



Ono Ha Ittō Ryū (小野派一刀流)

Guy Buyens

Introduction

In August 2011, in San Diego, I had the chance to participate in an Ono Ha Itto-ryu seminar with Sasamori Takemi, 17th Soke, and Hirata Tomihiko, his assistant. The host group was the "Kokusai Nippon Budokai", headed by Shimabukuro Masayuki Sensei (Jikishinkai).



Participants at the Ono ha Itto Ryu seminar (San Diego, 2011) with Sasamori soke and Hirata Tomihiko



I had seen demonstrations of Ono Ha Itto-ryu with Sasamori Takemi Soke before (their school also participated in the 32th event of The Nihon Kobudo Kyokai held in Tokyo in 2009, where we also had the chance to demonstrate with our soke and members of the sohonbu dojo of Hontai Yoshin Ryu).

I was convinced that studying and understanding a kenjutsu school like Ono Ha Itto-ryu, could be beneficial in order to improve sword skills and bring the kumidachi in our bojutsu to a higher level, so I decided to follow a seminar with Sasamori Soke.

Although a seminar of 3 days is not enough to get introduced into a system, it was certainly the ideal forum to get inspired. The time spent on the basis (kihon, etiquette) was highly appreciated and made this seminar very exceptional.

Back in Europe, together with 2 friends (both involved in iai-do and kendo), I started to train techniques from the seminar in the hope to preserve what I learned from the seminar and always looking forward to meet Sasamori soke again. In the meantime we also had the chance to train with André Feik, who trained several years in the Reigakudo (the dojio of Sasamori soke) in Tokyo, but who now lives in Germany again. I also had the chance to visit and train in the Reigakudo.

The school

Ono Ha Itto Ryu (小野派一刀流) is the Kenjutsu (剣術) school, founded by **Ono Jiroemon Tadaaki** (1565–1628), himself student and immediate successor of **Ittosai Kagehisa**, who developed Itto-ryu (Ittō Ryū; 一刀流).

Ittōsai (1550-1644), the founder of the Ittō-ryū ("one sword" or "one stroke") school of sword fighting, was a famous Japanese swordsman. Before starting his own style, he had studied Chūjō-ryū with Kanemaki Jissai, a student of Toda Seigen (famous for short sword). Ono Jiroemon Tadaaki, his successor, was one of the many students he had.

*Tadaaki's original name was Mikogami Tenzen. Before he became the successor of Ittosai, Mikogami Tenzen had to fight a serious duel with Ono Zenki (another student of Ittōsai) in order to become the successor of his master. Mikogami Tenzen won and took the name of **Ono Jiroemon Tadaaki**.*

Later Tadaaki would serve as an instructor to both the second and third shoguns, along with Yagyu Munenori of the rival school Yagyu Shinkage-ryu. Although it is believed that Tadaaki was Munenori's superior in swordsmanship, his severe character led him to be the less favored of the two.

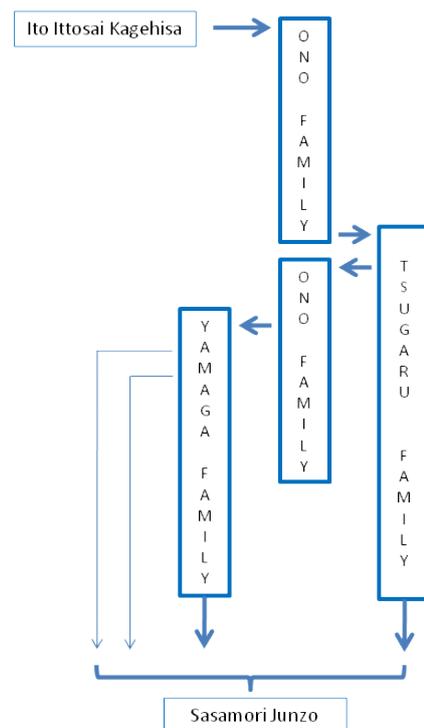
Ono-ha Ittō-ryū (小野派一刀流), which was based on Ittosai Kagehisa's original Itto-ryu is at the origin of other systems like Mizoguchi-ha Itto-ryu (溝口派一刀流), founded by Mizoguchi Shingoemon Masakatsu (a student of the second headmaster of Ono-ha Ittō-ryū, Ono Jiroemon Tadatsune); and Nakanishi-ha Itto-ryu (中西派一刀流), founded by Nakanishi Chuta Tanesada (who studied under either the 5th or 6th generation headmaster of Ono-ha Itto-ryu). Although many other Itto-ryu branches were developed later, Ono-ha Itto-ryu remains the oldest of the surviving Itto-ryu styles.

