Sword and Spirit

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— 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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Break the Stalemate!
Overcoming Tsuba-zeriai

Tsuba-zeriai (鍔迫り合い — literally, "sword-guards mutually pressing back") describes a circumstance in Japanese swordsmanship in which the opponents are in close contact, in what is essentially a clinch. The swords are crossed at the guards, with the swordsmen pushing against each in an attempt to gain advantage or create an opening to disengage and strike. There is a momentary stalemate, very definitely not a place one wants to stay for any length of time. The circumstance can arise in a variety of scenarios: a blocked attack, an insufficiently strong counter, a misjudged distance. Whatever the cause, the situation occurs frequently enough that classical schools of kenjutsu had specific *waza* (技, "techniques") to deal with it, and modern kendo incorporates rules for referees to handle fencers that become engaged in such a clinch, defining what techniques executed from tsuba-zeriai are valid scoring actions or fouls. If tsuba-zeriai persists for more than a certain number of seconds, the fencers are separated.

It's even the case that there is a colloquial use of "tsuba-zeriai" by regular Japanese, outside of those training in budo. In everyday language, the term is used to refer to persons of similar abilities fiercely competing with each other. Within budo traditions, the earliest use of the term may have been by the Hokushin Itto-ryu, in the early 1800s, although multiple, older schools of kenjutsu used other terms to describe essentially the same situation.

We're familiar with three kenjutsu waza designed to overcome tsuba-zeriai (and these are actually some of my favorite techniques to practice). All three were taught to us as *henka-waza*, variations in response to a technique that has failed and the initiative must be regained by going to Plan B. (An easy way to remember an important distinction: *Kaeshi-waza* are what you do to thwart the opponent's technique; henka-waza are what you do when the opponent has thwarted your technique, or you blew it yourself.) These henka-waza build from a kumitachi called *Katsugi* (担ぎ). Katsugi means "to shoulder," and refers to a method of deflecting an incoming, vertical cut by making an upward, sweeping motion with the sword.

Katsugi

Swordsmen assume *ai-chudan-gamae*, *kissaki-maai* (合中段構切先間合, a matching, middle-level guard, at the distance the tips of their swords are just touching).

Shitachi (仕太刀, the "responding sword") "opens the gate" by lowering his bokken and stepping back to *gedan-gamae* (a low-level guard).

Uchitachi (打太刀, the "striking sword") attacks with *nissoku*, *kiri-oroshi* (two steps forward with a vertical cut).

As uchitachi's cut descends, shitachi executes katsugi,

and immediately counters with a quick tsugi-ashi forward and a vertical cut toward uchitachi's face (so that uchitachi can clearly see the strike coming).

Mae (前 "Forward" — Henka-waza #1)

The henka-waza all begin the same way as Katsugi, but when shitachi executes katsugi he does so inadequately, resulting in tsuba-zeriai, with both swordsmen pressing forward.

Shitachi lowers his hips and brings his arms in close to his chest.

Shitachi drives up with his legs and arms, standing very high and raising his bokken as far as possible, shoving uchitachi back.

Shitachi executes *kashira-ate* (a strike with the end of the hilt)to drive uchitachi back,

and adjusts the *maai* (間合 "interval," or "distance") as necessary to cut uchitachi with *kesa-giri* (袈裟切り, a cut executed on an angle).

***Hidari* (左 "Left" — Henka-waza #2)**

From the point of tsuba-zeriai…

Shitachi subtly shifts his push slightly to his own left, toward uchitachi's right side (just past uchitachi's center line) and when uchitachi shifts back to counter that push, shitachi very suddenly releases his left hand from the *tsuka* (hilt) and grasps uchitachi's wrist, pivoting right and entering to his own left side by sweeping his right foot around to the back.

As uchitachi falls forward, shitachi executes a one-handed kashira-ate,

and then steps back with his left foot and cuts with kesa-giri.

***Migi* (右 "Right" — Henka-waza #3)**

From the point of tsuba-zeriai, both press their swords forward.

Shitachi subtly shifts his push slightly to his own right, toward uchitachi's left side (just past uchitachi's center line) and when uchitachi shifts to counter that push, shitachi very suddenly releases and spins toward his own left, entering toward the right-front corner.

Prior to his left foot touching the mat, shitachi uses his left elbow to impact uchitachi's left shoulder (for safety in practice; in actual application the target would be uchitachi's kidney), augmenting uchitachi's fall forward.

Shitachi continues his pivot to face uchitachi and cuts with kesa-giri.

Within the standard forms of these henka-waza, there are many opportunities for experimentation. As described in this presentation, the waza are executed on the initiative of shitachi, by shitachi "feeding" an input force to uchitach that causes him to respond in a predictable manner (i.e., pushing back to try to offset shitachi's push, and thereby creating an opening). But the waza can also be executed in response to uchitachi trying to overpower shitachi, with shitachi taking advantage of the situation by opening and entering rather than pushing back. Although the waza are illustrated here in a linear fashion, the practice can be much more "freestyle," with the training partners moving around the mat prior to executing one of the techniques. Taken to another level, the partners start from tsuba-zeriai without designating uchitachi and shitachi, and contest for advantage.

Unarmed applications are also possible, using identical body mechanics from a position of close contact, with execution of analogous strikes in place of the kashira-ate creating openings for aikijutsu techniques. Being able to morph from weapons to empty-hands is a great example of how closely related kenjutsu and aikijutsu actually are.

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*.