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Simple and Effective Aikido Knife Technique

by Reverend Kensho Furuya

In traditional Aikido, three weapons are frequently used in training: the *bokken* or wooden sword, the long staff which is about 5'6" in length, and the *tanto* or short dagger. In recent years, however, Aikido has emphasized sword and staff training more than the knife. At the same time, knives and other short-range weapons are becoming very popular in other martial arts, and new techniques are quickly proliferating. I do notice that many martial arts borrow techniques from Aikido for actual knife defense, and I believe this is a very good time for Aikidoists to re-examine the importance of knife techniques in their normal weapons training programs. In addition, if other martial artists wish to adapt Aikido techniques into their own disciplines, it is extremely important that they learn and practice them correctly.

I am sure this is not just a personal idiosyncrasy—it must be a common complaint among other martial arts teachers in their own fields—but, as an Aikido teacher, there is nothing more irritating, aggravating, and frustrating than seeing someone use Aikido techniques badly, whether they are Aikidoists or not. By “badly” I mean not only ugly and sloppy, but ineffectively and incorrectly.

There is an old saying among martial teachers; they tell a student, “I will teach you nothing. You must steal my art!” It is always understood that the master

wants the pupil to “steal” his good points and his good techniques. Unfortunately, more often than not, the student inadvertently steals all the teacher’s bad points. We laugh when the teacher pleads, “Don’t do as I do; just do as I say!” It is generally not that the teacher wants to boss people around, or loves to give orders; it only means that the student has tragically missed the whole point.

Ancient Knives

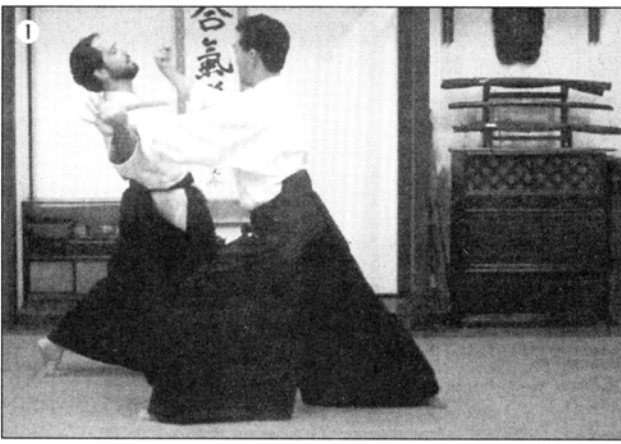
Now, back to Aikido knife technique: The general rule is that a weapon gives you the advantage of distance because of its length. The knife is a short weapon used at close range, or what is more commonly known as in-fighting.

In traditional Japanese martial arts, the short knife didn’t become really popular until the late 1500s, when there were many close-range encounters among the warriors during battles. Daggers with blades as small as six inches, as well as short, double-edged daggers, gained great popularity during this time. This indicates the growing use of grappling and body techniques which were used in conjunction with downing the enemy. Modern Japanese martial arts techniques using the short dagger or knife seem to have evolved from this tradition. One may note that daggers were common in fighting around the 13th century, but

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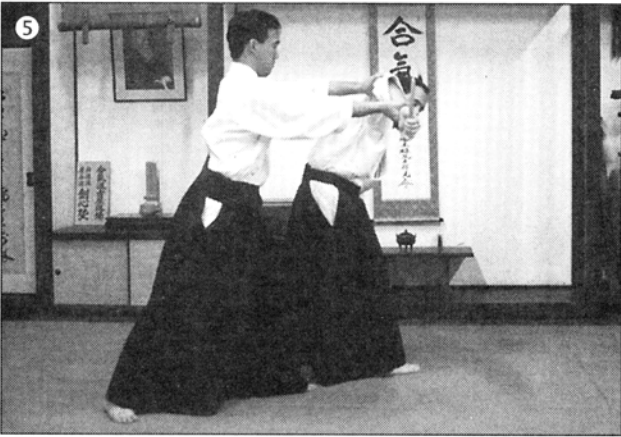
I do notice that many martial arts borrow techniques from Aikido for actual knife defense, and I believe this is a very good time for Aikidoists to re-examine the importance of knife techniques in their normal weapons training programs.



