

An Interview With:

Toby Threadgill, Menkyo Kaiden, Takamura ha Shindo Yoshin ryu

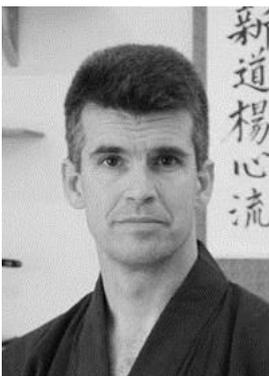
by Marco Ruiz Published Online

A little background. I met Yuki Yoshi Takamura in San Francisco's Japan Town at a JACL event in the early 1990's. When I realized he was the koryu instructor I'd heard rumors about in the South Bay Area, I asked him if he would do an interview for a budo newsletter I published. To my delight, he agreed. I visited Takamura sensei and his charming wife Mishiko, at their home one afternoon to conduct the interview. It was during this interview that I realized this man was a treasure of information and insight. Several years later I was contacted by Mr. Stan Pranin of Aikido Journal magazine concerning an expansion of my interview. The expanded version of this interview was published in Aikido Journal in 1999. Yuki Yoshi Takamura passed away in 2000. The leadership of his organization passed to Toby Threadgill in 2004 following the retirement of the other remaining senior exponents.

In May of 2008 during a trip to Colorado I visited Toby Threadgill. His dojo nestled in the mountains of Evergreen, Colorado is breathtaking. It reflects that Shinto influenced characteristic of achieving beauty through simplicity. It even smells the part of a Shinto shrine, imbuing the air with the fragrant scent of hinoki. I sat down with Threadgill sensei over tea in his dojo after a short training session to discuss the tradition he leads and the future of classical martial arts outside Japan. I hope you find his observations and insights as fascinating as I did.

Could you please give me some background on Shindo Yoshin Ryu?

Shindo Yoshin ryu is a school of koryu jujutsu. It was founded late in the Edo Period by Katsunosuke Matsuoka, a Kuroda Clan retainer.



Toby Threadgill Sensei

Matsuoka founded Shindo Yoshin ryu because he felt the contemporary jujutsu systems of the late Edo period had lost much of their military usefulness, evolving into systems driven more by individual challenge matches than effective military engagement. Matsuoka, embroiled in the political stresses of the late Edo Period, conceived Shindo Yoshin ryu as a true sogo bujutsu or comprehensive military science.

The school combines the jujutsu teachings of the Akiyama Yoshin Ryu lineage and Nakamura Yoshin Koryu lineage. Shindo Yoshin ryu was further influenced by the Jikishinkage ryu and Hokushin Itto ryu schools of kenjutsu. The Ohbata/Takamura branch which separated from the mainline in 1895, includes further influence from Matsuzaki Shinkage ryu. The two different

Yoshin ryu jujutsu lineage's reflected in our teachings were very prominent and influenced many other jujutsu styles as well as Kodokan Judo.

Only two legitimate branches of Shindo Yoshin ryu exist, the Shindo Yoshin ryu Domonkai under the direction of Dr. Ryozo Fujiwara in Tokyo and the Takamura ha Shindo Yoshin Kai here in the US.

You have become quite well known on an international level. You are especially in demand as a seminar instructor in both the aikido and Wado ryu community. Why the fascination as it seems unusual for a koryu jujutsu school to be of interest to members of those modern disciplines?

In the case of Wado ryu, the interest is historical. Wado ryu karate was founded by Hironori Ohtsuka in 1934. Ohtsuka was a highly licensed practitioner of Shindo Yoshin ryu and Yoshin Koryu who later studied Okinawan karate with Gichin Funakoshi, Choki Motobu and Kenwa Mabuni. Ohtsuka combined influences from classical jujutsu with Okinawan karate to create Wado ryu. Despite Ohtsuka's admiration of Okinawan karate, he rejected many of its harsher elements, preferring the softer and more subtle approach of jujutsu. This makes the Wado ryu representation of technique and theory rather unique among Japanese karate systems.

In the case of aikido, the interest is mostly technical. Takamura ha Shindo Yoshin ryu includes the study of internal strength and employs very subtle body dynamics. These areas of study and the principles that guide them are related to aikido theory. Another area of TSYR that aikidoka find especially interesting is the integration of weapons theory and taijutsu. Virtually all taijutsu techniques in Japanese budo are associated with classical weaponry. In TSYR the relationship between taijutsu and classical weapons has not been marginalized, both are still taught as an interconnected whole.

This is fascinating. Can you expand upon this?

