

LIKE CLOUDS AND WATER: THE NATURAL WAY OF MANAKA UNSUI

by Eric Baluja



Lt. Col. Fumio Manaka – Unsui Sensei – smiles after having struck his “opponent” and student, Shawn Havens. This photo is taken at the Honbu Dojo in 2002.

When he was a little kid, Fumio Manaka thought *ninja* were “very cool.” The legends of their superhuman feats of espionage and almost magical ability to become seemingly invisible to pursuers filled his comic books and ignited his imagination.

At that time he had no way of knowing that, by the time he was a teenager, he would be introduced to and become the student of a headmaster of several classical Japanese martial traditions...or that some of those traditions would include the last vestiges of *ninjutsu*, the techniques of invisibility and stealth practiced by those Japanese warriors popularly referred to as “ninja.” And he probably had not even fantasized that, by the time he was fifty, he would have been granted licensure in these martial traditions, established his own dojo and international organization, or achieved such a level of skill that he could then pursue “a freedom of movement and lifestyle that is restricted by nothing.”

It is in this spirit that the man who is now Japan Self Defense Force Lieutenant Colonel Fumio Manaka has taken the martial name *Unsui*. Composed of the characters for “cloud” and “water,” the term is used to describe itinerant Zen monks whose life of wandering and constant study, “...is characterized by freedom, spontaneity, humility, and inner strength, plus the resilience to adapt...to changing circumstances without strain or anxiety.” 1

雲
水

“Unsui,” “cloud” and “water,” by Manaka Unsui Sensei

“Unsui’ is a monk or priest in training who is seeking the Way. I think that I will never be complete or perfect until the day I die,” Manaka Sensei asserts. “I took this name with the intention of studying and training for as long as I live.”

Lt. Col. Manaka possesses full licensure in *Gyokko-Ryu Kosshijutsu* (a *ryu-ha*, or tradition, of unarmed combat primarily based on soft tissue and pressure point attacks), *Koto-Ryu Koppojutsu* (“*koppojutsu*” literally means “bone breaking art”) and *Togakure-Ryu Ninpo* (ninjutsu). He has also been granted teaching licenses for *Kukishinden-Ryu Happo Biken* (a branch of the *Kuki* family martial traditions that includes several weapons systems in its teachings), *Takagi Yoshin-Ryu Jutaijutsu* and *Shinden Fudo-Ryu Daken* and *Jutaijutsu* (which include a wide variety of unarmed combat methods).

However, Manaka Sensei believes, “There is nothing special in receiving these kinds of things. The ability to master things for yourself or to give birth to new things is more important.” With this in mind he founded his own dojo and organization in 1996: the *Jissen Kobudo Jinenkan*.



The Jinenkan logo incorporates the characters for “Jinenkan” and the clouds and water of Manaka Sensei’s martial name. There is also symbolism created by the three levels of clouds, the three characters, and the three streams of water.

The words *jissen* and *kobudo* lend themselves to literal translation relatively easily – “real fighting”, “classical martial ways”. *Jinenkan*, on the other hand, has shades of meaning that are not handily described. “The spirit of Zen,” according to Manaka Sensei, “is accepting that what is, is; what is not, is not. It is the world of Nature itself. This,” he emphasizes, “is the spirit of the Jinenkan. Our intention is to teach, through *budo* [the martial way], the things that are necessary as we go through life.”

FIRST STEPS

Although he has called Noda City in Chiba Prefecture, Japan home for most of his life, Fumio Manaka was born in neighboring Ibaraki Prefecture on December 14, 1945. His family moved to Noda by the time he was old enough to enter elementary school. He started studying judo in Noda at the age of twelve.

“At the time I started, I just wanted to be stronger,” Manaka Sensei notes. Strength was an issue because he didn’t have much of it as a child. He remembers being taken to see doctors practically every two days until he was about ten years old because he had a weak immune system and was as a result a sickly child. His parents were so concerned about his condition that they rarely allowed him to leave the house at all. He finally decided that the only way he was going to get better was to strengthen himself so, against his parents wishes, he took up swimming and judo. His other motivation for taking up martial arts was one common to boys his age: “I did not want to lose if I got into a fight.”

In his second year of studying judo he won first place in individual competition at a northern Chiba regional junior high school tournament. Masaaki Hatsumi, a *seikotsu-i* (a cross between an osteopath and a chiropractor) also from Noda, was a special guest at the event. When the young Manaka went up to receive his prize he was introduced to the man who would change the course of the rest of his life.

