

abstract

The practice of kata, or pre-arranged, patterned movements in the martial arts allows a student to learn specific basic movements, and to understand the meaning behind them. Many kata-based martial arts organize their curriculum into sets of practice. This paper demonstrates how a set of practice can build, one kata after the other, from simple to more complex ideas and provide a deeper understanding of the entire set.

Introduction

Kaho—instruction through pre-arranged patterned movement training (kata)—has formed an important part of training in many classical and modern Japanese martial systems. Kata training has sometimes been criticized, especially by contemporary Western martial artists as overly formal, rigid, and lacking in realism. But its use over the centuries suggests that, while by no means the only form of training, kata practice has important things to impart.

This article explores the ways in which the practice of a specific kata set, the Omori-ryu of the Muso Jikiden Eishin-ryu, can assist in the development of significant basic skills. It maintains that this training regimen can significantly help martial artists develop a solid foundation in terms of correct stance and the generation of power through the hips. The author notes that he believes that the art of drawing and cutting with the sword (iaido) is one of the best places for a student of the martial arts to concentrate on such things as posture, hip control and the transfer of power. This is because iaido can be considered a “closed” art, one that is done by practice designed to lead the trainee to the replication of an ideal form. This is in contrast to an “open” art which involves much more variation in performance due to the presence of another person. Good examples of closed and open Western sports would be gymnastics as compared to tennis. Certainly the modern contest forms of budo exhibit heavily “open” characteristics as well. In Japanese swordsmanship, iaido has maintained a “closed” structure, while kendo is an example of an “open” form due to its emphasis on shiai.

A secondary purpose for this article is to make explicit what is often implicit in kata training. In traditional systems, students are not usually told what they are learning in each kata. There is an assumption that skill will develop naturally with practice and that this developing insight will infuse all elements of training over time. This is a function of cultural patterns that emphasize hierarchy and rote learning, with little discussion of method and purpose. While traditional training has much to recommend it, more focused examination of effective elements in martial arts instruction can help improve that instruction.

Lessons from the Omori-ryu of the Muso Jikiden Eishin-ryu

The purpose of this article is to provide an idea of the sort of cascading instruction that one can get through practice of a set of kata. These lessons are often deeply embedded in the process of practice and are sometimes hard to acknowledge. In addition, the traditional approach to learning kata—emulation rather than discussion—can serve to sometimes hinder realization as well. Kata training in many martial arts forms involves similar features—standardization of technique, emphasis on proper form, sequence, timing, and an emphasis on experiential versus theoretical learning.

In this case we will be using iaido kata as a specific example. We will discuss the Omori-ryu set of the Muso Jikiden Eishin-ryu, a fairly well-known iai school which was founded several hundred years ago and organized into its current form by Oe Masamichi in the early 20th century. The Omori-ryu is the first set of kata taught in the Muso Jikiden Eishin-ryu and is thus intended to demonstrate the fundamentals of practice.

The very first kata that a student will learn in Omori-ryu is Mae which is quite simple, consisting of a horizontal and then a vertical cut. Mae is the base, the root, the original kata for this set and to the educated eye its performance will reveal the depth of knowledge of the performer.

Ten more kata follow, many of which are structured more or less on the same pattern of a horizontal and then vertical cut. There is, however, a developmental sequence to the series: in each, some basic principles of movement are repeated while something new is added as well. The student is expected to learn the new information and then to apply it back to Mae the next time he performs the kata.

Like many highly complex physical skills involving mental and physical integration, there are many things being taught and being learned in kata. For now we can concentrate on a few points for illustration. The main focus in this discussion will be on the use of the hips to provide power from the ground through to the attacking part of the sword. We will doubtless touch on other, more specific aspects of iaido, but posture and the use of the hips is key to all Japanese martial arts so this will provide an insight into the process of learning kata that will be understood by a wide audience.

As should be blindingly obvious, what follows is my particular understanding of iai, and my particular understanding of the underlying principles. It is not intended to be definitive, since varying instructors and practitioners can have differing insights.

INSIGHT: With the first four kata described below, we have established a good posture and great stability in the hips, while also learning how to project directly to the target from any starting angle.

1. Mae (front)

First a quick description of the kata. (much more detailed descriptions of these kata can be found in *BBI-3 Kim's Big Book of Iaido (III): Omori Ryu* by Kim Taylor, 1992 SDKsupplies.)

This is a horizontal cut to the front, followed by a vertical finishing cut, shaking the blood off (chiburi) and putting the blade in the scabbard (noto). The photos should provide a good idea of the movements.

This first kata moves straight forward, we must work out how to drive power from the hips directly forward into the opponent as a first principle. To do that we emphasize moving from the centre of the body, the centre of balance at the tanden, which is a point about two fingers below the navel, and midway through the body. You can find the spot by throwing yourself over a railing, where you balance in any direction (arms and legs on opposite sides, arm and leg on one side or the other, and sitting upright with your legs on either side will likely give you a pretty good idea.)

A good exercise to find out how to move from the tanden, and which muscles are involved, is to use a stick or wooden sword with a partner. The partner stands in front and provides resistance to your tanden through the jo while you rise and step forward.

Nuki Tsuke (the draw and cut)

Mae
Nuki Tsuke
front



Side



This movement must come from the centre, so the hands are positioned in such a way that they move from the centre in and forward with the draw. When grasping the tsuka, the hands both travel upward together, the left hand reaches the hilt first, then the right. Grasp the hilt from below, not on top which keeps the elbows down, closer to the tanden.

The cut must have power from the hips. The hips do not move up then down during the move, they rise to the proper height and are driven forward during the cut. The cut and the foot stamp are timed together and the level motion of the hips prevents a wavy motion of the tip on the cut.

At the finish of the cut the knuckles should be just below the level of the right shoulder. The tip should be just below parallel with the floor. The horizontal cut is given power by uniting the tip with the hips through the shoulders and torso, this is done by keeping the shoulders down, armpits tight, and closing the scapula at the bottom, while opening the chest.

Kiri Tsuke (vertical strike)

Mae
Kiri Tsuke
front



Side



On the next move, the shoulders and arms must be relaxed, while the hips retain their power. The blade moves around and up while the left hand moves from the centre of the body directly upward to grasp the hilt. The tip is brought up and over at the same time as the hips are driven forward and the cut is stabilized with the little fingers, armpits, and stomach through the part of the arc where it would be cutting.

Keeping the hips under the shoulders and maintaining an upright posture is very important to the ability to drop your weight into the cutting edge of the sword, the closer your tanden is to being under the cut, the more weight you can drop into it. Think about a ladder with hooks on the top, if you lean it up against a wall you aren't putting much pressure downward on the wall at all, but if you hook it over the top of the wall so that the ladder is vertical, you get maximum pressure. The sword is the hook, and your body is the ladder. The cut is the wall.