Most modern martial arts that had links to classical weapons study either discarded them altogether or relegated them to secondary status. For example, Aikido's founder, Morihei Ueshiba, frequently demonstrated the art's technical connection to weapons study, but in the greater aikido community these studies eventually took on a supporting role. Recently there has been a movement by some aikido groups to introduce classical weapons training alongside aikido in an effort to more thoroughly investigate the relationship between bukiwaza and taijutsu. TSYR is one of several models aikidoka can investigate that represent an undiluted example of this integration.

How did you meet your sensei, Yuki Yoshi Takamura?

In 1986, I became aware of Yuki Yoshi Takamura, headmaster for the Takamura branch of Shindo Yoshin ryu while doing research for a magazine article. The subject of the article was Wado ryu's historical and technical connections to jujutsu. Early in my research, many sources led me to believe that Shindo Yoshin Ryu no longer existed because Hironori Ohtsuka, as 4th headmaster, had abandoned it to create Wado ryu. However, I fortuitously met David Maynard who was a top student of Takamura sensei. I was excited to learn from David Maynard that Shindo Yoshin ryu was still being taught and that Hironori Ohtsuka was not the 4th headmaster of all Shindo Yoshin ryu, but instead led a small ryuha or branch associated with a Kendo teacher named Tatsusaburo Nakayama.

I contacted Takamura Sensei by mail and initiated correspondence with him. Several months later I decided to visit him at his dojo in Northern California. What I found there was a fascinating man, small in physical stature but with a very intense presence about him. The historical information and documentation he made available to me was invaluable. I learned that mainline Shindo Yoshin ryu was still a member of the Nippon Kobudo Kyokai in Tokyo and that the 3rd generation headmaster, Tatsuo Matsuoka was still alive. I also learned that the branch taught by Takamura sensei was descended from Shigeta Ohbata, Takamura sensei's grandfather.



Yuki Yoshi Takamura and Toby Threadgill in 1997

Takamura sensei and I got along quite well, so he suggested that if I was really interested in learning more about Shindo Yoshin ryu, I should start studying TSYR. In keeping with proper budo protocol, he contacted my Wado ryu sensei, Gerry Chau, and formally requested permission to take me as a student. Over a period of years I trained more and more in Shindo Yoshin ryu and less and less in Wado ryu. I suppose the most significant reason for this change in focus was my fascination with swordwork and the rich historical legacy surrounding koryu jujutsu

How did you wind up being awarded a menkyo kaiden in Shindo Yoshin Ryu?

That's a long story. (laughing) Let's go back a little.

During his life, Takamura sensei awarded three menkyo kaiden licenses in Takamura ha Shindo Yoshin Ryu. The first was issued to Iso Takagi sensei in Japan. I believe his license was awarded in the early 1980's. In 1994, a license was awarded to David Maynard sensei. My menkyo kaiden, awarded in 1999, was the last one issued.

The original intent of Takamura sensei was for each of the three menkyo kaiden holders to operate semi-independently, overseeing different geographical locations: Iso Takagi in Japan, David Maynard in Europe, and me in the Americas. After Takamura sensei's death in 2000, unfortunate events caused changes to this proposed organizational structure. A serious illness forced Takagi sensei to retire in 2001 and an automobile accident in 2003 left Maynard sensei with a debilitating back injury. In 2004, Dave Maynard and Iso Takagi asked me to officially accept the position of kaicho and oversee the organization worldwide.

What does it mean to be menkyo kaiden of a traditional ryu? Is that unprecedented for a non-Japanese?

The issuing of a terminal license in a koryu is specific to each individual school. In some koryu, for example, menkyo kaiden is purely a technical license. In TSYR, menkyo kaiden is an

administrative license, only issued to qualified holders of a joden gokui menkyo. There are no dan ranks in TSYR. We only issue the classical teaching licenses: shoden, chuden and then joden gokui. If awarded a joden gokui menkyo in TSYR, one is recognized as having learned the entire technical curriculum. With menkyo kaiden comes access to a small category of oral teachings and authority associated with administrative duties, political strategies and that sort of thing.

It is not unprecedented for a non-Japanese to hold menkyo kaiden of a traditional ryu. There are quite a few highly-licensed westerners in koryu budo now.

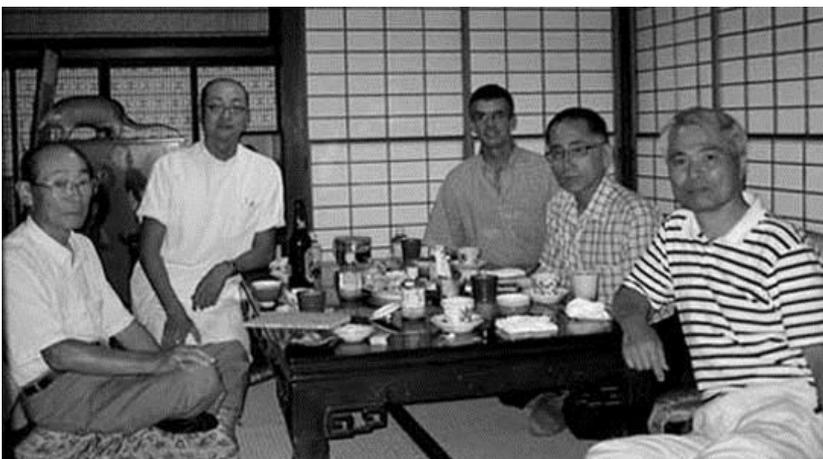
Was it difficult as a non-Japanese to be accepted as head of a koryu?

