

Understanding the No-Sword with No Teacher.

A practical attempt to read The Illustrated Catalogue of the Shinkage-Ryū Martial Arts with the help of Yagyū *heihō kadensho*

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Abstract: *The Illustrated Catalogue of the Shinkage-Ryū Martial Arts* (新陰流兵法目録書; *shinkage-ryū heihō mokuroku*), drawn in 1601 by Yagyū Munetoshi, the founder of the Yagyū *shinkage ryū*, is a classical catalogue of the style's techniques. Munetoshi painted the scroll as a present to a friend of his, a *Noh* actor. When looking at it one also sees the clear calligraphy explaining the techniques, helping anyone who reads it to get a grasp of the illustrated techniques. Yet these explanations were added in 1707 – over one hundred years after the scroll was painted. The textual explanations themselves sometimes seem to quote directly from the *heihō kadensho* (“A Hereditary Book on the Art of War”), which can be considered the central text of the style, and was written in around 1632 by Yagyū Munenori, the son of Munetoshi. This article questions whether the depictions and descriptions of *The Illustrated Catalogue of the Shinkage-Ryū Martial Arts*, and the 1632 *heihō kadensho*, can function together as a means of learning the techniques presented in the former, despite being created at different times; is it possible to extract the embodied knowledge embedded in the text by combining the scroll with the commentary and the book? To answer these questions a practical experiment in learning the techniques was undertaken.

Keywords: fighting manual, fight book, transmission of knowledge, traditions, secrecy, martial arts, sword fighting, Japan, embodied knowledge

I. INTRODUCTION

The invention of writing, which followed the invention of illustration, helped humanity a great deal in storing and transmitting data, yet it is not perfect or even well-suited to transmitting certain forms of knowledge. Oral transmission, for example, is very much alive in many societies and used to pass on information without anything ever being written down. Direct, oral transmission is able to confer a greater understanding than text just simply by the means of directly explaining anything that might have been misunderstood. A text, on the other hand, may very well remain ambiguous to the reader, no matter how well-versed they are in the matter at hand. Embodied knowledge puts up another very different barrier. We still lack a method to record movement in a way that



is immediately understandable because we cannot recreate the accompanying sensations: we cannot make it re-felt.¹ Over the centuries many attempts have been made to try and record such knowledge. The experiment conducted by the author of this article tries to evaluate the success of one attempt to understand such a recording. By applying the ideas of “practice as research” it attempts to (re-)create a practice in order to attain the embedded knowledge.² Central to this undertaking are *The Illustrated Catalogue of the Shinkage-ryū Martial Arts* (新陰流兵法目録書; *shinkage-ryū heibō mokuroku*) and Yagyū Munenori’s *heibō kadensho* (兵法家伝書; A Hereditary Book of the Martial Arts). The first of these is a catalogue of techniques from the *shinkage-ryū*, a Japanese sword-fighting style, which has an extensive commentary to explain the techniques shown. The *heibō kadensho*, on the other hand, is a book on the fencing style of the Yagyū family.

Throughout Japanese history, skills and arts have been transmitted in *ryū* (流, “flow”), which is mostly translated in this context as “school”. A *ryū* is a set of specific skills, beliefs, and a code of conduct which serves as a point of origin and a point of reference for everyone who is part of it.³ In order to become privy to the knowledge of a *ryū* one had to become a part of it. This necessity is at the heart of this experiment: put simply, is it possible to extract the knowledge of a *ryū* without having being introduced into it?

A scroll like the *mokuroku* is in line with other documents compiled and issued to practitioners of secret arts in seventeenth-century Japan, when it was customary to present a pupil who had mastered the techniques of a *ryū* with a certificate of his mastery. Sometimes this certificate was accompanied by drawings that show the basic postures of the techniques that had been mastered. It served as proof of one’s skill and also fulfilled the very real and needed requirement of ensuring the continuation of the school. In order to ensure the safety of the school’s secrets, these drawings generally did not show many steps of the technique, nor was any explanation given next to the name. The name of the technique in question would help the person reading it to remember the corresponding training exercises, thus activating the corresponding muscle memory required in order to execute it. This, of course, made such scrolls basically unintelligible to everyone else.

One of the reasons why this combination of scroll, commentary, and book is so interesting is due to the fact that it was not given to a known swordsman but to a famous *Nob* actor of the time, Konparu Ujikatsu. There is a documented relationship between contemporary *Nob* and swordplay, for example as seen in the sliding steps used in *Nob*, which are the same as in some fencing styles.⁴ In the early eighteenth century, Konparu’s family asked a master of the Yagyū *Shinkage-ryū* to add a commentary to the inherited

¹ Burkart, ‘Limits of Understanding’, pp. 10-11.

