

Basic Knife Fighting

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When I first got a copy of Hatsumi's book "Knife and Pistol Fighting", back in the mid eighties (I don't know if this book is available in print any longer, as it is written in Japanese), I thought it a bit odd to mix knife and pistol fighting in the same book. Sure, they're both one handed weapons, but certainly that's where the similarities end? Fortunately, I continued training, and perhaps, have gained a bit of insight.

Knives and pistols are the equivalent to us that the ancient battlefield weapons were to Samurai. Knife and pistol fighting are an elevation of the seriousness of a situation. Bringing a knife or gun into play is an acceptance of the deadly nature of the encounter.

How does this differ from regular unarmed training? It shouldn't. There is an old saying that goes: "you'll never see the knife that cuts you." This alludes to the fact that a decent knife fighter will not let you see the blade until it's too late. Thus, all of your unarmed training should recognize the fact that a knife could be in your opponent's hand, and your taijutsu should reflect this recognition.

A lot of instructors will tell their students that, no matter what, you're going to get cut in a knife fight. In a sense, this is true. The next step to that statement is continued training to avoid that inevitable occurrence. Unfortunately, too many people hear that statement and stop there. In the final battle in the Musashi book, Musashi's opponent draws his sword and tosses away his scabbard. Musashi says "I've already won". The opponent had already decided he would lose and not need to put his sword away after the battle. Don't stop training there and decide you're going to get cut, instead learn and grow and decide not to get cut.

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In knife fighting, much more than in unarmed fighting, your taijutsu must be very good to be effective. First and foremost it is important to get out of the way of any attack. If a swipe is coming for your face, and you don't move your face, it's going to get cut. It is only once you're clear of the attack that counter attacks can be launched.

A mistake I often see is someone moving into the attacker and launching their own attacks without addressing the knife. With a knife in an opponent's hand, you must control that weapon before entering into the attacker's space, or you will be cut.

It is with good reason that the front of Hatsumi's book "Knife and Pistol Fighting", has drawings of the basic wrist and elbow locks: uragyaku, omotegyaku, hongyaku, onikudaki, and others. These techniques effectively neutralize the knife attack and allow you to proceed with your attacks.

The next time you practice any of those wrist or elbow locks, imagine your opponent with a knife and see how effective your taijutsu is and where it might need improvement.

David Lyle has been training in the Bujinkan since the mid 1980's.