

# Iaido: Art of Drawing the Japanese Sword

Norwalk Kendo Dojo offers training in kendo, the way of the sword. The Dojo is a member of the Southern California Kendo Federation (SCKF), the largest kendo federation in the United States.

Although kendo's origins lie in fighting with real swords, today it is practiced using bamboo sticks, or *shinai* (literally "bamboo sword"). It is important to remember the principles of using a Japanese sword, such as striking using the proper section of the shinai and maintaining the proper cutting angle. However, the actual techniques of handling a sword are not taught in kendo.

Norwalk Dojo is one of only a handful of dojos in the SCKF to offer iaido as part of its curriculum. In iaido one learns how to draw and resheath the sword, as well as a variety of cutting, thrusting, and blocking techniques.

In contrast to kendo, which is a full contact art in which two contestants do battle in protective armor, iaido is performed individually, as a series of *kata*, or predefined forms, against one or more imaginary opponents. The iaidoka trains to draw while seated,



Jean Kodama, left, and Rebecca Lim, visiting from Australia, practice ZenKenRen iaido at Norwalk Dojo.

standing, or walking, against opponents from the front, sides, or rear, with vertical, horizontal, diagonal, and even upward cuts.

Each kata includes four elements: *nukitsuke*, the drawing of the sword from the scabbard, *kiritsuke* or *kirioroshi*, cutting, *chiburi*, flinging the blood from the blade, and finally *noto*, returning the sword to the scabbard.

In iaido, etiquette is even more important than in kendo (and it is *very* important in kendo!). The new student may spend weeks learning to master the proper way to pay the beginning and ending respects to the sword and the practice hall. To study iaido requires a great deal of patience, diligence, and concentration. In iaido the opponent is oneself, and the goal is to attain perfection in kata. Each movement requires not only the precise positioning of the sword and every part of the body, but also correct breathing, proper *metsuke* (gaze), and *zanshin* (intensity).

It is said that kendo and iaido are like two wheels on a cart, each side supporting and furthering the journey of the practitioner.

There are many styles of iaido. The All Japan Kendo Federation (Zen Nippon Kendo Renmei) developed a set of kata drawn from the major traditional iaido schools in Japan. The resulting *seitei gata*, also known as ZenKenRen iaido, is intended to encourage kendo students to practice a standardized style of iaido, not only in Japan but also throughout the world.

Our chief iaido instructor at Norwalk Dojo is Yamaguchi Takeshi sensei, Iaido 7 Dan Renshi, who has been with the Dojo since its inception in 1964. Yamaguchi sensei began learning iaido in 1963 from the late Mori Torao sensei, who is known as the father of modern kendo in the



Dennis Ralutin sensei demonstrates for Phillip Ma.

United States. Yamaguchi sensei is currently the chairman of the All United States Kendo Federation iaido committee. In addition to ZenKenRen iaido, Yamaguchi sensei teaches the Muso Shinden Ryu style of iaido.

Our other instructors include Ralutin Dennis sensei, Iaido 4 Dan, president of the Southern California Iaido Association, and Okuno Isamu sensei, Iaido 4 Dan, who teaches the Tamiya Ryu style of iaido.



Takeshi Yamaguchi sensei, right, with Rebecca Lim.

Norwalk Kendo Dojo practices kendo on Mondays from 7 to 8:30pm and Fridays from 7:30 to 10pm, and iaido on Mondays from 9 to 10pm. For information see the dojo website at <http://www.eanet.com/norwalk/>