

The Ninja

Ancient Shadow Warriors of Japan

Dr. Kacem Zoughari

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Yamada Nobuo, famous master of *kusarigama jutsu*, from the *Bukei haykunin-shū*. Private collection.

combined with a Spartan and dangerous physical regime as they struggle to understand the unspoken, undocumented intent of their founders.

In the final analysis, what benefit comes from these approaches? All that remains is a pain-ravaged student with a body broken by the effects of a practice regime too austere, who doesn't gain a form of spiritual enlightenment as his body is forever damaged. Then there is the compulsion to pursue medals and honors from a variety of tournaments and sport competitions. All of this comes from a martial practice and history where the very essence demands that one persevere in humble practice. Perhaps our Western mindset, so prevalent in martial arts today, has simply discarded the importance of pleasure and individual well-being.

A saint once said, ...there are as many ways [to salvation] as pilgrims.²⁶ With each school of thought in modern martial arts, one has to find what is most appropriate and fulfilling, without forgetting to keep “open the eyes of the heart” in order to avoid all missteps.

Interestingly, in Japan, as in the rest of the world, there are martial art philosophies that seem to have the form of *budō*. Many of these post-Meiji efforts claim the authenticity of a *budō* tradition, but they appear incomplete as they try to compensate for their lack of the *bujutsu* spirit that *budō* draws from. One can find schools that insist on an austere, violent, and even bloody attitude. The effort, even the physical suffering, are evident in their practice. In fact, they often take pride on the amount of pain and suffering practitioners have to bear.

Other schools claim a spiritual, or even mystical, approach to combat, with an attitude of going beyond aggressiveness, and they are critical of the more austere schools, which they see as primitive and unworthy of the tradition of *budō*. Among these modern expressions of *budō* are the vacillating philosophies that blend in “sport” speeches, colored with various “enlightenments,” preaching well-being and health. Some of these schools taught an approach to competition that focused only on tournament presentation, style, and “flash,” while in others, research of the effectiveness of their style is paramount, and they preach “the *budō* spirit” or “the spirit of the samurai”



Izasa Choisai, founder of the Tenshin Shōden Katori *Shintō-ryū* school. Painting from the *Bukei haykunin-shū*. Private collection.

Ninjutsu

After reviewing the development of “mainstream martial arts” in Japan, we can now turn to the very different development of ninjutsu. The representation of this discipline outside of Japan has seldom been edifying. This is not to say that some presentations of ninjutsu haven't been accurate, but the “myth” of the ninja seems to be the point of reference for the world. So, as we explore the “myth” and the art of ninjutsu, you will gain a better overall comprehension of a martial art that is as important as it is mysterious.



Yamada Yoshinaru, famous master of *bujutsu*. Painting from the *Bukei haykunin-shū*. Private collection.



Hikita Bunguro and Yagyū Muneyoshi, two masters of *Shinkage-ryū* and Kamiizumi's top disciples. Painting from the *Bukei haykunin-shū*. Private collection.

The origins of ninjutsu are surrounded by mysteries and legends, seemingly developed to scramble its tracks. One cannot speak about ninjutsu without evoking the image of the terrifying devotee, who devoted body and heart to it: the ninja, the “superspy”, who left fear and death on his wake. The ninja was, and remains, in the fullest sense of the word, a specialist, a veritable combat expert, fluent in the handling of a variety of weapons, a remarkable scout, tracker, acrobat, and illusionist.

However, what most know of the ninja and ninjutsu is only a pale reflection of reality. For instance, the commonly held image of the ninja clad all in black is itself a recent invention. Indeed, it appeared at the same time as all the legends and myths, during the Genroku era (1688–1704), when the first paintings representing the ninja were created, starting with the military chronicles (*軍記物*: *gunki-mono*).²⁷

From there, a whole class of fantasy literature developed, making the ninja out to be a superman, giving him awesome and terrifying magical capabilities. Cultural influences resulting from the “floating world” (*浮世絵*: *ukiyo-e*) in 1780, also seized on this image, which, at the same time created both fear and fascination.

The image of the warrior clad in black, a color which gave him a demonic and mysterious visage, developed at the same time as all the legends regarding ninjutsu and the supposed skills obtained through its practice.

