

# Seven Questions to Ōtsuka Ryūnosuke, 7<sup>th</sup> Sōke of the Hokushin Ittō-Ryū Hyōhō



**An Interview with [www.hoploblog.de](http://www.hoploblog.de)**

Ōtsuka Ryūnosuke Taira no Masatomo, was born as Lösch Markus in Munich, Germany. He started training taekwondo when he was six years old. Back then, nobody could imagine where his journey would lead him in the future. After his long-time practice of shooting the English-Longbow, he started practicing iaidō in a local dōjō in Munich and later because of his search for a traditional Japanese koryū, he went directly to Japan. There he became the private student (uchi-deshi) of the 6<sup>th</sup> sōke of the Hokushin Ittō-ryū Hyōhō, Ōtsuka Yōichirō Taira no Masanori, by whom he was later taken on as foster-son. Ōtsuka Yōichirō-Sōke also appointed him as his successor as the 7<sup>th</sup> sōke of the Hokushin Ittō-ryū Hyōhō at the end of March 2016 and thus put him into charge of the whole school worldwide. Ōtsuka Ryūnosuke became through this the first non-Japanese person who was ever appointed to fully lead a Japanese koryū as headmaster.

## 1. How does one manage to be accepted as a private student in a koryū?

In today's modern world, the idea of an uchi-deshi (private student) is hard to understand. It's not just a student who will attend the regular training of his chosen ryūha more often than others. The uchi-deshi was selected by his sensei due to his exceptional talent and is allowed to train and learn with him on a daily basis. Often, the uchi-deshi is living with the teacher or he lives nearby in order to build a close teacher-student relationship. Anyway, the daily training for many hours is the foundation of this concept.

First we need to understand that taking on an uchi-deshi is a very time-consuming commitment for a teacher. Not many are willing or financially able to do this anymore. Today most koryū teachers in Japan or abroad have regular jobs and teach their koryū in the little bit of free time they still have. Only very few sensei worldwide are still professional koryū teachers. The fact that koryū do not attract many students makes it very hard for a teacher to make a living just from teaching. A few koryū even have only around three, five up to ten students worldwide for example.

If you are able to find a suitable teacher who is willing to accept an uchi-deshi you need to be mindful about the following: The uchi-deshi lives completely at the expense of the teacher or if this is financially not possible for him, the student needs to finance the education costs by himself. But as an uchi-deshi it's impossible to have a decent job besides the training, which may take up to ten hours a day and includes practical as well as theoretical lessons and this usually seven days a week.

The rare leisure time is needed for the recreation from training and to memorize the teachings received. The goal of such an education is to groom a shihan or successor who will teach and bring the school to the next generation. Therefore, if someone wants to become an uchi-deshi he needs to be absolutely certain what this means. Otherwise, he will only disappoint himself and the teacher.



*(6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> sōke of the Hokushin Ittō-ryū Hyōhō during an enbu)*

## 2. How does it actually happen that a German citizen takes on a Japanese name?

This happens when a student is chosen by his master as a worthy successor and has nothing to do with the nationality of the student in the first place. In many traditional Japanese arts such as chadō (tea ceremony), sword-smithing or bow making it is custom to transmit the art to the next generation. Usually, it is of great importance that the art will be kept within the own family and under the name. Whereas in Europe the direct bloodline for the order of succession for example in royal dynasties, family traditions etc. is of highest importance, the Japanese had and have a bit of a different approach. If there was no suitable successor from the own family available, it was quite normal to adopt a qualified student into the family in order to continue the tradition with him under the same name. Even in case if a headmaster's son had no talent or interest this kind of adoption was usual. This kind of succession planning was of great significance in the past, no matter if it was with Japanese daimyō houses or koryū. The most famous example today is "Suzuki Motor Corporation". The actual CEO is Suzuki Osamu. He was adopted into the Suzuki family as an adult and is already the fourth adopted son to run the business. Also in other notable Japanese companies such as Canon, Toyota or Kikkoman the same is the case.

