

SAMURAI WEAPONS



Sword Master James Williams Shows You How to Start Training With Japanese Samurai Swords

by Robert W. Young / Photography by Rick Hustead and Robert Reiff

Razor-sharp steel. Fraction-of-an-inch precision.

Put them together and you have the potential to lose some blood, lose a limb and even lose your life. Couple those dangers with centuries of traditions that are so strict there are even rules to govern how you look at a blade. It all adds up to an intimidating set of martial arts that offer plenty of benefits but unfortunately frighten away many prospective students. To dispel some of the mystery and explain some of the rules and procedures, Black Belt sought out James Williams, a 48-year veteran of the martial arts. The founder of Bugei Trading Company, a renowned source for quality Japanese swords and armor, Williams runs his own school in Encinitas, California, and oversees a network of instructors and students who carry on his nami ryu system around the United States.

— Editor

In the pages of *Black Belt*, we deal with a variety of Japanese sword arts — *kendo*, *iaido*, cutting, sport-style sparring, sparring with padded weapons and so on. How are they different from one another and from what you do?

First, sparring for sport has nothing to do with the Japanese sword arts. Kendo really doesn't have anything to do with old-style Japanese swordsmanship; it's a modern sport. The movements and stances are completely different. From a classical perspective, using a *shinai* is different from using a sword. Iaido is a modern art; it has roots in the past, but what they do is not combat oriented.

I don't think the samurai would be able to relate to most modern Japanese sword arts. We use the term *bujutsu*, or "warrior study," to refer to all the things those warriors needed to know: swimming while wearing armor, shooting arrows while on horseback, and how to use the *naginata*, *yari* and sword. From the classical *koryu* perspective, the sword was the foundation of strategy. All the movements came from it.

What's the best term to describe what you practice? *Kenjutsu*?

We do *bujutsu*. My system, *nami ryu*, has *kenjutsu* and *iaijutsu*, which is a subset of *kenjutsu* that was useful when you had to draw quickly under duress. It also includes *jūjūjutsu*, which is the strikes, drops and throws that are identical to the moves done with the sword, as

well as *shurikenjutsu*, *tantojutsu*, *hojojutsu*, *naginatajutsu* and some *kyudo*. But the big three we work with are *kenjutsu*, *iaijutsu* and *jūjūjutsu*.

Does your system also include test-cutting?

Yes. *Tameshigiri* is about making sure you can cut with the techniques you're practicing. A lot of people do it just because they can. It doesn't necessarily mean anything even if you can cut well.

Should martial artists who haven't trained in a sword art refrain from practicing tameshigiri?

It depends on what you want to learn. If you just want to chop things, there's all kinds of ways to do it. But swords are dangerous, and a mistake can be very costly. A big mistake can be life changing. I absolutely think you should get training first.

Furthermore, it took sword makers a long time to create swords that are as good as they are. If all you do is cutting, you're not showing respect for any of that. There's something about a sword — when you pick one up, you're picking up more than just a piece of steel. You're accepting the responsibility to learn how to use it and the responsibility to learn how to protect and defend other people. You're taking up a task that's been passed down for millennia.

Are you saying that focusing on just sword techniques is incomplete?

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Yes. The sword is the foundation of training because it demands the most from you. With a sword, you have a quarter-inch gap. That raises you to a higher level of consciousness. It changes your empty-hand technique.

How do you go about teaching beginners to wield such a dangerous weapon?

When we teach, we start by doing iaijutsu with a live blade. It's the edge of the sword that tells you whether your movements are right. The edge of the blade is the truth. Then, when you go to kenjutsu, which is usually paired practice with a *bokken*, you've just put away the real sword, and the lessons of the sharp blade are still in your head. That keeps you from trying techniques that have no chance of working with a real blade — things you might do with a shinai, for example. From kenjutsu, we go to jujitsu, which uses the same movements and postures.

How does a new student decide which sword art to focus on?

You have to ask yourself what you want to know. There's a place for all of them. Iaido, for example, isn't a combative art and doesn't have other aspects such as jujitsu, but it's great for movement and lots of other things. Kendo is a fine sport that develops fast reflexes, even though it doesn't have anything to do with kenjutsu.

