

Diane Skoss initially went to Japan in 1987 to further her study of aikido. Her path has led in some surprising (at least to her) directions, and she now trains in several classical and modern martial arts. For six years she was managing editor of Aikido Journal; her responsibilities there also included book design and production. In 1996 she founded her own publishing company, Koryu Books. This is her first publication.

Introduction: *Keiko Shokon*

Diane Skoss

Explore the Old

“By exploring the old, one becomes able to understand the new.” Kato Takashi, headmaster of the Tatsumi-ryu, draws on Confucius to describe the value of the classical martial arts in today’s society. In a similar vein, my own teacher’s teacher, Nishioka Tsuneo, has as his motto, “*Keiko shokon*: Reflect deeply on the past, decide what to do now, then do it,” urging us to connect our studies of ancient arts with decisive action in our daily lives. The stream of the *koryu bujutsu*, or classical martial traditions, flows down to us across more than four centuries, and provides a unique vehicle for both reflecting on the past and actualizing the present.

Training in the classical martial arts takes place within the context of a time-honored and very Japanese social structure that has at its center the transmission of tradition. These arts can be thought of as living history, preserving principles of combat and details of etiquette of an era long past. Yet they also serve a multitude of purposes in our modern world, ranging from “spiritual forging” to the cultivation of skills that are practical despite the archaic weapons employed. It comes as no surprise, then, that growing numbers of Westerners are becoming interested in these ancient Japanese arts.

The problem is that the secrets of these traditions are not revealed casually or quickly, and nearly all of those who are able to truly transmit *koryu* (classical) techniques and teachings are located in Japan. *Is-shin denshin*, a direct communication that occurs almost “telepathically” from the spirit of the teacher to that of the student is the only way to partake of the continuing transmission of a classical tradition. A decade, or three, is required; for many people in the West this just isn’t practical. Still, while it may be difficult to actually wet your feet, let alone become immersed, in the stream of the *koryu*, there *are*

other ways to benefit from some of the insights to be found in these classical arts.

Watching demonstrations of the koryu, talking with and listening to experienced practitioners and instructors, and reading and reflecting on the histories and lessons handed down from the past are a few of the more readily accessible approaches. One of the best places to begin is with the work of the late Donn F. Draeger, who was the first to write in any detail about the history of Japanese martial arts. He provided definitions and descriptions that after twenty-five years are still the most reliable starting point for any inquiry into the koryu bujutsu. I hope this volume will be a natural second step.

My goal has been to assemble a collection of essays by writers with impeccable credentials, not only as researchers, but as thinkers and educators, and, most importantly, as practitioners of the Japanese classical martial traditions. The five contributors to this volume have spent long years in Japan, training and getting to know the people who know the most about the classical arts. They are all licensed in one or more authentic classical traditions. They have direct and personal contact with headmasters and head instructors of many ryu in addition to their own—with them they have trained, wandered among castle ruins, researched lineages, explored musty bookshops, pored over fragile scrolls, visited ancient battlefields, gone shopping for blades, deciphered old-style writings, paid their respects at shrines, discussed relative merits of weapons and techniques, attended funerals, argued historical details, and drank in celebration. These experiences and connections, together with the fact that they are all native speakers of English, put them in a rather unique position to discuss the subtleties of the koryu bujutsu.

Meet the Contributors

I met the first of these exceptional men in 1988, about a year and a half after my arrival in Japan, while researching an article on *naginata*. I had discovered that a small group was doing some sort of “old-style” naginata in the Waseda University aikido dojo just before my regular Saturday aikido practice. Someone mentioned to me that one of the members of this naginata school was a “a foreign guy, who seemed to

know a lot about martial arts,” so I arrived for practice early one day to watch.

Meik Skoss, a.k.a. the “knowledgeable foreigner,” proved to be just that. He sat at the edge of the dojo looking the epitome of the immutable Japanese martial arts instructor, despite his American face. He answered my questions politely, explaining that the lower postures and bent knees of Toda-ha Buko-ryu were due to both the greater weight of the weapon and the fact that the techniques were designed to be done while wearing armor. He then proceeded to regale me with what turned into two pages of densely written notes on the history and techniques of the school.

Nearly ten years later, I am no longer in awe of this formidable researcher, instructor, and student of the classical martial arts. In fact, through some odd twist of fate, we are now married! (Those of you who are interested can read more of *that* story in Wayne Muromoto’s profile in *Furyu: The Budo Journal* 1, no. 4:33-34).

I first encountered Liam Keeley at a Japan Martial Arts Society meeting in March, 1989. JMAS was established in 1983 for non-Japanese interested in the study of modern and traditional martial arts. This organization was founded by some of the most senior foreign practitioners in Japan, including Chairman Phil Relnick, who first came to Japan in the mid-1950s. Through quarterly demonstrations and an accompanying newsletter, JMAS provided a valuable network for non-Japanese martial artists in Japan, until 1991, when it quietly fell dormant.

The March meeting focused on “Judo in Japan and Abroad” and featured Osawa Yoshimi and members of the Waseda University Judo Club. Afterwards, we gathered at the local Victoria Station (a more-or-less Western-style restaurant), where I got the chance to become acquainted with Liam.

An ex-South African, now an Irish citizen, he is the only person I know who has practiced an African fighting art, one of the very few outsiders to ever learn Zulu stick-fighting. He was also one of Draeger’s team, along with Meik Skoss and Hunter Armstrong, on his hoplological field studies in Indonesia. Liam impresses with his solid imper-

turbability, both on the dojo floor and in his “real” life, as husband and father of three. It was quite a surprise to discover just recently that he had not always had such a reputation—during his Goju-ryu karate days at Higaonna Sensei’s Yoyogi dojo, he had, in fact, been considered quite a hot-head! In short, he is a formidable example of the effects of diligent and correct training.

