

# Examination Questions/Assignment Iaido

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Sandan, Jörgen Sjöholm

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## Iaido and Jodo

All grades should write down their answer to the question **“What is the essence of Iaido/Jodo to you?”**

### Iaido

1 kyu and 1 dan	Name the twelve katas of Zen Ken Ren Iaido.
2 dan	Describe seven important details of “Mae”.
<b>3 dan</b>	<b>What is “zanshin” for Iaido?</b>

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## **What is the essence of Iaido to me?**

The most straight forward way for me to describe the essence of Iaido would be to start of in the term “martial art” which is the category that Iaido falls within. It would of course be more preferable to use the Japanese term Budo, which would probably open for a deeper discussion, but since I do not speak Japanese that would be an approach too risky and pretentious for me to choose. Even so, the term Budo has slipped in here and there in the text where I find it relevant to use in favor of the wording “martial art”.

I think that the fundamental essence of Iaido is much the same as for other martial arts, as long as you stay within the “true”<sup>1</sup> sense of this term. Iaido is Budo with the add-on definition that the sword is used as the main tool whereas other Budo uses other tools, and the essence is shared with Budo in general.

In short, both the martial-part and the art-part are essential for searching the essence. Removing the implications from one of them, or letting one dominate at the expense of the other, removes oneself from the essence of any martial art, Iaido included.

## **Some thoughts about “martial”...**

“Martial” implies that it has to do with combat, war or similar. If you loose this connection, it all becomes meaningless motions. It could still be spectacular to watch to some extent, it could still be a healthy exercise, etc; but it would not be Iaido. Then you could just as well do football, gymnastics or any other physical training with the only purpose of getting fit, winning a game or similar.

But Iaido is more than a ballgame, there must always be an underlying martial purpose and content, otherwise the essence is lost. The martial aspect also brings a very specific seriousness and mental sharpness into it. It becomes, descending to use an empty but pseudo poetic phrase, “a matter of life and death” rather than about winning a match.

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<sup>1</sup> Today, I decide what is “true”!

Having been involved in several other martial arts<sup>2</sup>, I could use a selection of them to exemplify<sup>3</sup> some pitfalls in this connection to the martial aspect of Budo:

- Jujutsu as it is trained today in Sweden often emphasizes the practical self defense aspect, which is interesting in itself, but also leads to a short sightedness and a disregard for old knowledge in favor of inventing “new street-proven stuff”. It is also tempting to market jujutsu as a “contemporary, effective and applicable method of self defense”. This mostly results in a trade of between tradition, practical applicability/function and market value. This mishmash tends to diminish the traditional values as well as the sought after self defense efficacy, a lose-lose situation where the essence is lost from all perspectives.
- Karate originally has a strong traditional martial aspect, but in most dojos the focus is on modern competition which leads to a narrowing of the technical repertoire as well as the training mindset. The rules of competition become the most important factor defining the art and determining what should be practiced and how it should be done. The supposed martial side of karate is then no longer truly martial, but rather sports oriented. This could end up in a completely different and perhaps equally valuable essence, but not the one I find in Iaido.
- Aikido to my experience has a quite close relationship to the martial side in a more true sense<sup>4</sup>. It could however be an issue that aikido is so diversified with a lot of styles and senseis with their own “truths”. This is *not* in opposition to Budo, on the contrary I think that “finding the truth of your own” is a highly significant part, but it certainly increases the risk of getting lost on the way, especially if you start looking for your own truth too early and/or without a solid foundation in the martial realities of your art. And not too many people today can have a reasonable understanding on the realities of sword combat, meaning that the heritage from a knowledgeable lineage is especially important when it comes to Iaido.

One circumstance that in this respect may be in favor of Iaido compared to many other martial arts could be that since swords are not very common in war or street fighting these days, the art of Iaido does not have to prove itself, and can not market itself, as a useful reality based fighting system. Therefore Iaido is not tempted to wander of from the tradition to the same extent as other arts might be, to gain selling points or to become more attractive in the modern society. Thereby Iaido has kept the connection to its original martial roots more than many other martial arts today.

On the other hand, a distinctive draw back for Iaido regarding its connection to the martial aspect could be the preferred method of training, solo kata practice. This way of training makes the martial context quite theoretical, the combative application is not very obvious and it is hard to determine whether there is any fighting credibility or not in the techniques trained. There is quite a risk that it all becomes merely a dance, with no deeper meaning than

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<sup>2</sup> One could argue that all of these examples are not Budo by a more orthodox definition. However they fit under the umbrella of martial arts as the term is commonly used, so Budo or not they serve their purpose as examples in this context.

