

What Is Tenkara?

Tenkara is the traditional Japanese method of fly-fishing, which uses only a rod, line and fly. Simple.

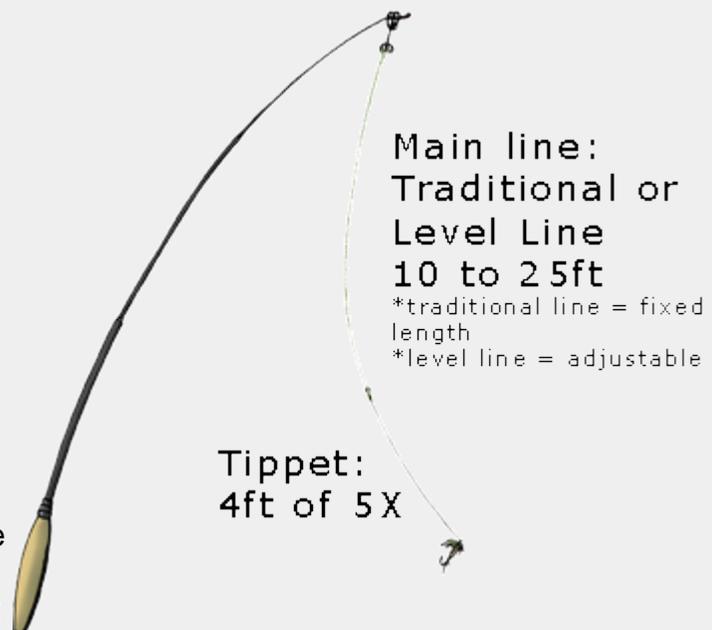
Tenkara is a method of fly-fishing particularly well-suited for stream fishing and for anyone looking for a simpler way to fly-fish. It is the ideal setup for backpacking. Tenkara is a very effective, simple and enjoyable method of fly-fishing.



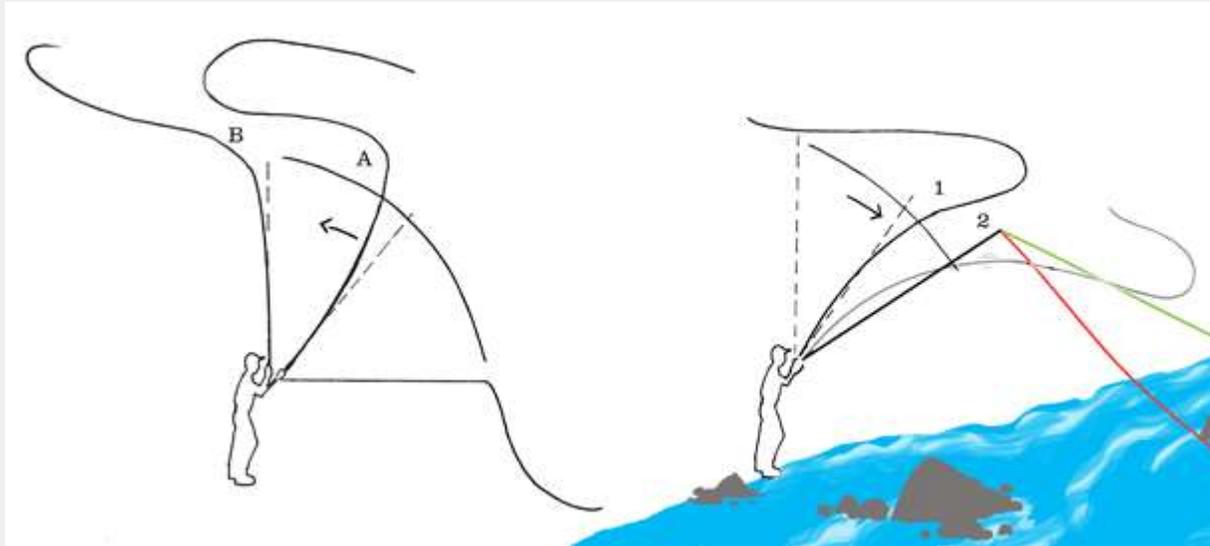
The basic concept:

Tenkara is particularly effective for fishing mountain streams. The main advantage is its simplicity. But, the benefits of tenkara go well beyond simple: delicate presentations with the light line, ability to hold the line off the water and a fly in place over difficult currents, precise casting, and greater control of the fly just to name a few.

Only rod, line and fly are used. The line is attached directly to the tip of the rod (anywhere between 10 and 25ft of the main line), tippet (usually 4ft



or tippet) is **attached to the end** of the tenkara line. There is a fly-casting technique involved, but it's much quicker to learn. The casting is usually a bit slower, and the casting stroke shorter. Landing a fish is very intuitive and similar to any type of fishing with a rod: angle the rod tip back to bring the fish closer, then reach for the line or the fish.



Tenkara is very easy for anyone to do. And, at the same time one may strive for perfection and make it a life-long learning experience focused on technique and actual fishing, not on the gear.

GEAR

Over centuries, and particularly once it became a sport, tenkara has evolved. Modern tenkara is known for using sophisticated technology to produce extremely light and strong rods. The rods are made of carbon-fiber and are telescopic. While the extended length is longer than most rods (normally 12ft, and up to 14ft7inches) they are super portable. Rods telescope down to 20 inches, with all pieces fitting inside the handle. This makes them ideal for going through bushes quickly, backpacking, or just going farther along your favorite stream. There are two types of lines used in tenkara, what we call the traditional tenkara line, which is tapered and casts very easily, and the tenkara level lines, which are a modern version of the line designed for casting well with tenkara.

