

Tenshin shôden Katori shintô ryû
ninjutsu kuden

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Defense against a *ninja*
A 500-year-old oral tradition on *ninjutsu*

Tenshinshoden Katori Shinto-Ryu 天真正伝香取神道流, to give it its full name, is one of the oldest sword schools in Japan. Originating in the late fifteenth century and founded by Lord Iizasa Choisai 飯篠 長威斉, who was awarded the divine scroll of his school from a god in the shape of a boy. The school derives its name from the Katori Jingu 香取神宮 shrine in Katori, Chiba prefecture, where the founder is now buried. As this is one of the oldest sword schools, with all of its internal sub-schools, to be registered and recognized in Japan, Katori Shinto-Ryu can also claim to be the oldest form of *ninjutsu* still to be taught today with an unbroken lineage, as no other body has evidence to predate the school's origins. The martial aspects of the sword school are passed down through ancient scrolls and thus have remained unchanged and unbroken. On the reverse side, the school is also home to a 500-year-old oral tradition and teaches its swordsmen the art of *ninjutsu* with an emphasis on defense against an attacking *shinobi*: with the spirit of *know your enemy*. It is recorded here for the first time in English for the martial arts world to enjoy and explore, and was taught to Antony Cummins by Ôtake Risuke in September of 2009.

Ôtake Sensei 大竹 利典, the head teacher, was born in Chiba in 1926. In 1942 he entered the sword school to understand courage and to find a path to valor and the strength to fight in the war if called upon.

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«In our school there is nothing about learning *ninjutsu* itself and nothing that is recorded within our ancient scrolls. All the knowledge that I have obtained comes from our founder and has been passed down by word of mouth for over 500 years. This is the true way of defending yourself from a *ninja*.»

II

«A true samurai wouldn't do *ninjutsu*, they in turn would hire a *shinobi* when necessary.»

This statement is the one statement that seems controversial. As is known, the author of the *Shôninki* was of samurai status and yet entered the history records as being involved with *ninjutsu*. Ôtake Sensei himself believes that the *ashigaru*, named Tori Sune'emon 鳥居強右衛門, was in fact a *ninja*.

III

«Every *ninja* had a speciality, such as taming and training animals in the mountains, hiding in the water, and hiding among trees amongst other things. In the daytime, they would usually work in the fields as farmers and go about their routine as normal.»

The word «*ninja*» is far too simplistic and generic of a term for there to be a correct understanding of the social context in which *ninja* were found. When dealing with the Iga 伊賀 and Koga 甲賀 *ninja*, there is the belief that they were farming communities. The problem comes when we find that people from Iga and Koga are hired out and do indeed train others in the way of *ninjutsu*. Thus, we can say that the archetypal *ninja* is a farmer, but we have to understand that the concept of *ninja* is much broader than was first thought.

IV

«Those who tame dogs as a skill would ask how urgent the job was when they got an offer or contract. If the job wasn't urgent they could then use their time to tame the said animal by methods such as feeding or befriending the animal. Or if the need was urgent, they could give a female dog to male or a male dog to female. Also, a *shinobi* would lure a dog out of its area by food and then proceed to beat the animal badly. They did this while applying a selected scent such as whale oil. This was done so that the dog would remember the scent at night and fear would then grip the dog as it would recall the near death beating it had received at the hands of the *ninja*. As a result the dog would run away or cower after giving forth a short bark and investigation into a disturbance.

Only those who know this skill could know that a *shinobi* might be there and upon hearing such a reaction from a guard dog. A *samurai* from our school would take up a bow and shoot into the darkness with the hope of hitting the *shinobi*.»

