

Japanese fencing

Japanese fencing represents wide range of combative traditions and schools with the origin in different periods of Japanese history. Nowadays combative sport kendo could be also described as Japanese fencing, however this sport is practiced with training bamboo weapon (shinai), not with a real sword. But kendo it is an mental output form old schools (koryu) to the world of modern sport. However, the school subject Japanese fencing focuses on only one school from the koryu, Tenshin Shoden Katori Shinto ryu, which is one of firstborn and most traditional schools of Japanese fencing.

The textbook contains knowledge about Tenshin shoden katori shinto ryu (TSKSR) in basic areas:

- History of TSKSR
- Types of teaching in TSKSR
- Armament and armour
- Schooling in fencing
- Philosophy and religion
- Function and mission of Japanese fencing

History of TSKSR

The Origins of Tenshinsho

Katori Jingu and Tenshin shoden Katori Shinto ryu have had extremely close ties since the tradition's inception. Jingu designates the highest rank of shrine. Taisha and jinja are second- and third-ranked shrines, respectively. Located in Katori City, Chiba Prefecture, Katori Jingu is one of the oldest and most esteemed shrines in Japan. Records date the construction of Katori Jingu to 642 B.C., which would make it ove 2.600 years old.

The Founder, Lord Iizasa Choisai Ienao

Iizasa Choisai Ienao was born in 1387 in the rural hamlet of Iizasa village in the domain of Shimosa (present-day Takomachi, Katori Country). Lord Ienao's upbringing was that of a typical rural samurai, and he began training in the arts of sword and spear at an early age.

The Founder was active during the early Muromachi period (1392 – 1573). It was time when members of the Ashikaga family occupied the position of **shogun** and established new military regime in Kyoto. Although the Ashikaga clan occupied the shogunate for nearly 200 years, they never succeeded in extending their political control as far as did the **Kamakura bakufu**. Because provincial warlords, called *daimyo*, retained a large degree of power, they were able to strongly influence political events and cultural trends during this time.

Iizasa's reputation for martial skill was outstanding even within the Chiba household in which he served. He was never defeated despite taking part in countless battles, and his renown eventually spread far and wide.

After the downfall of the Chiba domain, Ikeno released his kinsmen and retainers from service. At approximately sixty years of age, he donated one thousand koku (one koku equals roughly 180 liters of rice, enough to feed one retainer for one year) to Katori Jingu and embarked on a spiritual journey, taking the name Choisai. Lord Ikeno secluded himself in an area of the shrine's grounds called Umekiyama Fudansho, located near the Oku no Miya shrine, which is now the site of his grave. Ikeno prayed to Futsunushi no Okami (in Japanese mythology *Futsunushi no O kami* is god of swords) for one thousand days and nights and, purifying himself through fasting and ablutions, engaged in shugyo (intense training). Afterwards, Futsunushi no Okami, in the form of a small boy, appeared to him atop an old Japanese plum tree. The boy declared, „Thou shalt be master of all the swordsmen under the sun“, and presented him with a divine scroll on the warrior arts. Since the teachings were a direct transmission from Futsunushi no Okami himself, Ikeno entitled them Tenshin shoden, or „direct and authentic transmission from the deities,“ and named his new art Katori Shinto ryu in honor of the shrine.

The Founder passed away on April 15, 1488, having lived to the advanced age of 102. The Founder left a legacy consisting not only of the results of his shugyo, but also more than twenty generations of descendants. Had his austere training involved sacrificing all human attachments as in Zen, it would be inconceivable that the prosperity of the home in which he was born and the well-being of his descendants in Katori Country should continue for more than five hundred years, from the Muromachi period to the present day.

Lord Ikeno taught, „One who prevails against his opponent is superior to one who strikes down his opponent.“ The timelessly noble teachings of heiho (the art of peace), left to us by the Founder, are still relevant in today's society.