"The Director of the Board of Education gave me the prize certificate and pointed to Hatsumi Sensei sitting next to him with the comment that he was a 'ninja,'" Manaka Sensei recalls. "When I heard the word 'ninja' I could only associate it with Sarutobi Sasuke [the "ninja" version of Spiderman, more or less] from the comic books. I thought that sounded cool!" 2

By the time he was twenty, Masaaki Hatsumi had studied and achieved significant ranks in several modern Japanese martial ways, including karate-do, judo, aikido and kendo. In his early twenties, however, he decided to start over and take up the study of the classical Japanese martial ways, or *koryu bujutsu*. He studied several traditions including *Masaki-Ryu* and *Asayama Ichiden-Ryu* from various teachers for almost ten years. According to Hatsumi Sensei his search for a true martial arts master ended when he met and became the student of Takamatsu Toshitsugu of Nara in 1957, under whose tutelage he would remain until Takamatsu Sensei's death in 1972. Within that time Takamatsu Sensei appointed Hatsumi as his successor in several of the ryu-ha that he had been made headmaster of by his own teachers, Toda Shinryuken Masamitsu, Mizuta Yoshitaro Tadafusa and Ishitani Takekage Masatsugu.



Takamatsu Toshitsugu Sensei instructing Masaaki Hatsumi in the use of the jutte.

Mr. Hatsumi invited the young Manaka to join his classes once he heard that the boy was also a Noda City resident. "Hatsumi Sensei recommended that I try it," Mr. Manaka recalls, "and I was convinced that it would make me stronger than judo would."

He took him up on the offer and showed up at Hatsumi's home, which also served as his seikotsu office. What Hatsumi had not realized when he made his invitation, however, was that the young man was only fourteen. As soon as he found out he advised the boy to wait a year. Not to be deterred, the young Manaka said, "I came all this way to see you, so why don't you show me just a little bit today anyway?" And that's how he got started. The teen was so sure that this was what he was looking for that he quit judo shortly thereafter.

"I was in the middle of my adolescent years," Manaka Sensei remembers, "when I wanted to rebel against everything that any adult ordered me to do. Sensei was so different from the other adults, however. He was not strict or particular about anything. I wanted to be like Sensei. I wanted to have that kind of open and accepting heart." 3

Hatsumi Sensei's sincerity and openness were inspiring, Manaka Sensei remembers, "...but the training itself was not fun at all, because all I did was receive techniques." He recalls spending the first two and a half years of his study learning only about punching, kicking and *ukemi* – falling and receiving skills – which was all he needed to know to get bounced around by Hatsumi Sensei and the five or six friends that were training with Hatsumi at the time. "In the beginning," Manaka Sensei says, "I was only a guinea pig for their experiments."

He remembers training in a room in Hatsumi Sensei's house which was about six *tatami* straw mats in size – or little more than a 10' x 10' box. "We would move the furniture and his examining table off to the sides to make space, so really we only had about two or three mats' worth of space to train on. If my ukemi was poor, I would be thrown into the corners of tables and things." Consequently, his ability to receive techniques and take hard falls got better very quickly.

Over time Hatsumi's training friends drifted off one by one, eventually leaving the young Manaka as the senior student. He was soon joined by others, including Tsunehisa (now Shoto) Tanemura, Tetsuji Ishizuka, Hideo Seno and Koichi Oguri. With Manaka Sensei, these gentlemen formed the nucleus around which Hatsumi Sensei built his *Bujinkan Dojo*. These five were the first and among the very few of Hatsumi's students known to have been allowed into and granted licensure in the specific ryu-ha that now make up Hatsumi's syncretic art of Bujinkan Budo *Taijutsu* (lit. "body art" – unarmed combat methods).

It was during his senior year of high school that another key event in Manaka Sensei's life took place. "The reason I entered the military is an interesting story," he relates. "A guy who sat next to me in my senior year of high school asked me if I wanted to take the entrance exam for the Self-Defense Force Academy. There was no testing fee, so I decided to try it. In the end, I passed and that guy failed. When the time came, I took other exams for universities I wanted to go to but I failed them all. So," he adds, sheepishly, "I *decided* to enter the military academy."

Having to be re-stationed every two to three years made it difficult to consistently train under the direct guidance of Hatsumi Sensei. "I covered for it by doing solo training on the things I learned when I was home," Manaka Sensei says. He carefully scrutinized and assiduously worked on all the skills he was being taught in minute detail. He did pushups on his thumbs and finger joints to condition his hands and arms for the striking methods he was learning from Hatsumi Sensei. He struck anything that could withstand his constant practice. He worked to perfect the weapon skills he learned during his trips home to Noda, which included everything from the Japanese sword to the *hanbo* (3' wooden staff) to the *yari* (spear) to specialized weapons like the *kyoketsu shoge*, a hooked knife attached to a metal ring by a length of rope. He wrote copious notes, and pored over texts related to his field of study. He also engaged in matches and trained with practitioners of other martial arts.