The short answer is definitely, yes. There's a feeling among some Westerners that koryu cannot be transmitted outside Japan. They believe that to transmit or to study koryu properly, it must be done within the culture of Japan and in the country of Japan. My teacher didn't believe this. His position was that the feudal culture that bore the koryu in Japan died with the Meiji Restoration in 1868. Takamura sensei believed that modern Japanese culture is almost as divorced from Japanese feudalism as is modern western culture, therefore the location of training is irrelevant. Properly taught, the critical cultural nuances required in studying TSYR are integrated into its teachings.

So what do the Japanese in the Nihon koryu community think of a westerner like you holding such an important position?

Many prominent Japanese koryu instructors and budo historians acknowledge my position and have offered their support to me. Probably the most important recognition from Japan came in July of 2007 when I visited the Matsuoka family in Akeno with Wado ryu 7th dan, Shingo Ohgami. Meeting the family of Shindo Yoshin ryu's founder was an important event, as it re-established the link between the contemporary Takamura ha Shindo Yoshin Kai and the Matsuoka family. It had been over 30 years since my teacher had direct contact with the Matsuoka family through 3rd headmaster Tatsuo Matsuoka.

The Matsuoka's invited us into their home where we spent several hours over lunch. They provided access to historical photographs and documents seldom seen outside the immediate family. They permitted us to record a three-hour interview covering their family history and then accompanied us to visit the grave of Katsunosuke Matsuoka.



Toby Threadgill & Shingo Ohgami with Masahiro, Matsuoka, Takeshi Matsuoka and Saitoh Takao at the Matsuoka home in Akeno, Japan - July 27th, 2007

In Wado ryu circles there are many supporters, but Shingo Ohgami deserves special mention. Ohgami sensei has been a long-time practitioner of both gendai and koryu budo. He is also a dedicated historian and exhaustive researcher. He has been deeply involved in collaborating with the Takamura ha Shindo Yoshin Kai on historical research and other important issues surrounding Takamura Sensei's legacy. In 2006 Ohgami sensei published an essay concerning Takamura sensei and me that appeared in the Tokyo University Karate Club newsletter. We are planning to co-author a comprehensive book on the history and techniques of Shindo Yoshin ryu. I cannot over-emphasize how valuable Ohgami sensei has been to me personally and to the Takamura ha Shindo Yoshin kai in general. I owe him a great debt.

Many koryu practitioners in the West have been supportive as well. Ellis Amdur of Toda ha Buko ryu and Araki ryu, Meik and Diane Skoss of Koryu Books and Phil Relnick of Shindo Muso ryu and Katori Shinto ryu. These are just a few of those I am fortunate to consider friends and supporters.



Toby Threadgill, Dr. Ryozo Fujiwara, Tatsuno Yoriyoshi and Shingo Ohgami in Tokyo, July 25th, 2007

There seems to be surging interest in koryu. Does your organization benefit from this?

Surging interest? Are you sure you're not confusing koryu with MMA?

Okay, maybe not surging interest but how about increased interest?

I think with increased access to authorized teachers more people are studying koryu in the West, but it's still a very small number. Many students are not really long-term prospects, they are attracted to koryu by the romantic tales in popular culture surrounding the samurai. When these students get a dose of what koryu training actually entails they are out the door almost as fast as they entered. Because of this, I require a personal interview and a significant probationary period for all students applying for membership in the kai. This allows me to observe and disqualify those whom I find are not really suited for koryu study. Classical budo requires a huge amount of dedication, patience and determination. Our training requires a rather unique attitude and mindset. It is certainly not for everyone.

Can you describe the ideal koryu student for me, while I take notes?

The most important requirement of a student is that he possess a personality trait called "nyunanshin" – the ability to overcome one's previous experience and any pre-conceived ideas.

He must be willing to put his ego away, empty his cup and begin anew. He must be willing to embrace what the kai has to teach him without resistance.