Assuming a person wants to do a form of bujutsu that involves the sword, how should he proceed?

You have to find someone who teaches it. You have to be careful because a lot of people buy a sword, then look at YouTube and decide they know what's going on. You can't stick iaido and *aikido* together and think you have anything that's even close to classical bujutsu.

What if there's no instructor nearby?

One of the reasons I broke with tradition and estab-

lished nami ryu and the study groups is I know people are interested but often there isn't any place for them to train. I used to travel two hours to see Don Nage *sensei* for lessons. Even now, I travel to Japan to learn skills that aren't available here. It's not always easy. If you do have to travel to attend a class, it should give you a lot of material to practice on your own — probably more than a week's worth. Remember that the *dojo* isn't there to give you repetitious practice. The teacher isn't there to make you exercise; he's there to show you stuff you can practice on your own.

And if a person has no regular access to a teacher?

You should go to seminars. Watching DVDs is good, but it's not as good as having someone correct you in person. Classical arts at a high level are designed to hide movements from your opponent, so with most of the material, you can't see what's happening. It's *hiden*, or hidden techniques. You need to have some contact with a teacher.

How often does a student need to spend time with his teacher in a long-distance relationship?

As often as you can.

For a newcomer to the sword arts, is the first step to buy equipment, to find an instructor or to read books and do research?

Assuming you've decided on a classical art, you have to realize that it's going to be time-consuming, that you'll have to change how you move your body, that it will require dedication and that sometimes the results don't come as quickly as you'd like.

Then you should research the art you've chosen. If you have an opportunity to watch people do it, great. You might be able to see some demos on the Internet, and that can be beneficial, but often you won't know if



THE DRAW: James Williams assumes a combative stance with his right hand grasping the handle of the sword. To illustrate how the sword stays almost stationary as the wielder's body moves, Williams begins the draw by moving his left hip back. He completes the unsheathing with both hips on the same line. The sword has yet to clear the body, and it's not necessary to turn the scabbard to cut at any angle. Next, his right hip engages to power the cut. (This cannot be seen on the omote or "outside." It's the body that actually powers the technique.) He completes the initial cut, then moves into the single guard to finish the drawing and cutting aspect of the kata.

what you're seeing is being done right.

After that, you should seek out people who do it well. If you can find a school, watch a class. If the teacher is very serious and there's no laughter in class, you might want to think about what you could learn there. Some people like that, but most people would rather not take it so seriously.

At what stage would a new student begin buying gear?

If you're going to study at a school, your teacher will tell you when — and what size. There's no one right size for swords. It all depends on your body.

What kind of investment is involved? Thousands of dollars?

No. You can get a well-made sword for \$700 or \$800.

Should a beginner look at his first sword as something he'll inevitably wear out or damage and, therefore, opt

for a cheaper model?

If you're damaging your sword during training, something is wrong. You should buy the best sword you can reasonably afford.

What else does a student need?

If it's a classical sword art, you'll also need some sort of kimono or modified top like a *keikogi*. And you'll need an *obi*. A karate belt isn't adequate, and it isn't even Japanese from a classical perspective. You'll also need a bokken.

Is there a limit to how good a person can get by attending seminars and training on his own?

That depends on the individual. I've had people tell me that Miyamoto Musashi wasn't trained, that he learned everything on his own. That's not true. Just because he didn't get a *mekyo kaiden* from a classical school means nothing. People in that society trained all



THE RETURN: The *noto* action begins when the cut is finished. James Williams brings his feet together as he moves the sword to the centerline. He tilts the blade back toward his body, then makes sure the spine is near the opening of the scabbard. Next, Williams opens his body, just as he did in the draw, and aligns the blade and the scabbard. Once the tip of the weapon nears the opening, he guides the blade into the scabbard without using his fingers. Williams' left hip moves forward, sliding the scabbard onto the blade. His final position has his feet together and the sheathed sword repositioned for wearing.

the time. His father was a martial artist. People learn from people. He didn't pick it all up on his own.

