

Sword and Spirit

The eNewsletter of Itten Dojo

September/October 2018



— Why Budo? —

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

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

These are exactly the things membership in a dojo provides.

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Life Hacks from the Martial Arts...

Tachi-dori Kiri-age

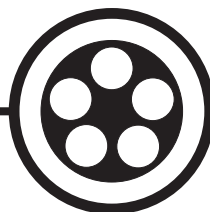
Many systems of *kenjutsu* (Japanese swordsmanship) incorporated a variety of weapons and unarmed techniques. In older usages of the term, *jujutsu* was not just a category of unarmed techniques, but rather any supplemental technique or weapon employed to cover the gap in response between an attack and the moment the primary weapon could be brought into action, or to cover instances in which the primary weapon was lost.

The *jujutsu* curriculum of the modern style of *kenjutsu* we formerly studied encompasses *waza* (techniques) related to *nuki-dome* (stopping a draw), *kiri-dome* (stopping a cut), *tachi-dori* (sword disarming), and *tedori-gaeshi* (“returning a grab” — methods of countering a grip on one’s wrist, so that a draw can be completed). I remember Lovret Sensei mentioning that these sets of techniques are somewhat generic, common to a variety of arts, and are not as sophisticated as analogous techniques in arts like *aikijutsu*.

This article focuses on the *tachi-dori waza Kiri-age*. While it could be considered a relatively simple technique, *Kiri-age* is by no means easy to execute properly. In fact, the technique is fully representative of the aggressive spirit and control of the engagement demanded by all the *tachi-dori waza*.

It seems likely to me that *Kiri-age* — at least as it is practiced is this version — originated in a Tokugawa-era dojo and was primarily intended for purposes other than practical application. I base this supposition on the consideration that while a sword might (with a great deal of luck and advantageous circumstances) be taken away from an armored opponent by means of *Kiri-age*, the *kusazuri* (the “skirt” of *yoroi*-style armor) would interfere with the finishing cut. In a Tokugawa-era street brawl, an enemy in *kimono* and *hakama* would have been vulnerable to the technique, but only if he was sufficiently clumsy or unskilled to be disarmed by a method that incorporates no *atemi* (striking).

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In the context of the dojo however, then or now, there are substantial benefits to the practice of tachi-dori. The most critical lessons involve developing an instinctive assessment of *maai* (distancing) and *hasuji* (the trajectory of a cut). Because of the significant disparity in reach and lethality between opponents, when one is armed and the other unarmed, these waza require absolutely correct perception of the physical interval separating the combatants and the path a sword is going to take.

Combined, these elements define the danger of an attack, and developing the ability to perceive and exploit *maai* and *hasuji* transform personal effectiveness. When I started training in kenjutsu, I was still very active in karate, a sandan in rank, and the smallest male in what was a hard-core *kumite* (sparring) dojo. After a little more than a year of kenjutsu training, I began for the first time to be able to deal with larger and stronger opponents, because 1) I had a much more highly developed sense of how to cause an attack to miss, and 2) routinely dealing with much larger opponents armed with weapons made big guys with empty hands seem a lot less threatening.