"I recall one time when I was facing off against a man who was very good at karate. We started some distance apart, and as we closed in, it was as though the air pressure between us eventually stopped us from coming any closer. This is what ma-ai [timing and distance interval] means. It was an experience that cannot be felt in regular training. When two people face off like that, they are like two dogs bristling and barking at each other, with neither making a move. That feeling of not being able to move forward has gone away, and I now feel like I can walk forward without much effort even if someone is trying to attack me, but that was a necessary experience to go through to come to an understanding of ma-ai." (Fumio Manaka)

In 1971 Hatsumi Sensei took his students to visit his teacher, Takamatsu Toshitsugu, for the first (and last) time. The gnarled old man left quite an impression on them all, as their accounts of that experience all employ the same word to describe him: *eerie*.



A photo taken on the occasion of Hatsumi Sensei's students' only meeting with Takamatsu Sensei in 1971. Front row, from l. to r.: Ishizuka; Takamatsu Sensei; Hatsumi Sensei. Second row: an unidentified individual; Tanemura; Oguri; Manaka. Third row: Kobayashi; Seno.

"Takamatsu Sensei was running a ryokan [inn] next to the Ashihara Shrine in Nara. Hatsumi Sensei, his wife, myself, Tanemura, Ishizuka, Seno, Kobayashi and Oguri all visited. He watched our enbu [martial arts demonstration] and we had a chance to watch his ken-mai [sword-dance] and taijutsu. It was only a year before his death and his face was thin and gaunt. His eyes had a strange whitish color, which was possibly from some disease. All in all he had an eerie appearance about him."

"Hatsumi Sensei called on me to attack him, so I grabbed him, thinking from his size that he would be easy to push down. He did something, lifted one of my hands up, and attacked my ribs with his thumb. It was so painful it felt as though he had stabbed a red-hot poker into my ribs. Takamatsu Sensei was a very eerie individual." (FM)

Another such training experience took place in 1973, while then Captain Manaka was stationed in Hachinohe City in Aomori Prefecture with the JSDF 5th Anti-aircraft Technical Group Ground-to-Air Missile Unit. While engaging in cultural exchange and English classes at a local U.S. Army base, he was introduced to a Green Beret sergeant who was just back from Vietnam and was said to have quite some skill with knives. "He was surprisingly slim, exceptionally handsome and had a gentlemanly personality," Manaka Sensei recounts. "However, I did sense a terrible, weird feeling coming from his whole body, like a puma which had just killed." 4

The sergeant was interested in receiving some instruction,...so to speak. Although Manaka Sensei showed him some formal *kata* (movement patterns), the combat-hardened soldier remained unconvinced and somewhat surly. Manaka Sensei handed the man a short wooden training sword and advised him to attack any way he liked. "I used the strategy 'Let them cut your flesh as you cut their bones'," he recalls, "and while shortening the distance I exposed my left hand well within his space. Very quickly, with a method very economical on movement, he went to cut it." Manaka Sensei ignored the knife, pulled back his left hand and kicked the soldier powerfully, so powerfully in fact that the sergeant was knocked to the ground. "This connected so well I even surprised myself. When I asked him, 'Do you want to do it again?,' he replied, 'That won't be necessary.'" Manaka Sensei felt that the American soldier had come to appreciate the Japanese martial ways. "From that day his attitude changed completely and he came to address me as 'Sir.' I naturally continued to interact with him as before, with an attitude of respect and affection." The two soldiers became good friends. "I enjoyed teaching him how to throw *shuriken* [hand thrown blades], and learning in exchange how to throw knives the American way." 5

Manaka Sensei believes that his years of training in the traditions that he was accepted into by Hatsumi Sensei, which are devoid of competitive aspects and do not overemphasize athletic ability, size or speed, formed the basis of his present movement, way of thinking, and way of being. "Taijutsu has been the greatest factor in polishing myself as a person.," Manaka Sensei says. "Now, budo has become a part of the rhythm of my life."

JINEN (Nature)

Nature and natural adaptability are the core principles of Manaka Unsui Sensei's movement, thinking, lifestyle and interests. Nature is the primary element of the names he has chosen for himself and his dojo and is evident in his skill in the martial ways that he has studied for the last four decades. It also shines through in his hobbies, his outlook, and his character.

