

Principles from Ono-ha Itto-ryu

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In our practice of Ono-ha Itto-ryu Kenjutsu, we are exposed to the study of principles that are considered to be the signature methods of the style. However, these principles are of great importance in iaijutsu and kenjutsu in general, and can be found in many styles, including Muso Jikiden Eishin-ryu.



The first principle that will be discussed is called “*isshin itto*”, which means “one heart, one sword.” This phrase can be understood as one beat (of the heart), one technique and describes the fundamental principle of *Ono-ha Itto-ryu*. *Isshin itto* is clearly expressed in the techniques contained throughout the curriculum of *Ono-ha Itto-ryu*. An example of *isshin itto* can be seen in the technique called *suriage*, in which one receives the enemy’s cut with the *shinogi* as the defender’s sword rises up along the same line as the enemy’s cut, displacing the opponent’s sword, and cuts down to the enemy’s men. This action of receiving, displacing and cutting happens in one movement. This principle is also expressed in *suriotoshi*, a technique found in *Hitotsugachi*, the first *kumitachi* in *Ono-ha Itto-ryu*. *Suriotoshi*, also called *kiriotoshi*, or dropping cut, is cutting down at the same time as the enemy cuts down, along the same line as the enemy’s cut, displacing his sword with the *shinogi*, thereby creating the condition of *shini tachi* (dead sword) in the enemy’s technique. The action of *kiriotoshi* continues by cutting to *men* or through to *chudan* (with the *kissaki* at the enemy’s *nodo*) and immediately thrusting. As in *suriage*, this all happens in one action.

These techniques, receiving and displacing the opponent’s cut and countering in one action, are usually considered to be advanced techniques in most styles. However, they are the first things practiced in *Ono-ha Itto-ryu*. This is especially the case with *kiriotoshi*, which represents both the beginning and end of the *Ono-ha Itto-ryu* curriculum. While *isshin itto* is a very important component of *waza*, it requires *kokoro gamae*, the mind in a state of readiness, enabling the mind and the sword to execute *waza* together as one unit.

Another important technique or principle is “*makura no osae*.” *Makura* means pillow and *osae* means push or hold. This phrase refers to the principle of restraining or holding an opponent with the light touch of a pillow. This principle can be demonstrated in the example of someone sitting in a chair and then attempting to stand up. Typically, one feels very strong when they rise. But a light touch of the finger to the forehead of someone sitting in a chair can prevent them from rising. In practice, if one applies *osae* when the opponent cuts or thrusts, one can immobilize the opponent, preventing him from applying a technique. The application of *makura no osae* requires correct timing as well as the ability to read the opponent’s intent.

The final principle that we will discuss involves some interesting historical references. *Itto-ryu* contains a concept called “*shisha tachi*”, which refers to using the *kissaki* like the *shisha*, or scouts, of the armies of feudal Japan. *Shisha* were intelligence gatherers tasked with obtaining as much information about the enemy, the landscape, potential obstacles, etc. Once this information was acquired, the *shisha*’s job was accomplished. This information would then be used to affect the proper strategy and tactics in deploying the full force against the enemy. *Shisha tachi* refers to using the *Kissaki* to probe the opponent much like *shisha* would probe the enemy prior to mobilizing the full army against the enemy. One tactic that a *shisha* might have employed in a given situation is called “*mon zen no kawara*.” This refers to *kawara*, roof tiles, that *shisha* would throw at the front (*zen*) of the gate (*mon*) of an enemy’s stronghold, causing a disturbance in an attempt to lure him out. In a way

reminiscent of *mon zen no kawara*, *shisha kissaki* can be used to lure the opponent out, forcing him to commit to a course of action. *Shisha tachi* can also be used to assess the opponent's skill and to determine the correct distance for attack and defence. The information obtained through *shisha tachi* is then used in support of one's skill and *waza* in overcoming the opponent. Once this information is acquired and can be used to defeat the opponent, *shisha tachi*, much like the *shisha*, is no longer necessary, and is replaced by the use of one's full technique.

