

## ***The history of movement in the Japanese martial arts: structure, way of thought, and transmission***

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“No one hitherto has gained such an accurate knowledge of the bodily mechanism, that he can explain all its functions; nor need I call attention to the fact that many actions are observed in the lower animals, which far transcend human sagacity, and that somnambulists do many things in their sleep, which they would not venture to do when awake: these instances are enough to show, that the body can by the sole laws of its nature do many things which the mind wonders at.” ... 1

According to the most recent report presented at the gathering of the *Nihon budô gakkai*<sup>2</sup>, we see that after a century of modernization, the Japanese combative sports, collectively known as the martial arts, are now at an impasse. This sentiment is shared by large number of researchers and high ranking practitioners. This impasse extends itself right down to the way of moving in every day life, as the modern martial arts claim to be the end result that is founded on the way of movement of the greatest martial arts masters of Japan such as: *Yagyû Sekishûsai* (1529-1606), *Yagyû Munenori* (1571-1646), *Miyamoto Musashi* (1584-1646), *Itô Ittôsai* (1550-1618), *Tamaoka Tesshû* (1836-1888), etc. Japanese culture is strongly influenced by the undeniable presence of body, and in the artistic domain the body very often plays a principal role. The way of seating one's self, clothing one's self, all the way to the use of the paintbrush or any other object, is governed by a culture of movement to which there is no equivalent in the west.

In fact, for the warriors mentioned above, the art of moving or grasping a weapon was inseparable from the art of calligraphy, *Shodô*, *Nô*, *Sadô*, and of course from all movements found in everyday life. As well, *Shodô* is all at once inseparable in the way of thinking, posture, breathing, mastery of gesture and rhythm. The momentum which carries the movement of the brush is charged with significance; to read is to make the written word take flight and to capture that which lies beyond.

The same applies to *Nô*, in the way that both arts, the martial arts and *Nô*, rely on extremely precise physical movements. Komparu Zempô (1454-1520), a

1 Baruch van Spinoza, *The Ethics*, Part III, Proposition II; Proof, Translation by R.H.M. Elwes, 1883.

2 The *Nihon budô gakkai* is an organization created in 1972 bringing together scholars and researchers with different studies on the disciplines of budô. These studies range from history, to the way of thought, philosophy, sociology, ethnology, medicine, biomechanics, psychology, ESP, etc... The *nihon budô gakkai* organizes two major symposia per year in a Japanese university where a large number of practitioners, researchers and scholars are invited. It circulates a wealth of knowledge in the form of a research paper which is greatly appreciated in the university world and by certain practitioners. Report dated 08/09/2005.

[Bulletin No. 69](#) | [June 2005](#) 17

*Nô* interpreter during the last period of the Muromachi era, wrote in his work *Zenpô zatsudan*, the following considerations:

“*Bujutsu* (combat techniques, martial arts) and *Kemari* (a ball game) are analogous to *no*. However, there is something that I do not like about *Kemari*, whereas everything is relevant in *Bujutsu*.”<sup>3</sup>

With regards to *Nô*, Yagyû Munenori wrote in a letter to one of his close disciples, Kimura Sukekuro (1580-1656), the following remarks:

“Each step (transfer of body weight) and word spoken hides a profound truth. It is this truth that is the foundation of the *Nô* of the Konparu School. It is interesting to note that this principle is the profound science that governs the movement in *bujutsu*.”<sup>4</sup>

In the way of moving in these various disciplines, refined in some to arts of gesture, we find a common ground: The act of eliminating all extraneous movements which reinforces concentration and allows each movement to become profound.

The way of moving in the martial arts is intimately related to, among other things, the manner in which the sword is held and worn, its weight and shape, the style of clothing, the way of walking, etc...

However, if we compare the movements of modern *kendo* to certain schools of classical *kenjutsu* such as the *Shinkage-ryû*, the *Nen-ryû*, or even modern *jûdô* or *aikidô* to classical *jûjutsu* of schools such as the *Takeuchi-ryû* (founded in 1532), the *Shoshô-ryû* (founded in 1520), *Hokki-ryû* (founded in 1596)<sup>5</sup>, we see that there is a gap separating the modern disciplines from the traditional disciplines. We can ask ourselves where the relationship lies between the different artistic domains where the body remains the main pillar. This same and intimate relationship connects the martial arts masters of old with the practice of *nô*, *shodô*, *kemari* or *sadô*.

