

Basic Principles

The *shuriken's* tactical advantage is its small size and concealability, and ability for a quick draw which helps one gain the upper hand by using surprise when attacked. With practice, great accuracy with the *shuriken* can be achieved, and this enhances its tactical advantage. By momentarily disabling an attacker who could be from 3 to 15 paces away, this gives one precious time to collect your thoughts and move to better position from which to deal with the attack.

To make better use of this advantage, a thorough understanding of the draw is necessary, and how the *shuriken* are worn can either help or hinder your ability to respond to attack effectively. Traditionally, in Shirai and Negishi Ryu, a number of points around the hip were used as places to wear the *shuriken*, and each position would offer some advantage over another, due to hand position, angle of the hand to the opponent, and position of the blade as it comes into the hand.

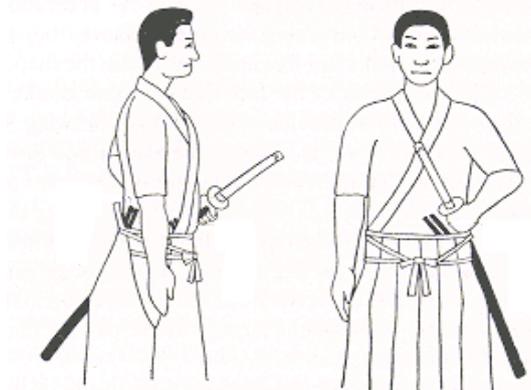


Figure. 26. Wearing the *shuriken*

The illustration above shows 3 positions, each convenient for a right hand draw in a variety of situations. The points of the blade are embedded in the clothing, so whether one takes the front or back set, the blade will fit in the hand ready for a turning or a direct hit, dependent upon the situation. (Particularly important in Shirai Ryu) In feudal times in Japan, Samurai did not have the restrictions on wearing such weapons as we do these days, so their blades could have been in view, or hidden, as the left illustration shows.

Ninjutsu practitioners hold their *hira shuriken*, up to 8 or 10, together like a stack of coins wrapped in a leaf of cotton, which is then pocketed or secreted in any number of pouches built for that purpose.

As mentioned above, *shuriken* were also worn as hairpins.

The *shuriken* in flight

The *shuriken* travels through the air to the target in 3 different ways, depending upon the school, grip, and throw. The "direct hit" method, *jikidaho* or *choku-da*, involves holding the blade with the point out, towards the target. This method is employed in the Negishi Ryu, and also as a short distance throw in the Shirai, Jikishin and other Ryu. (see *fig. 22, below*)

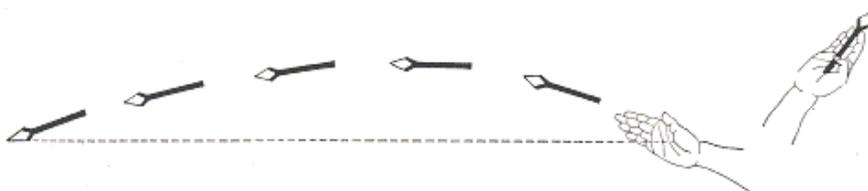


Figure 22. "The direct hit" method

The second way that the blade turns, the "turning hit", is called *hantendaho*, or *Ikkaiten-da*, and involves holding the blade with the tip pointing into the palm. During its travel through the air to the target, the blade turns 180 deg, or 1 turn. This method is employed by the Shirai and other Ryu. (see *fig. 23, below*) but not by Negishi Ryu, however I believe nowadays students of Negishi Ryu also learn the throws and about the blades of other Ryu, including Shirai.



Figure 23. The "turning hit" method

The third way a blade turns, the "multi turn" method, or *dakaiten-da*, has the blade turning 360 deg. or more as it flies through the air. This method is employed by the *hira shuriken* schools, where the many points of the star shaped blade will rotate and have no difficulty piercing the target at any distance. This method is also employed by the Shirai Ryu over long distance throws, (up to 18 steps). (*Not illustrated.*)

Distance

Distance from the target, especially in Shirai Ryu, is measured in steps, rather than units such as feet or metres, because distance varies for each individual. A taller individual has a longer stride, but they also have a longer arm reach, so proportionately, the relationship between the travel of their arm and their distance in steps from the target is exactly the same as for a shorter individual. This makes standard units of measurement useless as a guide to learning distance. In Shirai Ryu, throwing distances are multiples of 3 steps from the target, from 1 to 15-18, (about the maximum effective range for throwing a blade). This is due to the fact that Shirai Ryu is based upon the principle of the "turning hit" method of throwing. Each turn in the air is equivalent to 3 steps of added distance, which is a kind of limitation, as one can only throw from one of these distances. 1 step's distance is measured by standing in a right *zenkutsu dachi*, or right forward stance, with the right arm extended forward touching the target with the tip of the shuriken. By taking one deep stride backwards with the right foot, then withdrawing the left foot so one is standing in *shizentai*, or natural stance, this process measures the 1st step's distance. From this stance, the form is practiced (*Manji no kata*, with blade, see below), utilising the "direct hit" method, as there is not room enough for the blade to turn in flight..

