

# Sword and Spirit

The eJournal of Itten Dojo

April 2021



## — Why Budo? —

**Regardless of the times in which you live, or the circumstances of your life, success largely depends on things you can control:**

- **Building a foundation of strong relationships in a community of mutual support and achievement.**
- **Forging a disciplined and positive mindset.**
- **Enhancing your physical health and capabilities.**

*These are exactly the benefits membership in a dojo provides.*

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701 W Simpson Street, Suite C  
Mechanicsburg, PA 17055-3716  
[www.ittendojo.org](http://www.ittendojo.org)

## Introduction to Aikijo The Four-foot Staff in Sanshu-ho Aiki-budo

In old cultures around the world, there were two types of sticks in daily use—short sticks (like canes) that were used to place one’s weight on, and long sticks (walking sticks) used on uneven ground to help pull one’s weight up. The *jo* (literally, “stick”) is an approximately four-foot staff originally sized for Japanese of the middle ages for use as a walking stick.

Most students of traditional budo have heard the story of Muso Gonnosuke creating the *jo* after losing a duel with Miyamoto Musashi, in which Musashi gained the upper hand by trapping Gonnosuke’s weapon, supposedly a *roku-shaku bo* (a six-foot staff), in a two-sword cross-block. After being spared by Musashi in an act of mercy, Gonnosuke meditated in the mountains and received inspiration in a dream which told him, “Beware the vitals of a log.” Following this revelation, Gonnosuke cut down his *bo* to create a *jo*, and his art eventually became known as Shinto Muso-ryu.

At a seminar I attended in San Diego in the late 1990s, focused on use of the *jo*, Fredrick Lovret pointed out a questionable aspect of this origin story—Musashi simply never spared anyone in a formal duel. According to Lovret Sensei’s research, the real story was something like this:

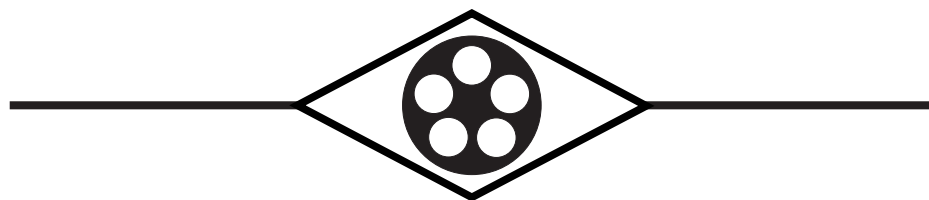
Musashi was sitting in a courtyard, whittling a statue of *Kwanin* (the Buddhist goddess of mercy—which is where the “merciful” aspect of the legendary version came from).

Armed with a katana, Gonnosuke entered the yard unannounced and attacked.

Musashi, irritated at the interruption, stood up and whacked Gonnosuke over the head with the little wooden statue.

Gonnosuke stood there for a while, utterly amazed, and then left. Later, in consequence of the dream described above, he created the *jo*.

Because of the way some *jo*-based arts are practiced, there are a few people nowadays that claim a *jo* is comparable in effectiveness to a *shinken* (a “live,” i.e., sharp steel sword). This is ridiculous—no one in his or her right



mind would choose to face a shinken with a skinny stick. *Jo-waza*, techniques using the staff, are intended for use of a weapon of opportunity, because of the possibility of a surprise attack when one is walking along with a staff. While it is true a jo provides a couple of inches of “reach” over the length of a katana as regulated during the Edo period, there is no way the weapons were ever comparable.

Originally, Shinto Muso-ryu was known as *Heiho* (Strategy) rather than *Jodo* (Way of the Stick), which implies the aim of the art was much wider in scope than the use of a staff against a katana. Because of the inherent disparity in lethality between a katana and a jo, it is likely the art was really intended to teach very fine perception and exploitation of *maai* (interval), *hasuji* (“blade-line,” or trajectory), *hyoshi* and *choshi* (rhythm and timing), and *kurai* (mental and physical preparedness).

In Sanshu-ho Aiki-budo, aikijo *kata* (forms) and *waza* comprise about five percent of the overall curriculum. But this relatively small portion is incredibly diverse, including a wide variety of *kumijo* (combative exercises, typically against a sword), *jo-nage* (throwing or otherwise controlling an unarmed opponent), *jo-dori* (disarming an opponent that is wielding a jo), “walking-stick” techniques that are eminently practical even today, and a set of specialized stretching exercises. There are no techniques for jo against jo; only *waza* for countering a sword, knife, or unarmed opponent. Aikijo is also a great deal of fun.

