

Lighting Fires

People often tell me their favourite technique and I will say, “That’s *my* favourite technique!” My students hear me say this often and I notice them smile to each other as if it were a joke. During a private lesson, I once asked them which was their favourite technique. Their answers were that all techniques were their favourite and smiles rippled along their row as they thought they had given the correct answer. I told them it was good to have a favourite technique, even if the reasons were unethical. They then asked me for my *real* favourite technique. I thought for a moment and realised that tenchi nage had not featured in the conversation. I explained that all techniques are truly my favourite but would explain why tenchi nage was a candidate. I had no idea how I would convince them. I simply started. This is when things go wrong, when planning has not been possible, just like juji waza, or 50 miles downriver from base-camp and the weather turns cold and raindrops the size of buckets. Lighting a fire can become a necessity. Reading about it is one thing but doing it under poor conditions, difficult, like juji waza. Dusk had arrived and rain had been falling hard for a couple of hours.

“When one is armed one should feel unarmed, and when one is unarmed one should feel armed.” This really used to confused me. Shiho nage was the first technique that helped me to see what Saito Sensei meant. By practising to raise, wield and cut with the sword, it being lighter than uke, one can feel the correct actions, directions and source of power. I took those feelings into shiho nage. The tip of my hand-drill began to smoke. For me, shiho nage and the sword have become inseparable. The circular motion we make to execute this technique contains more subtle movements by imagining us holding a sword, than it does by holding uke’s hand. Subtleties and practice are the key. Orange kayak is doing well; got one of those throw-it-in-the-air-tent-things and he is frying already on a gas stove. The guy in the red canoe has returned with many logs and has lit a fire-lighter from the smell of it and piled a large heap over it. A pirouetting uke is the result of too much emphasis on twisting the arm, rather than on lifting and cutting the sword and getting the motion to concentrate on rotating the shoulder. Twisting the arm is like using damp logs, nothing is ever lit by a small flame. Kihon dosa is everywhere in shiho nage! Kihon dosa is like the basics: campsite, tarp, fire-site, fuel, kindling, tinder and flame. There is more to practice than perfecting technique, planning is essential but how does one plan for the unexpected? No-one waited when I stopped under a dead tree that morning and drifted for a while, or noticed me collecting things and putting them in my pocket.

I have always looked upon ikkajo as the big brother of the four hold-downs. The three little brothers appear to gain control through pain. This is not so, but impressions are important because they trap the mind and lead us away from the trail. Wood burns, little logs burn easier, therefore damp twigs must burn! “It ain’t logical,” he curses and rakes off the log-pile and lights another fire-lighter. His matches sound damp. Ikkajo is where uke is controlled by his outstretched arm with the contact point on the back of his elbow, with no pain as a useful aid. The temptation to use strength is overwhelming and he smothers again the small spiral of smoke. The tip of my hand-drill is faintly red. I pull the tinder out of my trouser pocket. I had gathered lichen, bits of birch bark, feathers and the inside of a old bird nest during the day. It was warm and dry. I place it on the charred wood-dust. The motion of ikkajo is better described as a raising of the sword, a cut followed by directional changes, a thrust, hip movements, cascading waterfalls and the power of rushing water. The osae appears to need a strong grip on the elbow and a forward lean to transfer as much weight as possible to pin uke. How can one not realise it is wrong when one extinguishes a fire-lighter? Still his canoe is filling nicely with drinking water, even if his rucksack is still in it. The only way I found that big turn-over, was to release myself from having to succeed, back off with the strength and feel for the subtleties. An effective ikkajo without pain or strength is the key to executing similarly the three

little brothers. That sounds crazy but it's true, although I am sure the Almighty would take a little more notice were he to moderate his language. He has obviously never practiced lighting wet wood with fire-lighters.

The irimi nage techniques utilise moving off the attack line, closing hip to hip and throwing uke diagonally to his rear. The entering arm is essential for a successful throw, however, this can make the shadow arm seem unimportant. I broke a shoulder in my early days. Training was regimental and I had to throw with the shadow arm every other go. Arm power was everything and not having any, I soon discovered lower body movement. I break off the red drill-tip and it falls into the tinder. I always pick up that little bundle, don't know why, it is euphoric and primitive rolled into one brief moment, like entering deep and taking their legs away. I love the warmth of that first flame in my hands. Charred sawdust and a small red tip are fragile and easily lost, like a new glimpse or fleeting feeling in a technique. Even if it falls into good tinder, it needs to be nurtured to a flame. The next moments are vital. The kindling is alight and I build a wigwam of the dry softwood twigs, plucked from some standing deadwood and kept dry in the front of my canoe. I had drifted with the current and feathered some into fire-sticks. Belt and bracers I know, but good habits pays dividend and you never know when stuff will kick off.

Throughout basic techniques the use of hiriki no yosei is prevalent. Its application defines the quality of engagement and it is common in kihon waza. However, nowhere is it more naked than it is in tenchi nage. The temperature is dropping fast and the rain is turning to sleet. I fetch the small logs out from under the canoe. The success or demise of the technique may be thought to rely on a single arm. Although the arms are at their greatest distance apart, subtle movements are imbedded in the technique and reliant upon co-ordinated movements from every other part of the body. Tenchi nage contains subtleties that appear in other throws, especially when uke feels he is losing balance and clings tighter still to that which throws him. A fantastic moment as the little logs blaze. Now to get some big stuff to burn. I ask Red-canoe if I can take his kindling logs and suggest he cooks on my fire. His body-language thanks me. "How d'you do that?" he says, thrusting his chin towards my fire. "Ain't easy, friend...took me all day!"

Perhaps every technique has been my favourite at some time. I have had favourites because of their pain and their devastating effectiveness. The *martial* is never far away so naturally, I have been tempted by the Dark Side. However, if you stay on the Dark Side, or your favourite technique remains unchanged, or your vision of aikido does not evolve, you paddle in stagnant water. I have never had a single favourite for as long as a year and while I have been tossed in muddy water, it was the torrent of a river in flood. No single technique stands above the others for giving insight but that insight will be confirmed in other techniques and then gradually by all. That is because we are learning a system and not a series of tricks where kokyu nage is the final frontier. My broth is smelling good and I stir in some human kindness and invite Kayak over to warm himself, a sprinkle of humility and some thyme. Our understanding has no boundary and our Self can ever grow. It is now a cold sodden night. I sip my broth while Kayak-Roy chats about the advantages of frying on a gas stove and Pete-the-Red burns Cumberland sausages and Tesco's oven chips in his Uncle Ben's sauce. By the way, all attacks are my favourite, but you must have guessed that already.

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