

Some Thoughts on Buying Your First Real Katana for Cutting - Richard T. Lochowitz 2021

Selecting your first katana from the myriad available can seem to be a daunting task. The market is full of “hand made” swords, many of which seem to be incredible bargains (Especially on Amazon, although Amazon does sell some name brands, and eBay - Avoid eBay!!). I have been dealing with swords for over 30 years and would like to share some of my knowledge and experience that will enable you to purchase your sword with a little more confidence than randomly picking one that just “looks good.”

The most important part of the katana is the blade: it should not be too soft or it will dull and bend easily nor should it be too hard or it can chip and break.

Types of Steel Commonly Used for Swords

Stainless Steel:

Avoid this in all swords made for cutting! I can't stress this too much. The chromium - steel boundaries are weak causing any blade over 12 inches or so to become so brittle it can result in catastrophic failure. It can however be used in decorative “wall-hangers” and is also commonly used in the fabrication of the iaito (unsharpened sword) used in class for non-contact training and kata.

1045 Carbon Steel:

This is on the mild side of what we consider high carbon steels. It is soft, easy to work with and machine thus its fairly low cost. The down side is that it dulls and bends easily. This is the kind of steel most often seen in swords on eBay, etc. The only way this can be used for reliable cutting is if it tempered properly. In my opinion, this is a crap shoot unless you buy from a reputable manufacturer such as Cheness. I would pass on most swords made of 1040 steel.

1060 Carbon Steel:

This is our work horse steel. It has a higher carbon content, is durable and when properly tempered it will hold its edge. It is more difficult to forge and finish than 1045 thus its higher price. It may be either through tempered (also called monotempered) or differentially tempered (sometimes called “clay tempered”). I tend to prefer differentially tempered blades where the edge is about Rockwell 60 hardness and the spine is a softer Rockwell 40 hardness. This allows the edge to be hard, sharp and durable while the blade can absorb the shock of contact. It's pretty hard to go wrong with 1060 steel and I recommend this the blade material of choice for your first katana.

1095 Carbon Steel:

Very high carbon, very hard steel. More difficult to sharpen but will tend to hold its edge longer. Must be properly tempered or can chip and be damaged when hitting a hard target, like the stand rather than the mat. An expert swordsman might consider this steel.

Spring Steels:

Tough and durable with an increased resistance to lateral bending. Usually through tempered but can be differentially tempered. The tempering process is critical to bring out the best in this steel. More expensive than 1060. Buy from a reputable manufacturer such as Hanwei or Cheness.

T10 (High Speed Steel)

Tough, hard and keeps an edge. Difficult to forge and finish thus usually seen in upper end swords. Beware of bargain basement swords made of this steel, especially from questionable manufacturers. Otherwise when properly forged and tempered is a superior steel.

L6 Bainite:

This is a really nice steel. Very hard, very difficult to work with. Also very expensive! If you have the "bucks", go for it.

Damascus Steel:

This is a very pretty steel, usually consisting of alternate layers of the same or different steels such as 1045 and 1060 folded multiple times. It looks really nice on display but that it is stronger than other steels is a myth. The imperfections in folding and layering this steel make it weaker, sometimes excessively so. These imperfections cannot be seen on the surface and can result in catastrophic failure. I would avoid swords of this material except for display. (The patterns really are pretty!)

Layered Steel: (Traditionally forged)

Beautiful when manufactured by a highly skilled smith (We're not talking factory made here) out of tamahagane steel. In spite of this being the way Japanese swords were traditionally made, they are less durable than a sword made of modern steel. Very expensive, starting in the low thousands of dollars. **I really want one of these!**

Aluminum alloy:

Light weight, easy to work with and used exclusively in unsharpened practice swords (Iaito). If you want a nice, light sword for class, an aluminum alloy blade is just the ticket.

Recommendations

Live Blade for cutting:

For your first sword and not breaking the bank, go for a sword with a 1060 steel monotempered or differentially tempered blade. You may want to buy this without a groove (bohi). You're probably looking somewhere between \$200 to \$300 with some in the \$150 to \$200 range. Buy from a reputable source. Be my guest if you wish to upgrade to a better steel.

Remember: the blade is the most important part of the sword, Everything else is just fluff. Once you have settled on the blade, then consider the sword fittings. With these higher quality usually equates with higher price. Black silk or pink polka dotted cotton handle wrappings. Your choice.

Unsharpened Blades for training and kata:

For non-contact class use, either an unsharpened steel, stainless steel or an aluminum alloy blade will work. I tried to match my iaito blade to the weight and balance of my working blade, but found that an hour of swinging a heavy sword was just too much. I have now settled on a medium weight stainless steel or aluminum alloy blade. I also like the practice blade to have a groove (bohi) because it makes a really cool sound!