

Sword and Spirit

The eNewsletter of Itten Dojo

April 2020



— 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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A Deeper Exploration of the Martial Arts...

Kenjutsu and Movement

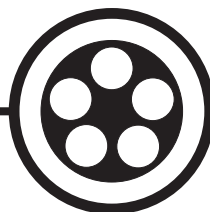
Part One — The Foundation

Kenjutsu is often credited with being the premier martial art of Japan, an art preserving the finest qualities of the samurai, facilitating the deepest strategic and tactical insights, and providing inexhaustible challenge and satisfaction in training. One of the most fascinating aspects of study is the science of body movement (*tai-sabaki*) in relationship to the sword.

Historically, the sword was a secondary weapon for the samurai during the *Sengoku Jidai*, the period from 1482 to 1573 during which Japan was wracked with continuous civil war. Early in that era, much greater emphasis in battle was placed on the bow and the spear, and later on firearms (Turnbull, 1998). By the late sixteenth century, Japan possessed more firearms than any contemporary European state. Following the unification of the country, however, a series of regulations controlling firearms manufacture and distribution combined to divest Japan of this tremendous accumulation of firepower and engender a return to simpler (and ostensibly more noble) means of armament (Perrin, 1979).

The sword achieved preeminence during the Tokugawa Bakufu (1603–1868), the military government which codified and regulated virtually every aspect of Japanese life and which decreed that only the samurai could wear two swords as a badge of office (Bottomley & Hopson, 1988). During this extended period of peace, swordsmen were afforded ample opportunity to explore every possible physical and spiritual application of the weapon in personal—as opposed to massed—combat, and by the end of the Tokugawa Period there were at least 700 kenjutsu *ryu* (styles) in existence (Turnbull, 1990).

Some of these *ryu* have survived to this day, many others have completely disappeared, while still others of more modern formulation attempt to emulate the spirit of the older traditions.



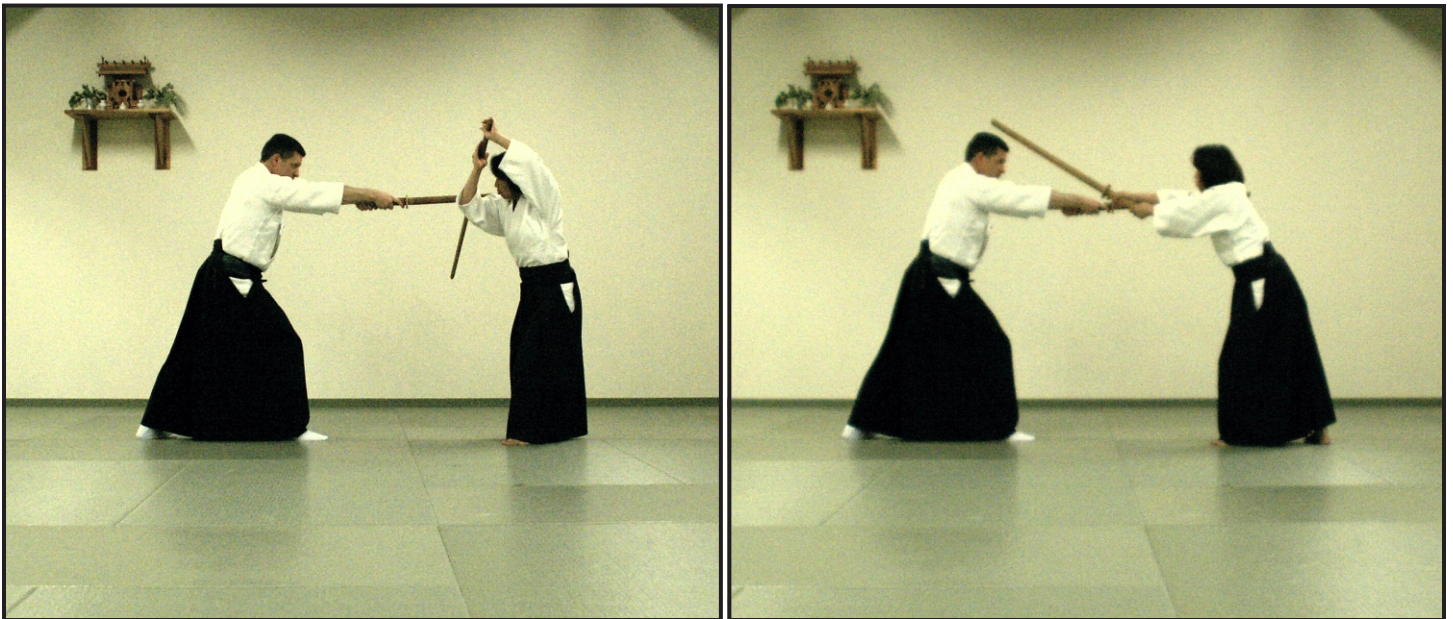
Whether embodied in the teachings of the *koryu* (old traditions) or newer, classical-styled, systems, one principle that remains consistent for individual participants in the massed, set-piece battles of the Sengoku Jidai, in Tokugawa Period sword duels, or even in modern military or law enforcement confrontations is the idea that *movement equals survival*. A stationary target in the open is more readily engaged and eliminated. Another principle applicable at multiple scales of combat is the notion that some distinction can be made between the relative merits of force and strategy. While it's probably best to enjoy an advantage in both, an abundance of one can offset a deficiency in the other, and strategy employed against force is often a matter of maneuver.