TECHNIQUE

Tenkara is not just about the absence of a reel, it includes a different approach to fly fishing. With few elements between you and the fish, tenkara can be interpreted as a philosophy that takes fly-fishing down to its most fundamental level and puts a stronger emphasis on technique than on gear.

Casting requires a slower and shorter stroke to completely turn the tippet over. Landing a fish is similar to any type of fishing, where the angler simply raises the rod and reaches for the fish. Fighting the fish may be a new experience: catching small fish suddenly becomes very enjoyable while fighting a larger fish will require a new skill level. With a larger fish (i.e. >17 inches) the angler will need to play to a rhythm dictated by the fish, moving the rod along, with patience and awareness.

One may be interested to know that the simplicity of tenkara even extends to the choice of flies. Tenkara anglers in Japan rely on their one fly pattern and do not focus on matching the hatch. They do not second guess fly choice. Instead, in a stream, any fly can work, and the fly that is in the water is what will catch fish. To entice fish, keep the same fly on and try manipulating the fly in different ways

History

Tenkara has a long history, though little of it is documented. Fly-fishing in Japan is suspected to have been practiced as far back as the 8th or 9th centuries B.C. The first reference to tenkara fly-fishing was recorded in 1878, a quick passage in the diaries of Mr. Ernest Satow, and English diplomat who lived in Japan, describing the sight of someone fishing for *yamame* at Mt. *Tateyama* using flies.

Tenkara was originally the domain of commercial fishermen in mountain areas of Japan. These anglers used to catch fish for a living. The original tenkara angler would camp in isolated mountain streams, then come into the nearby villages to sell dried and fresh fish to inn-keepers and other people. Some people may have also used tenkara as a method of catching fresh fish.

Though there are a few different theories on the exact origins of tenkara, based on our research we strongly believe tenkara was originally and independently developed by these anglers and not passed on to them by other people. The original tenkara fishermen likely realized they could try to imitate bugs with feathers, silk, etc. At that point they quickly realized the great efficiency of using these flies (*kebari*) to "harvest" the abundant Yamame in the mountain streams of Japan. As opposed to using bait a simple fly would take seconds to tie and could catch several fish before ever being replaced.

The name **tenkara**, is written in Japanese Katakana characters (normally used for foreign words):

テンカラ - **you may notice the symbol in our logo is the first character of tenkara: "Te"**. The most commonly accepted meaning is "from heaven" or "from the skies". However, the original meaning, and its origins are not known for certain. It's thought that the word came about because of the way a fly softly lands on the water, and if looked from a fish point of view, it would be slowly descending "from the skies". However, there are other theories for the name *tenkara* as the Japanese writing system allows for multiple possible interpretations of the word based on the sound for tenkara. The term tenkara became popular in Japan about 30-40 years ago, prior to that it was known as *tenkara* in most areas, but also commonly called "kebari tsuri" (literally "fishing with a feathered hook"). **Regardless of the origins of the name or possible interpretations, tenkara is just....tenkara.**

Not much has been documented about fly-fishing and tenkara in Japan because tenkara was primarily a source used to secure food, not a form of leisure or sport. However, it's interesting to notice that similar styles of fly-fishing are or have been practiced throughout many regions in the world, such as Northern Spain, Italy, Slovenia, Russia, and others. Before reels became widespread, fixed-line fly-fishing such as tenkara was practiced in many parts of the world. Tenkara is the only method that has remained popular and continues to be practiced. For mountain stream fly-fishing all that is necessary is a rod, line and fly.

Tenkara Gear

Tenkara was developed and refined over centuries. Each element in tenkara fly-fishing, being vital and necessary in the sport of angling, was perfected to be the best at its use. Unlike in western fly-fishing, where rods were originally made of wood, and thus too heavy for comfortable use of long

rods, Japanese anglers used bamboo. This light material allowed for the favored long rods to be continually improved upon, whereas in the west the angler's creative energy was spent devising ways



to reach farther with shorter rods.

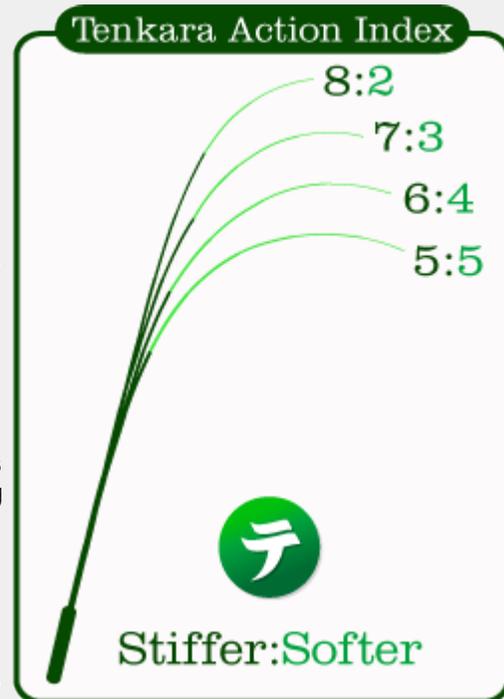
Rods

Tenkara rods are the fundamental and most distinctive feature of tenkara fishing. They are long, each piece telescopes and fits inside each other, and they have very sensitive and soft action.