Yet for a novice or a simple practitioner, and occasionally an expert, the modern practices are the most profound and effective expression of the way of 3 Konparu Zenpo, his son Yoshikatsu, as well as actors of the following generation, Yasuteru and Ujikatsu were all versed to a very high level in the martial arts. The *e-maki Shinkage-ryû Heihô Mokuroku no Koto*, written in 1601 by Yagyû Muneyoshi Sekishûsai (1529-1606) which was given to Konparu, testifies to his high level of skill. This document, along with many others, are preserved at Hozanji, in Nara.

<sup>4</sup> Yagyû Munenori, 5<sup>th</sup> son of Sekishûsai, instructor of combat techniques to the first three Shôgun of the Tokugawa family, enjoyed a prestigious position. Author of the *Heihô kadensho* (written in 1632), he was versed in the practice of *Nô* which he did in conjunction with the practice of *bujutsu*.

<sup>5</sup> The *Takeuchi*, *Shoshô*, and *Hokki* schools are known for being the oldest in Japan. The roots and creation of the *Takeuchi-ryû* can be demonstrated historically and philologically, it would seem that the *Shoshô-ryû* is an appellation that dates back to the beginning of the Edo period, the document of transmission for this school reveals two appellations with the same technical content: *Koden-ryû* and *Kanze-ryû*. It is very interesting to note that this school possesses a curriculum of techniques and a way of moving that is completely different from those found in schools that date from the end of the Edo period and of the *jûdô* of Kano.

18 [Bulletin No. 69](#) | [June 2005](#)

moving from the grand masters of long ago. In looking at the following documents, we quickly come to terms with the magnitude of the gap separating

them:

Combat between two graded *kendōka* during a competition in Tōkyō (March 2003, photo, *Budō*, No.437), note the position of the feet, on two parallel lines, the heel of the rear foot is elevated, as well as the position of the arms.

Photo showing the successor (left) of the *Ittō-ryū*, founded at the very beginning of the Edo period, and would later influence modern *kendō*. The grip on the sword and the position of the arms is different from those of the two seen in the previous photo. The position of the feet and of the rear heel (person on the right) is almost identical to the previous photo. We note as well, a difference in the protective gear. Seen here is the very first protection used for protecting the wrists, invented and used in this style of *kenjutsu*. (Photo taken at the end of the Taishō period, private collection of Sasamori Junzō, (1886-1976)).

[Bulletin No. 69 | June 2005](#) 19

Illustration coming from; *Kenjutsu hidden Hitori Shugyō*, written in 1789.

Here we see the same position, *seigan no kamae*, however we see that the feet are on a different angle (90°). The heels are approaching the same line and the grip of the sword as well as the position of the arms is very different. The *kamae* is called *seigan no kamae*, as the tip of the blade is pointing to the eyes of the adversary. However, the body is of a slight profile and retreating, which shows that it is of a type of *seigan no kamae* that is very different from those presented as of yet. In fact here, the position of the legs is known as *hanmi* or *ichimonji no kamae*.

Above, the illustration from the *Shinkage-ryū heihō mokuroku* of Kamiizumi isse no kami (1503-1578?), 1570. The positions are wider and the feet are on the same line even if that is not obvious on the picture. This type of position shows that the body is on a profile and that the body weight is either on one leg or the other. This position is known under several appellations: *hanmi*, *ichimonji goshi*, *ichi no kamae*, *ichimonji no kamae*, *shumoku no ashi no kamae*, and *hira ichimonji no kamae*. In addition to being one of the basic postures of all of the classical *bujutsu* schools of Japan, we also find it in armored combat, *yoroi kumiuchi*.

Above we see the *Shintō-ryū Kukejō Matacho* or *madaitō* of the *Shintō-ryū* founded by Tsukahara Bokuden (1489-1571). The broad positions which are clearly profiled, the feet on the same line, as is the sword with its long curved blade of the same type as the *daitō* or *tachi* used during the Muromachi (1333-1467) and Momoyama periods, show again the difference between the positions of modern *kendō*.

[20 Bulletin No. 69 | June 2005](#)

In light of the fact that there are different representations for the same combat attitude with a sword, we see that the positions are completely different. Similarly, the manipulation as well as the grip of the *shinai* (bamboo sword) is vastly different from that of the sword or even wooden sword. We have applied the same method between *jūdō* and *jujutsu* and all of the various martial arts currently known in Japan and the results are the same.

