

TANABE MATAEMON TALKS ABOUT HIS FUSEN-RYU JUJITSU

The Fusen-ryu school of jujitsu is a relatively young one but it became well known on account of one of its later teachers, Tanabe Mataemon, who it is said fought Kodokan men and beat them on the ground

The following brief account of the Fusen-ryu is translated from the 1170 page Dai-Nippon Judo-shi (Great Japan Judo History) printed in 1939. It is headed, Tanabe Mataemon Talks about his Fusenryu Jujitsu.

The founder of the Fusen ryu jujitsu was a Zen priest/abbot known as **Motsuge Zenji** otherwise known as **Genkotsu Osho** of the Saihoji temple of Onomichi. He was renowned for his great strength. Genkotsu means ‘hard fist or knuckles’ and there are a number of stories as to how he got that name. It is said that he was the 9th descendant of feudal lord Takeda Shingen (1521-73) who planned to unite Japan but who fell ill and died before achieving that. His son Takeda Katsuyori was unfortunately destroyed by the combined forces of Nobunaga and Ieyasu in 1582 which marked the end (?) of the Takeda clan according to my Japanese history books .

The next in line was **Takeda Sadaharu** followed by **Tanabe Torajiro** and then by **Tanabe Mataemon**.

Tanabe Mataemon was born in Okayama prefecture in 1869, shortly after the restoration of the Meiji emperor to the throne. At the age of 9 he began studying jujitsu under his grandfather Takeda Sadaharu and by the age of 17 he had received his full certification (*menkyo kaidan*). Then with his father – Tanabe Torajiro he taught jujitsu in various parts of the prefecture.

Gankotsu Osho (Motsuge Zenji) was a loyalist (to the emperor) with a great abundance of human qualities and learning. He was good at the eighteen martial arts not to mention Sado (tea ceremony), Haiku poetry, calligraphy and antiques appreciation. He was an extremely strong man about which there were many stories. He was also a Zen priest of the Soto Zen sect. His Zen mental strength combined with his physical strength and it was said that he never had to use his full strength on anyone. Perhaps the best known story concerned a *chikara kurabe* (test of strength) he had with a huge sumo-man around 1850 at his Saihoji temple in Onomichi. As a mark of his victory he left a knuckle print on a vertical wooden pillar of the temple. If you talk to locals nowadays they will confirm that the marks of the imprinted knuckles are still carefully preserved there.

One story I heard from my parents concerns Gankotsu’s visit to my grandfather (Sadaharu)’s house. As they were chatting and drinking tea he said, ‘Oh I have forgotten to bring you a small present’. Whereupon he picked up his tea bowl and pressed it against a wooden pillar. His other hand he used to press from the other side. Then with a shout he pressed hard and the house shook. This left the bowl with the imprint of his three knuckles in it. This bowl is still kept in the family warehouse.

Tanabe Mataemon died aged 73 in 1942 in Osaka. His jujitsu school was founded on his massive strength and the classical idea of Ju yoku go seisuru (the pliant can defeat the resistant) and as far as I recall he and his pupils mostly did *gyaku-waza* or joint-locking.

In later years my father Tanabe Torajiro served the Matsudaira clan and on the recommendation of Motsuge Zenji (the hard knuckled Zen priest) I taught in the Kyoto Shoren-in This was a famous calligraphy school in Kyoto.

The rough *Maitta Nashi* (no submission/surrender) training

I, (Tanabe Mataemon) first received instruction in jujitsu/judo from my father Tanabe Torajiro when I was nine years old in. The reason I adopted the name Mataemon which had an old fashioned feel to it was because I wanted to become the best jujitsu ka in Japan and because my father resembled the famous sword master Araki Mataemon. Although my father was keen on me becoming the best at jujitsu that did not mean that he took it easy on me. No matter who he trained with he was merciless. For me as a child this was cruel training and perhaps the reason that I did not grow very much in my earlier years. I did not like jujitsu very much to start with but once I had put my training gear on I did not like to lose either so I did my utmost and slowly and unawares I gradually improved.

After I turned 14 my father and I would take on large strong peasant farmers and go travelling round various dojos. Nearly all my opponents were bigger than me but I could not see the point of taking on weaker ones. Since I constantly trained with adults I had to put up with broken bones from time to time which I found very hard. Although my arm strength was not comparable with that of my opponents the fact that I had to train with such people proved to be very good training later on.

