

## From Acorn to Bokken

I stand in front of the class, in kamae with my bokken in a defensive posture, with an uke ready to strike. I have never had any formal education in kendo. I have had some secondhand lessons in Yagyū Ryu Kenjutsu, but why am I here with sword in hand?  
His eyes are wandering, his kamae is weak and his bokken, just a piece of wood.  
A mighty oak burst into leaf.

When I was young, training was physically hard. Yu Sensei never worried about the use of upper body strength and we fought until we dropped. There was always a fresh uke to substitute a tiring one, so *death on the battlefield* was inevitable. If you had not dealt with as many ukes as your best number, there were press-ups, sit-ups, pull-ups and koho ukemi until you threw-up!  
I see deceit in his eyes followed by a sudden shift of weight.  
An acorn grew upon a twig.

Sensei loved demonstrations. Once, five of us had travelled for a couple of hours in a car. As usual, we mapped out what order and who should do what, from kamae to juji-waza. We changed and waited in the changing room until we were called. After we bowed, Sensei shouted, “Uke”. I sprang into action giving the meanest side strikes I could. Suddenly, I was aware of being pushed out of the way by another uke. I crawled to the edge of the mat only to realise that I had my back to the kamiza. Wondering whether to move to my correct place, I was horrified to realise that the fourth uke was on his way out. I sprang up, shoved him out of the way and struck out at Sensei. Next thing I remember was that it was my turn again and I was shouting, “What’s up with you guys? Get up! Hit him!” I was at the point where a throw-up was imminent when I realised that we were all on the ground. I looked up at Sensei and heard him softly say, “Yamei”. We bowed, followed Sensei off the mat, to absolute silence.

No use of peripheral vision.

An acorn was buried by a squirrel.

All the way back I was quiet, perhaps stunned like the audience. I knew I had learnt something but all I could conclude was that Yoshinkan was for real. Sensei only ever taught us. I was fit but the best I ever did at that time was four ukes. I reasoned that I could not have been uke for more than four times but that would make me the thirteenth uke and although we would not have been fresh every time, Sensei’s fitness level did not compute! What was it that he did that we did not do? Soon after that he told us that he wanted a special training session one Saturday. I asked whether we could be taught some of those techniques that he stuck on us every time a spectator came through the dojo door. His very words were, “So you want to know advance techniques? Ok.” I told everyone about the extra session. They were salivating like there was going to be raw steaks there. We all turned up and spent four hours on kihon dosa and I just knew I would be dead the moment Sensei left. Fear can give the mind clarity. As Sensei left the mat, a thought came to me like a bolt of lightening...if the basics were learnt thoroughly, the smooth and non-energy sapping advanced techniques, would come of their own accord...that was why the basics were vital! My assailants were unimpressed.

His mind still wanders.

The acorn split and the root unfurled.

Gradually I taught more and more until in the end I was being called, “sensei”. But there were too many unanswered questions for me to feel like a sensei. One question above all had become the Holy Grail of aikido: what was it about basics that teaches one advanced techniques? This period in my life was where my path took me through the wilderness. Also, many people had developed knee problems. I discussed the problem with several sports injury specialists and doctors and came to the conclusion that it would be best to practise aikido with a straight front foot. A year later, Takeno Sensei came to England. He asked me why it was that my students had their front foot pointing forwards. I must have hesitated as I knew the answer was medical and therefore wrong, when he told me why he was teaching that to his students. His explanation was a revelation as it was based on technical knowledge. This was the first time any Sensei had spoken of the technical aspects of aikido. I sat listening, eyes as wide open as my mouth.  
He has decided to strike.

A shoot bursts into the sunshine.

A few years later after searching for more technical knowledge, I attended Chida Sensei's seminar in Paris. To my astonishment, he never taught a single technique. We played games! I was like a child with Christmas toys, uncontrollably jubilant and playing with everything at once. I realised that technicalities were not a random collection but groups of related aspects.

That way.

The young tree grew taller and stronger .

Training changed immediately, from the, "Don't question sensei, just do as he says" to, "You must question sensei if you do not understand". I poured out my technical soul before my students. The more I poured, the more they questioned. The more I answered, the more comprehensible technical knowledge became. More important still, came the realisation that technical knowledge was independent of and underpinned all techniques. Most important still, came the realisation that the road from kamae to kihon dosa to kihon waza to juji waza was not a one-way street. The answers to questions always lay back down the road, not ahead. And above all, that traffic could move in both directions, making aikido a whole and self-checking system. It was a strange thing to feel enthralled by my discovery and yet hear Yu Sensei's voice telling me the same thing, in his own way, all those years ago! I had carried the Holy Grail unknowingly for years. All that I need to know in the future is already within me.

Now!

My branches and leaves are no longer eaten by the deer and I grow free.

I am the only English bokken of Yu Sensei and I know I am oak. Perhaps mighty oak I will never be, but I am good for a dozen fine bokken. Bokken, I hope, who will never walk in the wilderness, who will feel the fear in reality, the energy in the attacker, the entry in combat, the beauty in technique, the power in movement, the simplicity in the technical, the weight in the cut and the timing of blade with blade. Is it aikido that gives one the bokken, or the bokken that gives one aikido?

I give my prostrate uke an imperceptible bow as he realises my bokken is at his throat.

The squirrels bury my acorns and I know the bokkens will survive even amongst rocks.

Sensei A.R.Yates