



Priest Koun Suharas of Dokuto-an, Engaku-ji Temple in Kamakura, demonstrating an old form of archery. Concentration, simplicity, and meditation - all marks of the ko-ryu, are reflected in his eyes as he takes aim at a target.

# How to Find & Join A Traditional Japanese Ryu



## Ancient Traditions In A Modern World

By Wayne Muromoto

As a writer, I've received surprisingly few letters - of complaints or compliments - directly from readers of my martial arts magazine articles. Maybe it's because my chosen beat doesn't force me to get involved in all contemporary ego-politics and one-upmanship shenanigans so rife in the American martial arts field. Of my noninvolvement in those arguments, I am forever grateful.

But of the few letters I've received, most of them have asked me for some advice on how to find and join a ko-ryu (Old, traditional Japanese martial arts as opposed to shin-budo ("newer" martial arts such as karate-do, aikido, judo, kendo, kyudo, and so on). The letters are well-meaning, and after a few of them, I believe that some advice might do well in print, especially after a spate of other articles on how to avoid fake shin-budo schools.

### Ko-ryu and Shin-budo

First-of all, we must make a qualified and tentative definition of the difference between shin-budo and the ko-ryu. The late Donn F. Draeger's delineation is quite explicit, especially when he used to talk about bujutsu and budo, which is basically what we mean by ko-ryu and shin-budo.

Bujutsu schools, by their very name, are more closely tied to actual "battlefield" methods, in the sense that the kata and methodology are relatively unchanged from when they were found to be successful on a classical warrior's battlefield. Note that we said "classical warrior's battlefield." The bujutsu schools couldn't care less about whether the techniques look good in a tournament down in Butte, Montana or in the urban streets of Chicago.

One of the most important and misunderstood concepts of the ko-ryu is its respect and reverence for tradition. The U.S. is a mere 200 years old, so it may be natural for many of us to denigrate tradition as so much needless claptrap. In many ways, breaks with bad traditions - such as slavery and the lower status of women - are good. But that is not always the case when it comes to all cultural and artistic traditions.

A student of the Owari Yagyu family Shinkage-ryu, Miek Skoss, once put it this way to me: if the ko-ryu has as its reason for existence the practicality of their techniques for contemporary street fighting, their techniques would have been altered long ago. Such a style would have long since thrown out empty-hand or sword techniques for learning how to handle a loaded .45 pistol. But they didn't, and the reason why might

include the following:

For one thing, we are talking about family traditions. Stop thinking about martial arts as a macho self-defense ego tripping endeavor, for a moment, and think of it as a family artistic tradition like tea ceremony or flower arrangement. Each generation of a family that inherits the lineage can add to or alter the existing forms or kata of all such Japanese arts, but they must never step out of the flow that has come down from the family founders. In this way, they pay their respects to their ancestors and continue a flow based on an ancestor's god-given inspiration.

This is the reason why styles are denoted by appending the term -ryu at the end of their names, such as shito-ryu, or daito-ryu, or goju-ryu. The character for ryu can also be pronounced nagare. Nagare means flow, as in a flowing river. The founder of a ryu is its fountainhead, its wellspring. What he or she developed is the flow of the river, with its many tributaries and branches. That river is the ryu, or style.

As students of a ko-ryu, we can put our feet into the ryu, take a drink of the river, and help the style along. As we get water and nourishment from the river, or nagare, so too our responsibility lies in seeing that the ryu is ever-flowing, ever clean. We can come and go, but the ryu flows along its way, nourished from a master in the past.

So in the example of swordsmanship, it will matter little if we can use the methods directly in a self-defense situation in our modern streets. What matters is that theories and strategies set down by the ryu founders still come across clearly to us, decade after decade.

In contrast, the shin-budo are relatively recent arrivals on the Japanese martial arts scene. The earliest of the shin-budo, judo and kendo, are modern inventions, from a modern society, peopled largely by merchants and businessmen. When judo was organized, the day of the samurai was long gone. So the actual need for such older ko-ryu also disappeared. What the modern founders sought to do was to mold old fighting arts into something that would be of spiritual, physical, and mental benefit to the modern individual. Notice here that we don't say anything about fighting. Self-defense is a very distant and frivolous topping to the essential meanings of shin-budo such as judo, kendo, aikido, and karate-do.

This is not to imply that a shin-budo disciple is incapable of handling himself. I've met some of the toughest men and women in judo,

aikido, and karate-do who, because of their physical and mental toughness, could take on all comers in any free-for-all. Simple from the sheer discipline involved and their top physical shape, followers of shin-budo are tough.

Shin-budo may also follow tradition, but for the sportive shin-budo such as karate-do, kendo and judo, competition is an important part of training. Transforming budo into a sport allows for innovation and alteration of techniques not to win on a battle-field, but in an arena where there are rules and regulations.