The long rods, usually 12 ft and ranging from 10ft to 14ft 7inches, close down to a mere 20 inches and weigh an average of 3 oz, making them ultra-portable and ideal for backpacking. The extended length of the rods makes them well suited for most suited for fishing in streams, where keeping line off the water at a longer distance provides for a significant advantage: the current will not drag the line with it. The collapsible feature also removes ferrules used in western fly rods, which allows for a very smooth curve and bending action through the rod.

The telescopic feature of these rods ensures all pieces, including rod tip, are well protected inside the stronger parts of the rod, making them portable and less prone to breakage when transporting. The tenkara setup is ultra-light, rod weighs an average of 3 oz, and by not using a reel or fly-line several more ounces are cut.

Every rod will have a different feel, and the feel of the rod (how much it flexes) is primarily a personal preference for softer or stiffer rods. To explain the "flex" or "action" of a tenkara rod, an index ratio was developed. We call this the "Tenkara Action Index®". The Tenkara Action Index® tells anglers how many: **"Bottom parts are stiffer : Tip parts are more flexible"**. Most tenkara rods are classified as 5:5 or 6:4, where a 5:5 rod indicates 5 bottom parts are stiffer and 5 tip segments bend more easily. A 6:4 rod indicates 6 parts are stiffer and 4 tip segments bend more easily, and so forth. 7:3 and 8:2 rods are considered more specialty rods for those who prefer fast rods or are pursuing larger fish and want the rod to help them land the fish.



Choosing a rod

Each Tenkara USA rod model is developed to be very different from each other and offer anglers a range of choices with little overlap. While we may want to say the ideal is to have one of each because they really are that different, we do not want to push that and would prefer that anglers stick with their preference.

Length: The length of the rod should primarily be chosen on the streams one will fish. 12ft is a pretty standard length for tenkara rods, allowing for reach when needed and in occasions when necessary the angler may always hold the rod above the handle or use a shorter line. We like to recommend people get the longest rod they can get away with. Places with more overhead cover may benefit from

a shorter rod, whereas longer rods will allow you greater reach, versatility and more control over the line over a longer distance. One foot is the difference between having your arm next to you or stretched in front of you depending on the stream.

Options based on length: 11ft rod: [IWANA](#); 12ft rods: [IWANA](#), EBISU, [YAMAME](#); 13ft rod: [AYU](#); 13ft6in: [AMAGO](#); 13ft-14ft7inch "zoom rod" (can be fished at either length): [ITO](#).

Action: The rod action is chosen primarily based on the angler's preference for a softer (5:5) or slightly stiffer (e.g. 6:4 or 7:3) rod. The following should be kept in mind:

5:5 rods feel more delicate when casting. Playing a smaller fish will feel slightly more enjoyable, while landing a larger fish will be more challenging because of the extra flexibility of the rod. Thinner tippets (e.g. 7X or 8X) will be more protected as the rod will also take more pressure off it. **Rods:** [AYU](#) (13ft), EBISU (12ft).

6:4 rods will normally feel more precise when casting. Hooking up a larger fish will be slightly easier, as is casting against a bit of wind. Sensitivity to subtle bites is greater. **Rods:** [IWANA](#) (11 or 12ft), [AMAGO](#) (13 1/2ft), [ITO](#) (13ft-14ft7in).

7:3 rods are stiffer and will assist an angler in landing that larger fish. Also more precise and powerful when casting. **Rod:** [YAMAME](#) (12ft).

Lines

In tenkara, since the fly has virtually no weight, the line is what is being cast forward. Tenkara lines are specifically offered for use with tenkara and are highly recommended with your rod.

The [traditional tenkara line](#) is made to cast in perfect balance with tenkara rods - with power and precision and very delicate presentation. Traditional lines come in a fixed-length (10 1/2ft or 13ft) and are super quick and easy to setup and to use.

[Tenkara level lines](#) are a special formula of fluorocarbon and have been selected based on their *castability*, and higher visibility. Level lines are dense enough to be cast, but very light so they can be kept off the water a longer distance. They also come in large spools and the user can cut several lines of whatever length is desired, so between 3 and 5 lines can be made out of one spool, making them very economical.

To the end of either line simply add between 3 and 6 feet of tippet. There is no need for a leader to be used with tenkara.

We advise against using western fly-line; western fly lines (even the 000wt fly lines) are much heavier than necessary and will take away the advantages found in tenkara, namely, the heavy fly-line will cause the fly to be pulled back toward the rod after casting, will splash harder than necessary on the water thus reducing the delicate tenkara presentations. We recommend people try both the traditional and level lines to find one they fit better.

Tippet

The tippet is a necessary part of fly-fishing. It is the thin line that goes between the tenkara line and the fly. It allows the angler to connect the fly to the line, and prevents the fish from seeing a thicker line on the water.

Tippet in the US is normally classified as #X, with larger numbers being thinner diameter tippet. We recommend using only **tippet of 6lbs breaking strength or less (usually 4X or thinner)** in order to protect the rod in case of snags that are out of reach. The flexible rods does a great job at protecting thin tippets.

Fly

Tenkara's long history could have meant that thousands of fly patterns are normally used. Refreshingly, the simplicity of tenkara fishing is also present in the flies used.

Tenkara fly-fishing often focuses more on the techniques of presenting a fly rather than the appearance of a particular pattern. The idea of giving life to a fly by motion makes tenkara flies very versatile and effective. For example, one of the most recognizable tenkara fly patterns are the reverse hackle flies

Motion in a fly is an important aspect of tenkara fishing, and is made possible by the light fixed line used, where the long rod allows the angler to precisely control the motion of flies.