In the beginning, you should try to do exactly what you were taught and get it right. Don't extrapolate. I made that mistake and had to go back and redo core movements. If your teacher is good and he's training you in a classical system, there will be things he shows you in the beginning that, if you don't get them right, you'll have to go back and relearn. If you go to a seminar and are taught something, practice only that. Then find another seminar to go to.

At a seminar, is it OK to ask the instructor if you can

demonstrate what you've practiced at home and have him critique it?

Some instructors may do that. Just remember that there are serious differences in how people move in different arts, especially now. Classical movement isn't common; a lot of the movements have been lost. You can go to a seminar and learn one thing, then go to a different seminar and find that it's not the same. The main thing is to stick with one you like. Try to see that teacher or someone else in that style as often as you can.

How frequent should the visits be?

If you pay attention and practice hard at home, you



THE GRIP: The sword is grasped with the thumb joint well to the inside of the handle. The opening of the elbow needs to face forward to align the shoulder (1). When the elbow is correctly positioned, the kasane (thickness) of the blade bisects the radius bone three to four inches above the wrist (2). The correct grip shown from the side (3). The position of the thumb knuckle in relation to the handle (4).

can improve by seeing a good teacher once a month.

And if it's once every two or three months?

You can still do it, but it's going to be a little boring and repetitious. It all comes down to your dedication to practicing what you're taught. If your teacher sees that you've been practicing hard, he'll show you a little more so you have more to practice at home. That's where the trust in your teacher comes in.

What are the biggest safety considerations for beginners?

Swords are sharp. They will lop off arms and legs. They will kill you.

You could be swinging that sword around, not paying attention, and somebody walks too close. ... If you hit someone in the arm while you're moving very fast at all, that arm is coming off.

So when they practice at home, students need to make sure no one is nearby.

Yes. When you've got a live blade in your hand, it's a whole other world. Your first time with a live blade should not be when you're home alone; it should be when you're with your instructor. He'll show you what to do, and you should do just that. Don't whip it around because it feels good.

Do a lot of accidents occur because students try to do something they saw in a movie?

They almost always happen for that reason.

When you train, small things are always going to happen. The bottom line is, the sword never forgets it's a sword. But sometimes we forget. It bites, and that's what keeps us on the straight and narrow. Do only what you've been shown and be patient with your progress.

How often do equipment failures happen?

I haven't had an equipment failure. Certainly, you should be very careful of less-expensive swords. Stain-

less-steel swords are not swords; they're "swordlike objects." They break very easily. Do not use them for anything. If it's sharp and hard, it's dangerous.

That's why I say buy the best sword you can afford, not necessarily the fanciest sword. But even with the best sword ... many years ago in Japan, a master was doing an iaido demonstration and the *mekugi* (pin that connects the handle to the blade) came out. When he drew, the blade went flying and hit a boy and killed him. The teacher offered to commit *seppuku* (ritual suicide) on the spot. That's why all our blades have two mekugi. When I'm doing stuff, I constantly push on the pins to make sure they're in place.

What else causes accidents?

When you start hacking away at things in your backyard, the blade probably isn't hitting at the proper angle, and that can cause problems. Anybody can walk out and start whacking stuff, but that makes you just another goofball. You're not doing anything that a warrior would do, and you're not respecting the sword.

Are there any other don'ts you'd like to mention?

Don't bang swords together. They're not toys, and they're not there for you to re-enact your fantasies. Exercise maturity and common sense.

Also, keep your fingers off the blade. First, the oil on your fingers is corrosive, and it can actually etch a fingerprint into a blade. The only way to get it out is to polish it. Second, you don't touch another man's blade out of respect. You don't pick it up, and you don't step over it. If he gives you permission to see it, there's a process for looking at it, but you still wouldn't ever touch the blade.

What about cleaning the blade after test-cutting?