Deflect your opponent's knife hand as in the previous technique.



Reach over with the striking hand and grab the knife hand.



Bring your opponent's hand downwards.



Drop his entire body towards the ground.



Applying pressure downwards on the elbow will cause the opponent to weaken his grip. Remove the knife.

slightly. Incidentally, there were very few cases involving sword attacks, almost none from a samurai sword.

Slash wounds to the arms and hands are the most common. This is from the defender's efforts to ward off or block the knife attack. Next in frequency are

slashing type wounds to the face, head and neck. Puncture or stabbing-type wounds are found mostly on the body—often on the defender's sides or back. Attacks almost always involve multiple wounds; there were few cases where someone died of a single knife wound.

Also, most victims (another title for “unsuccessful defender”) died from loss of blood, not a wound to a vital organ.

This information seems to coincide with general Aikido practice, which uses defensive techniques against slashing attacks to the head and upper body—neck, shoulders, etc.—and thrusting or stabbing attacks to the main trunk of the body.

Rules of Defense

The first rule of knife defense, obviously, is not to get stabbed, cut or stuck. Second, remove the knife or weapon effectively and safely from the attacker. Third, immobilize or demobilize your attacker.

Although a knife attack implies a close-range encounter, keep your distance or the proper spacing—called *ma-ai*. However,



1
Yokomen-uchi: It is vital to establish the proper spacing between yourself and your opponent. Your opponent will try to break your spacing by closing in or attacking with considerable speed from a distance.



2
The opponent moves in for the attack. Focus on the movement of his entire body, not just the offending knife hand. The knife hand moves quickly, but you can catch the movement of his feet and body more easily.



3
Move in deeply to his side (irimi), blocking his attacking hand just below the elbow with your lead hand. Strike his face with your free hand to distract him away from his knife hand; force him to block your hand. If you push his knife hand too low, he can slide his knife into your side. If you block too high, you will receive the entire force of his attack.



4
Opening the striking hand, follow through, locking his neck and head. Break his balance completely as you slide through, moving forward with your back foot. You use your entire body, centering yourself well in the hips, legs and feet, to throw him full force. Do not collapse the hand blocking his knife but keep it extended and keep the knife moving back away from your body.

those weapons were wider and longer—11 to 13 inches in length, and used mainly for taking the enemy's head as a trophy. The shorter six-inch dagger of the 16th century indicates that very close-range fighting and grappling techniques were common.

The tanto commonly used in Aikido training is designed after the Japanese short sword. The tanto is usually a short knife with a single cutting edge no longer than 12 inches. In practice, the tanto is made of solid oak for safety considerations, but techniques must be executed as if it were a real blade.

As a weapon, what the knife lacks in length, it makes up in versatility. It is usually lighter than other weapons, and almost always easier to use and manipu-

late. In Japanese traditional fighting arts, the knife often comes under the classification of *kakushi-buki* or concealed weapons. The meaning is obvious. Because of this, defense against a knife is very problematic, and is therefore extremely interesting to study.



5 Completing the throw. This technique uses the irimi or entering principle which allows you to move forward, deflecting his knife hand, neutralizing his attack and throwing him off balance in a single move.

Coroner's Office

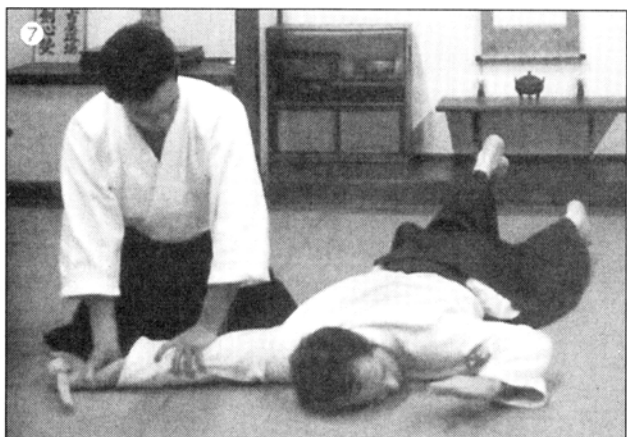
I once had the opportunity to study many reference works in the coroner's office. I noted that knife wounds were very common, almost as common as gunshot wounds. I do not know the current ratio, but I'm sure that it has changed