<sup>3</sup> Note that this is not intended as a valid description of the arts mentioned; it only reflects my personal experiences from the aspects being promoted in the schools were I happened to study them.

<sup>4</sup> A problem for aikido could be that it tends to attract esoteric personalities who often prefer not to reflect on the martial side so directly or realistically, but instead adopt a rather academic or “romantic” approach, which of course on the other hand can be argued to be in line with O Sensei’s intentions. This is however a side track and not within the scope of this essay.

performing nice or flashy movements. And one could certainly argue that a lot of necessary knowledge and experience is never gained if one never trains with real opponents in a more realistic setup<sup>5</sup>. But this potential disadvantage of Iaido could also be seen as positive; demanding more of the practitioner in terms of effort and energy to reflect on deeper meanings that are not obvious from the beginning. This makes us ready for...

### ...some thinking on “art”...

“Art” implies that it goes beyond mere function and effectiveness. It is not *only* about pure usefulness, in this case for swordfighting. It is not even about systemizing the fighting into a training progression/syllabus (which to my understanding could be the scope of a “jutsu”, such as in “Iaijutsu”). To be an art it must address qualities and development on yet another level as well.

You could to some extent say that from an art point of view, proficiency in the contents, in this case handling and fighting with the sword, is not even a goal in itself. It is merely the mean for accomplishing something more.

However, an art is of no value if the craftsmanship is poor. If for instance the cut is weak or the stance unbalanced, there will be no significant deeper meanings available on the art-level. You cannot reach any artistic levels if the tools are insufficient, meaning that the entry point to Iaido or any other martial art is in the physical training, you can not skip that level trying to get quicker to the actual point. Then you will end up doing fuzzy things on a nearby mountain top, drinking red wine or sake as you grow a long tangled beard.

But you must not stop at the physics; they only give you the tools for entering the art level. Excellent craftsmanship alone does not make it an art. You could be the most awesome swordfighter of all times, but still not a martial *artist*, but perhaps a thug or a psycho killer.

So, which are these “other, more noble things” that should be accomplished in order to qualify as an art? These I cannot pinpoint in a simple list without sounding like an advertising flyer for a newly opened “crash-course-in-meditation-for-\$-centre”. But I hope that the remaining discussion will indirectly give some initial indications of at least where to start looking.

An interesting reflection is that an art does not seem to be linear in the sense that you simply learn more and more facts and skills and thereby becomes better and better. In stead the understanding, insight and physical proficiency goes hand in hand on different levels, much like the layers of an onion: from the beginning you only see the outer layer, when you have peeled that one of a new layer emerges, with the same basic characteristics as the first one, but yet on a level closer to the core. An art is infinite, and has many levels of understanding.

This could be exemplified like this: An instructor teaches a small class of three students, a beginner, a shodan and a sandan. Based on what he sees, he gives a general instruction, for instance “your hips should be square when you cut”. This instruction could be beneficial for all the three students, but they would individually understand it on different levels.

- The beginner would think “ok, hips should be square, I didn’t know that”.
- The shodan might think “oops, I lost my hips again; good someone is on to me about that”.

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<sup>5</sup> This is why Iaido and Kendo could be considered “sister arts”, none of them is complete without the other. But that too is beside the point for this text.

- The sandan, by good training always keeping his hips correctly, does not have to change anything about their position, but may instead, triggered by the instructors remark, reflect deeper on for instance why the hips are important or how the rest of the body should be used to support and be supported by the hips or how the position of the hips actually affects the cut.
- Trainees on even higher levels may even start to reflect on occasions were it would be correct to position the hips in a different manner during a cut, what do I know?

The exact same instruction had value for all three students, but on completely different levels. That is one of the main beauties with Iaido according to me. What my instructor told me three years ago is still a valid instruction for me today, but my understanding of it now is very different. I understood it from one perspective already back then, but today I realize that there is also another, deeper, way of understanding the same statement. That does not mean that I had the wrong understanding of it three years ago, it was relevant for that level, but it means that there is always more to it than what is readily available at the present level.

Of course there are many things specific for each level. A comment from the instructor or a certain exercise may be very useful for the development of a practitioner on one level, but could be completely impossible to understand for a student on a lower level, or impossible to perform sufficiently well for obtaining the intended purpose of the exercise. And for a student on a higher level, the same comment or exercise might be totally meaningless since he has already past the level where this would lead to any progress. But these level dependant issues do not really relate to different “truths” on different levels of Iaido, they only reflect that various means to promote understanding of the same truth sometimes are appropriate on different levels.