Movement can be a critical consideration at the tactical level, as well, in the execution of particular techniques. For example, different kenjutsu ryu have differing opinions on the desirability of blocking opposing sword cuts, although Japanese swords are strong enough by design to withstand being used in such a manner. In fact, a number of the antique blades in use at our dojo show the battle scars of past engagements. Some schools, particularly those that are more modern, advocate “not being there” when the opponent cuts and utilize movement as the means to achieve that goal, with blocking being viewed as a last resort in the face of inadequate or ill-timed *sabaki*. Other, older ryu lure and exploit the energy derived from contact.

In the Ono-ha Itto-ryu:

Uke-nagashi is a flowing block that parries the force of an opponent's attack and uses it to generate momentum for a counterstrike. To perform it, a swordsman responds to a straight vertical attack to his forehead by rolling his hands upward to his left, raising his blade with the cutting edge up and the tip angled slightly downward to his right so that it protects his forehead. In the instant in which the attacking sword collides with his, he steps forward and slightly to the left with his right foot, allowing the power of his opponent's strike to push the tip of his blade downward as he slips out from under it. In this way, the attack slides harmlessly off his sword, much like water off a roof, while at the same time imparting momentum to the defending weapon, which the swordsman uses to spin his blade around and deliver a counterblow of his own. (Friday, 1997)

Uke-nagashi (receive and let flow away) can also be employed in as an alternative means to achieve *jodan-gamae* (the upper level posture) from a disadvantageous position. The swordsman still rotates his sword in his hands as he steps off line, such that if contact inadvertently occurs it will be to the *shinogi-ji* (upper side surface) of his blade rather than to the edge, but moves with sufficient alacrity as to preclude contact and achieve *jodan-gamae* while the opponent is just completing his cut.



While an Ono-ha Itto-ryu swordsman might use the impact of blades to accelerate his sword and counter-cut, another swordsman, by avoiding contact to achieve *jodan-gamae*, aims to eliminate an extra beat of time from his counter, and regain the advantage before his opponent can recover. Essentially the same strategy, manifested in two different, tactical applications.

The number of “beats” inherent in different styles of movement provided a major impetus to the evolution of *sabaki* in *kenjutsu*. Human locomotion, it seems, is often a matter of “ready, set, go.” Stand and try this yourself: As you start to take a step, you will feel yourself lean forward, then stick a foot out to catch yourself, and finally drag the rear foot along. This works for the average civilian, when there is no other concern than getting somewhere, but is completely inadequate for the warrior who has to get there *now* (usually while applying a technique *en route*).

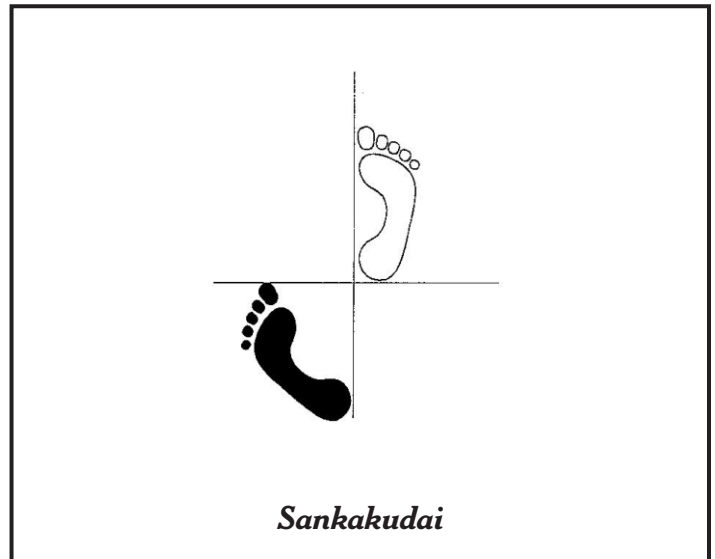
Most forms of *sabaki* in *kenjutsu* are designed to facilitate entering to an advantageous position on the count of, “One!” How they achieve this is one of the distinguishing characteristics of different *kenjutsu* *ryu*.