Chiburi (shaking off the blood)

Mae
Chiburi
front



Side



Noto

MaeNoto
front



Side



Lessons Learned

In this kata we have found our tanden, learned how to move from there, and how to unite the trio of sword tip, hips and floor.
On the theory that we can't learn everything all at once, we will leave Mae now and move on to the next kata so that we can learn something new.

2. Migi (right)

The opponent is seated to your left. He begins to rise up and draw. You turn 90 degrees to the left and cut horizontally across his chest, raise the blade as in Mae, and cut down from his head to his groin. The chiburi, foot change and noto are as for Mae but the opposite foot is forward throughout the movement.

Migi
NukiTsuke
front



Side



This technique “is” Mae, it's just performed toward an opponent to the left. We must get the same direct movement toward the opponent as we do in Mae, but while turning. To do this we have to envision a straight line from our right hand, through the hilt, to the centre of the opponent. Our right hand moves along this line as we attack. To rise and turn at the same time, we need to do some fairly complex hip movements and weight shifting.

First, move the right knee toward the opponent, to touch the left knee. This makes sure we don't actually move backward as we turn, but it also puts our right knee in the centre of our body as we're sitting. Now as soon as we start to lift the hips, straight forward from our original position, our weight shifts onto the right knee. By pulling back on the left hip, and driving into the right hip, our body spins naturally to the left. At the same time we start to feel the power move from the tanden toward the opponent as we draw the blade along that straight line.

The back foot plants to stop the turn as we cut horizontally.

None of this works if we throw our heads forward to turn, if that happens we will spin outward and off balance as our heads act like eccentric weights on the side of a spinning axle. Just as we don't turn right or left as we walk or stand by throwing our heads and chests around first, we don't lean forward to do Migi.

Lessons Learned

With the second kata we have learned more hip and weight shifting, reinforced the feeling of attacking directly into the centre of the opponent, and become much more aware of our right hip as we drive it around and forward.

We have also learned how to cut with the legs changed, which means we are rooted into the ground differently, which helps us to further understand what's happening in the hips.

Reflection

What we take back into Mae: We now have a better awareness of our right hip (as the right hand brushes by it and we imagine it driving toward the opponent), we know not to throw our heads forward as we rise to do Mae, (just as we can't do it for Migi) and we likely have a stronger movement of the scabbard (saya biki) as we must use our left hand more to clear the tip of the blade out of the scabbard.

3. Hidari (left)

This kata is Mae for an opponent to the right side.

Hidari
Nuki
Tsuke
front



Side



Here we have a slightly different way to visualize our turn, since a straight line from the right hand to the opponent will leave the sword behind. We need to move the left knee to the right, rise and turn much like we did for Migi, shifting the weight onto the left knee and pulling back the right hip. In this case though, the left hand moves past our centreline and picks up the hilt, moving it into the right hand on its way directly toward the target.

As we reach the position where we hit the target, the hips are rotating past that target, or are not doing anything at all. Here we need to rotate the hips to square, and then drive the left hip back into the left foot to root it as we cut horizontally. This is the first time that we've had to change the rotation of the hips in order to stabilize them before we cut. It's also the first time that we've changed the movement of the sword from left hand to right to left again on the vertical cut.

Lessons Learned

With Migi and Hidari we are starting to get a much better feeling of driving the hilt toward the opponent, while keeping the hip strong and the posture erect. We have also developed a feel for both sides of the hip, and how they can be used in combination with the tanden to create a strong base for the cuts.

The importance of the rear foot to the cut, and a more efficient, smooth transfer of power from hand to hand has been demonstrated.

Reflection

The foot position and the stability of the hips should be much better now when doing Mae.

4. Ushiro (behind)

The opponent is seated to your rear. He begins to rise up and draw. In one smooth movement you turn 180 degrees to the left and cut horizontally across his chest, raise the blade as in Mae, and cut down from his head to his groin. The chiburi, foot change and noto are as for Mae but the opposite foot is forward throughout the movement.





This kata, Mae to the rear, is an excellent reinforcement of the skills we've learned so far in turning, since you turn 180 degrees, any lean of the head or the torso will throw you off balance. The right knee shifting to the left and in front of the left knee will allow you to shift your weight as you did in Migi and Hidari, so that you can turn.

The new problem here is that your hands cannot "see" the opponent, so it's hard to draw straight toward him. You would have to draw through your own body, so we must deal with the turn. In order to draw straight toward the target, we must know our hand has cleared the left hip. Here is where the eyes become important, without straining the neck, if we turn our eyes, then our head as we rise, until we can see the target, we are in position to cut directly. The right hand is actually moving slightly away from the opponent, so as we line up to draw at him we must switch from a right hand movement to a very strong left hand movement to clear the scabbard from the blade as we turn. Dealing with this turn means a great deal of attention to our posture and to keeping the hips working without putting tension in the upper body and especially not in the shoulders.

Lessons Learned

We have now learned how to deal with our non-seeing right hand, and with an opponent we can't see, we've learned the importance of catching the opponent with our eyes and using that motion to begin our turn and cut.

Reflection

We can now do Mae with good posture, great stability in the hips, to an opponent at any position around us.

Insight: The next kata requires the swordsman to learn to take the principles in the first four kata and become more mobile, with a second series of attack and defense.

5. Yae Gaki (defence in depth)

The opponent is seated as per Mae, as he starts to rise you draw and cut as in Mae but he shuffles backward. You step forward with the left foot as you cut down from his head to his groin. Perform a horizontal chiburi (yoko chiburi) and noto drawing the left foot back to the right knee. At this point the opponent (teki) swings his sword at your right knee so you draw and block this attack while stepping back with the left foot. Take the left knee to the right foot, bring the blade around and over your head, and cut down almost to the floor as you shift the right foot forward to the square positions again. Raise the tip out of teki and then perform a large or circular chiburi (o-chiburi) and noto the same way as for Mae.

This is Mae with a second engagement. The main feature of this kata is the second attack and defence, demonstrating the importance of a lingering awareness (zanshin), and that the kata is never really “over” until you are back home. There are several new lessons here about posture as well.

Nuki and Kiri Tsuke 1

Yae Gaki
Nuki Tsuke 1
front



Side



On the first horizontal cut, the opponent has squirmed backward to avoid being cut, so you must chase him down, you do this by stepping forward with the left foot and cutting as you sink back down on your knee.