Within the koryū world the most famous example is the Tenshin Shōden Katori Shintō-ryū. In 1929, a university professor married into the Iizasa family and was later adopted. He became a so-called muko-yōshi (adopted son-in-law) and changed his name to Iizasa Shūrinosuke Kinjirō and was then named 19<sup>th</sup> sōke of the school.

An adopted person is called yōshi in Japanese. This is the same in my case. I am a so-called ryūha-yōshi, or dōjō-yōshi. This is a student of a koryū who is taken in by the master as a kind of a foster son. As Ōtsuka Yōichirō, the 6<sup>th</sup> sōke of the Hokushin Ittō-ryū, does not have own children, he chose among his students the most suitable successor and made his decision public in 2014 at the time I was awarded the menkyo-kaiden license (highest license of mastery in a koryū). At this time, I had to change my name to Ōtsuka Ryūnosuke Taira no Masatomo as the teachers and most students of our Ryūha already knew that I will succeed our master as the 7<sup>th</sup> sōke. The official appointment ceremony then took place two years later in March 2016 at the Nakano Sunplaza-Hotel in Tōkyō.

Such a name change does not necessarily involve a legal change of your passport, although this would make things a lot easier. Many yōshi in Japan keep their original birth name on paper but live and operate under their new adopted name. A well-known example of taking a new name without a legal name change is the Hanayagi-ryū (traditional Japanese kabuki dance). In this school almost all menkyo-kaiden receive the family name Hanayagi together with a new first name.

However, I have learned that this system seems to be strange for many non-Japanese and nowadays even some Japanese people. I was asked frequently if I am OK with giving up my "identity" by several people. This leads to the question: What exactly is the own identity? Of course, the answer is different for each person. Many would say that the identity is defined by your roots and your ancestors. As a descendant of a family with a long history I would have answered the same a few years ago. Well, today my response is different. Identity is not so much about the roots as no one can choose them on their own. Certainly these roots do have an influence, but the own identity is defined by your actions and the way of life you pursue.

### 3. What is Hokushin Ittō-ryū Hyōhō and how does the instruction plan look like?

The Hokushin Ittō-ryū Hyōhō, which roughly translated means “North Star One-Sword School of Strategy”, is a Japanese koryū. A koryū is a school or system of warfare which was founded before 1868 when the Meiji restoration took place and the Japanese feudal system was abolished. Of course, the class system with the bushi (samurai) on top was abandoned as well.

In order for a koryū to be defined as such it is essential to have a direct transmission from generation to generation. For example, European fencing traditions which can still be studied today usually became extinct sometime in the past and has been recreated with the help of old writings or so called fencing manuals. This is not the case with authentic Japanese koryū where the school is transmitted from one headmaster to the next.

The Hokushin Ittō-ryū Hyōhō was founded in the 1820s by the bushi and sword master Chiba Shūsaku Taira no Narimasa who is considered the last kensei (sword saint) of old Japan. At the end of the Bakumatsu period (1853 – 1867) the Hokushin Ittō-ryū was considered on top of the so-called san-dai-ryū, the three strongest and most important sword schools of Japan who together brought out thousands of sword masters. The san-dai-ryū were the Shintō Munen-ryū, Kyoshin Meichi-ryū and the Hokushin Ittō-ryū. Today, only the Shintō Munen-ryū exists beside the Hokushin Ittō-ryū. The Kyoshin Meichi-ryū died out sometime in the Shōwa era and therefore ceased to exist.

Hokushin Ittō-ryū is classified as a so called sōgō-bujutsu. This term means “complete art of war”. Ryūha are described like this if they are teaching not just one kind of weapon but prepare their students to fight and survive with different weapons and unarmed techniques, either if it is for duels or the battlefields of feudal Japan.

