

# *The Iron Fan*

## *Classical Weapon for a Modern Martial Art*

*Hillary Kaplowitz*

The iron fan or tessen is one of many truncheon-like weapons used in classical Japanese martial arts (koryu bujutsu). The word tessen is a contraction of two kanji, testu (iron) and sen (fan). Tessenjutsu is most often taught as part of a larger comprehensive martial art (sogo bujutsu) rather than as its own style. In Danzan Ryu Jujitsu the tessen arts are taught as part of the Kiai No Maki course<sup>1</sup>.

Most of the techniques of Danzan Ryu Jujitsu are done without weapons. There are, however, a number of techniques in the Kiai No Maki course that are done empty-handed against an armed opponent. But our iron fan arts are one of the few instances where our opponent is empty handed while we hold a weapon<sup>2</sup>. Even though we have the weapon, we still use it defensively to break holds and defend against attacks – in other words, to do jujitsu. This training exposes us to the subtleties of wielding a weapon and how it can be used to enhance our jujitsu techniques.

Beyond recognizing that the tessen is used as a wielded weapon, we don't have much information about Prof Okazaki's rationale for the inclusion of the tessen arts in our Danzan Ryu curriculum. One thing we can certainly ascertain is that Prof Okazaki held the tessen in high regard since he is usually seen in

formal photographs with a tessen visibly displayed in his hand.

We also know that Prof Okazaki was interested in preserving tradition. We can see this evidenced in many aspects of our style. For example, he chose to use the older Japanese word yawara (written in hiragana in the moku roku to maintain the pronunciation), probably as a way to retain the connection to the older term.

The inclusion of tessen arts in Danzan Ryu might be another way Prof Okazaki chose to preserve tradition.

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It is interesting to consider that while the sword is a symbol of the samurai, the tessen does not represent a particular group or class per se. As we know, Prof Okazaki broke tradition to teach non-Asians and that he embraced gender equality. He may have chosen to emphasize the fan because it was an implement that was not restricted by barriers of culture, class or gender.

The simple folding fan was an everyday accoutrement for Japanese men and women of all classes. The weather was

often hot and humid and the fan was a simple way to cool oneself. Fans played a significant role in many facets of Japanese culture such as in the arts (theater and dance), social interactions (greeting and voting), and recreation (throwing games and refereeing sumo matches). The fan was also a status symbol and was regarded as symbol of authority and position in feudal court.

Military leaders carried a fixed open fan (gumbai or uchiwa) into battle to signal and command their troops. This fan was not only a symbol of their military rank and status but served useful for many functions including blocking sword attacks, shielding against arrows and providing shade on a hot day. Armored warriors (bushi) carried a metal folding fan (gunsen) in their arsenal that had a variety of uses beyond the primary purposes of cooling off in the heat. They could be used as a fencing implement, projectile weapon and even as a flipper for swimming.

The tessen was also a folding fan but usually lighter in weight and worn as part of the normal attire<sup>3</sup>. Most tessen are one shaku in length (about twelve inches) and are crafted in three basic shapes. Each type is modeled after a particular fan style and named accordingly. They are the sensu-gata (everyday fan style), the maiohgi-gata (theater/dance fan style) and the gunsen-gata (military fan style). The

<sup>3</sup> The tessen is usually worn tucked hilt side in on the front right side of the obi with the tip angled back. Different styles employ different drawing techniques. The most common is to insert the right thumb and grasp the shaft pulling it out of the obi. Some systems will draw the tessen by grasping the tip and either wield it in that manner or flip it over before using it. Many tessenjutsu techniques start with the tessen already in hand thereby avoiding these issues.

<sup>1</sup> It is important to note that in Danzan Ryu the list where the weapon arts are covered is called the scroll of kiai and not the scroll of buki (weapon). These arts are used to teach more than weapon arts, they are a vehicle to forge the spirit and intention. Having to use empty hand techniques to defend against a weapon is integral to that training.

<sup>2</sup> The exceptions are the techniques Hanbo Uchikomi Dori and Rokushaku Bo Furi, both from the Bo No Maki section of the Kiai No Maki.

