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# THE ART OF CONVERSATION: RANDOM FLOW TRAINING IN VISAYAN CORTO KADENA ESKRIMA

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## VISAYAN CORTO KADENA ESKRIMA

is the name  
Sonny Umpad  
has given to his  
martial art system.  
Visayan refers to the  
Visayan Islands of  
the central Philippines  
where Umpad grew up.  
Corto Kadena means  
“short chain,” and has  
many levels of meaning  
from the physical  
to the philosophical.  
Eskrima has the  
same root as the  
word “skirmish,”  
therefore it can be  
loosely translated  
as “fighting art.”



## INTRODUCTION

This article is about the art of Visayan Corto Kadena Eskrima and some of its concepts and training methods with regard to free-sparring with swords. It is a Filipino martial system encompassing empty-hand and non-bladed and bladed weapons. Its principles, however, are based on the sword. It is essentially a dueling art that, in times past, would leave only one participant standing.

Unlike empty-hand or even stick fighting, dueling with swords offers no forgiveness. A mistake in timing or reaction does not lead to a bruise or a broken arm, but to severed tendons, deep trauma, and potentially death. A much greater emphasis is therefore placed on strategy than perhaps would be with less lethal weapons.

As those who spar with weapons know, to hit a target is not too difficult, but to hit a target and “get out clean,” without taking a hit, is much harder. However, this must be the goal. Thankfully, today we do not have to prove our skill in challenge matches with live blades, but dueling in the traditional manner with non-lethal blades is still a valuable and fascinating lesson in human interaction, the training for which not only works the physical body but the mental/emotional and perhaps the spiritual as well.

The techniques, entries, strikes, and counters needed to prevail in a duel are as numerous as the variety of opponents one can meet. Rather than go into detail about all of these aspects, this article will focus on three fundamental skills, universal in nature and particularly pertinent to sword fighting, that underlie the Corto Kadena system. These are:

- ❶ The ability to understand relative motion and extrapolate from it.
- ❷ The ability to be accurate.
- ❸ The ability to differentiate a real threat from a feint.

**Relative motion:** the way that two people interact in an attempt to gain an advantageous position from which to strike, while maintaining a defensive wall.

**Striking:** involves choosing the position, angle, and timing from which a strike must be done in relation to the opponent's motion and position.

**Ability to extrapolate:** understanding how the human body moves over time and understanding at each moment, the available options for stepping, weight shifting, and striking.

**Accuracy:** refers not only to the ability to strike a chosen target, but to accuracy in judging range, differentiating angles of attack, and the ability to "catch" an opponent's rhythm.

Internalizing these concepts comes from partner practice, by watching others move in relation to oneself, and experiencing the potential actions and reactions as the motion unfolds. Understanding gained through a dynamic, free-form interaction with a partner will train the body to respond appropriately in real time by learning to recognize patterns and rhythms in movement. The Corto Kadena system trains these skills using the concepts of "pendulum motion" and "random flow." A pendulum has the quality of continuous motion. The two still points at either end of the swing come at the cusp of a deceleration and an acceleration and are only momentary. Pendulum motion ebbs and flows, gives and takes, but always re-cycles its energy.

There are three main pendulums: 1) the stepping pendulum, 2) the body pendulum, and 3) the weapon pendulum. In the beginning, the pendulums are practiced in a straight line, either with a swinging target or with a partner. The idea of moving in relation to something else is key. Accuracy in judging range, angle, and timing are trained and the changing position of the defense line in motion is explored.

Through practice, the motion becomes more natural and the pendulum becomes more free-form, circling around, changing lead, and moving side-to-side in no pre-determined pattern. The rhythm can change from slow to fast to slow again, but does not stop. This is Random Flow Training.



**1-a-b WEAPON PENDULUM**

The weapon extends away from and back to the body. Also practiced side-to-side.

*All photos courtesy of  
Maija Soderholm.*

At this point, more subtle skills are introduced, including mirroring an opponent's movement (*salamín*), shadowing behind a strike (*anino*), and the use of body language to open the defensive line (*hata*).

Random Flow training is done at varying speeds, increasing with skill level. However, even highly skilled players practice at slow speeds to explore new angles, entries, and counters. The ability to keep continuous motion and accuracy of strike angle at low speed without stops, hesitations, or tracking will increase understanding of motion in real time.

Ideally, a videotape of a slow speed flow put on fast forward will look natural and real. Practicing at slow speed will also help with blade and body expression—a key element of successful feinting—and also with balance; hence the ability to issue power at any moment by exploring ways to coil and uncoil the body using high/low, left/right, and turning motions.

Like good conversation, Random Flow training is an interaction between two people where one speaks and the other listens and reacts dependent on what the first has said. This give and take will open up new angles of inquiry and new ideas to explore. The more open one is to another's questions, the more one is likely to learn.