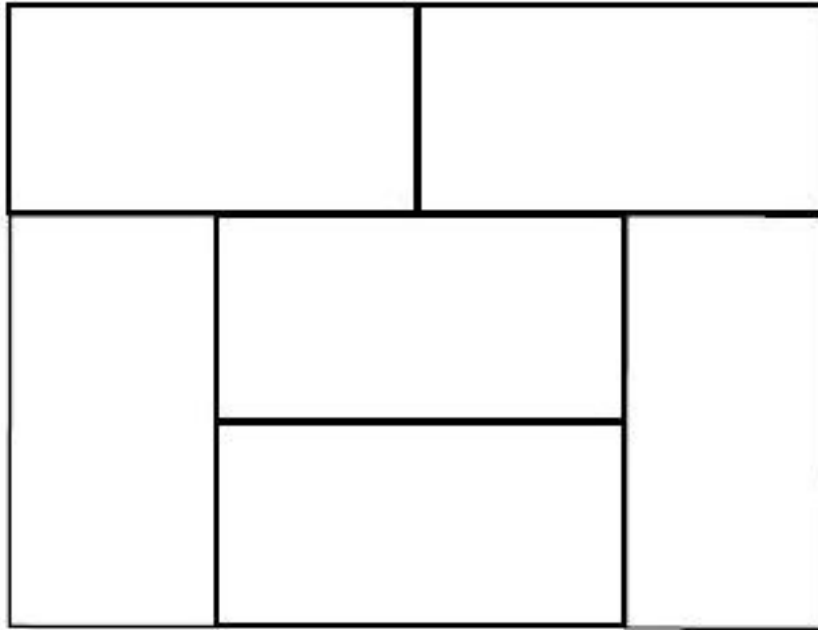
A selection of manuscripts talk about dogs as the enemy of the *ninja*, and how to deal with them. The *Shōninki* and the Katori Shintō-Ryū deal out drastic and deadly punishments for guard dogs.

V

«They also used other animals which people dislike, such as frogs and snakes, to bring on panic. A *shinobi* would use this distraction to attain his aim. As a member of my school, you must understand this.»

Ôtake Sensei embellished upon how a *ninja* would train in the wilderness with animals of all kinds, learning how to handle animals and utilize them to their own advantage.

VI



«*Tatami* mats are laid in the same way for every room that has an external exit. This system of laying down the mats is universal in Japan and nobody can tell you why or how it started. In fact, it started because of the *shinobi*. You have to remember that in the beginning *tatami* mats were an expensive commodity and only owned by those of high ranking, thus they were owned by the *samurai* and were relatively unknown by those who were of lower birth. Where there is a room with a doorway that leads outside you will always find the *tatami* mats laid out so that you walk across the width of the mat and not so that you walk down its length. The reason for this is simple, *tatami* mats have their weave in the same way each time and when you lay a mat in this fashion you find that the weave runs in straight lines away from the wall. The *shinobi* who enters the house of a *samurai* would automatically use a cross crawl walking style. Thus, as he walked along the wall in this fashion his sideways sliding step would go against the weave of the mat and create a swishing sound that we at this school would be trained to listen for, this is why we lay *tatami* mats in such a way.»

This method of laying mats is called *Mawashijiki* 回り敷き, where all the mats line the wall. It is said that they are put this way to avoid one mat joining another in front of a doorway but it is impossible to verify if this is indeed the origin for *tatami* mat plans or if Ôtake Senseis oral history is correct. However, it is of great interest as it is hard to find a *tatami* room with an external door that is not laid out in such a way. In reference to the *ninja*, we can now qualify that they did use the iconic «cross-crawl» stepping action, and as an audience we can now get an understanding of the level of noise that a *ninja* could not surpass if he wished to avoid detection.

VII

«The *shinobi* applied water to the stills of sliding doors so that they wouldn't make noise when stealing in, thus if you find unexplained water around your doors, be warned that a *ninja* may have entered.»

VIII

«When you rush out to chase down *shinobi*, you shouldn't be barefooted as *shinobi* scatter caltrops to disable those who are in pursuit.»

Caltrops were often dragged behind a *ninja*, on a piece of rope that the *shinobi* held in his hand. Throughout all the scrolls, the escape route for a field operative was paramount and it is thought that a *ninja* would place caltrops at or along this route in preparation for his escape. The concept of him simply scattering them around may not be fiction but it is simply not effective. The probability is that some would be placed at specific points while others would be carried on a string in case the *ninja* was being chased down.