*Ono-ha Itto-ryu remained in the **Ono family** until Ono Jiroemon Tadakazu (the fourth headmaster), taught Tsugaru Nobumasa, lord of the Tsugaru clan (nowadays Hirosaki city, Aomori prefecture, the northern part of Honshu), who established later the **Tsugaru line**.*

Tsugaru Nobutoshi returned the responsibility for the transmission of the teaching to the Ono family, when he taught both Ono Tadahisa and Tadakata.

For some time, the Ono and the Tsugaru families jointly held responsibility for the teaching of Ono-ha Itto-ryu, until Ono Tadayoshi (the seventh head of the school) taught the entire Ono-ha Itto-ryu system to Yamaga Hachirozaemon Takami (a retainer of the Tsugaru clan).

*Later, in the **Ono** family there would not be a successor any-more, but in the Tsugaru clan, both the **Yamaga** and **Tsugaru** families would work together, to transmit*



Schematic presentation of the Ono ha Itto Ryu lineage. The system of the Ono family would later also be transmitted by members of the Yamaga and Tsugaru families

the system.

The Tsugaru Clan, besides holding a legitimate lineage of Ono-ha, partially adopted Nakanishi-ha gekken Kenjutsu (one of the first types of Kendo to appear at that time) as a part of their practice.

Two years after the Meiji restoration (1869), the Tsugaru were relieved of their offices by the abolition of the han system. Fortunately, the transmission of Ono ha Itto Ryu continued after the Meiji restoration by former retainers of the Tsugaru clan.

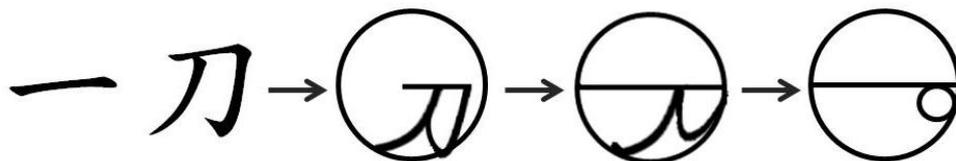
Sasamori Junzo (1886-1976) was born near current Tsugaru city (founded in 2005 from the merger of the town of Kizukuri and the villages of Inagaki, Kashiwa, Morita, and Shariki, all from Nishitsugaru District), in Aomori prefecture (previously known as Mutsu Province) and started to learn Itto-ryu in the 1890's from Tsushima Kenpachi, a former master of Itto-ryu for the Tsugaru Clan. After that he studied for a long period under Nakahata Hidegoro sensei (also a former master of Itto-ryu for the Tsugaru Clan). Finally Sasamori Junzo acceded as 16th Soke to the legitimate Ono-ha from Yamaga Takatomo the previous successor of Ono-ha for the Tsugaru Clan.

Most of the techniques of the school are studied in a traditional style of **Kumitachi** in which *kata* are performed by a **Shidachi** against an **Uchidachi** (the one undergoing the techniques but yet guiding the *kata*).

Most of the time, students make use of **Bokuto** (or *bokken*), and the Uchidachi wears thick protective gloves called "**Onigote**" (translated as devil's gloves). The Bokuto used in the school is quit thick and is called **Hamaguri Bokuto** (HAMAGURI: Blade so thick as to resemble a clam shell outline).

In the school there is also the usage of a **Habiki** ("pulled edge"). An habiki is a steel (compared to Zinc alloy in an *iaito*) edged blade sword with an edge that is blunted. It is more robust than an **iai-to** but in contrast to a **Shinken**, not sharp.

The symbol (*Kamon*) of the school is a circle that contains a line and a smaller circle:



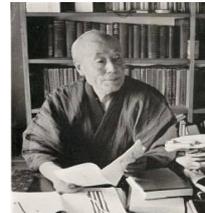
The symbol (Kamon) of Ono ha Itto Ryu was explained by Sasamori soke at the seminar in San Diego (see later). Interesting to see how the kanji for sword, TO (刀), and even the concept of one sword/cut, ITTO (一刀), are incorporated in the symbol

Note: In this text there is only a description of the symbol. Like in many koryu, the true symbol belongs to the school and can only be used when permission is given by Soke.

The current teacher

Sasamori Takemi, is presently the 17th soke of Ono Ha Itto Ryu. He took the role of the preservation of the system from his father, Sasamori Junzo, in 1975.

