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Tanemura Talks

Hatsumi's Chief Rival

Interview conducted by Tsabar Erem



Ninja instructor Shoto Tanemura strikes a pensive pose. Tanemura recently broke away from the Bujinkan dojo and formed his own Genbukan system.

When one thinks of ninja rivals, the names of Stephen Hayes and Robert Bussey immediately come to mind. However, in the past several months, a far more intense and deeper rivalry has come to light-the one between Dr. Masaaki Hatsumi, the 34th grandmaster of ninjutsu, and his former top student and friend, Shoto Tanemura. Tanemura has spent approximately 30 years in the martial arts, 25 of them training with Hatsumi and Toshitsugu Takamatsu (the 33rd ninja grandmaster). In the fall of 1984 however, Tanemura, who was an eighth dan in the Bujinkan system and considered Hatsumi's right-hand man, broke away-and it wasn't a pretty sight. According to several witnesses, Tanemura got into some kind of altercation at the funeral of Hatsumi's mother. This apparently caused irrevocable damage between Tanemura and Hatsumi, who are also distant cousins. Shortly thereafter, Tanemura left the Bujinkan and formed his own Genbukan system. After the split, neither Tanemura, a former instructor at the Tokyo Metropolitan Police Academy, or Hatsumi would discuss the issue-until now. In an interview with Andy Adams in the October, 1986, BLA CK BELT, Hatsumi blasts Tanemura, saying that he doesn't have enough ninjutsu skills for setting up his own school,"and that Tanemura has a bogus school and doesn't have the real ninjutsu spirit. " When Tanemura did this interview, the BLACK BELT article hadn't come out yet. Still, he addressed the issues candidly (and maybe more diplomatically) and presented his version of the split for the first time. This FIGHTING STARS NINJA exclusive was conducted by Tanemura's top student in the U.S., Tsabar Erem, who runs a Genbukan school in Los Angeles. -Ed.

FIGHTING STARS NINJA: What do you think of the ninjutsu boom in the West?

SHOTO TANEMURA: It is good because people become interested, ask questions and -eventually some go ahead and "taste it," then enroll in a legitimate school. Of course, much



of the image is wrong and some people form their opinion without actual, first-hand knowledge. However, this is also the case in Japan, where most of the public has pre-conceived ideas derived from comic books and chambara movies, where the ninja are depicted as evil assassins. I think that eventually, when the dust settles, we'll find that the serious persons who take the trouble to check things out will find their way into ninpo (higher order of ninjutsu) while the not-so-serious will go their own way. So, ninpo will ultimately benefit from this natural selection process.

FSN: Why is there any need for spreading the art? Why not let it be the way it was in days of old-a small, shadowy, clannish affair?

ST: There are a few reasons. First, there doesn't seem to be an imminent physical danger to life today in the normal household in the West. People rely on the police, on accepted norms of behavior, on modern democratic ideas to protect them. This is actually a misconception; if one doesn't take responsibility for himself-no one else will, but most people don't realize that. I believe ninpo has a lot to offer in that respect, educating for self-reliance in attitude as well as physically. In addition, and because of the said common beliefs, people are not interested in the wisdom of the ancients. They believe, like average people of every age did, that today is different from yesterday and that there are no beneficial lessons to be handed by yesteryear's sages. Because of this wrong assumption-the people of today rarely study ancient arts such as ninpo. I am afraid that the art might die out. The average youngster in Japan is much more interested in baseball than in budo. If he does practice a martial art -it is usually sport karate or sport kendo.



The legacy of ninjutsu is sacred to Tanemura, who said he has a mission to accomplish.

Now you're strictly a martial arts instructor. How does it feel?

ST: Some people are reluctant to say "I am a martial arts instructor." Perhaps what they teach and how they do it are the reasons. Perhaps not. Maybe they feel it more appropriate to be accountants or merchants or politicians. In any case, they are ashamed and prefer to have another formal occupation which they actually don't like.



Philosophical differences on how ninjutsu should be taught caused the split between Tanemura and Hatsumi..

FSN: Surely, with the prevalent ninja boom, the art won't die out . . . ?

ST: With the spread of the art, the quality of instruction might dwindle. There are also many impostors who make money out of it while spreading wrong ideas. In a few years, the boom will have died out, and if there is no strong core of sincere, committed practitioners the true art will die out. As a resident of a capitalist nation you must understand the inherent good of growth, albeit checked growth. This is what we are trying to achieve through Genbukan.

FSN: You've been a policeman for many years.

