Kenjutsu

Kenjutsu (剣術 kenjutsu) is a classical Japanese martial art, a koryu budo. There are many different schools, with the objective to teach the efficient use of the Japanese sword in combat.

The practice is largely done in the form of kata, and also by actual cutting and thrusting of the blade against water-soaked rolled mats and bamboo poles tameshigiri. The practice tool is either a bokken (wooden sword), iaito (unsharpened steel sword), or shinken (live blades such as katana, tachi, etc.). A common misconception of practitioners and observers alike is that the bokken is used for safety when performing two-man kata, when in fact it is used to minimize the chance of damaging the blade of either the shinken or iaito. Some schools of kenjutsu have adopted the shinai (bamboo sword) from kendo for safety reasons, and at least one family of schools (derivatives of Yagyu-Ryu) uses a modified leather-wrapped version of the shinai.

Origins of Kenjutsu

One of the oldest known forms of kenjutsu dates the Kofun Period (3rd and 4th centuries). The style, called Kashima no Tachi (鹿島の太刀), was created at the Kashima Shrine (in Ibaraki Prefecture). Thus Kashima shrine is also known to house the Kami (god) of Kenjutsu. It is believed that the swords of that age were double-bladed and better suited for stabbing than slashing.

In the Heian Period (8th to 11th centuries) we see the development of sword-making, through iron casting techniques brought from china through the korean peninsula. The first bronze and iron swords were of chinese design, but later local designs, like the Warabite-tou gained in popularity.

Among the main improvements, the japanese-styled sword (katana) becomes one-edged, and better suited for slashing. This is reflected in the styles created during this period. From the Kashima shrine's Kashima no Tachi sprang the Kantō-nanaryū (関東七流 - also known as the Kashima-nanaryū 鹿島七流). In the same period, the Kyō-hachiryū (京八流) was created in the Kurama mountain (in Kyoto). These two styles are considered the roots of Kenjutsu as we know it today.

Modern Kenjutsu

Some pre-19th century sword schools are continued today, such as Tenshin Shoden Katori Shinto-ryu, Kashima Shinto-ryu, Kashima Shin-ryu, Hyoho Niten Ichi-ryu. As in other koryu arts, belt colour is not used to show the practitioner's ability. Instead of grades, licences such as menkyo kaiden are given. Most of these schools trace their lineage to the early years of the Tokugawa shogunate, when large numbers of samurai had become "unemployed" ronin, and turned to sword instruction as a means of making a living (A similar phenomenon can be observed in the proliferation of tae kwon do schools in the United States run by Korean
emigrants). While several hundred schools of kenjutsu were founded during this era, the
majority of them died during the Meiji Restoration, when the wearing of swords was
outlawed.

Among the modern budo arts derived from traditional kenjutsu styles we find kendo and
iaido. Aikido incorporates the art of the sword into the core of its structure. Many techniques
and principles, although normally empty handed, are performed as though the outside edge of
the hand was the edge of a sword. Aikidoka are instructed to firmly 'cut' in many instances to
reinforce this similarity. Bokken are often used in training as well.

The major distinction between iaijutsu and kenjutsu was the condition of the sword at the start
of combat - in iaijutsu, the sword begins sheathed and the emphasis is on the initial strikes,
while in kenjutsu, the sword begins unsheathed, and the emphasis is on both attack and
defense. Kenjutsu also often includes consideration of combat against opponents wearing
armor while iaijutsu generally assumes that the opponent is unarmored. Some kenjutsu
schools also teach sword combat against other weapons such as naginata or yari.