



# Tenkara

## The long and short of it.....

*What* is a rodmaker who does most of his fishing with a six and a half foot bamboo doing with an eleven foot graphite Tenkara rod? This was a question I was asking myself as I made my first cast with the no-reel, fixed line, telescopic rod on a small, Snowy Mountains stream.

### What is Tenkara?

Tenkara is a fly fishing method, practised in Japan for thousands of years. Literally translated, it means 'from Heaven'. Like most old rod based methods of fishing, it involves no reel. A fixed line is simply attached to the tip of the rod.

Originally the rod was a single piece of bamboo, and the line horsehair.

On the end of the horsehair, the fly was cast or dapped onto the water.

Modern Tenkara has evolved to long (eleven to fourteen foot) telescopic graphite rods. Folded down, these rods are incredibly compact, at around 50-55cm. Though the tips are incredibly fine, and fragile if mis-handled, under normal fishing they are cushioned by the rest of the rod. The butt cap

unscrews, allowing easy removal and replacement of broken sections if this does happen.

A short length of braid (called the 'lilian'), sealed at the very end, is permanently integrated into the rod tip. A knot is formed in the lilian, allowing the casting line to be looped onto it for fishing, and quick removal when taking the rod down.

The casting line is of a fixed length, from one to one and a half times the rod length. There are two choices here. Traditional Tenkara lines are of a tapered, twisted design (like twisted leaders). More recently, people have started using high visibility level 10-15lb fluorocarbon as a casting line. The traditional lines are very light and soft landing, while the relative weight and fine diameter of the fluorocarbon give more line speed and less wind resistance. To the end, a length of fine tippet (recommended 5lb maximum) and the fly are attached.

Quite a bit of detailed information on Tenkara is available on the internet. It has generated some recent interest in the USA so there are rods and other accessories available there too. Without reel seat hardware, guides (or wraps), they are quite cheap. A couple of hundred dollars will see you set up with all you need. Check out [www.tenkara-usa.com](http://www.tenkara-usa.com) as a starting point.

Though I had heard about Tenkara fifteen years ago, I didn't give it much thought until recently. While researching bamboo rodmaking in Japan, I came across numerous magazines showing pictures of Japanese anglers fly fishing small streams using Tenkara. The simplicity and apparent limitations of

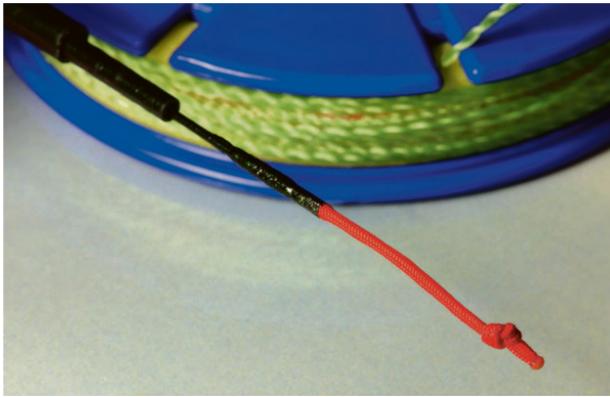
this technique had me curious, especially given the recent resurgence of short line nymphing around the place. Much of my own small stream dry fly fishing is also done at close range, albeit with a very short rod, so I thought Tenkara might make an interesting comparison. *Japan Flyfisher* magazine staff writer, Tomoniri Higashi, organised a Tenkara rod and line for me to try out. I opted for a 'short' 11 footer, in the hope that this would be best suited to our small, often bushy streams.

When the package arrived, I attached the line, tippet and a casting fly and went outside for a flick. Without the weight of a reel, the whole outfit was a combined 3oz, which is a strange feel to start with. What clicked straight away, was the casting stroke required to turnover the almost weightless line. It was very similar to the action for throwing a long leader with no line out the tip off a short bamboo rod. This shouldn't have been a surprise I suppose, as you need a short, firm, casting arc to load the rod without using the weight of a line to do so. Most references recommend a finger on top style for Tenkara, but I found it a little easier to squeeze a tight positive loop into the cast with a V or thumb on top grip.

After this brief introduction, I organised a day with a fishing mate, Troy, up to a small high country creek. We also took a short, 6'3" Cane rod as a comparison. Just to relax and get into the feel of the day, we started with the bamboo, catching and releasing a few small rainbows. It was time, we decided, to get the Tenkara rod out of the back of Troy's vest and put it to the test.