The key bit of instruction for this kata is here, as you plant the left foot on the first cut. To move forward smoothly you will take the weight off of the left knee, now the movement is smooth and with a natural arc of the hips.

Yae Gaki
Kiri Tsuke 1
front



Side



Don't slam the left knee into the ground as you perform the vertical cut downward, stop half an inch above the ground and then lower it the rest of the way. At this point your position is the same as when you finish Migi.

Yoko Chiburi

Yae Gaki
Yoko chiburi
Front



This is the first time we encounter yoko chiburi, which is the most common chiburi in the school. Release the hilt (tsuka) with the left hand as you move the sword very slightly forward with the right. The left hand moves to the mouth of the scabbard (koiguchi), pulling the scabbard (saya) into the belt at the left side. Moving the blade as a whole, not leaving the tip behind, snap the sword directly out

to the right side so that it stops about 20 cm to the right of the right knee. The tip points directly forward and is just slightly below the level of the blade at the tsuba. The blade is flat with the edge pointing out from your body.

Usually, when we do chiburi we forget to keep the hips alive, and by now all our weight is on our downed knee. This sets us up for some lurches and grunts as we rise. What happens next in this kata teaches us not to be so careless.

Noto 1

Yae Gaki
Noto 1
front



Side



From this position move the koiguchi to the centre and bring the back of the blade (mune) directly over to perform noto. Draw the sword out and place it into the saya as per Mae. As you slide the sword into the saya maintain zanshin and pull the left foot back and in toward the right ankle so that the left heel is near the anklebone.

Again, we must use the hip to do this movement, we can't rock our body back until there is no weight on the foot and then pull the foot back. If we are attacked while doing that we are helpless. At any point along this foot pulling movement we must be able to rise into a standing position. To do this we must move the foot back with some weight on it, and use the hip to shift the foot. Now we can respond if necessary, and it turns out to be necessary.

Nuki Tsuke 2 (sune gakoi)

Yae Gaki
Nuki Tsuke 2
front



Side



Just before you seat the wedged fitting on the blade (habaki) in the koiguchi the opponent manages to cut with his sword toward the outside of your right knee. Draw the sword out until 1 inch is left in the saya as you rise straight up. With a strong saya biki clear the tip and swing it down in front of your right foot to stop about eight inches in front and four to the right of your toes. Turn the back of the sword toward your leg as you block the opponent's blade thus saving your leg from damage if the blade is knocked back again into your shin.

As you swing the blade down the left foot is thrust straight back so that a right stance is taken. Make sure that it is a strong stance and that the hips are stable so that the block will be solid. The hips are usually turned to a half forward (hanmi) position at this block and if they are loose, your block will not hold. The best way to get to this position is to think of thrusting the left heel outward from your centre, and turn the toes as close as possible toward the opponent without losing the power in the right arm.

Kiri Tsuke 2

Yae Gaki
Kiri Tsuke 2
front



Move the left knee down to the right ankle as you bring the sword around the left side of your body and raise it above your head. Shift the right foot forward to the proper position as you do a dropping cut into the opponent's body as he lies on the ground. It's important to move under the sword with your hips rather than pulling the sword back and releasing the pressure on the opponent. At the finish of the cut the legs must be square at the knees and the back straight. All this is best done by working from the hips, driving them down under the sword and toward the opponent.

To avoid dropping the hips and raising them again, you must also stretch the hips upward (keep the left leg extended downward) when setting the left knee on the ground. The importance of an upward posture is reinforced here.

Chiburi 2

Yae Gaki
Chiburi 2
front



At this point finish the kata as per Mae.

Noto 2

Yae Gaki
Noto 2
front



Lessons Learned

First, as the initial horizontal cut is made, the rear foot is usually mentioned. Here is where the concept of lifting the rear knee just clear of the ground on the initial cut is introduced. This is to enable the drive forward into the full step before the vertical cut to be made smoothly and without hesitation. It also provides a much stronger and more stable hip for the horizontal cut and so should be tried in the first four kata. Of course once it is, the problem of how to slide forward for the vertical cut is met. It is in working out how to drive the rear foot into the ground while still being able to slide forward on the cut that the student learns even more about the hip girdle and how it works. Being able to do all that smoothly, without bouncing up and down or rocking back and forth is a complex skill that must be approached systematically, as we have done here.

The block after the second attack is the introduction of a standing posture where we need to be as precise with the hip position as we do on our knees. The left foot is driven back and the heel turned outward in order to make a strong posture, if the foot is moved carelessly the hip is likely to be loose and the block will fail. The drive back downward with the left knee for the final cut is also done from the hips.

All this movement gives ample opportunity to practice control of the hips so that the body is smooth, and the cuts and blocks accurate.

The final downward cut is a great check on the torso, with any sort of lean forward, the student will drive his blade into the floor. A straight posture means that the blade stops an inch from disaster.

A balance of power between the feet at all times is key to this kata. We must not rock the body from foot to foot if we are to be prepared to move quickly in any direction. With two knees, a knee and a foot or two feet on the floor, we must be ready to move without hesitation and preparation.

Reflection

At this point, if you are working through this article, try to take the first nuki tsuke back to Mae, do the horizontal cut with the left knee unweighted, now without dropping your weight back onto the knee to lurch forward, do the vertical cut with a surge forward of the hips. It will seem impossible to do, but can be done if you maintain pressure on the hips forward and simply pop the right foot off the floor. Remember to move from the hips, not the left foot or all sorts of unwanted things might happen.

Insight: In the next three kata we learn how to drop our weight into the cut and to deal with our knees and ankles being free to move. Up to now the body has been stable through the hips because we've been kneeling on the floor, now we must stand up.

6. Uke Nagashi (receive and deflect)

In this kata, teki moves to us from the left side and cuts down once on our head. As he begins to cut we draw the blade horizontally forward while stepping forward with the left foot. Teki now lifts the blade and cuts again toward our head. Raise the blade and twist to the left to block the strike. To do this, move the right foot over so that you are now facing teki.

Now turn the left foot on the spot and step up to it with the right foot as you do furi kaburi and cut down on the opponent with a strong hip drop. Move the left foot back along teki's original attack line as you move the tsuka over to the left front and place the tip over the right knee. Change the right hand grip and then let the tip swing down and up again as you move the mune to the left hand. Draw the mune out and put the kissaki into the koiguchi then replace the blade dropping down onto the left knee while twisting to shomen. The right hand is reversed to its usual position at this time so when you finish noto you can change to the usual right hand grip and then stand up and move back as per Mae.