² Arlander, *Performance as Research*, pp. 9-10.

³ Braun, *Bunbu-ryōdō*, p. 28.

⁴ Morignaga, *Secrecy in Japanese Arts*, p. 24.

scroll, which he did. This appears to have been a clear attempt to decipher what was written.

The *heibō kadensho* was written nearly thirty years after the creation of the *mokuroku*. It is a treatise on the Yagyū way written by the son of the school's founder, Yagyū Munenori, who himself was a swordplay instructor to three *shōgun*, the de facto military rulers of the Japanese islands. The *kadensho* was meant to help initiates through the difficult learning of the schools techniques but also acted as a guide for proper living and behaviours of Yagyū *ryū* pupils.

These two works served as the starting point of a self-conducted experiment which tried to answer the following question: can the techniques of the Yagyū style be self-taught by using the *mokuroko* scroll with help of the *kadensho* to illuminate certain parts? This was attempted because the combination of an illustrated scroll with commentary, and a further explanatory book, provide not one but two sources to decipher and retain the embodied knowledge embedded in the scroll. In this undertaking we are dealing with several levels of encoding and decoding which we have to keep in mind.

1. The original author tries to convey the knowledge, fully aware of the fact that writing alone is not sufficient, so he has to provide other means for readers to decode the knowledge in his texts.
2. The commenter tries to add meaning to the already existent images, by adding clues for how to decipher them.
3. The translator first has to decode the meaning of the written text and then encodes it into another language, which adds an extra layer of interpretation.
4. Finally, the reader needs to decode all of the above in order to extract the knowledge and recreate the technique in question.

This experiment attempted to evaluate how successful the author and the subsequent writers were in conveying the ideas of the embedded techniques. In order for a transmission to be judged successful, a given technique must lead to an actual stance or executable technique which theoretically would be applicable in combat.

With this goal in mind the author attempted to acquire the basic skills and as many techniques as possible from the scroll over a period of eight months. Prior to this attempt, the author had no training, neither formal nor informal, in *kenjutsu* or kendo. He had some experience in medieval European sword fighting, as well as some basic training in *taijiquan* and *ju jitsu*, but none of the mentioned disciplines were close to a level of mastery. Accordingly, the experiment was done with little practical knowledge of Japanese sword fighting, although a theoretical knowledge was existent in abundance. Training was conducted from three to five days a week without any consultation of an actual practitioner of Japanese sword fighting.

Before discussing the results, some description of the material at hand and how it is structured is necessary. The following section will thus discuss the nature of embodied

and hidden knowledge, focusing on the existence and functionality of *hiden* (秘伝, secret transmission) in Japan. The third section will highlight the differences between the commentary of *mokuroku* and the *beihō kadensho*. Section four will describe the actual application and training exercises.

Throughout the text newly introduced Japanese terms are given both in phonetic script and kanji. A translation is provided at first mention. A glossary of all terms is provided at the end. After a term has been introduced, only the phonetic script will be used and Japanese terms will be highlighted in italics. The Hepburn transcription will be applied. Japanese Names are given in traditional order with family name first and given name second; personal names are not italicised. At first mention both names will be given and afterwards only given names will be used. It is also worth mentioning that only one name is used for a certain person, independently of how many names they used during their lifetime.

II. EMBODIED AND HIDDEN KNOWLEDGE

The Yagyū *shinkage-ryū* has its origins in a time where sword fighting saw a transition from an actually employed art on the field of battle to an art of self-defence, self-cultivation, and sport. This transition prompted a great rise in the amount of schools of swordsmanship to several hundred.⁵ The *Sengoku jidai* (“Age of Warring States”, 戦国時代) is generally estimated to have lasted from around 1467 to 1615. This period is characterised by the decrease and disintegration of royal influence and the rise to power of local warlords. It ended after the so-called three unifiers successively managed to either ally with or destroy all opposition. The last of them was Tokugawa Ieyasu, who finally established the rule of his dynasty with the successful siege of Ōsaka castle in 1615, during which Yagyū Munenori actually saved the life of the second Tokugawa *shogun*, Hidetada, by single-handedly defeating several men before they could reach him.⁶ With the end of the Age of Warring States, large battles ceased to happen and from around 1600 duels to the death were officially forbidden.⁷ In turn these changes led to a large amount of battle-hardened veterans who now found themselves without a war to fight in. In addition, the samurai – who were established as the highest social class – were now a class of warriors who were forbidden to fight, creating a need for an outlet for their martial urges.