Certain paintings showed the ninja as an honest warrior, being introduced furtively into a castle or using his psychic abilities to detect danger. Others, on the contrary, showed violence and the perceived threat that characterized it. Another collection of paintings, *shunga* (春画), shows the ninja in scenes of eroticism taken to the extreme. These representations show a black clad ninja, with disproportionately enhanced sexual anatomy, subjecting his partner to a whole series of erotic flexibility exercises that would make any yoga master blush! *Ehon Futami-gata* (1803),²⁸ a book of illustrations attributed to Hokusai (or possibly to Utamaro) shows a ninja raping a woman. All the details of the clothing of



Illustration of Edo *hokapiki*, or Edo's law enforcement's, man in action. From the *Zahei mongatari*, written in 1769. Private collection.

the ninja are represented perfectly there. This painting is one of the first to show the ninja as a man dressed in black.

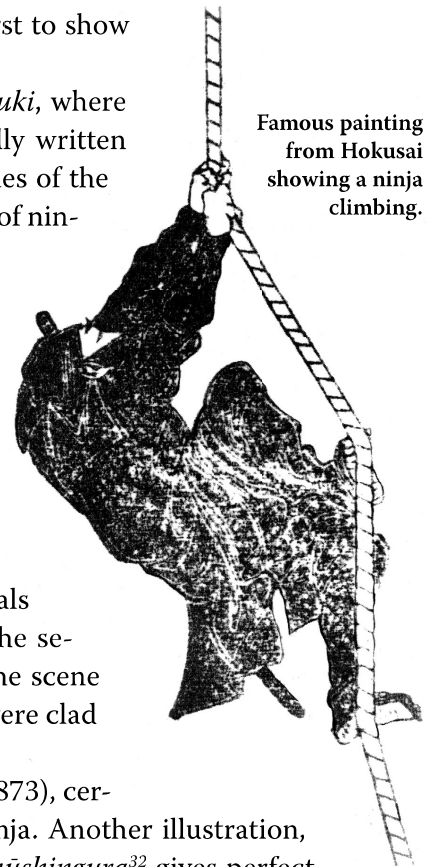
Most of these paintings draw inspiration from certain parts of *kabuki*, where the ninja played a role. The part *Meiboku Sendai Hagi*²⁹ was originally written for *jōrori* (theater of the puppets) and offers us one of the best examples of the ninja portrayed as a magician. The character of Nikki Danjō, a follower of ninjutsu, is transformed into a rat, using incantations and a form of ritual magic. This character became the most famous theatrical ninja. In the play *Kikutsuki Irafune Banashi*,³⁰ there appears a ninja by the name of Tenjiku Tokubei, who is transformed into a giant frog, using a magic ritual that he executes with his fingers. There are many parts where warriors are presented like ninja and, under cover of the intimidating, dark clothing, they carry out their misdeeds.

The famous history of the 47 Rōnin, which became one of the most popular works of Japanese literature, also promotes the myth of the ninja. The night attack launched by the faithful avenging vassals against Kira Yoshimoto implied the complicity of the darkness and the secrecy that the night offers. Two books of illustrations clearly depict the scene of the night raid against the house of Kira during which the 47 Rōnin were clad in black like ninja.

In the *Chūshingura*³¹ (a version of the history) of Sadahide (1807–1873), certain members of the 47 Rōnin are shown carrying the hood of the ninja. Another illustration, attributed to Kunisada, in a part of the *kabuki* entitled *Kanadehon Chūshingura*³² gives perfect examples where ninja are shown controlling a woman and holding a lantern, which has all the characteristics of a lantern used by the ninja. And the list goes on. However, these popular caricatures give only vague information on ninjutsu. This image of the ninja appears in almost all the epic and fantasy novels of Japan.



Samurai disguised as a ninja in observation. From the *Ehon Taira gunki* by Kunisada Tadachūji, in 1852. Private collection.



Famous painting from Hokusai showing a ninja climbing.

It is this image that the Japanese have in mind when they think of ninja and ninjutsu. Westerners are no different. Most see ninjutsu as arcane, combining occult practices with extremely effective combat techniques. Is this really true?