Nuki Tsuke

Uke Nagashi
Nuki Tsuke
front



Side



As you catch teki attacking, surge forward to avoid his cut by rising onto your right knee and stepping forward with your left foot. At the same time draw the blade horizontally forward. The lesson here should be obvious, you must move your hips out of the way of a cut, rather than just ducking. If you simply rock forward the opponent will still cut into your lower back. Move forward from the hips and take the left foot out of the way and he can slam his sword into the floor without hitting you.

In a fast move, teki now raises the sword quickly and cuts down once more. To block this cut, step forward with the right foot to a position where your body is lined up facing teki, and raise the blade to take the cut on the tsuba moto (the area near your tsuba) of your blade, held horizontally above and in front of your head.

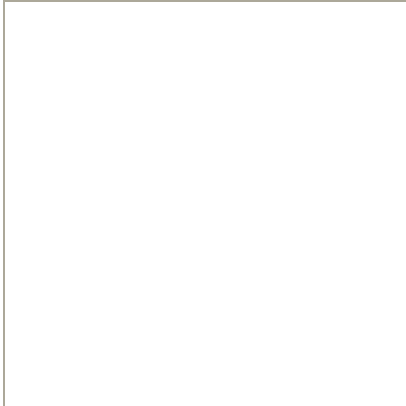
The left foot is still twisted so you had better have a solid right foot position to receive the cut or your left knee will suffer. The body position has to take a full force blow and transfer the power through your centre and down into your right foot. The arm position, hip position, and leg positions are examined carefully here. Lines of force moving from sword to ground are clearly seen now, and when one moves back to Mae, the lines from the kissaki to the left foot are also a bit more clear.

Kiri Tsuke

Uke Nagashi
Kiri Tsuke
front



Side



After a definite brief stop at the block position (kime) the sword is turned through the overhead position (furi kaburi) and brought down in a one handed vertical cut (kiri otoshi) on the opponent's exposed neck as he leans forward to make his second cut. This cut is made as the left foot is raised, turned to face the opponent, and brought down again. As the cut is made and the left hand is brought to the tsuka the right foot is brought up beside the left. The cut finishes with the blade in a horizontal position, the feet together, the knees bent and the hips lowered.

This is the first cut we've performed that relies almost entirely on dropping the hips rather than on a braced rear leg. Instead of being weak as it might at first seem, the cut is surprisingly strong if we can connect the sword through our armpits to the hips. While we have little push from the leg muscles, we have the greatest amount of weight under the sword that we will ever have. This gives us a real feel for dropping our weight into a cut rather than muscling it over.

Chi Nagui (wiping off the blood)

Uke Nagashi
Chinagui
front



Side



The next movement represents wiping the blood off the blade. Maintaining zanshin the left foot is pulled back to your left rear from where you are currently facing to establish a position called karuma. The hips are turned off of square and the left heel is placed

down onto the floor. The weight is evenly distributed on both feet. At the same time as the left foot is moved, the hands are moved to the left so that the tip of the blade is drawn straight back to finish 1 to 2 inches above the right knee. The blade is flat and the edge points away from the body. At this point we would take a cloth and wipe the blade.

This hip position is similar in feel to the blocking position of the kata Yae Gaki, reinforcing that lesson. As the blade is placed into the scabbard the hips are rotated to the original front (shomen) position, which will be very painful or upsetting if we haven't placed our feet in the right position to begin with.

Noto

Uke Nagashi
Noto
front



Side



Lessons Learned

We have mentioned the lessons above, the hip surge to avoid a strike, the lines of force from rear foot to tsuba moto on the block and the very powerful dropping of the weight into the cut. We have learned to cut powerfully while standing without dropping back onto our knee. The hips are key, the joints above and below them must be controlled, tightened and loosened as needed in order to make the sword cut as we want it to.

Reflection

We are now expanding our feeling for our hips throughout our body and even into the sword and the ground. We are now prepared to go back to Mae with a new appreciation of how to “cut from the hips” and how to get some real power into the sword. Speed and muscle are hopefully being replaced with power and weight.

7. Kaeshaku (assistant)

This waza is different than those described previously. It is not a response to an attack by an enemy but is the method of assisting someone to commit ritual suicide (seppuku). The kaeshaku is the person designated to cut through the neck of the person who has just disemboweled himself. This is necessary since a person with this type of stomach wound can survive for a long time in a great deal of pain.

Nuki Tsuke

Kaeshak
u
Nuki
Tsuke
front



Side



Draw the blade out horizontally behind the back of the person doing seppuku as you move the right foot forward slightly. Lift the sword tip (kissaki) over your head as you pull the right foot back into a left hanmi position with the right elbow bent to 90 degrees, the forearm held vertically and the blade at the same angle as the saya. At the appropriate moment cut down one handed to the neck, the left hand joining in time to prevent the tip from cutting through the skin at the throat. The position is a right hanmi or karuma posture. Move the blade to the blood wiping (chinagui) position as in the kata Uke Nagashi, reverse the right hand grip and then perform noto quietly.

Chinagui and Noto



Lessons Learned

The physical lessons in this kata are not as important as the psychological lessons but I won't go into that here other than to ask a simple question. Why is it that this kata is placed here in the school? This is the seventh (yes the "shichi" or "death" position) kata in the very first set of things you learn. In fact, if you consider the first 4 kata to be the same one (Mae from 4 different directions) than this is the fourth ("shi" or, again, "death") kata. Why so soon? What do we need to learn from so cold-bloodedly taking a life, what is so important to know, this early in our education?

Physically of course, we continue to learn. The movements in this kata are without a feeling of pressure toward an opponent (seme) there is no enemy here, so we must move smoothly, quietly, and without distracting the other person present. This means that we need great control of our hips and tremendous leg strength as well as a very delicate touch on the blade. We are learning to separate the strong actions of the cut from the softer actions of moving the blade between the cuts.

The cut is also unusual, starting much lower than we are used to, and stopping so abruptly, all the power being focused between the back and front of the spine in the neck. In fact the only place in the entire kata where there is any power shown is in those few inches of cut. There has to be a very strong connection between hips and feet, and no tension in the shoulders at all, for this to be done.

Reflection

Psychologically, our Mae should now be much more solemn and weighty, physically we should be moving the sword and ourselves with grace and control in the times between the cuts, while instantly applying tremendous power from the floor to the tip when needed.

