

The return of Tenkara

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To cut a rich, long and very fascinating history short, over the centuries fly fishing has independently evolved in different regions and cultures across the world. Most of us are accustomed to the so-called 'western style'; the traditional arrangement with rod, line and reel. This is the story of Tenkara, an ancient Japanese style of fly fishing, and why it affords the modern day fly fisher an unparalleled experience on the water.

Tenkara strips fly fishing down to its bare essentials. No reel is used, only a rod, line and fly. The telescopic rods are typically long, 12-14ft, with a line which is essentially just a leader, as long as the rod. The leader is either of a traditional style, similar to a furled leader, or just a length of level fluorocarbon, and the rig terminates in tippet and fly. It has a pronounced and unique casting stroke, and one can land the fly with great delicacy, typically at short distances from the angler. The focus is on pure simplicity, to not to get bogged down by gear and different flies, but rather to focus on fly fishing technique, and how you as an angler relate to the very nature of the trout.

It is hard to piece together Tenkara's development in Japan, mainly because it's all in Japanese. What is clear is that it has a long and rich history. The exact meaning of the word 'Tenkara' is unclear, but it is thought to mean 'from the skies' or 'from heaven' which might be a reference to how softly the fly lands on the water during presentation. The exact dates of its emergence in Japan are not known, but the first western reference was made in 1878 by Ernest Mason Satow in his book *Diary of climbing Mt Tateyama*. However, since westerners rarely visited Japan in the 17th century, this date is certainly a poor indicator of Tenkara's development. Apparently, a family-run fly tying business has been producing traditional flies for Tenkara for the past 400 years, and still does so to this day. As the business has remained in the family since then, it can be inferred that, by that time, the sport was sufficiently established in Japan to make tying flies for it a viable business. It's very likely that Tenkara did not develop as a pastime but rather to serve the needs of fishermen, who were responsible for supplying fish to the local villages and needed a simple and very effective way to catch trout.

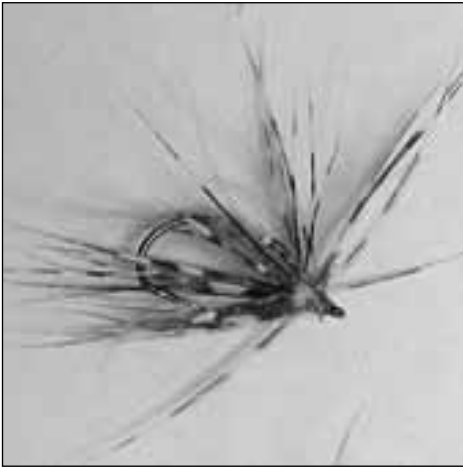
I think that two reasons greatly influenced the development of Tenkara in comparison to western style fly fishing. One was the easy access to bamboo, the other the fairly unique fishing environment in which Tenkara developed. Medieval European fly fishers could not take advantage of a longer rod since the materials used to make the very first fly rods were too heavy and cumbersome in longer lengths. Rods thus remained in the seven to nine foot lengths we still use. European streams are also typically larger with bigger fish, and this no doubt influenced the invention and use of the reel. In Japan, most of the streams are small, run very quick and clear, and the native trout grow to about 14-16 inches so they could easily be subdued without the reel. Japanese rod builders also had plentiful access to bamboo, so light, long rods were the norm. I would argue that under most conditions and provided you are not encumbered by vegetation, a longer rod on a small stream offers an angler more options and versatility and better presentation. Japanese rod builders were quick to see these advantages.

The history and development of this ancient art appeals to me, but I can understand that it does not do so for all anglers. What does Tenkara offer the modern day fly fisher, especially since our regular tools can do the job so well? One can now acquire locally a relatively inexpensive graphite rod from Japan. The sport has really taken off in America, as Tenkara is remarkably effective for fooling trout. Its main advantages are delicacy and accuracy and I think the main reason for its success is that it allows a drag-free drift, with almost no line on the water. A drag-free drift is the Holy Grail for any small stream fisher, and because of the arrangement of the long rod and line, Tenkara facilitates casting flies to hard-to-reach places and long, drag-free drifts, which could not be as easily achieved with a western-style rod. It is particularly suited to casting across streams with conflicting mid currents, as you can keep all the line off the water and easily drop the fly in the desired spot. It also allows you to explore pocket water - which is common on the Cape streams - at a longer distance and you thus alarm less fish.