Sasamori Junzo, born in 1886, was a Japanese politician in the Taisho and Showa Eras and served as a cabinet minister during the Katayama government. He was also a well known and high ranked kendo practitioner (one of the rare 10th dan and author of the book "This is kendo") and gathered all the information about Ono-ha Itto Ryu in a book entitled "Itto Ryu Gokui" ("The Secrets of Itto Ryu").



Sasamori Junzo

Sasamori Takemi was born in Hirosaki in Aomori Prefecture in 1933. He was educated at Harvard School of Divinity and continues to follow in his father's footsteps as a Christian scholar. Sasamori Takemi, resides in Setagaya-ku, Tokyo, Japan. He learned Itto Ryu from his father, Sasamori Junzo, the 16th soke, and has been studying Ono Ha Itto Ryu for over 60 years. He studied the Ono Ha Itto Ryu of Sasamori Junzo until his father's death in 1975 at which time he assumed his father's position as 17th soke of the ryu.



Sasamori Takemi

Hirata Tomihiko, is one of Sasamori Takemi's assistants

Hirata Tomihiko is one of the senior students of Sasamori Takemi. Hirata Tomihiko was a member of the Tokyo Metropolitan Police Department and holds an 8th Dan in Kendo.



Hirata Tomihiko
next to Sasamori

Fundamentals:

There are three fundamental ideas in Itto-ryu:

1. "**Ittō**" (一刀): everything starts from one
2. "**Kiri-otoshi**" (切り落とし): the one cut
3. "**Ittō suku ban tō**" (一刀即万刀) or "ittō sunawachi ban tō": one sword equals ten thousand swords

The supreme philosophy of this school is to defeat the opponent with one stroke, hence the name "**Ittō**" (which can be translated as "one sword" or "one stroke").

Everything starts from one, can also be illustrated by explaining the symbol (Kamon) of the school. The symbol starts with one point, to become multiple dots in a straight line. Many points then become one line. At the end of the line, it continues the and

makes a small circle: one line continues, to end in a which is the perfection of oneself. At the end of the perfect, small circle, the symbol continues in a the bigger circle, which ends exactly where it started: at the small circle. The big circle is the bigger Self, the True Self. This True Self is connected with the cosmos. The meaning of the two circles is that you should be perfect; true Perfection; but everything starts from one point.

Kiri-otoshi is both the main technique and idea (philosophy) of the school. In *Kiri-otoshi* (dropping cut), the idea is to wait for the attack to initiate, but when appropriate, to cut down at the same time as the enemy cuts down, along the same line as the enemy's cut (straight through the center of the enemy's body). By overriding his sword (displacing it with the *Shinogi*), the attack is disrupted before it can be completed, thereby creating the condition of *Shini-tachi* (dead sword) in the enemy's technique. *Kiriotoshi* continues to *Men* or through to *Chudan* (*Kissaki* at the enemy's *Nodo*).

Ittō sunawachi ban tō, or the expression that one sword equals ten thousand swords means that if one understands swordsmanship's fundamental principles, one technique embodies and informs all other techniques and situations a swordsman might encounter. A profound understanding of the fundamental technique of cutting will lead to understand all the variations in swordsmanship.

Other important concepts:

- **Ma-ai** (間合い): distancing
- **Hyoshi** (拍子)/choshi: timing/rhythm
- **Hasuji** (刃筋): trajectory (literally, "blade line),"and/or targeting
- **Chikara Okeru** (力置ける): leave force behind
- **Seme age** (攻め上げ): attacking upwards, tactic by which the *kissaki* is pushed forwards (and upwards) to the opponent's face, in order to make the opponent step back
- **Ue dachi** (上太刀): the idea that your sword has to come over the sword of the opponent, like a wheel that rolls over his sword
- **Kaku o katameru** (格を固める): lit. fortify position/status, the idea to maintain concentration during *kumidachi*

Techniques and training

A usual training session will start with warming up or breathing exercises, followed by:

- Kake Kyu-hin
- Suburi
- Kiri Otoshi
- Shin-gyu-so (Randome)
- Kumidachi (Kata)

I. Kake Kyu-hin

Kake Kyu-hin no kamae (架九品の構え), is the practice of 9 kamae.

1. **Seigan** 正眼
2. **In** 陰
3. **Yo** 陽
4. **Jodan** 上段
5. **Gedan** 下段
6. **Wakigamae** 脇構
7. **Onken** 隠剣
8. **Kasumi** 霞: chudan (中段), jodan (上段), gedan (下段)
9. **Hongaku** 本覚

Most of the time, these kamae are trained in the order above. Between every kamae, Seigan (正眼) is reassumed except with:

- Wakigamae (脇構), which is immediately followed by Onken (隠剣).
- Kasumi starts with Chudan Kasumi (中段霞), immediately followed by Jodan Kasumi (上段霞). Gedan Kasumi (下段霞) is mostly not done, but can be performed between Chudan and Jodan.
- Tsuite Hongaku (付いて本覚): after Kasumi Jodan (霞上段) there is a step forwards with a tsuki (突き), followed by pulling back in Hongaku (本覚).