The *yagyū shinkage-ryū* was established by Yagyū Sekishusai Munetoshi (1529-1606). He had been taught by Kamiizuna Hidetsuna (b. 1508), whose teachers in turn claimed to have been inspired by the *kami* (神, “gods”).⁸ Hidetsuna’s approach to swordplay was one of the first to put an emphasis on perception and, by extension, learning to correctly time

5 King, *Zen and the Way of the Sword*, p. 109.

6 Wilson, *The Life-Giving Sword*, p. 15

7 King, *Zen and the Way of the Sword*, p. 110.

8 Friday, *Legacies of the Sword*, pp. 22-24.

an attack, instead of focusing on specific techniques. It set the mind before the action, so to speak.⁹

Munetoshi lived through the later years of the Age of Warring States and witnessed the rise of the three unifiers and the corresponding upheavals. He took part in his first major battle at the age of sixteen, which was only one of many during his life.¹⁰ For him, sword fighting was an applied art and a means of survival. Munetoshi became Hidetsuna's student after he was easily defeated twice in trial combat by Hidetsuna's nephew and disciple in 1559.¹¹ Hidetsuna and his nephew lived under Munetoshi's roof for two years, teaching Hidetsuna's style to the Yagyū. Munetoshi mixed what he learned with his family's techniques to create the Yagyū *Shinkage-ryū*.

Three persons are of special interest here for our analysis: Konparu Ujikatsu, Yagyū Munenori, the son of Munetoshi, and Yagyū Hyogonusuke, the grandson of Munetoshi.

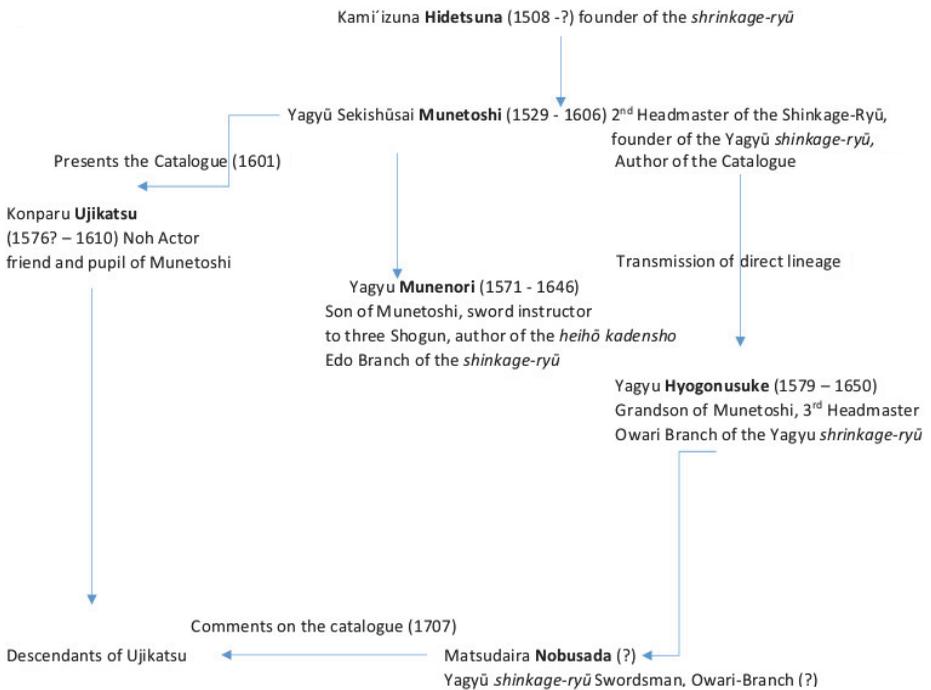


Figure 1: Persons of Interest. Diagram of the author.

The first of these, Konparu Ujikatsu, was a famous *Nob* actor of the time and the owner of the catalogue discussed in this article. *Nob* is considered a high art in Japan, and had already been recognised as such for centuries by Ujikatsu's lifetime. In addition, *Nob*, as

9 Sugawara, *Lives of Master Swordsmen*, p. 95.

10 Sugawara, *Lives of Master Swordsmen*, p. 102, 107.

11 Wilson, *The Life-Giving Sword*, pp. 22-24.

with fencing, existed as an art form that transmitted its knowledge through *hiden* (see the paragraph after the next), so Ujikatsu would be familiar with the concept. Why Ujikatsu received the catalogue is unclear. It is known that he and Munetoshi were close friends and shared some views about the similarities of dancing and sword-fighting, especially the idea that the ways of moving within the *Nob* theatre and the *shinkage-ryū* were very similar.¹² Two major explanations are plausible: either Ujikatsu received it as a token of friendship or he actually was instructed in the *shinkage-ryū*. The chance that he did train in swordsmanship should be considered likely and it can be assumed that he was a pupil of Munetoshi. It is also important that his descendants took great care to preserve the *shinkage-ryū mokuroku*. In the eighteenth century they asked a student of the *shinkage-ryū*, Matsudaira Nobusada, to comment on it, in order for them to understand it. This commentary enabled the experiment discussed in this article to proceed.