Tenkara Technique

Tenkara removes the more intimidating aspect of western fly-fishing (e.g. long distance casting and the management of a lot of line) and it can be easily treated as the simpler fly-fishing.

Casting

Tenkara, like western fly-fishing, has some basic casting techniques involved to cast the fly to a target. The basic tenkara cast is shown in the diagram below; instead of the usual 10 - 2 o'clock approach of western fly-fishing, tenkara tends to require a shorter stroke (e.g. 10-12) and a little more wrist may be used.

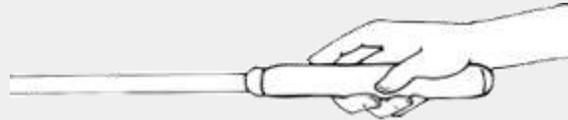
The traditional grip of a tenkara rod is also shown below, with the index finger positioned above the handle; this grip allows you to use your rod as a precision tool for controlling the line.

The main tips we give people about casting are:

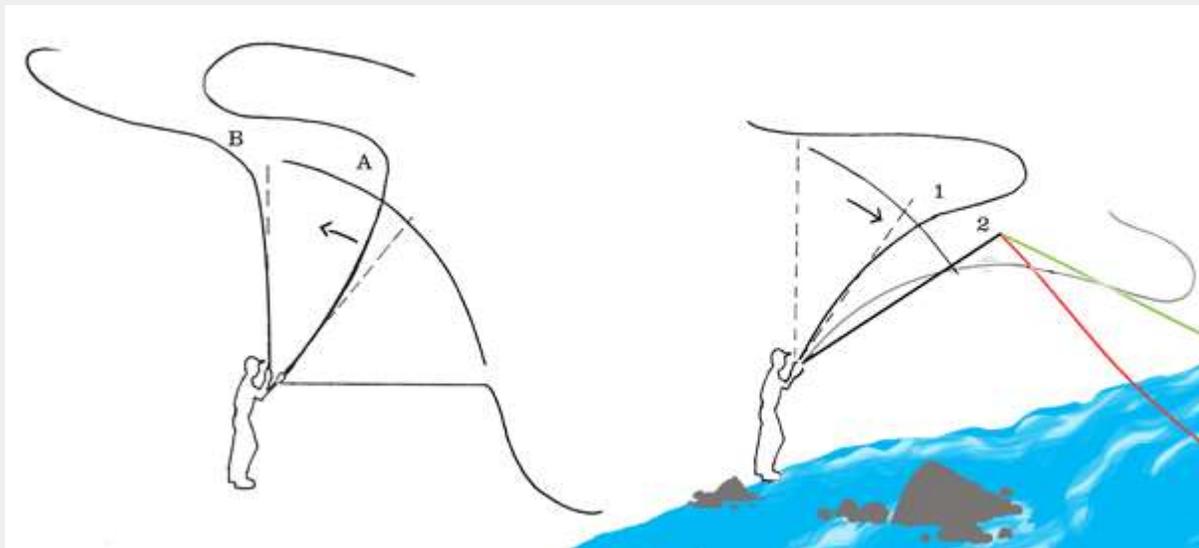
- 1) Keep the arm close to the body to avoid getting tired and for better control of the rod
- 2) Grip the rod as close to the end of the handle as possible, this will give you a greater lever and casting will be more effortless
- 3) Relax. Lead the cast with the arm on the back-cast, moving the arm up a couple of inches, then break the wrist to make the rod load in its entirety. On the forward cast, move the arm back down a couple of inches and break the wrist slightly to unload the

rod. The cast should be very effortless.

4) Relax (again). The cast requires very little effort, even with long lines. If your line is not stretching forward at the end of the cast there are two things that are probably happening: (a) you're overpowering the cast, take your power down a notch. You still need speed (i.e. acceleration) but very little force; (b) you wrist and arm are very stiff at the end of the cast and the rod is wiggling after you have stopped. You need a well-defined stop, but your wrist must be relaxed at the end of the cast to allow the arm to absorb rod oscillation and make the line stretch forward.



The tenkara cast requires a shorter stroke than western fly-casting, and it's a bit slower too. The backcast stops at the 12 o'clock position (B), though it may be stopped sooner (A) to cast the line higher up behind you (for example, in case there is much foliage behind you). On the forward cast the line can be stopped a bit higher (1) or lower (2), and this may depend on where you want to cast your fly (closer or further), or how you want your presentation to look.



Also, be sure to have a well-defined stop at the positions B, and 1 in order to transfer energy from the rod to the line for an effective cast. And, on the forward cast, as soon as you come to the abrupt stop, try lowering the rod tip right away for a very delicate presentation.

