



Isn't a Staff just a Stick?

If you've ever watched a martial arts movie, attended Poly Fest or Pasifika Festival, or been to Hawaii or the Pacific Islands then you've probably seen a staff in action. The staff, a common prop, is not just restricted to flow arts - it's a well recognised tool in many other art forms and areas of life.

What is a Staff?

At its simplest, a staff *is* just a stick.

A staff could be a broom handle, or a length of dowel or aluminium tubing, or a literal stick.

However, to make this 'stick' easier to spin and execute moves with, grip is added for a 'handle' and weight is added at the ends of the staff to assist with maintaining momentum.

Staffs come in many forms, ranging from a simple day-flow spin staff to a shorter staff used in pairs (known as double staff), to an elaborate, well balanced staff with spokes on the ends (known as dragon staff).

Like many props, the staff is a common tool in both flow arts and martial arts. Although the technique and style for each of these art forms varies, many of the moves can be used in either style.



The single, non-contact, spin staff is possibly the easiest prop to begin learning to spin with and can set you up well if you want to move onto contact or dragon staff in the future.

History of the Staff

Staff spinning, like many other flow props, has been around in one form or another for thousands of years. The martial arts are one of the most common origins of prop manipulation, and the staff is no different.

[Okinawan Kobudō](#) (old martial way of Okinawa) is a Japanese term that refers to the weapons systems of Okinawan martial arts. Among these weapons are the *nanchaku*, *tekko* (knuckledusters), and the *rokushaku bō* (six foot staff, better known as the 'bo staff') and *hanbō* (mid length staff).

Feudal Japan had a caste, or class system. When the island of Okinawa was made part of Japan, the *Samurai* (warriors) were the only class that were permitted to carry weapons. As such, it's commonly believed that the *Heimim* (commoner) developed farming tools, such as the *tenbin* (a stick that sits across the shoulders used to carry baskets or buckets), into weapons used to defend themselves. More recently, evidence suggests that it was the Pechin Warrior caste that practised martial arts in secret, using weapons with Chinese origins.

The Chinese word, *gun* (rod/stick), refers to a long staff used in Chinese martial arts, often known as a [Shaolin staff](#). The *gun* was traditionally made from wax wood, which is strong and flexible, and usually has one thick end as the base, or handle, and one thinner end as the tip.

It's not known exactly when martial arts training was first introduced into Shaolin, but the Shaolin monks have practised the staff for thousands of years. Monks are synonymous with peace, compassion, and harmony, and this is perhaps the reason why the staff was a preferred weapon over something more deadly, such as a sword.



Photo by [RODNAE Productions](#)

The Shaolin staff became a common tool, not just a weapon. When monks travelled, they disliked carrying weapons. A staff, however, is more than just a weapon. A staff can be used to assist in moving obstacles or jumping across a body of water and can be used as a cane or walking stick.

In the Canary Islands, [juego del palo](#) (game of the stick) refers to a traditional folk sport of stick fighting. Staffs ranging from 120-180cm are wielded in both hands and are used for both attack and defence moves. It's thought the origins of *juego del palo* go back to the indigenous people of the Canary Islands, the *Guanches*, in the early 15th century. *Juego del palo* is still practised in the Canary Islands today, and is similar to the Portuguese *jogo do pau*, and the Venezuelan *juego del garrote*.

[Canne de combat](#) (fighting cane), is a French martial art that was developed in the early 19th century primarily for self-defence for upper class ‘gentlemen’ in unsafe cities like Paris. Use of cane or staff increased in popularity, and eventually became a common tool for French military and police. In the late 1970’s, *canne de combat* became a sporting competition with a padded suit and fencing mask being worn as protection. The *canne* is usually about 95cm, is made from very light chestnut wood (about 120g) and is slightly tapered.

Here in Aotearoa, [mau rākau](#) (Māori use of weaponry) was an important part of traditional Māori society. To Māori, weapons were *taonga* (treasures) and were often handed down from one generation to the next. These weapons were meticulously hand crafted from wood, stone, and bone, and sometimes *karakia* (prayers) were said over the weapons.

A common weapon was the [taiaha](#) – an elaborately carved and decorated fighting staff. The *taiaha* was usually crafted from hard wood, although sometimes it was made from whale bone. The *taiaha* was usually around 1.5m long with one pointed end, the *arero* (tongue). The *arero* came out of the *upoko* (head) which was often adorned with a *tauri* (collar) of feathers or dog hair. The *tauri* was both to add beauty to the *taiaha*, and to distract the opponent during battle. The body, or *tinana*, was where warriors would grip, and the other end had a smooth, flat blade, or *rau*, which was usually about 5-7cm long and was the main striking blade.

After Europeans arrived in Aotearoa, the use of Māori weapons declined and was replaced by muskets (old school guns). Over time, *para whakawai* (weapons training schools) stopped operating, and many Māori lost their knowledge of traditional weapons. Since the 1980’s though, there has been a revival of traditional Māori weaponry, and this can be seen during *wero* ceremonies (challenge at a *pōwhiri*/welcome), in *kapa haka* (Māori performing arts), and during *whaikōrero* (formal speeches).

The staff has been a common instrument used for fire spinning in the Pacific Islands and Hawaii for decades. It’s believed that fire spinning first emerged in 1946 when Samoan knife dancer, Freddie Letuli, was intrigued by a fire eater he watched perform. Letuli wrapped a towel around his blade, borrowed some gas from the fire eater, and created ‘The Flaming Sword of Samoa’.

It’s not certain when the staff entered the flow arts world, but it’s believed that the emergence of music, arts, and cultural festivals has had a part to play in staff becoming more popular in Western countries, and in flow arts communities across the globe. The introduction of the internet has meant that practitioners of this art form can share, learn from, and teach each other, regardless of their geographic location, increasing its popularity and the speed with which staff spinning has developed.