The Yagyū *shinkage-ryū* diverged into two main branches; the Edo and the Owari. Yagyū Munenori was the son of Munetoshi and after the *shōgun* asked Munetoshi to become his swordplay instructor, he recommended his son instead. Munenori thus came to live in Edo and by virtue of this became the head of the Edo branch of the school. Despite this, he did not become the direct heir of the sword school as his nephew, Yagyū Hyogonosuke, was later named headmaster by Munetoshi. Yagyū Hyogonosuke was the son of Munetoshi's eldest son Yoshikatsu, who suffered from a physical disability and thus was unable to follow into the footsteps of his father. The choosing of a new headmaster was generally done by writing a certificate of said headmastership and presenting it to the new successor.¹³ Hyogonosuke was this successor and not Munenori, despite his appointment as swordplay instructor to the *shōgun*. Through these events the two branches came into existence, and the divide also sported some rivalry. Both branches continue to exist until this day, with the present headmaster of the Owari branch being the twenty-second in the line, while the Edo branch is currently under the tutelage of its eighteenth headmaster.¹⁴

The *heiho kadensho* was written around the year 1632 and is a treatise on the secrets of the Yagyū *shinkage-ryū*. It serves as a guide for students of the *ryū* but also is Munenori's summary of the style and his thoughts on martial arts in general. The scroll, as well as the *kadensho*, are part of a system of a hidden transmission of knowledge, which was well known at the time. The idea of *hiden* was firmly established at the time of writing. At the centre of *hiden* is the correct and proper transmission of a school's knowledge and lineage. Improper transmission would endanger the school, so great care was taken to secure a

12 Maki, *Secrecy*, p. 24.

13 Sugawara, *Lives of Master Swordsmen*, p. 105.

14 <<http://www.yagyu-ryu.org/history.shtml>>, accessed 04.07.2020 and <http://yagyu-shinkage-ryu.jp/yagyu_e.html>, accessed 04.07.2020

proper one¹⁵. As such, the *kuden* (oral transmission, 口伝) – an integral part of any teaching – was only attainable by an insider.

II.1. The scroll

The scroll which was handed to Ujikatsu is central to this experiment. The scroll consists of twenty-eight pages, twenty-six of which are dedicated to the different techniques. The other two pages are used to explain the mystic history of the martial arts and a depiction of the *kami* Izanagi and Izanami, who, according to Shintō mythology, are the creators of the Japanese islands, and also, according to this text, the creators of the martial arts.

The catalogue is split into five parts, which are titled as follows: the three learnings; history; the nine items; *Tengu*'s selection; the six techniques. The catalogue was presented to Ujikatsu in 1601, by none other than Munetoshi himself, and in its original form only consisted of the titles of the depicted techniques and the drawings of two opponents, generally two men. The exception to this is “*Tengu*'s selection”, where the one executing the technique is swapped for a *tengu* (天狗). *Tengu* are mythical creatures who are said to be master swordsmen, so depicting them as presumed teachers for sword skills was not uncommon. The last three techniques are clumped together on the last page and originally only consisted of the titles; no pictures or descriptions were given. The scroll does not contain any more pages and the commentary on the techniques was added later.

II.2. The commentary

In 1707, Matsudaira Nobusada was asked by the descendants of Ujikatsu to comment on the existing scroll. He complied with the request and wrote a small description to help understand the different techniques. One can differentiate his handwriting from that of from Munetoshi by comparing several characters which appear regularly throughout the script. When comparing the character used for katana (刀), for example, which appears in three titles¹⁶ and nineteen commentaries¹⁷, it is notable that Nobusada's first stroke, which starts horizontal and then turns downwards, is generally more curved than Munetoshi's. When comparing the up character (上), which appears in one title¹⁸ and ten commentaries¹⁹, it is obvious that Nobusada starts much higher up with the second stroke. In addition, he generally puts more pressure on the paper while progressing to the final horizontal stroke, resulting in more ink on the paper. Finally, in the character for

¹⁵ Maki, *Secrecy in Japanese Arts*, p. 62

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 139, 147, 161.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 139-53, 158-62

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 162

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 140, 142, 144, 146, 151, 152, 153, 154, 158, 162

eight(八), present in one title²⁰ and two commentaries²¹, Nobusada's strokes are less angled in general, but have a stronger turn towards the horizontal plane at the end of the first one. In conclusion the different handwriting is distinguishable.