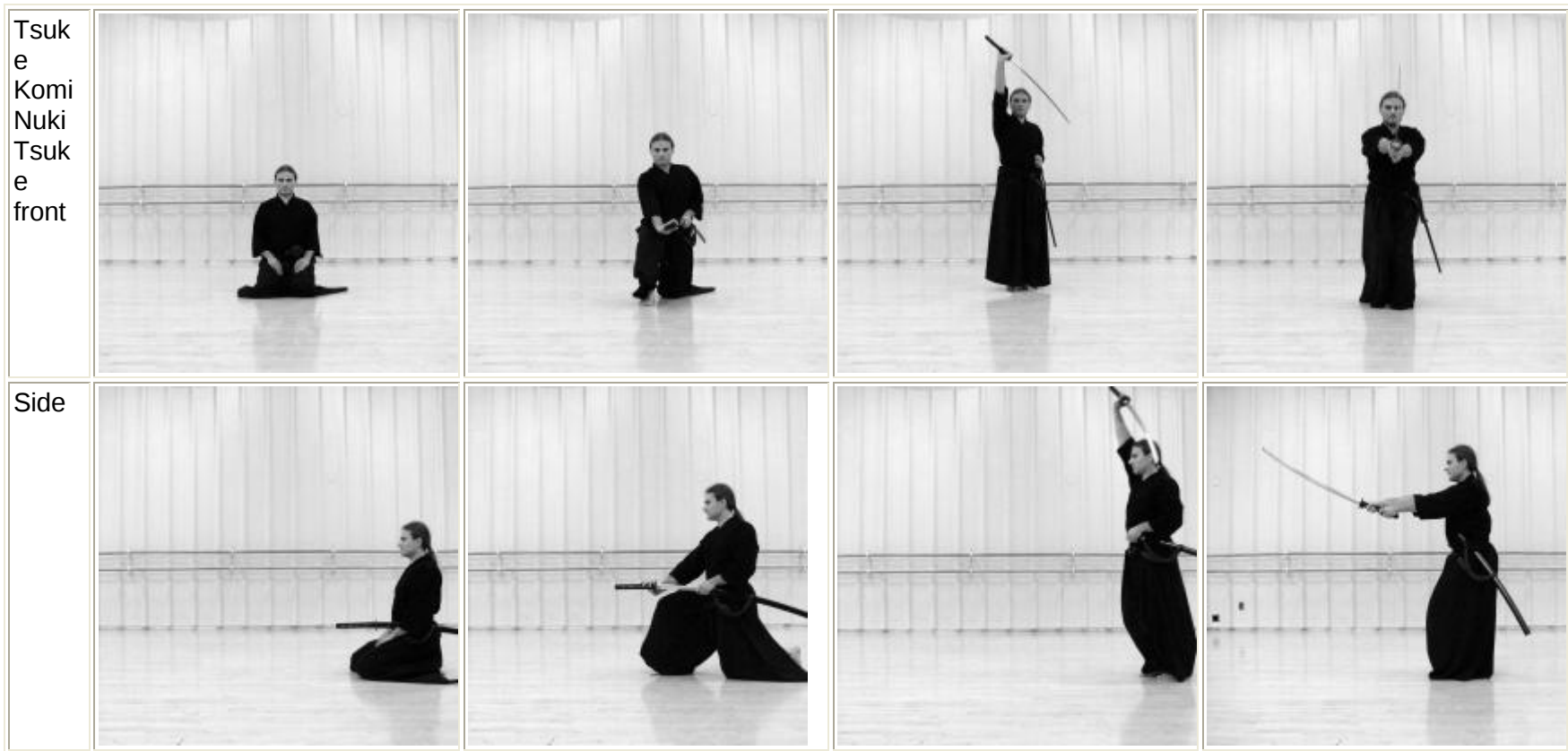
8. Tsuke Komi (an opening at close range)

The opponent walks toward you, intending to cut you down. Move forward and draw as if pulling a radish from the ground (go ho nuki) toward him, the right knee up as in the nuki tsuke of Mae. As he cuts down on your head stand up, move the blade up in a block that will receive and deflect (uke nagashi) and pull the right foot back. Immediately after his tip swings down past your nose, step forward and cut down from his forehead to his neck. The left foot moves up beside the right as you cut. Move forward once more with the right foot and the left following to cut from forehead to groin. Step back with the right foot and raise the blade to the upper stance (jodan gamae) position to check the opponent. Move the blade over in a cutting motion as you sink down onto the right knee.

Grip the tsuka with a reverse

grip of the right hand, turn the blade over and wipe it using the left hand, pulling the mune along the left palm. Perform noto, stand up, then move back to the original position.

