To the observer, much of the action may appear ponderously deliberate, while to the practitioner there is no time, whether in motion or in stillness. But make no mistake: this Art strips away the safe and familiar, leaving only the primitive, raging animal within us all, fighting to survive. It is up to the budoka alone to loose this beast, face it head-on, and cage it again. Cleverness and erudition need not apply. Caution must be thrown to the winds. This is the ground angels fear to tread.

A Deeper Exploration of the Martial Arts...

Itto Tenshin-ryu Taikai

In early November 2019, Mr. A.H. Rajguru conducted the annual Taikai (Great Gathering) of the Itto Tenshin-ryu. A good mix of senior deshi and newer students gathered for two days of intensive training in Gekken-sho. This central element of Itto Tenshin-ryu kenjutsu is unique among all traditions of martial arts. The Tenshin-ryu bokken, and the style of its application, can be seen on the cover of The Way and The Power, by F. J. Lovret (soon to be republished in a new edition). The word gekken is translated from the Japanese as “severe sword” or “terrible sword.” Its forms are loud, violent, and dangerous.

But these phrases understate the case by orders of magnitude. The heavy bludgeon of exotic hardwood rings like iron when struck. If dropped overboard it would sink like stone. Like a polished sword, its potential is that of a loaded firearm with the safety off and a round in the chamber. Just to touch the thing involves considerable risk to one’s person, not to mention bystanders. To wield it is to confront the fundamental forces of Newtonian physics; there are gravitational impacts upon one’s psyche. The heart-stopping sound of it crushing the air rivets all attention, and as to ego, the message can only be, “Fly, for you are known!”

Everything about Gekken connotes total destruction. Yet, there is refined elegance in its polished surfaces and clean lines. Like the ancient haiku from which the 17 kamae (stances) derive their names, there is only the undiluted Essence, nothing more, and nothing less.

To the observer, much of the action may appear ponderously deliberate, while to the practitioner there is no time, whether in motion or in stillness. But make no mistake: this Art strips away the safe and familiar, leaving only the primitive, raging animal within us all, fighting to survive. It is up to the budoka alone to loose this beast, face it head-on, and cage it again. Cleverness and erudition need not apply. Caution must be thrown to the winds. This is the ground angels fear to tread.
Gekken-sho encompasses 17 kumitachi, in which two opponents do ritual combat. It begins in reishiki, a formal process—no, a way of being—in which the swordsmen approach both weapon and opponent: a deep mental, physical and spiritual purification and preparation. Outwardly one seems to be adjusting attire; but after tying back kimono sleeves and donning hachimaki, a warrior emerges, with the icy calm and inner fire appropriate to the ultimate battle. The combatants step to their weapons, placed point-to-point on the mat between them, in perfect synchrony. The tension is palpable, the atmosphere ringing with potential—yet by their facial expressions this might be a tea ceremony.

What follows is as rigorously structured as ballet, and probably about as difficult to master (and martial artists who have tried ballet speak of it with new respect). With kissaki just barely touching, the two lower their weapons, separate by five small steps, and resume seigan kamae. The nominal challenger, uchitachi, moves the bokken rightwards, then up and slightly back, stretching tall, as if looking down upon an insignificant annoyance; and gives a tremendous shout! The other, shitachi, assumes one of the seventeen kamae from the haiku—ki, ku, no, ka, ya, etc.—and responds in kind. With that, uchitachi attacks with the force of an oncoming freight-train, even before the sound has left shitachi’s throat.

At first glance the attacker seems to be the one who makes a show of charging in with total abandon—only to bail out before landing the intended blow. In any case shitachi has already forestalled any such possibility by a thrust to the face, and follows up in the manner of another old poem: “…and now the air is shattered by the force of Casey’s blow.” (1)

There is sound and fury. The fury of an irresistible force aimed at an object that has already failed at being immovable in the face of an advancing shockwave, and the sound of kiai, like the sonic boom that inevitably follows.

“Turn it on; turn it off.”

As explosively as it began, so it ends: the blast-furnace door is closed; the howling beast is back in its cave; all is as silent as the graves on the road to Nara, in Basho’s time.
These 17 kumitachi appear to illustrate 17 responses in 17 kamae, to one attack. Early in our keiko, however, it is not so clear just who initiates the contest. Each attack is identical, and it never lands: uchitachi escapes by a hair’s-breadth from the very brink of catastrophe. Indeed, this human avalanche is only delivered in full after the fact, with great formality, in unison: facing each other at open ma-ai in seigan, each takes one sideways step off the line to their right, and both execute the attack with tremendous kiai. They land left shoulder to left shoulder. As the echo fades, they face left toward each other, a living tomo (the symbol familiar to most as yin-yang) of “fearful symmetry.”

Rising, they move to the opposite starting line, thus exchanging roles. In delivering this strike after the fact, budoka make certain that the beast they have let loose for a moment is once more securely confined. This critical responsibility is not to be taken lightly.

The forms of Gekken-sho embody critical principles of hyoshi, ma-ai and tai-sabaki (timing, interval, body movement), as well as relationship, power and communication.

In the two-day seminar, Rajguru Sensei delivered all 17 techniques in a manner that left no participant behind, regardless of their level of experience. Senior deshi encountered many satori, while more junior practitioners acquired physical experience against which to measure their development as they continue training.

Given the breadth and depth of this body of work, even to brush the surface over several years is a monumental achievement. Nonetheless there were additional gifts: a curriculum liberally salted with challenges for which no demonstration was offered, inviting students to create new forms drawing upon the heiho, waza and spirit of Gekken-sho. As the seminar drew to a close, this extended into kenjutsu, aikijutsu and other arts, as Itto Tenshin-ryu is a resource of unlimited application, relevant in any circumstance, when written into our bones in the indelible ink of keiko.

Notes


(2) A phrase from William Blake’s poem “The Tyger” (Tyger, tyger, burning bright / In the forests of the night, / What immortal hand or eye / Could frame thy fearful symmetry?) Source: Wikipedia.
The Haiku-gamae

The Haiku-gamae of the Itto Tenshin-ryu receive their name because a haiku written by Basho (Matsuo Munefusa, 1644–1694) is used as a mnemonic to aid in remembering the stances...

菊の香や
奈良には古き仏たち

Kiku no ka ya!
Nara ni wa, furuki hotoke tachi.

“Ah! The scent of chrysanthemums.
In Nara,
There are many old Buddhas.”

Each of the kamae is named with one syllable of this poem, and a student will quietly recite it as he cycles through the set. Each kamae has an oku, also based on lines of the poem. For example, the first four kamae (migi and hidari chudan, and migi and hidari o-gasumi) are done with a feeling of quiet alertness, and the fifth (koryu jodan) is done with intensity.

One interesting point about the set of stances is than many of them intentionally violate a standard rule of swordsmanship, a rule which states that you should never allow your opponent to see the side of your blade.


Peter Barus, chief instructor of the Donguri Dojo in Jacksonville, Vermont, has trained in budo since 1984 under Mr. Fredrick Lovret and Mr. Arvind Rajguru. Licensed as a Senior Instructor, Mr. Barus conducts regular classes in Itto Tenshin-ryu kenjutsu, and devotes the rest of his time to writing, teaching and volunteer work. Author of Matters of Life and Death: Essays in Budo, he can be reached through http://barus.com.