Nobusada was a student of the Owari branch of the *Yagyū shinkage ryū*. The two traditions diverged during the seventeenth century, as proved by many duels between the two, in which the Owari tended to triumph. As such it is possible that Nobusada knew techniques that possessed the same name but different content. It is also worth mentioning that every passage ends with the words “an oral transmission” (*kuden*), which is no surprise – we are still dealing with a *biden*, though by adding this Nobusada made the commentary superfluous, to some degree. Without the *kuden* the descendants would still not be able to learn or properly apply the techniques from the *mokuroku* alone. It is conceivable that Nobusada did this as he wanted to assure his employment as an instructor, as his help, or that of another initiate of the *shinkage-ryū*, would be needed to teach the techniques. The *kuden* functions as a failsafe device to transmit the techniques correctly. By simply alluding to them Nobusada could stay true to his oath of secrecy, while still fulfilling the request for the commentary.

II.3. The book

The *kadensho* is divided into three parts: the shoe-presenting bridge, which is an introduction into the *shinkage-ryū*; the death-dealing sword (殺人刀, *setsuminken*); and the life-giving sword (活人刀, *katsuminken*). Both of these latter elements are meant to help a student transition through their different phases of learning. The most interesting part, however, is the first one, as it is here Munenori that breaks down the style into four aspects. This includes the three learnings and five stances, the nine items, *Tengu's* selection, and the six techniques. The English translation by William Scott Wilson was used for this research.²² A Japanese version, which had a different ordering of the chapters than Wilson, was also consulted.²³

Both the scroll and the book follow a certain path in describing the techniques. As shown above they mostly structure their teachings in the same manner, but there are differences. In order to use the book to help us understand the scroll, we must account for the differences. The first of these is the historical narrative that is missing in the scroll, which is not repeated like this in the book. This is easily explained as Munenori often refers to history in his writing, so this is not needed to put the history at a certain point. Given the practical focus of the author's experiment the missing historical narrative did not merit

²⁰ Ibid., p. 152

²¹ Ibid., pp. 149, 152

²² Wilson, *The Life-Giving Sword*.

²³ Ōkuchi, *Gorin no sho. Heibō Kadensho*.

further questioning, but it is worth noting that its inclusion was most likely meant to legitimise the bearer of the scroll as an heir to a godly skill.

The most profound difference, however, is the addition of the five stances, even though this label is misleading. The *kadensho* starts with the three lessons relating to one's stance, their hands and feet, and finally the sword. It is explained that of these three considerations, one's stance is the one of highest priority. Five stances are named: "one cut, two halves"; "cutting through nails, slicing through steel"; "half-open, half-opposed"; "circling right, turning left"; and "long and short, one and the same". These are the same five names that are listed under the "three learnings" in the scroll. In the *kadensho*, the list of stances is followed by the comment that these have to be taught orally, as explaining them through writing is difficult. Here the author refers to an external source for the decoding, which is needed to understand the techniques, but which also keeps in line with the text being an *biden*, in which he naturally would not write down everything.

It would appear that in the scroll the five stances are listed under the title of the "three learnings", because they are, according to the book, part of the three basic learnings. The stance is the learning which needs the most explanation as there are several basic stances that must be internalised; in this regard it makes sense to illustrate them in the catalogue. Knowledge of the other two learnings, which deal with the fundamental ways of standing and holding the sword of the *ryū*, would have been expected to already be in the possession of a reader of such a catalogue. Someone without such knowledge would not have been initiated into the *ryū*. To someone uninitiated in the *ryū* this clarifies that one has to understand these facets of the system before one can start to learn the techniques in the scroll. This was particularly relevant to the author's experiment. The *kadensho* supplies the reader with some information about these fundamentals to begin with.

From this point on, the "nine items", the "*Tengu's* selection", and the "six techniques" follow the same order, but there are differences. Chapters about the *tengu*, for example, actually have three different names for the applied techniques. The original scroll names each technique after a *tengu*, but the names of the *tengu* do not match the traditional list of *tengu* who dwell in the mountains. Most likely these are names of local *tengu* and thus were not widely known. The commentary gives us another name for the technique, a subtitle so to speak, which is probably given in order to assist with comprehension. The *kadensho* confers yet another, less concealed name to them, although this bears no direct resemblance to the other two. For example the first technique, which is named "In ranko", or "rioting armour" in the commentary, is called "flower wheel" in the *kadensho*, at least hinting at a wheeling motion in the technique. From the description in the commentary there is a similar wheeling motion involved, but the language could easily describe a non-wheeling motion. The title from the *kadensho* is important to a modern understanding of this technique as it can help in trying to visualise the execution of the technique, although an incorrect visualisation could be misleading. The modern reader faces a dilemma in choosing between various potential meanings if they wish to attain the knowledge, although testing the potential variations seems feasible.