After Hongaku there is either:

- Suri-age Men (磨上面)
- Suri-age Kote Orishiki (磨上小手折敷き)

II. Suburi

Suburi (素振り) is practice swinging.

In Ono-ha Itto Ryu, Suburi (素振り) is practiced alternating from In (陰) and Yo (陽). The following 2 series are done during every training session:

- Shomen (正面)
- Te no uchi (手の内)

III. Kiri-otoshi

Kiri-otoshi (切り落とし), lit. dropping cut, is a completely vertical cut. In Kiri-otoshi, the concept of Ue dachi (上太刀) is very important. When cutting an opponent who also attacks with a vertical cut, the sword has to come over the sword of the opponent, like a wheel that rolls over his sword.

Kiri-otoshi is the most important technique in Ono-ha Itto Ryu. Therefore this technique is performed in the beginning of the training in a similar but less formal way than Ipponme from odachi (see later). At this stage, both sides (uchidachi and shidachi) usually use bokuto but uchidachi doesn't wear Onigote. The exercise is repeated several times and started and finished with Ritsurei (standing Rei).

IV. Shin-Gyo-So

In Ono-ha Itto ryu, kiri-otoshi (at an advanced level other parts of kumidachi as well), is often practiced in 3 different ways: Shin (真), Gyo (行), So (草).

“Kai-Gyo-So” or “Shin-Gyo-So” comes from the three ways of writing in Japanese calligraphy or “Shodo” (書道): “Kaisho” (楷書), which is equivalent to Shin, “Gyosho” and “Sosho”. Beginning with the original non-cursive Kai (or Shin) form, this is gradually broken down into the semi-cursive Gyo style and then the cursive So style.



Nihon (Japan), written in 3 styles (Kaisho, Gyosho, Sosho)

These three levels of formality are taken into the practice of Kiri-otoshi.

Both the engaging distance (Ma) as well as the way of moving is different for each of the forms:

- **SHIN (真)**
 - The engaging distance is large (far): **To-ma (遠間)**
 - The way of moving is the same as in kumidachi: **Futsu Ashi (普通足)**, which is normal or regular walking (lit. normal feet/steps)
 - In Kiri-otoshi, the cut in Shin is directed to the solar plexus, **Suigetsu (水月)**
- **GYO (行)**
 - The engaging distance is medium: **Chu-ma (近間)**
 - The way of moving is faster: **Haya Ashi (早足)**, fast steps
 - In Kiri-otoshi, the cut in Gyo is directed to the throat, **Nodo (喉)**
- **SO (草)**
 - The engaging distance is small (near): **Chika-ma (近間)**
 - The way of moving is fast with very little steps: **Kake Komi (駆け込み)**, which, although translated as rushing, still allows control of the movements
 - In Kiri-otoshi, the cut in So is directed to the head, **Men (面)**

Another terminology for this kind of practice, is **Randome**.

V. Kata

There are many Kata (形) in Ono-ha Itto Ryu.

Each Kata is performed by **Shidachi (受太刀)**, against **Uchidachi (打太刀)**, who wears **Onigote (鬼籠手)**, protective gloves (lit devil's gloves).



In Ono-ha Itto Ryu, Uchidachi (striking/attacking sword) is often the most advanced student who will guide Shidachi (doing/presenting sword), since Uchidachi “presents” Shidachi with an opportunity to practice his Waza, usually by initiating with a strike.



Note: Ono-ha-Itto Ryu has a particular way of counting its kata. When there is more than one encounter (or a series of victories), they are all counted as techniques. For instance in odachi, after number 5, there is futatsugashi (lit. 2 victories) which is number 6 through 7.

Odachi

The basic series of 50 victories from 36 encounters (some encounters have more than one victory) with both opponents using the odachi (大太刀), in kumidachi (組太刀) style.

When referring to the first 5 kata, it is common to call them ipponme, nihonme,..., gohonme (sometimes followed by the name of the kata). After that only the name of the kata is used.

Each kata is performed by shidachi, against uchidachi, who wears Onigote.

Before the kata starts, there is a formal start, Kumidachi no Hajime (組太刀の始め) in which both opponents perform rei (礼). At the end of the kata there is a formal closing, Kumidachi no Osame (組太刀の納め).

