

Tenkara – Japanese Style Fly Fishing

By Rozlynn Orr

As the world watches and recoils from the devastation of the recent earthquake and tsunami in Japan, I have had my nose buried in the book *Tenkara: Radically Simple, Ultralight Fly Fishing* by Dr. Kevin C. Kelleher, MD, and Misako Ishimura. Misako is a fly fishing friend and sent a copy of the book for me to review for our club.

Misa, a FFF, CCI, has an extended list of accomplishments in the fly fishing world ranging from teaching fly casting in Japan with Joan Wulff and the late Mel Kreiger, to her work with Casting for Recovery®, Project Healing Waters™, and Trout Unlimited, Inc.™, to studying fly tying with Mary Dette and Poul Jorgensen. Misa has been the Director of the Theodore Gordon Fly Fishers, and a Director of the International Women Fly Fishers (IWFF). She was president and founded World Fly Fishing Of Japan, where, she formed Fly Fishing Team Japan. As captain and member of Fly Fishing Team Japan for FIPS-Mouche World Fly Fishing Championship, she has fished in England, France, Spain, Slovakia, Sweden, Portugal, Finland, New Zealand, Scotland and Poland. Misa was honored as the First Woman Angler during the World Fly Fishing Championship at Slovakia in 2004. Misako is dedicated to the conservation of the waters we fish, the sport of fly fishing, and her flies and artwork have been in many fly fishing publications. She is a life member of FFF and TU, a member of Japan Fly Fishers and numerous other fly fishing clubs and organizations. She currently resides in Mountain Home, Arkansas. Misako exemplifies her belief that women and all generations of fly fishers and their organizations are enriched and strengthened by reaching out to others across the globe. Misako Ishimura could well be considered an “International Ambassador of the Fly Fishing World”.

Tenkara: Radically Simple, Ultralight Fly Fishing is an intriguing book, full of fly fishing information, easy to absorb, and it has totally enticed me to further explore tenkara techniques and equipment. For the minimalist, the back packer, the unencumbered, this is the fly fishing style to try out. Pure and simple; less is more.

By definition from Wikipedia, “Tenkara fly fishing, (Japanese, literally: “from heaven”, or “from the skies”) is a traditional type of fly fishing practiced in Japan. Primarily used for small stream trout fishing, tenkara is one of the most popular methods of angling among fresh-water fisherman in Japan. Tenkara has been virtually unknown outside of Japan until the first company to introduce and popularize tenkara outside of Japan, Tenkara USA®, was founded in April 2009 in San Francisco, CA.”

Tenkara dates back about 200 years ago and rods were made of very long and lightweight bamboo. The length of the rods range from 11’ to 15’ and allow the angler to span the small stream with a line affixed directly to the end of the long pole with no need for a reel to store extra line. The tenkara fly is tied to the end of the tenkara fly line. These long rods with a simple furled type tenkara line allow for flawless, weightless delicate presentations. The length of the rod also allows for keeping most of the line off of the water thus enabling easy detections of strikes and takes. It’s all about fly control, placement, and manipulation to entice the fish.

The simplicity and ease of this ultra lightweight fishing system is finding appeal in the United States at a time when everything is complicated and involved. This is a short cut to immediate gratification for getting on a stream with minimum gear and investment. These rods collapse to around 20 inches offering extreme portability and convenience for those on the go. A rod, tenkara line, some tippet and a handful of flies allows one to easily escape to a treasured fishing locale or board an airplane with everything tucked into a carry on without a lot of bulky gear bags that can be possibly lost or damaged.



Of course, if you're only fishing holes are large rivers and lakes, then this system is not your first choice of gear. You can fish large waters but you will be limited in your reach of the fish. I can envision fishing a tenkara rod in my local creeks and on the Llano River, the Medina or the Paluxy. The gear is best suited for a smaller body of water that doesn't need much casting.

According to *Tenkara: Radically Simple, Ultralight Fly Fishing*, casting for the novice is easily attained using the tenkara rod. The shorter line makes it easier for the novice to achieve line control and fly placement without some of the beginner frustrations of too much line and too many steps to perfecting the cast. This would have to be a bonus for the novice fly fisher who sometimes gets overwhelmed with gear, flies, line, and rod.

The book explores the dynamics of casting with straight-forward easy to understand approaches and techniques. There are uncomplicated directions for knots, rigging, and making furred leaders. Also included are simplistic instructions for tying a few flies using a vise, hook, ordinary sewing thread, and a few feathers. Further chapters detail bug hatches or bugs 101 with drawings of predominant stream species.

The part of the book that I really enjoyed covered tenkara flies and their construction. These flies are known as "kebari" in Japanese and are simplistic in design compared to some of our western flies. They basically use feathers and thread and some fur. The most interesting aspect is the construction of the flies. Many of them are tied with "reverse" hackles, meaning the hackle collars are facing forward to the hook eye, instead of pointing to the rear of the fly as we are accustomed to. This in itself makes for a fly that pushes more water and has more motion of the hackles or legs or wings to entice a fish. This design makes pretty good sense and I look forward to incorporating this in my tying.

The book closes with words from Joan Wulff and the role of women in fly fishing from the first book on fly fishing and hunting in the 1400s by Dame Juliana Berners to the current statistics that over 20% of the U.S. fly fishing population are now women. Joan surmises that women are also leading the trend toward tenkara fishing due to the ultralight equipment and the simplicity of the system.

All said, the book reminds us that tenkara is just fishing and a way to find nature and enjoy yourself outdoors. It is just one more peaceful way to commune with something that is so grand and great and vast and to remind us that we are observers that receive pleasure from this greatness.

The book is being carried online on Amazon and I'm sure at your local bookstore. It makes for some good reading as well as a true appreciation for the Japanese art of fly fishing. In a hurried, complicated world, this simple way to fly fish is a refreshing way to enjoy nature and the art of fly fishing without all the modern day encumbrances and equipment. A bit of solitude for the soul found in a small collapsible rod, a line, and a pocket full of flies!

Many thanks to Misako Ishimura for forwarding this book to me to enlighten and expand my fly fishing knowledge. I believe you have hooked a tenkara fan!