IX

«Those *shinobi* good at hiding between trees could move around from treetop to treetop as quickly as squirrels. Also, when climbing up a tree, they used their sword as a stepladder or foothold and by lifting themselves up by holding the tree with one arm. They then retrieve their sword by the means of a long cord which they have attached to their weapon. They also climb by swinging a long wet cloth with a snapping action around a branch and ascending from that point.»

The image of a *ninja* using his sword as a foothold and then retrieving it via a long cord is iconic now in the «*ninjutsu* world» and many references have been made to it. However, Ôtake Sensei here introduces two other techniques. The first was to «hug» the tree with one arm and shimmy up the trunk with his other hand free, presumably for his sword. The second skill was to get a long cloth and soak it in water, then swing the heavy cloth around a branch and let the weight of the wet material wrap around the limb and take hold, thus a *ninja* could then ascend.

X

«During a night activity, the *shinobi* would use a bag of charcoal powder from the wood of the *Kiri* tree (*paulownia*). This wood is very fine in texture and has a distinctive smell. The *ninja* would apply it to their face and also sprinkle it over and around their body as they moved. Thus, as a defender, you should learn its aroma and then peer into and penetrate the darkness from a low position, close to the ground. If you see something blacker than the darkness moving, be warned – that is a *shinobi* ! »

Surprisingly (or not), this skill is still used today in modern military forces. The art of camouflage is the skill of concealing the human shape. The reason for the standard camouflage pattern of uniforms in the military is to break up the human form, as the eye can recognize this almost immediately. Thus, this black powder used by the *ninja* would actually break up their shape and make it harder for them to be spotted. Ôtake Sensei then told of how, when you smell this powder, you should take up your bow and shoot randomly into darkness and into the bushes with the intent of hitting the *ninja* or scaring them off.

XI

«The image of a *ninja* hiding in the water with a reed is from manga and is a modern invention. It is ridiculous to contemplate that this works, for even a mosquito will make a ripple on the water, and furthermore a *shinobi* does not participate in this type of activity in the daytime anyway.»

In the *Shôninki*, it states that you should use the bamboo pipe to come up for air at intervals so as to not show your face. This skill may have worked in the black of night, but Ôtake Sensei implied that a watchful samourai would be able to spot this without a problem and that this image has been established as a *ninja* method by modern media. What people often believe is that a *ninja* will hide in the rushes with this breathing pipe, thereby escaping detection from a passing group. The reality is that a *ninja*, at night, would swim a body of water and when in need of air, he would come close to the surface, take a breath with his pipe or scabbard and then continue to swim. It was never the act of staying stationary in an attempt to hide.

XII

« When a *shinobi* is chased and comes across a pond, they sometimes throw a rock into the water to pretend that they have jumped in. Or they get across the pond by a type of triple long jump, making the pursuers think that they are under the surface. This skill is called *Mizugakure* 水隠れ : "hiding in the water". »

There was confusion here as to the type of jump Ôtake Sensei is describing, the closest translation that can be identified is that of a triple long jump. Upon questioning Ôtake Sensei on this technique, we came to a wall in the description of its execution. It appears to have been a jumping skill that gets the *ninja* to the other side of the small river while also making the sound of a person entering the water, thus having the effect of the people giving chase believing that the *ninja* is in the water, whereas in reality he is in hiding on the other bank.

XIII

Was Torii Sune'emon a *ninja* ?

«There was a foot soldier called Torii Sune'emon who I think was a *ninja* performing the art of *Mizugakure*. It is said that he swam a river, infiltrating enemy territory for over 3.5 miles (6 km) without being noticed and then he ran more than 18 miles (30 km), even though he had to escape from his fortress, which was besieged by the Takeda's force of over 15 000 men. The river was said to be booby-trapped and under heavy security. To me it seems like this man was more than likely a *ninja*.»