The best koryu student is usually a student of modern budo who realizes that he is looking for something different, something that speaks to him in another budo language. He is frequently older or unusually mature for his age. He has cultivated a well-defined perspective of what he is looking for and what he desires from his training. He is not searching for simple self-defense or the personal gratification of sport competition. He is interested in immersing himself in an endeavor that is both physically and intellectually stimulating. He enjoys the idea that he is part of something with history, something with a larger purpose than himself.

Frequently koryu students are involved in law enforcement or have experience in some sort of government service. I have a significant number of students who have served in our military. I think the perspective and character of koryu speaks to these individuals in a way the more ubiquitous forms of budo do not.

That said, some of our students train in modern forms of budo in addition to TSYR. I'm fine with that as long as they can separate the disciplines. If they cannot, I must insist that they make a choice between one or the other because they aren't doing either art justice.

So koryu is not really concerned with modern self-defense or competition?

Self-defense was of considerable concern to Takamura sensei. He took it very seriously and went so far as to embrace a ramped up version of training that addressed the effects of adrenal stress. However, we are still a koryu. Our principal focus is maintaining the traditions and technical heritage of our art. If a student's sole reason for training in martial arts is self-defense, perhaps learning to competently handle a firearm and obtaining a concealed carry permit would be a better choice.

About self-defense, I once read an article that alluded to a home invasion incident you experienced. It was cryptic but inferred that you handled the situation successfully, a situation that could have gone very bad.

Yes. That was a long time ago. I was lucky to survive. I really don't like discussing it but I'll give you a condensed version. I confronted two men who broke into my home evidently intent on assaulting my wife whom they had followed home from a late shift at work. The situation escalated and although I managed to disarm both attackers, a bullet passed an inch from my head and I was severely cut with a knife. I almost lost my life.

The primary lesson I learned from this incident is that despite my martial arts training, I was ultimately unprepared for this type of threat. Had I taken a few simple precautions, these men never would have entered my home without my knowledge. Even a barking dog would have been a valuable self-defense asset that night.

The event changed my life and eventually my martial mindset. Something else I learned is that if you are not mentally prepared to kill another human being in a situation like the one I experienced, you may be forced to make that decision in an instant. I was lucky that I reacted in a way I am now comfortable with. The decision to kill another person is a grave one and needs to be addressed before our mortality is staring us in the face. I could have ended one attacker's life at one point in the conflict but I chose not to when he was no longer a direct threat to me. I made that choice simply because it felt like the right thing to do at that moment. Later, the gravity of

the situation and what I faced weighed heavily on me. Ultimately, I realized my instinct for a measured response was a positive trait that allows me to sleep fine with the outcome. I was not trained to be an executioner or a sheep. I was trained to engage a threat until I was convinced the threat was neutralized and then withdraw without malice. That said, if I had been forced to kill either of the attackers in mid-conflict I would sleep just as soundly.

Wow! I'm blown away. What an amazing story!

Let's not make it more than it was or make it into something it wasn't. It happened 24 years ago and I was scared out of my wits. I experienced such intense adrenal stress afterward that I couldn't hear or feel anything. My memories of the event are like an out-of-body experience. Hours passed before I came down from the situational stress. I don't clearly recall going to the hospital or being stitched up in the emergency room. The whole thing was all very surreal.

Given this experience, one of the things I came to appreciate about Takamura sensei most was his martial mindset. He exhibited an eerie calm under stress. I came to realize that this trait was a skill enhanced not just by his physical training but by the mental and spiritual training that accompanied it. He lived everyday completely on his own terms, without fear or worry. There's a lot of lip service given to "living your budo" but Takamura really did it. His attitude and mindset was the model that helped me reject second-guessing my actions following the attack. The incident just happened and was dealt with the best way possible at the time. If another similar event happens in my life, I might live or I might die. That's just a fact of life I now accept without too much concern.

Is there more insight you can provide about this event?

There's not much more to tell. As I said, I'm not really comfortable talking about it because some people get the wrong impression about such a story and it becomes mythologized. This trivializes the seriousness of what happened. The event forever altered my perception of what budo really is, but it's not an experience I would wish on anyone. Proper budo really is a study of life and death. It effects how we confront the conflicts and challenges of life. Unfortunately people often become fixated on the mechanics of budo and neglect or dismiss other equally important elements of training. As a result many people treat budo like a game. Real budo is not a game.

How about a nice segue? So, concerning competition in budo?

As for competition, we don't compete in the contemporary sense in TSYR. However at the higher levels of training we do include force-on-force freestyle application of our waza. It can get really dicey applying joint locks and atemi in this environment so the progression of increased force is very strictly controlled, but in time it is our aim that an encounter be over as fast as possible. During my joden level training I took and delivered shots as hard as anything I experienced in Muay Thai boxing. Joint locks applied at high speed with force are very dangerous. It takes extreme skill and sensitivity to apply kansetsu waza in such an environment without risking a serious injury.