First of all, the study of these documents of transmission of technical knowledge written at the very beginning of the Edo period show that the study of a martial art or the use of a weapon, has as a starting point, a similar position whose name varies depending on the school and time period. This basic position, *hanmi* or *ichimonji goshi*, is found in many of the best *jûjutsu* schools such as the *Takeuchi-ryû*, *Hokki-ryû*, *Shoshô-ryû*, *Shishin takuma-ryû*<sup>6</sup>, *Takagi yôshin-ryû*, *Asayama ichiden-ryû*, etc.

It should be noted that these schools were, for the most part, born before the Edo period or at the very beginning and their differences with modern *jûdô*, as much in their way of moving as in their use of the body, are flagrant. The practical and theoretical study of the classical martial arts and the comparison with *no* and traditional Japanese dances show that the corporeal arts, whose history we can retrace and explore, revealed principles of motion or gesture very different to those we take for granted today.

The technical differences such as the amplitude of the movements and the quality of those, as well as the way of holding the weapon, brings us to the following hypothesis: An insidious rupture has occurred at the level of the transmission of combat techniques and that, all the while believing to follow the classical form i.e.; the positions, movements, and ways of holding the weapon; the way in which today's practitioners perform them follows a different principle.

Moreover, if we look at the gestures conveyed in today's *budô*, a large number of questions surface. For example: did Yagyû, Ittôsai, or Musashi use protective armour while training? How did they train and with what type of clothing? What was their starting position? How did they hold the sword, spear, halberd, dagger, or *shuriken*? Were there different ways to grasp them? Are the uses of techniques and ways of moving that we find today in the martial sports created during the Meiji period different?

The majority of the combat techniques from the classical schools were created for use in any type of situation. It would seem that the way of walking, the starting position, and the way of manipulating the weapon were the

<sup>6</sup> The oldest document (1595) still in existence today, conserved in the library of the city of Toyama, is the *Mokuroku*, an index of techniques where the name of each technique is entered. The document attributes the founding of the school to the monk Saichô (767-822). Historical source unknown therefore subject to caution. It would seem that none of the techniques, in spite of being transmitted at the heart of several temples, were never recorded as the first historical document is dated to 1595. The point of interest of this school is that it was transmitted conjointly with the practice of several weapons, including *ken-jutsu* and that one of its characteristics is to not use muscular force to effect combat techniques.

[Bulletin No. 69](#) | [June 2005](#) 21

principle elements to which a large variety of techniques would become grafted. Avoid all superfluous movement and focus only on rational movements that allow complete mobility and freedom without any hindrances; the famous *jiyu jizai*<sup>7</sup>, the fundamental principle. This same principle can be found in every

*densho* and *makimono* from the *bujutsu*; in all disciplines without exclusion. What is this *jiyu jizai* and how can we materialize it in the medium of forms (*kata*) conceived for the physical education<sup>8</sup> of children?

### ***The Different Ways of Walking***

After a thorough study of many of the documents of transmission of combat techniques written just prior to, during and after the Edo period, we note, unequivocally, the many differences between the classical martial arts and the “modern martial arts”. One of the first issues is the attitude of the body while walking. In effect, all of the teachings and manuscripts of the masters aim to realize any type of technique while in mid stride and, according to them; therein lies the ultimate secret.

Today, it is difficult not to notice that the majority of martial arts practitioners, from all disciplines; *jûdô*, *karate*, *aikidô*, *jôdô*, *kendô*, *iai-dô*, etc., walk like athletes. This is to say that their legs are straight, they keep a straight or nearly straight torso, and they balance with the arms diagonally applying torsion to the vertebral column. In short, they walk in the habitual manner. Nevertheless, when these same practitioners find themselves in the process of training in their respective disciplines they use a gait founded on the model of the classical schools.

All of the disciplines created during the Meiji period (*jûdô*, *karate*, *aikidô*, *jôdô*, *kendô*, *iai-dô*, etc.), have a common point: They use a gait where the body is used differently than in the classical schools. This shows that all of the disciplines mentioned above diverged in a period when Japan was absorbing all of the sciences and techniques of the west and when the “western walk” would have been in style.

However, during the Edo period it appeared that the Japanese of the time had a way of walking and moreover, mannerisms that corresponded to their social class. We know the words *Bushi-aruki*, *Hyakusho-aruki*, *Chonin-aruki*, *Shokunin-aruki*, and *Hinin-aruki*, though the meanings behind these words are all but forgotten today. Thanks to a few good old movies from the first half of the century, we are able to pull a repertoire of physical attitudes allowing us to shed some light on the dynamic of movement of which we only find images frozen in the iconography.