We encounter a similar situation when we come to the six techniques in the last chapter of the scroll. Just as the scroll, the *kadensho* lists six of them, but they do not quite match.

Scroll + commentary	Kadensho
Tengu's Selection	Tengu's Selection
Korinbo: Ranko	Flower Wheel
Fugenbo: Noritachi	Open Body
Taranbo: Komurakumo	Appropriate Waiting
Eiibo: Kiritsume	Leading
Chiraten: Kurandome	Riotous Sword
Karanbo: Subete Koran Uchimonodome	Preface
Shutokubo: Kissakizume	Breach
Kunbirabo: In no Kasumi	Dispatch
The 6 Techniques	The 6 Techniques
Concomitant Cutting, Riotous Cutting	Concomitant Cutting
The Matchless Sword	Riotous Cutting
The Life-Giving Sword	The Secret Principle
The Highest	The Matchless Sword
The Secret Principle	The Life-Giving Sword
The Mysterious Sword	The Mysterious Sword

Fig. 2 Kadensho – Differences in order and techniques

The book splits the first technique of the scroll into two different techniques and does not list the one named “the highest”. It also has to be pointed out that the last three techniques do not have images accompanying them in the scroll, and only their titles are listed. Judging from the handwriting the titles seem to be original; the description was added later. Within the text the impression is given that the “mysterious sword” is specifically designed to counter the “secret principle” technique, which is of note as this seems to be a fail-safe mechanism whereby someone initiated into the final techniques would be able to defeat someone less familiar with the more intimate secrets of the art. This would explain why the “mysterious sword” is the last technique in both cases: it acts as a final trick to defeat those who would turn against their teachers.

Unlike the stances, which get some coverage in the first chapter of the *kadensho*, the other techniques, although they are named in the book, are not covered in much detail. On every occasion they are relegated to oral transmission or learning through direct training. This complicates the process of accessing the scroll through the book, but at the same time solves a problem. The complication arises from the fact that one can only try to glean insights from the text by comparing it or adding to it the perceived meaning of the commentaries. Having concrete descriptions of the techniques would make the process of understanding much easier. On the other hand the discrepancies make it very clear that there are differences in the transmission between the two branches. As we only have the descriptions in the commentary, we cannot be misled by possibly contradicting statements concerning the same technique.

III. APPLICATION

After reading the complete *kadensho* and the scroll it was time to try to put their art into practice. The first stage of this process was studying the three learnings, which are, as explained by the *kadensho*, nothing different than the five stances of the school. As space is limited, only the first stance will be discussed in full. One example of the six techniques will also be used to illuminate the interactions between the commentary and the book.

This experimental process started with the first of the three learnings, which is titled by Wilson as “one cut, two halves” (一刀兩腹, one sword/blade both sides/hip). At first glance, it is irritating that Wilson would leave any mention of the sword out of his translation, but he conforms to the naming logic of the Yagyū, who name this technique after a Buddhist phrase that describes “instantaneously cutting through existence and non-existence”.²⁴ All five basic stances are actually named after Buddhist sayings. Here we have an example of the translator trying to ease the decoding for the reader by providing context. Wilson’s translations read as such:

When your opponent takes the *chudan* stance, aiming the tip of his sword at your eyes, drop your sword back to the right like a wheel, advance your left foot, and cock your left knee slightly.

Your body should be at an oblique angle to your opponent. Draw the sword slowly but surely to the front while fixing your eyes. When the hips seem set for an attack and your opponent strikes at your left shoulder, release the fixation of your eyes, drop your fist to your knee, and extend your left elbow with certainty and deflect his blow. As he raises his sword to strike, step forward with your right foot, open your stance to the rear and cut his left wrist. An oral transmission.²⁵

After reading it the author tried to extrapolate a movement from the description, first by directly consulting the *kadensho*. The first thing we noted is that the description starts with a premise, the opponent being in the *chudan* stance, which is a very common basic stance in many Japanese fighting styles. In *chudan* both feet are about the length of one’s shoulders apart and angled towards the opponent. The right foot is usually in front and the knees slightly bent. The sword is held with both hands, with the hilt placed at around the height of the navel and the blade pointing towards the opponent’s head. It is a centred stance with many options both for movement and attack, so encountering it in a real fight seems a reasonable assumption. When recreating this stance we imagine an opponent aiming their sword at our eyes. The first instruction is to then draw one’s sword back to

