

JAPANESE SWORD

ARTS 101

Basic Drawing and Cutting Techniques of JSA



JAPANESE SWORD ARTS 101
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In the Beginning...



It is hard to know where to start this.

As this is not my first study of a sword related art, I do not want to confuse people or mix traditions by sounding too definitive about my text or reasons. I have been studying various types of Kenjutsu for 18 years now on and off, along with other Japanese traditional weapons arts, however until now have just looked at myself as a student and probably always will.

The handling tips I refer to here are based my learning's from the *Shinto ryu* school of swordsmanship, and are only a guide for those with an interest in the subject that may not have a sword school in their area.

Nothing else replaces true instruction by a highly dedicated teacher or instructor, but please look at this as just a taste of what you could learn with proper one on one tuition.

This was also inspired by the amount of cheaper katanas that are available on the market nowadays and the rather young or inexperienced hands (sometimes!) that seem to be obtaining them. If this prevents just one accident from mishandling a sharpened blade then it has been worthwhile.

After all, the Japanese have all these formalities and doctrines so unnecessary harm does not befall any practitioner who wishes to train correctly. I will try to simplify it as much as possible, however may use the odd Japanese phrase here or there for want of a better English word of the same meaning.

Every move or stance we use while training is highly tried and sequenced to lessen any shortfall that may occur to the teacher, student or even a bystander that may be too close to the moment. This is not a guarantee though, and I can assure you many accidents still occur due to other factors that can be unforeseeable. At the beginning of class, we always bow down to the dojo facing front as a mark of respect to what we are about to learn. The bokken (wooden katana), Iaito (unsharpened katana), or shinken (live, sharp blade) is placed on our right side as my photo (above) shows.

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The sword is placed on my right side during bowing to openly show NO hostility to the moment, if it was placed on my left side it would show that I intended to use the sword in a hostile fashion after unsheathing it (i.e. times of impending battle or before a duel). This is because I would have to hold the scabbard in my left hand to unsheathe with my right in times of need. Also if passing a sheathed blade or bokken to a fellow practitioner

I pass it with my right hand to his/her right hand, always with a gap of a hands width below the mouth of the scabbard for the receiver to grab it with.



As if you hold it too far up the scabbard when the other person goes to grab it they are forced to grab the tsuka (swords handle), if the scabbard is loose it will fall to the ground

injuring your fellow practitioners toe or foot, possibly breaking the scabbard, and making a loud noise.

The reason we practice this pass-over technique with bokken as well, is that we use a bokken as a pretence for using a live-blade so must treat it with the same respect.



After rising from the bow to begin our class, we pick the sword up with our right hand as such, with our thumb over the tsuba (hilt-guard).



This is for the obvious reason that we only want the blade to come out when we actually want it to come out and some swords do sit loosely in their scabbards after they have been drawn in and out too many times.

The left hand then slips the obi (sword belt) over a little for the sword and scabbard to then be inserted into your respective belt.

When deciding to use a katana one should be of empty mind, it will not do your techniques any good if you are highly stressed, angry, worrying about something, or thinking about anything that stops you from being relaxed and calm in the moment. You have a potential killing and maiming instrument in your hand, and must have the respect of a calm mind to instrument it correctively and precisely. If your mind is not in the correct frame, you should put the sword down and go and deal with your thoughts at hand before proceeding further. When you feel it is time to proceed, I am taught to position my sheathed sword on my left-side of my belt facing parallel to the front position of your stance.



While having your katana displayed across your body, as the next photo shows,



may look nice and remind you of a samurai, however if you were to draw the blade quickly at this point, you would slash or bash your fellow practitioner on your right, in the face or chest! This method of positioning your sword on your left facing front was also used by the Roman army, as marching in Phalanx formation means one has to take care of who is around you when drawing any blade. After all, it is counter-productive to kill or maim your own troops by accident. This method in positioning also makes your sword's length harder to see on your person than the classic sword carrying samurai position.

When ready to draw the blade from its scabbard, your left thumb should already be securing the blade (as explained earlier) in place, bring your right hand up to the sword's handle and grip it securely. Slowly release your thumb to be now holding the mouth of your scabbard with your left hand rather securely, whilst drawing the blade from scabbard in an upwards motion.



When the kissaki (tip of the blade) has cleared the scabbard, bring the sword to a 45 degree angle in front of your body whilst releasing your left hand from the scabbard to now grip the end of the swords handle. The swords handle should have a slight tilt towards your left hip in case you have to draw it back quickly, with the tip of the blade dead centre in front of you.

At the same time as all this, moving your right foot forward about one foot ahead of your left foot. Without getting to technical, this stance you have now achieved is a basic stance that most movements you will make with your sword, defensive and offensive, start from.



At this point I feel it worthy to mention a few points on the common hand-grip used with katanas or other longer Japanese swords.

As I have stated earlier, being relaxed is where it all stems from. You do not grip a Japanese sword like you are about to squeeze the living s**t out of it, or as if you are ringing someone's neck. If your grip looks similar to the first two photos below, you need to relax. Whilst you may grip an axe like this (gakku), you need a lot of swing to swing an axe properly. If you hold the sword correctly, there never need be fear that it will slip out of your hand or that you should need excessive force in order to 'cut it harder?'

