

# Sword and Spirit

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## — 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 benefits membership in a dojo provides.*

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701 W Simpson Street, Suite C  
Mechanicsburg, PA 17055-3716  
[www.ittendojo.org](http://www.ittendojo.org)

## Kenjutsu and Movement

### Part Four — Fundamentals & Applications: Gyaku-tai

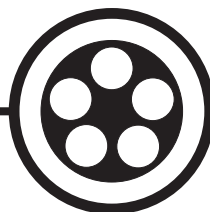
The most complex of the fundamental forms of movement is *gyaku-tai* (reverse-body), a method for reversing direction without first having to stop the initial motion. If a swordsman engages more than one opponent, he will almost certainly have to change directions or reverse the direction of a turn at some point. If he tries to do this with a “one-two” rhythm, he will likely be too late and be struck.

By lowering his hips slightly during the reversal, the swordsman converts a one-two movement to a single, blended motion (essentially a horizontal “U”-shaped track), redirecting energy rather than stopping it and having to initiate a second, separate rotation.

The principle involved here can be readily illustrated with a simple drill: Hold your right hand in front of yourself, in line with the right edge of your body, and move it as quickly as you can to the left edge of your body and back to the right, in a straight line. You’ll note that there is a very short, but distinct, moment at which your hand stops before returning to the right.

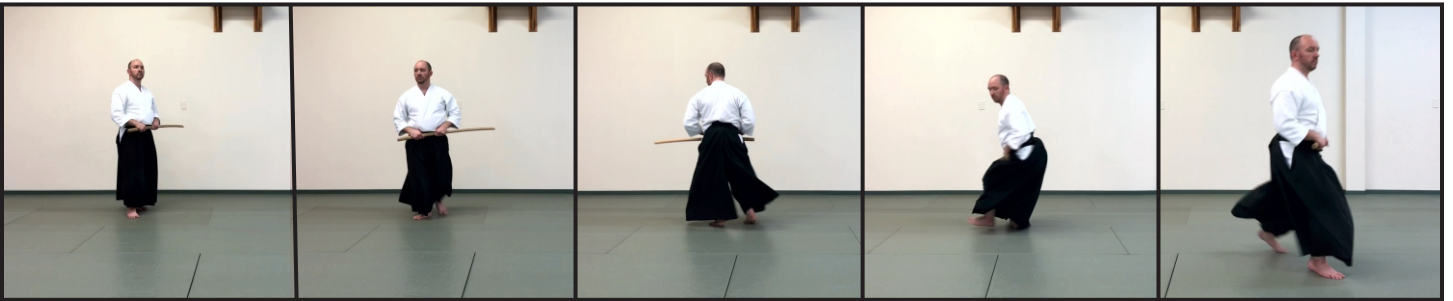
Instead, at the transition from left to right, lower your hand an inch or so. The stop-point is eliminated and the return to the right is slightly but noticeably quicker. Translating this principle to standing movement, however, is one of the most difficult processes a student of kenjutsu (or aikijutsu) will undertake.

To demonstrate one of the most critical elements of *gyaku-tai*, we use a two-person drill (see photos, next page). A student stands in *sankakudai*, while a partner takes an anchored stance and grasps the student with a bear-hug. The student attempts to move forward. If he does this by stepping, he will not be able to advance. Rather, the student must first rotate his hips. Key point: In order to achieve strong hip rotation, the feet must remain in contact with the mat as long as possible. This principle is critical to *gyaku-tai* because the requisite power and speed of the hip reversal are greatly enhanced by the swordsman keeping his feet in contact with the ground through as much of the turns as he can manage.





***A partner grasps the student with a bear-hug. The student attempts to move forward. If he does this by stepping with his rear leg, he will not be able to advance. Rather, the student must first rotate his hips.***



Solo drills are used to enhance the student's grasp of the process and to practice maintaining contact with the mat, proper hip rotation, and lowering the hips to reverse the turn.

In the first drill, the student stands in right foot forward sankakudai, with his bokken held at his hips and extending to the left side. The student should keep his eyes on the point of the bokken, to ensure a dip is evident at the point

of gyaku-tai. Rotating his hips to the right, the student advances slightly and turns to the rear, then lowers his hips, and reverses direction. If the reversal is performed properly the student's knee will lead his foot.