I didn't realize that type of training existed in koryu. Is this commonplace?

Honestly, I'm not sure. I do know Tenjin Shinyo ryu includes a ramped-up type of training that seeks to test a person's tenacity and martial mindset. I believe Kashima Shin ryu embraces a similar practice. Araki ryu definitely does. You should experience Ellis Amdur whacking at you

with a bokken sometime. He was demonstrating at my dojo once and broke a lignum vitae bokken over mine — a piece striking me in the head and then sticking into the dojo wall. You screw up or cower up at a moment like that, and bones get broken or worse.

Koryu are frequently criticized as being staid and unrealistic. I assume you would disagree with this conclusion.

Not in all cases, but let's examine "unrealistic." If the critic means antiquated in today's environment and therefore unrealistic, I can understand the opinion and conditionally agree. However, if the critic means unrealistic in the context of the arts purpose, I beg to differ. Koryu, like every other category of budo, exists within the boundaries and parameters of history and purpose. Takamura sensei was adamant that a koryu must remain true to its core principles to avoid degenerating into what he called "pretty dancing." This doesn't mean that I should require my students go into some seedy bar and get in a street fight, or enter some modern sport venue like the UFC. What he meant was that an art's core principles must be constantly challenged within the context and assumptions the art was founded on.

To challenge an art's principles within the context of its creation is a valid test that keeps the art a living martial entity instead of an empty shell. People who say all koryu are unrealistic, base this opinion on challenging a koryu outside its original parameters. That's like taking a knife to a gun fight. Look, if you're studying classical battlefield bujutsu, learning to throw a hand grenade is a skill existing outside the art's historical context. If however a school of classical swordsmanship employs a tactic utilizing specific timing, but the students never practice this timing in freestyle against a live adversary who can use feints and countertiming, how can the student realistically internalize this principle? Vibrant schools of koryu budo must have a mechanism to validate principles and tactics in their original context to ensure that nothing essential has been lost, compromised or corrupted.

A competent teacher can help students dig deep into the core principles of a koryu and then challenge them in the appropriate context. It's part of Shu Ha Ri. It is my opinion that this type of training is indispensable because the challenge is a physical and intellectual investigation that teaches the student how to understand and internalize a principle in all its technical and historical depth. Koryu, or any school of budo that denies a challenge to its core principles inevitably risks degenerating into a representation of academic theory absent any vitality or spark of realism.

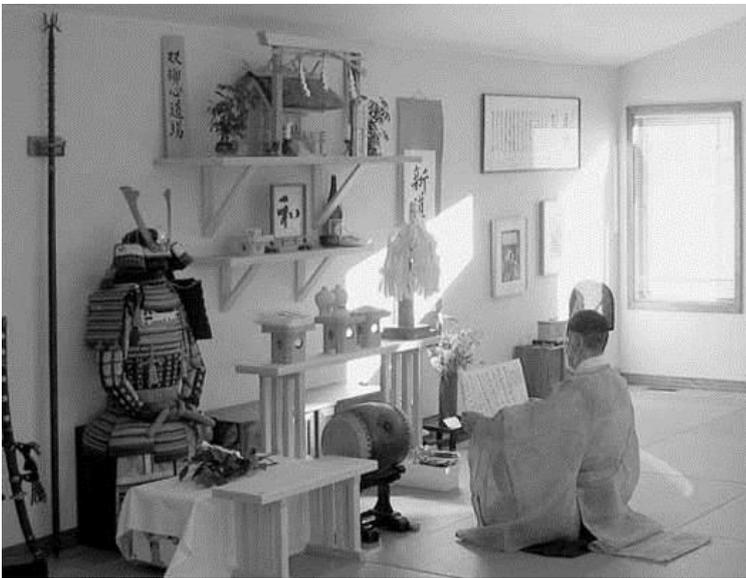
Practicing such an antiquated form of budo is obviously a very unique pursuit. Can you give us any insight into why you chose to study a koryu?

I had enthusiastically studied modern forms of budo from 1978 up until about 1993. Western fencing, Wado ryu, Muay Thai boxing and a short stint in Jeet Kune Do were my favorites. I guess I became more and more fascinated in the classical arts of Japan from both a technical and historical standpoint around 1986. With so much history and technical depth to the curriculum, I realized that classical budo was one of those things I could study for the rest of my life and never become bored with.

From a purely historical standpoint, studying a classical sogo bujutsu (comprehensive martial art) like Shindo Yoshin ryu is a fantastic exercise in living the history of budo instead of practicing it for strictly personal reasons. Studying the history and lineage of the art, realizing that you are actively engaged in a knowledge tradition that has been passed from generation to generation, all this is a very fascinating and rewarding endeavor. It makes you part of something much larger than yourself. Such study is a huge responsibility, however, and something that

cannot to be taken lightly. It is a responsibility that should weigh heavily on anyone who pursues it.

