

the TENSHO KATA

The "Smiling Form" of Goju-Ryu Karate

by Scott Lenzi

"Sensei, is it possible to overcome fear and fight fearlessly?" the student asked his instructor.

The teacher thought for a moment, then responded "To be able to fight, you must be able to smile."

The student was puzzled by the answer.

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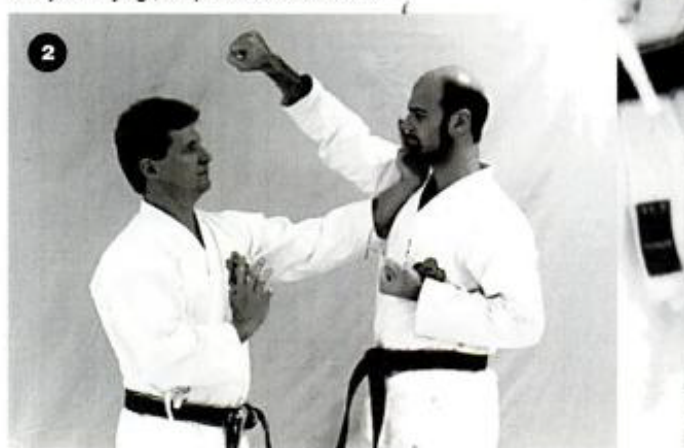
Goju-ryu's tensho kata teaches students how to block (1) and counterattack (2) with the same hand.

"Smile? What does smiling have to do with fighting?"

To explain what he meant, the instructor, Toshio Tamano, recounted an incident he had experienced with his own goju-ryu karate sensei, Seikichi Toguchi, in Okinawa in the 1960s. On the way home from visiting a friend, the two men were confronted by a number of American GIs who sought to relieve Toguchi of the whiskey he was carrying. Sensing the tension of the situation, Tamano readied himself to fight, then noticed that Toguchi had moved behind him. Just as fighting was about to begin, Toguchi stepped in front of Tamano and,

smiling, shook the hands of each of the soldiers. So odd was this action, that the mood of the situation quickly changed to one of levity. The incident ended peacefully, and both sides went their separate ways. Afterward, Toguchi scolded Tamano, telling him that he must be able to smile or he cannot fight.

Toguchi, now 77, credits his longevity and health to, among other things, proper breathing methods and the consistent practice of the *sanchin* and *tensho kata* of his *shorei-kan* goju-ryu system. The tensho kata was created by Toguchi's teacher, goju-ryu founder Chojun Miyagi, to promote the more





In this example of the tensho kata's use of rotational wrist action, the goju-ryu stylist (above left) deflects (1) an opponent's punch and slides his wrist around his adversary's elbow joint, locking it (2) in place as he counterattacks (3) with a throat grab.

advanced softer techniques of the system. The form is actually more of a training exercise designed to strengthen and develop the student's stance, focus and fighting techniques.

The primary elements of the tensho kata are:

- Proper breathing at the *tanden* (the area just below the navel).
- Proper coordination of hand motions and breathing.
- Correct use of *taisoku* (hard breathing) and *jusoku* (soft breathing).
- Sanchin stance.
- Soft changing of hand positions.
- Application.

The most significant component of the kata is proper breathing. The breathing method in tensho is identical to the breathing in the sanchin form. The application of the breathing, however, is far more difficult because there are segments that require multiple inhalations. The practitioner must therefore develop significant lung capacity to properly execute the tensho breathing patterns.

Inhalation is always done through the nose, and exhalation through the mouth. The tongue is placed on the roof of the mouth at the end of each breath. The breath is focused in the *tanden*, the point approximately two inches directly below the navel. The *tanden* is considered the body's center of gravity. It is therefore believed that your breathing centers and relaxes your body. To fight or, as Toguchi noted, to smile, you must breathe correctly.

Once proper breathing has been accomplished, you must



Demonstrating tensho's concept of "turning the palms," the goju-ryu stylist (above left) deflects (1) an opponent's punch and grabs (2) the attacker's wrist. The defender then rotates (3) the wrist joint backward, applying (4) a chicken-beak strike to the elbow joint.

coordinate the breath with your actions. Generally speaking, taisoku, or hard breathing, occurs as you exhale during striking portions of the kata. Jusoku, or soft breathing, occurs as you inhale during blocking segments of the form. This is a somewhat oversimplified explanation of the concept of taisoku and jusoku. The idea of hard or soft breathing evolves to a much higher level and, in fact, in *koryu* (classical) kata, breathing can be one of the key factors in the study of *kaisai*, the hidden applications in kata. Coordinating the breath properly with his movements allows the goju-ryu practitioner to apply techniques with maximum effectiveness. The breathing must

be timed properly to begin and end simultaneously with the block or strike.