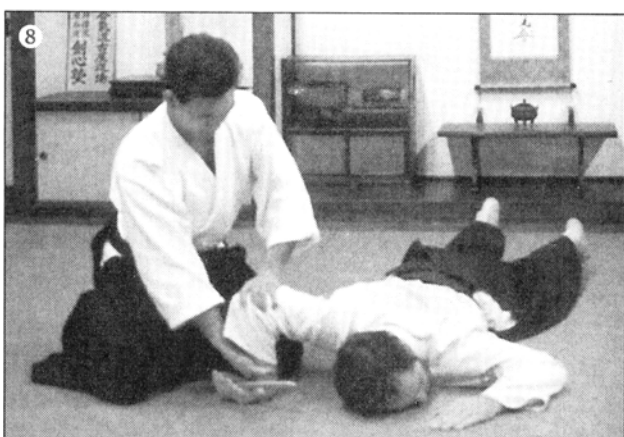
Use both hands to extend the attacker's knife hand towards his face.



Move deeply behind your opponent.



Immobilize the knife hand and your opponent's body against the ground.



Push the wrist under the opponent's elbow and apply pressure against the joint.

keep in mind that your opponent can cover a great deal of distance, reaching you very quickly. Watch his body and feet, as they move more slowly than the hands.

Standing too close puts you at a disadvantage: You don't have a full view of your attacker's hands and feet, and don't have enough space and time to negotiate his attack. Standing too far away, on the other hand, causes your opponent to approach with too much caution, often changing his attack in the process. Or it might force him to move very quickly against you. Proper distancing is vital. From the very onset of the attack, do nothing to escalate the situation or irritate the attacker further.

In the proper Aikido stance, the practitioner adjusts his arm slightly to cover

his vital points along the center line of his body. Observe the opponent's type of weapon and estimate his speed, strength and quickness of movement. You may not see the weapon at first: Is the weapon concealed? Where? In his pocket? In his hand? Behind his back? Is his friend holding it? Is it on the ground? Nearby? Where? Where?

Estimate how much he is trying to psyche you out, bother you, or make you lose your mental equilibrium. It is nothing personal; it is part of his attack strategy. Knowing this, remain calm. Don't let him get to you. If there is a chance to escape, why not? In fighting, I always say, "If you don't know how to fly, politely say, good bye!"

If you cannot escape, however, the following aikido knife techniques, having

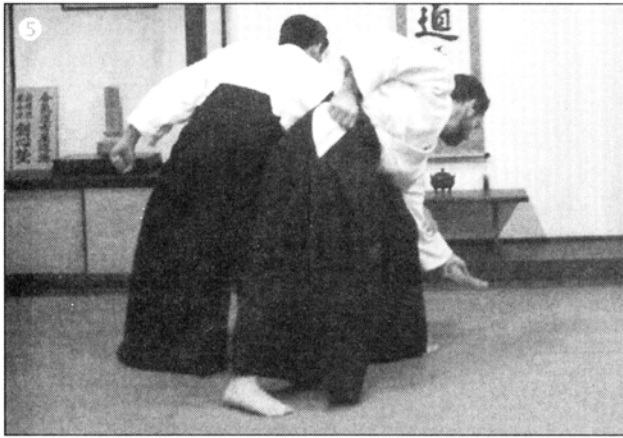
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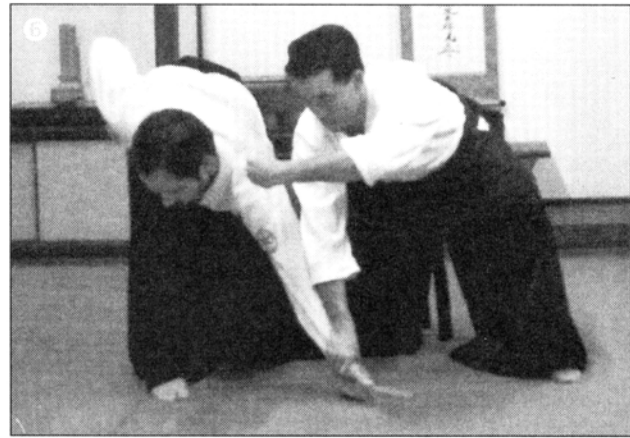
1 The opponent lunges forward with the knife.