But true respect comes from whatever occupation, so long as the person is doing his utmost and is good at it. I am proud of my art and I like it greatly. I am also confident that I am doing the best of my ability in teaching it correct!, When a person is sincere, honest and hard working, he need not be embarrassed.

FSN: When will you come to the United States again?

ST: When there will be enough people interested, who are already capable of seeing beyond personal style, or reading behind the lines and who seek to truly learn, not merely watch.

FSN: When do you think that might be?

ST: I don't know. Perhaps next year, perhaps in five years, perhaps it depends on the work done. If people come to study because they want to see me or watch me work out, or say that they've personally studied with Tanemura, then they are not the true disciples of ninpo. Those who study ninpo whether I come or not, for the sake of the art, to the sake of truly learning it, for their own sake-these are the true disciples. When there are enough of these I'll come.

FSN: Are there any particular areas the ninja should concentrate on while doing his conditioning routine? **ST:**

Every part of the body needs to be conditioned-especially the brain. A good ninja, like any good strategist prepares for any eventuality. The little finger, well-conditioned, may be what would save you in an emergency. Everything you train in has a purpose. For example, one who better endures pain may be the final victor although his adversary can punch harder. One should enlarge his arsenal so he can widen the scope of his options. That is why ninpo encompasses so many arts and such a variety of attacking mediums: the soft and the hard, the direct and the subtle, limbs only or the whole body. This is true flexibility of maneuverability. When one doesn't know any other way, how can he adjust? The secret of adjustment is wide and varied knowledge, thorough experience and mastery of the basics.

FSN: Why did you part ways with Masaki Hatsumi?

ST: There were differences of opinions with regard to the path ninpo teaching should take.

FSN: The Bujinkan system has been the same for years. Why did you leave when you did?

ST: These are actually two questions. 1) Why did I not leave earlier? and 2) why did I decide to leave at the particular time that I did? As for the first, there are a few reasons. One is that Bujinkan (Hatsumi's organization) was not always the way it is now; it is only in recent years that Hatsumi began to deviate from the true path. Another is that I still needed to learn from somebody, still needed a teacher and Takamatsu Sensei has already passed away. In addition, I did not realize Hatsumi is truly bent on doing things the way he was doing them. I thought he was simply swayed by other people, events, or momentary impulses. I believed he would go back



Tanemura said that unless ninjutsu is taught by proper, dedicated instructors the true art will surely die out.

to the right way, the old way. For a time, I also gave credit to his judgment, thinking that, perhaps, I didn't have a correct perspective.



The legacy of the ninjutsu is sacred to Tanemura, who says he has a mission to accomplish.

As for the second question, I left when I realized that my perspective is correct, and that the differences cannot be bridged. A few years before that, I had also reached the point where I no longer needed a formal teacher. I have acquired everything that he could give me and my progress henceforth was self-found.

FSN: So, when you reached that point- you decided to leave?

ST: No, I could well continue being part of Hatsumi's organization while growing on my own. I didn't need to part ways just for that. Also, for the good of ninpo it would have been better not to split. It was the profound difference in outlook and a particular occurrence which brought about the decision. I gave my life to ninpo, to the art, not to a person it should he understood that "guruism" is contrary to ninpo concepts and ideals. As an example, the picture of one's teacher is set near the kamiza (seat of honor), not on it; we do not pay obeisance to a person, dead or alive, though we show due respect to him as a source of our knowledge.

FSN: And then? Did you have any plans right away? Did you immediately set up your own organization?

ST: No. I continued to teach my students, of course, and sought answers in meditation and prayers. When my plans began to shape up, I paid a visit to Takamatsu Sensei's grave and prayed there. It was there that I felt inspired to go ahead with my plans. I then visited Mrs. Tane Takamatsu (Sensei's widow), and told her about my plans. She approved and encouraged me warmly, as did the son of Akimoto Sensei, Takamatsu Sensei's foremost student.

FSN: I thought Hatsumi was the foremost student.

ST: Hatsumi was the youngest and it was Akimoto himself who suggested he (Hatsumi) become the next soke (master) because of that. You see, Akimoto himself was already well advanced in years at the time, and he thought he was doing that for the good of the clan.

FSN: Do you maintain then that only Genbukan is teaching true ninpo now?