Landing a fish

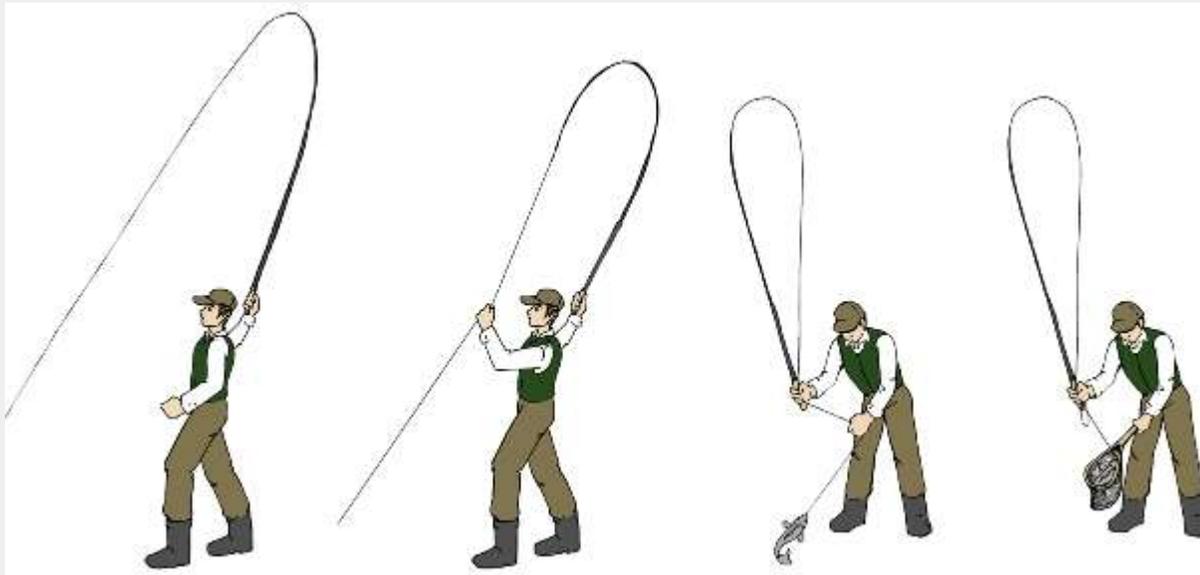
Now, for the fun part, how to land the deserved fish?

Several people have asked us "How do I land a fish if there is no reel?" It is so simple a person who has never fished or a kid will figure it out in a second, but experienced fly anglers may overthink it and have a hard time visualizing it. Simply angle the rod back to bring the fish closer and then you grab the line and then the fish (or you hold the fish directly). When using a longer line, one will need to hand line the fish.

Main tips we share with people for landing their fish:

- 1) **Keep the arm close to the body the whole time!** This is absolutely crucial. An arm that is extended above the head means little control over the fish, and if you're using a long line it will be nearly impossible to reach it.
- 2) Angle the rod back to fight the fish. Tenkara rods are made for playing fish, use them.
- 3) Bring the fish to calm water to net it or hold it, don't do it in a current.
- 4) When using a longer line, you will need to hand-line the fish in. This is easy, do it steadily and calmly. With a large fish you may have to let it run if it really wants to run when you're holding the line. Your hand will almost serve as an additional guide for your rod, not a grabbing machine. **Do it steadily and calmly.**

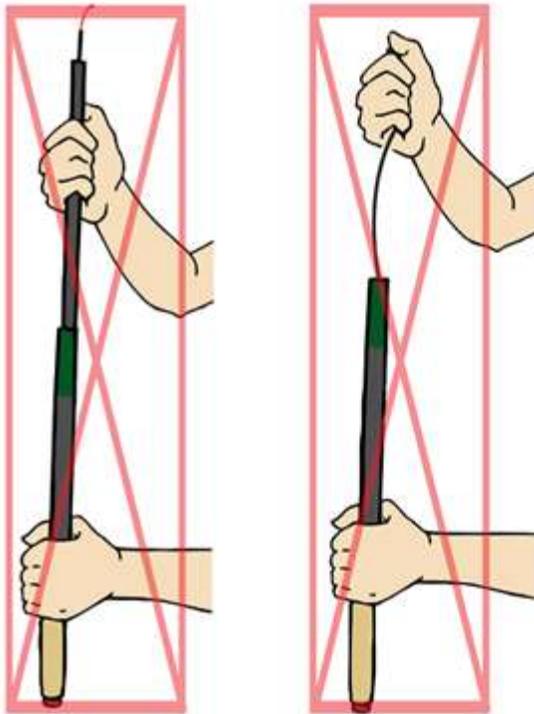
The picture below shows landing a fish with a line longer than the rod, where the angler must hold the tippet/line. By using a line that is about the same length, one can often reach the fish directly.



Closing Rod

It may seem odd that we'd start by talking about closing the rod before we even covered opening and setting up. That's because closing the rod requires some special care.

Tenkara rods are excellent and strong fishing tools that can take a load and handle fish very well. But, they are also delicate for handling, and most breakages will occur when closing the rod. It's important to **never exert any sideways pressure on the rod segments when closing the rod.** It's best to put the bottom of the rod on a flat and stable surface when closing it. And, then push pieces **STRAIGHT** in. As soon as the piece is loose you may let it slide down. **The 2 tip segments are particularly fragile and special care should be taken when handling them.**



DO NOT:

- Close tip segment first
- Hold thinner part of segment
- Apply sideways pressure
- Hold tip segments with whole hand

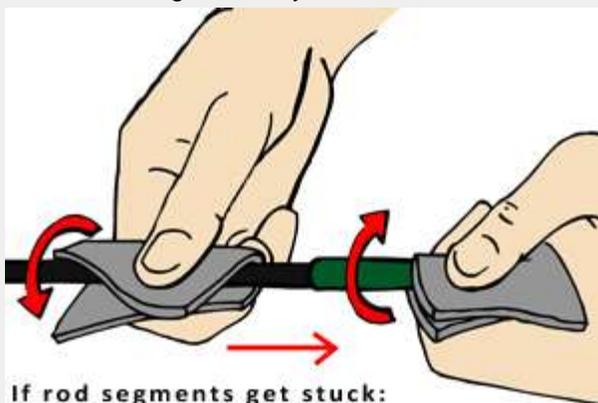


DO:

- Start at bottom
- Hold near joint
- Push straight
- Use fingers

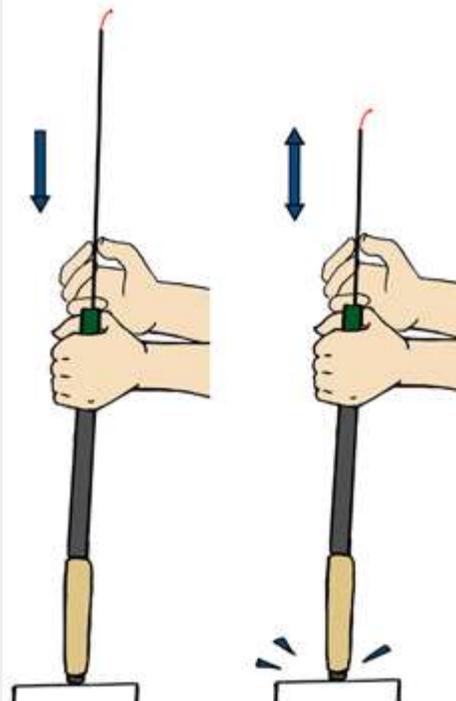
- 1) Put rod bottom on flat surface.
- 2) Gently hold the stuck piece at its thickest point.
- 3) LIGHTLY tap segment against bottom of the rod.

If pieces are stuck, you may try: holding stuck pieces with rubber pads for increased grip and pushing straight in, or gently tapping the stuck piece down. Simply hold stuck segment with your finger close to joint, lift it up and tap it down a few times to dislodge it. Always do this on a flat surface and hold delicately:



If rod segments get stuck:

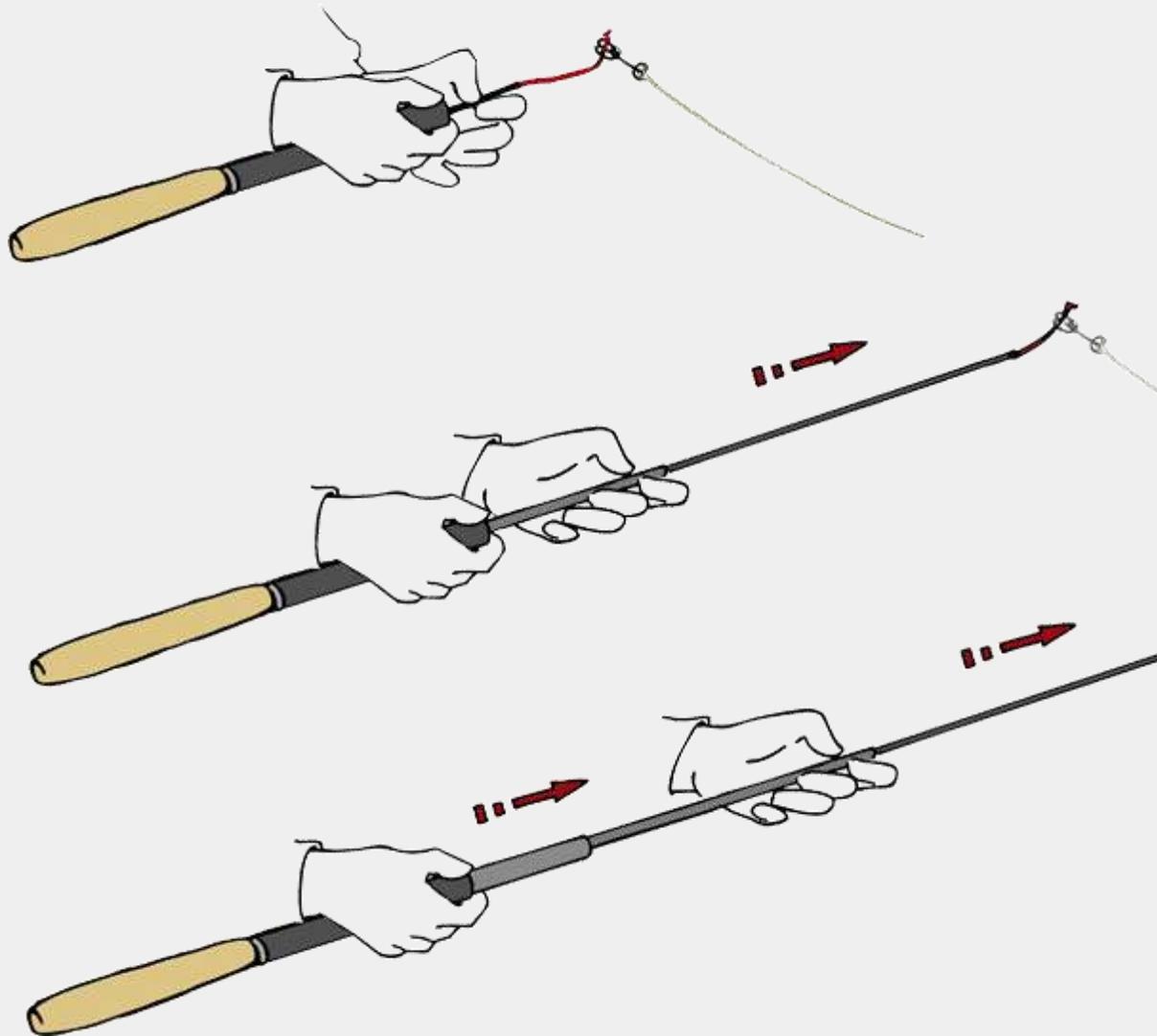
- 1) Hold segments close to joint
- 2) Force thinner segment in. Twisting is okay, but no sideways pressure.
- 3) For increased grip, try using rubber pads (e.g. tire tube).