It was at another JMAS meeting that I met Dave Hall, who was then hard at work on his Ph.D. dissertation, *Marishiten: Buddhism and the Warrior Goddess*, from which his contribution to this book is derived. We used to run into each other quite often at the Wendy’s in Shinjuku. This is not as odd as it sounds, as that particular Wendy’s was just across the street from the largest English language bookstore in town. More importantly, at that time decent salad bars were a rarity anywhere in Tokyo, and Wendy’s was the only fast-food restaurant (i.e. one that you could possibly afford) that offered such fare. Best of all, at least according to Dave, was the fact that during the summer months the salad bar included watermelon, another expensive rarity in Japan. He developed a technique for stacking a large quantity of watermelon chunks on a single salad bar plate. He’d then retire to a table in back to feast and work on his dissertation. And that is where I would often find him when I stopped in after my book-buying expeditions.

We had many a lively discussion about martial arts and editing, since he had been involved with the *JMAS Newsletter* and I had just taken a position as editor for what was then *Aiki News*. Dave was the first to point out to me the fact that Zen was not necessarily the only, or even the most important, religious influence on the Japanese martial arts. Esoteric Buddhism, or *mikkyo*, played a profound role in the world of the Japanese *bushi* (warrior). In order to better understand this connection, Dave was undergoing the full course of training for ordination as a Tendai priest. In the process, he learned a number of esoteric rituals, including some related to Marishiten, the warrior goddess of his dissertation.

Dave’s departure from Japan in October of 1990 curtailed our chats until several years later, when Meik and I visited him and his family in California. This time, instead of sitting comfortably across a table dis-

cussing warrior goddesses, I had the opportunity to face Dave with only a stick between me and his wooden sword. I had not been training in *jo* long, and he kindly introduced me to some of the subtle nuances of Draeger's approach to Shindo Muso-ryu,¹ which included finishing strikes in a closer proximity to one's face than I had previously encountered!

Hunter "Chip" Armstrong and I first became acquainted in 1990, at the Second International Seminar of Budo Culture. This annual event, organized by the Nippon Budokan Foundation, was created, according to its sponsors, to deepen the understanding of historical, philosophic, and scientific aspects of budo, to increase mutual friendship, and to internationalize Japanese traditional culture.

One of the more interesting features of this seminar is the "New Budo Experience" session, when participants can spend a few hours "trying out" an unfamiliar martial art. Expert instructors provide brief introductory classes in judo, kendo, kyudo, karatedo, aikido, Shorinji kempo, naginata, jukendo, and sumo. Jukendo, or bayonet fencing, was offered for the first time that year, and a group of us, including Meik, Liam, Chip, and myself, jumped at the opportunity to try this most unusual art.

Chip left soon after for the States, first to the Big Island of Hawaii, later to settle in Arizona. As Draeger's successor to the directorship of the International Hopology Society and co-editor of their newsletter, *Hoplos*, he maintains the extensive IHS library and is a ceaseless fount of information. He's also fond of barefoot treks, accompanied by his son Hunter, and their half-coyote dog, Tengu, up the magnificent rock buttes that fill the view from his living room window.

¹ The characters for this school's name, 神道, may be transcribed or pronounced either "Shindo," or "Shinto." My own teacher prefers "Shinto," and this is the form I generally use. However, a number of my seniors, not to mention Draeger himself, consistently use/d "Shindo," so I use this form when writing of them and their training. The two terms are identical.

Ellis Amdur left Japan about the time I arrived, so for many years he was to me just a figure in photos, an author of articles in back issues of the *JMAS Newsletter*, and a voice on a videotape. I finally met him in the flesh during a brief visit to Seattle in 1992. We spent our two days visiting dojos, training, and chatting, in the course of which he mentioned that he'd been doing some writing about *aiki*. As an editor, I was always on the lookout for intelligently written, thoughtful material, and my interest was piqued.

Sure enough, his first submission challenged many of the aikido world's treasured notions, and as a contributing editor to *Aikido Journal*, he has gone on to write profound, sometimes disturbing, reflections on aikido training today. Working with his series of insightful and provocative "Improvisations" was one of the highlights of producing each issue.

Ellis now trains and teaches in Seattle, where he is raising two bright, athletic sons. Wisely, he has encouraged them to take up the Brazilian martial art of *capoeira* (in addition to their number one passion, soccer), which he himself has never practiced. Special dojo occasions now include a performance by capoeiristas, the chants, music, and exuberance a striking contrast to the formality of the classical Japanese traditions.

Shades of Gray

The expertise of these contributors is everywhere apparent in the chapters that follow and the effect is cumulative. Themes echo, reverberate, and connect in illuminating configurations, and the threads running throughout the book are well worth puzzling out. I won't explicate further here, except to point out what I believe to be one of the most important lessons revealed in these pages: variation and differences are the only certainty when speaking of the koryu bujutsu. You'll find vastly different, yet equally valid definitions, explanations of purpose, and even terminology. As one of my teachers, Phil Relnick, is fond of saying, there is no black or white. In koryu, as in Japan in general, black and white can often both be true simultaneously, giving rise to a rich variety of grays. Recognizing that there is no need for "either/or" and that more than one seemingly contradictory thing can

be true at the same time is one of the most difficult, yet essential, concepts for the Westerner interested in these arts to internalize. Perhaps these writers and their essays can make that understanding just one shade easier.