ST: No. I maintain that there are two approaches. Certainly every person is influenced by events and experiences that affected him personally and I assume I am not different than Hatsumi or others in that. I am not the reincarnation of Takamatsu Sensei- much as Hatsumi is not, and just as Takamatsu was not a copy of Shinryuken Masamitsu Toda Sensei (32nd ninja grandmaster). Things normally change in time and surely ninpo underwent changes throughout the centuries of it's existence, for one of our basic concepts is adjustment to prevailing situations. However, what I am trying to do is capture and preserve the special attributes of ninpo that were handed down to us. The knowledge I was given is not a personal present with which I can do whatever I

want. It is a sacred legacy to be kept alive. Even as the leader of my own organization, I have responsibilities I cannot shun, and obligations I must fulfill, or else I will not be true to my heritage and to my mission. I realize with humility that people are not generally interested in Tanemura the person as a human being, but in Tanemura the ninpo master. They are after the knowledge and after my views as pertaining to that. An ambassador of a country should be the representative of that country and express his government's views, not his own. Surely, I must then make sure that I truly represent the art and not only myself. Genbukan, therefore, is dedicated to ninpo, to the ancient wisdom of our sages of old as passed down through the centuries. It is not the manifestation of any egotistic assumptions Tanemura the person may have.

FSN: In what way is Genbukan different?

ST: In order to answer that, I should explain a little about ninpo. Nowadays, I often hear it said that ninpo is this or that; art of assassins, a way to be happy, to know oneself, etc. Some go as far as saying that ninpo is whatever you want it to be. These are all true to a point. However, the base line is-there is something called ninpo, not only in one's imagination. The correct practice of this "thing," in its entirety, will bring about the ability to know oneself and be happy. One should realize that there are other paths to the same goal.



According to Tanemura, Hatsumi's Bujinkan is only teaching a segment of ninjustu. He promised the Genbukan will remedy that.

Practicing karate might lead you to the ability to defend yourself. The study of religion may lead to inner serenity and so on. What is unique in ninpo is its ability to enhance your own capabilities in any given area you choose to specialize in, and the fact that it can substitute for all or any of these if you choose to view it that way. The prerequisite, however, is that you study it correctly and in its entirety with a competent and sincere instructor who is willing to teach you all. When this prerequisite is not met, one should not expect results: Studying Latin does not turn one into a doctor, although a doctor does use Latin terms.

Now in recent years, Bujinkan has concentrated on teaching only a segment of ninpo and through Genbukan, I try to remedy that situation. Going back to the example of the doctor: One may read carefully and memorize the symptoms of a disease in a medical encyclopedia, but 1) he would still be unable to propose a cure, and 2) there are numerous other diseases he has not studied. Members of Genbukan will be masters of all segments of ninpo; they'll know them all and know them well. This would be the foundation to their joy and ability, not the passive pleasure of watching me or somebody else perform.

FSN: It still sounds as though you are claiming to be the only teacher of true ninpo.

ST: I am speaking for Genbukan only. I am not out to declare what Bujinkan is all about, certainly not to claim what the various teachers abroad teach-and they do deviate greatly from the approach in Japan and from each other. One of the things I hope to achieve in Genbukan is, that all branches will "speak the same language" as it were; all practice the same way and the same things, so a new student will know he is

getting what he'll be getting if he studied with me. One way to achieve that is by promoting only competent instructors. Some may be good only as far as the physical aspects are concerned, for example, if they switch from another art and when they are very experienced. In that case, they may be head of groups or clubs, but not branches.



Tanemura is master of many weapons and will teach them to worthy students. I will give them everything, he said. I will teach them all.

FSN: How is that?

ST: Many people come to Japan to study. Few stay long enough to capture truly all the subtlety and intricacy of ninpo; fewer capture the spiritual essence. None, as yet (of the foreigners) is a true master. Yet, they say and write a lot, often without permission of the Japanese masters, sometimes contradicting the true concepts or facts. Only a person who has passed the test for renshi (instructor) or higher, is the head of what I term a "branch. " In order to pass that test, a person has

to be fourth den at least. That will assure, hopefully, that he'll be spiritually mature besides being physically competent. Other black belt holders may head groups or clubs and should prove their adherence to the spirit before being promoted. All too often I read statements to the effect that a foreigner has studied so many years-while in truth he only studied a few months or a little over a year. It's true that he was involved with the art for some years, but most of the time was spent teaching abroad, not studying here (Japan). You yourself (Erem) have studied four years under me, which may be equivalent to a university BA; yet many who have studied considerably less, advertise themselves as PhD. Why? I don't want liars to be part of my organization. One has to develop a true heart in himself, not only preach to others about it. I am seeking out those special persons who possess the worthy attributes of humanity. When I find them, when they find me, I will give them everything I have to offer. I will teach them all.