The reason for using the term aikijo, rather than jodo or jojutsu, has to do with the fact Maren Sensei views the jo as an extension of the spirit and body in consonance with the core principles of Sanshu-ho, and not as a separate art. While there are certainly percussive strikes in our aikijo, much greater emphasis is placed on the jo as an implement with which to manipulate the opponent. As is the case across the board, *kata* are *seitei* (standard, and inviolable) while *kata bunkai* (applications) and *waza* in general are meant to be the subject of intense investigation and experimentation, varying targets, stances, distancing, timing...virtually anything can be played with.

The overall curriculum of Sanshu-ho Aiki-budo is referred to as the *Soden*, the Inherited Teachings. Aikijo *kata* and *waza* are found in two categories, the *Omote-soden* (things that usually, but not always, are taught

openly), and the *Oku-soden* (things that usually, but not always, are kept secret). *Kihon* (fundamentals) within Oku-soden jo include the *Goju-te*, the “50-Hands,” 48 techniques in six sets of eight *waza*, with one opening and one closing, all using a specialized and very unique *temoto* (the means of forming the hands to hold the staff).

The kihon-jo of the Oku-soden are executed in an almost staccato fashion, very much “by the numbers,” and the special *temoto* associated with the *Goju-te* kata are used only for *waza* from the Oku-soden. The kihon-jo of the Omote-soden are based on a long and complex kata called *Nagashi-jo*. A natural *temoto* is used, and flow is the key; there is only very brief *kime* (focus of strikes) and virtually no stopping. The *saki* (end) of the jo should never stop moving and, if the jo is moving, everything should be moving (this principle is an example of an oku that is openly taught).

Unlike arts such as Shinto Muso-ryu, in which the length of the jo is standardized, a jo used in Sanshu-ho is sized according to the height and arm-reach of the individual. In general, standing naturally, a jo should just fit under the armpit. Some men and women have reach in their arms that is disproportional to their height. In those cases, a test can be performed to determine the proper length for the jo:

1. Stand naturally, holding the jo by ends of the staff.
2. Swing the jo to a vertical position, on the left palm.
3. Slide the right hand down and then track the hands back to the ends of the jo.
4. If the hands slip off, the jo is too short; if fast rotation is not possible, the jo is too long. Most westerners will need a jo longer than the standard, Japanese length of approximately 48-inches. In any case, the proportions must be such that the jo is flexible—there is a secret here.

Students are first introduced to aikijo using an exercise from the Omote-soden. The “Four-count Jo” is derived from the fifth “phrase” of the *Nagashi-jo* kata, so named because it incorporates four techniques in sequence: a *tsuki* (thrust), *jodan-uke* (an upper-level deflection), *jodan-uchi* (an upper-level strike), and *gedan-barai* (a low-level, blocking sweep). The exercise can be performed solo, as a partner drill, and as a series of *bunkai* with engagements starting at different points in the basic form.





**Four-count Jo — Yoi (Ready).** The Four-count exercise begins and ends in hidari-sankakudai, chudan-gamae. The jo is held at a slight upward angle, with the left index finger and right little finger hooked over the ends of the staff.



**1. Tsuki.** Slide-step forward to kake-dachi, thrusting with the jo; the right hand is in front of the center of the body, and the body itself is square to the front. In kata, the tsuki is horizontal; in application, the thrust targets solar plexus or throat.



**2. Jodan-uke.** Slide-step to the rear and raise the jo to block an incoming cut. The jo at the finish of the deflection is positioned with a 15-degree down-angle, a 15-degree cross-angle, and with the center of jo in line with the forehead.





**2A. Shift.** After the jodan-uke, slip the right hand forward, partway toward the center of the jo (the elbow and end of the jo would be even), and fling the lead end to propel it to jodan-gamae with a big spring off the left hand fingertips.



**2B. Jodan-gamae.** On the way to jodan-gamae, the right hand must not track forward. In jodan-gamae, the base of the left thumb must be over the top-center point of the head. Stretch into the posture, while keeping the navel pointing down.



**3. Jodan-uchi.** Step forward with right foot and strike down on the head of the imaginary opponent. Generally, strikes with the jo are executed on an angle, with the trajectory being through the target in a line toward the opponent's lead foot.





**3A. Draw.** After the strike, withdraw the left hand, sliding the jo through the right-hand until the hand reaches the end of the jo. Maintain the angle of the jo without any alteration.



**3B. Waki-gamae.** With the right hand, push the jo back through the left hand, to waki-gamae. The angle of the jo continues unchanged through this transition.



**4. Gedan-barai.** Step back with the right foot and snap the right hand to the hip for power, blocking just to the outside edge of body. Return to chudan-gamae by tensing the left hand and releasing the right to spin the staff back into position.