The next throwing distance from the target is 3 steps, which involves turning the blade in the hand so the tail is pointing to the target. Standing at the target as before, take 3 deep strides backwards, so that the left foot is forward. From here, withdraw the left foot, and stand in *shizentai*. This is the 3 step's distance, and from here the "turning hit" method is utilised, as this distance dictates, according to the Shirai Ryu technique, a turning hit.

For the remaining distances, this same process is repeated, each time turning the blade in the hand. When retrieving the blades from the target, stride forward counting the steps, so one gets a disciplined and repetitive experience of measuring the distance by steps. Ultimately, one should be able to judge automatically whether one should hold a blade in hand with the tip or tail pointing out.

The technique of Negishi Ryu does not have this problem of turning the blade, because the principle of the throw is different. As mentioned above, Negishi Ryu solely utilises the "direct hit" method of travel, with the tip of the blade always held pointing outwards, so throwing at any distance can be achieved. However, the technique is much more advanced and much more difficult to master, though technically, it is superior to Shirai Ryu. Judgement of distance is purely by feel based upon experience, and minute adjustments in technique (see below) are made to allow for the minute variations in distance. To develop this judgement, one must train quite severely and repetitively, otherwise a good hit of the target will be an impossibility. Training starts at 1 steps distance, arrived at in exactly the same way as above for Shirai Ryu. The individual practices at this distance for about 2 weeks, ensuring that mastery of this distance is achieved.

After 2 weeks, the next distance is begun. From a left *zenkutsu dachi*, the left foot slides back so the heel meets the instep of the right foot, weight is transferred to the left foot, then the right foot slides back, stepping again into *zenkutsu dachi*. This action decides the next distance, and is actually a shuffle, however it is exactly the same change in distance as a full step, except that one remains with the same foot forward, rather than the opposite foot, as described above with the Shirai Ryu.

The throw is then practiced, with the necessary adjustments made (eg. earlier release, see below), for another two weeks. Each day, the individual at first throws at 1 steps distance, until they are comfortable with their ability, then the next distance back is trained at. After 2 weeks of this, the slide backwards is repeated, and the 3rd distance is added to the routine. Once again, the individual starts at 1 steps distance, progresses to 2 steps, then onto 3, and practices like this, each day, for a further 2 weeks. Every 2 weeks, a further backstep is added, only practiced after each of the shorter distances have systematically been practiced. So after 9 months of dedicated training, one should be reaching the limit of their throw.

The throw of Jikishin Ryu is only used for short distances, as its grip does not allow for a "turning hit" method of throwing, nor does it allow for earlier release. The practice of Jikishin is primarily a development in speed, as it is only used for short distance. Because it can only be used at short distance, the reaction time to attack is necessarily much shorter, therefore the goal of the training is achieve a quicker draw and throw.

Striking the target

There are many forms of target, so only a brief discussion will follow. *Shuriken* were developed as a quick response shock weapon that caused the enemy to be distracted while the thrower rushed closer for a killing technique, usually by sword. This is why *shuriken* appears to be have been taught as part of swordsmanship. So it can be said that it is not a weapon that can deal deathly blows. In its role as a distracting weapon, it therefore was targeted at the softer and more vulnerable parts of the body, such as the head, especially the eyes, the throat, and various exposed regions of soft tissue, such as the back of a swordsman's hands, and the exposed feet. It was not meant to pierce armour or to be able to kill with one blow from a distance.

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Figure 22 Tatami used as target

For this reason, practice with a hard target is not necessary, and it also tends to damage the *shuriken*. Traditionally, *tatami*, or straw matting was used, although more elaborate targets consisting of frames holding various types of material, ranging from screens of paper, boards of wood, or even blocks of wood have been developed. Trees have been often used, especially by "yamabushi", or mountain warriors, whose retreat to the wild had left them without resources. Today, cardboard boxes, or sheets of cardboard, with a piece of white paper and a target image drawn on it and pinned to the box would be sufficient.

According to Satoshi Saito Sensei, targets consisted of two main areas in which the throw was focused; head height, representing the face, and stomach height, representing the swordsman's hands while holding the sword.

The *shuriken* can hit the target in a number of ways, and the ideal is to have the full weight of the blade moving down its length through the point into the point of impact. This gives maximum force to the hit. If the tail is swinging up or sideways as the point strikes, much of the blades force is lost to lateral movement, and penetration by the blade is reduced.

Because the blade is falling due to gravity, and turning during flight due to the force of the throw, there is an ideal moment during the rotation of the blade for it to hit the target, and that is as the blade is just becoming horizontal, or just as it becomes aligned with the direction of the throw. If one were to draw a line from the hand that releases the blade directly to the target, then the blade should hit the target just as it becomes aligned to the trajectory of the throw.