Tenkara rod, lines and other (optional) accessories



Lilian with overhand knot prior to line attachment



Lilian showing simple hitch to the line

Which brings me back to the start of the article. The short, tight casting stroke described earlier proved quite effective, and I was popping the fly into corners, up bubble lines and against undercut banks. With an eleven foot rod, and eleven foot line, plus your arm and the leader, casts over 25 feet could be made without too much trouble. It should be noted that some more experienced Tenkara anglers use as much as one and a half times the rod length of line, so with a fourteen foot rod, quite long



An 11 foot Tenkara rod can deliver a fishing reach of close to 30 feet.

casts can be made. When the wind picked up, it did take a little more work to punch the fly in than my little bamboo. Similarly, while more accurate than I expected, it was hard to obtain quite the same pinpoint delivery as with a shorter rod. In part this may be down to experience and technique.

A few other adjustments had to be made over a conventional rod, but for the most part these were quite intuitive. Without a line hand to manage line, slack had to be managed by lifting the rod up. The long rod and light casting line did make it

easier to minimise drag without having to mend. All but the last few feet or even inches of tippet could be held off the water. Even when more line was on the water, there was less drag on the fine 15lb fluorocarbon 'flyline' than a plastic or even silk. It was also fun to flick the fly up and around a bend in the stream before you reached the corner. Knowing when the fish takes your fly would be another thing though I guess!

Well, before too long, the inevitable happened, and a little rainbow of about eight inches took down the deer hair caddis. Lifting the long rod gently the hook was set. Now the fun really started. Normally a fish like this would be brought to hand without much fuss. Think again. With the seemingly unwieldy length of the rod and fine tip, and no line to strip in, some short-term mayhem ensued. The rod actually took a much deeper bend than I expected. The feel was also very direct. The line, being attached directly to the tip rather than running through guides, telegraphed every quiver of movement down the rod into my hand. The fish went for an undercut bank close to me and I had to step back to get the rod down low enough to put side strain on it. Back out, it headed downstream in a modest flow and I had to take a few paces after it. Before too long however, with the rod raised up, I had the tippet in hand, and soon after, the fish. Whew, and an eight inch rainbow at that. I will say, however, that there are claims of quite large fish being taken on this tackle.

After a quick picture, the fish was released and I handed the rod to Troy. It wasn't long before he landed a fish too, and we went fish for fish for a while. I'd left the cane rod back a hundred metres while we fished and took pictures. I called out to Troy I'd pop back and get the other rod so we wouldn't lose it. He said (jokingly, I think) 'nah, leave that crap back there'. I don't think either of us were planning to ever be full time Tenkara converts, but it

was a lot of fun. We were laughing like kids through the whole experience. There was something Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn about the simplicity of it.

We continued on for a bit, before we both started to notice that our rod arm was getting tired and a bit sore, like when you're holding something up on a wall waiting for someone to get organised with a hammer to nail it up. This mainly came about from trying to squeeze the maximum length out of casts, particularly in longer glides, as well as holding the line off the water to obtain a drag free drift.

One feature of the telescopic nature of the rod is that you can temporarily shorten it by collapsing one or more of the bottom section to create a shorter rod. This can be used in more tightly overgrown sections or under tree canopies. With so many Australian streams being very bushy and overgrown I do think the ability to fish with a short line as well as a short rod is an advantage. I think Tenkara is probably better suited to more medium sized freestone streams with pocket water and tumbling, turbulent flows, than it is in a really overgrown water. I'm sure more experience would obviously help in managing the almost weightless line in sticky situations however.

Seeing some immediate strengths of a new technique are interesting, but what gets me thinking just as much, maybe more, are the limitations they present. It makes you open your mind up a little, and this can feed back on to your regular methods of fishing. As an example; when fishing up a smooth glide, you usually make successively longer casts to fish the water with creating wading wake. This isn't an option with Tenkara, so you'll have to look for options from the bank. Too overgrown? Then you'll have to learn to wade like a heron, lifting each foot gently out of the water on each step, maybe even crouching low while doing so. Result – you become a better wader, which will help whatever tackle you're using.

After a while we decided to go back to the bamboo. The first cast I made, I nearly threw the rod right out of my hand. The ease of casting the full loading little rod was overwhelmingly comfortable and natural. Again, this was maybe partly being because what I fish most of the time. Troy noted the same thing. We caught a couple more little stream fish and then headed for home.

In a curious coincidence, fellow bamboo rodmaker, Callum Ross, mentioned to me recently that he and some friends from the NSW Southern highlands had been trying out Tenkara gear on small streams there and in the Snowy Mountains. I also see that the Spring 2010 edition of Fly Rod and Reel magazine has an article discussing Tenkara.

So, should conventional fly rod and reel manufacturers be quaking in their boots, with Tenkara taking the place of all other tackle? Probably not. I doubt I will fish it more than a few times a season, but even from the brief trial, it was a worthwhile experience. It's obviously an elegant, simple, effective method, and quite a bit of fun!

Nick Taransky

Check out Nick's website:  
[www.taranskybamboo.com.au](http://www.taranskybamboo.com.au)



Packed down, the Tenkara rod and a small conventional rod are around the same size.