The focus of study in the Hokushin Ittō-ryū lies clearly with kenjutsu (sword fighting techniques) and battōjutsu (quick sword draw techniques). Needless to say, this just represents the arts with the main focus on but of course naginatajutsu (pole weapon techniques) and jūjutsu (unarmed techniques) are part of the curriculum and the students are being instructed accordingly. The techniques here are based heavily on the body mechanics and techniques the pupil learned in the kenjutsu part. Both arts have a substantial base in the syllabus with many Kata and Techniques. For example, the naginatajutsu curriculum encompasses 29 kata of sword vs. naginata and yari vs. naginata.

Overall, the Hokushin Ittō-ryū counts 182 omote (open) kata. This includes all kenjutsu, battōjutsu and naginatajutsu kata. The jūjutsu kata together with certain kenjutsu and battōjutsu kata form the ura (secret) curriculum of the school which are only passed on to the best and most dedicated disciples.

Furthermore, the school has a strong focus on gekiken which is a kind of free-fight training with the use of shinai and bōgu mainly. Historically, over 90 percent of all active ryūha at the end of the Edo period practiced gekiken. Unfortunately, most of the schools lost that knowledge in the course of the last century. Even small countryside schools, which isolated themselves in the past quite much and only became widely known in the last century, like for example the Katori Shintō-ryū, lost their free-fighting practice around the Meiji and Taishō periods. But still, numerous historical texts still exist and proof the gekiken duels of those schools. One of them is the “Gekiken Shiai Oboechō” which lists

duels of many different schools and interestingly one such duel which was even fought by the 16<sup>th</sup> sōke of the Katori Shinto-ryū, Iizasa Shūrinōsuke Morishige himself. The result is unknown just the place of the duel (Katori-jingū) and the kamae used by Iizasa-Sōke (chūdan) is mentioned. Even schools that were renowned for their gekiken and their strong kenshi lost that traditional practice method around the time of World War II. Among others, this included the Mugai-ryū, Shintō Munen-ryū, Shingyōtō-ryū and the Ono-ha Ittō-ryū. Fortunately, the Hokushin Ittō-ryū together with the Jikishinkage-ryū, Nen-ryū, Tennen Rishin-ryū, certain Shinkage-ryū lines and a few lesser known ryūha are the only schools who were able to preserve that knowledge. And imagine, around one hundred schools are still in existence today and many of them used to practice gekiken in the past.

The gekiken practice of the Hokushin Ittō-ryū is widely accepted as the direct ancestor of modern kendō which was trained before World War II. Modern kendō, especially after WWII in comparison to original gekiken has been modified to become a point-scoring contest budō and hardly has any resemblance to the practice of the Hokushin Ittō-ryū anymore, except for the equipment and a few techniques. Gekiken on the other hand is used as a reality based practice method for an encounter with real swords in a life and death situation. Through this severe training the kenshi not only develops a very strong technique, but also a strong spirit and personality as a human being, which is based on the way of the sword.



(Gekiken-shiai of the Hokushin Ittō-ryū Hyōhō)

The Gekiken training in the Hokushin Ittō-ryū is structured in four stages. Stage one starts with practicing the kata, in bōgu and with shinai, with full contact in order to test the techniques which have been learned in kata-geiko. Later in stage two, the uchikomi-geiko is introduced where the uchitachi only attacks without any defense so that the shitachi can learn to defend himself against different attacks and counter them effectively. This was crucial in the past where it could happen that unskilled kenshi had to fight against a fully-trained sword master. Therefore, it is natural that the focus at the beginning lies on defensive techniques according to the principle of go no sen. After uchikomi-geiko follows shiai-geiko, the free sparring (or duel) training of our school which is considered stage three.

A clear distinction is how the bōgu is used in Hokushin Ittō-ryū. It is used only to protect the student from grave injuries. But in comparison to modern Kendo, where only men,

kote, dō and tsuki are valid targets, in Hokushin Ittō-ryū Shiai, the whole body is considered a valid target. On a high level, duels are even fought without the protection of a bōgu with the shinai and full contact. Of course, for being given allowance for this, the student needs to have ample control and polished technique with their weapon so that serious injuries can be prevented.