Along with these differences is a matter of taste. Writer Dave Lowry once likened shin-budo and the ko-ryu to beer and fine wine. Both have their special tastes, and both have their uses. Some people are beer drinkers and some are wine connoisseurs. The ko-ryu is like fine wine, aged and with a delicate and subtle taste. The shin-budo is like good beer. And like fine wine, the ko-ryu is not for everyone, whereas good beer is available enough so that many people can drink it.

Most people are content to be part of a shin-budo, and in actuality, the ko-ryu is not ever going to be a popular pastime in the States because in its purest form, it will not change to fit our lifestyle: we have to change to fit the ko-ryu. So if you are perfectly contented studying karate from a good teacher, there is no reason why you should spend all your money seeking out a ko-ryu master. Especially when they are still rare in the U.S. and many who do claim to be are frauds.

But supposing you know all this and still feel that the ko-ryu are for you, What do you do?

### Finding a Ko-ryu

Step one is finding a school. They usually aren't money-making ventures, so don't go looking for them in the Yellow Pages or in shopping mall ads. Your best bet is to ask. Kendo teachers may know of another kendo teacher who is teaching ko-ryu iai to a few students. Or a judo teacher may know someone licensed in ju-jutsu. Also, taking an active interest in Japanese cultural clubs is a good way to build up contacts and friendships. A tea ceremony teacher might know of a friend who has a menkyo (teaching license) in a naginata school, for example. It would be best to go this route in any case, since the ko-ryu are still mostly taught by Japanese nationals or people who have spent long years in Japan and maintain a close tie to Japanese culture.



When you do find a lead, you will find that your connections with local Japanese or Japanese-Americans might be a plus, because your mutual friend will have to serve as a shokai for you. It is possible to simply walk off the streets and be accepted in a school, but the easiest way of being fully accepted is to have a mutual friend introduce you to the teacher. Having someone shokai for you means that the friend is - in an unspoken and informal way - vouching for your reliability and moral character. In long ago Japan, entrance into old schools were almost always done on this basis, someone within the school or well-known by the headmaster would have to vouch for you.

In this era, the shokai is not necessary, but it's a good way to start off on the right foot.

Because the ko-ryu are usually non-moneymaking ventures, classes are small and tuition is free or minimal. There are no real strictures against asking to observe the first session, to see if the style is to your liking.

If you observe the practice session, it would do well to realize that you are being watched as closely as you are watching the practice. Not that you're being acutely scrutinized from head to foot, but how you carry yourself, how you act in this situation will affect whether you will be accepted or not.

In my experience, I've seen some people come in, quietly removing their shoes or slippers, and bowing and asking to observe practice. Once given approval, some of them will sit in seiza (formal sitting position) or stand without slouching. When practice is over, they will wait until the sensei (teacher) is finished with the formal part of class and then ask questions of the sensei or the senior students. And I've also seen people tramp into the practice hall with their shoes caked with dirt, ask to watch, and then drape their bodies over a pile of mats in the corner. One guess as to which of the two examples is allowed to join and which of the two can bear the discipline and practice?

There is no problem with asking questions about the ryu's history and philosophy, as well as some of the basic techniques or things such as club dues etc. But don't think you'll be appreciated if you begin needling the ryu's members about the meanings behind some of the higher-level techniques or its okuden (secret teachings). Even with many of the okuden now written down in books (in Japanese, at least), practitioners of the ko-ryu are still wary of simply giving out such information to anyone who stumbles into their dojo (training hall). Reading about it is one thing, actually learning the methods are another thing, and a lot

of the forms are still carefully kept from those judged too immature.

Maturity in a potential student is the most important characteristic, ahead of physical ability or intelligence. One karate student was intent on joining the local jo (short staff) club here in Hawaii, so he showed his earnestness by running up a steep hill that led to the practice ground, baring his chest, growling, letting out loud kiai (yells), and doing hundreds of sit ups and gyaku-zuki (front punches) in front of our dojo before practice. One of my sensei simply thought the fellow was a bit loony. He was never allowed into the ryu, and he could never figure out why.

What will you see? Don't expect to see unkept louts screaming and assuming fantastic stances as seen in a chanbara, the samurai equivalent of our cowboy western movies. It's a sure bet that if people are doing things that look like they copied it from a samurai movie, they've made up their style completely from celluloid. Don't expect, either, much modern innovation beyond plastic used for the tsuba (sword guard) for some bokken (wooden swords). Authentic ko-ryu sword styles will never use - as I found demonstrated in one article by a supposed American swordmaster - shovels to improve their swing, foam pillows as target dummies, or cushion chairs to sit in meditation.