Nuki Tsuke

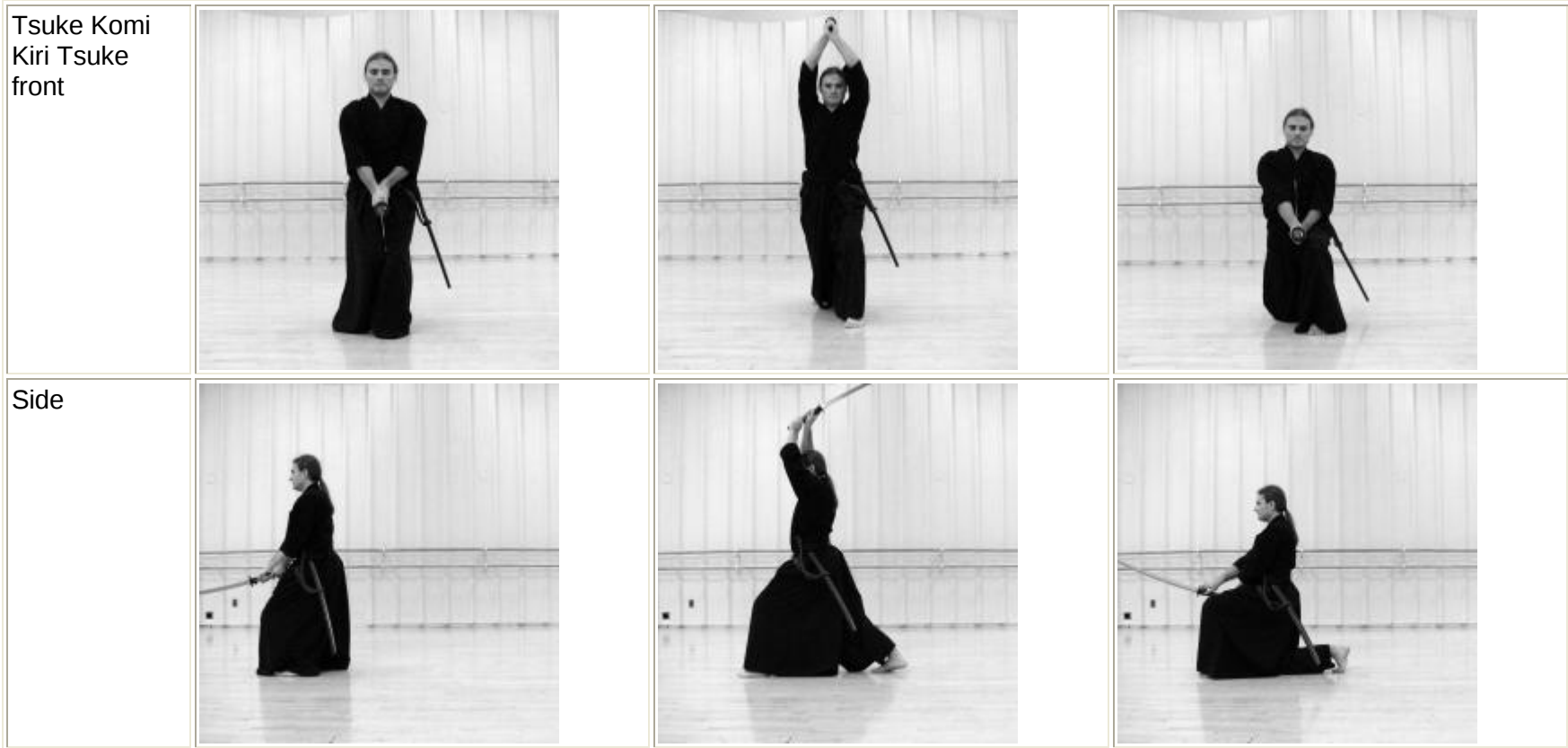


As you make the first motion to draw the blade you must cause teki to hesitate, step short and then cut short (to where you now are). The technique relies on this and he won't be fooled unless you fully intend to continue your draw into Mae and cut across his stomach. When he does stop short, just out of range of your draw, and cuts down on your head, you can stand up and back causing him to miss. You have been prepared to do this short sharp movement to a standing position by the kata you've done so far in the set. The instant movement back and upward is not a problem now.

The two vertical cuts are done with a feeling of dropping the hips into the tip of the blade, again something we've already learned. However, the movement between the two vertical cuts is of extreme importance. This must be done with a feeling of seme, of pressing forward from the hips and threatening the opponent with the tip of the blade. We have only dented his forehead with the first

cut which is one handed and very fast, so we must continue to keep him on his heels and moving backward. If we don't move from the hips, or if we bounce off his head into the next cut, he will recover and escape or attack. The surge forward with the hip from our feet together position must feel exactly like the surge forward from seiza into nuki tsuke in Mae. It can't come from the shoulders.

Kiri Tsuke



Step back with the right foot and raise the sword to jodan, expecting to step in immediately to cut once more. As the opponent collapses we have no need to cut so we slowly perform the motion of kiri otoshi and sink down onto the right knee, finish with the sword held just above horizontal with the tsuka at the height of the left knee. If we have moved back properly and have the hips

under control there won't be any wavering around of the upper body and arms, the sword will move precisely and strongly but not stiffly.

Chinagui

Tsuke Komi
Chiburi
front



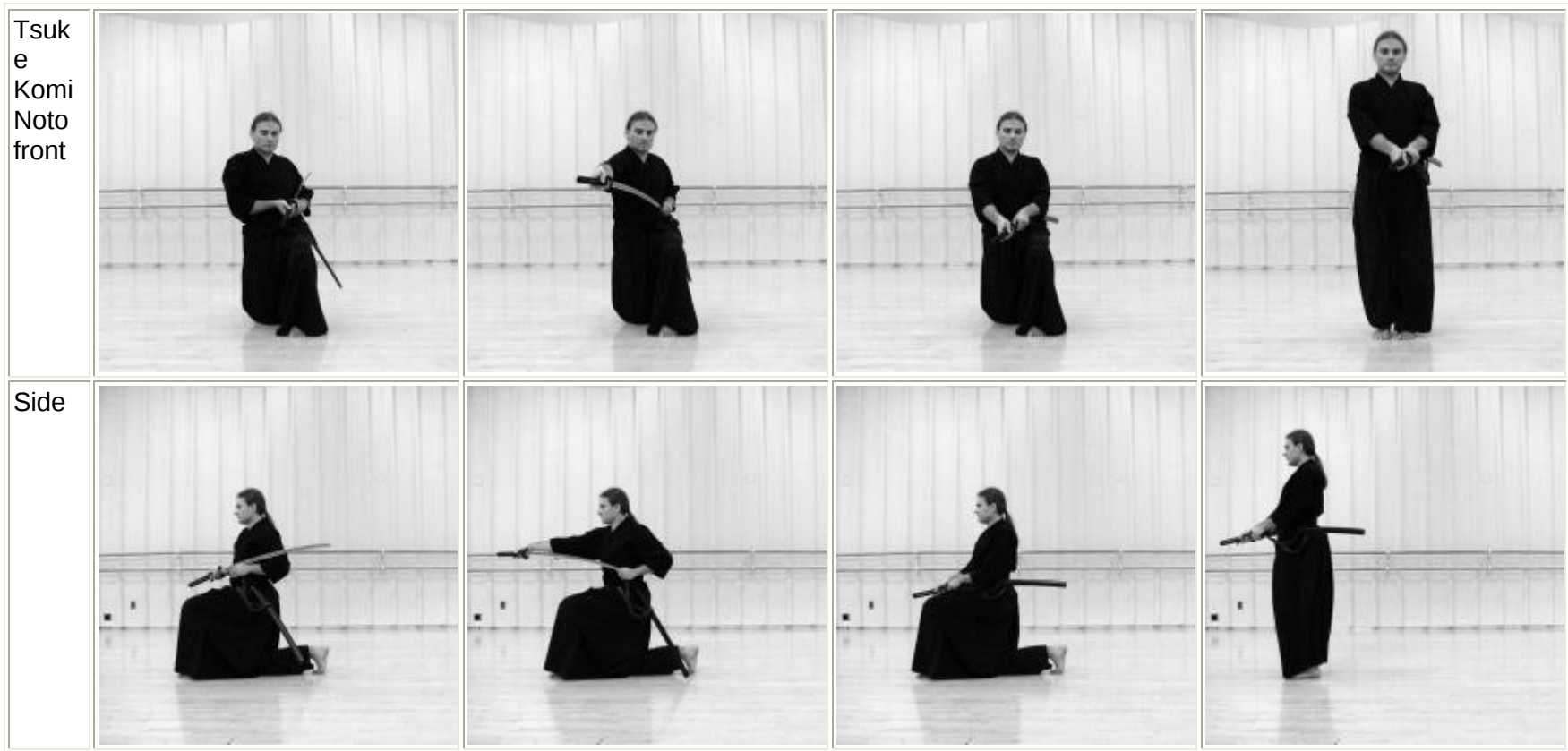
Side



The right hand is turned over, the left wipes the blade, and the sword is put into the saya once more, this time without moving the left leg back. All this takes a long time and at the end of it, the entire body weight is usually on the right knee so standing up without lurching and grunting is impossible. The lesson of course is to maintain the body weight between the two feet and keep that right

knee floating throughout the entire movement. A very difficult task and one that will build some good leg muscles. Perhaps there is something we can do with the hips to help here?