The Tradition of Katori Shinto ryu

Katori shinto ryu is a comprehensive martial art that has existed in a direct transmission since ancient times. To this day, the teachings of the tradition have been kept secret through the strict requirement that candidates for membership sign an oath in blood, called keppan. For nearly six hundred years, this rite has contributed to the preservation of the quality of the tradition's teachings as the founder envisioned them in both form and spirit. Ikeno initially named his tradition Tenshin shoden Katori Shinto ryu, but the name went through several variations, including Shinryu Shinto ryu, Katori Shinto ryu, and Tenshin Shoden Shinto ryu. Near the end of 1940, the nineteenth soke (headmaster) and his leading disciples standardized the name once again to Tenshin Shoden Katori Shinto ryu.

Keppan

Respectful oath to the supreme deities

To: Headmaster, Iizasa Shurinosuke

On becoming a member of the Tenshin Shoden Katori Shinto ryu, which has been transmitted by the Great Deity of the Katori Shrine, I herewith affirm my pledge that:

1. I will not have the impertinence to discuss or demonstrate details of the ryu to either non-members or members, even if they are relatives;
2. I will not engage in altercations or misuse the art against others;
3. I will not engage in any kind of gambling or frequent disreputable places;
4. I will not cross swords with any followers of other martial traditions without authorization.

I hereby pledge to firmly adhere to each of the above articles. Should I break any of these articles I will submit to the punishment of the Great Deity of Katori and the Great Deity Marishiten. Herewith I solemnly swear and affix my blood seal to this oath to these Great Deities.

The teachings of the tradition were designated an Intangible Cultural Asset of Chiba prefecture in April of 1960, making Katori Shinto ryu the first martial art to be granted this designation by the Japanese government. In addition, the Iizasa family dojo, estimated to be over three hundred years old, has also been designated a Cultural Asset of Katori City, Chiba Prefecture.

Unlike modern budo that specialize in one specific field, such as kendo, judo, or iaido, our tradition involves a comprehensive study of a broad range of martial arts. The content of this study can rightly be called bugei juhappan („eighteen categories of martial arts“; a complete study of the martial arts). While today arts such as suiren (swimming), hojutsu (gunnery), and kyujutsu (archery) are no longer extant within the tradition, the syllabus of Katori Shinto ryu is comprehensive, and even includes an understanding of ninjutsu (espionage) and noroshi (use of fires for signaling), transmitted through oral instruction.

On the battlefields of yesteryear, warriors wore armor and fought with spears. If their spear snapped, the shaft would be pressed into action as a staff. Should this weapon be lost, warriors would fight with tachi (swords) unless their swords broke, at which time they would revert to kumiuchi (grappling) and rely on skill in jujutsu. These warriors lived in a time when a single form of martial arts was insufficient for the realities of combat. Katori Shinto ryu's extensive syllabus is no doubt a by-product of the art's creation during a time when this kind of combat was common.

Training in Katori Shinto ryu begins with tachijutsu (swordsmanship). It goes without saying that training is focused solely on kata, which is prearranged pattern of movement used to transmit the principles and techniques of the tradition. The kata practiced in Katori Shinto ryu are longer than those found in other traditions. The same kata is practiced thousands of times over many years and decades, so that one can perform the movements automatically – even to the extent that one can complete the kata correctly while thinking about tomorrow's work. Through attaining this state, the body is able to move unconsciously when facing an opponent in actual combat.

In kata training, Katori Shinto ryu does not dictate the precise form of the practitioner's body, such as the positioning of arms or legs. For example, part of the training involves the practitioner leaping up as high as possible from a seated position then landing his feet. The position and form the legs naturally assume will provide the best balance for that person. This is why we place emphasis on natural movement. As another example, the inward squeezing of the hands when cutting or striking is traditionally known as chakin-shibori (tea-cloth squeezing). However, this movement is not emphasized in Katori Shinto ryu. This is because the human body is constructed in such a way that the hands naturally squeeze inwards when strongly cutting or striking with a weapon. Strikes or cuts cannot be effectively stopped by squeezing outwards.