Ninjutsu is not a *bujutsu*, nor is it a sporting practice resulting from *budō*. It cannot even be classified as being like *budō*. It did not follow the way traced by *budō* as it cut a path during the Meiji period. Rather ninjutsu practitioners observed the changes in martial arts from deep in the shadows and watched the evolution of *budō* from *bujutsu*. To observe, to spy, to predict, and to stop danger, this, in a few words, is how ninjutsu is summarized.

Ninjutsu, or *ninpō*, is a *kakutō-jutsu* (格闘術), that is a true science of survival and combat born of necessity to predict and protect one from danger. Although, technically, the difference is obvious when compared with *bujutsu*, the contrast lies mainly in one's frame of mind. Ninjutsu shows how to be a ghost to one's enemy and to "disappear" in front of him.

Defined in the English language often by the phrase "the art of remaining unseen" or "the invisible art," even these definitions of ninjutsu do not fully illustrate that invisibility, anonymity, and secrecy are



Ise Saburō, famous ninja warrior and friend of Minamoto no Yoshitsune. Painting from the *Bukei haykunin-shū*. Private collection.

Each warrior culture had its own rules and precepts. For example, an old Arab work of the end of the thirteenth century was titled *The Book of Tricks*. The anecdotes and councils reported in this work show a remarkable similarity to the principles of ninjutsu.

Put more trust in your tricks than in your bravery, and give more importance to your circumspection than to your courage in combat, because war is a continual effort to mislead the enemy. It is truly a struggle for those who rush blindly into an operation but only a momentary cloud for those who remain wary.³³

Although Japan and Arabia are societies with different warrior cultures, the science of using deception in combat does not differ. The advice in this Arabic work shows a certain resemblance to the principles of ninjutsu that consists of using deception and tricks continuously against the enemy.

From a deeper perspective, it also shows the cautious, careful, and attentive character of the ninja, who did not dive blindly into the mouth of the wolf. It is very interesting to note a similarity with the attitudes and techniques of combat that one finds among the tribes of Native Americans.

As a practice intended to predict and defeat danger, ninjutsu demonstrated a control of time and information, which are essential for survival and success during a confrontation. Ninja did not engage in protracted battles but were deployed sparingly when it would impact the outcome successfully. Also, rather than face the enemy head on, ninja would use all the fraud, deceit, and trickery that were necessary to successfully carry out the battle or the mission. An example drawn from the same work illustrates this well:



Tsukahara Bokuden, famous warriors who founded the Kashima shintō-ryū. Painting from the *Bukei haykunin-shū*. Private collection.

Have no fear of employing deception in war, because it enables you to arrive at the goal in a way more certain than the battle of body to bloody body.³⁴

The ninja was a specialist in evasion, and in direct and rapid action. A ninja's role as a spy was to sow disorder and confusion in the enemy troops after having carried out his mission of information gathering.

keystones of the art, and that these aptitudes can be acquired only through an iron discipline, where deception plays a prevailing role.

Deception is the foundation of all warrior strategies, and ninjutsu is no exception. However, it should be noted that in the use of tricks or stratagems, ninjutsu exceeds all others disciplines by far. This is why the lords of feudal Japan surrounded themselves with practitioners of ninjutsu.

One can also define ninjutsu as “the use of tricks” and the manner of putting them into practice. All the weapons and techniques of the ninja were created with the aim of misleading, of deceiving the enemy and, thus, overcoming him. By using deception, the ninja could survive. It is the prerogative of spies, and ninja are no exception.

Ninja Attributes

To illustrate the methods of subterfuge used in ninjutsu, outside entities (particularly Chinese martial artists) would often draw comparison to the behavior of savage animals. Animal behavior gives some insight into how the ninja behaved in combat. The ninja, however, would not be dominated by animal instincts, as these did not take into account an intelligent sense of timing. All animals, especially the wildest and most dangerous, are captured or killed by more intelligent adversaries.

A key to understanding ninjutsu is knowing that the birthplace of this art was in the provinces of Iga and Kōga, which were mostly uninhabited wild areas. The observation of nature, of the practices and habits of people as well as the climatic phenomena, plays a considerable role in practice of ninjutsu. One can easily understand that the first ninja, practicing in the wild mountains of these areas, developed very keen skills in observation and adaptation. To know how to observe is an essential capacity for a ninja, because all his strategies started with careful observation.