Another aspect of classical study that differentiates it from most modern schools is the integration of spiritual elements into the training curriculum. Shinto is deeply interwoven with Takamura ha Shindo Yoshin ryu. As such, a student of Shindo Yoshin ryu is exposed to various dojo rituals and practices associated with Shinto. Instructors are eventually required to memorize various Norito (prayers) and dojo rituals. These rites and prayers also function as symbols of initiation into specific levels of study.



Shinto Oharae performed at the Shindo Yoshin kai Hombu Dojo

That's very interesting. So the prayers function not only as part of the spiritual legacy of the art but also as proof of access to specific teachings?

Yes. By the time a student receives a Joden Gokui license, he has memorized 8 or more Norito, many of them quite long. Some of these Norito are associated with specific levels of knowledge and authority within the kai. If someone unknown to me were to claim a certain level of training in TSYR, he must be able to recite the Norito associated with that level of initiation. All of this is quite complex and unique to TSYR.

This seems very culturally specific. Is this level of familiarity with Japanese culture and religion normal in koryu?

Yes and no. Different schools of koryu require different levels of familiarity with Japanese culture. It is true that koryu will frequently require a much more comprehensive study of Japanese cultural elements than modern budo but these vary from school to school. Some koryu require fluency with Japanese language. All demand a certain familiarity with Japanese social customs.

So, if you're not finished learning how do you continue without your teacher to guide you?

He will always guide me. He imbued me with tools and determination to continue my quest of learning. When you receive an advanced level license in a koryu, it means you know all the kata and have internalized the omote. At this point you're starting to grasp the true depth of the ura,

or the art's hidden wisdom. As you continue your study, you are expected to develop an individualized expression of the art that is still true to its origins. With every generation in a classical martial art, the headmaster has a responsibility to add what he has absorbed back into the tradition. This is because it's impossible for any teacher to transmit 100% of what he knows. So, if I only teach exactly what my teacher has taught me, something is inevitably lost. If this continues through successive generations much of the wisdom and knowledge of the ura can be lost. Takamura provided me the tools and methods to transcend his own teaching. With this knowledge I can access the wisdom of all the past teachers. The wisdom of many generations is available if the student has tools and the determination to access it.

This is sounding a bit otherworldly.

Well, that's certainly one aspect of it. The influences of esoteric Shinto are an important part of TSYR but there are also concrete ways to interpret my comments.

I am charged with the responsibility of accessing the kai's deeper wisdom and ensuring that my expression of this wisdom is taught to my students. In every generation something may diminish, but something is also renewed. In our view, principles are the core teachings of any school of budo. You may adapt the waza here and there or add variations to address modern realities, but you may not compromise or alter the principles. Someday I may discover something that I feel works a little better than the way my teacher taught me. If I institute such a change, it must occur over long stretches of time and intense testing. Such changes cannot be haphazard or taken lightly because they can be detrimental, obscuring the hard-earned wisdom of the past headmasters. Takamura sensei always said haphazard change was "kegare," a manifestation of corruption caused by one's ego, arrogance or insecurity. To embrace new or conflicting principles risks altering the art's identity, disconnecting it from its technical roots and intellectual wisdom. Classical budo can evolve but it must do so within the framework of its core principles to accurately reflect its genuine heritage.

I've never really understood this about koryu but hearing you explain it like this makes perfect sense. On the subject of learning, your teacher wrote a fantastic essay on Shu Ha Ri? What is your slant on this method of teaching? Do you think it is still practical in today's modern society?

Sure, why not? Shu Ha Ri is the classical method of knowledge transmission in Japanese culture. The first step, "Shu," is to take a classical kata and completely immerse yourself inside it without any thought of variation. It is mastery of orthodoxy.

"Ha" is taking the kata and grasping its depth through its principles and then creating an individualized expression of the kata as a henka or variation. The caveat is that these variations must be based only on the principles and waza existing in the original kata.

"Ri" is when the practitioner has become so immersed in the art and its theory that kata are no longer necessary. Movement becomes an involuntary representation of pure principle. There is no conscious thought associated with performing the art because the practitioner's representation has evolved into a moving meditation based on principles devoid of intentional form. Practitioners achieving Ri have truly mastered their art. Observing them, they appear almost psychic, able to perceive even an advanced adversary's intent and action before it happens. In truth they have developed their sensitivity and efficiency of movement to such a high degree that there is simply no initiative or mental inertia involved in the conflict. They are so far ahead of their adversary's intent that the adversary is already defeated before he can threaten.

That sounds a lot like aikido's or Daito ryu's definition of "aiki!"

