

# Japanese Sword 101



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## ***Part I: Construction and Classification of the Japanese Sword<sup>1</sup>***

The swordsmith, a master craftsman, forges the actual blade. Typically, he begins with a special kind of traditional Japanese steel called tamahagane, and uses hammer and forge to fold it a number of times. There are two processes: one to make core steel (shinganae) and the other to make jacket steel (kawagane). The latter is folded more times and ends up being harder and less pliable than the former.<sup>2</sup> In the simplest construction, a piece of kawagane is folded around a piece of shinganae to form a jacketed core. Thus the shinganae allows the sword to flex instead of breaking on impact, and the kawagane allows it to take the famous razor edge. More complicated construction methods can produce swords made of as many as 5 pieces of steel, all forged differently.

The folding process is used to closely control the uniformity and carbon content of the steel. An accomplished smith can tell by eye to within a tenth of a percent the carbon content of a piece of steel.

When the basic blank has been constructed, the smith will continue to work what is essentially a metal bar into the shape of the sword. When the forging is done, the blade is the correct length, curvature and general shape, but lacks a finish and certain of the various edges and features. The smith will then use coarse polishing stones to further define the blade before passing it on to the polisher.

The polisher uses successive grades of stone to finish the blade. The polisher is responsible for the famous edge, but that is only one part of his job. His real job is to bring out the beauty of the smith's art. Properly polished, the complexity of the construction is revealed. Improperly polished, the blade is ruined.

A woodcarver makes a saya (scabbard) for the sword. Each saya is custom carved out of wood from the ho tree. The actual blade is required, as the carver will use it as a template to make a properly fitting saya.

A jeweler makes the habaki, the small but critical metal piece that is constructed to fit exactly on the blade next to the tang, and provide the snug friction fit that keeps the blade from rattling in the saya.

Further craftsmen make the finishings. There can be separate craftsmen for the tsuka (handle), tsuba (handguard) and menuki (hilt ornaments).

Generally, swords are classified by length. A daito is a sword with a blade longer than two shaku ( shaku = 11.9 inches ). A wakizashi is between one and two shaku in length, and a tanto is less than one shaku.

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<sup>1</sup> This section of the essay was adapted from, <http://www.kjartan.org/swordfaq/section09.html>, one of many good sites discussing Japanese weapons and armor.

<sup>2</sup> Shinganae is generally folded about 10 times, resulting in about a 1000 layers. Kawagane is folded anywhere from 12 to 16 times, depending on the smith and the metal he is working with, and so could have from 4000 to 65000 layers.

There are lots of other names. The most common one, katana, refers to the style most people have seen, a daito inserted through the obi (belt) with the edge up. A tachi is an older style, slightly longer and more curved, and worn suspended by cords edge down (cavalry style). A nodachi is a bigger tachi, with a very long handle, slung over the back for battlefield application. A kodachi is a smaller tachi. A wakizashi is also a short sword, although of a newer style (kodachi is often used as a generic term for short sword, and so may also be used to refer to a wakizashi). A chokuto, or ken, is a very old style straight sword.

## ***Part II: Parts of the Japanese Sword***

It is important to know the parts of the tool that you intend to master. I have divided the major sword-parts into three different groupings – those associated with the handle, the blade, and the scabbard – and then divided each group of parts according to the type of tool you intend to use, bokken or iaito. If you own and train with a bokken, you should learn the basic terms under that heading; if you own and train with an Iaito, then you should learn the more complete list (see below).