He insists, however, that such ability and adaptability do not come...well...*naturally*. He believes that to achieve any degree of naturalness a student of budo must first pay careful attention to the fundamental skills of the path he or she has chosen to study, practicing those skills diligently, correctly and repeatedly. The essence of his message to all practitioners has remained the same over the years: "Focus on proper basic technique," just as he had to in order to achieve his present skill level, freedom of movement and attitude. This may seem like a very simple fact, but it is important to understand that there is absolutely no way around it, no shortcut to the *kamiwaza* ("divine techniques") that true artists like Masaaki Hatsumi can now perform effortlessly. Manaka Sensei became Hatsumi Sensei's student only about three years after Hatsumi himself had begun studying under Takamatsu Sensei. As a result, he witnessed firsthand the amount of sweat, blood, effort and attention to detail that went into the making of the man who many now call a martial arts genius. He knows that simply parroting such genius is futile. He stresses the vital importance of the basics to his students because, as he says, "I do not want to build castles on sand."

"Soon after Unsui Sensei began the Jinenkan," recalls Shawn Havens, Manaka Sensei's personal student and the first Jinenkan *dojo-cho* (training hall chief instructor), "he came to Dayton [Ohio] and gave a private training session on the very basic skills just prior to his seminar. That's when I realized that I knew nothing." Mr. Havens felt compelled to remove the black belt he had been awarded a decade earlier by a related organization. "I felt wonderful and terrible at the same time." 6



Manaka Unsui Sensei faces off against John Orth, Jinenkan Atlanta Dojo Dojo-Cho

"When I first saw him move I just knew that was it," Mr. Havens remembers. "His taijutsu was so clear, so clean. There is a beauty in the simplicity of his approach. To be good enough to accomplish safely in one movement what would take someone else three movements to do is a very high level of skill and takes a lot of practice. To make a technique look simple and easy when there are so many small things to be aware of and to do correctly is a true sign of mastery." 7

Manaka Sensei's tendency has always been to teach the lessons he learned during his thirty-six year relationship with Masaaki Hatsumi very directly, very honestly. According to Mr. Havens, "Sensei teaches according to the tenets of each ryu-ha. He passes the

knowledge on in a very clear and thorough manner." Manaka Sensei presents the ideas behind each tradition in much the same way he learned them: discretely and comprehensively. "Without these ideas," Mr. Havens says, "my practice would be about hollow techniques. By honoring these aspects of the ryu-ha Sensei teaches, we each have a fair and equal chance of truly understanding what we are studying." 8

The focus of Manaka Sensei's current teaching is, in his words, "Teaching people to 'modulate' when to let things flow by and when to use their strength." He uses the forces of nature to explain this idea: "Natural phenomena, such as clouds, water, wind or lightning, never force anything at all. They simply move in the direction which conditions have set up for them." It is this kind of attitude that Manaka Sensei is trying to impart to his students, an attitude which he hopes will affect not only their training but also their lives.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

Mr. Havens is one of a large number of non-Japanese that have gone to Manaka Sensei seeking his instruction. Manaka Sensei sees no problem with this at all, despite the language barrier (which he is working at surmounting anyway). "Words are used to explain, but learning [martial arts] is done with the body," he maintains, "so I believe that this is something that non-Japanese can most certainly master. Even for the Japanese, nobody can ever master it without enough training. And humans have not changed for thousands of years. I think that teacher-student relationships can be made regardless of race."



The Jinenkan Dojo-cho at a seminar in Maryland, September, 2000 (from l. to r.): Sukh Sandhu; Dr. Joseph Bobovsky; Scott Mueller; David Hewitt; Manaka Unsui Sensei; Shawn Havens; John Orth; and Scott Teague.

In an effort to share his experience Manaka Sensei has spent almost all his vacations since 1986 giving seminars, mostly in the United States. These are characteristically fast-paced, with a vast amount of material being covered in only a few days. "My intention when I teach a seminar is that everyone should remember and learn everything," he jokes. He readily admits that he can only provide a minimal introduction in such a setting, and that this is not his ordinary style of teaching. Manaka Sensei is in fact well known as a strict technician, demanding that his students respect what they are learning by doing their utmost to do the things he teaches correctly. "I would rather go much slower and correct more carefully as I do when I teach regular classes."