The fourth and highest level of gekiken training in Hokushin Ittō-ryū is called shinken-shōbu. Here, two masters of the school fight a duel with live blades. It is not about the practice of “first blood” (or “premier sang”) like in European fencing and dueling. Instead a strike will be performed with sundome. Sundome means that the blade is stopped one sun (circa 3 cm) in front of the opponent’s body what will demonstrate control and mastery of the own technique. This kind of training is very dangerous and demands tremendous technical and mental prowess and only the highest masters of our Ryūha are allowed to participate in a shinken-shōbu.

But normally, the regular Gekiken training of our school is conducted with bōgu and shinai and just like in modern Kendō, normally no real injuries happen, except for a few bruises. Everything else is reserved for senior members and masters of the school.

#### **4. Where can one study the Hokushin Ittō-Ryū Hyōhō?**

The Hokushin Ittō-ryū Hyōhō maintains two dōjō at the moment. One in Tōkyō and one in Munich. After my appointment as the 7<sup>th</sup> sōke the Chiba-Dōjō in Munich became the honbu-dōjō (main dōjō) of our ryūha worldwide. Actually, this is the second time in the history of our school that the honbu-dōjō was transferred by a sōke from Japan to abroad. The 4<sup>th</sup> sōke, Chiba Tsukane, closed the Chiba-Dōjō in Japan as he went to Taiwan in the Taishō era due to job-related reasons where he reopened the dōjō for a period of time. Later in life he moved back to Japan.

The Chiba-Dōjō always had quite an open policy. In the Edo era it was the first dōjō which accepted pupils from all social classes. Not only bushi were admitted but as well farmers, merchants and even women and children. This was an absolute novelty and exception at the time but it produced a massive rush of students from all over Japan. Contrary to this, the Jigen-ryū in Satsuma did not even allow the wives of their masters to just watch practice. Many schools had similar strict regulations which limited the student numbers heavily. But of course not only people with a bushi background had a talent for the arts of war. Toyotomi Hideyoshi is a good example. The successor to Oda Nobunaga was born as a peasant and worked his way up under Nobunaga until he was named kanpaku (regent) by imperial edict in 1585. The Chiba-Dōjō took such examples as model cases to foster people for their talent no matter what family background they had. This policy was responsible that the Chiba-Dōjō produced many famous and strong swordsmen who spread the Hokushin Ittō-ryū all over Japan.

Today we continue this heritage, but with the small difference that the school is not focused on Japan only. In our ryūha only shihan with a menkyo license (chū-mokuroku) who also received a dōjō-mokuroku (license to open an own dōjō) can take on own students and teach them the techniques and philosophy of the school. Therefore, a dōjō

can only be opened and led by such a shihan. As the education is very time consuming and not everyone is able to complete it successfully so-called dōkōkai have been established. A dōkōkai is a defined training group which is led by an advanced student, so-called kaichō (director), who stays in very close contact with me or the previous sōke. All dōkōkai-kaichō confirm by contract to have at least two private seminars (more than ten hours training time) with me and to attend at least one of the three major seminars which are held per year and train there for at least five days. Two of the seminars are held in Munich and one in Japan. Besides that, the kaichō sometimes organize seminars in their respective dōkōkai with me in order that also students who cannot afford to travel to the main seminars can receive the teachings directly from myself.



*(The Chiba-Dōjō nowadays)*

Currently the Hokushin Ittō-ryū operates seven dōkōkai worldwide. They are located in Switzerland (Basel), Germany (Bonn and Osnabruck), Portugal (Braga), Hungary (Budapest), Australia (Canberra) and Italy (Florence). The kaichō of a dōkōkai is authorized to admit students for the ryūha and to impart certain teachings and knowledge to them. But those students are not the kaichō's own students as he is not a shihan and therefore lacks the official permission to have own students. They are pupils of the school who train with their kaichō together in the respective dōkōkai. When a kaichō receives the chū-mokuroku, which is the fourth scroll, together with the title of shihan (master) he/she is allowed to open a shibu-dōjō (branch dōjō) of our ryūha and accept own students(dōjō-mokuroku). Such a shibu-dōjō will receive an own name and be under control of that shihan. In that case the shihan uses the title of kanchō (dōjō head).