I experienced my first jujitsu competition when I was fourteen. This was in a small village in Okayama prefecture where I went with my father. The other adult competitors there were reluctant to fight somebody so light and small as myself but eventually they allowed me to compete. The first problem was that they were unable to match me up against anyone. So I singled out a strong looking one sitting opposite to me and volunteered to fight him. I thought that since I did not care if I lost I would take on the strongest there. He was a local sumo student of Nagayoshi and he knew some jujitsu as well. My father worried about this and said that there was too big a physical difference between the two and that it would be stupid to get injured. I should try somebody else he said. But I wouldn't agree and eventually they gave in and allowed me to fight.

We started the match with a (sumo?) *tachiai* start. I pulled him towards me but wouldn't let him get too close. Then I stooped low and managed to grab his two thighs and twirled him around several times still keeping him at a distance. This match ended in a draw. However he was a lot bigger and I was a lot younger. At the end of the match there was much applause and my father was delighted. His praise still remains in my memory.

When I trained with my father's other students I would never give in to a strangle or a lock. When I was fifteen I got caught in an arm-lock and my elbow was dislocated

with a loud crack. My tactic was to wait till my opponent got tired and then make a move to free myself. It was the same with strangles. This ability to endure locks and strangles created various strategies for me. I soon came to be called Newaza-Tanabe.

When I was seventeen I participated in a mixed sumo and jujitsu competition which consisted of ten bouts spread over a week. My sumo opponents all weighed about 30kan (248lbs) and I beat them all except for one man called Kandagawa who was so fat I could not get hold him anywhere

My jujitsu was not so much the result of my fine teachers (I did learn a lot of wrist releases from my father) but because I always chose to fight strong ones and never give in regardless of injuries or unconsciousness. In this way my jujitsu became polished and this made me work out various ways to capitalize on my strengths. For example I came up with what I called the Unagi no Osaekata (the eel restraint). As is well known if you press an eel with your hand it will slide away and escape but if you put your hand on it gently it can be trapped. Later I came up with the snake and frog technique. Like the snake that slowly swallows a frog one bit at a time my groundwork overwhelmed my opponents in much the same manner.

When I was 22 I went up to Tokyo in Meiji 23 (1890). In the same year I was appointed martial arts master (*shihan*) by the Tokyo Metropolitan Police (*Keishicho*) and spent a number of years teaching judo/ujitsu in various schools. In Meiji 39 (1906) I was made judo Kyoshi (teacher). I quit working as a jujitsu/judo master in Taisho 11 (1922) aged 53. In 1927 I was made Judo Hanshi (master) by the Butokukai aged 58.

There is a little bit more information on Tanabe Mataemon and Fusen-ryu in Oimatsu's book Fifty Years of Judo. Oimatsu was not only General Manager of the Kodokan for a number of years but was also Professor of the Tokyo Education University. In his book he says, "Yukio Tani and Gunji Koizumi both set up the London Budokwai in 1920. Tani was a student of Tanabe Mataemon in Kobe under whose hammer he learned Fusen-ryu jujitsu. Just before the Japanese-Russian war of 1904-5 he travelled to America and then to Europe where in the company of Mitsuyo Maeda, Shinshiro Satake, Akitaro Ono and Taro Miyake he toured Europe taking on boxers and wrestlers for money where they were mostly successful". Apart from Yukio Tani it is not known if others in the group were also of the Fusen-ryu. Maeda and Satake are known to have travelled to South America where they perhaps taught the founders of Brazilian jujitsu. As can be seen above Tanabe Mataemon seems to have been ranked and employed both by the Butokukai and the Keishicho till quite late in life. It is not known whether he ran a dojo or not or who his students might be (apart from Yukio Tani).

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Some years ago I came across an account of a match held in 1899/1900 which was attended by the Emperor. This account was either in the Kodokan's monthly Judo magazine or it was in the Judo International which was a joint French-Japanese project. The match took the best part of thirty minutes and eventually the Kodokan man succumbed to an *ashigarami* leg lock. As I recall one of the competitors was Tanabe Mataemon. It was felt at the time that this was a messy match and should not

have been held before the Emperor. Rule changes were mooted. I am still looking for that account.

My interest in the Fusen-ryu is because my principle teacher was Trevor Leggett who was taught by Yukio Tani which puts me in the Fusen line perhaps. Leggett was far and away the best teacher I ever came across either in Europe or in Japan. One feature of his instruction was his very broad knowledge of dirty tricks and fouls. He would start by saying what I am now about to show you is illegal but you need to know it. That invariably sharpened our interest in what he had to show. Much of this must have come from Yukio Tani and his Fusen-ryu jujitsu.

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