### Four-count Jo with Multiple People

The same exercise can be performed in a group, with two, four, six, or more people, standing at an open maei in a circle. Starting slowly to establish an exactly-matched cadence, students run the exercise in a continuous flow, speeding each each set. Strikes and blocks are executed strongly, but focused precisely to central points in the middle of the circle, thereby presenting a challenging problem in control of the maei and preventing a huge (and potentially damaging) clash of the weapons. After the “wind-up” in waki-gamae, partners leap to the left while executing the gedan-barai, such that everyone shifts around the circle.

This version of the Four-count Jo is one of those exercises that are so much fun you don’t realize how hard you’re working. It’s a really great way to get everyone’s heart-rates up.



### Four-count Jo Bunkai

There is a specific *reishiki* (ceremonial etiquette) used to open and close aikijo kata and kumijo and, although not illustrated in this photo-essay, applies as well to combative applications of the Four-count Jo exercise. In aikijo combative practice the respective roles of attacker and defender are designated as *kenshi* (the person armed with the sword) and *joshi* (the person armed with the staff).

From an open *maai*, *kenshi* and *joshi* assume *ai-chudan-gamae* (a mutual, mid-level guard stance).

*Kenshi* attempts to attack with *nissoku*, *kiri-oroshi* (a two-step advance with a vertical cut targeting *joshi*'s head).

As *kenshi* reaches *jodan-gamae*, *joshi* advances with a sliding-step (*tsugi-ashi*) to *kake-dachi*, and executes a *tsuki* targeting the throat to halt *kenshi*'s forward motion and forestall his attack. *Kenshi* leans well back to evade the thrust. DANGER: The strike to the throat is potentially lethal; students without sufficient control should be restricted to targeting the solar plexus.

*Kenshi* rebounds forward, stepping with his right foot to complete the *kiri-oroshi*. *Joshi* waits until *kenshi* is fully committed to the attack, and then springs slightly back and executes the *jodan-uke*, "kicking" *kenshi*'s sword to the outside. By incorporating a slight shift to his left while stepping back, *joshi* has the option to thrust into the side of *kenshi*'s neck without having to change the alignment of the *jo*.

To recover from the deflection, *kenshi* allows his sword to continue its motion, circling back up to *jodan-gamae* as he prepares to slide-step to the rear, assuming *migi-zenkutsu-dachi*.

*Joshi*, in the meantime, swings the *jo* to *jodan-gamae* to set up a counter-strike.



Joshi steps forward and executes the jodan-uchi to kenshi's left forearm to break the wrist. If instead of using a slide-step to the rear, kenshi steps fully back with his right foot to hidari-zenkutsu-dachi, kenshi can cause this strike to miss, creating a "beat" of time that kenshi can exploit and from which joshi must recover before kenshi is able to connect with his cut.

While still in either a right or left foot forward zenkutsu-dachi, kenshi attempts to regain the initiative with a cut targeting joshi's lead leg, just above the knee.

Joshi steps back with his right foot and executes gedan-barai to block the cut.

Note that this kumijo can be practiced nagashi-style (flowing), in continuously repeating sets, or against multiple opponents. As mentioned previously, there are other Four-count derived kumijo that begin and end engagements at different points in the basic form.


Note as well that the Nagashi-jo kata, from which the Four-count exercise is derived, also features bunkai and variations for every phrase of the kata.

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One of the problems with translating kihon as "basics" is the tendency of English-speaking students to equate basics with introductory-level material, things to be gotten past as quickly as possible. In reality, kihon as fundamentals are quite literally the most important aspect of training and the foundation on which all "advanced" waza are built.



In my own practice, as part of my warm-up prior to every aikijutsu class, I run multiple repetitions of the Nagashi-jo kata, followed by ten repetitions of the Four-count exercise. I execute the Four-count on both right foot and left foot leads, shifting the lead when the jo is spun back to chudan-gamae between repetitions, sometimes changing the direction I'm facing in a free-style fashion mid-exercise. Then I do two, both-side lead repetitions of the kihon jo-nage, blending with the jo as if it were an uke.

That's the personal importance I place on these aikijo fundamentals. 

**Robert Wolfe, chief instructor of Itten Dojo, began martial arts training in 1975 while attending Bucknell University, where he earned a degree in Japanese Studies. Mr. Wolfe has taught since 1985, and founded Itten Dojo in 1992. His articles on martial arts have been featured in publications such as *The Bujin*, *Budo Shinbun*, the *Journal of Asian Martial Arts*, *Bugeisha*, *Aikido Today Magazine*, *Inside Karate*, *Martial Arts Training*, and *Martial Arts Professional*.**