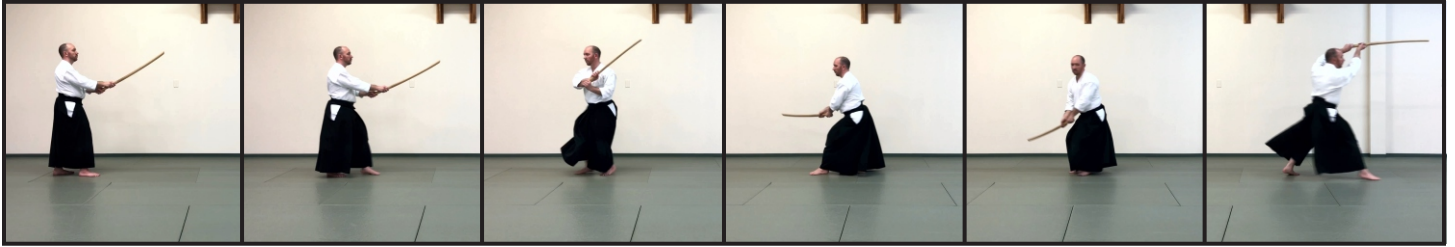
The swordsman should endeavor to snap his hips sharply enough to cause the flare of his hakama to "Pop!" similar to the manner in which a karate student's sleeve cracks during a punch.



The second drill is continuous, to facilitate practice of gyaku-tai from both right foot or left foot leads—we use this drill as part of the warm-up and conditioning sets preceding every aikijutsu practice. The student enters and

executes gyaku-tai, uses the sankakudai pivot-in-place to turn around, and repeats gyaku-tai from the opposite foot lead. As always, "No tenkan without irimi," so there is a straight-ahead entry prior to pivoting into the gyaku-tai.





Finally, we use a series of drills to practice gyaku-tai in application. In the simplest exercise, the student stands in right foot forward sankakudai, chudan-gamae. Shifting forward, the student pivots to face the rear and allows his bokken to fold to his left shoulder and strikes with a diagonal cut. The student lowers his hips and turns back

to the front, then steps forward with his right foot and completes a reverse-diagonal cut.

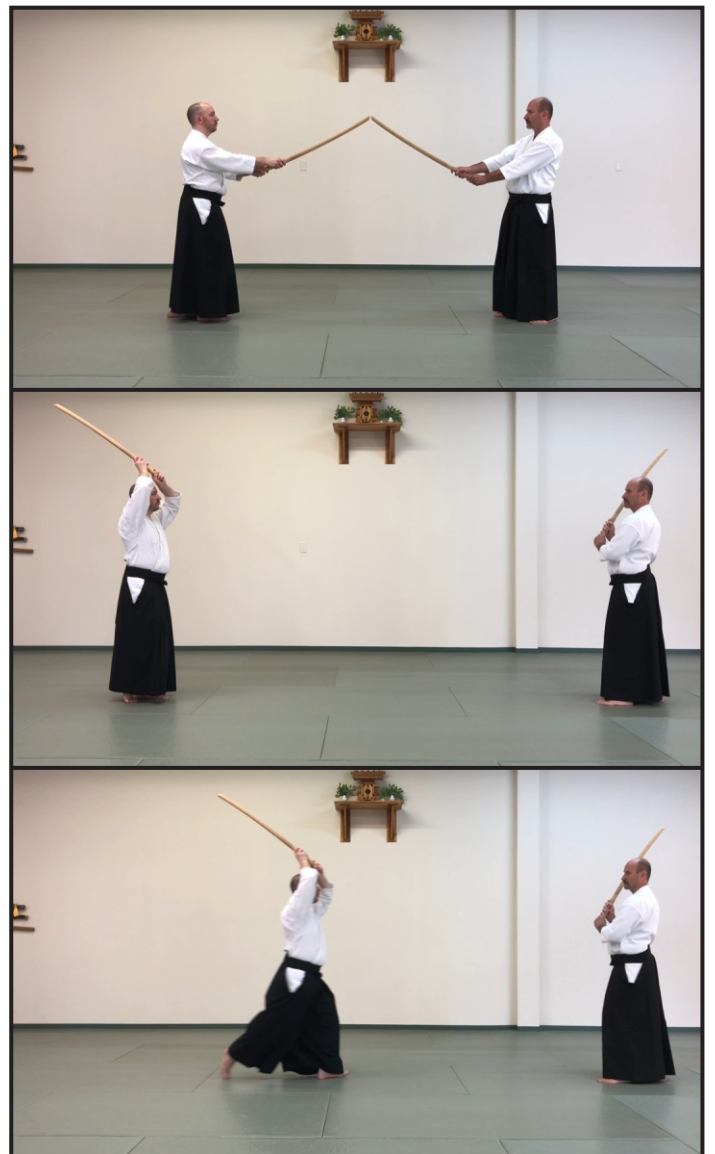
The drills in this series become increasingly complex, playing with degrees of rotation and types of cuts, to facilitate the student accumulating thousands of repetitions of gyaku-tai.

