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Ninjutsu Water Training

The Wave of the Future?

By Robert Bussey



Ninja were known to use their unique water-fighting skills in or around the lakes, ponds, moats, fields and streams that came in to Play during battle.

On a winter day many years ago, my brother and I attempted some martial arts sparring on a frozen lake near our parents' resort home in Nebraska. In those days, we both held black belts in Korean fighting forms. Determined to kick my older brother in the noggin, I threw a roundhouse kick while pivoting on my base leg. Needless to say, I ended up bruising both my funny bone and my pride.



For the typical martial artist, frustration sets in when it becomes impossible to execute an attack or defense move. Sometimes, your inability is caused by an opponent's superior ability; and other times it can be linked to specific terrain or circumstance. Regardless of the reasons, a true warrior must find ways to overcome obstacles in a direct confrontation. While working out at my academies. Practitioners from other styles have exhibited difficulty in moving on floor mats.



"I am used to working on carpet," they explain. Other martial artists, however, are right at home when training on mats. But the ninja must be equally prepared for battle among a variety of locations - mats, concrete, dirt, jagged rocks or even water.



A ninja's cleverness in responding to any situation is based on his skills of adaptability. Students of the Nebraska ninjutsu system are taught to develop abilities in combat that will enable them to turn potentially dangerous situations to their advantage.



To survive in combat, the martial artist cannot rely solely on a set of fighting principles. The ninja must be able to respond without thought or hesitation, and utilize skill which is equal to or better than the enemy's. There is a time to use the feet, a time to apply joint manipulation, and a time to grapple.



When fighting on ice, for example, it would be more pragmatic to feature various hand strikes, as well as elbows, knees, and grappling techniques. Kicks won't work as well because of the slippery surface. The ninja's physical arsenal must be wide enough to give him total body/terrain unification. The same holds true whether he's fighting among trees, on a city bus or in a large body of water.



During the summer, it is not uncommon to teach training techniques in the Midwest's bountiful lakes. The practitioner is taught to realize the vast capabilities and alternatives available to him as a water warrior. Some of the key study areas include: above and below surface traveling, under- water tube breathing, conditioning (for health and survival), water safety, invisibility, water purification (for drinking), and in water combat fighting.



Traditionally, ninja were known to use their unique water-fighting skills in or around the lakes, ponds, moats, fields, and streams that came into play in Japanese battles fought between the 12th and 17th centuries. Swamp and other water confrontation scenarios also were integral parts of World War II, the Korean War and, of course, the Vietnam War. Although the later examples made use of more sophisticated weaponry, there were many hand-to-hand water-fighting examples, especially among elite troops and escaping prisoners of war.



One cannot hope to teach a student the ins and outs of every combat situation. A ninjutsu instructor, however, can guide the student toward general circumstances of self-defense, and then allow him to grow in

his ability to respond naturally. When called upon, his knowledge can be put to the test.

In mastering the art of water fighting, a on a new approach to combat. Unless his weapons (in most cases the arms and legs) are above the surface of the water, many of the typical kick/punch/ throw techniques are less effective. In waist level water, for example, all of the upper body tools, with the exception of mobility, will work well. It is when the ninja and his opponent get into chest-level water and above that special approaches need to be taken.

Skin pinching, pressure-point control, and joint manipulation can become the best weapons for water fighting. In head-level water, the stronger individual usually swims to safety because a person's striking skills are neutralized. But by using the ninja methods of water fighting, even the smaller or weaker person can gain the upper hand.

The prescription for self-defense in water fighting depends greatly on whether the warrior wants to: a) escape from his opponent(s); b) injure or maim his opponent(s); or c) kill his opponent(s). The decision, obviously, would vary greatly with each situation. But in all cases, choice "c" or death would be a last resort.

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Escaping from an opponent's grip while in the water requires the use of body twists, pressure points, thrusts, or joint locks. Against a throat choke, for example, the ninja might squeeze the skin on each side of the enemy's rib cage and then follow with a push-kick against his stomach. After breaking free, the defender can either flee or take advantage of his enemy's incapacitation.

When attempting to escape the grip of an opponent, it is often more practical for the ninja to allow his head to go under the surface. By taking a deep breath (fill the lower stomach first), the ninja can better position himself and actually gain power by balling up during the execution of his technique.

By pinching nerves or applying pressure to the sensitive areas of an opponent's body, the ninja can temporarily stun or paralyze his foe long enough to stop the intended attack. There are six basic target points just on the neck. Other primary targets can be found on the hands, forearms, face, chest and legs. Pressure-point techniques are very painful. However, once the pressure has been removed, the pain will quickly leave.

To incapacitate an enemy, the warrior must rely on more aggressive tactics of personal defense such as joint manipulation. By gaining control of an enemy's joints, the ninja can easily: pin or lock out his enemy's joint; dislocate his enemy's joints; or break his opponent's joints or bones.

The five key areas for dislocation and breaking in water fighting are: the fingers, wrist, elbow, shoulder and knee. Through an understanding of ninjutsu's joint-lock techniques, the warrior can control and/or injure his enemy.

The primary effective striking techniques used in the water are those of the short-range variety. Because of the resistance offered in the water against full-extension strikes, it is much more practical to apply four basic weapons. They are: the head (for butting, biting, and spitting); the elbows (for horizontal and vertical strikes); the knees (to drive into the groin, thighs, face); and the instep (used mainly for groin attacks). Techniques such as scratching the face and body, eye poking and the pulling of hair will help defeat the opponent.

Specific techniques used to drown the opponent will not be discussed for obvious reasons. There are skills using pressure points, strikes, and chokes that are practiced in various dojo (training halls) at the more advanced levels. A strike to the solar plexus during a deep-water fight can result in drowning. By using a particular pressure point with a thumb, one is actually capable of holding the opponent under water.

In ankle- or knee-deep water, virtually all weapons, including kicks, will be effective.

If you decide to practice any water combat skills, it is best to have someone around who is certified in lifesaving training. I say this for a good reason. One evening during a routine water-training exercise, I had a large group of ninja students practicing various tactics. I ran into complications during the exercise and almost drowned. No matter how basic or advanced the

techniques, play it safe.

In ankle- or knee-deep water, virtually all weapons (kicking or otherwise) will be effective. Remember that a wet uniform will be heavier when you are out of the water. Also, flying sand, mud or dirt can easily get into your eyes (as well as your enemy's). Remember to be natural and relaxed. Panic and fear are not water soluble.

About the Author: Robert Bussey is a ninjutsu instructor in Fremont, Nebraska. He also is a student of Masauki Hatsumi.