Ono-ha Itto-ryu emphasizes the principle of *isshin itto*. However, in addition to the techniques that reflect this principle, it also contains teachings such as *makura no osae* and *shisha tachi*. This is important because one must have not only good technique, but must understand strategy, possess common sense, and have a clear mind and strong spirit.

Ono Ha Itto Ryu History

The founder of this style was a man named Yagoro. At age fourteen, Yagoro arrived in the little seaside village named Ito. How he got there is speculation. According to legend, he floated across the narrow Sea of Sagami from the island of Oshima on a piece of wood. Villages were closed societies in that time and hostile to strangers. However the young Yagoro soon earned the friendship of the inhabitants, when he drove away six bandits who attacked the village one day. He ended up remaining there for some years. The villagers then saved up money for him to travel to seek out a master, since he had expressed the wish to become a great swordsman. He went to Kamakura to the famous Hachiman Shrine to pray to the gods. He stayed there for six nights, practicing and praying, on the seventh night, he was attacked from behind by some unknown assailant. Somehow he sensed the attack, drew his sword, turned and cut the man down in one stroke. His technique was spontaneous and done without any thought. He did not understand the meaning of the technique he had used that night until many years later, when it would become the fundamental technique and philosophy of the style he would eventually create. He would also change his name to Ito Ittosai Kagehisa.



Ono Ha Itto Ryu is the oldest of the many Itto-ryu styles which branched off from Ittosai Kagehisa's original art, it continues to be one of the most influential of the traditional kenjutsu styles today exerting a major influence, along with Hokushin branch, upon modern kendo's kata, tactics and aesthetic.

This branch was founded by Ittosai's immediate successor Ono Jiroemon Tadaaki (1565-1628) from whence the name of the art is derived. Oral tradition has it that Ittosai made Tadaaki fight a serious duel with another student, Zenki, in order to establish a successor to the style. Serving as an instructor to both the second and third shoguns, along with Yagyū Munenori of the rival school the Yagyū Shinkage Ryu, Tadaaki was able to continue to give his art wide exposure. It was said that Tadaaki was Munenori's superior in swordsmanship but that his severe character led him to be the less favored and respected of the two.

Known as a dueling style which focused upon the sword rather than a more multifaceted multi weapon battlefield style Ono developed a mock sword in order to reduce training injuries and allow more committed fighting practice.

From a technical standpoint this style consists of more than 150 techniques for both long and short sword. Still the defining technique, like that of its parent style, is the technique referred to as *kiri-otoshi* which translates simply as 'cutting down'. It is a characteristic of this style that they often feel that they have the ability to strike freely due to their technique of cutting down the centre-line during an opponent's cut in order to displace their attacker's sword and gain victory. The style adheres to a philosophy articulated in the phrase "*itto sunawachi banto*" or "one sword gives rise to ten thousand swords" meaning that a thorough understanding of the fundamental technique of cutting will lead one to understand the myriad variations.

Although formally established as a system for unarmored fighting the techniques maintained an awareness of the demands and tactics of armored fighting thus making the techniques adaptable to such circumstances. The transmission of the system passed out of the Ono family briefly and was maintained by the feudal lord Tsugaru Nobumasa. The second headmaster from this family taught Ono Tadakata allowing the Ono family to continue preserving the line while the Tsugaru family continued their practice of the art thereby having two families maintain the main line of the Ono Ha Itto-ryu tradition thereafter. The Tsugaru family also instructed members of Yamaga family the system and they worked together to preserve the line of their art.

Sasamori Junzo a well known and high ranking kendo practitioner took over the preservation of the system in the Taisho period. Junzō Sasamori (May 18, 1886 - February 13, 1976) was a Japanese politician during Taisho and Showa era (served as Japanese cabinet member for Prime Minister Katayama), educator, and martial art master (16th Head Master for Ono Ha Itto Ryu). He was a Christian minister, and educator, who later became an influential politician noted for his work for international peace. He received Order of the Sacred Treasure in 1964. Sasamori Junzo Soke was Menkyo Kaiden in Ono-Ha Itto-ryu, Chokugen-ryu Naginata jutsu, Shin Muso Hayshizaki-ryu and was the last known teacher of Muraku-ryu. Sasamori Junzo's 1964 book, **This is Kendo: The Art of Japanese Fencing**, was one of the first English-language kendo texts, and many of his Japanese-language texts remain in print.