<sup>7</sup> The best known documents of transmission are, among others, the *heihô kadensho* written by Yagyû Munenori (1571-1646), the *fudochi shinmyô roku* written by Takuan (1573-1645), *Ittô sai Sensei Kenpô Sho* by Kotoda Yahei Toshisada (1620-1700), the *Tengu Geijutsu Ron* and the *Neko no Myô-jutsu* by Issai Chozanshi (1659-1741)...

<sup>8</sup> In *Nihonshi kohyakka Budô futaki Kenichi*, Irie Kôhei and Katô Hiroshi Ed. Tokyôdô 1994 p.192, and in *Budô wo shiru*, Tanaka Mamoru, Tôdô Yoshiaki, Higashi Kenichi and Murata Naoki, Ed. Fumaidô, 2000, *kata to bunka*, p.106.

22 [Bulletin No. 69](#) | [June 2005](#)

The Japanese prior to the Meiji era walked without torsion to the body. Even after the war we could still find traces of this gait in farmers and in certain merchant families of ancient descent<sup>9</sup>. The warriors walked by lowering their

center of gravity without fully straightening the legs, the right hand followed the right leg, and the left hand stayed in close proximity to the sword so as to be able to draw the sword or any other weapon or object at any time. This way of walking is called *namba aruki*<sup>10</sup>. It employs no torsion to the body and does not cause the *kimono* to shift. This walk was found within the continuity of the apprenticeship of technical movements for every warrior, and analysis of combat techniques found within certain documents allows us to reconstruct this type of movement with great precision.

By carefully analyzing different basic techniques we notice, starting from the second half of the Edo period, a profound mutation in the practice of the martial arts. During the Edo period instruction to the masses, the creation of new schools, the diffusion of techniques, the creation of new methods of training and protection, and technical specialization led to unprecedented changes in the practice of the martial arts and thus in the manner of moving as well.

To understand this phenomenon it helps to have a precise representation of the history of the martial arts. Several different currents will influence the way of thinking and the way of moving in the schools of the Edo period. Upon studying the history of the different schools that were born during the Edo period, it becomes obvious that their founders developed themselves in one of three currents.

### ***The Four Currents***

The creation of these three currents dates back, without a doubt, to the Muromachi period (1333-1467). We call them the three currents at the origin of the use of the sword, *kenjutsu no sandai genryu*. The names of these three schools are as follows:

☉ The *Tenshin shōden katori shintō-ryū*, founded by Iizasa Chōisai Ienao (1387-1488)

☉ The *Kage-ryū*, founded by Aisu Ikōsai (1452-1538)

☉ The *Nen-ryū*, founded by Sōma Shirō Yoshimoto (1350- ?), better known under the name *Nenami Jion*

In spite of the fact that these three currents are known for their use of the sword, the teachings of the school rests on a broad range of weapons and  
9 In Training Journal, May 2001, N°259, debate on the theme: “*nanba* and the use of the body”, between the martial arts researcher, Konō Yoshinori and the Doctor Watarai Kōji of Tokyo University, p.12.

<sup>10</sup> This way of walking is used in *no* and in the puppet theatres. The *kanji* that designates *nanba* or *nanban* is difficult to interpret. The most reliable reference is found in the work of the ethnologist Shioda Tetsuo entitled *Hakimono kenkyū*. The author describes several types of walks used by farmers to move around in the rice fields. *Nanba* is written in *katakana*.

[Bulletin No. 69 | June 2005](#) 23

combat techniques whose primary matrix remains the rational use of the body as a whole. The generic term used to designate the teaching of these currents is *bugei juhappan*, the eighteen warrior disciplines. As well, the founders of these

four currents were all masters in the use of many weapons and could pass from one to another without constraint in their movement.

Therefore, if the practice of the martial arts was passed on via a multidisciplinary apprenticeship, this would mean that there was also a method of moving, a way of transferring body weight common to all the different weapons. The documents of the four currents presented above reveal a common position, a common defense and a kind of displacement that most often constitutes the secret teaching of the school.

Moreover, the study of different documents spread out over the history of the martial arts since the 17<sup>th</sup> century reveals the presence of this same posture or attitude, under different names, and of the same type of unique displacement that was applied to all kinds of weaponry.