*Continued on page 6*

*Continued from page 6*

outer ribs of the fan were made of iron while the inner were usually bamboo, though in some cases all the ribs were metal. The number of inner ribs usually varied from six to thirteen. The paper that made up the leaf was lacquered or painted to increase its durability. The leaf was sometimes decorated with an inspirational poem, family crest or representative image such as a sun and moon (signifying inyo). Very often there was a silk cord with a tassel attached to the rivet (kaname). The cord could be wrapped around the hand to aide in weapon retention.

Folding fans were most often used in the closed position for a variety of martial applications. The tessen is primarily used for striking, poking and blocking but can also be employed for joint-locking, choking and trapping. The fan was occasionally used in the open position to thrust toward the eyes or if the ribs were metal to puncture at the ribs. Also the open fan could be brandished as a way to distract the opponent and draw their attack, much like a matador with a bull. However, most traditional tessenjutsu techniques use the fan in the closed position, which also lends well to using a solid tessen.

The tenarashi<sup>4</sup> was a variety of tessen that was constructed of solid metal (tenarashi-gata tessen) or solid wood (tenarashi bokusen<sup>5</sup> or bokusen for short). These were made to look like a closed fan and were used in an almost identical manner. The tenarashi-gata tessen were much heavier and stronger than their folding counterparts. The solid metal was usually forged or cast and was often decorated with images of dragons and tigers. Blows from this heavy weapon could be devastating. It was also a particularly effective device for parrying sword attacks. The solid wood bokusen was often preferred over the heavier metal variety of tenarashi. Still an effective weapon, the bokusen was

<sup>4</sup> The tenarashi is also known as a valuable training tool to develop wrist and forearm strength because of its hefty weight.

<sup>5</sup> The tenarashi bokusen is sometimes called a motsu-shaku

more economical to construct and easier to carry. Bokusen are useful for training in the dojo not only for safety but also to match well against techniques utilizing the bokuto (wooden sword).

The tessen was favored among the samurai because it was a weapon they were able to carry with them at all times. When a samurai entered the house of a lord he was required to check his swords and other weapons at the door, but he could always keep his fan with him. There is a well-known tale where

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an assassination plot was defeated by the judicious use of a tessen. The plan was to close the sliding doors on the victim's neck as he performed the customary bow at the threshold. However, the would-be victim placed his tessen in the track preventing the doors from closing, thereby defeating the plan and shaming the conspirator.

The tessen was considered a sophisticated and practical defense weapon. There are many stories where a bushi successfully defended himself against a sword with his fan alone. In addition, a samurai could use his fan instead of his sword in cases where social status made

it undesirable to use his sword to settle a confrontation. Feudal police often carried a tessen as an adjunct to their jutte (truncheon). The two weapons could be used together to form a scissor to block and catch a sword attack. The tessen was an important part of the policeman's arsenal for a non-lethal response for arresting and restraining.

The use of the fan for martial applications has a long tradition in Japanese culture, but its usefulness in the modern world may seem obscure to some. On one level, we can appreciate the importance of working towards mastery in all aspects of our system and for that reason alone it is important to study and practice the Tessen No Maki techniques. On a strictly practical level we see how the tessen techniques can be adapted for use with many similar sized common objects that can be used as improvised weapons, such as a rolled up magazine, compact umbrella or flashlight.

But looking beyond the obvious practicality, there is a deeper goal to be achieved. In Aikido they use the term riai to convey the concept that one should develop consistent movement regardless of whether you are empty handed or using a weapon. The tessen arts in our system complement our empty hand techniques in that same way. The tessen makes sense as a jujitsu weapon because it utilizes many of the same applications of our primary principles of yielding, leverage, frame, distancing, and so forth. Edged weapons tend to have a different principle base and strategy so they might not have the same integration with the arts of a jujitsu system. Of course,



*Continued on page 8*

*Continued from page 7*

some martial systems encompass many different sets of techniques as a way to become a well-rounded martial artist or warrior. That is a laudable goal but yields a different result than training in something that reinforces and aligns with the fundamental principles that we as practitioners of Danzan Ryu Jujitsu are working to master.

Sometimes it takes looking at something from a different perspective to gain further insight. The tessen arts are just one way to accomplish this goal, but it is a way that is an inherent part of our Danzan Ryu system.

In addition to personal instruction from my sensei, Prof Robert Hudson, the following other materials were consulted:

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