As a rule (save for some very unusual styles such as the famous Jigen-ryu kenjutsu school), most ko-ryu kata are spare and conservative to the point of being boring to the eyes of an untrained observer.

Also, don't expect a ko-ryu to resemble karate very much. Karate, even in its Japanized form, has its roots in Okinawa, an island culture that is very different and separate from old Japanese culture. Not only are many of the kamae (stances) of the ko-ryu different, but even the weaponry are very, very different, save for some basic implements such as the bo (long staff). Except for basics or kata for iai or batto-jitsu, most of the ko-ryu kata require a partner. The kata, unlike many advanced karate kata, are usually quite short and simple.

Listen to what the teacher or senior student says, how he or she presents the ryu. Be aware of the characteristics of the ko-ryu and watch how students and teachers conduct themselves. If it is actually connected with an old school of Japanese martial arts, then you are bound to see a lot of etiquette and dignity involved, carried over from the traditional culture that gave birth to the ko-ryu. Don't look for macho-out types with crazy looks in their eyes. Look instead at how humanely and dignified people are in treating other people. Don't even

expect to see a display of bulging muscles. ko-ryu schools prefer understated clothing: a simple white gi, for example, or a hakama over a dark blue keikogi.

### Once You're In

Now let's suppose that in spite of all the fakery, hype and simple scarcity of ko-ryu, you happen to stumble onto a good school. Once you begin, what should you expect? Don't expect to be decked out in fancy satin pajamas, doing your kata to the latest top ten music beat. For many people, the ko-ryu might be simply boring.

Gi and perhaps hakama, simple black, indigo blue or white. Very little, if any patches, insignia or emblems. A spotless and spare practice hall. And repetition. Endless repetition of basic moves and kata, year in and year out, until they become part of your body and mind.

Can you handle doing hundreds of men-uchi (head cuts), practice after practice? Or as in the case of iai, having to endlessly repeat the initial drawing and cutting motion before ever learning the first kata?

If this sounds like I'm trying to discourage those among you with short attention spans, who need to dress up in open-chested garish costumes or display five foot tournament trophies in your living room on top of your TV set, I am. The ko-ryu are not for everybody. And while I have personally found much satisfaction in training in various ko-ryu, I would hesitate to popularize an art form that is, to be honest, elitist and exclusive.

Going back to writer Dave Lowry's analogy, the ko-ryu and shin-budo are like fine wine and good beer; both are all right, and either are chosen according to your tastes. But as Draeger concluded in his monumental three-volume book on budo and bujutsu, both have much to learn from each other. The ko-ryu could do well to open up its doors a bit to more people, so that more people can understand the heart and root of Japanese martial arts. And the shin-budo would do to heed the way the ko-ryu has retained its dignity and grace over centuries of trial and error. Maybe a little bit of dignity and self-pride should be infused into the shin-budo to drag it out of its dregs of moronic and childish behavior on the part of its more vocal and small-minded exponents.

Time will tell, and so will a new generation of martial arts students who are even now studying in Japan. They may soon herald a new wave of martial arts on the fertile shores of the United States. Whether they will be enough to displace the rampant ko-ryu fakes remains to be seen.



However, once through all of this, and if you do find that you mesh with a legitimate and authentic ko-ryu, then count yourself lucky. The ko-ryu are still a rare phenomenon in the U.S. and the odds of stumbling across such a school are quite low. So low, in fact, that if you really wanted to involve yourself in a ko-ryu, the best bet still is to go to Japan and spend over two years getting to know the basics of a system. Yep. Two years to learn only the basics. ko-ryu training is measured in the decades, not by months or years.

But - and here's the lure of the ko-ryu - there is no end to them. You can spend years in it and still find secrets and meanings that illuminate your practice; give it new life. And in the decades of training, the ko-ryu also teaches lessons that can be applied to the rest of your life. You will find yourself subtly being molded by the dignified and even tempered manner of these warrior arts that stretch back hundreds of years.

For anyone willing to spend the time and effort, the ko-ryu are like drinking cool and life-rejuvenating waters that flow from a deep and ancient fountain.

NOTE: One practical resource in finding out whether a ko-ryu teacher in America is a fraud or not is by querying JMAS, the Japan Martial Arts Society, c/o C.P.O., Box 279, Tokyo, Japan 100. JMAS is an organization of English-speaking martial arts students in Japan, many of whom are engaged in a study of one or more ko-ryu styles. This is the best clearing house for all queries, since many other organizations that claim to represent mainstream ko-ryu in America are suspect or inflate their claims to an unbelievable degree.

JMAS is not an official sanctioning organization per se, but is a loose affiliation of foreign-born martial arts practitioners in Japan who sponsor lectures, seminars and publications in English on various aspects of traditional Japanese martial arts.

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