

Shinden Fudô Ryû: The Ninja in Nature

by Josh Sager and Jonathan Haas

Shinden Fudô Ryû (the Immovable Heart School) is one of the nine martial traditions in *Bujinkan Ninjutsu*. The origins of this art date back to the mid-twelfth century when the founder of *Shinden Fudô Ryû*, Izumo, learned Chinese *Kempo* boxing. As a result of being on the losing side of a battle, Izumo fled to the Iga province of Japan. It was there that he expanded on his Chinese *Kempo* training and developed *Shinden Fudô Ryû* into a formalized martial discipline. Elements of Chinese *Kempo* can still be seen in many of the techniques practiced today.

Shinden Fudô Ryû has been cultivated and passed down through 26 generations and now resides with current GrandMaster Dr. Masaaki Hatsumi (also the 34th generation GrandMaster of *Togakure Ryû Ninjutsu*). It also has the unique distinction of being the first art taught to GrandMaster Hatsumi's mentor, Toshitsugu Uoh Takamatsu. Takamatsu began the study of *Shinden Fudô Ryû* at the age of nine under the tutelage of his grandfather, Shinryuken Masamitsu Toda.

Toda Sensei, the 24th GrandMaster of *Shinden Fudô Ryû*, wrote down a set of five "truths". These "truths" are said to be the "law of the *dôjô*":

1. Know that patience comes first.
2. Know that the path of man comes from justice.
3. Renounce avarice, indolence, and obstinacy.
4. Recognize that sadness and regret are natural and therefore seek to develop an immovable spirit.
5. Do not stray from the path of loyalty and familial love and pursue the warrior and literary arts with balanced determination.

It is also said that Takenaka Tetsunoke, a student of Jigoro Kano (the founder of *Judo*), was at one time a student of *Shinden Fudô Ryû*.

The Principles of Shinden Fudô Ryû

There is a twofold meaning to the "Nature" of *Shinden Fudô Ryû*. First, there is the secret principle of the school, the "Principle of Nature." Instead of building a *dôjô* and then training, students are taught to use nature to make the body strong. The legs and the hips are conditioned first. Then, rocks and trees are used to toughen the fists. Trees are excellent training partners for practicing *do jime* (body choke) and various strikes and kicks. Body throws can be practiced by bending supple trees. Rolling and falling on uneven ground with rocks and sticks provide a realistic training environment and help to teach situational awareness.

Shinden Fudô Ryû also uses "Nature" to emphasize the importance of moving in a natural way, without power or force. All of the techniques in this school (and the

others in the *Bujinkan Ninjutsu* system) are practiced without utilizing physical strength as a means to overcome an opponent. The techniques are successful by using angles, distance and timing. Striking and kicking are done from a natural posture with no set-up or telegraphing. They should take the opponent by surprise from a blind angle.

There are no set *kamae* (stance, posture) in *Shinden Fudô Ryû*, with the notable exception of *Shizen no kamae* (natural posture), which holds no fixed form. A characteristic of this *ryû* can be found in its recognition of natural style as the only posture of defense. However, in reality, a person imagines a posture of defense in his mind and places himself on guard. As nothing in nature is fixed, so it should be with one's movement. Nature is comprised of moment to moment changes, and these natural body changes become the *kamae*.

Moving Naturally

Every individual has a unique way of moving. As people mature, "habits" of motion develop, giving each person their own distinct way of walking, sitting, etc. Unfortunately, most of these habits contradict natural movement, and actually hinder motion. When a baby picks up an object from the ground he or she will bend down at the knees, keeping their back straight, and use their legs to raise and lower their body. Babies will instinctively use the largest muscle groups to coordinate balance and strength when moving. Most adults, on the other hand, will bend at the waist and rely on the smaller back muscles to perform the same task. They assume that these "shortcuts" of motion are more efficient, when in fact the opposite is true.