**5. It is a well-known fact that some koryū also have or had certain sub-disciplines like shurikenjutsu, bōjutsu or even ninjutsu in their curriculum. Are there any elements in Hokushin Ittō-ryū Hyōhō which got lost through the centuries?**

If parts of the school got lost is actually quite hard to answer. The honest answer would be Yes and No. If it is about the combined technical curriculum the answer is No. All jutsu have been preserved thankfully. Nevertheless, it is hard to say if and when certain kata

have been omitted. Anyway, things have been added. Evidently a full set of kata in the omote battōjutsu curriculum was added, the so-called “Kaden no Kata”. Those ten kata were created and added to the curriculum by Chiba Michisaburō Taira no Mitsutane, the third son of the founder of our ryūha, Chiba Shūsaku.



*(Makimono of the Hokushin Ittō-ryū Hyōhō)*

Shurikenjutsu was never a part of the Hokushin Ittō-ryū syllabus even though two famous shihan of our school were also sōke of their own shurikenjutsu-ryūha. Those were Kaihō Hanpei, the sōke of Ganritsu-ryū (shurikenjutsu) and Negishi Shōrei, the 13<sup>th</sup> sōke of Annaka-han Araki-ryū (kenjutsu, sōjutsu, jūjutsu), who was at the same time the founder of the Negishi-ryū (shurikenjutsu). Due to such circumstances Hokushin Ittō-ryū is sometimes associated with shurikenjutsu but never incorporated the art into its own curriculum. However, our school does still have relations with the Negishi-ryū.

If we talk about lost teachings or if there have been changes to the curriculum, I would like to mention a wonderful quote by my master and predecessor, 6<sup>th</sup> sōke Ōtsuka Yōichirō: “A ryūha is just like a river. It starts with a fountain and a light splashing of water. The stream gets faster and stronger while it passes. And what started as a tiny streamlet becomes eventually a raging torrent. There are also many other rivers which will flow into the major one and therefore change it. But still, that main river keeps its name and its personality and stays the same.”

In my perspective this quote describes aptly the Japanese schools of warfare in its purest sense. If we, just for a moment, discard all the founding myths of divine transmission of complete martial systems or swordsmen trained by tengu (legendary Japanese mountain goblins famous for their mastery in the martial arts) and other historically and scientifically unverifiable imposture, this quote consolidates the development of the Japanese bujutsu schools neatly. Every school is exposed to changes constantly. The whole world is changing constantly and nothing stays the same forever. The same goes for all koryū.

A fine example for a consequent change is the Nen-ryū, the oldest, still existing school of swordsmanship. Founded in the 1380s by Sōma Shirō Yoshimoto in what is today known as Nagano prefecture. At the time this school was founded, it focused, like most schools on kyūjutsu (archery) and naginatajutsu, sōjutsu in connection with bajutsu (horse-riding) for close combat. Over time, the conduct of warfare changed and close combat outweighed long-distance combat. Armor design changed because of that, as well as the schools of koryū-bujutsu. New techniques and tactics were introduced and with the start

of the Edo period and the development of fukurō-shinai for which Kamiizumi Ise no kami Fujiwara no Nobutsuna, the founder of the Shinkage-ryū in the 1540s is credited, Nen-ryū incorporated that tool into their training quickly. Soon enough the school conducted regular sparring with fukurō-shinai which led to the development of rough-and-ready protection equipment. That equipment was refined over the years of course. This quick historical overview of Nen-ryū demonstrates nicely how the school discarded outdated teachings such as kyūjutsu or certain kata completely and introduced new kata in order to keep the school strong. Because of the constant adaption it was possible for Nen-ryū to remain for centuries as one of the strongest and most famous schools up to the end of the Edo period (Bakumatsu) and produce some of the best swordsmen all over Japan.