²⁴ This common phrase in Zen Buddhism is represented in the following *koan* from the Pi Yen Lu (The Blue Cliff Record) a Chinese compilation from the twelfth century: “Once the monks of the eastern and western Zen halls in Nansen’s temple were quarrelling about a cat. As he saw this, Nansen held up the cat and said, “You monks! If one of you can say a word, I will not slay the cat.” No one could answer. Nansen cut the cat in two”.

²⁵ Wilson, *The Life-Giving Sword*, p. 139.

the right, right obviously being the right side of the body. By doing this one automatically opens up their body to an attack, as such an action removes the protection offered by the blade. One should then advance the left foot and cock the knee. This way one closes in on the opponent, now with an exposed shoulder, basically daring them to strike. This movement also is to be done like a wheel. In the opening remarks of the *kadensho* it states that “the wheel” is a name for the basic stance in the Yagyū *ryū*, and that “it is so named because you move your weapon in a circular pattern”. As such, it becomes clear that the blade has to rotate in order to reach the intended position, having the effect of setting the sword in motion. This makes it easier to swing the sword back if needed, as the existing momentum could be used to do just that.

The next line instructs that the practitioner’s body should be at an oblique angle in order to present the smallest target possible to the opponent. This instruction is also mirrored exactly in the *kadensho*, where one is instructed to be on a plane with the opponent’s fists with their shoulders, which should also be facing the opponent. Then or rather, while doing this, the sword should be drawn slowly back to the front, while the combatant fixes their eyes on the target. Fixing the eyes is also to be found in the *kadensho*, where it is explained that there are several ways of fixing the eyes when the opponent attacks and when he does not. The different targets to fix one’s eyes on are not named directly and presumably need to be transmitted orally. Still it is said that one has to concentrate their mind below the waist in order to be attentive, which itself is an element of use in later passages. The next passage, for example, is a reminder of how important timing is in this *ryū*. When the hips seem set for an attack and the opponent strikes at one’s shoulder, one has achieved their goal of baiting the opponent to strike at an exposed part, thus falling for the feint. But what happens when the hip does not seem fit for an attack just yet? How would one cope with this? One interpretation would be that the swordsman should simply be prepared for this action from the opponent. Part of watching the enemy is thus to observe when their hips foretell their attacks, as stated in the *kadensho*’s explanation of how to fix the eyes to an opponent.

At this instant one has to stop looking at his hips, as it says to release the fixation of the eyes, drop the fist to the knee – so bringing the sword down – and deflect the blow by extending the left arm. My first instinct here was to go down with both the arms and torso to get my fist to knee-height. Yet the aforementioned knowledge of the wheeling motion, which I gained from the *kadensho* and which was mentioned in the commentary, tells me to turn my hands from left to right to effectuate a downwards swing with the blade. When I experimented with this, my hands dropped lower and I was also able to deflect an incoming sword with the back of my blade. This is a technique often employed in Japanese sword fighting as the softer back of the blade is less prone to break or chip, and thus is much more useful for parrying than the hardened edge.

After that the text instructs the reader to step forward with the right foot as the opponent raises his sword to strike, and at the same time the reader should open their stance to the rear. By following these instructions one should be able to deliver a strike to the opponent’s waist, Stepping forward seems easy enough to understand, but when it came

time to open up the stance to the rear, I experimented with moving forward with my right foot and wheeling out with my left in order to remove my body out of the way, aiming for a forty-five to ninety degree angle in respect to my opponent's body. This allows me to cut into my opponent's hands from below as he raises his blade again, and furthermore brings my body back into an oblique angle to his. If all of this works out as planned, I should be basically in the same position relative to my opponent, so even if he avoids my own attack, I would be ready for the next.

I reached the conclusion of these movements and how to execute them after several attempts. After two weeks I reached an acceptable level of skill in the execution of the technique and moved on to the next stance. The next two actually have a passage at the end which instructs you to cut the opponents wrists "as above", further accentuating the need to learn the stances one after another.