(Laughing) I'm not going to step into the quagmire of what is or is not "aiki." Let me just say that numerous principles of strategy and tactics exist under various names. To conclude that the name or strategy you employ in your particular martial art is unique or unknown by others is rather delusional and demonstrates a weakness that can be exploited. If you always assume that your adversary is as smart as you are, you have a much better chance of survival or victory.

The curriculum of Shindo Yoshin Ryu is enormous. 305 kata! How do you maintain them all?

All our kata are organized and categorized on 6 different scrolls. Obviously, a teacher must consciously remember the individual kata to properly teach them but the organizational structure makes it easier. Fortunately, I have an innate sense for visual recall. For many students however, it is a function of simple memory. We do have some esoteric Shinto practices that are intended to develop a better sense of recall but frankly, without a talent for good memory, a student is in trouble. My advice is to write everything down in detail in a notebook or grab a camcorder. Maintaining our mokuroku is a daunting task.

During our training session your expression of technique occasionally demonstrated very soft application yet I was unable to resist it. The result was amazingly powerful. Can you explain what you're doing?

This is something I get asked about all the time. People see this type of application on video or at a demo and think it's staged or phony. You thought the same thing, right? Then you felt the technique in person and changed your mind. Why?

I couldn't feel how you were moving or throwing me. I mean, I could feel myself moving but the source of the movement was difficult to ascertain. Being unable to figure out the direction or source of the power made it impossible to block or counter the technique.

This type of execution is very difficult to explain but I'll give it a try.

Advanced jujutsu is supposed to be very subtle in application. "Maximum result from minimum effort" is a common maxim. Unfortunately, many higher level jujutsu principles were abandoned after the Edo Period. Confusing the situation is the preponderance of overly cooperative training in some arts and an over-dependence on muscular strength in others.

For instance, Aikidoka flying around the room without the slightest provocation may look similar to advanced jujutsu but believe me, proper Shindo Yoshin ryu feels very different from the forms of aikido that are almost dance-like.

Alternately, Judoka pumping away on weight machines and looking like Mr. Universe instills the wrong body awareness and mental approach for developing high-level judo technique. It is impressive, but unfortunately now rare, to see a talented judo technician defeat a larger and stronger adversary with the very subtle application of Judo waza.

The application of soft and sophisticated waza requires highly developed senses. Takamura sensei used to touch someone lightly on the arm and say "I can feel inside your toes." What he meant was that through light contact he could feel someone's whole body structure without threatening them. At that point the adversary would be very vulnerable without realizing it.

Takamura sensei was adamant that this was not some magical force or mystical form of “ki,” but a very refined physical connection. Developing your senses to an extreme level is a very important aspect of TSYR Myoden waza, our most advanced level kata.

So, the Myoden waza are all very soft?

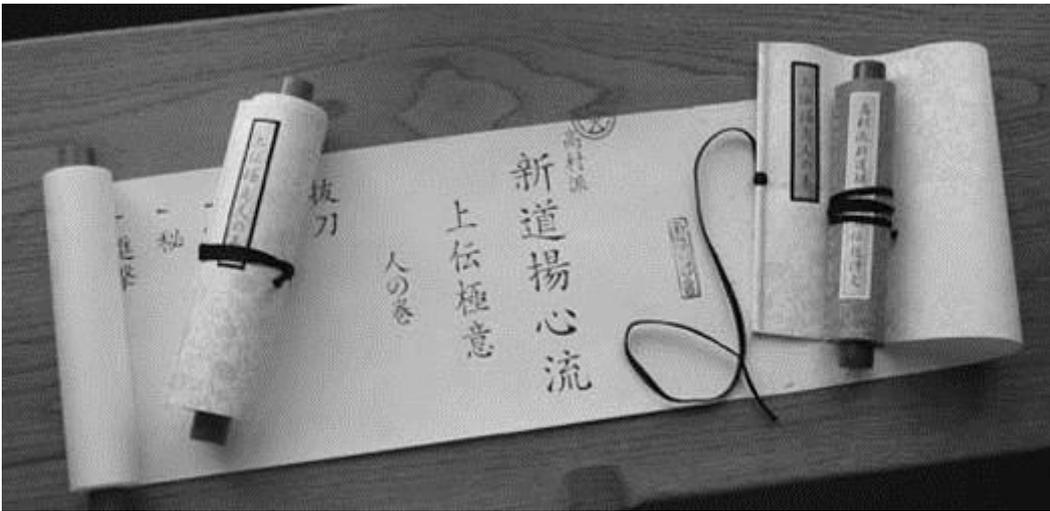
Not necessarily. The soft application of waza is much less decisive in empty-hand application than it is in an art like kenjutsu. Takamura sensei frequently stressed that soft application in jujutsu was more valuable as a study of advanced body mechanics and mental manipulation than as a practical taijutsu technique. Sometimes an initially soft entry or sophisticated deception can result in a crushing application of classical jujutsu waza, however, it is with an edged weapon that soft waza really demonstrates its superiority. If I can deceive my adversary through the soft application of kenjutsu technique, a razor sharp sword becomes decisive in a way that throwing or striking cannot be.