### **Group I: The Handle**

#### **Bokken**

Tsuka	Handle
Tsuba	Guard
Tsubadome	Rubber ring that secures guard to handle

#### **Iaito**

Fuchi	Ring that separates handle from guard
Habaki	Ring that separates guard from blade
Seppa	Spacer between handle and blade
Menuki	Handle ornamentation
Mekugi	Bamboo pin
Kashira	Handle end cap
Ito	Handle wrapping (thread)
Same	Handle wrapping (shark skin)

### **Group II: The Blade**

#### **Bokken**

Ha	Edge of the blade
Kissaki	Tip of the blade
Mune	Back of the blade

#### **Iaito**

Mono Uchi	(“cutting thing”) Last 1/3 of the blade
Hi	Blood groove
Hamon	Wavy temper line along the blade

## **Group III: The Scabbard**

### **Iaito**

Saya	Scabbard
Koi-guchi	Mouth of the scabbard
Saya-giri	Bottom of the scabbard
Sageo	String for tying scabbard to obi
Kurikata	Cord knob

## ***Part III: Proper Care and Use of the Japanese Sword***

In this section I will discuss several practical matters related to the proper care and use of the Japanese sword.

A. How to hold the sword. It is necessary to hold the sword properly to make smooth, straight cuts. Begin by grabbing the sword handle close to the guard with the right hand. Hold the sword vertical in front of you (blade facing forward). Place the end of the handle in the left palm, then wrap the fingers around the handle to take a grip. When holding a bokken, the small finger will protrude slightly past the end of the handle; when holding an iaito, the finger and end of handle will be lined up. With the left grip established, lower the tip of the sword forward to about a 45° angle, then place the right hand along the top of the handle near the guard. The thumb will wrap around the left side of the handle, the fingers wrap around the right side. The right hand grips the handle at a slight angle (i.e., not perpendicular) to the sword, so the base of the thumb is about two fingers width from the guard. One should have a firm, but not tight, hold on the handle at all times.

An important skill in cutting is to constantly “adjust” one’s grip on the sword handle. This concept is easier to demonstrate than describe in writing, but suffice to say that one’s grip will shift quite a bit during cutting.

B. How to take distance. There are two different situations in which you may want to “take distance” with a sword: the first is when cutting an unarmed opponent (for Tai Sabaki practice); and the second is when facing another swordsman. As the former is usually done by an experienced swordsman, I will only explain the latter here.

Begin by doing Ritsu Rei, either Batto-ho or Notto-ho. After taking Seigan no Kamae, uke should shuffle forward or backward so that the tip of his/her sword and tori’s sword cross (to the inside) by about three inches. Uke then drops the tip of his/her sword slightly, moves it to the left side of tori’s sword tip and “taps” tori’s sword out of the way to the right. While tori is readjusting his/her sword, uke steps forward with his/her left foot so both feet are side-by-side, then steps back with the right foot to take Daijodan No Kamae. This establishes proper distance between uke and tori, and prepares both partners for a technique, which is generally initiated by uke.

C. How to breath and kiai. Breathing must be coordinated with the cutting stroke. Inhale while taking kamae, exhale and kiai during the cut. There are two basic kiai used during sword training. The first is a long vowel “iiiiiee” sound made during an offensive move (cut or thrust). The second is a long vowel “tooooo” sound made during defensive moves (blocking and some cuts). The sounds issue from the lower abdomen (hara), not from the throat or chest.

D. How to draw and put away.

The challenge in removing an iaito from its saya is to pull it out smoothly, thus reducing friction and increasing speed. The challenge of returning the sword back to the saya is to do so without slicing your fingers. In the end, both challenges are overcome with practice. However, there are a few techniques that can make the process easier.

Stand with feet together, knees slightly bent, iaito in the saya, which is tied at your left side, and left hand grasping the end of the saya. With your left hand, move the handle-end of the sword toward the front of your body at waist level. Grab the handle with your right hand so that your thumb is next to the guard and your palm is as low as possible on the inside of the handle. Draw the sword out of the saya with your right hand while pulling back on the saya and simultaneously sliding your left foot back. When the sword tip has cleared the saya, flip it over so that the tip is aimed at your partner’s eyes, then use your left hand to slide the saya to your back (so that it is out of your way) before taking a grip near the kashira. You should now be in Seigan no Kamae.