### Application: Aikijutsu Tachi-no-kata “Gyaku-tai”

Uchitachi and shitachi assume ai-chudan-gamae, kissaki-maii.

Shitachi steps back with his right foot, to hasso-gamae, to “open the gate.”

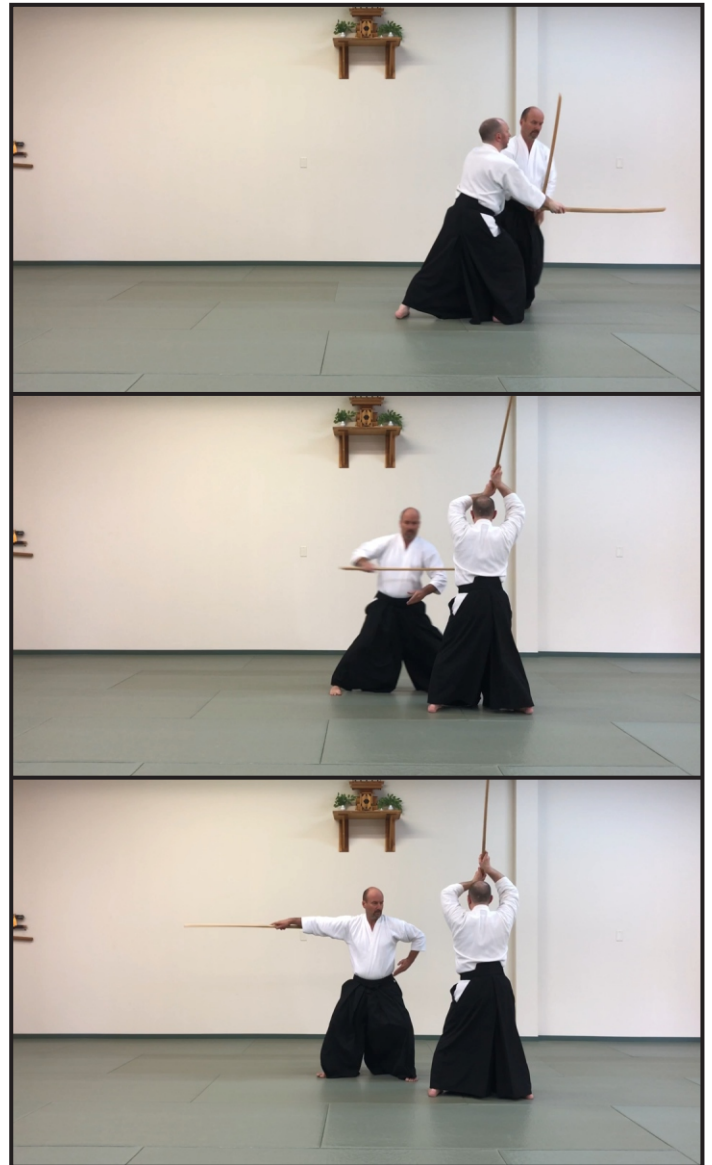
Uchitachi attacks with a four-step advance, finishing with a vertical cut.



As uchitachi executes his cut, shitachi enters on a 45-degree line and turns to assume a guard in a low, modified chudan-gamae (the angle of shitachi's sword is intended to block an immediate, follow-on yoko-giri by uchitachi).

Uchitachi looks left and snaps his hips to pop his left foot forward to recover to jodan-gamae in preparation for a second kiri-oroshi. As uchitachi is in transition to jodan-gamae, shitachi executes gyaku-tai and...

...cuts uchitachi across his abdomen.



### Series Conclusion

Of all the techniques that can be performed with a Japanese sword, relatively few depend *exclusively* on the physical manipulation of the sword with the arms. The number of practical ways to strike or cut an opponent with a sword can be condensed to a handful, each of which—in the absence of maneuver—can be more-or-less readily dealt with. It is the combination of a vast repertoire of methods of moving the body (to cover or control distance) with the fundamental cuts and strikes that yields myriad techniques and strategies.

In his letter to the master swordsman Yagyu Munenori, the Zen monk Takuan Soho advocates movement of the mind:

*If ten men, each with a sword, come at you with swords slashing, if you parry each sword without stopping the mind at each action, and go from one to the next, you will not be lacking in proper action for every one of the ten. (Soho, 2012)*



Students of the sword must continually remind themselves that the spirit (mind) leads the body, leads the sword, and that with regard to all three aspects of kenjutsu, movement equals life. ㊦

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**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*.**