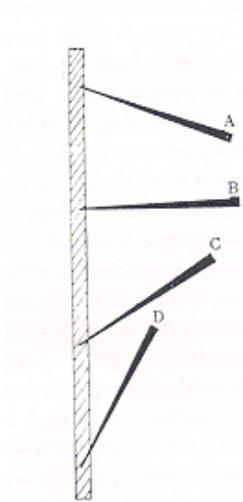


Figure 23 The "Live" and "Dead" Hit

This illustration shows a number of possible angles the blade can hit the target if thrown in a horizontal trajectory. Any angle between A and B is ideal, because as the tip hits the target, the body of the blade is still rotating and applying force down its length to the tip. This type of hit is said to be a "live hit", as the blade is still applying force directly to the strike after it touches the target, thus is more penetrating..

C and D are termed "dead hits" because at the moment of impact, the weight at the base of the blade is no longer being transferred to the tip, but is being carried upwards, laterally to the point of impact, and is therefore much less penetrating.

The throw

Needless to say, the throw is the most important aspect of the *shuriken* art. How important it is though, is the obstacle we have to realise and overcome. All schools and methods stress the importance of "form" when throwing, it is not just a matter of throwing the blade at the target. Adhering to the throwing form is absolutely necessary for achieving consistent and controlled accuracy.

In throwing the *shuriken*, at the moment of the throw, there are two major variables that affect the outcome of the throw; **distance** and the **throw**. The distance we are subject to, so it is a variable we have to account for by adjusting our technique. The extent of variability in the throw can be decreased through training, to the point where it becomes a constant. When the throw becomes constant, the only variable facing us in hitting the target is distance, which we can learn to adjust to through regular training at different distances. It is very difficult for the mind to be able to judge and adjust to 2 variables at the same time, so by making 1 of these become close to a constant, it makes the task of judging 1 variable easier. The principles are very similar to the game of golf. In golf, there are also two variables, distance and swing. The variability of distance is compensated for by changing between heavier and lighter clubs, it is the swing that has to be refined so it becomes constant. Once the swing is mastered, its variability has been reduced to close to constancy, and the trick becomes choosing the right size club according to the distance.

In *shuriken*, once the throw has been mastered, and thus becomes constant, minute changes in technique can be made to adjust to changes in distance, thus creating a more controlled and accurate throw. To achieve a constant throw, great attention must be paid to practice of the form.

Breathing

The Breath is very important to the throw, one must coordinate their breathing pattern with the physical movements of the body for the technique to become natural and effective. Due to the physiology of the body, power cannot be generated as effectively on the in-breath as

it can on the out-breath. This is because generation of power in a strike is an outward force, as is breathing out, whereas breathing in is an inward force. Breathing in as one exerts force tends to sap power from the body, and severely limits physical performance. Therefore, it is important to understand the physical movements, and the type of breath that should be associated with these movements.

In Japanese swordsmanship there is the concept of "*In-Yo*", probably more widely known as "Yin-Yang". This concept describes how all things in the universe can be represented by two opposing yet inter-related sets of alternating polarities, that combine to form the whole of things that we perceive. In our body we have *In-Yo*, it is found in our footwork: step with the left foot, step with the right foot. With our breathing it is: Inbreath - Outbreath, in cutting with the sword it is raise and lower. If we take certain movements to be related to *In*, and other movements to be related to *Yo*, and combine them, we can through an understanding of this concept, unite various groups of movement into a unified whole, thus making our overall performance much more harmonious, and efficient.

In the ultimate form of throwing a *shuriken*, *Koso no I* (see below), there is only two components, the raising, and the lowering of the arm. Thus the in-breath is coordinated with the raising of the arm, and the outbreath is co-ordinated with the lowering of the arm, or the throw.

Observing and judging the strike

At the end of each throw there is a moment of stillness. At this point, one must hold their intent with the feeling of *zanshin*, or readiness and observation. At this point one concentrates on the feeling at the end of the throw, and observes the result of the throw. In simple terms, one examines the position of the blade in the target, and how close to or far from perfect it is, then observes or remembers how they felt during the throw. One can then judge how their body influenced the blade and its flight, then assess what postural and other adjustments need to be made for subsequent throws.

Observing the position of the blade in the target can tell you a lot about the throw. Not only can it tell the weaknesses in the throwers technique, it can also give an indication of the psychological state of the thrower. On an individual throw, its position can tell you about the throw itself. If 3 or more were thrown in a row, the grouping, and the relationship between each blade in the target can tell you about the state of mind of the thrower at the time. If the positions of the blades are observed over a whole session of throwing, details of the throwers technique and their general state of mind can be observed. In effect, the results of throwing a blade can be a good barometer for measuring the mental state of the thrower.