Another benefit of proper breathing in the tensho kata is the development of *ki* (internal energy). The basic exercises of shorei-kan goju-ryu (called *daruma taiso*) are derived primarily from classical kata. These exercises are unique in that they not only strengthen and stretch the body, but most of them also include a specific breathing pattern. The breathing pattern, coupled with certain body movements and positions, allow the development of *ki*.

Goju-ryu is a "hard/soft" self-defense system. Beginners learn the more natural "hard" applications of the style first, but as they progress, hardness in blocking is replaced by softness. Goju-ryu blocks are actually designed to be soft in nature even at the beginning level, but the novice will generally try to use strength and momentum to execute the technique. As the student progresses, he acquires more precision in his techniques and, hence, more softness.

Breathing, once again, plays a crucial role in allowing the blocking techniques to flow properly. The idea is to, in essence, block attacks without physically touching the opponent. Although many people dismiss this concept as fantasy, there is proof that it can be done. For example, Morihei Uyeshiba, the creator of *aikido*, was well-known for his ability to channel and direct his *ki*. With dedicated tensho practice, you too could develop and channel internal energy.

The tensho form utilizes the same stance used when per-

The ending sequence of the tensho kata has several applications, but this is one of the most effective: The defender (below left) rotates (1-2) his wrist around the opponent's punch, deflecting it downward, then counterattacks (3) with a simultaneous palm heel to the groin and claw hand to the face.





In this example of blocking and striking with the same hand, the goju-ryu stylist (above left) deflects (1) an opponent's right-hand punch with the left hand, then uses the same hand, but open this time, to deflect (2) a left-hand punch by his adversary. He is now free to deliver a counterattack (3) to his opponent's midsection with the left hand.



forming the sanchin kata. The practitioner's toes are pointed slightly inward, creating a triangle-shaped base. The toes of the rear foot line up with the heel of the front foot. The outside of the feet should be approximately shoulder width. When executing taisoku, the hips are tilted upward, causing the toes to attempt to pivot outward. Maintain the foot position and keep your back straight.

The inner thigh muscles will likely experience some tension during this stance. The knees, however, should be allowed to angle in to tense these muscles. Goju-ryu instructors will often kick upward between the student's legs as a way of determining the tension and hip alignment in his tensho or sanchin stance. The student's goal is to develop a strong, supple stance, correctly centered, aligned and rooted to the ground.

Once fully versed in the finer points of tensho, it is time to apply them to the sequence of movements in the kata. As you practice the "changing of hands" in the form, a multitude of

applications or possibilities will present themselves. A punch could be a block or a strike, while a block may be a strike or a punch. At more advanced levels of training, all applications can be one and the same—both a block and a strike.

The beginning of tensho is identical to sanchin, the kata on

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which Miyagi based the form. By understanding and studying the principles of *kaisai-no-genri*, he was able to further the ideas explored in sanchin. The term *kaisai-no-genri* refers to theories handed down over many generations which clarify



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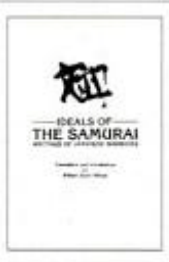
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how to analyze kata and determine the meanings and applications hidden in a form.

After the first three movements, the sequence of the kata is performed with both the left and right hands individually, and then finally with both hands. Many practitioners mistake the last grouping of techniques utilizing two hands as an indication that the actual application is performed with two hands as well. In fact, two hands may be utilized, but not to perform the same motion. For example, although you could execute two simultaneous *ko uke* (open-hand head-level blocks), there would never be a need. In *goju-ryu*, if the practitioner uses one hand to execute a *ko uke*, the other hand would simultaneously deliver a counterstrike—perhaps a *shote* (open-palm strike) to the opponent's pelvic region, or a *ko ken* (bent-wrist strike) to the throat. When both hands are executing techniques in *tensho*, you can assume the application is a simultaneous block/strike.

Where you utilize a single hand in addition to an obvious block or striking motion in the *tensho* kata, you are being introduced to the concept of an interchangeable block or strike. This is a critical point in *goju-ryu*. A hand position can in one instant be used as a block, and in the next be converted to a strike. The simple "turning of the palm" in *goju-ryu* adds to your arsenal of techniques and helps your movements flow naturally during combat. Thus, you can perform an extremely quick single-hand block and counterattack without even changing your stance.

The softness promoted and developed in *tensho* training allows the *goju-ryu* stylist to utilize the wrist as a pivot point for rapid and precise blocks and strikes. The more relaxed the wrist, the faster and more powerful the block or attack. The wrists can be further loosened and developed by practicing the *daruma taiso* exercise sequence created by Miyagi.

Tensho could be rightly called the "kata of smiles" because, as Seikichi Toguchi pointed out: To fight, you must smile. To smile, you must breathe. And to breathe, you must practice *tensho*.

About the author: Scott Lenzi is a Peekskill, New York-based *goju-ryu* karate instructor and is the North American representative for Seikichi Toguchi's *shorei-kan goju-ryu* system.

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