

Tenkara Information

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I. Approach to Tenkara

- A. I use the “traditional” tenkara approach, as per Masami Sakakibara (“Tenkara no Oni” – tenkara demon) and Dr. Hisao Ishigaki (primary tenkara teacher – tenkara king)
- B. Appreciate where you are, rather than focusing on how many or large the fish!
- C. Relaxed but accurate casting
- D. I use TenkaraUSA as the primary provider of rods and information for people beginning tenkara flyfishing. TenBum.com is a good source for many Japanese rods. There are also several US rod providers, such as Teton Tenkara, DragonTail Tenkara, Tenkara Rod Company, and Tenkara Tanuki . There are others as well.
- E. The fundamental tenkara approach to fly fishing is not to match the hatch; but to focus on the details of water conditions and currents, different fly presentations and manipulations, and using flies that are simple but give a general impression of being buggy.
- F. Use one fly as a good first approach to improve fishing skills

II. Basics

- A. **Good reference on basics:** if you are new to tenkara flyfishing, or just want a refresher on some things, check out the www.TenkaraUSA.com website.
- B. **Opening/closing rod:** use steady hand pressure to seat the sections: not too tight or loose. To close the rod, collapse the sections starting at the handle end, where the thickest sections are.
- C. **Types of lines:**
 - 1. Level lines: level fluorocarbon lines available in 2.5#, 3.5#, and 4.5#. I recommend 3.5# orange - most versatile and visible. Purchased as a 20-meter (65 feet) spool, which you can cut to desired lengths.
 - 2. Tapered braided lines (9', 10'6", and 13') – easy to cast. Purchased at one of the available fixed lengths.
 - 3. Tapered nylon lines (11'6" and 14'9") – easy to cast. Purchased at one of the available fixed lengths.
 - 4. All lines will sink, and can be fished on the surface or below the surface. The nylon lines and braided lines sink more slowly than the level lines.
- D. **Before Fishing:** The first time you use a level line or tapered nylon during the day, it's a good idea to stretch the line out in sections to remove the coils from the line holder. Don't stretch the tippet, though, or put sideways pressure on the tip section. The braided lines do not need stretching.
- E. **Cleaning after fishing:** remove rod base plug, disassemble sections, wipe off and dry overnight. Reassemble in reverse order, starting with the lillian end section.
- F. **If rod sections bind or don't move smoothly when closing on the stream:** do not force!! Disassemble, rinse sections in stream, wipe off, reassemble, and check for no binding. Dry at home later.

III. Knots for level lines

- A. **Line knots:**
 - 1. The lillian should have an overhand stopper knot in it. If it does not when purchased, tie one as close to the end of the lillian as you can.
 - 2. There are a number of knots that can be used for tenkara. The following is just one possibility.
 - 3. For level lines, a single loop slip knot, for the lillian end of the line. The lillian can also be put twice through the slip knot. On the tippet end, of the line, use a figure 8 or double overhand knot as a stopper knot.
 - a) Cautions on tying the line to the lillian: be sure to keep end rod section collapsed to protect it, particularly when tying the line onto the lillian, or taking it off. Never place any sideways stress on the end section, as it can break easily.

4. For tapered nylon and braided lines, use a girth hitch on the lillian (with stopper knot).
5. For the tippet, you can tie onto the line with a double loop slip knot; or using a Surgeon's loop in the tippet, then tie onto the line with a girth hitch.
6. Use whatever knot you are comfortable with to tie the tippet to the fly. A Davy's knot ("Davy and a half") is known for its ability to consume very little tippet.
7. You could also consider TenkaraUSA's 'one knot' (a double loop slip knot), which serves for all the connections. Check out the video on their website.
8. Using a line about the length of your rod is good for many stream situations.

B. Knot references:

1. There are several references for some good approaches, with videos included:
 - a) TenkaraUSA: <https://blog.tenkarausa.com/learn-tenkara/>
 - b) For the Davy's knot: https://www.netknots.com/fishing_knots/davy-knot

IV. Casting

A. Arm position: elbow close to your side and relaxed, use forearm motion, a stiff wrist. Elbow close for casting, striking and landing fish. They are long rods, so if you can't reach some place, move rather than reaching out. There is another form of casting that is sometimes used, where the forearm and upper arm stay at a right angle, and the casting motion is shoulder motion. This can be useful for longer lines, or for when there is fatigue from forearm casting; one can switch between the two styles.

B. Standard cast: 12 to 10 pattern. 12-11 sometimes, to better land the fly first.

1. No false casting is used.
2. As in Western casting, need to apply smooth acceleration on back cast, with the end of the back cast a reversal of direction to a forward cast, rather than a stop. When the rod flexes to the back, take advantage of it for the forward cast. The line need not straighten out on the back cast. Most of the motion is in the forearm. Speed, rather than power, is important.
3. In casting, drifting or other presentation, and landing fish, keep your elbow in and close to your side.
4. Try to minimize the vibration of the rod on the forward cast, as this will introduce waves in the line. A relaxed arm and grip is important for this.