And now to the most interesting point: how many more levels are there that I have no real conception of today? I could only imagine how I will understand the same statement from my instructor five years from now, or 25. This is what makes an art so intriguing: You do not know exactly what is in it for the future, but there is a distinct and “proven” feeling that many new levels will emerge infinitely as you go along. And constantly rediscovering those same old “new” truths again and again in the same old backyard but from different perspectives is what makes it so rewarding. Do not dig more holes, dig deeper in the one you have already started. Do not search wider, search deeper. (Says he who has admittedly started digging a lot of holes by studying quite a few different martial arts.)

Let’s leave it there, before starting to write things about “knowledge about your inner self”, “coming in tune with the universal life spirit” and similar, which is not necessarily nonsense, but is quite impossible to write something substantial and meaningful about, at least for me. It also seems a little too far out for a text like this that I think should demonstrate some understanding of Iaido quite directly, not enter a “quasi-religious” level.

### **Summing up**

This adds up to a characteristic of Iaido that I think captures its essence perfectly and therefore is suitable as a summary: the fact that “depth of practice” is an explicit evaluation criterion during examinations.

The quality of your Iaido is not primarily measured on how many “techniques” you know, or even how well you perform them in terms of speed, power etc. It is more what your Iaido expresses “in between the lines” about your depth of practice that really counts. And for

gaining increased depth of practice, I strongly believe that both the martial and the art side must be addressed with the same level of emphasize in the training.

That is the essence of Iaido to me.

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### What is “zanshin” for Iaido?

One translation of *zanshin* that I feel quite comfortable with is “extending spirit”.

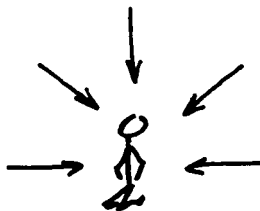
This expression I think captures the main characteristics of *zanshin*. It implies that:

- it is something that extends (outwards from a source, by necessity),
  - which in turn indirectly implies that there is an *active* source involved in some way, and that
- it is not mainly a physical attribute.

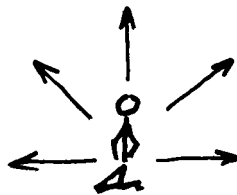
Some elaborations on that:

### Awareness?

Awareness is a term sometimes used for describing *zanshin*. This could be relevant on a lower level, but I do not think that it is entirely correct, since it implies stimuli coming from the outside to be passively received and noticed, not something emerging *from* you which I think is an important property of *zanshin*.

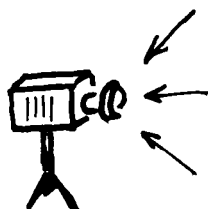


*Awareness* – you notice stimuli from the outside.

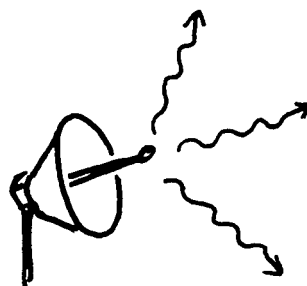


*Zanshin* – extending from you.

If awareness should be used for describing *zanshin*, the mental picture should not be that of a film camera, passively receiving and registering the light coming into its lens from all directions. Rather you should imagine the awareness like a radar, which is actually actively sending electromagnetic pulses out, which then gives echoes of information back.



*Passive awareness* – there is a lot more to *zanshin*.



*Active awareness* – now we are closing in, but we are not there yet.

This would give the term awareness a slightly more active connotation which moves it a little closer to *zanshin*, but still I do not quite like this visualization, there is more to it than that.

### Zanshin in aikido

In aikido, *zanshin* is often said to be for example the mental fulfillment of a throw, keeping the connection with the opponent also after physical contact has ceased. You continue to control the opponent mentally, even after your physical contribution to the technique is over.

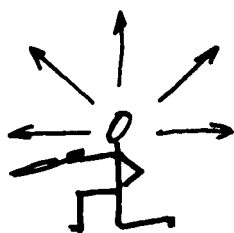
This I also feel is a little bit shooting beside the point when it comes to describing *zanshin* in Iaido, but to the opposite side compared to the term awareness. If awareness is too passive to describe *zanshin*, the aikido interpretation is a little bit too active and too focused in one direction, on one specific purpose. *Zanshin* should work in all directions, 360 degrees around, and not primarily in one particular direction, such as towards a specific opponent. And furthermore I do not think that the purpose of *zanshin* in Iaido is to put *direct* pressure on the opponent(s), it should not be *that* directional.