Sasamori Junzo passed the Ryu on to his son Sasamori Takemi (17th Soke of Ono Ha Itto Ryu), who is the seventeenth generation headmaster. Sasamori Takemi, is also an ordained minister and prominent educator.

Major Figures & Influences

Itto Ryu has proven to be one of the most studied styles of swordsmanship. Many superior swordsmen have graduated from this school over the centuries. The most notable is:

Ono Tadaaki who became the successor to the Itto style when Ito Kagehisa mysteriously disappeared from the field of Koganegahara where Tadaaki and a would be successor, Zenki, fought a duel to decide who would succeed Ittosai as the next master of the style. He was reputed to be an excellent swordsman, even superior to Yagyu Munenori, but his cold and stern character earned him less respect and admiration than his contemporary Munenori. Along with Munenori, he was also designated as an official teacher of swordsmanship to the Tokugawa Shogunate. There is some speculation that one of the famous treatises on Zen and swordsmanship, "the Sword of Taia" written by Soho Takuan, was addressed specifically to Ono Tadaaki. If this was indeed the case, then it lends credibility to the speculation that Itto Ryu became influenced by Zen at a much earlier stage, under Tadaaki. Tadaaki's son Tadatsune, an excellent swordsman in his own right, founded the Ono branch of Itto Ryu.

The Significance

Of all the major styles, Itto Ryu stands out as being one whose philosophy is the most pragmatic. The style concentrates solely on the art of wielding the sword. While other styles sought to discover religious and spiritual meanings in swordsmanship, Itto Ryu did not. It did only seek technical superiority in swordsmanship and in this, it was very successful.

The supreme philosophy of this school is to defeat the opponent with one stroke, hence the name "itto" (which can be translated as "one sword" or "one stroke"). This simple yet fundamental principle continues, not surprisingly, to this day.

There is speculation that Itto Ryu became influenced by Zen under Ono Tadaaki due to his association with the priest Takuan. In the Ono style, much of the philosophy that there is, can be seen to be Zen based. Later branches of Itto Ryu such as Nakanishi Ryu ha Hokushin Itto Ryu and Muto Ryu under Yamaoka Tesshu openly incorporated Zen into the art. Many concepts common in Zen can be seen in the techniques used in these schools: techniques which stress simplicity and directness. The nature of the style and the one mindedness of its

philosophy indicate a strong foundation in Zen thought.

From a technical viewpoint, Itto Ryu strives for simplicity in all actions and movements. It is the hallmark. Much of modern kendo originates from Itto Ryu and more recent figures include: Takano Sasaburo and Sasamori Junzo and Sasamori Takemi. Many of the principles can be found in the techniques used in kendo, particularly the focus on simplicity.

Sasamori Takemi, Soke



The 17th Headmaster (sōke) of the traditional sword art school of Ono Ha Ittō Ryū Reigakudō is Master Takemi Sasamori (b. 1933). He is today one of most notable and esteemed caretakers of Japanese martial tradition.

Sasamori Takemi was born in Hirosaki in Aomori Prefecture in 1933. He was educated at Harvard School of Divinity and continues to follow in his father's footsteps as a Christian scholar. Sasamori Takemi, resides in Setagaya-ku, Tokyo, Japan. He learned Itto Ryu from his father, Sasamori Junzo, the 16th soke, and has been studying for over 60 years. He studied the Ono Ha Itto Ryu of Sasamori Junzo until his father's death in 1975 at which time he assumed his father's position as 17th soke of the ryu.

Sasamori Soke brings to us all of his skill as both a master of Itto Ryu, and his experience as a teacher at the Police College in Japan, where he teaches Itto Ryu.

- Born 1933
- Present representative/ Menkyo Kaiden - Ono Ha Itto Ryu
- Awarded the degree of Hanshi, the highest recognition in the practice of traditional Japanese martial arts
- Member of the Board of Directors of the Association of Ancient Martial Arts (Kobudō kyōkai)
- Teacher of the University Police (Keisatsu-daigaku) of Tokyo
- Headmaster Reigakudo, Tokyo, Japan