Large weapons such as the *ono* (battlefield axe), *ôtsuchi* (large war hammer) and *yari* (spear) are also found in *Shinden Fudô Ryû*. Because of their size and weight, it would be impossible to wield these weapons unless the entire body's movement was integrated.

As an exercise, walk slowly in a straight line. Try to eliminate all unnecessary motion or habitual patterns. Keep your body relaxed and allow your body to compensate for uneven terrain or obstacles naturally – without overcompensating with muscle or tension. This is the true movement of *Shinden Fudô Ryû*.

Shinden Fudô Ryû Punching

Traditionally, *Shinden Fudô Ryû* was developed for warriors wearing armor. Because of the heavy and cumbersome armor of the time, techniques needed to be both energy efficient and powerful. A punch, as we know it today, would be very slow and difficult to execute. The unique punching style of *Shinden Fudô Ryû* emphasizes the use of natural movement with the whole body, not just the shoulder and arm. This economy of motion saved time and energy, both of which were vital in battle.

Here is an example of the *Shinden Fudô Ryû* punching method:

- Start from *Shizen no kamae* (stand naturally).
- Step forward with your right leg. At the same time, punch by bringing your right hand straight out from your hip, surprising the opponent from a blind angle.
- Make sure to open your hips to provide better balance and posture. By opening the hips, a better posture of balance and stability is achieved, which is crucial when wearing heavy armor.

Punching in this fashion provides added benefits such as allowing you to keep your sword (worn on the left side of the body) away from an opponent's grasp. This also allows the punch to go unnoticed, by coming from underneath rather than straight on (like a jab) or from the side (like a hook). The *Shinden Fudô Ryû* punch should strike areas of an opponent's body not protected by armor.

laijutsu and the Sword

It is written in the *Shinden Fudô Ryû* scrolls that *laijutsu* (draw cutting) may have originated from this school.

The *Shinden Fudô Ryû* sword is typically much longer than a *katana*. To compensate for the sword's unusual length, a unique style of *laijutsu* (sword drawing) was developed. One technique in this style involves drawing the sword vertically while pushing the *saya* (sword scabbard) back. This type of *laijutsu* allows the sword to be drawn in a confined space, for example when fighting on a crowded battlefield. Due to the swords' size it is important to use the spine and not just the arm when drawing the sword. By drawing only with the arm, many people would not be capable of completely removing the sword from the *saya*.

Sheathing the sword is done by turning sideways so the tip of the sword will always face the opponent. If necessary the sword can be pushed forward to prevent an oncoming attack. This type of sheathing also helps to hide the length of the sword, since the opponent is looking at the sword head-on. By taking a step back with the left leg and angling the body when pushing the sword into the *saya*, the dimensions of the sword stays hidden, and the sword remains in a ready position.

The cutting method of *Shinden Fudô Ryû* relies on using the swords' weight, not upper body movement or power. This again emphasizes the principles of natural movement as opposed to forced muscle strength. The sword is literally allowed to drop on to the opponent, and body movement is used to push the sword down and in to complete a cut.

The Essence of Nature

It is difficult to quantify and express in words the true meaning of "Nature" in the training of *Shinden Fudô Ryû*. The principles of this school lie on many levels,

often too complex to explain in simple terms. To fully understand how and why these techniques were developed, it is important to think and train the way Izumo did in the 1100s:

- Train outdoors.
- Use what is around you as your dōjō.
- Don't get caught up in positions and details.
- Above all try and eliminate any forced or "unnatural" movement.

Not everyone has access to armor, so when training, try to visualize and incorporate your movement as if you were wearing some. When you can apply these principles to your training you will begin to understand the essence and true "Nature" of *Shinden Fudō Ryū*.

The historical and technical information for this article was compiled from several sources, including Mats Hjelm's Bujinkan Budo Taijutsu Web Site, Paul Richardson's History of the Bujinkan, various Internet sources, and many long conversations and email discussions I've had with several Bujinkan Ninjutsu instructors. Special thanks to all for the information.