Noto



Lessons Learned

Again we have mentioned them above, a powerful and convincing surge forward, followed by a sharp movement out of danger. What is new is the feeling of driving the opponent back relentlessly as we perform the vertical cuts.

Reflection

We must take this feeling of pounding forward into the opponent back into Mae, especially in the timing between Nuki Tsuke and Kiri Tsuke. On a basic level we can also apply this sort of driving threat to the movement of nuki tsuke.

Insight: In the final three kata we cut from various angles and levels (above and below) to complete our overall sphere of attack. We also return to the ground and to the most basic of iai movements in the final kata.

9. Tsuki Kage (moon shadow)

Turn to the left 90 degrees and sit in seiza. The opponent will walk toward you from the right side and strike in kiri otoshi (a vertical dropping cut). Grasp the blade and look at teki. Draw and turn on the left knee while sliding the right foot toward teki. Rise off of the left knee and cut through teki's wrists from left to right. Move forward using tsugi ashi (a shortening and lengthening of the stance) and cut down from forehead to groin. Perform o-chiburi while standing, switch the feet and then perform Noto without sinking down on one knee.

This is of course our old friend Mae, done toward an opponent to the right, but standing now instead of being on the floor with us. All the previous lessons apply, and it seems the only difference between Hidari and Tsuki Kage is the angle of the horizontal cut.

Nuki Tsuke



Side



There is, however, another lesson here, and that's in the turn and rise to a very low standing position on the opening cut. By turning and sliding the right foot out toward teki, we actually move toward him in such a way that he doesn't realize the maai has changed, and we can hit his wrists sooner than he believes we can. Another lesson here is how we rise up on this cut. If we simply stand up we will move our heads into the attacking cut, so we must, instead, drive the left heel backward and down into the ground while keeping the hips at roughly the same height as when we are sitting in seiza. This requires and allows a much longer stance which, incidentally, lets us put our right foot much closer to teki.

Kiri Tsuke

Tsuki Kage
Kiri Tsuke
front

The chiburi and noto is identical to Mae except that you do not drop down to the right knee but remain standing instead. We stand up to respond to a standing opponent, and the next kata starts from standing, so we remain standing for noto here. This is a lesson in hip control in itself, since our training and instinct is to drop as we put the blade away.

Chiburi and Noto



Lessons Learned

We now can perform Mae in any direction and to any height. We have also learned about "stealing distance", moving toward an opponent without him realizing we've closed the gap. This is quite different to the driving pressure we applied in Tsuke Komi. It is the Ura, the rear side to the Omote or front side of Tsuke Komi.

Reflection

The hip control and power of this kata, driven through the back leg must be applied to Mae. The feeling of stealing distance can also be applied to the movement of nuki tsuke.

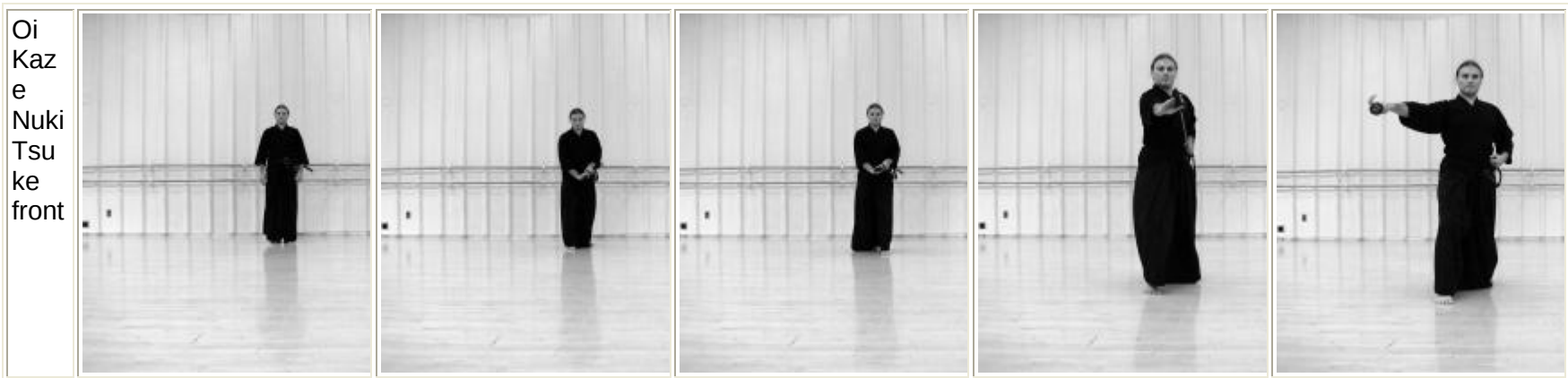
10. Oi Kaze (chasing the wind)

Remain standing at the original position facing the front. Your opponent is running directly away from you. He is moving backward, trying to get clearance to draw his sword.

Remain standing throughout the whole kata. Grasp the sword as you drop your hips and then open the habaki. Starting with the right foot take two normal steps, then five short-to-long steps as you draw the sword finishing with a horizontal nuki tsuke across teki's shoulders. Step forward with a shuffle step where the left foot approaches but does not come in front of the right (tsugi ashi) as you raise the sword and then cut down with the right foot forward. Perform a standing o-chiburi and noto and move back to the starting position.

Yes, as you suspected, this is Mae while running. To start, bend the knees as you lower the hips and grasp the tsuka, lean forward until you come unbalanced over your toes. Now take two long steps to catch your balance and to close the distance between you and your opponent. He doesn't have the room to draw so has to start moving backward, when he does you chase. Keep the distance close but allow it to lengthen as you straighten your body up, driving your hips forward while drawing. When you reach saya banari draw and cut teki across the shoulders.

Nuki Tsuke



Bring the left foot up to the right as you raise the sword. Step forward with the right foot and cut kiri otoshi finishing with the blade horizontal.

Kiri Tsuke

Oi Kaze
Kiri Tsuke
front



Keep the hips at the same height throughout the kata. Move under the sword and keep the movement going forward as you do the final cut. It's important to keep driving forward with the hips to make sure teki stays on his heels and backing up.

