

Principles of Kenjutsu (Japanese Swordsmanship)

Class Blurb:

This class will explore some of the foundational principles in Japanese swordsmanship in a historical and martial context. After a brief discussion, the class will participate in a workshop style exploration. We will examine the kenjutsu principles using specific techniques and then work to note similarities and differences between the kenjutsu and a more HEMA-centric approach.

Equipment Required: A wooden or polypropylene bokken is preferred. However, any two-handed trainer (wooden or synthetic) will suffice. Instructor will have some basic wooden bokken for sale (\$15). Mask and gloves preferred for extra safety.

Full Description:

Despite what some traditional practitioners and overly zealous fans would like to think; like nearly all arts Kenjutsu (Japanese swordsmanship) is not one monolithic set of principles, strategies, and techniques. Over centuries, hundreds of schools and styles have created and adapted the techniques of Kenjutsu to suit their specific time, place, and purpose. The kenjutsu practiced for battlefield combat in heavy armor was drastically different from the kenjutsu of court duels and street combat practiced later. Battlefield combat relied more on spears than swords and the sword work utilized more thrusts and grappling from close range. In later history the unarmored dueling and battles fought in city streets and noble courts tended towards slashes to open up flesh, quick-draw cuts, and greater use of single-handed techniques.

Likewise, the katana changed to meet the needs of the samurai and the era. There are always exceptions to any historical generalization, but there are sources that describe that foot soldier katana tended towards shorter, straighter, and heavier blades with longer handles to benefit thrusting and chopping power. This gave grater advantages in fighting at ground level fighting with opponents in heavy armor. Some early swords were even straight and double edged! Some battlefield katana used early in Japanese history by higher ranked samurai had far greater curvature through the handle with some suggesting the design was for use from horseback with rising slashes to get under the nape guards of foot soldiers and cut the neck and throat. Later in Japanese history as combat moved off the battlefield and into the courts and city streets, katana were often lighter with shorter handles to facilitate the favored techniques of the time against unarmored opponents.

Despite the wide variety of both style and sword, the long view of kenjutsu does present certain combat mechanics and principles that are worth exploring for any fencer. This class will explore some of the foundational principles in Japanese swordsmanship in a historical and martial context. The principles will cover combat paths, evasion, blade work, and combat range adaptation. After a brief discussion of the principles with historical context, the class will participate in a workshop style exploration. We will examine the kenjutsu principles using specific kenjutsu techniques and then work to note similarities and differences between the kenjutsu and a more HEMA-centric approach.

Instructor Bio

Geoffrey Beeson is the chief instructor for Five Circles Martial Arts in Tulsa, Oklahoma. He has studied Japanese martial arts (including swordsmanship, striking, grappling, and general weapon use), history, and culture for more than 20 years, and despite his natural abilities and work ethic, has actually managed to learn something in that time. As an instructor for more than 15 years he has worked at developing the practice of kenjutsu and contributing to his art. In 2008 he implemented and oversaw a complete curriculum overhaul within his style. (Mostly because he likes people to do things his way.)

In 2016 Geoff began experimenting with HEMA (you all know how that goes) and has since worked to further develop his Japanese swordsmanship using steel weapons against a variety of HEMA styles and practitioners. (I mean really, there is almost nowhere and no one this guy won't fight. I'm not saying he'll win...but he'll definitely fight.) He believes that practice of kenjutsu can be elevated and evolved through use of steel sparring and modern protective gear and is working to spread the practice in the Japanese martial arts community. (Though they mostly think he's a crackpot.)