

## Retrospective on Oni School

John Pellegrin

In 2015 I attended the first “Oni School” in Salt Lake City, which was hosted by the Tenkara Guides – the set of three guides that were certified by TenkaraUSA as the first tenkara guides. “Oni” is Masami Sakakibara, who is recognized as the top tenkara flyfisher in Japan. He is often referred to as “Tenkara no Oni”, which loosely translated means tenkara demon, likely because of his intense concentration when he’s fishing a stream or river. In the course he has been just called “Oni”. Prior to 2015, I had purchased my first tenkara rod (the Ayu) in 2011, and by the spring, and henceforth, had stopped Western fishing and converted to tenkara fishing. In 2012 I attended the second TenkaraUSA Tenkara Summit, hosted by the Tenkara Guides in SLC, and met and got coaching from Dr. Hisao Ishigaki, the primary tenkara teacher in Japan. At that time, I met and spent time with Dr. Rob Worthing (one of the three Guides) as part of the Summit. The next year, I hired him for a day of tenkara fishing. So when the first Oni School in 2015 in Salt Lake City was announced, I was quick to register.

The course was a real eye opener! Seeing Oni in action casting and fishing was indeed a wonderful experience, and I aspired to achieving some of that in the future. The course was attended by, and restricted to, 20 people. Among them were Dr. Tom Brown, owner of the Teton Tenkara blog site, where he obtains and evaluates many tenkara rods; Chris Stewart, who owns the Tenkara Bum website, a very informative site for tenkara information and rods; and also Luong Tam, of Tenkara Tanuki, who spoke at the March 2019 GBF meeting.

As a result of Chris Stewart’s wonderful review of the 2017 Oni School, I decided to attend again in 2018. I found that it had changed significantly, as the 2015 course was the first, and hadn’t yet matured into later versions. It was so good, that earlier this year, I contemplated attending again this year; but decided against it. Then Oni informed the Guides this spring that he wished to retire from doing the course – he is around 70, and decided he would do his teaching only in Japan, where he has a collection of ongoing students. By then, Oni School was holding two sessions every year, and the first was filled up; so I signed up for the second session. And so, I attended for the third time.

So what did I and others learn at the course? The first thing to note is that Oni does not speak any English, except for some key fishing terms. However his wife, “Coco”, accompanies him everywhere and she does speak English. Also, the three Guides have worked with him a lot, in Japan as well, so they are fully attuned to what he is doing.

During each of the three days, we met every morning at the Sundance Resort, accessed from the Provo River canyon – we stayed in Orem. After any discussions, we would go to one of several fishing locations on the Provo River. Oni would demonstrate things on the river, then we’d fish that part of the river, we would have a BBQ’d lunch there, and finally move to another location for the afternoon. More demonstrations, fishing, and then end the day. The Guides (Erik Ostrander, John Vetterli, and Rob Worthing) had different primary roles during this: Erik was the MC each morning and accompanied Oni in the river when he was demonstrating, John took care of all the food and other arrangements during the day, and Rob interpreted what Oni was doing during demonstrations. Oni and the Guides were available all other times for any questions, discussions, and coaching.

So what were specific things that I can point to as things learned at the course? Although it's difficult to capture everything, there were specific techniques used by Oni and described very well by Rob, which are worth mentioning:

- Improving one's casting skills. Oni is able to cast very long lines, and in a huge variety of ways. During the course, there are many opportunities to observe him, work with the Guides on casting, and to try things during the fishing period. Clearly, skills develop over the years; but at the course, there are insights for how to improve. They mostly focus on the hand and arm position and motions during casting. Oni is particularly attentive to keeping the elbow relaxed and close to the side, using no force in the back and forward cast – letting the rod do the work, no hesitation between back and forward casts, stopping at 12:00 in the back cast, etc. There are no false casts with tenkara. There are many nuances, as indeed there are in Western casting.
- On the first day at the resort, the first activity is for everyone to space out on a large field there, with rod and line; and Oni, Coco, and the Guides tour around to each person and give them feedback and coaching on their casting. It is an amazing experience! The other aspect is that all 5 people are slightly different in the details of how they cast. So you get a chance to develop your kind of tenkara that works for you. In fact, that is a general takeaway from the overall course.
- It should be noted that Oni has his own style of tenkara fishing. Just as in Western flyfishing, there are many different styles; the same is true of tenkara. He has decided to use unweighted flies, and to attract fish to the surface or near the surface. That informs many of his specific techniques. There are many other approaches to tenkara in Japan; for example, Hisao Ishigaki will use bead head flies in the winter, in order to get more depth. So a part of the course is essentially deciding what your particular tenkara style will be. In the course the Guides are solely teaching the Oni style of fishing; however, they are happy to advise on other things: weighted flies, different types of nymphing adapted to tenkara, etc.
- As Rob put it, the things of importance in decreasing order, are "ichthyology, hydrology, entomology" - understand the fish, the current and micro-currents in the water, and lastly, the insects. For understanding the fish and what they need, as well as different water types, an excellent reference is "Reading Trout Water," by Dave Hughes. In Japan, the emphasis is not on matching the hatch, but on where and how flies are presented, and also manipulated, to attract attention. So flies are much simpler in nature, and manipulation is much more prominent in tenkara fishing.
- Oni has a way that he approaches a stream or river. I think all flyfishing, Western or tenkara, have ways to develop a fishing strategy. One of his rules, which is almost universal, is to not approach or wade water that you have not already fished; that is, clear the water first. Beyond that, he will decide beforehand what sequence he will use to position himself, fishing upstream and downstream, to cover the relevant areas of the river – where fish are likely. He is attentive to many things, some of which we heard about; such as, if he catches a fish, how will he be covering the area so he can land it with minimal disturbance to other fish. On several occasions, as we were on a bridge or back about to observe a demonstration of his, he would first sketch a diagram of the river, and indicate how he was going to fish it. Then he would proceed to do so, catching fish in the process. One thing is clearly apparent: he never casts until when he is firmly planted on the ground (in or out of water), and totally focused on the cast and drift. The Guide Erik described it as having no other activity to divert attention from fishing (moving around, stumbling on rocks ...).

- Within the context of the larger strategy for covering the river, given that there are a number of features in the river (boulders, logs, shelves, etc.), there is the matter of how he fishes each local section. In many cases, he appears to favor in each position he takes fishing downstream on the surface (dead drift, then manipulated surface), downstream under the surface (without manipulation, then several kinds), upstream dead drift, across or quarter up subsurface. He then moves on to another position. The next item (aerial mends) impacts how these are done.
- Tenkara aerial mends: these share an objective with Western aerial mends, which are intended to minimize the effects of fishing line on the water. In Western fishing, it's a way of making casts that move the line, tippet, and fly into alignment relative to the current where the fly is placed. In tenkara, where there is no line on the water (at least at first), the idea is to align the fly and tippet with the current, so that the line weight does not drag the tippet and fly across the current. If there is a wind, and one puts some line in the water to anchor it, it is particularly important; and of course, with subsurface presentation, lining everything up with the current is important. How the mends are executed depends on what the purpose of the cast is: downstream surface, downstream subsurface, upstream surface, upstream subsurface. This is modified by where the current is: straight downstream (as a current seam), upstream in a larger eddy, around rocks, and other current features.
- Landing big fish: this was clearly explained by Rob, and seen over and over again as Oni caught fish of any size, as well as the Guides catching fish. It is mostly actions that are taken when you hook what seems to be, or is, a large fish. When the fish starts to run, it bends the rod down, which is not its power position, where it is strongest. This is generally straight up or slightly forward, depending on the rod. So the action to take is to move the rod forward and down as much as you can, and moving forward yourself, if possible. This allows the rod to return to its power position. You can also hold the rod at the upper end of the handle, brace the back end against your forearm, and put a finger or two up the rod one section to give more leverage for fighting the fish. Lastly, moving the rod angling down to the side, and moving side to side, will direct the trout in different directions, and keep from encouraging it from being on the surface, where the current is fastest. There are also details about hand lining that may be needed. See the article I have placed in the GBF Library on the website.

I will be adding details for some of these things to my tenkara fishouts, as they are applicable. For example, landing large fish for the East Carson fishout. I will also be adding additional documents to the Tenkara education section on the website to detail some of these topics.

In addition to the fishing things, Coco and Oni have a small store of items that they bring in a large piece of luggage: Oni rods (4 or 5 different ones), lines, line holders, patches, T-shirts, etc. I have taken advantage of this, several times!

The experiences from these three sessions that I have attended were unforgettable! As a result of attending them, I feel my tenkara fishing has improved significantly! The following are a few photos from them. As I mentioned above, there are more documents that are, or will be, in the Tenkara document in the Education pull-down on the GBF website.



Oni School 2019, at Sundance Resort, UT



Casting practice at Sundance



Rob Worthing, Erik Ostrander, Masami Sakakibara, John Vetterli



Masami Sakakibara – “Tenkara no Oni”

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