To be crafty is not enough. It is also necessary to have physical and psychological conditioning, a potent combination that makes it possible to be most effective. Especially necessary for the follower of ninjutsu, one must develop clarified determination, which makes it possible to adapt to any situation and to effectively and judiciously use deception and stratagems. There was not, as many believe, a great number of ninja who had all skills necessary to disappear at the first inkling of danger. Only from the purity of his deepest convictions could one in a thousand ever arrive at this level. It is for this reason that the skills and deepest essence of ninjutsu have always been passed only to the person who gathers the deepest of human qualities. With this in mind, consider the following:



Ittō Ittōsai, the founder of *Ittō-ryū*, and his successor, Migami Tenzen Tadaaki. Painting from the *Bukei haykuni-shū*. Private collection.

What one calls ninjutsu was, in the beginning, a discipline of the *kobujutsu* (traditional techniques of combat). Having changed its form, part of this art remains in Japan. Ninjutsu does not consist in attacking men or taking life without reason, as many would like to believe.

The character *nin* (忍) of ninjutsu, is read *shinobu* or *shinobi*. To apply one's thoughts and ego to the edge of the sword; to be constantly vigilant of one's self and one's surroundings and to have courage with endurance . . . such is the intention of the word, *shinobu* (忍ぶ).

If one exerts his will in an unreasonable way, the blade stops us at once, and cuts us; and, thus, to act under the constraint of a blade prevents us from being driven by the winds of change. To act by controlling one's ego, such is true essence of the character *nin* in *ninpō* (忍法).³⁵

By understanding the various interpretations of the character *nin*, we begin to get a clearer picture of the follower of ninjutsu and can see that it is far from that reported by novels and films. Although there is no technical information given in this example, it shows the state of mind necessary for the practice of ninjutsu.

Ninjutsu is more than a simple set of techniques for guerrilla warfare. The heart of the techniques in ninjutsu lies in the practice of vigilance, by finding and exploiting an opening from all directions, by retaining flexibility *and* strength forged by endurance.

For practitioners of ninjutsu, it all came down to survival in order to help and to protect their families during a period of history where the slightest dissent could mean death. Just as the great religions appeared during very disturbed periods in history, so did ninjutsu. Ninja were trained to endure and to avoid danger by seeing it, accepting it, and adapting to it.

The following is another impression, different from the first but also indicative of the practice:

The spirit of the ninja is based on the ability to endure shame without exerting resentment. It is not a question of dangerous actions, in wounding people by putting a sharp blade to the heart but rather like the flower, flexible, to be full of love and peace.

In short, to naturally evade the sword of the enemy, to be invisible, and for the people and the nation to overcome the enemy by using the five phases of Nature, such are the principles of the ninja.³⁶

In this passage, one realizes that the level of endurance goes well beyond any ordinary example. It is a question of enduring and of overcoming the seemingly insurmountable without “exerting resentment,” which for an ordinary person would be rather difficult. Only one with a disciplined body and who lives in perfect spiritual harmony would be able to maintain this level of endurance.

Disciplines of the Ninja

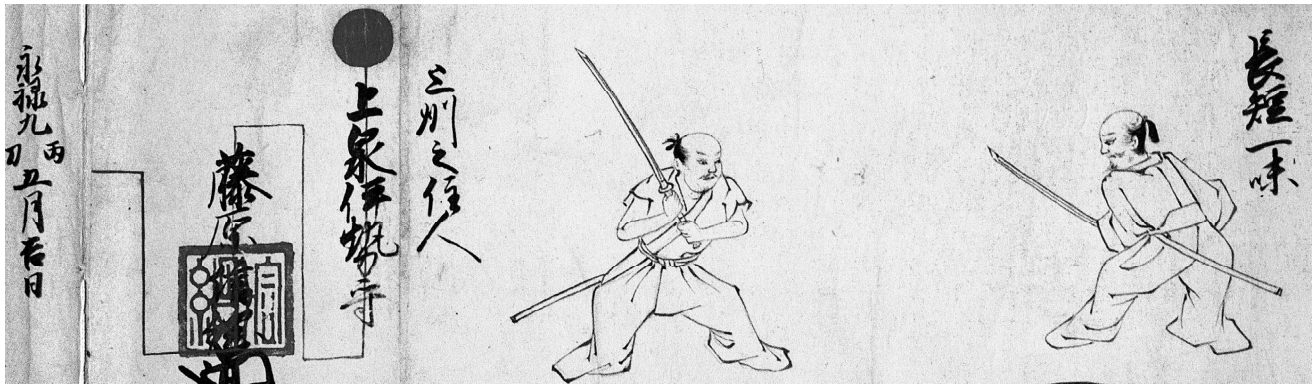
To be able to disappear, to “be erased” in the mind and eye of the enemy, and use nature judiciously, requires more than one simple technique; rather, it requires a very focused state of mind. It requires a vision