Chiburi and Noto

Oi
Kaze
Chiburi
and
Noto
front



The chiburi and noto are as for Tsuki Kage.

Lessons Learned

The importance of doing a “samurai run” with the feet close to the ground, short steps and the hips lowered is brought home in this kata since at any moment you may have to stop and cut, or even reverse direction. The idea of a “stable gun platform” helps with this feeling. Imagine trying to hit something with very powerful cannon on a small boat, at long distances it can't be done because the platform is bouncing all over the place. That's why heavy battleships were invented, to provide a gun platform that was steady enough to hit a target miles away. The same thing is required for the sword, one can't hit the target if the hips are bouncing up and down or slopping around from side to side. Keep it smooth and controlled.

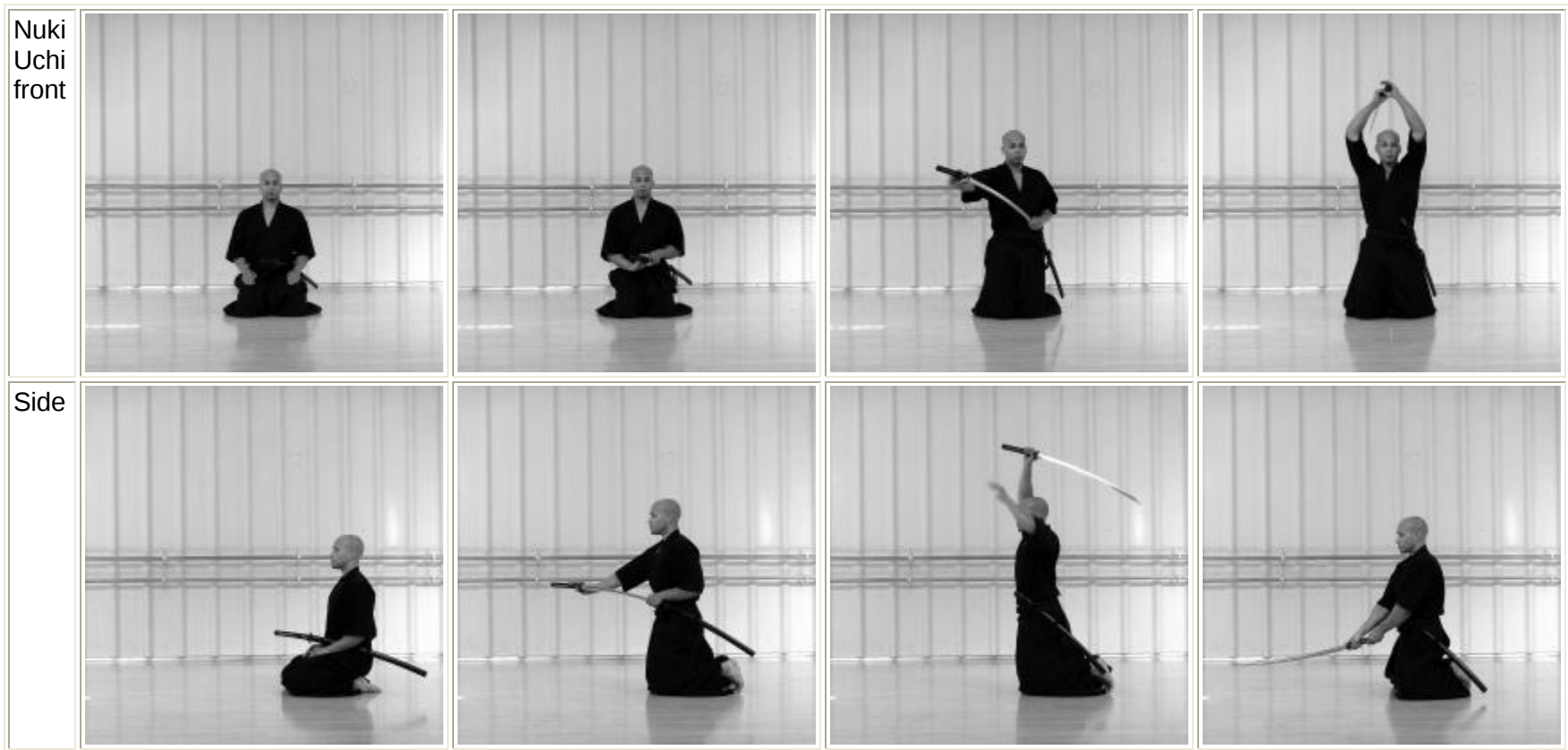
Reflection

The same idea of a stable hip translates back to Mae of course. While it may not be immediately apparent that you are bouncing up and down when you're on your knees, after trying to run and having the knees and ankles flexing, it should be easier to feel that bouncing in our base kata.

11. Nuki Uchi (draw cut)

Sit once more in seiza facing forward. Your opponent is facing you as in Mae. He attacks directly and quickly. As he starts to draw, you draw from the seiza position, lift the blade over the head while raising your hips then cut down, splitting the knees for power. Perform yoko chiburi, noto and lower the hips again. Close the knees, sit in seiza and put the hands back onto the lap.

Nuki Tsuke / Kiri Tsuke



Lessons Learned

Here we have the final test of what you've learned about your hips. The draw is done with a surge forward as we rise to the knees so that we slide forward about six inches and then cut as we drop the hips downward with the knee split. Weak hips and stiff shoulders will result in stabbing ourselves rather than cutting the opponent.

Reflection

Strong hips and relaxed shoulders are, as always, the key and of course this is what we take back to Mae from this final kata which is the essence of iaido, a draw, directly into a final cut.

Chiburi and Noto



By the end of this series of kata the student has learned the fundamentals of swordwork, and most specifically has learned how to use the hips in an efficient and powerful manner. This will provide a powerful base for further instruction in the other levels and sets of practice.

Conclusions

This article presented an examination of how posture, hip control and the transfer of power from the ground to the tip of the sword is taught through a series of kata. The implicit lessons which are learned by studying the set in sequence have been partially examined with the hope that budo students who study in this way will look at their own practice and perhaps find similar insights. I hope that this examination of the Omori ryu of Muso Jikiden Eishin Ryu has provided the reader with some idea of how a series of simple exercises can be used to teach and learn the basics, and to deepen that practice through various additional exercises which highlight different aspects of the skills.

I'd like to thank Dennis Nikitenko and Nathan Bain for demonstrating the techniques.

Bio: Kim Taylor holds renshi 7dan iaido and 5dan jodo in the Canadian Kendo Federation. He sits on the national grading committee of each art. He is the author of several instructional manuals and books which are available through sdksupplies.com. He is also an associate editor for JAMA.