The use of the tachi must change when facing long polearms such as the naginata (glaive) or yari (spear). Katori Shinto ryu training is therefore designed to prepare members for the battlefield and whatever weapons they may face.

The teachings of Katori Shinto ryu

In the opening passages of the tradition's mokurok appears the sentence: "The art of war is the art of peace; no man should remain ignorant of this matter." Upon taking the keppan, a disciple is expected to constantly uphold his oath to the deities, act in accordance with the rules of the tradition, and undergo a lifetime of training until he can dispatch an enemy with a single blow. Above all, a warrior must be strong, supple, and tenacious, while also developing an indomitable spirit.

While it is true that traditional martial arts are a means to defend both one's self and one's homeland, extensive training in these arts naturally produces a balanced state of mind, and it is only after a relentless year of training that one understands the true value of the art of peace.

Members of the Katori Shinto ryu have been strictly forbidden to engage in duels since the time of the founder. Such matches only lead to death for one or both of the combatants. These matches are referred to in Japanese as shiai („to test“ combined with „to meet“), but a slight modification of the characters produces the phrase „shi ni ai“, to meet with death.

Since Choisai's dojo was located at the foot of Katori Jingu, long revered as a shrine dedicated to a god of war, and the founder had groomed practitioners who went on to become renowned in their own right, martial artists would frequently appear wanting to cross swords in matches. To deal with these inevitable requests, the founder Ikenao left us with the teaching known as kumazasa no taiza (a variety of short bamboo grass with a thin, pliant stalk and very low weight-bearing capacity; taiza, in this case, describes two people, or opponents, facing off. So a loose translation would read "Standoff from atop the bamboo grass."). When faced with a challenger from another tradition, it is said that Ikenao would sit atop a patch of kumazasa without it bending and offer him a seat beside him. Unable to duplicate this amazing feat, the challenger would lose heart and withdraw. Thus it is said: "One who prevails against his opponent is superior to one who strikes down his opponent." Through this example, Ikenao taught us that true victory does not lie in striking down our enemies, but in achieving our goals through peaceable means. Since times of old, there have been countless examples of those whose preference for settling conflicts with brute force not only cost them their lives in quarrels, but resulted in the ruin of their martial traditions as well.

When considering the mindset prescribed by the Katori Shinto ryu towards the arduous pursuit of one's own humanity, one saying in our tradition stands out: "The control of one's self is a far greater feat than the defeat of a thousand enemies."

Sport is merely competition with set rules in which participants pit themselves against one another for points that determine victory or defeat. Since Katori Shinto ryu lacks the Japanese kyu/dan ranking system used in modern Japanese martial arts, there are no competitions for award of promotion. Rather, the students and teachers are simply expected to learn from one another (much like the interdependent relationship of yin and yang) and dedicate themselves wholeheartedly to their training. Meanwhile, their skill in movement and mental maturity are assessed, and they are awarded with a mokuroku if they have achieved a designated stage of development, followed by a

menkyo after many more years of training. Finally there is also the gokui kaiden scroll, which is the highest level within the tradition. An age restriction is imposed on this last, however, in that no one under the age of forty-two is awarded this scroll, regardless of their development.

“Victory through combat is no real victory. True victory is gained by achieving one’s aim without reliance on weapons or recourse to violence. This path leads to real peace. Indeed, this path embodies the way of peace.”

Combative Techniques

Defensive Weaponry

Defensive weaponry, which has developed in tandem with offensive weaponry as its counter, includes the use of regional climatic conditions, available local resources, and man-made defensive equipment.

Fortresses and other such facilities are common examples of the use of local resources or terrain. Similarly, shields are one form of highly mobile defensive equipment; they then evolved into armour that could be wrapped around the human body like clothing.