It is unknown here if Ôtake Sensei has this opinion from his own research or whether this is information passed down to him. Either way, it does seem like a classic *shinobi* activity, and in such circumstances it is probable that a *ninja* would be called upon. However, from a historian's point of view this is only speculation.

XIV

« When caught within a prison, *shinobi* soldiers can communicate with each other by imitating the sound of birds such as water rails, or crickets. This skill is called *Kuina onkyo* クイナ音響. When they do this they lie down and bring their mouth and ears close to the floor. If you hear these sounds while you have a captured *ninja*, be warned that they may be communicating in this way. Also, with this skill, a *ninja* could place his ear to the ground and hear cavalry moving 500 – 1 000 feet away (about 200 – 300 meters), determining their number and the direction in which they were heading. »

As inconceivable as this sounds, we can gain an understanding that the *ninja* did use an instrument for listening to the ground and detecting enemy movement, we know this from a few sources. However, the distance that they could hear is still lost to us without experimentation.

XV

«When a *shinobi* aims to steal documents or something of the like, they sometimes achieve this by taking two mice with them on a mission. They steal into the house when everyone has fallen asleep and let a single mouse go to create a fuss. After the people have settled back down and asleep, again the *shinobi* lets the second mouse enter. This makes the household think that there is an infestation of mice and the house awakens to deal with the problem. During this confusion, the *shinobi* can steal what he wants without effort. This is one way of taming animals, a swordsman of my school should understand this trick.»

The author discussed this point with Nakashima Sensei, who fully supports the idea of *ninja* using animals as part of their arsenal. There are several accounts within the scrolls of using animals for misdirection. Nakashima Sensei also went on to describe that a *shinobi* would use this trick to get the occupants to leave a given room, as they would almost certainly leave the room to find the source of the infestation.

XVI

«When you think you are being pursued by a *shinobi* or someone of ill intent, you should walk in the middle of the road so that you will not be stabbed from behind the bushes while you walk along them.»

At points, Ôtake Sensei's information correlates to the historical documents with amazing accuracy. The *Shôninki* states that as *ninja* should walk along the edges of bushes as to imitate a dog's behavior and thus you can follow a target or evade a passer-by. Therefore, this is a perfect defense against a *ninja* technique.

XVII

«When you stay at an inn, you shouldn't sleep on a *futon* that has been prepared for you. The staff may have been bribed and may have given over information as to where you are sleeping to a *shinobi*. You should move your *futon* without being noticed so that a *ninja* will be misled.»

Again, this coincides dramatically with the historical literature, it is said that a *shinobi* should bribe local people for information that they need and also, in the *Shôninki*, it instructs the *ninja* on how to get information of this kind from a conversation without your opponent knowing your intentions.

XVIII

«Those in the ancient times used wolves' droppings to make smoke signals as the droppings of wolves make very good smoke, a smoke which will resist the wind and go straight and high in the sky.

When in the woods and confronted by wolves you should hold a stick above your head, vertical and high. A wolf will not attack anything that it cannot jump over, thus hold the stick high and the wolf will not attack.

A story that has been passed down to me is as follows : Wolves once put out the fire that woodsmen left alight within the woods. The wolf pack ran down to the river, submerged themselves and then went back to the fire and doused the flames.»

The first quote is directly related to *ninjutsu* as wolf dropping smoke signals are mentioned elsewhere within the records. The second two Ôtake Sensei ascribes to «ancient woodsmen's knowledge» that has been passed down to him through his school.

XIX

«When you get lost in the mountains and come across a crossroad, you should taste the soil, for the road which people walk along will taste salty and you can discern the most traveled route.

When lost in the mountains, descend to find a river, follow that river down hill and you will find a village along it.»

Remembering that «roads» in medieval Japan, especially in the mountains where it's more likely to be a «path», it would seem plausible that a well-traveled road may have a higher salt content from human sweat. However, this would have to be tested, but this statement appears in more than one account.

