

Sword and Spirit

The eJournal of Itten Dojo

March 2021



— Why Budo? —

Regardless of the times in which you live, or the circumstances of your life, success largely depends on things you can control:

- **Building a foundation of strong relationships in a community of mutual support and achievement.**
- **Forging a disciplined and positive mindset.**
- **Enhancing your physical health and capabilities.**

These are exactly the benefits membership in a dojo provides.

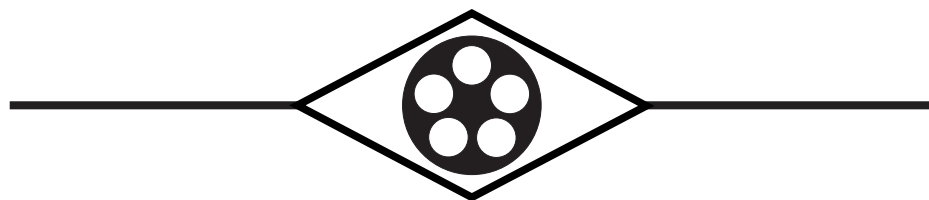
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Kata and Application in Sanshu-ho Aiki-budo

One of the best aspects of aikijutsu training within Sanshu-ho Aiki-budo is paired *kata* (two-person forms). Kata, in the most fundamental practice, are strictly defined and collaborative, and embody an idealized version of the *waza* (technique) being addressed. But rather than being restrictive and dry, the practice of kata offers an essentially infinite opportunity for exploration, development, and refinement of the skills critical to application of techniques in real-world, combative environments. Moreover, these benefits apply to both persons executing on a kata. There are an astonishing number of lessons encoded in a typical kata, for the “attacker” as well as the “defender.” For purposes of testing for rank in Sanshu-ho, there is a 50/50 split in responsibility for producing as ideal an execution of a kata as possible; in higher levels of training the kata can be a basic template for variations ranging from a simple shift in focus from one partner to the other to complex “pressure-testing,” in which the technique is executed against determined opposition.

A good example of this process of striving to perfect a kata and then using the lessons learned to achieve combative skills can be seen in training *sumi-otoshi*, or “corner-drop,” a *waza* to which students are introduced in preparation to test for *sankyu*, the third of five ranks preceding *shodan* (first-degree black-belt). The name derives from the fact that three points of contact with the ground are required for stability, while people have just two legs. Where that third point of contact would be for optimal stability forms the corner of an imaginary triangle. Since there is no leg to provide support on that point, shifting the opponent toward that corner of the triangle results in a degradation of the opponent's physical structure (*kuzushi*), making the opponent easier to throw. In execution of *sumi-otoshi*, *kuzushi* is toward the third corner irrespective of the ultimate direction of the throw.

The *sankyu seiteigata* (standard form) is *Katate-dori Sumi-otoshi*: *Nage* (the person executing the *waza*) leads *uke* (the person on the receiving side of the *waza*) through a complex sequence involving breaking *uke*'s posture and



then propelling uke through a turn and into a roll. But not just any roll. Too soon, and uke will enter *ushiro-kaiten* (a backward roll). Too late, and uke will enter *zenpo-kaiten* (a forward roll). Just right, and uke will be projected into *yoko-kaiten* (a sideways roll, across the top of the shoulders). This particular kata purely teaches principles, including *michibiki* (leading along a path) and *nagare* (flowing), rather than direct, combative application, but builds a strong foundation for dynamic and effective applications. An especially interesting aspect of this kata is the fact kuzushi is achieved by an extension of energy and not a physical, push or pull on uke.

To practice the kata, nage and uke bow-in from the standard *maai* (interval) for Sanshu-ho seiteigata, such that, assuming *ai-chudan-gamae* (a mutually facing, mid-level guard position), nage and uke can just barely touch fingertips if their lead arms are extended. Note that uke will be projected to the “open” side—in this case, very nearly toward the camera—so when taking positions to practice this sequence it’s important to allow an unobstructed landing zone.

Nage extends his right arm, presenting his wrist as a “lure.” Obviously, no one enters combat saying, “Here. Grab my wrist.” In this case, extending the wrist simulates the natural swing of the arms when walking, so even though the action is very formalized the general position of the wrist in space should be generally similar. Uke steps forward with his left foot, to grasp nage’s right wrist with his left hand. Uke wants to grab in preparation for striking nage with uke’s opposite hand (which is chambered for the strike). As is the case with all aikijutsu kata, uke must maintain the intention to strike even if the strike isn’t actually thrown—maintaining intentionality is one of the most difficult things for juniors to learn, but is critical to creating the connection that aikijutsu waza exploit.



Nage shifts his lead foot very slightly forward to the front-right to clear a path, and initiates an entry known as *tai-no-henka* (body change). Properly executed, this entry will cause uke to be compressed and shifted out of position to strike. Nage continues his turn through almost 180-degrees, to face nearly the opposite direction from which he started. Note that stopping just short of a 180-degree entry in executions of *tai-no-henka* is my personal practice; I find this prevents pulling uke's arm out of position and basically handing him back his center. Nage must keep his own wrist essentially stationary in space while allowing his hand to turn palm-up and aiming his elbow over uke's elbow.



