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Appropriating the Sword

By Carter Block

Spend any time at some of the Japanese martial arts fora on the web and you'll eventually be treated to a bunch of JSA (Japanese Sword Arts) practitioners posting pictures from various websites. The JSA types have a knack for sniffing out pictures depicting the Japanese katana being used and abused. There's no doubt that there's quite a few silly people out there posing on the web, passing themselves off as martial arts instructors and ninja masters with nothing but a black gi and a stainless steel sword to back up their claims.

The sorts of things you see on these discussion sites, though, will get your head spinning. "That guy's left pinkie finger is a quarter of an inch too far down the *bezuki pylon*! Look, his right big toe is three millimeters off the imaginary *flapuli zo'rhombus* line bisecting his legs! Have you ever seen such bad swordsmanship in your life? Quick, let's start a thread talking about how funny he looks and how bad his hair is, just to prove what superior martial artists we are!"

The elitism of these practitioners obscures for many the *utility* of the sword as a weapon of self-defense. Yes, it's the product of a bygone era, and yes, there are more effective weapons. This does not change the fact that the sword is a *weapon*. It isn't a religious object. It isn't anybody's soul. It isn't some vessel for reverence to be carried aloft during herb-tea-splattered solstice rituals while children throw rose-petals before a procession of dour, katana-bearing villagers. It's a length of sharpened metal that is good for

stabbing, slashing, and cutting another human being. Despite attempts to romanticize, deify, or otherwise equate the sword to some Eastern or Western Holy Hand Grenade of Antioch, it's a tool for delivering force, period. What's more, *that's all it's ever going to be.*



Photo by Phil Elmore

There are three basic patterns of sword: single edge, double edge, and no edge (the latter being blades like rapiers and small swords intended primarily for thrusting). As long as the sword's length does not get beyond the distance within which a human can comfortably manipulate the weapon before his body, the basic movements possible don't vary by much.

The sword can travel in an overhand and underhand arc (vertically, diagonally, and horizontally). It can be brought *against* its target with a flat hacking motion and it can be drawn *through* its target with a slicing, cutting motion. It can be thrust *into* its target. Using the leverage provided by the

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handle (which might be large enough for two hands or only large enough for one), the tip of the sword can be manipulated to produce tight, whipping arcs and abbreviated and curling cuts and chops. The blade of the sword, particularly the flat, can be used to block, deflect, or otherwise move aside another weapon, provided that weapon is not strong enough or moving fast enough to break the blade it encounters.

That's it.



Photo by Phil Elmore

That's all a sword does. Sure, the mechanics of these motions can be refined to a degree so miniscule that you're practically Miyamoto Musashi – but unless you go around introducing yourself as Duncan MacLeod of the Clan MacLeod, you're never going to need that degree of skill. Unless you're traveling in circles a lot more interesting than those in which most of us move, wielding a sword is for you a question of bringing to bear a relatively uncommon (in today's age) weapon against a foe armed with some other implement. That could be a knife, a baseball bat, a chain, a firearm (in which case you're

outgunned), or any of countless other things. Because you won't be facing another blade in a *duel*, you can discard a lot of the finer points of swordsmanship. You can use form so sloppy it will make Fencing champions and Kendoka want to find your grandmother and slap her. You can risk the dreaded bent elbow, the equally dreaded unbent elbow, the inappropriate placement of feet, the recklessly bent neck... because none of these minutiae are important to the pragmatic application of the sword in modern times.

A sword is a great big knife. It's a sharp bat. It's a really long, really strong pointed stick. These are all the things master swordsmen will tell you the sword is *not* – and in the context of their very specific, very developed dueling arts, they're right. In the wider and more appropriate contemporary context of using the sword to hurt another human being before that human being can hurt or kill you, however, there is nothing that makes the sword special compared to those ideas. It is a mundane object that obeys the laws of physics just as does any other weapon.



Photo by Phil Elmore

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If, to paraphrase Antonio Banderas in *Zorro*, you can shove the pointy end in the other guy before he does whatever it was he was hoping to do to you, you're going to disrupt his plans. If you can lop off a piece of him before he hits, kicks, or stabs you, he's not going to care if your arm was too straight or your feet weren't shoulder-width apart – and you can accomplish the deed without a lot of overwrought hand-wringing about your form or your technique.



Photo by Phil Elmore

Now, I'm *not* saying that any moron can pick up a sword and defend hearth and home from barbarian hordes. While you can get away with being sloppy in using the sword as a weapon of pragmatic self-defense (as measured against the standards of traditional swordsmanship), it takes some practice and a little innate ability to wield the sword and any other handheld, non-projectile weapon. You've got to understand the basic physics involved (if you've trained in stick fighting or with staffs you've already got the basic components) and you've got to be aware of things like timing and distance.



Photo by Phil Elmore

My point *is* that these skills can be acquired relatively quickly with practice and are not the exclusive purview of those who've spent years contemplating their navels while leaping from their knees to draw centuries-old weapons. You don't have to be an Olympic fencer to be able to stab, slash, and cut an attacker efficiently and capably. You can, in fact, make mistakes that would make an Olympic fencer or an laido master quiver with contempt – because while such details might make the difference in a duel with a like practitioner, they have little or no bearing on whether you put your sword in the knife-wielding thug who just tried to climb in your window.

You're probably starting to see the possibilities, which all stem from looking at the sword as an ordinary edged weapon rather than a near-religious icon. What you may be wondering is, why choose it? In an era when shotguns, handguns, expandable batons, and other modern weapons are

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either more effective or more portable and concealable, why *would* you arm yourself with a sword?



Photo by Phil Elmore

There is any number of reasons. You might be unwilling or unable to own firearms. You might be staging such a blade as a backup for when you run out of ammunition. You might be concerned about over-penetration of projectiles in an urban setting (such as in an apartment complex). You might want an advantage of physical reach. You might just think swords are *cool* – and we're lying to ourselves if we don't admit that, yes, they really are.

Any modern, functional sword has to have a few qualities. It has to be sharp. It has to be made of properly tempered carbon steel, not stainless steel. It has to have a strong connection between its handle and its blade. It has to be short enough that you can wield it comfortably.

The rest is up to you. It's a function of practice and familiarity in the context of what you can do, the art or style in which you train, your physical type and abilities, and your combative mindset. You can appropriate the sword for self-defense – because there's nothing special about it. It functions like any other sharp, pointed weapon and it does what any of those weapons do. You don't have to bow to it, sleep with it, pray to it, or revere it. As with any weapon, you do have to *respect* it – but that respect extends only to recognition of what it can do, of the danger it therefore represents to you as its owner.

If my attitude seems overly cavalier, it's not meant to be. I know there are a bunch of teeth-gnashing, shinai-wielding dojo-bound *artistes* out there muttering under their breaths. I know they're annoyed. I intend no offense, though there will be those traditional swordsmen who are offended at this very concept. That is their right.



Photo by Phil Elmore

It is *our* right, as *martialists*, not to give a damn. ♠