Yes. The blade needs to be kept clean, dry and oiled. At some tournaments, they cut and put the sword away with all the junk on it — I disagree with that. The samurai didn't do that. Whenever you get into competition, it



THE INVERTED DRAW: James Williams assumes a ready stance. He moves his right hand, palm up, under the handle in preparation for the draw. The action begins as he moves his left hip back. The blade clears the scabbard and begins the cut. Williams completes the gyakugirage technique, then executes a kesagiri..

takes on a life of its own and gets further away from what was done a long time ago. Now, that doesn't necessarily make it a bad thing.

What's your advice for the student who learns something at a seminar, then goes home and tries to teach it to his friend?

Until your teacher says you're ready to teach, don't teach.

Is it essential for students to delve into the history and culture of Japan when they're learning a Japanese sword art?

I find it critical because if you're studying a classical art, you're studying a strategy first. If you're studying a battle strategy, you need to know what the landscape is like in Japan to know why things were a certain way. And if you don't study the history, you'll only get a tiny piece of things. For example, were your techniques designed to work against armor on the battlefield or against civilian garb — flesh, bone and silk?

How tough is it for a Westerner to study in the United States and then go to Japan to continue his training?

There are advantages and disadvantages to being a foreigner in Japan. The biggest advantage is, you can ask questions. You don't have to follow in lock step. Don't try to be Japanese. However, you should always show respect for the teacher, his traditions and his culture.

But it all depends on who you're training with. There are some people who've gone over and done very well. It's not, however, a panacea. Don't think that by going there, you'll learn better than you can learn here.

What are some of the benefits of learning the Japanese sword arts?

I look at the sword as a combat weapon. I don't look at it as a tool for personal development — although you can certainly get that from the training. A long time ago in Japan, they talked about "the killing sword" and "the life-giving sword." One aspect of that is, the only way you can protect — the only way the sword can give life — is if you can kill. If you're not capable of cutting down evil, you can't protect anybody. The only proper use of the sword is to cut down evil to protect and defend. You can do all the pretty movements, but if you haven't learned how to use it as a killing tool ...

Specifically, what benefits could a practitioner of kung fu or taekwondo expect?



THE MAINTENANCE: The mekugi (pins) are driven out using a mekugi hammer. Once they're removed, the handle can be separated from the blade.



It's a completely different study. You'll have to give up those operating systems if you're learning a classical system. Personally, I think it's a far deeper and richer endeavor.

What if the student's background is in a Japanese art like karate? Will that give him an advantage?

Even then, it's probably not going to make a difference. Between what we do and modern kendo, judo or aikido, it's light-years.

Why would anyone elect to give up what he's been doing and take up a totally new pursuit?

It's a lifestyle. Don't look at it like you're going to get a belt rank — because you're not. It's a broad study in which you're walking the path of warriors, not tiptoeing around the edge of the meadow. It's a connection to the past. It teaches you things about life that you can't easily learn elsewhere.

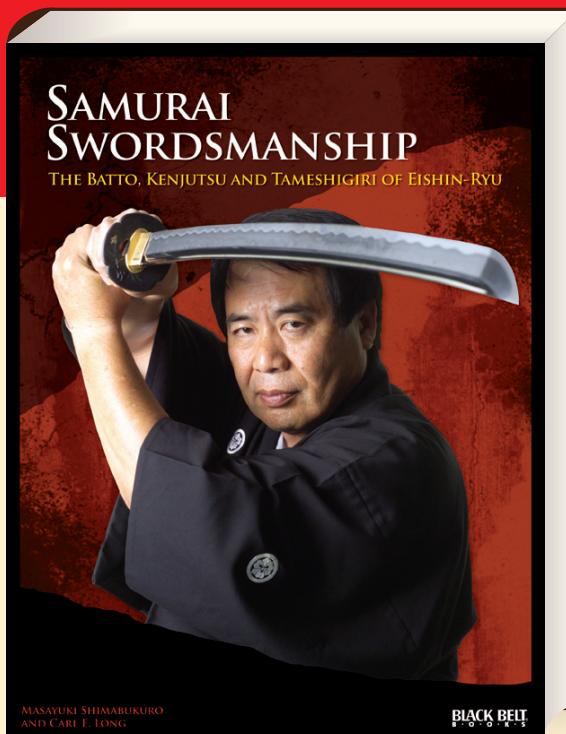
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Robert W. Young is the executive editor of Black Belt. For more information about the Japanese sword arts, including videos of James Williams in action, visit www.blackbeltmag.com.