Nage turns his (held) hand palm-down, to maintain *kuzushi* in uke and induce uke to attempt to regain balance by taking a step forward. At this point, nage reverses his turn to face toward uke, which has the effect of spinning uke on his lead foot (the foot that had just stepped forward). This point also highlights a major distinction of kata designed to teach principles: Uke could easily strike nage with his free hand as he's being turned, even while in a state of *kuzushi*.



Uke's spin will begin to take him away from nage, so nage augments that lean to create a projection, stepping forward with his right foot to *zenkutsu-dachi* (forward stance) and pointing toward the spot on the mat nage wants uke to land. Ideally, the projection occurs while uke is spinning on one foot, prior to his being able to place his left foot on the mat.



Uke rolls out of his yoko-kaiten into *chugoshi* (“middle hip,” a kneeling posture), and then pivots to face nage.

There is a *kuden* (oral teaching) for this kata, citing “constant tension.” The idea is that nage, after establishing kuzushi, must attempt to maintain the exact same “load” on his wrist throughout the waza. Any difference in the perceived weight of uke indicates a compromised technique resulting from a break in the connection, a substitution of muscle for proper sourcing of power, a misalignment of nage’s posture, or other factors.

As you can see, Katate-dori Sumi-otoshi is a very complex kata, one that demands significant investment of time and attention from both nage and uke, but the payoff is a skillset that has considerable utility in counters to real-world, unscripted attacks.

In application, sumi-otoshi is almost always executed in a linear manner rather than by taking uke into a turn, projecting the enemy along the line on which he attacked. The projection can be headfirst into the ground at nage’s feet, a potentially lethal response—*only when absolutely justified*—or outward to allow a window for survival.

Sumi-otoshi can be employed against an exceptionally wide range of attacks, ranging from single or double-hand grabs to punches and strikes coming from various angles.

This example illustrates an overhead strike with a club, but could as well be a broken beer bottle, adding for nage the additional challenge of staying clear of the weapon throughout the execution of the waza.

Because uke is threatening attack, verbally and/or physically, nage adopts the “calming fence” position suggested by Ellis Amdur in his exceptional book, *Words of Power: A Guide for Ordinary People to Calm and De-escalate Aggressive Individuals*, and described in detail in the September 2020 edition of this journal. As always should be the case, nage assumes the presence of a weapon even if one is not immediately visible. Nage is directing uke to “Stay back!” as nage attempts to disengage.



Uke breaks forward and initiates a strike with the club.



As the strike descends, nage slips his rear foot to the rear, entering and lowering his center as he deflects the incoming strike with *tegatana* (sword-arm), imparting kuzushi to uke's front-left corner.



Without impeding uke's forward momentum, nage steps forward, maintaining control of the weapon with his right arm while slipping his left arm under uke's armpit.



Continuing his turn, nage lowers his right arm while his left arm provides a fulcrum (nage's arms form the sides of a circle). Nage is now grasping uke's wrist to ensure the weapon is kept away from nage's body.



Nage steps back and drops his center, projecting uke into a forward roll.




As final insurance he's not struck by the weapon, nage sweeps his hand up and away.





This is the “nice” version of a sumi-otoshi application, in that it allows the window for uke to execute a forward roll. For the “not nice” version, nage maintains closer contact with uke while controlling the weapon and levers uke down instead of out, directing uke’s head into the ground (potentially resulting in a fatal, broken neck) or even into nage’s sharply rising knee (potentially fracturing uke’s skull, which could also be a lethal use of force).

WARNING: If you decide to practice the more dangerous versions, be certain to do so carefully and slowly, with extreme attention to safety, especially if you incorporate the knee-strike to uke’s head. A slight error in aim can result in serious injury—don’t take chances!

William Maren Sensei, founder and head of our ryu, instructs us: “There is a Sanshu-ho *kuden* (oral teaching) which states, ‘There are circles inside of circles.’ Shoden-level, kata-based training focuses largely on big circles and tai-sabaki. This forces the student to discipline and control their minds and bodies. (After all, you can’t expect to control an attacker’s body if you haven’t learned to control your own.) Once mastered though, you begin discovering and engaging the smaller circles—the circles within circles—and that is when the magic begins. A technique such as the sankyu seiteigata version of sumi-otoshi can be done with a very abbreviated action, much like cracking a whip.” 

Robert Wolfe, chief instructor of Itten Dojo, began martial arts training in 1975 while attending Bucknell University, where he earned a degree in Japanese Studies. Mr. Wolfe has taught since 1985, and founded Itten Dojo in 1992. His articles on martial arts have been featured in publications such as *The Bujin*, *Budo Shinbun*, the *Journal of Asian Martial Arts*, *Bugeisha*, *Aikido Today Magazine*, *Inside Karate*, *Martial Arts Training*, and *Martial Arts Professional*.