To put away from Seigan no Kamae, step forward with your left foot so that your feet are together, legs slightly bent. Pull the saya to your side with your left hand, holding the saya at the end, with thumb wrapped around inside and fingers around outside. (It is important that your thumb and index finger are encircling the edge of the saya!) Turn the sword over and lay the back side of the blade (closest to the guard) along the “v” between your thumb and index finger. Slide your left foot back, pulling the saya back as you push the sword forward. The back of the blade should stay in contact with your left hand until it clears the saya. Lower the tip and insert into the koi-guchi. Slide the sword into the saya as you step forward with the left foot and move the saya forward. After the sword is put away, straighten your legs and grab the guard with your left thumb, placing your right hand on your right thigh.

E. How to tie saya to obi with sageo.

Before training, the iaito (both sword and saya) is inserted into the obi on the left side, and secured with the sageo. The sageo must be tied to the obi in such a way that it can be quickly unfastened. This is accomplished with a special knot, which I will describe here.

Begin by inserting the sword and saya into the obi on the left side. Insert the sword to about mid-way along the saya so the sword will balance near horizontal in the obi. Take the ends of the sageo with the right hand and move to the right side. Double the sageo and slide into the obi from the top. Make sure there is about a three inch loop protruding down from the inside of the obi. Take the end of the sageo and double it as before, sliding the bend into this loop. Now pull the first loop closed so that it grasps both the obi and

the second loop. To release the sageo, simply pull the end. The sageo is normally tied on the right side.

F. How to respect the sword. It is hard to overestimate the degree of esteem accorded the sword in old Japan. A samurai, especially during times of war, would treat his sword like a best friend, from whom he was rarely parted. In the Genbukan/Kokusai organization, we preserve this sense of respect for swords and other training tools.

Respect is conveyed in the way one treats the sword. Always bow in the tool before and after training. When carrying the sword or handing it to a training partner, it should be obvious that you have a profound respect for the tool. The sword should be carried in your left hand or worn at your left side. When seated (*seiza*), you may place the sword on the floor along your right side. In general, the blade of the sword is not “shown” to anyone unless you are doing a technique.

In the dojo, when the bokken or iaito is not next to you, it should be stored along a wall or on a weapons rack. In the former case, place the sword where it will not be stepped on or over (bad manners!), either standing up against the wall or laid down along the wall with the point aiming toward the front of the room. In the latter case, place the sword in the rack blade down and pointing to the front of the room.

G. How to carry the sword. Whether iaito or bokken, the tool is held horizontal at one’s left side, blade up, with the thumb placed on the tsuba just to the right of top center. When not doing a technique, the tool is held down at arm’s length; when doing a technique, the tool is raised to waist level.

H. How to wear training uniform. Proper attire can make training a more pleasurable experience. During sword training, Genbukan/Kokusai students may wear either the more modern Judo-style gi or a traditional hakama. If a gi, the color should be black; if a hakama is used, the color may be either blue or black. The uniform should not have any markings or patches, except for the organization patch, which is worn over the heart. While most people are familiar with a gi, few are as familiar with the more traditional items, such as the hakama or hachimaki.

- **Hakama.** The hakama is a pleated skirt that was worn by men and women during the Edo Period. Though hakama were worn by individuals from several different social classes, in our own time it has come to be associated with the warrior, or samurai, class. In our organization (Genbukan, Kokusai), the hakama is reserved for Yudansha (a.k.a., Black Belt students), either during Jujutsu or weapons training.
- **Hachimaki.** The hachimaki is a strip of cloth about 90 cm. in length, wrapped around the head and tied in the back. Hachimaki certainly has a practical use (i.e., to prevent perspiration from obstructing one’s vision), but the traditional schools tend to emphasize its symbolic meaning. Putting on hachimaki is likened to putting on armor or gathering one’s spiritual energy in preparation for battle.

Consequently, in our organization the hachimaki is never worn during Shinzen Rei.