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PHILOSOPHY OF JAPANESE SWORDSMANSHIP

Sword-drawing techniques or *battojutsu* is a unique practice that is different from *kenjutsu*. Of course, many kenjutsu styles include *batto* as a component of their training, but there is a difference between styles designated as kenjutsu and styles classified distinctly as *battojutsu*. Kenjutsu refers to sword methods that take place once the sword has already been drawn. *Battojutsu* also addresses a scenario of face-to-face combat but it is a response to an attack or combative situation while the sword is still in the scabbard. *Battojutsu* imparts methods of instantaneously defending against an attack, often from a disadvantageous position, which means the practitioner must draw his sword and cut simultaneously. Kenjutsu refers to everything that happens after the draw has been completed.

There are obviously many *waza* in *battojutsu*. The *waza* recreate possible combative scenarios, but it is a mistake to think of a *waza* as a single method of dealing with a specific attack. Instead, you should think of the curriculum of *waza* as an alphabet in that each technique represents a letter. However, just knowing the alphabet is not enough. You must understand how each letter can be combined with other letters to form words.

Waza works this way, as well. Each technique imparts principles and methods of properly using the sword, and like the letters of the alphabet, they can stand alone or in combination to express an idea. Eventually, the various techniques and principles of one *waza* can be combined with methods from other *waza*, resulting in *kae waza*, variations that express an alternative strategy or concept. In fact, the combining of *waza* into formal techniques is seen in many other kenjutsu styles, too.

When you understand the *waza* of the curriculum of a given *ryu*, you'll see that a single *waza* actually contains many possibilities — one sword can become 10,000 swords, and one *waza* can become 10,000 *waza*. This

concept is perhaps best represented in the classical kenjutsu style of *Ono-ha itto-ryu*. In this style of kenjutsu, the application of *kirioroshi* is the most important technique learned in the first *kumitachi* (paired drill). This first waza is the most important of all the kumitachi because everything in the ryu is built off of it and always returns to it. This is, in fact, the very meaning of “*itto*,” which means one sword.

This same idea is found in all kenjutsu styles, like in *nukitsuke* of *Eishin-ryu batto-ho*, which is the technical focus of this book. You’ll see how everything in the book begins with and comes back to nukitsuke.

But, from the standpoint of self-defense, what is the value of understanding battojutsu in the modern age? The sword is an archaic weapon, but battojutsu actually contains principles that are applicable to the root of many empty-hand *jujitsu*-related arts. An expression of this idea is found within the practice of *muto-dori*, which refers to unarmed methods of defense against an opponent wielding a sword. In short, you take the sword from the attacker. (This is why Japanese swordsmanship can also be applied to auxiliary weapons, such as the *tessen*.) Practitioners with a high level of battojutsu skill and understanding will probably even be able to create empty-hand techniques directly from the study of battojutsu, but it will be the result of many years of dedicated practice.

THE DEFINING ELEMENTS OF BATTOJUTSU

The basic components of *Eishin-ryu* battojutsu can be distilled down to four primary techniques. These essential components are the first draw, the finishing cut, the ceremonial cleaning of the blade and the return of the blade to its scabbard. Although they may seem to be independent of one another, they are all considered a continuation of the very first movement, which is known as nukitsuke.

Because nukitsuke endows the swordsman with insight that lives hang in the balance of this very first drawing cut, nukitsuke is often referred to as the “life of *iai*.” Unlike empty-hand techniques, a sword cut will always leave an indelible mark in the world. Once the sword has left the *saya* (scabbard), it will change a life forever because it is meant to strike down the enemy before he can attack or retreat. The separation of the sword from the *saya* is intentionally meant to separate the life force of your opponent from his body. You can easily draw parallels to how the sheathed sword represents the stable and balanced forces of nature whereas the lethal cut of the sword separates the manifest and non-manifest union of what is recognized as a human’s existence. Battojutsu changes the life of your opponent, his family, community and everyone whose life he may have touched in even some small way, forever. Likewise, the victor in this encounter will change forever, as well. Therefore, the trained practitioner strives to confirm that all life is precious and that the taking of such is not without consequences. After all, if a person is the sum of all his experiences, then he will eventually become a result of his actions and experiences.