If the methods above don't work, try the "rubber band method":

Opening Rod

Tenkara rods are telescopic. Opening the rod is nothing complicated, but there are a couple of things to keep in mind to make it easier/quicker to open and prevent damaging the rod:



Keep control of the rod segments when opening or closing the rod!

- 1) Remove rod plug. Tilt rod down a little to expose the rod tip.
- 2) Keeping the hard tip of the rod inside the main segment, expose the braided tip material (the lillian), attach line to rod tip.

3) Once your line is attached, hold rod tip near opening of rod. Pull the tip, and each subsequent segment out, sliding them out between your fingers. Pull each piece (tip, second segment, 3rd segment, etc) out completely until next segment is snug and pulled out before pulling the next segment out. **Pieces should feel snug, not overly tight.**



Warning:

1) When pulling the cap out, pull it straight out without any sideways pressure. (2) Never swing the rod open, and do not apply too much pressure when pulling the segment out as that will cause pieces to get stuck together.

Attaching Line to Rod

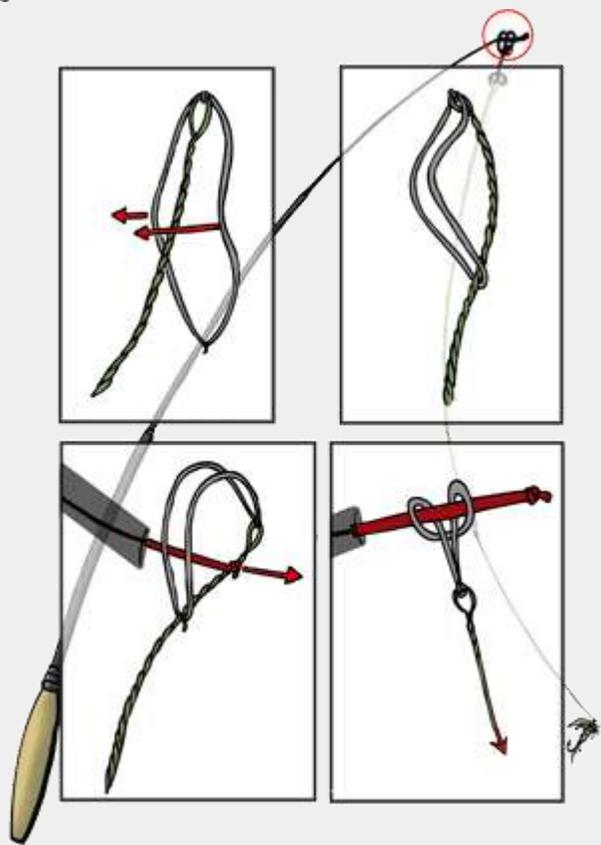
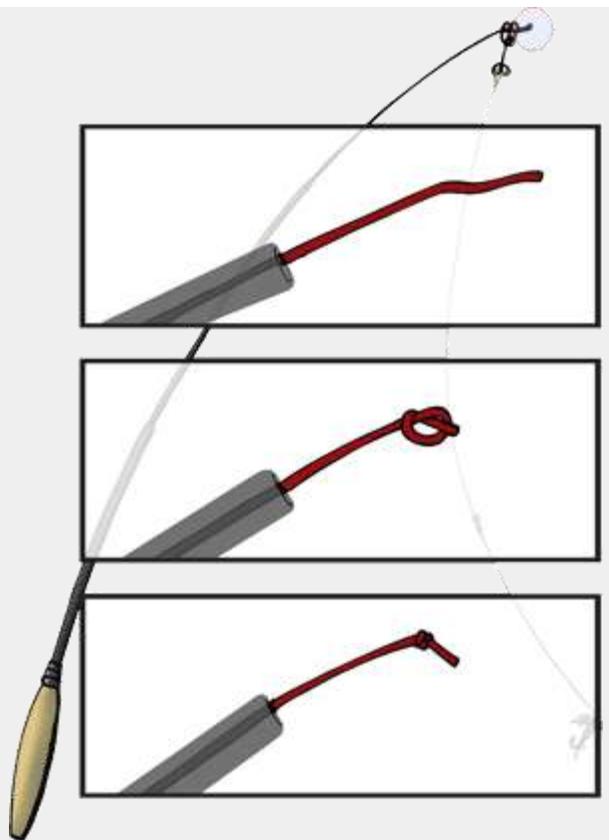
One major difference between tenkara rods and other fishing rods is the absence of a loop at the tip of the rod, or any guides throughout the rod.

The tip of tenkara rods are made of strong braid material called "lilian string" (or just lilian) where the tenkara line is then tied. This greatly enhances the sensitivity for detecting subtle strikes and also provides for a smoother cast.

To tie the line to the rod, simply tie an overhand knot on the braid material at the tip of the rod (leaving a 1/8 to 1/4 inch tag sticking out), then follow the illustrations below to attach the line to the lilian. These are very secure knots.

