

ALL ABOUT TENKARA.....

Tenkara History

Tenkara can trace its history back well over 2000 years to ancient Japan. The Tenkara techniques have been re-introduced to the western world in recent years as the ideal method for fishing small streams for smaller fish.

The simple tackle is light and easy to use. Modern materials allow for a very fine carbon telescopic pole to be made that is capable of casting a fine line attached to the tip of the rod. The fly is tied on the end of the line. There is no reel.

The Japanese are not the only ones fishing this way through history. This method is very similar to those used by Izaak Walton and Charles Cotton in the most famous angling book ever written "The Compleat Angler", that appeared in five editions between 1653 and 1676. They had long poles with a line on the end with an artificial fly. Earlier than Mr Walton and Mr Cotton, the use of artificial flies to catch fish was first recorded by the Roman Claudius Aelianus near the end of the 2nd century. William Radcliff (1921) gives the credit to Martial (Marcus Valerius Martialis), born some two hundred years before Aelianus, who wrote: "Who has not seen the scarus rise, decoyed and killed by fraudulent flies." It is doubtful that they had reels in those days either.

Technique and Flies

The western world has been very preoccupied with finding the perfect fly. If the fish are not biting then there has been a tendency to blame it on the fly rather than anything else. Tenkara takes a slightly different approach and focuses on presentation and accuracy. It is said that some of the early commercial Tenkara fishermen in Japan only ever used one pattern. This is perhaps a little extreme, even for the most pure Tenkara fishermen today. Having said that, the Japanese Masters have very limited patterns they use and trust. They say it is all about putting the fly where the fish live.



Tenkara flies have traditional Japanese names like sakasa kebari or dry flies and gujo kebari for wet flies. They are tied on a variety of hooks but the traditional look is to use a hook with no eye, not even a spade end. The shape of the hooks is also slightly unusual to the western eye. A loop of silk or similar is tied at the front to attach the line to. The hackle is swept forwards to give it more action as it is bounced gently through the currents. Having said that you can tie these flies with the normal eyed hooks you would use for western patterns. The choice is always yours.

With such light tackle it is possible to present a fly accurately at range without any line on the water to spook the fish. Repeated casting and more intensive coverage of a swim is therefore quite possible.

Tenkara Rods

Historically Tenkara rods were possibly bamboo. Modern rods are telescopic hi modulus carbon fibre. The modern rod is lightweight and strong. The tip of the rod is very fine carbon fibre perhaps only 1mm or so thick depending on the rod. These fine tips need careful protection when extending or collapsing the rod. On the end of the tip is a short length of braid called a "lillian". It is to this the Tenkara line is attached. When collapsed there is a stopper that plugs in to prevent the rod extending when not required.



At the other end of the rod is the handle which is the same as a western fly rod grip. At the end of the rod is the butt cap which unscrews to give access to the sections for taking apart and cleaning. Only take apart the rod with extreme care and keep the sections in order and the right way round. It's a nightmare trying to get the rod back together if you don't.

Rods are classified in terms of their flex. If you imagine the rod has 10 sections then the flex is easier to explain. A soft 5:5 rod has 5 stiff sections and 5 flexible sections. This gives a large curve to the rod and gentle casting action. The best casting stroke is the Tenkara style which is much more "wristy". A 6:4 rod has 6 stiff sections and 4 flexible sections. These rods are the middle ground and the most popular because they offer easy casting but with a bit more backbone for handling larger fish. 7:3 rods are what the west would call a "fast action". With only the top 3 sections flexing the rod is quite stiff and a more western style of casting works best.

Now here's the catch. Not all 6:3 rods are created equal. A 14 foot 6:3 will feel softer than a 12 foot 6:3. So for a longer rod I would consider a grade up in stiffness than my preference. However, it also depends on the fish targeted. Use a stiffer rod for bigger fish.



As a general rule, choose the longest rod you can for the water you fish most. The longer rod will give you better reach and line control.

Tenkara Lines

There is very little information on traditional Tenkara lines. However, lines made from horse hair and plant fibres would be in keeping with the times. You can still get horse hair lines if you really want them.



Modern Tenkara lines are very light and designed to be cast and help off the current out of the water. Experiments with nylon and co-polymer level lines have not been as successful as fluorocarbon. Especially the hi-viz fluorocarbon that is available. There are also tapered fluorocarbon lines that provide a much more delicate presentation than the level lines. Japanese line makers, Sunline, have invested a lot of research into developing fluorocarbon lines specifically for the Tenkara. These lines have superior casting characteristics to the "off the shelf" fluorocarbon that you might buy in larger diameters for sea fishing.

Level lines are all about the diameter. It doesn't make any sense to talk about lbs breaking strain. Japanese line numbers that equate to diameters are as follows:

Size 1.5 (diameter 0.205mm = .008")

Size 2 (diameter 0.235mm = .009")

Size 3 (diameter 0.285mm = .011")

Size 4 (diameter 0.330mm = .013")

Size 5 (diameter 0.370mm = .0146")

Relating size to which rod is a common question. Here is a rough guide:

Rod Flex	Line Weight	Notes
5:5	2	Only for still conditions
	3	Good match for the rod
	4	Easier to cast in a breeze
	5	Only if you really have to in a stronger breeze.
6:3	3	Good match for proficient caster
	4	Best general purpose line but you won't keep as much off the water as a size 3.
	5	Only when there is a breeze and in shorter lengths
7:2	3	Possible to cast but skills required
	4	Best general purpose line
	5	Casts well but not so easy to keep off the water

Level lines are not the only way to go. Furled lines with their tapered design are commonly used. Many feel these are the best way to present a fly delicately. Tenkara is all about the presentation after all. The problem with furled mono is that if you break off on a snag it curls up on itself. Modern development using furled spectra has all but solved this issue.

There are those that swear by furled leaders and those that prefer level lines. There are advantages to each. Level lines are cheaper and easier to set at the desired length. Furled leaders give a better presentation. Level lines can be in various weights and arguably cast better in a breeze. Furled leaders can have different tapers for different conditions. You pay your money you take your choice. Tapered fluorocarbon is the middle ground. The versatility of the level line buy changing the butt length with the presentation of the furled line. Price is in the middle as well for tapered fluorocarbon.

How long should a Tenkara line be? That is like asking, How long is a piece of string? For simplicity a leader plus tippet slightly longer than the rod length is easier to handle. However, it is perfectly possible to cast a line twice the rod length but the line handling difficulties increases as a result. Remember there is no reel. The length you choose to fish will depend upon the conditions you are fishing in. Shorter lines for more densely vegetated stream and longer in more open conditions.

Similarities to Western Methods

Czech nymph, close fishing with a very short leader and heavy bugs is all about covering every inch or the river bed with the flies. Putting the fly patterns on the fish's nose. Tenkara allows this across difficult currents and flows. It allows the fisherman to target pockets that potentially hold fish that a traditional fly line would struggle to reach without some terrible drag on the fly.

French leader is probably the closest modern technique using modern tackle with a reel. That does not mean there isn't a synergy between the techniques. I believe that lines developed for Tenkara will work just as well in French leader set ups and vice versa.

What is Tenkara?

Tenkara is not "New"... it has a very long history with equivalents round the world.

Tenkara is not "Dapping" ... There are a range of casting techniques employed to present the fly.

Tenkara is not only for small fish ... A stiffer rod can cast a heavier line and will tame much larger fish.

Give Tenkara a chance and find a simplicity that will take moments to learn and a lifetime mastering.

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