*"You do not grip a Japanese Sword like you are about to squeeze the living s**t out of it..."*



For a correct grip, your arms should be relaxed but your grip firm and secure. One of my sempais, would shake my hand every training session to see how relaxed he thought we were. As I was brought up to give strong, firm handshakes he would crease up as I charged in with my hand. He would then say, "Is everything ok, I didn't realise we were arm-wrestling". Thing was I thought I was relaxed until I shook his hand. True emptiness takes years of practice. The grip for a Japanese sword is like that of a tennis racquet, a golf club, or a cricket bat. So ask your local sports teacher, golf-pro, or your Dad for any tips on structuring your grip if one is handy to you.

The grip goes tightest from your little finger up to lightly resting in your forefinger and thumb.

Your right hand at top should be a little less than an inch from the sword guard (tsuba), with your left hand at the rear of the swords handle (tsuka) and your left little finger wrapped tightly around the very end of the handle, as shown below.



Many of you have probably seen scenes in Japanese movies where disgraced Yakuza cut off their little finger's digit as a penance for a misdeed.

This was to make the disgraced gangster unable to hold a sword correctly and then directly need to rely on their organization more for defence. The next offence would then require the next finger up from the little one to be cut off and so on, until eventually you developed the nickname Stumpy or had to commit seppuku. Probably the latter though.

From your current position, you could proceed with a thrust or to adjust into Jodan, or maybe aiso. Stepping forward with your left foot about one foot ahead of your right, for Jodan you raise your sword above your head.

The blade over your head is not parallel to your stance but with the tip on a slight angle towards your right side, as your cut is aiming to the left-side bottom. Not a straight down vertical cut.

So as the katana raised over your head looks like it flows out of your left arm, as a sort of elongated extension. Your elbows must be tucked in to not look like chicken wings.

Looking through your forearms at your opponent.

"Your elbows must be tucked in to not look like chicken wings."



CHICKEN WINGS!



CORRECT POSITION



As a guide, if you look up a bit you should just be able to see your left fist almost touching your forehead. To get to the position known as Ahso, as you step forward with your left foot raise the sword past your shoulder to the right side of your head (as in next photo).



Now you are ready to cut. We cut away from our body with NO wind up whilst sword is in mid air. Think of it as cutting a very, very large tomato, we cut away from us, then in a downwards fashion, and then at the end of the cut bring it back into yourself. If this seems confusing, practice with a large kitchen knife cutting a tomato on a chopping board. Away, downwards, then back-in in a semi-sawing fashion.

“Think of it as cutting a very, very large tomato, we cut away from us, then in a downwards fashion, and then at the end of the cut bring it back into yourself.”

At the end of the cut your arms should be positioned like mine are in photo below.



Theoretically, the tip of the blade should not fall any lower than the swords handle. If you look like this after your swing and cut:



“As you cut step forward with your right foot. This step is probably the most important as it ensures you don’t cut your kneecap off!”

You are OVER-swinging the blade and compromising your grip on the sword, try practicing again but slower until you achieve correctness.

As you cut step forward with your right foot. This step is probably the most important step as it ensures that you don’t cut your kneecap off! If you are cutting from your right shoulder you will step forward with your right foot, cutting across yourself (Kesa) ending down on your bottom left side, and vice-versa.

Constantly your opponent will be looking at your technique to find flaws of which he/she will then use to attack you with. The blade is always the teacher, even in Jodo, the blade is the teacher. A good swordsman waits for his opponent’s pre-emption of movement to see how to counteract it. Not always, but more than often, he who strikes out first , loses ! Simply because they give their movements away by acting first. There is never any rush where swords of any kind are involved. Patience will always triumph.

After the cut is finished, unless another cut is eminent, the blade should be re-sheathed to stop any accidents and ready the sword for the next draw. A loose blade is just asking for trouble and a quick draw is best achieved from the scabbard, so putting the blade away is the natural recourse.

Bring your left hand up again to hold the mouth of the scabbard, while turning the sword on a horizontal angle with the right hand and placing it above the scabbard ready for re-entry to the scabbard, as photo below.



Slowly, at first, 'wipe' the blade down your left hand directing it with your left thumb and lightly with your left forefinger until you reach the tip of the blade (kissaki). Then again with the two fingers mentioned on your left hand, gently direct it in and down your scabbard. Obviously the more times you practice this the more confident you get. I find myself now hardly using my forefinger at all with just a little push of my thumb to get it in.



As you are re-sheathing your blade, place your left hand back to the mouth of the scabbard. The sword is brought down the scabbard at an about 45 degree angle . With the sharp edge of the blade slightly angled away from you.



Some schools re-sheath their blades with the scabbard horizontal, as I used to practice in battojutsu training, however, this is not so in my current school so will leave to another time.

This completes the action. All that is left are certain formalities of the discipline which really need to be taught by a authorized teacher. The above transcription is missing certain details that are just too hard to explain in text. They would have to be shown in one on one training, as I would only confuse you all or leave too much to open questioning in their explanations.

I sincerely hope that this short introduction will inspire others to seek out schools of true swordsmanship. The furthest I have had to travel to get the training I felt I needed, is a 2-hour drive each way, to do a two hour class in between. In life if you want something bad enough, nothing can stand in your way, not even distance.

GOOD LUCK and thank you for your time.