

Essay's and Opinions

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#1 "Ninjutsu- Misunderstood Art" - written for Blitz Magazine (1995

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Blitz intro: 'Mention the word "NINJA" and many of us conjure up an image of a sword-bearing, star-throwing man dressed in black who disappears behind a cloud of smoke. In this article, Ed Lomax explains the origins of Ninjutsu, its relevance today and the story behind the myth of what for centuries has been one of the world's most mysterious martial arts.'

Origins of Ninjutsu

Much has already been written on this topic but mostly it has been over dramatized and a little misleading. The origins of ninjutsu are much like that of many martial arts - people getting in fights - whether petty squabbles or warfare, the surviving participants will have gained valuable experience and maybe some technique knowledge.

The human condition is such that disputes and wanton violence have been and are likely to remain part of society. For over a thousand years and until last century, Japan and China were no different. Provinces were almost constantly in conflict with each other. The political times made the knowledge of unconventional tactics not only useful, but since your enemies were using them, a necessity for survival.

An early sign of this is in the book by Sun Tzu who in the 5th century B.C. devotes an entire chapter of his book on warfare to espionage and counter espionage. This was to become a major specialty for many groups of warriors in the following wars in both countries. The great Musashi also suggested many tactics that could hardly be called fair play, postulating that there is no such thing as a fair fight, or war for that matter.

Guerrilla fighting is another so-called ninja specialty, but I can't think of any military commander in history that hasn't used shock troops, guerrilla fighting or the odd night raid. The Japanese had a long history of sniper action, ambush, and assassination, even before the introduction of guns. So it is not surprising that all across the country, and notably in Iga and Koga, that there were people who specialized in such tactics, just as a spearman specializes in spear fighting.

A common myth is that the ninja were enemies of the samurai. Many samurai were ninja - Hattori Hanzo an ally and advisor to the Tokagawa clan, as well as the head of one of the largest ninja clans, is still famous in Japan today.

Reconnaissance of an enemy position was a common duty for a samurai, and often they would take a disguise as a commoner or a ronin and enter the enemy position, so it is hard to draw a line between samurai and ninja. The main separation being that those involved in espionage (other than reconnaissance) were usually not of the samurai class because commoners had more freedom of movement between provinces, and spies from other clans in their own province were not likely to notice them.

The ninja didn't just have links with the samurai however. The same tactics were extremely useful to the ronin groups that existed in large numbers, and in common folklore are the actual origin of the family clan ninjas. Some of these clans had several thousand warriors, plus their families, and quite easily controlled large sections of the Japanese countryside (Iga and Koga etc.).

Often the only thing stopping the heads of these clans achieving samurai status was recognition from the Emperor, and so they were considered by the local Lords to be rebellious peasants and as such were often attacked. The same things happen today, Iraq claiming Kuwait to be one of its provinces is the same in many ways. Some of the clans did get recognized, and even fought for the Shogun Ashikaga Yoshitane, naturally others fought against him.

Over many centuries the ninja purposely developed as much superstition concerning their abilities as was possible. A scared or confused opponent is an easier victim. To help with this they developed many gadgets, and tricks that would help them appear "magical", and others that were simply vicious.

One of the tactics that I find still horrifies people today, is to tie a live poisonous snake onto the end of a rope, swing it above your head or to your side and when your opponent approaches entangle him in the rope.

That brings me to a point Hatsumi emphasized very strongly on my last visit to Japan. "Don't be friendly in technique, ninjutsu is not friendly". Nagato Sensei once said, "If someone attacks you, do not think of them as a person, think of them as an animal, a rabid animal, and put them down!". With people like this it is not surprising ninjutsu is alive and well today. Don't get me wrong, they are very nice people and easy to talk with, just no nonsense people.

Ninjutsu Today

Many people (martial artists and others) have asked me why I study ninjutsu, and what use is it today. Don't people still fight? Don't people still desire a safe and peaceful life? The need for self defense still exists and so martial arts still exists for reasons other than just sport.

An instructor of any martial art knows this and yet some still question the usefulness of ninjutsu in several ways, many of them holding naive, stereo-typed views of what ninjutsu is.

