

The weight

Swinging a sword can be best compared with a pendulum or sling shot. A slight increase in weight will cause an exponential increase in force at the tip. Naturally, when wielding a sword this effect results in a stronger strike but that also increases the amount of strength needed to stop the sword.

By experience we can now tell that for modern day Japanese swordsmanship training the ideal weight lies between 900 and 1000 grams (without the sheath). For our samurai'ettes the average is about 50 - 100 grams lower. Body physique and blade length are the main criteria to determine your ideal weight. Note that iaito of 700 grams or even above 1200 grams can be ideal for some. You should be able to train comfortably and with minimal chance of muscle or joint injuries.

That said, a sword which is too light for the user will not give any feedback, which makes it difficult to feel what you are actually doing. Movements will become less controlled and accurate.

When the weight is too much there is a rather high danger of muscle or joint injury. Stopping the sword will require too much strength and you'll feel the weight pulling your muscles until it hurts. Don't be stubborn and talk to your co-students and/or sensei if you think your sword is too heavy (it's not a shame, really!).

laido kata are constantly repeated and 'repetitive strain injury' is a serious danger for swordsmanship practitioners. Quite some iaidoka have experienced the effects of a 'tennis elbow', whether they realize it or not (iaidoka also tend to be very very stubborn people :))!

Perhaps it's also nice to know that the old Japanese swords are often much heavier than the iaito that you are using for training. Each time a Nihonto (Japanese forged sword) is polished it will lose some weight. After numerous polishes it may reach the weight of 900 - 1000 grams but the starting weight of a freshly forged sword is often 1100 grams or even higher.

However true battle swords were often without a bo-hi (groove meant for reducing the blade's weight) which saves you at least 100 grams. A thick sword in battle allows you to strike harder

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and reduce the chance of breaking or bending. Also the sword should be able to take on at least a dozen of polished before they were rendered useless. There are even example in antique Japanese sword where the weight in mounting would raise above the 1400 or 1500 grams!

The handle

The handle of a Japanese sword is known as the tsuka. The tsuka is made out of two wooden boards where the shape of the nakago (tang) is carefully carved out. The friction of the tsuka onto the nakago should be enough to hold the blade but for safety at least one bamboo pin (mekugi) is added. Due to this rather simple construction the tsuka can be considered the most crucial part of a Japanese sword. Problems or defects can cause life-threatening situations. Besides a properly constructed tsuka you'll also need to determine your ideal tsuka length. Note that there are two camps who have different opinions about this matter. Here we will describe the traditional tsuka length as how it's been transmitted by the Zen Nippon Kendo Renmei, the largest iaido association in the world. According to the Japanese sword tradition, the tsuka of a katana daito needs to be around 2.5 times the width of the wielders hand. Another way of measuring are: two hands and two fingers, two hands and a thumb and (when holding your arm in a 90 degree angle) the distance between your inner elbow to your wrist. There are more methods written in different densho but these are the most used.

Is your handle much longer or shorter when using the above rule-of-thumb then you may want to try another sword.

The techniques you are practicing were designed in a certain place and time in ancient Japan. Because every period and time in Japan knows their own unique sword geometry, we know exactly which type of sword the founders of Muso Shinden Ryu, Muso Jikiden Eishin Ryu, Shinkage Ryu and Hoki Ryu were using.

If your sword looks nothing like the people who have founded your iaido style, you can't perform the techniques they were intended to. Imagine playing tennis with a squash racket, baseball bat or a hockey stick.

The thickness of the handle is really just a matter of taste and the size of your hands. Since your pinky and ring finger determine your teno-uchi (the grip on the tsuka) it is necessary to be able to wrap these fingers around the handle. A too thick handle will result in holding the sword as a baseball bat which will make your strikes wobbly and unbalanced.

Often terms like 'full tang' are brought to the table. To be completely honest this has absolutely no effect on the safety on the sword. The majority of Nihonto katana swords have a very short nakago (15-20 cm). Also swords which are mounted in Japan will always have only one mekugi pin. If the tsuka is carved out properly this is more than enough, however a second pin does not harm as well.

Strictly speaking one should check the state of their tsuka and mekugi pins every time before starting their training. Since we do not always have the time or knowledge, many Western dojo prefer (and sometimes demand) to have two mekugi pins.

The level of the craftsman who constructed the tsuka can often be recognized by the quality of the tsukamaki (wrapping of the handle). When examining the cross-overs we can look at the evenness of the diamonds and the tightness of the wrap. With a proper wrap the cross-overs are unable to move... at all. If you can easily move the cross-overs the wrap will definitely come loose after a few training sessions.

Another detail in the tsukamaki is that the cross-overs should alternate (left over right, right over left etc). If this isn't done and the tsuka-ito rips, the complete wrapping will unravel itself, with all the possible dangers.

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Details which are a bit more difficult to spot are the hishigami (translated: diamond paper). These are small folded paper triangles which are placed under the cross-overs to support them from below. After the ito gets flattened by tapping the hishigami will take the shape of the bumpy ray skin and the exact shape needed to support a neat diamond. Only this traditional method of handle wrapping will result in a tsuka which is tight and safe to train with. Should there be any doubt about one of these points then the sword is suitable NOT for training. This may sound harsh but don't forget you are swinging a 1000 grams object with still a very sharp point.

'Wallhangers', cheap chinese production swords and more

"It's not all gold that glitters" is definitely applicable to purchasing swords online. Beautiful images and marketing terms like 'traditional polish', '100 times folded steel' and 'full tang' are nothing but meaningless terms when it comes to Japanese swords.

Despite that we can use modern electrical equipment to parts of the sword production process, a large part will always be manual work. The steel quality is one thing but the safety will be mostly determined by the quality of the mounting and tsukamaki. Buying a second hand iaito (of zinc alu alloy) from a fellow student is will always a better choice than a 200 euro sword through a box-moving website or even worse... ebay.

It is nearly impossible to create a good sword for such a low budget. Concessions don't have to be a bad thing, however these should never be done on building quality and safety.

Looking at the future

A woodworker should know about wood, a car dealer about cars and a computer salesman about computer hardware and software.

Unfortunately for swords it doesn't work that way and many sword sellers have absolutely no clue of what they are doing. Quick copying and start selling through a 123website or ebay. You should expect from a serious supplier of martial arts equipment that they are able to dismount your sword within seconds and explain every single component. Does this person can (and wants) to help you when the sword gets loose after some time? Maybe you have a rattling tsuba or hear a strang click with every strike. What about when the tsuka-ito rips or the saya gets loose or splits or the kashira is getting loose?

And probably the most important... If he can't see the difference... How can this seller advise you about a high quality sword?

Think before you commit to a purchase.

Conclusion

Of all experienced Japanese swordsmanship students only a few still train with their first sword. That partially shows how difficult it is to choose your first sword. The best is just to try a few swords; of your teacher, your co-students and if you have the option: a supplier of high quality budo equipment.

The guide will be updated and edited from time to time. Should you think something should be in here but isn't, let us know! If you still have any questions you can always contact us. Train hard and stay safe!

Domo arigato gozaimashita!

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