Warriors from the last Tokugawa's shogunate on a visit to Kyoto. Picture taken in the Meiji era. Private collection.

of a very precise way of living that appears when one's life and lifestyle are threatened. It is honed by developing a pragmatic approach to combat. This brings us back to the issue of the ninja's many specializations and to the spirit and tactics used. In understanding the dispassionate yet focused manner in which a ninja can accomplish the mission at hand, one might be led to suspect that there would be a certain number of mentally or emotionally disturbed practitioners. But how can one claim to have a unity of body and spirit, and in a certain manner to truly be spiritual, if one is flawed in mind and body? The philosophy and teaching of *ninpō* is a useless jumble of great words and ideals if one does not have a certain physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual balance—to be, quite simply, human.

Therefore, it is necessary to maintain a level of psychological health through physical discipline, combining flexibility and adaptation. The first stage of ninjutsu practice has to do with the control of various disciplines, which are dependent



The *Kage-mokuroku* scroll written by Kamiizumi Hidetsuna, founder of the *Shinkage-ryū*. Private collection.

on a common thread, allowing one to start from a single movement, one breath, rate of movement, or rhythm, and to generate from that an infinite number of movements and applications. It is the control of the union between the body and the spirit that makes it possible to reach this level.

Ninjutsu is composed of eight fundamental disciplines, whose generic title is *ninja no hachimon* (忍者之八門: eight disciplines of the ninja) or *ninja no hakkei* (忍者之八景). They are:

- ◆ *Ninja no kiai* (忍者の気合): Practical synthesis of breathing and energy
- ◆ *Koppō tai-jūtsu* (骨法体術): Techniques for bare-handed combat based on the laws which govern the human skeleton and framework
- ◆ *Ninpō no ken* (忍法の剣): Swordfighting techniques
- ◆ *Yari-jutsu* (槍術): Spear techniques
- ◆ *Shuriken* (手裏剣): Techniques for the throwing and handling of sharp blades and objects
- ◆ *Ka-jutsu* (火術): Techniques for using fire in all its forms, from setting fires to using explosives
- ◆ *Yūgei* (遊芸): Cultural pursuits: music, painting, dance, and the like
- ◆ *Kyōmon* (教門): Religious practice

In the case of other schools of ninjutsu, like *Togakure-ryū ninpō* (戸隠流忍法), these eight disciplines carry the generic title of *happō biken* (八法秘剣): eight secret rules of the sword. In addition to their secret techniques, the ninja used the long sword (*daitō*) and short sword (*kodachi*). The *happō biken* includes the following disciplines:

- ◆ *Gun-ryaku* (軍略): Military strategy
- ◆ *Tenmon* (天門): Meteorology, astronomy
- ◆ *Chimon* (地間): Geography, geometry, distances, and angles
- ◆ *Shuriken-jutsu* (手裏剣術): Techniques for throwing edged weapons
- ◆ *Senban-nage-jutsu* (銚盤投術): The technique of throwing four-pointed metal discs
- ◆ *Tonpō* (遁法): Methods of escape—also including *goton* (五遁): five methods of escape, based on the five phases and *jūton* (十遁): ten methods of escape
- ◆ *Jō-jutsu* (杖術): A technique for using the 4-foot staff
- ◆ *Hanbō-jutsu* (半棒術): A technique for using the one meter stick
- ◆ *Bisentō-jutsu* (眉尖刀術): technique for using the battlefield halberd (which has a very broad blade like a scimitar)
- ◆ *Naginata-jutsu* (薙刀術): A technique for using the ordinary halberd
- ◆ *Rokushaku-bō-jutsu* (六尺棒術): A technique for using the 6-foot staff
- ◆ *Sō-jutsu* (槍術): A technique for using the spear