Unfortunately, what has happened in some schools of internal martial arts is that they have evolved into a limited and unrealistic expression of high-level technique. In TSYR we aim to not only execute technique efficiently but also maintain the option to employ a debilitating strike, crushing throw or draw an edged weapon as a finish. Every technique in TSYR begins and ends with atemi. Without the consideration of a decisive finish to a conflict, subtlety of execution is wasted.

Yes, I know what you mean. You mentioned ki. Do you employ ki in TSYR? If so, is “ki” the source of the internal power you mentioned earlier?

Not really. First of all, the term itself is problematic. People are constantly debating what “ki” means. Some are so arrogant that they actually think they can strictly define the term for the rest of us. Look up the kanji and the radicals that create it. Like many Japanese terms, “ki” is generic in definition and totally dependent on context. It can mean things as diverse as life force, spirit or mental processes. “Ki” in our expression of budo is a generic term, broadly based, complex and nuanced. “Ki” in TSYR is the integration of internal strength, perception of intent, manipulation of involuntary physical and mental processes, plus several other proprietary teachings. So, “ki” is not the source of our internal power—internal power is one the components we employ in the development of “ki.”

Concerning “internal power,” this concept is likewise difficult to strictly define. There are as many definitions of this concept as there are schools claiming to teach it. In TSYR we have a series of kata called “Nairiki no Gyo.” These kata seek to cultivate specific body skills associated with developing internal energy. But what exactly are these skills and how are these kata employed to develop internal strength? As part of our gokui, I am not permitted to discuss them in detail outside the kai membership but I can give you a general idea of what they constitute. They are solo exercises that inculcate the proper balance, movement and muscular application utilized in our greater curriculum. These types of exercises are actually quite ubiquitous in Japanese jujutsu schools of the Edo Period, although they are rather unfamiliar to those outside the membership of specific Nihon koryu. According to Yoshin ryu lore, this form of body training was introduced to Japan from China in the mid-Edo Period. In the case of Yoshin ryu, the Nairiki no Gyo were specifically created adaptations of Chinese practices intended to augment the study and application of specific body skills required in Yoshin ryu’s greater curriculum.



TSYR Joden Gokui, Jin no Maki, Ten no Maki and Joden Kishomon issued to Toby Threadgill by Yuki Yoshi Takamura in 1998.

Could you offer any advice to those individuals interested in seeking martial arts training? How do you suggest they find a competent teacher?

The first thing someone interested in martial training needs to do is define his goals. Martial arts training offers diverse benefits and capabilities. He needs to ask himself what has attracted him to considering this pursuit in the first place? Once he can answer that question, he can proceed towards that goal without compromise or distraction. The internet can be a fantastic resource for finding a good teacher, but be wary of those people on public discussion boards providing what I call “budo infomercials.” When someone claims to have all the secrets or is willing to provide you knowledge no one else has, walk away. That attitude alone is reason to disqualify someone as a potential teacher. You should seek humility in a teacher, not self-aggrandizing hype or bluster.

Unfortunately, martial arts are very much a buyer-beware environment. Be suspicious of anyone wanting you to sign a contract. The best martial arts instructors do not operate their dojos like a carpet-cleaning company. Most importantly, always pay attention to your gut instincts. Remember your original goals and ignore flashy demonstrations or hyped marketing presentations that are designed to distract you from your original reason for seeking training. If your reasons for training change, it should be an evolution or a personal journey based on experience, not something influenced by marketing hype or a fancy demo. As far as children go, I would recommend a traditional karate, judo or aikido dojo headed by a teacher with impeccable credentials and references.

In closing I must say the dojo is fantastic. It’s the type of dojo every Japanese budoka dreams about. To make all this more enviable, the teaching lives up to its reputation. I hope your students realize how fortunate they are.

Well, they are a good group. I am fortunate to have them.

Something that needs to be emphasized is that I am only a temporary custodian of TSYR. My duty as kaicho is to pass the art forward in a way that ensures its survival as a vital and living representation of its origins. Koryu are in a precarious position these days, even in Japan. They cannot be reconstituted once direct transmission is lost. If potential students do not recognize

their value, the koryu will pass into obscurity. I think that would be a tragic loss to the greater martial arts community.



Takamura ha Shindo Yoshin ryu Hombu dojo in Evergreen, Colorado

Thank you for the interview and the introduction to TSYR.

It's been my pleasure.

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