Today, practice should promote the notion of a life-giving sword (*katsu jin ken*). Your practice is meant to preserve the life of the swordsman and not to take the life of your enemy (*satsu jin to*). Although this may seem like an argument of semantics, it is actually predicated on what the swordsman’s intention is that gives life to his technique. Nukitsuke with a sword in your hand is much like the words that come forth from your mouth. Think of how people are sometimes accused of having a sharp tongue. Once the words have left your lips, they can never be retrieved. No apology can take back the suffering of those who have been hurt by harmful statements. Impetuous actions lead to regret and are the result of a lack of self-control. Through these four seemingly simple acts — nukitsuke, *kirioroshi*, *chiburi*, *noto* — the modern swordsman develops *heijoshin*, which is a calm and peaceful spirit that is unaffected by the daily ups and downs that modern living presents. He may not need to carry a sword in modern society, but the need to develop a razor-sharp mind and a clear, focused spirit is as much a part of battojutsu today as it was centuries ago.

NUKITSUKE

1



2



3



4



1-4: When performing *nukitsuke*, the drawing action begins slowly as if to allow the opponent the time to reconsider the outcome of his actions. Therefore, *nukitsuke* becomes a life-giving technique. The practitioner does not focus on winning but rather on stopping his opponent's aggressive behavior and preserving life. In the last moment of *nukitsuke*, known as *saya banare*, the sword leaves the scabbard. This action appears to happen seemingly on its own accord to cut down evil intentions and therefore restore order. Immediately following the initial drawing action, the practitioner moves to raise the sword above his head to perform a downward two-hand cut.

KIRIOROSHI

1



2



3



1-3: Throughout the history of *Eishin-ryu*, the master's responsibility has always been to give life to the traditions and spirit of the founder while at the same time adapting the art's relevance to the modern world. A critical wound on the ancient battlefield meant untold suffering. The samurai considered the two-hand, downward finishing stroke, *kirioroshi*, to be the humane way to end the suffering of a mortally wounded enemy. *Kirioroshi* should remind a practitioner that ethical and morally just actions should be an aid to ending the suffering of others. It is through the act of *kirioroshi* that a swordsman can end suffering through his practice of samurai swordsmanship. True understanding of compassion through the sincere intention to end the suffering of others leads the swordsman to make positive contributions to society. Through *kirioroshi*, the practitioner seeks to attain both social and self-perfection.

CHIBURI

1



1: There are many methods of ceremoniously cleaning the blade, and each *waza* ends with a procedure for acting out the cleaning process. These methods would be done quickly on the battlefield before resheathing the sword. Later, a full cleaning of the blade would be required after the imminent danger of combat had passed. This ritual act of cleansing the sword is known as *chiburi*. Within the art of *battojutsu*, there are several methods of cleaning the blade. Each method utilizes a particular series of movements to symbolically as well as practically remove the gore from the sword. The blade is also thought to mirror the intentions of the warrior. It is for this reason that the *katana* is often referred to as “the soul of the samurai.” For if the swordsman has performed *nukitsuke* to preserve life and *kirioroshi* as an act to end the suffering of another, then his conscience and soul are free from the negative aspects of violence for violence’s sake. Therefore, the actual physical cleaning of the blade is always done with the proper equipment.

NOTO

1



1: In each *waza*, the swordsman must return the sword to the *saya* (scabbard). The act of resheathing the sword is known as *noto*. *Noto* gives the swordsman the opportunity to practice lingering awareness because he must return the sword in an efficient manner without exposing himself to attack. This action is performed with the feeling of completing the *waza* and maintaining the awareness that there may still be evil in the minds of others. Resolving the past and being ever mindful of the present, the practitioner generates the realization that he must be ever diligent to control his mind and not allow it to become complacent or lulled into an undue sense of security.

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