



Zen Kobudo

*“Sword and mind must be one.”
(Yamada Jirokichi, Swordmaster)*

Fighting with weapons (*kobudo*) involves an additional element of complexity relative to empty-hand fighting. The combatant must not only coordinate the movements of his or her own body, but also those of the weapon(s). As with all Oriental martial arts, Zen provides techniques to aid in the mastery of kobudo. We have previously discussed *mushin* and *zanshin*, the Zen concepts critical to sparring; they are equally important in fighting with any weapon. But Zen also provides a visualization technique specifically for weaponry which virtually negates the increase in complexity of thought processes required to use a weapon. Naturally any reduction or compression of the computing process will yield faster and more efficient performance which, in the martial arts, can mean the difference between life and death. Consequently the Zen approach to kobudo should be assimilated by every student of the art.

The essence of Zen weaponry is simply that you “become” the weapon and the weapon “becomes” you. More precisely, the weapon becomes (in your mind) a part of your body to the same extent that your hands and feet are parts of your body. How is this accomplished? By a simple reprogramming of one mental parameter which might be referred to as the “body envelope.”

The brain makes calculations for body movement based on a very precise set of learned measurements defining the length of arms and legs, positions of joints, width at every point, and so on. Taken together these measurements define the entire outer surface of the body at any moment in time, so that you need not keep looking at your extremities to see where they are or how far they are extending. To examine settings for your own body you need only relax, close your eyes, and create a mental image of your body in space. To compare the accuracy of the settings with reality, imagine where your foot is and precisely which direction it is pointing, then open your eyes and see how close you were in your estimate.

Our mental settings are not always precisely correct. Rapidly growing children and teenagers routinely go through periods of awkward clumsiness following growth spurts. Their legs or feet may be an inch longer than their mental settings say they are; until those settings are updated, errors will be made in calculating body movements. The same problem exists for adults who have gained or lost a significant amount of weight, have suffered an amputation, or are just wearing something new having unaccustomed dimensions (longer or thicker-soled shoes, a large backpack, etc.). You can even sense it

when you attempt to drive a larger car after having long been accustomed to a smaller one. (Driving can be a very Zen experience.)

Fortunately, having had to make such adjustments throughout our lives, our minds have learned how to do this reprogramming and will carry it out if we focus repeatedly on the proper visualization, and if we put in the necessary practice time.

The key to Zen weaponry is to temporarily *extend* the settings defining our “body envelope” to include the weapon. Then, as far as our thinking is concerned, the weapon becomes our own flesh and bone as if it had grown right out of our hand. It *is* us, and we *are* it, no longer two separate entities but one, like some bizarre alien. The mental calculations for body movements are then simplified back to one variable (the body) rather than two variables (body and weapon). Eventually it even becomes possible to “feel” very sensitively through the weapon as if it had its own nerve endings connected directly to your brain.

In Oriental martial cultures this concept is extended to include “*ki*,” the life-energy doctrine that is accepted as factual throughout all countries of the Orient. You extend (or imagine extending) your *ki* *into* the weapon, suffusing it with your life-power, and actually creating a sort of neurological continuity with it. Thus, internally as well as externally, the weapon “becomes” a connected part of the body. Westerners view this as a very effective and useful illusion to maximize calculating efficiency; Orientals view it more literally. On some level, at least, you must make yourself believe it for it to work.

Regardless of our overriding philosophy, the technique does produce results. It just requires practice. In early Japan the male children of samurai, destined some day to become samurai themselves, were given a wooden sword almost as soon as they could walk. They were expected *never* to be without it. They learned from an early age that it really was a part of them, and they reinforced this program daily in their handling of it.

So, to the student who would achieve the ultimate skill with his or her chosen weapon, the best advice is simply to get intimate with it. Spend as much time handling, holding and manipulating it as possible; imagine it as a part of you, complete with nerves, blood and bone; treat it with loving respect and care; even sleep with it. Extend your mind to cover it and incorporate it as if it were your own hand. The result will be an enjoyable new level of amplified power, speed and effectiveness in kobudo.

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