In between kata, when the opponents resume their place, the sword or bokken is held in the right hand in a posture called Kamae otoku.

Both opponents start far away and then move in. All initiatives start from a distance called Itto issoku no ma (一刀一足の間).

First 25:

- 1 **IPPONME** 一本目; Hitotsugachi 一つ勝: *One victory*
- 2 **NIHONME** 二本目; Mukaizuki 向突: *Driving Thrust*
- 3 **SANBONME** 三本目; Tsubawari 鐔割: *Break Tsuba*
- 4 **SHIHONME** 四本目; Gedan (no) kasumi 下段霞: *Lower (Ground) Mist*
- 5 **GOHONME** 五本目; Wakigamae no tsuke 脇構付: *Sticky Block (from Wakigamae)*
- 6-7 **Futatsugashi** 二つ勝: *Two Victories*
- 8-9 **In To** 陰刀: *Shadow sword*
- 10 **Gedan no Uchi otoshi** 下段之 打落し: *Bash from below*
- 11-12 **Norimi** 乗身: *Riding Body*
- 13 **Hitotsugachi** 一つ勝: *One victory*

- 14-15 **Gedan no Tsuke chu seigan** 下段之 付け 中正眼: *Sticky Block from Gedan and Chu Seigan*
- 16-17 **Orimi** 折身: *Bend Body*
- 18-19 **Suriage** 摺上: *Slide up*
- 20 **Wakigamae no Uchi otoshi** 脇構之 打落し: *Bash from Wakigamae*
- 21 **Honsho** 本生: *Real life*
22. **Jodan no kasumi** 上段霞: *Upper Mist*
- 23-24 **Kobushi no Harai** 拳之払: *Sweeping Fist*
- 25 **Ukki** 浮木 : *Floating Wood*

The next 25 are:

- 26 **Kirikaeshi**: *Returning Cut*
- 27-28 **Sayu no Harai**: *Sweeping left and right*
- 29-30 **Gyaku no Harai**: *Reverse Sweeping*
- 31 **Chishou**: *Born from the earth*
- 32 **Chishou no ai-gedan**: *Born from the earth, meeting low*
- 33 **In no harai**: *Sweeping shadow*
- 34-35 **Maki gasumi**: *Rolling mist*
- 36-38 **Maki kaeshi**: *Rolling return*
- 39 **Hikimi no hongaku**: *Pulling back from hongaku*
- 40 **Hikimi no ai-gedan**: *Pulling back, together with gedan*
- 41-42 **Hotsu**: *Departure*
- 43 **Uragiri**: *Treachery*
- 44 **Choutan**: *Long and short*
- 45 **Haya Kirikaeshi**: *Quick return*
- 46 **Jyunpi**: *Touching the fish's skin*
- 47 **Nuke Jyunpi**: *Descal the fish*
- 48 **Tsumari**: *The jam*
- 49-50 **Amari**: *The left over*

Kodachi:

- 1-2 **Futatsugashi:** *Two Victories*
- 3-4 **Gedan no Tsuke:** *Sticky Block from Gedan*
- 5 **Hotsu:** *Departure*
- 6-7 **Sayu no Harai:** *Sweeping left and right*
- 8-9 **Norimi:** *Riding Body*

Ai Kodachi

- 1 **Uragiri:** *Turning the table (Treachery)*
- 2-3 **Norimi:** *Riding Body*
- 4 **Suriage:** *Slide up*
- 5 **Kobushi Dome:** *Fist Stop*
- 6-7 **Hotsu:** *Departure*
- 8 **Nukiuchi:** *Sudden attack*

Other kata include:

- **Kojo Gokui Goten: 5 kata**
- **Tatchiai Batto : 5 kata**

Although all kata can be performed with a sword, the last series (batto) is always performed with a sword (iaito, habiki, shinken) instead of a bokuto. In this series, kata start with the sword sheathed.

Ono ha Itto Ryu in Japan

Soke Sasamori Takemi teaches Ono ha Itto Ryu at Reigakudo

c/o Komaba Eden Kyokai

1-13-2 Daizawa, Setagaya-ku, 155-0032 TOKYO

TEL.: +81-(0)3-3412-6986

TRAINING SCHEDULES

1st - 3rd - 4th SATURDAY of the month

14:00 ~ 15:00 ⇔ Juniors

15:00 ~ 17:00 ⇔ Adults

1st - 3rd - 4th SUNDAY of the month

15:00 ~ ⇔ Experts (Free practice)

<http://onohaitoryu.3.pro.tok2.com>