

***Den* - What does it mean, tradition, school, derived from and teachings of? Or
(Now and *Den*)**

By Robert Benson

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While visiting with Tanobe San (head sword researcher of the NBTHK) on Nov 23, 2001, I was able to not only see and handle some wonderful swords, I was able to ask some questions about the use of *Den* in regard to evaluation of swords.

My understanding of *Den* was that it meant the tradition or school. Such as in Goka *Den*, the five traditions or schools. My assumption has always been that the use of *Den* in conjunction with a sword smith was that it was not thought to be the direct work of that smith but was of his teachings, derived from his school or tradition. In trying to pin down the when and why the use of *Den* started I asked numerous people what they thought. Most thought that it was started by the Honami and that it meant the school of the smith it was used with. I thought it might be interesting to see how much the use of *Den* was used in the past century. I made a check of the Juyo Bijutsuhin listing of Rai swords. I found that there are 82 Rai swords as Jubi's and 25 are listed as *Den* something. With that as a starter I decided that there would not be any reason to go further. There was just going to be too many swords with *Den* prefixing the name. There are Bunkazai with the *Den* prefix so I suppose there are also Kokuho that are designated as *Den* something. I have not been able to check that out as yet. I have been told that the use of *Den* along with an appraisal was started in early Edo. I am going to see how early the use was and I will report my findings at a later date.

I related to Tanobe San that some Americans look down on a sword with a *Den* appraisal even to the thought that it should be cheaper in value. He stated that he didn't think that was the same thinking in Japan but conceded that the value might be ever so slightly lower.

I asked, "What does *Den* mean in the use of *Den* Rai Kunitmitsu, etc?" He said, "The *Den* means that that sword is almost a Rai Kunimitsu." He said, "We use it meaning almost". I said, "You mean the sword is lacking so it is almost a Rai Kunimitsu" He smiled and said "No. That is where the misconception by collectors comes in. In some ways the sword might not have all the traits produced by that smith, but most of them, so we say *Den*. In this case it may be lacking somewhat, on the other hand it might have all the traits of a Rai Kunimitsu but in addition, it has work that is better or could be considered his best work. In this case it displays greater ability and qualities not normally seen in the smith so here again we use *Den*." I said "Now it is making sense to me because I have a sword that I bought because of my search for Soshu mono. That sword I had thought to be a high ranking Soshu sword because of the workmanship that I could see. Upon polishing it I came to the conclusion that the sword was probably a Rai Niji Kunitoshi." It didn't have a nie utsuri but it has a very strong ko nie hamon with long ashi to the cutting edge and contains many warabite choji in the hamon. What it has that might be excessive, is that the hamon is full of nice kinsuji and sunagashi. Upon taking it to Japan I showed it to a dealer friend and said my kantei was Niji Kunitoshi. He said that he didn't think so because it was too full of kinsuji to be his work. Another friend Kurokawa San also thought the hamon work to be too much for Niji Kunitoshi and

proceeded to bring a signed piece to show me, which was basically suguba. There are many suguba Niji Kunitoshi but just as many in chogi gunome so I was still sure I was on the right track. While making my rounds to old friends I stopped at Seikodo also and showed the sword to Saito Hisashi San and told him of my kantei. He broke out a Jubi book and showed me a sword with similar hamon and the exact same boshi from the Niji Kunitoshi group. Upon submitting the sword to shinsa it went as *Den* Niji Kunitoshi. In July I submitted to shinsa another sword and it went as Niji Kunitoshi. Both swords passed to Juyo Token in November. I told Tanobe San that it would be a good learning experience to get the two swords together and compare them. He said it sounded like one must have been right on for the kantei of Niji Kunitoshi and the *Den* piece must have additional traits. He advised me to make a through examination of both so I could conclude why *Den* was used on my sword. This I will do upon their return in February. I also told Tanobe San that I noticed on the preliminary Juto paper it just says *Den* Niji Kunitoshi on my sword but on the other one it says Niji Kunitoshi and to the side its says with out reservation of *Den*. I now look forward to seeing the difference of the two swords.

During the course of our conversation Tanobe san said, “ Your specialty is Soshu so I want to show you a Tokuju Masamune.” He then brought out a wonderful ubu kodachi with shumei by Honami Kojo. This I had seen in pictures and under glass but had never handled before. It was the Kishu Tokugawa heirloom. He pointed out an area on the ura at the start of the monouchi that the nie runs up into the ji turning into black chikei. The work was wonderful and so reminded me of my Tokuju Norishige. I told Tanobe San that my Norishige had long black chikei and a hamon just like this Masamune. He said you have a very wonderful Norishige. To get back to the *Den* question I said “Why did my Norishige go Tokubetsu Hozon as *Den* Norishige and Juyo Token as Norishige then Tokubetsu Juyo Token as *Den* Norishige?” He felt that it was the appraisers on the shinsa board at those times and the final Tokubetsu Juyo Token appraisal was probably because the board felt there was plenty of Norishiges traits and some that exceeded the expectations of Norishige. When I had initially sent the sword to the Honbu I had wrote to Tanobe San saying that the sword was either a Norishige, Go Yoshihiro, or a Masamune. My thinking was that the jihada with it’s long chikei was more like Shin Togo, and Yukimitsu jihada but I had never seen a hamon by these smiths like the one on my sword. I was elated when Tanobe San sent me a fax saying that the shinsa team had agreed with my appraisal and made the blade Norishige. A few years, later I was to see a Norishige tanto with a 1319 date that had the same kind of hada and I had appraised that blade as a Yukimitsu when looking at it. I would have appraised it as a Shin Togo if it had a quieter hamon. I would not have said Norishige because one is always expecting the Matsukawa hada to appear but this particular tanto did not display that trait. It was an early work so I figured my daito was probably also early work for Norishige. Tanobe San said this (My Norishige) is a good example of the use of *Den* not being derogatory. He explained to me that for a sword to make Tokuju it has to have the condition and quality of a Bunkazai sword. He went on to say that collectors should evaluate their swords for those conditions before submitting them to the Tokubetsu Juyo Token shinsa and don’t worry about an earlier *Den* appraisal. Since the first Juyo Token Shinsa and through this year, the 47th, there has been a total of 7333 Koto swords making Juto. Of these, 3691 were mumei and out of this group 1287 were appraised as *Den*

something. To check further about how *Den* swords fare against other swords I looked at the Tokubetsu Juyo Token records. Since Dec 3rd of 1971 there has been 579 Koto swords raised to the Tokubetsu Juyo Token Status. Out of this number 61 are appraised as *Den* something. A little over 10% of the swords have the *Den* prefix which doesn't seem to hold back the chances of a sword if the work and quality are of the Tokuju standards. I guess it gets back to what I was taught years ago. Forget the appraisal and look at the sword. Be able to hone your own abilities so that you can judge for yourself. If we do that then the *Den* appraisal will not seem so bad after all.