C. Problems

1. If the back cast is not strong enough, the line will hit the rod tip on the forward cast and wrap itself around the rod tip, due to the flexibility of the rod. The first thing to try in this case is to point the rod straight up; the line and tangle may slide down the rod where you can work with it. If not, collapse the rod with as little jiggling as possible (which complicates the snarl). Consider removing the fly to untangle the mess, and retying the fly on – much faster!
2. If the forward cast is overpowered, the line will pile up. As in Western casting, you need to let the rod do the work. However, in this case, there is very little line loading from the light line: it's the rod's flexibility that throws the line back on the back cast, and then forward again. There are many nuances as in any casting, and you need to discover how your rod works best for you.
3. At the stop at the end of the forward cast, at about 10:00, resist the urge to drop the rod as in Western casting. If you have trouble with this, at the end of the forward cast bring the rod back a little, just to ensure that you don't lower it.
4. If too much wrist is used, along with too broad an angle during the cast (more than 12 to 10), you may get a very open loop, or even hit the tip of the rod with the line. Pay attention to wrist motion and casting angle in this case.

D. Sidearm, steeple, Belgian casts (etc.): the usual variations to avoid flora and with wind; but the 12 to 10 rule still applies, and how you are accustomed to these casts with a Western rod will not work with a tenkara rod.

E. Landing fly before line: You can also slightly lift the rod as the line stretches out at the end of the forward cast to help the fly land first. Do not overpower the cast. With a basic cast with the intention of doing a dead drift (the first approach at a fishing position), the line will not stretch all the way out; but will approximately be at about a 90 deg angle with the rod. With some lines (heavier level line, tapered nylon, braided) it may hang down straighter. This is a natural consequence of the line. If

you cast it out further than this, the line will drag the line back on the water surface, which is undesirable for dead drifting a fly.

- F. **Dealing with flora:** Keep looking around all the time before casting. Plan how you would set a hook and retrieve a fish. Consider the above casts, and also possibly reaching out into the stream and casting parallel to it. It may be easier if you are standing out in the stream.

V. Moving around

- A. **Closing rod with line on:** anchor fly on the line holder, wrap the tippet and line, and anchor the line against the foam (or whatever your line holder uses) with about a foot unwrapped; collapse the rod at the same time. Put the line holder over the collapsed rod with the fly side down. Move to the new location and unwrap the line and tippet. A great advantage of a tenkara rod when moving around in a forested area to a new stream location. You may also use one of the several line holders that attach to the rod base section and allow you to wrap quickly.
- B. **Changing rods or lines:** Same as A, but unhook the line from the lillian and change the line or rod as desired.
- C. **Hooking big flies on the line holder (not needed for the TUSA Keeper):** Stick the hook into the foam with the hook eye toward the center of the line holder. Pull the tippet across part of the line holder and anchor against the foam on the far side of the holder. Wrap the rest of the tippet and the line as usual. This keeps the hackle from a large fly out of the way of the line.

VI. Presentation

A. One-Fly Technique

1. Can be a good approach at first to improve fishing: focus on the water, fish, and presentations of the fly; not the equipment or changing flies.
2. Sakasa Kebari (reverse hackle fly) many consider the best choice: can fish all parts of the water column and gives attractive motion to the fly when animated.
3. In Japan, there are also many flies with hackle facing back or upright. All share the property that they don't use many materials. All flies are designed to manipulate well in different water conditions.

B. Presentation Techniques (partial list)

1. Dead Drift

- a) Be conscious of movement: don't want the fly to swing. Cast across or slightly upstream; then move arm downstream and slightly forward to give a straight drift.
- (1) Variation: can stop the fly for 1 or 2 seconds before resuming the drift.

2. Pause and Drift

- a) Can pause with rod high or low.
- (1) Variation: Pause for up to 5 seconds, then recast to the same place and pause. Objective: keep fly in the same place.
- (2) Variation: when you pause the fly, give it a quick series of small twitches.

3. Up and Down

- a) Cast quarter upstream, follow the drift and pulse the fly by moving rod tip up and down 3-5". Use controlled, regular movement, not erratic. Not long drifts: maybe 4 times, 4 seconds between, then recast.

4. Pulling

- a) Cast downstream, then pull the fly upstream or towards shore at about 1' intervals. Keep rod tip low so fly doesn't come out. Can do this fast or slow.

5. Sinking a fly

- a) Main approach: cast upstream of tumbling water, rod tip low – the churn will sink it. As the line moves, it will eventually tighten. At this point raise the rod tip and follow downstream. Other methods:
- (1) Slowly lower line to get more depth
 - (2) Slowly lower line with back and forth motion
 - (3) Use an up and down motion to help get it down more.
 - (4) Cast upstream, keep rod tip in place until the fly moves downstream from it. Then pull the fly a little upstream, then give slack. Repeat. Each time,

the introduced slack sinks it a little more. Can also pause at various places.