XX

«*Shinobi* swords have leather handguards instead of iron. This is so that they will not rattle when moving around, they also have shorter blades and a longer cord.»

This is an obvious step for a *shinobi* to take and highly plausible, the need for a silenced sword is also repeated in the other manuscripts. Also, the *Shôninki* states that an Ô-wakizashi 大脇差 is best, which is, of course, a short sword.

XXI

«*Kuji-in* 九字印 and *Kuji-kiri* 九字切 are for self-concentration and to be used as a magical power. The spells themselves come from Sanskrit and their meanings are not understood. *Jûji* 十字, or «ten signs» contains an ideogram within the *kuji* grid of nine lines. For example, you write the kanji for «dragon» in the *kuji* grid and when you are going to board a ship, you use a dragon as the tenth symbol, as for us, the dragon is the lord of the water. We, as swordsmen of this school, use the spells and the *jûji* to protect ourselves from the *shinobi*, have faith and believe, for it truly works !»

Kuji is an expansive field with countless debates surrounding it. The basic principle is that *kuji* is split into two sections. The first is named *kuji-in* and is a selection of nine hand positions that are accompanied by a *mantra* and a specific direction of concentration. The second is the *kuji-kiri*, this is the concept of cutting nine lines in the air and creating a grid. From here you draw the tenth sign, which is a *kanji* character that the adept feels is correct for the situation, as described above. The first use of *kuji* is for empowerment and concentration, the second is ritualistic magic. The origins of *kuji* date back to Hinduism and are not, as commonly believed, used by the *ninja* alone.

XXII

«Kozuka 小柄 are the small blades found next to the hilt of a *katana*, these are often portrayed as being used as *shuriken* by the *ninja*. This is also not true, they were expensive and hard to replace, and thus their real use was for cooking and peeling vegetables, nothing quite as exciting as a *shuriken*.»

The image of a *ninja* agent *incognito*, throwing these small side knives from the hilt of a *katana* is rife within the *ninja* media, but this is a media created image. It is within reason that a person would use this knife for combat if the situation dictated it. However, to throw them as *shuriken* would indeed become an expensive venture.

XXIII

«I am the master of this school, but even when I throw straight *shuriken* I cannot become accurate at more than a room's length, so do not believe some of the mystical abilities some people attribute to *shuriken* masters.»

A balance has to be reached here between what is expected of a *shuriken* master and what is reality. To the average person, a master *shuriken* thrower may be able to perform amazing feats, but to a master of *shuriken-jutsu*, the fabled arts of the *ninja* can become outrageous. As we observe the martial and historical world, we can postulate that a circus knife thrower would have a similar ability as a *shuriken* master of the past, thus, fitting this template onto our historical *ninja*, we can refine our concept of the accurate range of the *shuriken*.

XXIV

« About *Yô-nin* 陽忍 and *In-nin* 陰忍 :

To infiltrate a mansion or somewhere else, a *shinobi* used two methods : *Yô-nin*, the method by which you perform the skills by revealing yourself in the daytime, and secondly, *In-nin*, the method by which you perform infiltration skills without showing yourself at night. »

This is an important element when investigating *ninjutsu*. Many people do not understand the difference here, or at least they argue that a *ninja* would only do one of these methods. *In* or *Yin*, is the female and darker side of the « balance » and constitutes what we could call the classic *ninja* methods. While *Yô* or *Yang* methods are the light and open sides of *ninjutsu*, the method of being in plain sight, yet unnoticed by the world. Both *In-nin* and *Yô-nin* are words that have not been used within the modern « *ninjutsu* » community, which is extraordinary as they form the fundamental core of the *shinobi* arts.