My *zanshin* should not make them “scared” of “my sword” in particular (ie “frightening” them individually or in specific directions), they should rather be generally reluctant to enter my “sphere” altogether since I am occupying it fully with my presence<sup>6</sup>.

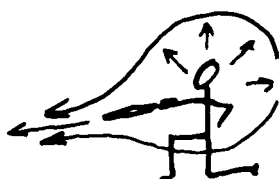
### Connection to seme?

The aikido meaning of *zanshin* I would say connects better to what is called (*ki*-)*seme* in Iaido. And you could probably say that *zanshin* has some relationship with *seme*. They seem to be of the same basic quality, but expressed in two different ways.

Perhaps you could say that *seme* is *zanshin* temporarily focused or extra augmented/active in one specific direction for a specific purpose. But I do not like that way of expressing it, since it could indirectly imply that if you focus *zanshin* in one direction, it is correspondingly weakened in the other directions. And that is not appropriate for *zanshin*.



*Zanshin* – equal in all directions.



*Seme* = focusing *zanshin* in one direction? Could be, but it doesn't feel right.

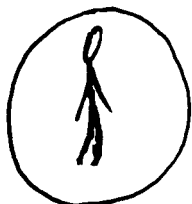
Another way of visualizing the would-be connection between *zanshin* and *seme* could be this, quite theoretical approach:

You are in the center of your sphere of *zanshin*, which for the sake of this argument is assumed to be of a finite, suitable diameter. “Moving” towards an opponent, or increasing your *zanshin*, expanding the sphere, will make your sphere intrude into the sphere of the

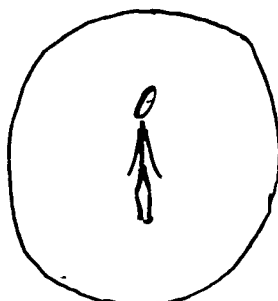
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<sup>6</sup> When writing this sentence, it strikes me that “presence” may be a good word for describing *zanshin*, which is also in tune with the definition of Iaido as “being in harmony with the moment”, ie being present here and now. But that is a new association to me, so I leave it hanging for now.

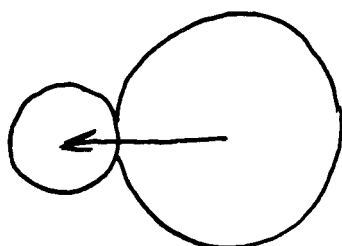
opponent, who then experiences this as your *seme*. Provided that your *zanshin* is stronger than his of course, *seme* goes in the direction from the stronger *zanshin* to the weaker, so if his *zanshin* is the strongest it will be you who bounces of his sphere in stead. This way of thinking actually allows you to imagine *zanshin* and *seme* as pretty much the same thing, without making it appear like *zanshin* has to be weakened in some direction to make possible a concentration of it in another direction.



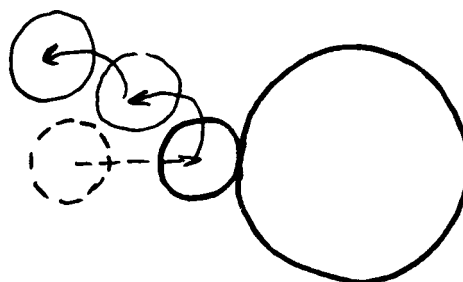
*Weaker zanshin.*



*Stronger zanshin – more intense and reaches further out.*



*Stronger zanshin meets weaker – seme is created in direction from the stronger to the weaker.*



*Weaker zanshin “bounces of” stronger zanshin.*

Modeling *zanshin* and *seme* like this gives some useful images, but I also find it a bit too theoretical in its academic approach, even if one does not take the geometry lesson literally. But most images can be beneficial in exploring some perspective of a certain concept, models are not intended to be the truth, their only purpose is to facilitate the understanding of some aspect of the “truth”.

For instance this model leads me to a brand new thought<sup>7</sup>: When trying to express *ki-seme*, one should perhaps not do it with a feeling of focusing more in the direction of the opponent, but more like “growing” in all directions by increasing the overall *zanshin*, thereby primarily intimidating the opponent you are dealing with in front of you who is likely the closest, but also in fact sending a message to any attacker that prepares himself behind you.

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<sup>7</sup> This line of thought might be total nonsense, but it is an example of how imagining different models can help to explore different levels of Iaido, which ties into the discussion on “art” in the answer to the first question in this assignment. If it only takes me on small step further, it has been valuable, but then it might be necessary to throw this image away so that it is not blocking me from seeing it in a more developed manner on the next level.