Many other schools such as Jikishinkage-ryū, Ittō-ryū and other Shinkage-ryū lines can show similar development and success. This does not mean that smaller schools never brought out fine and strong swordsmen. There have always been superb sword masters regardless of the school. But the schools mentioned before were famous throughout the country for bringing out countless notable swordsmen who distinguished themselves on battlefields and in duels over the centuries.

But it is very hard to verifiably trace back changes of the curriculum of a ryūha as usually the sōke or shihan never set out in writing when they omitted kata or even full teaching sets. Only through the examination of makimono and other documents from different generations it is possible to detect if parts of a school were changed or discontinued. Most important was that the core of the school, the so called gokui (on which all teachings of a ryūha are built on), was always unchanged. “The fountain of the school stays the same even when the school is changing constantly. If the fountain runs dry the river dies”. The same applies to all koryū.

I feel utmost respect for the Nen-ryū that such an old school was able to keep their tradition strong and independently for such a long time. Some of the first students of the Hokushin Ittō-ryū have been former students of Nen-ryū who deflected to our ryūha after Chiba Shūsaku (our founder) delivered a strong defeat in a duel against the Nen-ryū on his musha-shugyō (warrior pilgrimage). Actually, this victory was the event which made the Hokushin Ittō-ryū famous all over the country. Despite the loss, Nen-ryū kept their power and good reputation up until today. This is something I really admire.

I have certain old documents in my collection from my ryūha as well as from other schools which prove, that a number of kata have been omitted or others added. Such changes are quite usual in every school no matter if they admit to it or not. You just need to spend some time in the National Archives of Japan in Tōkyō and you will find many documents which demonstrate such changes. Unfortunately, only a few ryūha have the self-confidence to discuss this openly. Many feel that it is kind of a stigma if some of their teachings have been omitted or changed through the centuries. Especially, when their founding myth is based on divine transmission of a complete system (which is the case with many schools). However, such progress is the most natural thing to happen! Of course, it is the highest goal of any headmaster to pass on the school undistorted to the next generation but minimal alterations will happen anyway from one generation to the next. But as long as the gokui of the school stays unchanged the ryūha will survive authentically even if certain teachings have changed or whole jutsu were omitted.

## 6. What would you suggest if someone intends to learn a traditional Japanese martial art?

First of all: Get yourself informed. And not only the basic historical facts about the founder of a tradition etc. To choose and eventually master a koryū is a serious endeavor. Keep in mind that this will mean as well to spend a considerable amount of your life with a special group of people. There are certain criteria how a newcomer should proceed.

In my assessment it is crucial to make up your mind what you actually would like to achieve. If you would like to “play bushi” a bit, any lower-rung dōjō is a fine place no matter if they teach an authentic koryū, a gendai-ryūha (martial traditions founded after 1868), modern kendō or even a self-invented school without any historical foundation. But if your aim is to train an original koryū, it is absolutely necessary to learn about the historical background of the schools. Today there are some really good books in Japanese, English and German about the topic of koryū and valid online resources. They give the layman quite a good picture about which ryūha are authentic and which are not.

Unfortunately, even in Japan you will have your share of impostors who will tell you fairy tales about their school being trained publicly only since the 1960s and before that it was a hard kept secret which was handed down just to one person in each generation. Be aware that any military activities were closely monitored by the bakufu in the Edo period. If there were rumors about any secret meetings of military nature, hard measures were taken to suppress any possible rebellions against the government. Therefore, it was exceptionally unlikely for “secret” schools to exist for a lengthy period of time. If such a school would have produced only one capable sword master who would have fought just one duel in the name of his school, that ryūha wouldn't be so secret anymore after all.