6. Create a Hatch

a) Cast to same spot repeatedly, flicking the water surface lightly, creating the illusion of a hatch. Cast or 5-6 times, then let it sit; and repeat.

7. **Move!** But move like a heron – very slowly and deliberately!

C. Reasons for Tenkara Fly Manipulation

1. Without changing flies, you can:

a) Simulate different insect stages

b) Respond to different fish species behaviors and individual fish behavior

c) Take advantage of different current features

2. Have the luxury to fish 360 deg. from a stream position

VII. Landing a Fish

A. Large fish (~ >14")

1. With tenkara rods, there are two general risks: 1) with tippet at least 5X, too low an angle of the rod can lead to the fish breaking it; 2) at too low an angle to the back, a strong fish could break the rod. A good general rule-of-thumb is to keep the rod higher than 45 deg. in front and back.

2. If the fish is much larger, perhaps above 18", special techniques are needed. If this may be the case where you are fishing, please read my article on the GBF website under Education->Tenkara.

3. When the fish has calmed down and you have maneuvered it to calm water, reach far out, grab the line, and hand line the fish in.

a) The lines are typically 12-15' long, and the tippets 2-4' long; so there is not much hand lining to do.

b) Hold the line not too firmly, in case the fish gets energetic again, thus breaking the tippet. If the fish does, you can let the line go back to being controlled by the rod until the fish calms down again.

4. TenkaraUSA rods and many others are designed to handle fish up to the low 20's inches, assuming you are experienced at doing so. If you consistently catch large fish, there are rods designed with that in mind. Tenkara rods would probably not be a wise choice for steelhead fishing (though maybe "half-pounders").

B. Small fish

1. You can pretty much just land them directly, but it is still a good idea to keep the rod above 45 deg. as above.

VIII. Problems

A. Snarled line: this usually happens because of a weak back cast – the fly hits the rod on the forward cast. As a first approach, raise the rod vertically; the snarl may slide down the rod to where you can work with it. If that doesn't work, while wiggling the rod as little as possible, collapse the rod so you can get to the snarl. Consider cutting the fly off, and then retying it on after either unsnarling the tippet or replacing it.

B. Line caught in the stream: Do not try to unstick the hook by thrusting the rod against it. Try moving to the direction it was stuck from, and flipping the line to try to dislodge it. If you can't wade to it or reach it with a wading staff, then collapse the rod enough that you can grab the line, and pull on it to break the tippet. If you can't get to the line, as a last resort, extend the rod again and pull on the line with the rod pointing directly at the stuck hook (extremely important that the rod point directly at the fly); the tippet will break and not jamb the rod sections too much, if 5x or 6x tippet is used.

C. Fly in tree: don't try to yank it with the rod. If you can reach it with the rod, you might be able to unwind it from the branches. In the end, collapse the rod so you can grab the line and break the

tippet. As a last resort, as above, point the rod straight at the stuck fly, noting that pulling on it may cause the branch to move and make the rod not point straight at the fly!

1. **Evergreen trees:** it may be difficult to retrieve it. May need to break the tippet.
2. **Deciduous trees:** if you see that you are about to hit a deciduous tree or bush, you may be able to give slack as it happens, so it doesn't wrap around the branch. You may then be able to slowly retrieve it. You also try shaking the rod, with short shakes; it may flip the line out of the bush.

D. Stuck rod section when closing the rod: Tap the rod sections several times to jar it loose (pulling only along the rod). If that fails, you can grab the base of the section with thumb and index finger and apply force directly to unstick it.

E. Rod section does not open/close smoothly, or binds: This might happen if your rod, for example, gets into some sand in a stream. It's very important not to force the section at all. The right thing to do is to disassemble the rod sections (remove the base plug on the rod) and rinse them off inside and outside to remove any debris. Then reassemble it, verify that it opens smoothly, and continue fishing. That night you can take it apart again to wipe it off with a clean cloth and to let it dry overnight.

F. A section of the rod breaks

1. With TenkaraUSA rods, you can order replacement sections on their website in the rod purchase section. It is not necessary to send in the rod or broken section. It is inexpensive and quick to do so. It is also possible to replace other rod parts. Accidents do happen!
2. The procedure with other rod suppliers varies, so consult their website; but it only requires replacing the one section, without sending in the rod.

IX. Home after Fishing

A. If it got in the water: Disassemble the sections through the screw cap at the butt end, wipe off the sections, and let it sit apart overnight to dry out the insides of the sections. It's a dry climate here, so it will work all right; in humid climates need to be more aggressive about running thin cloths through the sections to dry them. When disassembling the lillian with the stopper knot will not pull through the next section; just leave the last two sections pulled open – they will dry all right.

B. Wipe off the rod: even if you don't remember getting the rod in the water, it may be worth disassembling the rod and wiping down the sections and letting it air out overnight. I find it a good habit to get into after each fishing trip.