### **Practical issues, how is zanshin demonstrated?**

*Zanshin* is most of all an internal state of mind extending outwards. Calm but yet alert, not locked on one specific object or event, relaxed but ready for immediate action if the need occurs. Without this state of mind there is no *zanshin*.

Consequently, there is no specific posture or other physical “attributes” to look for when trying to evaluate the level of *zanshin*. These physical signs are mostly secondary effects or expressions of the correct mindset; they in themselves are not *zanshin*. So, a fierce glance in the eyes, a deep strong stance or similar is not necessarily signs of *zanshin*, they could just as well be theatrical tricks to make it look like *zanshin* on the outside.

But on the other hand, some physical characteristics could be signs of the *lack* of *zanshin*, for instance:

- Tense muscles might make you look stronger, but then you are not ready to act instantly, so if muscles are tight there is probably not a lot of *zanshin* in the mind.
- Staring, focused eyes might be intimidating from the front, but reveals a narrow focus that is not compatible with *zanshin*. Focusing on one specific point makes it harder for the peripheral vision to function efficiently<sup>8</sup>. In stead you should apply *enzan no metsuke*, not look at anything in particular but rather daze on a far away location, keeping the peripheral vision instantly open to stimuli. But then again, only because your eyes are unfocused does not mean that there is *zanshin*.
- Shallow breath, or holding ones breath. This is a sign of stress, nervousness or general lack of control. Anyway, this does not go hand in hand with the confidence<sup>9</sup> needed for a mind of *zanshin*.
- Jerky or unnecessary movements could be caused by tense muscles, poor body control and/or that you are preoccupied with things not significant in the present situation. I.e. poor presence, lack of *zanshin*.

### **A completely different observation**

*Zanshin* is not only applicable for martial arts specifically. It ties into for instance animal psychology as well. To give an example: if you are trying to calm down a lively dog, or even intimidate an aggressive one, you should not use yelling and wild threatening gestures. The dog will in most cases take this as an invitation to play, or as a challenge for leadership leading to an actual fight. The dog sees this as you attempting to imitate *zanshin* on the outside, which it instinctively interprets as a weakness that could be an opportunity for the dog to climb the ladder. If you instead act calmly and with confidence, i.e. using *zanshin* from the inside, the dog will more likely submit to you and accept you as the dominant one. Problem is, the dog will sense your true state of mind, if you are afraid, you cannot hide it. There is not way to mimic *zanshin* on the inside.

Another similar example can be made with horses. They are not predators like dogs, but are flight-animals, and therefore react differently. Say that you are going to catch a horse in the

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<sup>8</sup> This could be a decent analogy: Seme is similar to staring at one point, whether *zanshin* is more corresponding to the peripheral vision. In fact there is scientific support for that even if the peripheral vision is not so good at seeing details, and has no colour vision, it is much quicker when it comes to detect and react to movements compared to if you are actually looking directly at something.

<sup>9</sup> “Confidence” strikes me as another word that is suitable to mention along with *zanshin*.



paddock to lead it into the stable. Also say that you have had a bad day, and feel sad, insecure, introvert and perhaps even depressed. The horse will sense this weak *zanshin* of yours and will likely refuse to follow you or even run away as you are trying to catch it. The reason for this is, according to horse experts, that in order for the horse to take the risk of following you, it must first trust you as a competent leader; otherwise you could lead it into trouble. And in your state of mind, without *zanshin*, the horse does not feel any confidence in you and thereby tries to escape from your potentially hazardous leadership. I personally have several first-hand experiences of this situation.

### **Summing up**

*Zanshin* is more a mental state of mind, characterized by confidence, presence, awareness and control, than a physical characteristic. What is seen on the outside is only an expression of *zanshin*, not *zanshin* in itself. It might be tempting to try to physically mimic *zanshin*, and perhaps even misunderstand that imitation as being the real thing, even when you yourself are the mime artist.

Which connects to the depth of practice discussion in the answer to the previous question: Someone with superior depth of practice<sup>10</sup> will probably see through an artificial expression of *zanshin*, whereas someone with less depth of practice might be deceived by it.

And at my level of practice, I don't really have a clue about *zanshin* I guess...

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<sup>10</sup> Or a dog or a horse according to the previous example, no further similarities implied, no offence intended.

But this could be one aspect on the term "art" related to the first question: An animal is just living out its instincts but has very developed senses and other abilities. The art helps you rediscover your natural abilities, but on a more conscious level.