Within the next year Manaka Sensei's regular classes will move to Maryland, on the east coast of the United States, which is where he intends to settle once he has retired from the Japanese military and where he will establish his first formal training hall. Although when he gets here he'll find that the tendency has been to alter classical martial arts to ensure customer satisfaction (a trend cheekily referred to as the "McDojo phenomenon"),

Manaka Sensei asserts, "Having people understand my martial art comes first. I will never think about ways to teach budo for the sake of getting money."

His diverse interests factored into his decision regarding where in the U.S. to settle. Manaka Sensei's interest in nature has led him to undertake a rather interesting array of outdoor activities including golf, fishing, ice skating, skin diving, sky diving, skiing, scuba diving and para-planing (you sit in what looks like a go-cart attached to a giant fan, while an open parachute attached to the vehicle keeps it aloft and steers it!). In order to be able to pursue these activities, he made sure to select a safe location close to both the mountains and the ocean.

Manaka Sensei also has an avid interest in his country's cultural arts, and has practiced calligraphy and traditional dance...although he admits, "I studied Japanese dance only because I was forced to."

"I recommend studying lots of different things," he says. "Humans are creatures who learn by experiencing." Regarding his own interests, Manaka Sensei says, "I am interested in 'movement in the midst of stillness' and 'stillness in the midst of movement.' It is interesting because it is difficult." This philosophy inspires his study of Zen Buddhism, the tenets of which imbue his approach to martial arts and life.



Jinen-Ryu bikenjutsu at the September, 2000 seminar in Maryland. Uke: Shawn Havens.

When Manaka Sensei established the Jinenkan he also decided to further systematize the lessons he had learned and the sum of his experiences in a new format, which he has called the *Jinen-Ryu*. He describes the *Jinen-Ryu* as, "...the use of weapons as an extension of taijutsu; using the weapon rather than letting it use you." The *Jinen-Ryu* incorporates techniques and strategies for using two swords (*nito*), the *tanto* (knife), the *jutte* (a short metal truncheon with a small hook), the *kusari fundo* (a short weighted chain), and other sets of skills. Manaka Sensei says that he created the *Jinen-Ryu*, "...to let people know clearly my way of thinking and the standards I have in mind regarding budo."

Another of his actions upon establishing the Jinenkan was the creation of the official Jinenkan website (<http://www.jinenkan.com>). The site provides the general public with an overview of the organization, its rank structure, articles by Manaka Sensei, training tips, photos, links to related sites and direct e-mail communication with the man himself. He also takes the time to write and issue a monthly letter to all Jinenkan members. These usually provide guidance on fundamental techniques, or relate some aspect of the traditions he teaches. He has also released videotapes of his seminars and private training sessions, most of which are only available to his direct students, in order to facilitate their training until he moves to the U.S.. When he does get here, Manaka Sensei says he is interested in instituting a *shosei*, or live-in student, program. In this system certain students will be chosen to live with and learn from him, in exchange for which they agree to throw themselves not only into their studies but also into all aspects of maintaining the household and making sure that Sensei has time to teach by taking care of even the most minute chores. As one author puts it, "It is by no means an easy lifestyle; it is a twenty-four hour-a-day responsibility." 9

"My purpose is to give what I have to everyone as soon as possible." Manaka Unsui Sensei's goal is clear, but he insists that those who come to learn from him understand that it is not merely a matter of showing up to receive a free gift. He asks his students to work hard to understand his way of thinking and, "...put the things they have been taught into practice with a heart that is open and accepting." When asked how large he hopes his organization will get he says, almost predictably, "I will leave that to nature." He states that it is his fervent hope, "...to have more people, even just one more, who will understand."

For the inspiration to continue on the arduous and relatively thankless path of budo, Manaka Sensei's students need only consider the man himself, who has spent over forty years and has sworn to spend the rest of his days walking along with them while showing them the way. He is living proof of the value of perseverance, consistent, focused training, and their natural results.

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Footnotes

1. Philip Kapleau, Three Pillars of Zen, Anchor Books, 1965, p. 361.
2. Stephen K. Hayes, "Major Manaka's Warning," Musubi, November-December, 1988, p. 1.
3. Hayes, p. 2.
4. Fumio Manaka, "Recollections," Sanmyaku, 1994, Vol. 1, No. 3, p. 14.
5. Manaka, same.
6. Eric Baluja, "The Jinenkan in America: An Interview with Shawn Havens," Ura & Omote (internet newsletter), September, 1998.
7. Baluja, same.
8. Baluja, same.
9. Gaku Homma, Aikido Sketch Diary, Frog, Ltd., 1994, p. xxiv.

NOTE: All quotes not referenced in these footnotes came from personal communication with Fumio Manaka.

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