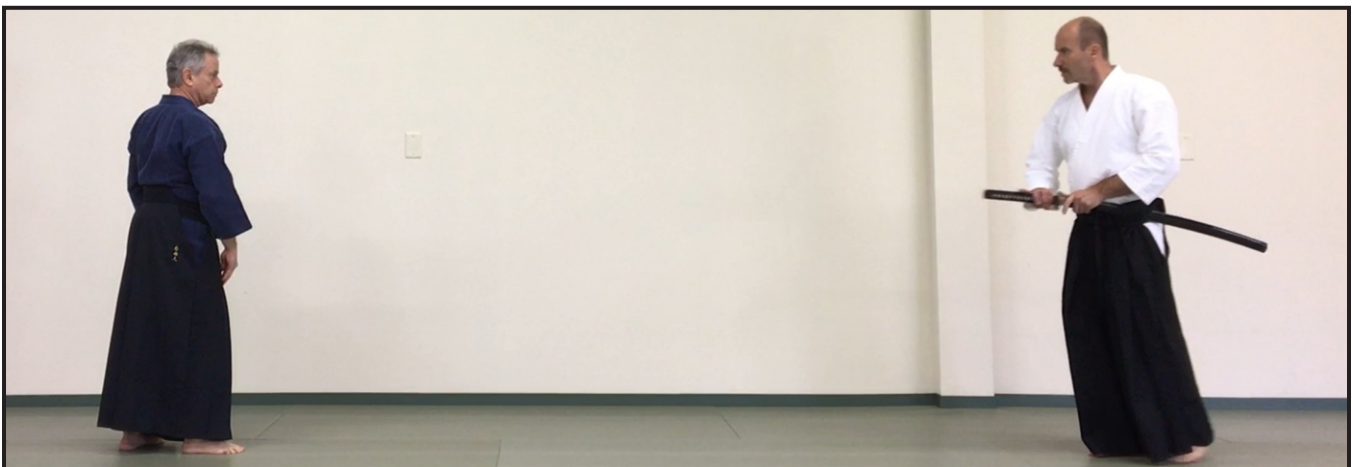
The sense of timing and the ability to fill a *suki* (a gap in the opponent's focus) with a technique are also developed by tachi-dori practice. Timing is cultivated by a process of "bracketing," in which we experiment with slight variations in the moment of entering against the attack, in order to determine the instant the opponent is fully committed to his cut and cannot readily react to our entry, while the ability to fill a gap is boosted by the student practicing his technique as an organic whole, in which each component action is seamlessly connected and unfolds with equal commitment. If we imagine an attack

from the perspective of the swordsman, I think it's likely the swordsman might be surprised to find his intended victim stepping forward to evade and counter rather than attempting to escape the descending blade, and that surprise could conceivably yield a *suki* prior to the initiation of a follow-on cut.

By consistent attention to moving through the momentary gap in the attacker's ability to continue his assault, the student learns to recognize and capitalize on *suki*, and the process of blending the components of the waza also serves as an analogy to the physical blending with the attack that must occur for the waza to succeed. Entering against a strong, focused attack, while maintaining balance and composure is difficult enough. It's even harder to step to the exact spot from which to dominate the engagement, but with each success a student's confidence and spirit grow, making success on the next repetition even more likely.

There are appreciable risks associated with the practice of tachi-dori: namely, the danger of being struck by a bokken or shinken, either of which is eminently capable of spoiling one's day. Without an element of real danger, however, the practice of tachi-dori would be pointless. Just as an infantryman is subjected to live-fire exercises to build confidence and help insure performance in combat, a student of the sword needs to clench the belly and step forward against a reasonably realistic attack to build credible skill in tachi-dori waza. The resulting confidence and composure will permeate the student's practice, and can manifest in many other areas of the student's life.

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Uchitachi (the attacking swordsman) approaches from an open maai, as *shitachi* (the swordsman responding to the attack, although in these techniques unarmed) waits in *migi sankakudai*, *chudan-gamae*. *Uchitachi* attacks with *nissoku*, *kiri-oroshi*, aiming his cut for *shitachi*'s forehead.



Shitachi holds his position until the last possible moment, and then enters by turning his hips to the right and advancing with his left foot. The principle embodied in the entry is *hito-e-mi* (single-ply body) — making the body as thin as possible in profile, relative to the line of attack. *Shitachi* must enter as close to the blade as possible, while insuring all parts of his body remain clear of the cut (while entering, it's all too easy to swing a hand into the path of the descending sword).



Before *uchitachi* can regain the initiative, *shitachi* takes control of the weapon. *Shitachi*'s right hand forms a hard "V" shape to keep his fingers away from the edge while engaging the sword on the *mune* (back of the blade). Simultaneously, his left hand comes up from beneath to grasp the underside of the *tsuka* (hilt). It's very important that *shitachi* avoids locking his grip in either hand, because too much tension will permit *uchitachi* to resist or *shitachi* will cut himself. *Shitachi*'s grasp should be firm but light.



Moving from his center and remaining relaxed, *shitachi* pivots a little to his left, which has the effect of breaking *uchitachi*'s stance and weakening *uchitachi*'s grip on the sword. Without pulling against *uchitachi*'s hands, *shitachi* steps back with his left foot to *kokutsu-dachi* — this brings the blade into contact with *uchitachi*. *Shitachi* cuts *uchitachi* from groin to sternum. ☸