It is even more interesting to see that we find this same type of fundamental movement in the majority of Japanese practices of movement.

### ***The Art of Concealing the Transfer of Body Weight***

The vast majority of documents that we have analyzed give mention to the same kind of movement: to move without making noise, without intention, without physical hindrance, entering into the shadow of the adversary, not having any tangible form, etc. The principle of this movement is common to all of the classical schools but the term used is different from one school to the other. We find the terms *suri ashi*, *shinobi iri*, *musoku no ho*, *kage ashi*, etc.

According to our analysis this type of movement was discovered and deepened in the very first classical Japanese martial arts schools by the following precepts:

- ⊙ The effort to overcome an impasse encountered in the search of a dynamic based on spontaneous movement.
- ⊙ The search for techniques that do away with preparatory movements that warn the adversary of impending attack.
- ⊙ The search for an ever increasing freedom in the use of the body as a whole in the execution of techniques.

The transfer of body weight to take a step in daily movements occurs automatically: The center of gravity is directed forward, at the same time we are propelled by our right leg as it remains behind us. In this type of movement we create an impulse with the legs against the ground to move forward. To simply outline: The force creating the horizontal displacement is the resultant of two vectors; the strike from the leg against the ground and the weight of the body.

The dynamic is such that, to produce a movement we must exert a force that goes against that of gravitation. This model, as obvious as it is, forms in Japan and elsewhere, the basis for modern physical skills and acts as an

24 [Bulletin No. 69](#) | [June 2005](#)

explicative model for the traditional skills accounting for differences in performance and intensity. This type of displacement is present in all of the sporting activities such as *kendo*, *judo*, *karate*, *aikido*, *jodo*, etc.

However, the principle employed in the classical schools, which is

generally unknown, is very different. This principle allows us to improve the speed of movement all the while concealing the transfer of body weight and increasing the power of execution of the technique. To the observer, the application of this principle is masked either by its slowness or blazing speed and the difference is difficult to tell, but once understood, is simple to express. At the instant of movement, instead of creating a force against the ground, we release, we take away any muscular tension from the legs to allow our body weight to come into play and in doing so we transform the force into a horizontal displacement under the control of body weight. It involves rediscovering a sensation of gravity as an already existing force that can be used, and no longer employing the usual habit of fighting against it. We can therefore come to “erase” the supports of the movements thanks to the technique consisting of controlling the transfer of body weight as well as lightly moving certain parts of the body such as the chest, the shoulders, the knees, etc. It therefore consists of a type of movement where there is no useless torsion to the body and where we seek for each movement the path of least resistance, with a preference for small arcs or, as is most often the case, straight lines.

This principle applies to the use of any weapon and allows one not to be tense, and to have a grip that is as supple as that which holds a paint brush. It consists of accompanying the weight of the weapon and to move in concert with its characteristics (for example the curvature, the edge, its elasticity, etc.). The employment of this kind of movement demands, from the beginning, an intimate knowledge of one’s body, as it involves using the whole body as a single unit with all its physical potential, and not just the hips as is the case in the majority of sporting practices.

Whether it is with a stick, spear, sword or knife, or even empty handed, the principle of movement that allows one to erase the transfer of body weight is associated with rotational body movements whose main axis is the body’s center line, *seichusen*, and the strike or technique is characterized by incredible speed and force. Without being physically grueling, the whole drops and the change of axis unites the different parts of the body as one single movement. This method of movement allows one to obtain physical speed with little muscular effort. Moreover, even an elderly person can demonstrate very fast, powerful, and effective movement. This would explain one of the major reasons for the retention of efficacy in the practice and realization of combat techniques at an advanced age, which is certainly the case in the vast majority of Chinese and Japanese classical martial arts.

[Bulletin No. 69](#) | [June 2005](#) 25

A large number of elements have yet to be explored, which leads us to believe that the application for this type of movement is much greater. We find it deeply rooted in the way of sitting down, standing up, walking, and in all kinds of movements that have as their founding principle; the movement of the

body in all its dimensions. We can even say that it consists of an essential principle that governs what we shall call for lack of a better term, the “culture of the ground” of which the Japanese society is the most striking example in Asia.

### ***Special Thank***

I would like to express our sincere gratitude to Mr. Watanabe Takashi, President & managing director, Mr. Akira Shiono, Deputy managing director, and Ms. Shizuko Kikuta, Office coordinator, for their great help and very warmfull advices.

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