1. The Founder—Kami- Izumi-Ise-no-Kami

Kami-Izumi-Ise-no-Kami was born in 1508 as the son of the lord of Kami-Izumi castle (located in present day Kami-Izumi, Maebashi city, Gumma Prefecture). At this time in history, the feudal lords of Japan were embroiled in a leadership conflict and this period is referred to as “The Era of Warring States” (Sengoku-Jidai — ca. 1480 - ca. 1570)

As the son of the lord of a castle born in such turbulent times, from childhood he devoted his time not only to academic studies, but also to the practice of Zen and training in martial arts. Having mastered the military arts of the Ogasawara school (a style based on the teachings and tactics of the great Chinese militarist and philosopher Sunzi), he earned a reputation as a great warrior and tactician. Although known as the greatest spearman in Gumma Prefecture (then called Kozuke-no- kuni), he showed particular interest in the study of swordsmanship and later evolved the style known as Shinkage-Ryu.

His training in swordsmanship was based largely on Katori-Shinto-Ryu and, later, on the two other major schools, Nen-Ryu and Kage-Ryu. In particular, he used the principle of Marobashi-no-Michi from Kage-Ryu as the cornerstone of Shinkage-ryu.

It is said that he gained full under­standing (or “enlightenment” in Zen philoso­phy) of the principle of Marobashi upon the realization, during his study of the Enkai-no- Tachi techniques of Kage-Ryu, that the principles of Zen, in which he had immersed himself from his youth, and the philosophy of Sunzi as manifested in the Ogasawara school, blended and became a perfect whole in this Enkai-no-Tachi.

As a warrior, Kami-Izumi-Ise-no-Kami was opposed to involving his subordinates, or those belonging to one of his fiefs, in battles in which it was probable that they would lose their lives and, whenever possible, avoided such futile and profitless conflict, thus display­ing an attitude unusual among members of the warrior class of those times. It is almost certain that such thinking was born of long years of Zen discipline.

Even so, in an attempt to prevent the fall of Minowa castle, Kami-Izumi-Ise-no- Kami, with only a small number of men under his command, invaded the enemy encamp­ment, although vastly outnumbered and in the knowledge of almost certain death. However, the enemy commander, Takeda Shingen, who valued and respected Kami-Izumi-Ise-no- Kami, ordered his forces to retreat. Kami- Izumi-Ise-no-Kami, who thus escaped what had seemed to be certain death, abandonned the life of a warrior and set out on a journey to spread the teachings of Shinkage-ryu.

Normally, in swordsmanship, one is taught techniques for defeating and killing one’s enemy with the sword; however, during his travels, Kami-Izumi-Ise-no-Kami preached a somewhat different approach. He taught that “the techniques of Shinkage-ryu are unbeat­able; this arises not from the needless taking of life, but from the true courage required to avoid unnecessary conflict.”

Kami-Izumi-Ise-no-Kami taught and spread these principles to his followers around the country in the belief that an increase in the number of those who adhered to these prin­ciples would herald the end of the era of warfare and the beginning of a peaceful society. Many of his followers understood these principles and, in their turn, did their best to further spread the teachings of their master. Eventually, these concepts came to bear fruit under Yagyu Munenori, master swordsman to the Shogun family, and were established as the basis of the 300 years of the Tokugawa era.

1. Yagyu Mimetoshi and Yagyu Munenori