And then again: What would be the benefit of a secret school? In old Japan sword masters had a good reputation but it was never a profession which was sought after. Just because of the job hazard. Competition and rivalry was strong and each day there was the risk that a contender defeated the own school which involved usually the loss of many students and the means of existence or even the own life. And to make a living as a swordsman it was necessary to have enough students. In order to get students a certain reputation was essential. If the school is secret, there is neither reputation nor students. It's that simple. All stories about legendary schools hidden in remote mountainous regions are usually just romantic fiction. They were fabricated by people to justify their self-invented traditions. For that reason, it is required to examine the claims of any prospective school one might want to study as good as possible, especially the claim that the school was transmitted unbroken until today. There are people in Japan who might take the name of an extinct school and form themselves as sole heir of that tradition in order to make a financial gain. This kind of fraud is compromising the reputation of koryū in general but it is almost impossible to take legal action against such despicable acts.

If a prospective student is looking for a strong school with powerful technique, he needs to look for ryūha who produced many renowned fencers in the past. As a beginner can hardly identify technical quality based on enbu videos etc. this point is to be taken seriously. Of course it is just fine as well to study a school which movements, at first glance, have a strong appeal to one self. There is not just one correct way to achieve a strong technique and it does not have to be school specific. One might find the favorite school by luck when just going to the closest koryū-dōjō.

Now we come to one of the most crucial points to be considered, the teacher and fellow pupils. It's a fact that not all people get along well with one another. It is important to get an idea of the group of people with whom you are going to spend a lot of time in the future. Key is the teacher-student relationship. If the teacher's personality isn't pleasant or you can't cherish his company, then the school will definitely not be to your liking. It is also important that you get along well with the majority of the students. Disputes between pupils in a ryūha are not tolerated and damage the learning process of all.

You need to realize for yourself how much you are willing to give to your education in your certain school. Constantly, new people show up and ask for instruction and admission. For many of them the training is basically an exotic hobby. And others are willing to train every free minute also outside the dōjō and even take up self-studies in the linguistic and historical fields. Both kinds of students should be welcomed in the dōjō of course. But people need to keep in mind that the students who achieve more than others will be fostered by the teachers and therefore make faster progress.

There is one special advice for non-Japanese who would like to start in a koryū: Look for schools where foreigners already have higher positions. Japan and its koryū can sometimes have some racial problems with non-Japanese. There are schools who will not admit foreigners at all and others where it is literally impossible for foreigners to achieve higher positions or grading's. This is not standard but there was some considerable pressure on myself and on my predecessor when I was named successor (first non-Japanese sōke of a koryū). There has been other sōke or shihan who approached Ōtsuka Yōichirō-Sōke verbally or in writing and objected strongly to that decision with the "argument" that Japanese koryū belong to the Japanese and have to be led by them. In my case a few even had the impertinence to state that "No matter how good this foreigner's technique and knowledge is or that he speaks Japanese fluently, he is still just a foreigner and thus not suitable as the successor of a koryū...". Race and origin should not matter anymore in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Certainly, there was as well a lot of acclaim and congratulations from various ryūha and their representatives who advocate more openness. But still there are many schools of classical martial arts who maintain the previous mentioned narrow-mindedness. As a matter of fact, such narrow-mindedness is not even historically valid and shows only that the certain individual has no historical knowledge of Japanese history. There have been a number of cases of foreigners who have been promoted to high bushi ranks and even were bestowed a native Japanese names by their respective lord. Famous examples would be the Dutch Jan Joosten van Loodensteyn, the Englishman William Adams and Prussian Henry Schnell. Schnell for example was accepted by the Aizu-clan and received the Japanese name Hiramatsu Buhei from Aizu-clan daimyō Matsudaira Katamori. Hiramatsu was given the right to wear the daishō (pair of long and short swords of the bushi-class), was married to a high ranking Japanese woman and received a residence in Wakamatsu the castle town of Aizu. He even was granted a group of bushi under his command who served him as his retainers.