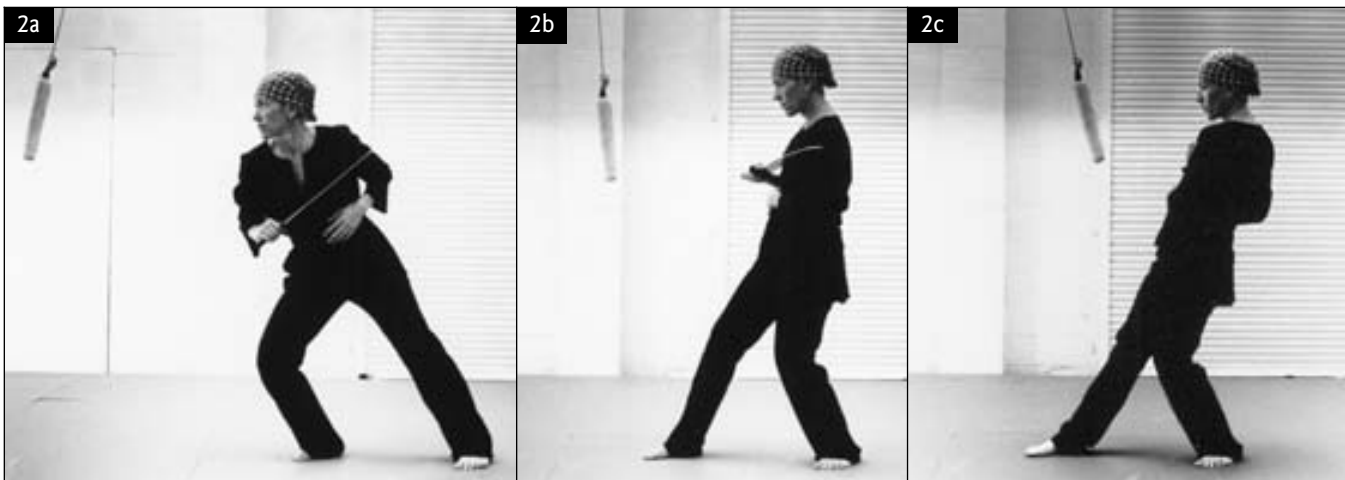
Of course, dueling is different. It is competitive and non-cooperative. Flow, if any, happens before contact, after which the end game follows soon after. However, if our goal is to prevail in such an interaction, it is well worth our while to “converse” as widely as possible in our training, for the only true knowledge is experience. Training the eyes to see things for what they truly are, to evaluate the novel and unexpected, and respond appropriately is the best way to stay alive.

## TECHNICAL SECTION

### 2-a-c

#### BODY PENDULUM

The weight shifts from one leg to the other,  
forward and backward as shown.  
Shifting can also be side-to-side.





### 3-a-c

#### STEPPING PENDULUM

Stepping pivots the body 180 degrees. For a Right Side Pendulum, the left foot stays as a fixed point and the right foot moves (opposite for Left Side Pendulum). The weight stays on the balls of the feet to facilitate pivoting. A change in direction can be executed from the central or neutral position (3-b), to encompass all 360 degrees of movement. Note how the opponents mirror each other's movement. The ability to syncopate these three pendulums is a key skill in flow training.



### 4d



### 4-a-d

#### THE DEFENSE LINE IN MOTION

An understanding of how to maintain a defensive "wall" relative to a moving opponent means one can stay in range longer instead of backing away out of range and having to re-enter.



**5-a-d**

**“MIRRORING” (SALAMIN)**

By mirroring an opponent’s blade and body angle, one protects the targets closest to their blade position, thus closing the most accessible targets they are in a position to strike.



**6-a-e**

**“SHADOWING” (ANINO)**

By adding the subtlety of timing to mirroring, one can “slip” an opponent’s strike and enter behind their defensive line.



### 8-a-d

#### FEINTING VARIATION

Feinting can also draw the opponent into making an attack, thus making an opening. An overly long cut invites a strike to the right ribs. Once the opponent has committed, a pivot out of range creates an opening for a cut to the underside of their weapon arm.

### 7-a-d

#### “FEINTING” (HATA)

Feinting requires a “feed” to cause the opponent to respond.

If the response creates our opening, one can recreate the same feed later with the body, however, this time using a strike angle aimed at the opening.

In the sequence above, a threat to the opponent’s sword arm causes an overextended block to the right. Later, the same body angle is fed, however the blade is now directed at the opening on the left side.

**9-a-e**

**COILING TO ISSUE POWER**

In the previous sequence (8-a-d), a pivot combined with a weight shift to the back creates a powerful pulling or whipping motion. The power is created by stepping behind and pivoting on both feet, creating an unwinding motion through the body and accelerating the blade.



**10-a-e**

**RANDOM FLOW  
"CONVERSATION"**

# RANDOM FLOW



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