Sankakudai and Chudan-gamae

Most martial arts have a signature posture, a way of standing that embodies characteristic principles of the art. Japanese karate has its *zenkutsu-dachi* and modern kendo makes extensive use of *moroashi-dachi* (from the Ono-ha Itto-ryu), while the *hachiji-dachi* of *kyudo* (archery) is perhaps the epitome of elegance and composure. *Tachi* is often translated as “stance,” but properly refers only to the placement of the body from the waist down. *Kamae* is a more complete term, encompassing *tachi*, the positioning of the rest of the body, alignment of the weapon, and spiritual attitude as well.

The primary *tachi* employed in our practice is *sankakudai*. Although we may in English casually refer to *sankakudai* as the “triangular stance,” the Japanese term is actually closer in meaning to “triangular foundation,” and the distinction is significant. *Tachi* comes from the verb *ta(tsu)*, to stand, and implies a fixed position. The character for *-dai*, on the other hand, has the meaning of “platform,” giving the sense that *sankakudai* is a platform from which we do something (in much the same way a

modern aircraft or warship might be referred to as a weapons platform). *Sankakudai* is a position one moves to, from, or through, rather than stands in.



Forming *sankakudai* requires placement of the feet along two sides of an imaginary triangle. Note that it is the *inside* edges of the feet which are aligned with the imaginary reference, rather than the centerlines. By aligning on the inside edges, neither foot blocks the other, and fluidity and a speedy advance are facilitated. Body weight is distributed evenly across the feet, both in terms of how much weight is placed on each foot (50%), and with regard to how the weight is distributed over the bottom of each foot (equally, side-to-side and fore-and-aft).

One of the most difficult aspects of *sankakudai* for the beginner to master is the concept of “active feet” (*tsuchi-no-fumatsu*). While by no means unique to *sankakudai*, active feet are introduced once a student has achieved a reasonable sense of balance in the triangular foundation. Active feet are sometimes described as a matter of gripping the ground with the toes, but actually the process is more complex. Think of a person with hands large enough to palm a basketball with a grip that is applied from fingertips to heel of hand, and you’ll have a good analogy for the toes-to-heel grip used in active feet.

Another challenging drill for beginners is the pivot in *sankakudai*, the purpose of which is to allow the student to reverse directions without taking a step. A student pivoting in *sankakudai*, regardless of whether he pivots on the balls





or heels of his feet, will always end up with one leg crossed in front of the other and off-balance. Instead, the proper method is to start the pivot on the ball of the rear foot and the heel of the lead foot. Then, at the half-way point of the turn, shift the pivot points from heel to toe and toe to heel. The result is a correct sankakudai, facing the opposite direction. Rather than considering this pivot to be a combative technique, we tend to view the drill as an exercise for developing greater dexterity. (Students of Yamate-ryu aikijutsu should note that this type of pivot can be used very effectively in the Ukemi-no-kata.)

Building on the tachi of sankakudai, the next aspect of a proper foundation is *chudan-gamae*, the middle-level posture. Chudan-gamae is a neutral position, both physically and spiritually. The hips and shoulders are placed on a 45-degree angle, relative to the direction the swordsman is facing (moving the left shoulder forward to more squarely face an opponent reflects an aggressive spirit; dropping the left shoulder back reflects a defensive attitude).

The hips and shoulders must remain aligned on all three axes—a state of *kuzushi* (imbalance) exists when the lines of the hips and shoulders diverge, and imbalance will destroy posture. Picture lines drawn through the points of the shoulders and the points of the hips and recognize that the lines must remain simultaneously parallel in vertical, horizontal, and transverse axes. ☉



Notes:

The “Kenjutsu and Movement” series will continue in the May 2020 edition of *Sword and Spirit*, with “Koshimawari: Technique and Applications.”

A complete bibliography of cited sources will be included in the final installment of the series.

Robert Wolfe, chief instructor of Itten Dojo, began martial arts training in 1975 while attending Bucknell University, where he earned a degree in Japanese Studies. Mr. Wolfe has taught since 1985, and founded Itten Dojo in 1992. His articles on martial arts have been featured in publications such as *The Bujin*, *Budo Shinbun*, the *Journal of Asian Martial Arts*, *Bugeisha*, *Aikido Today Magazine*, *Inside Karate*, *Martial Arts Training*, and *Martial Arts Professional*.

