

## FAQ: Buying a sword for training purposes

This article is meant to assist students of the Pittsburgh Bujinkan in choosing an effective live blade for training purposes. As always any and all mistakes are my own.

-Brian Fine

### What is a REAL sword?

A real (Japanese) sword is generally considered to be any curved, single edge blade that holds an edge, is hardened correctly, and has a full tang. However, individual “real” swords can and will have variants of these qualities.

### What was a traditional samurai sword and how was it forged?

Edo period (1603-1868) was when the Shogunate “standardized” swords. Before then there was no true standard, it varied greatly depending on location, specific smithing technique, and style of swordsmanship practiced. Edo period katana were declared to be 2 shaku, 3 sun in blade length (27.43 inches), and 8 sun (9.54 in) in tsuka (handle) length. The steel they used was made by combining iron with sand from Japan’s beaches, and would be comparable to 1045~1080 AISI today. Most katana were produced en-masse for use by the military, these weapons were not “folded” as it took too long, most were differentially hardened. Mind you that these were peace time blades, worn more as a status symbol than as a weapon of war, the relatively short tsuka length was for convenience of carry.

### What kind of steel should I get for my sword?

Alright, here in the US we use a number system to define steels. It works like this: 1045, 5440, or 9260. The first number, I.E. 5xxx, shows you the most plentiful element in the alloy, a 5 is for chromium, and a 9 is for silicon. The last 2 numbers are the carbon content in one-hundredth of a percent; I.E. 1045 steel has a 0.45% carbon content.

Chromium, which gives steel its stainless property, also makes it so hard it gets brittle. This is why “stainless 440” or any other chromium based steel is unsuitable for swords. Traditional Japanese steel was somewhere between 1040 and 1080 AISI, it’s a great steel for a sword. 92xx “spring” steel is probably the best thing going as far as sword material goes; it holds an edge, maintains hardness and has a “memory” that makes it very difficult to damage. The only “down” side to spring steel is it’s not very traditional.

### What about Damascus steel?

True Damascus is very hard to find. Most that you'll come across will be "pattern welded" which is just a fancy way of saying fake. Damascus is popular because of its pretty surface pattern; that is a side effect of its forging process. The pattern is basically carbon rising to the surface; true wootz Damascus can have a carbon content as high as 1.5%. It is expensive, hard to forge, and doesn't seem to make a great deal of difference in sword quality. Damascus blades can and will bend, they don't seem to hold an edge any better than any decent carbon steel, and they still require regular maintenance to prevent rusting. The reason everyone makes such a big deal about it is; microscopically, Damascus blades look like a saw blade, supposedly this makes them cut better. Theoretically this is true but the way we cut with a sword isn't like a saw blade is it?

All that said, I have one, and I like it. At the end of this FAQ you will find a link to a forge skilled in producing quality Damascus blades, get your wallet ready...

### What steel do you recommend for training?

For training purposes it comes down to cost. The cheapest decent steel is 1045; it can handle most cutting, is somewhat forgiving, and is similar to what would have been used in historical Japan. Runner up and costing a little more, is 1060; it won't bend as easily, holds an edge better, and would be close to a higher quality Japanese sword. The best for our purposes is probably 9260; it has all the properties of 1060 and a "spring memory" that makes it very difficult to damage.

### So more carbon is better...so if I can find say 1090 I'd have a better sword?

Think of carbon content as potential. A high carbon steel, properly forged, will be better than a low carbon steel forged the same way. Carbon makes blades harder and stronger, you don't want too much or it could become brittle. So, it is important to purchase your swords from a trusted forge/manufacturer.

### What is a tang?

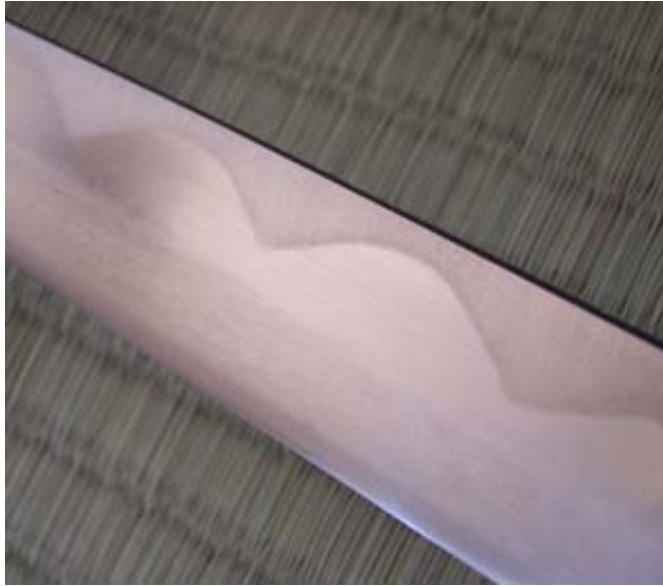
Tang refers to the part of the blade "inside" the handle. The only reason that it's even noted is because in many cheap display swords, the blade ends at the hand guard and is bolted into a plastic handle. Another cheap solution includes the blade filing down to look like the back of a drill bit and screwing into the bottom of a wooden handle. These cheap solutions make the swords poorly balanced (the blade is much heavier than the handle) and they will easily break in training/combat.

All swords that are meant to be used for training or in combat will be "full tang". This means that the steel of the blade runs the entire length of the handle, and is fixed to the handle by wooden pegs (at least for Japanese swords). Do not buy a sword that is not full tang, you will not be allowed to use it when training.

