

Sept. 14, 2009

The Jo

In my living room, sitting on top of a bookcase, is a small weapons rack which I made years ago. It is reserved for two jo and a bokken which mean a great deal to me. I still use these weapons occasionally, when I want to practice in my backyard, but for all practical purposes they are retired. The bokken was given to me by Saito Shihan some years back. He carved his name on the handle. Just above it is a jo he also gave me when I first became his student. I used this jo for many years, practicing suburi and kata and leading classes with it. It is smooth and polished from use. Sensei signed and dated the jo, and I later covered the signature with clear tape. Over the years the signature has faded and is now barely discernable.

At the top of the rack sits the other jo I acquired on an early trip to Iwama. I used that also for many years. I stopped using it after practice one day when my hand felt a sliver near one end. Fearing a crack, I took my bokken and tapped along the length of the jo. Sure enough, there was a dull sound right over the location of the crack. It is a shallow one, and I have to bend the jo a bit to see the crack separate. I plan to repair it some day, but for now it is retired too. I am a bit sad about this, since this is my favorite jo.

Most of my personal jo and bokken I acquired from Saito Shihan. Years ago he used to get his supply from an old man in Mito City who supplied wooden weapons to the dojos in the area. We called him simply the Bokken Maker, because we never knew his name. His shop was a small wooden building located near the train station. He did most of his work outside. There was no sign announcing his business. Those of us who were lucky enough to have jo and bokken made by this craftsman still treasure them. He had an eye for wood and his products never seemed to break easily.

At the dojo practice with weapons was intense, and we would break jo occasionally. Saito Shihan would collect the pieces and go to Mito along with his sickles and other small farm tools that needed handles. The Bokken Maker would cut them down and fit them to the tools. At the same time Sensei would pick up an order of jo and bokken which he sold at modest prices to the students. The jo and bokken were all hand made. Today the usual way to make a jo is to pass the wood through a steel die which makes the jo perfectly round, and the process can probably turn out hundreds of pieces a day. The Bokken Maker would take a blank and put it in a holding form. He would then proceed to plane each corner until the jo was round. This took him usually about five minutes. His plane was sharp and hissed as it passed down the length of the blank. A long, thin curl of wood, unbroken for the length of the jo, came out of the plane as he cut. He used no gages or measurements, and the result was a jo which was almost round with occasional plane marks along the length. Usually a few swipes with a fine sandpaper were enough to smooth the jo.

The Bokken Maker was typical of those anonymous craftsman in Japan who specialize in a narrow way and turn out a superb product. To watch them at their craft was a treat. They

handled their tools with a casualness that belied their skill. Their process seemed to flow out of their hands with scant effort and the result was formed before your eyes. If you were to ask them how they do it, they would just shrug and probably say, "Practice."

My favorite jo, although it was hand made by the Bokken Maker, could have been made on a rare off day. Perhaps he made it just before he retired and could not see too well. To the person in the dojo who sees the jo it looks like any other. To me the jo is unique. It is slightly larger in diameter at one end than the other. When I practice with it, I can tell which end is which easily. The larger end is not quite round and there is a section near the small end that is decidedly elliptical. It has an extremely fine grain to the wood, which makes it very tough. In short, this jo has a personality and a soul. When I practice the jo kata, I am holding something organic and seemingly alive. As the jo moves through the air I can feel it vibrate, and if I move quickly, the sound the jo makes is in harmony with that vibration. As my hand slides along the jo, I can feel all the contours and it gives me pleasure in my practice. It reminds me of classes attended long ago, and how very much a part of me they are today.