The distinguishing feature of Tenkara is the traditional flies, or *kebari* in Japanese, the philosophy behind them and how they are fished. Traditional Tenkara flies are wet flies, but with the hackle facing forward. The flies are actively manipulated in the water column, and their pulsating movement entices the fish to strike. Unlike western anglers, Tenkara fishers are less concerned about matching the hatch. Dr Hisao Ishigaki, a contemporary Tenkara master, ties and has used only *one* pattern over the last ten years for all his fly fishing. Often, anglers will only carry one fly pattern in a few different sizes and colours. This Japanese philosophy challenges our obsession to meticulously match flies to the prevailing hatches on the water. The idea is that the fish can be fooled no matter what the hatch is, solely by using the correct techniques, and by stimulating their innate predatory instinct. This involves presenting and manipulating the fly in a way the fish finds irresistible. I think the development of this one fly trend has much to do with the fishing environment in Japan. The currents are fast and fish only have a split second to take the fly, so are less concerned with an exact match but more with capturing an enticing morsel. Nonetheless, Tenkara's delicacy means that it is fantastic for dry fly fishing, and I also routinely fish RABs, mayfly and Elk Hair Caddis patterns to great effect on our home streams. I have not yet had the courage to take just one pattern for a day of fishing.

It is convenient to make quick comparisons between western style fly fishing and Tenkara, but I don't feel that the arguments add much to a deeper understanding of either. I think it is best to view the two as separate means or styles of achieving the same goal. It is simply fascinating to approach fly fishing from another angle, to realise that the sport has an even richer history than most of us realise. Practically, it's also just a great tool on a small stream. Modern Tenkara rods are telescopic, fold up to about 21 inches and weigh as much as a cellphone so they are easily accommodated in a backpack. Armed with only a few flies and some tippet material, you are ready to tackle any water. Playing and landing a fish without a reel may seem challenging, and a larger fish requires some adept playing, but, as with a western-style rod, you can simply lift the rod and the fish is drawn to your net. It really is designed only for small streams, and with tippets of 5X or less.

I was drawn to Tenkara because of its almost poetic simplicity. I think this is borne from a childhood fascination with fish, rather than just the act of catching them. The world of life inside a stream is always an unwelcoming environment for a human – no matter what, we just weren't built for it. But if you stare long enough at a nice run a sudden revealing flash



Tenkara flies resemble the British soft hackle spiders but some have the hackle forced forward to increase movement in the current. The fly at bottom right was tied in the traditional sakasa kebari style by Dr Hisao Ishigaki. Photo supplied by www.tenkarabum.com.



Rhodes guide Tony Kietzman fishes Tenkara on the Bokspruit ...



... and brings a fine rainbow trout to hand using one of Stephen Boshoff's Tenkara nets.

of a fish will disclose a world unknown to you. Wild and free and foreign; untouchable and unknowable. It is that wink of life in the water that makes you want to similarly trick that fish to take a fly. In that sense, Tenkara offers an alluring and intimate experience on the water. It strips fly fishing to its naked essentials, and you are free to discover the world of a trout, unencumbered by what we think they prefer, but rather to entice them with the minimum we have. I think a lot of us reach for that while we fish but, by simplifying, Tenkara makes the experience more real, more intimate. It breaks down and slows down what we need to interject into that world just to the minimum, just to its essentials. You had best try it for yourself to see what I mean.

For more information see: A South African Tenkara website: www.tenkara.co.za, TenkaraUSA: www.tenkarausa.com, YouTube video: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N40BOFYKR38>.

Editor's note: *In my circle of fly fishing friends and acquaintances I have yet to find one who has not become a convert to Tenkara fishing. CPS committee member and the owner of the Stream X fly shop in Milnerton, Craig Thom, imports a range of Tenkara tackle and a book, 'Tenkara: Radically Simple Ultralight Fly Fishing, by Kevin Keleher. Cape Town rod and net maker and Tenkara enthusiast, Stephen Boshoff, produces some beautiful and practical Tenkara nets, which are quite different in style to a normal trout net. Many Tenkara flies are similar to the North Country Spiders or Soft Hackles used in Great Britain for centuries. For an article on just how deadly these patterns are, see the article by Sean Mills, 'Fishing soft hackle flies – lessons learned'. Piscator No 139, November 2007.*



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