If someone follows these simple criteria he will find a school where he feels comfortable to be. If such a school can't be found in close proximity but the desire is strong to study something authentic it highly recommended to travel to this "school of dreams", be this in Japan or somewhere abroad. It is worth your effort and money for sure.

## 7. Will there be any changes for the Hokushin Ittō-Ryū Hyōhō with you as the new sōke of the school?

If the question implies that I could change the teachings or techniques of Hokushin Ittō-ryū I can assure you that will not be the case. One of my main goals is to preserve the school faithfully and as original as possible for future generations and transmit it as such. The techniques and teachings have proven to be very strong and reliable over the past two centuries, be that in gekiken-shiai or in life-and-death fights against other traditions or on the battlefield. Without a doubt I will give my best to improve my own technique constantly and ask the same from all the students of my ryūha. To rest on the school's accomplishments would be definitely the wrong thing to do and a disgrace to the art. The school is only as strong as its members are. Without powerful members the school will be weak even if it had a glorious history.

Also I will put the school's focus again more on hard and excessive gekiken-geiko. In the last century the Hokushin Ittō-ryū put more emphasis on kata-geiko while gekiken-geiko was more and more put to the side. This wasn't only the case with our school but many other traditions lost their gekiken even completely. As a gekiken-ryūha, to carry out shiai is a vital part of our tradition. When it comes to regular taryū-jiai, which means shiai-geiko against other traditions, we work closely together with the Tennen Rishin-ryū of the Bujutsu-Hozonkai. The Tennen Rishin-ryū Bujutsu-Hozonkai is under the direction of shihan and menkyo-kaiden holder Katō Kyōji-sensei in Tōkyō, who is one of the strongest and most skilled koryū swordsmen alive. Taryū-jiai geiko is an important component in the development of every Kenshi and should in no case be neglected. Our collaboration with the Tennen Rishin-ryū is something I value highly. It's marvelous that nowadays two ryūha can work together in order to grow stronger by fighting each other on a friendly basis.



*(right: Katō Kyōji-sensei, menkyo-kaiden of the Tennen Rishin-ryū and headmaster of the Tennen Rishin-ryū Bujutsu-Hozonkai)*

Apart from this I want to invest in promoting of persons with exceptional talent and skill. This was something Chiba Shūsaku-sensei and the other headmasters of my school did in the past to bring out many strong swordsmen. Promoting means in this respective the

recruitment of students with high potential even if they come from within the ranks of other ryūha. For example, if a high-ranking member of a taryū (other tradition) wanted to study Hokushin Ittō-ryū he received a special treatment. First, his skills in kata and shiai were tested. If he already possessed profound knowledge of fighting tactics and technique this person was able to start to learn immediately the higher teachings. The beginner teachings of the school in which newcomers are being instructed can be learned by this person on the side. With this, an extremely quick improvement was possible. There have been cases of senior members from other schools who were capable of mastering the teachings of Hokushin Ittō-ryū within one year and therefore were awarded menkyo (chū-mokuroku) or even menkyo-kaiden (dai-mokuroku) in this short period of time. For the benefit of the school I would like to carry on such promoting. This will of course include not only koryū, but also senior members of modern kendō as well as of legitimate modern iaidō schools such as the Musō Shinden-ryū which was founded in 1932 by Nakayama Hakudō Hiromichi.

The Hokushin Ittō-ryū Hyōhō is open to anyone who wants to study its teachings. No matter if Japanese or not, no matter from which religious affiliation or social background. But the students need to, without exception, strictly follow the rules of the school and must not violate the schools name by bad behavior. In the Hokushin Ittō-ryū each and every student will have equal opportunities. Anyone will be awarded a menkyo-kaiden when he/she mastered the required technique, philosophy and the historical and school specific knowledge. Hard training, studies in Japanese, tradition and history will also always be encouraged and supported by sendai-sōke Ōtsuka Yōichirō and myself. Ultimately, skill and knowledge are the recipe to become a strong koryū.