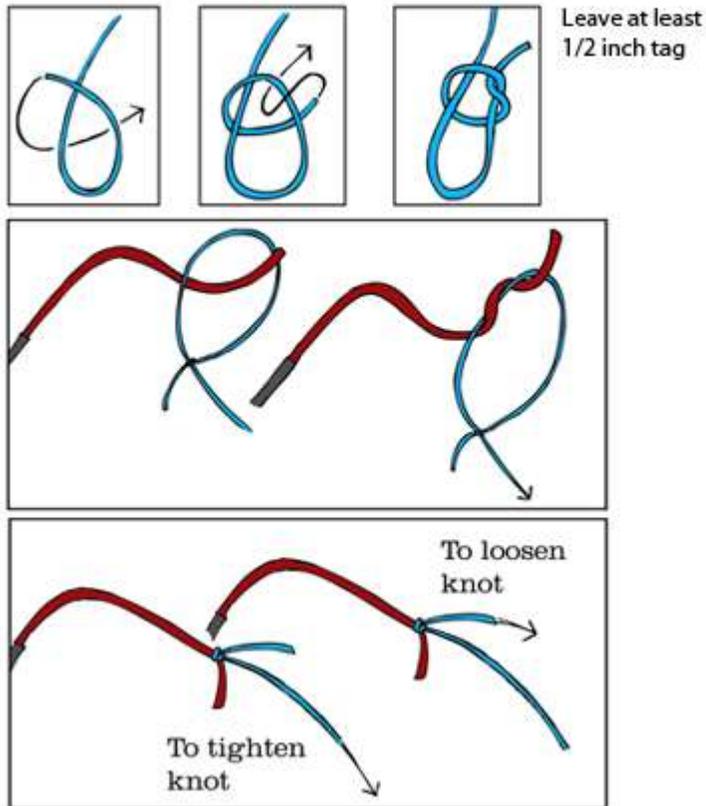
IMPORTANT: ALWAYS Leave the fragile hard tip of the rod inside its main segment while setting up, exposing only the braided "lilian" string to prevent sideways pressures and breakage.

Traditional Tenkara Line



Tenkara Level Line

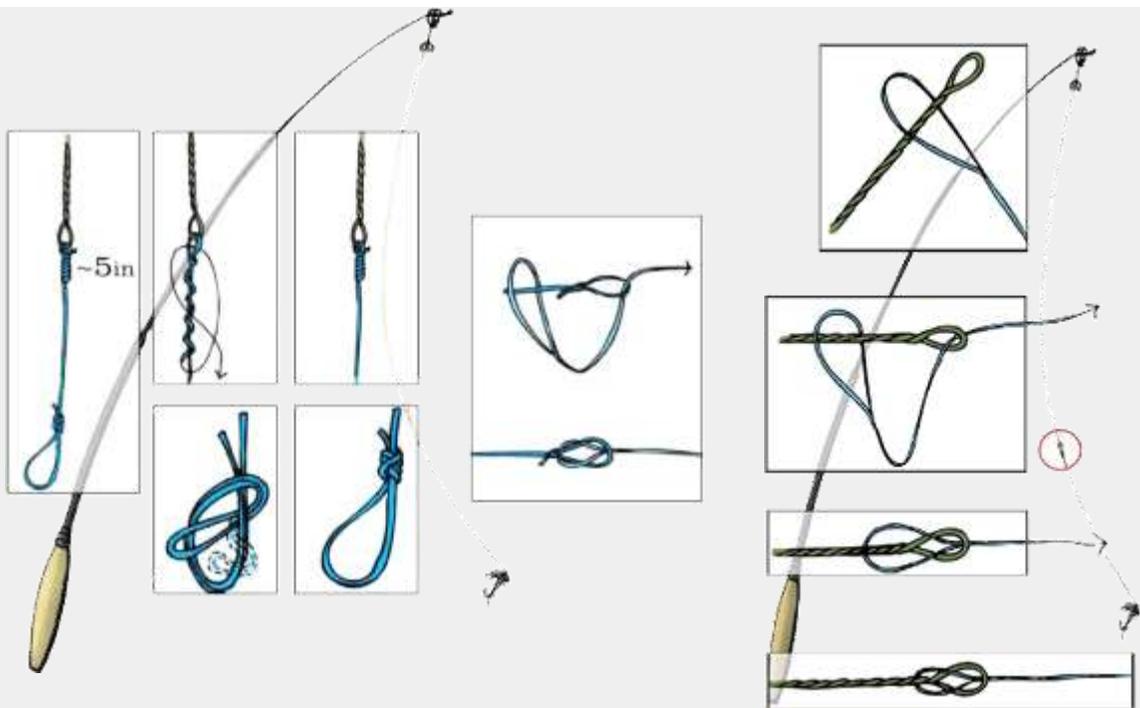
Level Line to Rod Tip



Tippet-to-line connection

Between the tenkara line and the fly one must use tippet material (very thin monofilament) which will be essentially invisible to the fish and allow you to tie the fly. Tenkara is a small-stream angling method, and a delicate fishing style. We recommend you use tippet that is 4lbs of test or thinner only (typically 5X or thinner: 5, 6, 7 or 8X) to help protect your rod.

Traditional tenkara lines come pre-tied with a 5-inch monofilament extender at the tip end. We highly recommend you always use an extender to help extend the life of your tenkara line and prevent any accidental snipping of the tenkara line. Then, tie the tippet directly to the extender (we recommend a loop-to-loop connection). To replace the extender, simply tie a short piece of monofilament using an improved clinch-knot to the tip end of the tenkara line, and form a small loop about 5 - 8 inches away where you will then connect your tippet, e.g. via a double-surgeon (instructions below).



Tippet to Level Line