While martial arts staff spinning focuses on attack and defence techniques, and fire/flow staff usually focuses more on the aesthetic of spinning the staff, many of the same principles and moves can be applied to either style.

Evolution of the Staff

Many flow props and styles of staff spinning have emerged from traditional staff spinning, especially from bo staff and Shaolin staff, and while they are all props/styles in their own right, they all overlap.

Single, Non-Contact/Spin Staff

Similar to how staff has been spun for centuries, the staff is gripped in one or two hands and spun or thrown around the body. This style is often done at high speeds, although slower movements combined with dance or acrobatics are also common.

This staff will often have grip in the centre section of the shaft, and some sort of weighted ends (most traditional martial arts style staffs do not add any weight to the ends). For the weighted ends, day flow staffs can use rope, rubber or even 3D printed ends, and fire staffs use Kevlar wick.



A spin staff, when standing on end, should measure from the ground to your chest/shoulder height. A shorter staff will make faster movements easier, while a longer staff is better for slower, smoother flow.

We reckon this style is the best place to start with staff as the basic moves and techniques are pretty easy to learn. It's a good idea to practice with both left and right hands – this will help you down the line if you want to progress to other styles of staff spinning.

Contact Staff

The contact staff is similar in appearance to a rotational staff, but usually has more grip and is heavier. A contact staff is manipulated in a similar way to Fei Cha (a trident-like martial arts weapon) without using a finger and thumb grip. Instead, the staff is kept in contact with various parts of the body using rolls and wraps.

Contact staff as we know today began to emerge in the 1990's. 'Mushy Pea Steve' is considered one of the key players in the early days of contact staff, and the move, the 'Steve', is named after him.



A contact staff should be slightly longer than a spin staff, measuring from the ground to somewhere between your chin and eyes. As with the spin staff, shorter is better for faster movement, and longer is better for slower, smoother flow.

The moves and techniques used in contact staff require flexibility and dexterity, and its generally considered more difficult to learn than rotational staff spinning. As well as moving the staff around your body, contact staff requires you to move your body around the staff!

Double Staff

Double staff spinning is similar to non-contact/rotational staff, except it's performed with one staff in each hand. Some prefer to use full length staffs for doubles spinning, while others prefer shorter, more baton style staffs. When first starting out, it's recommended to choose a length just under twice the length of your arm – when you hold the centre of the staff, the ends should be able to fit between your torso and your arm.



It's believed that double staff in flow arts originated with [baton twirling](#), which stemmed from military rifle twirling, used as visual flair for armies marching in parades. Originally, the twirlers were mostly males due to the weight of the batons used, but over the years they were altered to make them lighter and more balanced, giving the twirler more accuracy.

These tweaks lead to females becoming involved in baton twirling around the late 1930's. In the following years, the batons continued to evolve, becoming shorter and lighter, while the popularity of baton twirling with high school girls boomed.

In the mid 1950's, incorporated baton twirling associations began to spring up across the US, and by the 60's, twirling had evolved from half-time shows in American Football games to a full fledged competitive sport.

Double staff has also generated a few sub-styles: doubles contact, staff on staff contact, and anti-spin/isolation manipulation.

- **Doubles contact:** executing contact staff moves with two staffs.
- **Staff on staff contact:** using one of the staffs as a contact point for the other in place of body parts.
- **Anti-spin/isolation manipulation:** creating geometric shapes using the staffs. This style can be done using a single staff, but two staffs open up more movements, allowing the spinner to manipulate the staffs as if they are attracted to or repelled from one another.

Staff Juggling

Staff juggling is exactly what it sounds like: using three or more staffs to juggle with.

Like traditional juggling, juggling staffs can be passed between multiple people. Unlike traditional juggling, staff juggling can be very difficult to learn due to the size of the staffs and the height they need to be thrown.

Dragon Staff

A dragon staff is an evenly weighted staff with spokes on either end. Unlike a spin staff, a dragon staff is rolled across the body, making the spokes on the end spin, creating a stunning visual effect.

Generally, the full length of the dragon staff shaft will be covered in grip, which helps maintain contact with the body and minimises the staff slipping.

Because of the way the dragon is manipulated, it's extremely important that it's weighted equally, and that the spokes are centred. This will give your dragon a good, smooth roll and stop it spinning wonky.



Similar to the contact staff, a dragon should measure from the ground to around your nose, or somewhere between your eyes and chin. Closer to chin length will allow you to switch planes and execute certain moves easier but increases the risk of the spokes colliding with your head. Closer to eye length can give you a bit more freedom with your movements but increases the risk of the spokes hitting the ground.

You can check out more about the dragon staff in our article, [Age of the Dragons](#).

S Staff/Buugeng

S staff, or as they're commonly known, buugeng, are s-shaped staffs that are manipulated to create mesmerising optical illusions. Often, buugeng will be spun in pairs, although it's not uncommon to see quad-geng (4 s staffs manipulated simultaneously).

S staff are relatively new to flow arts, and are one of the trickier props to learn, but look absolutely fantastic in the hands of a master. S staff take more inspiration from double staff and poi than single staff.



S staff need to be short enough that your arms and torso don't easily get in the way. A general guideline is that if you're holding the handle, the tip of the staff should reach roughly the midpoint between your elbow and armpit.

For more detailed information about s staff/buugeng, check out our article, [Hypnotic Squiggle Sticks](#).

Fun Fire Fact

The most spins of a fire staff in one minute is 195! This impressive [world record](#) was set by Muhammad Rashid of Pakistan on 10 March 2024. He beat his own previous record of 188 spins, set on 7 June 2015.