### What is a hamon?

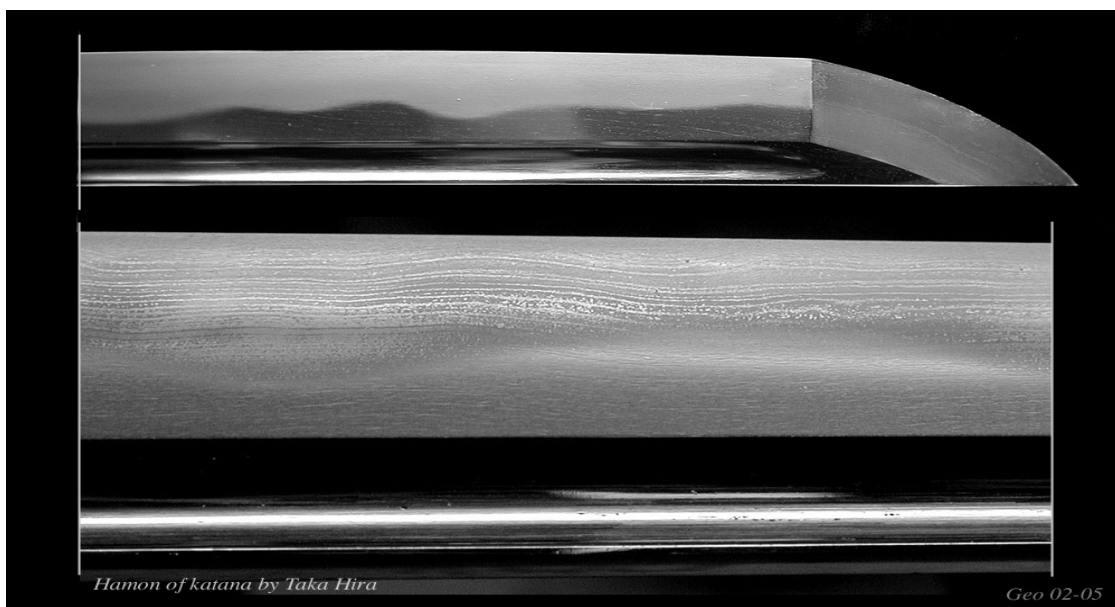
A hamon is a pattern along a blade that is a side effect of the forging process. Hamon are aesthetically pleasing, and also show that a blade was forged well. Unfortunately it has become common practice to fake a hamon by either stamping it onto the blade itself or wire brushing it.

Here is an example of a fake, stamped hamon:



Notice that the pattern repeats symmetrically.

Here is an example of a true hamon:



Note that the pattern is less distinct.

### So all Japanese sword have hamon?

Not necessarily, only blades that are differentially hardened will have hamon. Also, 9260 spring steel has a VERY faint hamon, there is a way to forge it to show up more, but it's an exception.

### Where should I buy a training sword?

Online. I recommend the following venders:

1. Cheness Cutlery - <http://www.chenessinc.com/>
  - a. Best blades I've ever owned
  - b. Affordable
  - c. Excellent forging process, they know what they're doing
  - d. Was commissioned by the Bujinkan to produce the togakure ninja sword
2. Hanwei/Paul Chen – <http://www.ebay.com/>
  - a. Only sold through venders
  - b. Aim for the “practical” line of katana, the practical and practical plus
  - c. Good swords for the money
  - d. All we bought until Cheness opened for business
3. Bugei - <http://bugei.com/>
  - a. Not Cheap
  - b. Very high quality
  - c. Historically authentic
4. Angel Sword - <http://www.angelsword.com/>
  - a. Not cheap at all
  - b. Best quality outside of Japan
  - c. All blades are custom
  - d. Deals in Damascus/Wootz

### What specific blade do you recommend for our training?

I recommend Cheness blades:

- 1045 Through Hardened Ichi maru - <http://www.chenessinc.com/maru.htm>
  - Great sword for the money \$150
- 1060 Through Hardened Mokko - <http://www.chenessinc.com/mokko.htm>
  - This is probably the best \$200 sword on the market
- 9260 Through Hardened Shura - <http://www.chenessinc.com/shura.htm>
  - Elegant, simple, and practically indestructible. Well worth the \$250

**Please note: if you intend to cut with these blades, don't get a fuller or bo-hi (blood groove). You'll want the additional mass in the blade to make cutting easier.**

### What about an unsharpened blade for drawing practice?

Unsharpened blades are called iato swords. Because of laws regarding Sword making in Japan, most of these blades are of a aluminum/zinc alloy, making them very light and low maintenance. Of course the weight difference can hurt you when you pick up a real sword, so once again Cheness helps us out with some “real” unsharpened swords.

I recommend the type 8 1045 iato - <http://www.chenessinc.com/t8iaito.htm> I'd get the 28 inch version. It costs \$170

### What is a Bokken?

A Bokken is a wooden sword. Shihan Dick Severance makes the best for our purposes. I recommend the white oak daisho set (2 swords, long and short) I believe the set is \$65. They can be ordered from him directly at: <http://www.n-i-n.com/Tools.html> He only accepts checks via mail.

### I want to know more! Where can I learn more than you?

That's a big list, but here is a start:

- [http://www2.una.edu/Takeuchi/DrT\\_Jpn\\_Culture\\_files/Nihon\\_to\\_files/tsuka\\_length.htm](http://www2.una.edu/Takeuchi/DrT_Jpn_Culture_files/Nihon_to_files/tsuka_length.htm) - a great article on the history of Japanese sword length
- <http://www.chenessinc.com/steelselect.htm> - a guide from Cheness on selecting a sword steel
- <http://www.sword-buyers-guide.com/> - a site from someone who has made it their mission to educate the masses on buying good swords.
- <http://stinet.dtic.mil/cgi-bin/GetTRDoc?AD=ADB962712&Location=U2&doc=GetTRDoc.pdf> – a government metallurgical report on the composition of an antique Japanese katana (yes I actually read this)