XXV

« A *shinobi* could utilize the advantages of the three major elements, they are Heaven, Earth, and Man 天地人. An example of Heaven 天 (astronomy) is to choose a moonless night and apply the charcoal powder of the *Kiri* tree to remain unnoticed by the ennemy. An example of Earth 地 (topography) is to climb a tree by using a sword or cloth and to use the nature of the earth to your advantage. An example of Man 人 (psychology) is captured in an anecdote handed down through my school and is as follows :

"There was a very smart young man and two old men. One day, the old men decided to test how good the young man really was. They invited him to their home and gave him alcohol saying, "We have hidden a wallet somewhere on this property as a test for you today. Can you tell where it is ?" In a few minutes, he answered its exact position, which was in the garden around the back of the stone lantern. He knew because he had guessed their intentions beforehand as the invitation was not so natural and he noticed they were casting glances in that direction."

This is the way of « Man » in *ninjutsu*. »

The three-point system of « Heaven, Earth, and Man » are known in some *ninjutsu* research circles, but generally they are not well known. This trinity also appears in other sections of Eastern culture and can be seen as an attempt by the *ninja* to understand the world around them and the ways it can be manipulated.

XXVI

« A *shinobi* had such good strength and skills that he could run over 60 miles (more than 95 km) without drinking or eating anything. When tired, they would dig a 1 foot (30 cm) ditch, where the soil is not firm and rest by lying within it, taking deep breaths for a short while. It revived them so that they could run dozens of kilometers again. In ancient times it was said that tremendous energy can be found in the ground, and the *shinobi* utilized it. »

This highlights a quality that has been long forgotten and for which the *ninja* were originally famous, and that was their amazing endurance. To run 60 miles in a day is by no means an unbelievable feat, especially for the ancient world. Modern athletes run double marathons, and military forces can come close to that amount. Thus, this is a legitimate skill that is attainable depending on one's level of fitness.

XXVII

« When a *shinobi* ran a long distance, they employed a unique running method. They would take big steps on one leg and natural steps on the other leg. When the leg which is taking the larger steps becomes tired, they simply changed legs. »

XXVIII

«In our school, there is a rule that we should not serve as a swordsman for any warlords, no matter how much of a stipend they offer. This is because if a master orders you to kill, even a friend or a family member, you cannot refuse them. It would be difficult for you to respect both your honor and loyalty under such a contract. Thus, even though many famous warriors came to have a match or to be trained at our school, none of them appear in fictional literature.»

The school still asks students to sign an enrollment paper in their own blood. A prospective student must promise to stick to a selection of rules, in which the above stipulation is included.

XXIX

« Our school's founding master was Iizasa Ienao 飯篠 家直 and he became enlightened after three years of praying at the Katori shrine. He taught that the art of war is the art of peace, where defeating the enemy without fighting is better than defeating him by force of arms. »

XXX

«Once, a *samurai* came to have a match with lenao, our founder. So, lenao put a thin mat over dwarf bamboo sections and sat on it without effort or without destroying the elevated and fragile seat. He then told the opponent to do the same and he would have a match after they had talked, but the *samurai* couldn't repeat that feat and ended up becoming a disciple of his. The original master was always moving along the path of perfection by learning tantric Buddhism as well as Shinto. He tried to find the way of peace.»



«In this picture of my founding master, he looks so relaxed but yet he has no gaps from where to get in and attack. I used to have this picture in my bedroom and I prayed to him daily, I prayed that I would be as close as possible to his level some day. However, one morning I had a vision that the master hit me with his *shuriken* so quickly; he simply threw it from the posture you see him in now. I then moved the picture into the next room where it stays.»

At the interview, Ôtake Sensei described how he would sit before the image each day and pray. As can be seen by the picture, the «baton» being held is held from the top with the point on the floor. Ôtake Sensei states that in this vision, the figure did not prepare his *shuriken* by lifting his hand, he simply shot from this posture and startled the school master.

XXXII

About the skill of *atemi* 当て身 slapping :

« A skill we teach in our school is that of *Atemi*. It can deliver serious damage, even a woman can do serious injury to a man. It's most effective when done on the *jinchû* 人中 point (between the nose and the lips), on the stomach, the bottom of the spine or other pressure points. A hit to the eyes could damage the enemy's eyesight for up to ten days. »