The black suit is a classic example. It stems from Japanese theatre and is actually a stage attendants uniform that was first used when the legend of a magical ninja, who could disappear at will, became popular.

As for the other comments, yes we do still use swords but not often. Shuriken (throwing stars) is almost never taught as the average student is unlikely to be confronted with one or a need to use one.

Modern street fighting is one of my favourites. These days, street fights are safer than in any century past. People rarely carry weapons. There are fewer people trained in unarmed or weapons combat than in feudal Japan, and the human body is still the same shape. So it goes without saying that what worked against an attacker then will work now.

The strange thing is that most so called "teachers" of modern street fighting are teaching boxing and karate techniques which both have histories dating back hundreds of years.

Weapon training is still very useful. Knife fighting is still knife fighting. Swords have similarities with sticks, crowbars and cricket bats as do bo and hanbo techniques. More importantly, weapon training hones your unarmed fighting ability. Most of our training is in unarmed combat as this is the most relevant to the average fight.

Older martial arts have passed the test of time and hopefully gained some experience along the way. The real value of the old styles is their knowledge, not their traditions, titles or trophies.

Although some people may practice martial arts for sport, and some for ego or monetary reasons, most of us started in martial arts for self defense. In this way I do agree with some of the people promoting "modern martial arts", that its teaching centres on self defense rather than tradition.

Most current ninjutsu instructors have reverted back to the Japanese way of teaching and stopped trying to re-invent the wheel by using so-called "innovative" modern teaching techniques. Even the teaching methods have withstood the test of time and proved themselves effective. Such things as dojo sparring are not practiced in Japan as there is very little similarity between any competition and a real fight.

Hatsumi Sensei says that there is no substitute for the feeling of a real fight, and having been in a few too many I would agree. A good instructor can teach you technique and tactics, and by associating with them you will learn the state of mind that is necessary to survive a confrontation. Today there is only one true school of ninjutsu left for people to study. Bujinkan Dojo. Hatsumi Sensei blames this on long periods of peace in the last few centuries, and the modern Japanese obsession with material things and fashion. There are a few insignificant break-away groups as with any style but the Bujinkan Dojo is the only real school left.

In the Bujinkan Dojo there are 9 sub-styles or sub-schools each having their own specialties. These are not taught separately as an academic study. All the sub-styles are very closely related in their basic technique, so they are normally taught as one whole style. This is why Hatsumi Sensei has named the school "Bujinkan" (training hall of the warrior spirit) as an umbrella style name over the others.

Unlike some of the other "ancient" or "traditional" schools, the aim of the Bujinkan Dojo is to produce strong people in both spirit and fighting ability, rather than a ritual practice of technique resulting in a downward spiral of real fighting ability.

The specific value of ninjutsu in comparison with many other martial arts is that it does not have an overall specialty. Many arts practice only part of the possible eventualities in a fight. Judo and Aikido for example specialize in grappling, Karate and Tae Kwon Do more so for striking and the same goes for Wing Chun Kung Fu.

The same is even more obvious with the weapon arts and even the weapons associated with the unarmed arts. This has its good and bad points. Most people are aware that boxers are good with their fists and judo players are good with throws. However for every field you specialize in you are likely to have a corresponding weakness. This is the reason why we see people like Chuck Norris training with the Gracie/Machado grappling specialists. Chuck is an intelligent person aware of a weakness in his abilities and doing something about it. This is also the aim of ninjutsu, to create complete martial artists with no specialties and therefore no weakness.

Hatsumi Sensei says it takes about twenty years to master ninjutsu, although he also thinks western students learn faster and have better spirit than the Japanese. The only people really at this level are the 10th dans (7 Japanese and 3 westerners), and their skill level is far higher than any instructor in Australia.

In August 1990 when I passed my 5th dan test (the only test in the Bujinkan), Nagato Sensei said to me "In another 10 years you will be good, 5th dan is like a baby, in ninjutsu, that has just learned to walk."

As such ninjutsu is a rare art, and as an integrated collection of the many facets of martial arts, has similarities with almost every martial art and value to all practitioners.

To all of you in the arts I leave you with the words of Hatsumi Sensei - "KEEP GOING".