- ◆ *Kisha-jutsu* (騎射術): Horsemanship, including mounted combat, shooting with a bow while on horseback, and the like³⁸

To be a ninja, in the spirit of the term, was to control all these disciplines to fulfill his function as a spy. This shows that the ninja's reputation for warriorship was not overrated. Nevertheless, it's hard to imagine how the ninja could master all these arts and so many various techniques of combat.

Obviously the ninja had to set aside a considerable amount of time for training. The essence of training in these various disciplines lies in *ninpō-tai-jutsu* (忍法体術): technique for using the body according to rules of endurance, perseverance and survival. This is a natural and unified approach to combat, where the harmony of the body and the spirit allows one's actions to flow with natural movement and enables one to hide and suppress one's injuries, adapting to all situations.

The study of ninjutsu included various fields, such as strategy, combat in all its forms, medicine, psychology, and so on. Ninjutsu showed how to use nature or the environment and the body to "disappear" and to attain this the practitioner needed to lose himself (lose his ego) and study deeply.

It is about a deep knowledge of the union of opposites that one acquires through a discipline dedicated to survival in the face of the threat of obliteration. Knowing the nature of danger makes it possible to circumvent it, just as knowing weapons and their use allows one to stop them or to use them with accuracy. Of course, this is not simple and it is not for everyone. As the old saying goes, "Many are called, but few are chosen." It is one of the reasons that ninjutsu was (and continues to be) taught to select individuals.

Defining Ninjutsu

As mentioned, in the first character of the word ninjutsu, one can perceive the state of mind of one devoted to the art. The character *nin* (忍) covers several significant levels; therefore, the follower of ninjutsu, the ninja, cannot be restricted to only one definition. Indeed, when it is pronounced *shinobu*, it has the meaning "to endure," "to support," and "to be tenacious," and when it is pronounced *shinobaseru*, it has the meanings "to hold hidden," "to hide," "to be furtive," "to be secretive."

In looking at the meaning of the character *nin*, one begins to understand that the practitioner of ninjutsu is a person who acts in secrecy and that ninjutsu is the practice that makes it possible to act in secrecy through the use of deception. By breaking up the character *nin*, one finds two other characters: heart (心) and blade (刃).



The tengu-shō section of the *Shinkage-ryū heihō mokuroku no koto*. The scroll was written by Yagyū Muneyoshi, successor of Kamiizumi Hidetsuna. Private collection.



Portrait of Yagyū Jūei Mitsuyoshi, eldest son of Yagyū Munenori and grandson of Yagyū Muneyoshi. Edo-yagyū shinkage-ryū's second headmaster. Private collection.

One can interpret the meaning of the character *nin* in two ways. The first interpretation depicts the state of mind of one who suffers, supports misfortune, and must moreover hide—for instance, to conceal and suppress pain and weakness, as described earlier. The second interpretation refers to a way of practice in which one's willpower becomes as sharp as a spinning blade. The body, terribly effective, is the tool of expression for this will. This evokes, consequently, the control of the spirit upon the body.

The concept of the “way of practice” with ninjutsu is different from that identified with the concept of *budō*. Contrary to the latter, one did not commit oneself to find personal enlightenment or intrinsic realization but rather to survive in combat and protect oneself by forming alliances. Therefore, one can say that the follower of ninjutsu, a ninja, is a person (者) who endures and perseveres despite all adversity, and embodies the experience rising from survival. A ninja understands the forces that temper the heart of an enduring person. *Ninpō* (忍法), as a doctrine (法), means the rule that governs self-discipline, endurance, and perseverance in all situations, as well as the techniques of pragmatic combat, drawn from actual situations, for the purposes of survival.

The following is a more general definition of ninjutsu or *ninpō*:

Ninjutsu, or *ninpō*, is a collection of adaptable survival techniques that allows one to face the uncertainties of life and to respond to dangerous situations, through physical and psychological discipline, where one uses orthodox weapons in unorthodox ways.