To defend from enemy assaults, humans are said to have wrapped themselves in pelts or worn wooden armor made of interlaced bark. By the Kofun period (ca. 300 – 710 A. D.), the early varieties of Japanese armor called tanko and keiko were already largely perfected.

In Japan, armour is known by a variety of terms, including katchu, yoroi-kabuto, and kabuto-yoroi, depending more on the period in which it was referenced than differences in design. Whether referred to as tanko, keiko, oyoroi, domaru, hara-ate, hara-maki, gusoku or other terms, as the face of warfare changed through the ages, Japanese armour kept pace to reach ever-greater levels of freedom of movement and efficient shape.

The key to successfully achieving victory resorting to conflict is to have an unequalled advantage over the enemy in terms of combative technology, weaponry, and psychology, and to be always one step ahead in terms of intelligence. Thus, we must have a thorough knowledge and understanding not only of offensive weaponry, but of defensive weaponry as well.

Japanese armour has as much artistic value, utility, and presence as the Japanese sword, and is a formidable product of the best in technologies.

However, Japanese armour has, for the sake of greater ease of movement, unavoidable and exposed weak points, and it is this design defect that is targeted by the omote set of sword techniques in Katori Shinto ryu.

When cutting at the exposed neck, the sword must slice into the artery just below the jaw. For a cut to the trunk of an opponent, the only exposed area is a roughly ten-centimeter gap between the portion of the armour protecting the torso and the kusazuri (hanging skirt protecting the upper legs), which is why an attack to the trunk is limited to this hip area. When aiming for the wrists or arms, given that the outer portion of the arm is protected by iron plates and chain mail, the underside is targeted both because it is only covered by leather lacing and because this target is closest to the vital arteries. When aiming for the legs, Katori Shinto ryu stabs at the inner thigh that is exposed

from behind the haidate, which extends the protective coverage of the kusazuri to just above the knees.

When aiming for the abdomen, the strongest and most proven attack is to thrust the blade flat into the target with the cutting edge facing left (assuming the standard right-handed attack).

Even the lightest armours weigh as much as ten kilograms with some specimens exceeding twenty kilograms. When pairing off in such armour, it is extremely difficult to move around on the balls of the feet as they frequently do in modern sport kendo. Nevertheless, omote practice trains one to be able to move as quickly as possible in this attire.

A unique feature of the Katori Shinto ryu is that kata, which in other traditions are ordinarily short and end quickly, have been organized as long practice sequences designed to increase stamina, and thus train for the tremendous endurance required on the battlefield.

The Practical Sword

Iaijutsu is the art of instantaneously drawing the sword and cutting down attackers with utmost speed. Once the sword is free of the saya (scabbard), sword techniques are known as kenjutsu. Our tradition practices iaijutsu forms centering on scenarios when one is assaulted while travelling at night or when indoors.

In the iaijutsu of Katori Shinto ryu, there are many kata in which one assumes the iai-goshi posture and engages low to the ground. The scouting parties of medieval Japanese armies needed to move by night from one low place to the next and settle in this posture. Peering up at elevated positions from low ground is the quickest way to detect an enemy, while keeping low to the ground in dark areas gives one the advantage of concealment. Given the advantages of this posture, a central tenet of the tradition is to drop to one knee at the outbreak of close-quarters engagements in faintly lit or pitch-black rooms.

The kata in kobudo traditions were designed as counters to a variety of potential attacks, but even though they are “fixed forms”, their martial nature demands that they be practiced at blinding speed. Iaijutsu involves drawing and cutting with the blade in a mere fraction of a second at most, a movement called nuki-uchi. Since you should never return the sword to its sheath until the entire engagement is finished, a slow, careful sheathing action is more than adequate. Some practitioners of iaijutsu manage to cut themselves during practice as a result of sheathing their swords at dangerous speeds. Such foolishness should never be considered iaijutsu.

Bibliography:

Otake, R. (2007). Katori Shinto-ryu: warrior tradition. (1st pub., XVII, 317 s.) Berkeley Heights: Koryu Books.