2 Step in deeply to the side and deflect the knife hand away slightly.



3 Use the downwards movement to completely break his balance.



4 Strike his face to distract him away from his knife hand.

been properly studied, can give you a fighting chance:

- *Yokomen-uchi*—A diagonal attack to the head, neck or shoulders. The first method is to step in to the attacker's side and block the hand. The deflecting hand moves along the center line of his body to block the hand. If you go directly after the hand, you are in danger of getting cut. Use the opposite hand to strike his face at the same time.

- *Irimi-nage*—Follow through with the striking hand and throw your attacker back.

- *Gokyo*—Reach over with the striking hand and grab the knife hand directly. Follow through with gokyō control. When grabbing the knife hand, both of your hands should work together to immobilize the attacker's knife hand. In the

gokyō pin, if it is difficult to release the knife from his grip, use the heel of your shoe.

- *Munetsuki kotegaeshi*—A thrust to the body. Deflecting the knife hand, move in very deeply to the attacker's side. Push his elbow downward, breaking his balance as you continue turning behind him. Grab the wrist of his knife hand. Turn his hand back and throw him down.

Important points to remember: As you move in toward your attacker, hide your back hand to avoid getting stabbed accidentally. As you drop your opponent's hand down to break his balance, point the attacking knife toward the ground, not toward your leg, foot or thigh. Make it a policy to always keep the knife pointing away from yourself and toward your attacker or the ground. It sounds obvi-

ous, but as often as I say this to students during practice, someone always forgets.

You have to make it part of the technique. Always treat the practice weapon as a real weapon. Every time it touches you, consider yourself cut. Every time the knife gets too close to your face or body in practice, consider that to be a cut as well.

In a real situation, you just may get cut. Always be prepared and let this possibility encourage you to really perfect your techniques in practice. I often see people practice knife techniques without energy or mental concentration. These people are in for a horrific surprise in a real situation when they find that they don't know how to move, or that they go into a form of shock and mental paralysis.



Move more deeply behind your opponent.



As you move around behind your opponent, bring his knife hand downwards.



Turn the wrist backwards.



Throw him down. Be careful that the direction of the knife is towards the ground (and not into your own leg.)

Always treat your practice seriously. Knife defense practice, especially in Aikido, is an excellent opportunity to develop your concentration, awareness and precision of movement.

Remember that most techniques fail through lack of proper instruction and inadequate practice. Performing the technique many times and knowing the order of the movements is definitely not enough. Practice to the point that you can do the movement in your sleep.

Also, consider your own psychology. Mental preparation and concentration are essential. You don't want to pass out at the sight of a little blood. Those who are more focused and mentally (or spiritually) prepared do not go into shock as quickly if they are slightly wounded. We don't expect to be cut or stabbed—we

do all we can to prevent it—but at the same time, we can never overcome our limitations if we are always afraid of being injured. Aikido trains practitioners to understand and overcome this type of fear.

Learn From Others

I feel that Aikidoists should expand their knowledge of other martial arts more and develop their techniques to include a wider range of possibilities. At the same time, other martial artists might seek out Aikidoists to understand Aikido practice more clearly and correctly. Martial arts will develop further through a greater exchange of knowledge and expertise among experts of all disciplines. There are numerous knife defense techniques in Aikido and all of them demand

study. Greater study can only encourage one's interest to study further.

You might miss the point of this article, but hopefully, you will also miss the point of the knife. 卍

Reverend Kensho Furuya is a 5th dan in Aikido and chief instructor of the Aikido Center of Los Angeles and the Los Angeles Sword and Swordsmanship Society. He has published numerous articles on Aikido, martial arts, and martial arts philosophy, and has recently completed a nine-volume set of videos on the comprehensive art of Aikido. Furuya conducts seminars all over the country on Aikido and *iaido* swordsmanship.

Editor's Note: Demonstrators are assistant instructors, Mr. Ken Watanabe and Mr. Andy Kissel.