For the other example of the interaction between the commentary and the *kadensho*, we shift our attention to one of the later techniques: the life-giving sword (活人刀; *katsuninken*). Wilson's translation reads:

Your opponent extends his right foot and lowers his sword in front. You do the same, consider the Moon on water, and fix your eyes. When you set a contrary rhythm and cause him to strike, strike, and hold back. As above, advancing and retreating numerous times is important. An oral transmission.²⁶

In this example it is the phrase "consider the Moon on water", which is of interest. In a chapter about observation, the *kadensho* talks in length about the "moon on the water" (水月; *suigetsu*). Here we are told foremost that *suigetsu* is a technique about judging locations in a fight, so one should pay attention to their opponent's movement and distance. It then goes on to explain that one should be like the "moon on the water" in their own movements. Just as the moon appears on water without any loss of time, and the water mirrors the moon perfectly, so should the reader. It also alludes to it being effortless and without intent. It just happens, and so should one's adaption to an opponent's stance, without delay and without it being a conscious act. As such, in this example the *kadensho* enables the modern reader to understand an instruction in the commentaries, which tells us something about the execution of the technique in question. Without the knowledge about the meaning of the *suigetsu* this technique would be completely undecipherable. With the *kadensho*, however, one can attempt to do just that. In other words, in applying the *kadensho* as a tool of translation, several parts of the commentary do indeed become clearer and easier to access.

²⁶ Wilson, *The Life-Giving Sword*, p. 161.

IV. CONCLUSION

Different bodies are differently able to apply or sustain different techniques. As such, someone with different training will come to different conclusions concerning the techniques at hand. My previous training has led me to some conclusions which someone who has been trained differently would not have drawn. So, in light of this, what can be said about the experiment? What are the conclusions and what was achieved? What can be said about the success of the different levels of encoding and decoding?

First of all, as expected, a comprehensive understanding of the described techniques was not possible. Even with the help of two external sources for comparative analysis, it remains impossible to directly extract the knowledge contained within the manuscript. This reinforces the notion that embodied knowledge is not transferable through the medium of text, even with the use of several external sources to assist with the extraction. Concerning the direct transmission from author to reader, this has completely failed.

Secondly, however, with the help of the texts it was possible to visualise and construct techniques from the scroll to a certain extent. Some of these interpretations might even be close to the original movement, although this would need to be evaluated by measuring their effectiveness as techniques in, for example, sparring matches. In other words, the inherent knowledge in the text is not completely unintelligible. Parts of it are accessible, and it is possible to construct a new way of fighting from them. It can be said that with the additional information provided by the commentary and translation, the transmission was basically successful. Yet the knowledge was not transmitted as originally intended and only a warped version of it remains. As such it would violate the idea of proper transmission in a *hiden*. An argument can thus be made that the knowledge would be lost this way, yet another argument would be that the original knowledge would be used to create new knowledge. Reinvention, rather than recreation, is what is happening here. Judging by this criterion the transmission was achieved, as something applicable has been produced.

The question as to which knowledge is “better”, however, is another discussion. For anyone interested in the historical techniques, it is clearly the older knowledge. For someone who wants an applicable technique, however, the new will suffice. To quote the *kadensho* once more, “when these techniques are learned you should be able to invent myriad others”. It is a good thing that new techniques are created from old sources, not only because it is practically impossible to recreate what was lost – as we have seen – but for another, simpler reason; just as my previous knowledge and previous training has changed my perspective on the techniques I tried to learn, so too did two other important factors. The first one was my physical condition at the time of training. As the body is trained and gets older, the same techniques become simpler or more difficult to execute, or even become impossible. Most will also get easier with more conditioning. As any experienced martial artist can attest, one constantly has to re-adapt what has already been

learned.²⁷ The second factor is the environment. Most techniques of the *shinkage mokuroku*, for example, are designed with unarmoured opponents in mind, as the opponents fought by contemporary warriors would be without armour. When facing an armoured opponent, one would need to adapt the applied manoeuvres in order to achieve some measure of success. Such adaptations are an assumed skill for a master of any style, so new techniques or variations of existing ones would occur regularly.

Of course, one can criticise this argument by citing the few instances wherein families still depend on the secrecy of their knowledge to support their livelihood. Yet this can be countered by stating how, in these cases, the aforementioned adaptations will generally be made before transmitting them to the students. This is, basically speaking, the Japanese definition of mastery: only someone with a complete knowledge of a field can go ahead and reshape it. Someone with lesser skill is not only taught to not do that, but they are simply not able.

Where the old techniques are lost, however, it is not only reconstruction that should be attempted, but also adaption. Anything else would be to succumb to fixation and thus lead to the practitioner being unable to move freely, in both mind and body; an ability which the *kadensho* explicitly reminds us to retain. Losing this freedom was the last thing that Munenori wanted anyone learning the *shinkage-ryū* to do. It is probably advice worth following.

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²⁷ Link, *The Anatomy of Martial Arts*, p. 6

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