

Karate and the Book of 5 Rings
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Formalized JKA shotokan style sparring (“*jiu-kumite*”) has come under fire for being unrealistic, not street relevant and in fact not “martial” at all, especially as it is largely non or “light” contact only, and is a judged match based on theoretical damage from visible techniques limited to a subset of those available to the street attacker. Further, it takes place between two experts using similar techniques in an ideal setting, unlike the scenarios of karate as it was first developed and as demonstrated in its native kata, i.e. an expert defending themselves with secret techniques against an attack on the street. While the criticisms in regards direct street relevance of sparring may have an element of truth in them, the argument ignores both the reason the format was developed and the basis on which it lies, namely the training methods of classical Japanese swordsmanship – kendo and kenjutsu, and the allied arts of iaido and iaijutsu. Many of the foundational tactical concepts are almost directly traceable to the 10 2-person kata of modern kendo, and before that, to the techniques outlined by Miyamoto Musashi in his Book of Five Rings ([Go Rin No Sho](#)).

It must be remembered that training for JKA style sparring was not envisioned as necessarily an end in and of itself, but instead as a tool to develop the mind and as importantly the “spirit” in the context of a physically dynamic and (at least emotionally) threatening encounter between two experts – a duel, if you will. In this sense, it can be considered as a form of empty-handed kendo, with basically the same rules and attitudes, e.g. *ippatsu* or winning with one single overwhelming strike. Since then, this type of competitive sparring has of course grown and expanded, and now has become the goal world-wide of many who train to dominate the various tournament circuits, but that history is not really germane to this work.

In regards the links to the kendo kata, I previously have published some ideas and examples in the book “Advanced Karate-Do” (revised edition, Tamashii Press), so I will not repeat that material again here. However, an analysis and “translation” of the methods in Five Rings into the physical language of this style of sparring has as far as I know not been attempted. Musashi was above all practical (for instance on the PDF page 10 he says: “the gun has no equal among weapons” – which is certainly more true today with handguns, than it was in his day with only matchlock muskets), and devotes considerable space to what he does not like about (in his time) “modern” schools of swordsmanship, eerily presaging the debates we hear today about MMA vs. the normally defined “traditional” arts. The sword methods Musashi describes are both actual methods of moving, holding and cutting as well as ways of thinking and influencing the opponent, primarily ways to dominate the encounter and so to win. It is this latter element that most easily makes the translation into karate *kumite*; however, the physical sword methods also can be translated into the “matching of hands”, which is the literal translation of the Japanese word *kumite*.

This booklet attempts to parse Masashi’s words into concepts and examples that have immediate and tactical relevance to the karate student. This work has benefited from long discussions with Bryce Fleming on the internet, whose insights are gratefully acknowledged. For a source, I will use a PDF that is currently available on the web at <http://www.feedbooks.com/book/3953> . I will

not quote the book itself, but simply refer to it, both to avoid copyright problems as well as to limit the length of this work. That book, it goes without saying, should be itself read repeatedly, since without that grounding, much of what I write here may remain opaque.

INTRODUCTION and Chapter 1: THE GROUND BOOK

After some biography, etc., Musashi starts with this (PDF page 4): “Generally speaking, the Way of the warrior is resolute acceptance of death.” This theme is recurrent and underlies almost all the tactics within, most obviously in his differentiation between “slashing” and “cutting” (later). From the karate perspective, this is easy to understand – you will get hit, and hurt, so get over it. There is no way to avoid this in the long run, and if you attempt to, all your actions will be “double-minded” in that you will be simultaneously attempting to attack and run away. This of course can rarely succeed if the opponent is at all skilled and can match you in speed and technique. A proverb says that you cannot catch a lion cub unless you go into the lion’s den – so resoluteness in entering the fray and viewing the “defensive” methods as only ways to actively receive and thus take away the opponent’s attacks is the lesson for karate students. “Blocking” as a rejection of the attack, pushing it away, as opposed to pulling it into your control shows that the retreating mind has taken control, and the opponent retains the initiative, to your detriment. Musashi reinforces this with the statement (PDF page 9): “In short, the Way of the Ichi school is the spirit of winning, whatever the weapon and whatever its size.” This is easier said than done, of course, but that is what training is for after all.

Continuing with the second half of Chapter 1, the Earth (or Ground) book, starting on the PDF page 9, bottom half, we come to The Benefit of the Two Characters Reading "Strategy" (and The Benefit of Weapons in Strategy. What is interesting here is that Musashi allows for specialists in specific military skills, but maintains that they are not central to understanding “strategy.” What is central is an attitude – and critical to that attitude is this: “You should not have a favourite [sic] weapon” (PDF, page 10). From the karate perspective, these sections warn against both tournament optimization (indoor techniques, so to speak) and “*tokui waza*” (favorite technique). If such is indulged in, one runs the risk of having “difficulty in actual encounters” that is, on the street when the fighting gets real as opposed to theoretical.

Timing in Strategy – “You win battles with the timing in the Void born of the timing of cunning by knowing the enemies' timing, and thus using a timing which the enemy does not expect” (PDF page 11). Each and every encounter, from friendly dojo sparring, through tournament competition to self defense is won by taking away the initiative from the opponent(s), and thus seizing control of the timing. Too often as one is learning and faces a stronger opponent can one see this effect from the losing side – the “oh sh*t waza” – in which all one has time to think is the expletive, and there is nothing that can be done to avoid the all too clearly seen incoming strike. Learning to do this i.e. be on the winning side of this interaction, is the goal of the techniques and methods Musashi describes in some detail later in the work.

Musashi concludes this chapter with what we today could consider a Dojo Kun, or a set of sayings that are to be taken to heart as admonitions to the individual:

1. Do not think dishonestly.

2. The Way is in training.
3. Become acquainted with every art.
4. Know the Ways of all professions.
5. Distinguish between gain and loss in worldly matters.
6. Develop intuitive judgement and understanding for everything.
7. Perceive those things which cannot be seen.
8. Pay attention even to trifles.
9. Do nothing which is of no use.

This can be contrasted with the JKA dojo kun, and is notable in its difference in emphasis. The JKA version (source: <http://www.24fightingchickens.com/2008/08/16/the-dojo-kuns-lack-of-guidance/> with that author's glosses) can be translated as:

- * Seek completion of character (often mistranslated as "Seek perfection of character")
- * Protect the Way of the Truth (often mistranslated as "be faithful")
- * Foster a spirit of effort (often mistranslated as "endeavor for effort")
- * Respect the principles of etiquette (often mistranslated as "respect others")
- * Suppress the blood spirit (often mistranslated as "Refrain from violent behavior")

One can view the JKA Dojo Kun as warnings about the actual results of (excessive) martial arts training, rather than goals which such training is to produce. In other words, training can foster a narrowness of mind, neglecting a good balance in family life, work, etc., so one should combat this effect of training by striving to complete one's character, as opposed to letting it be completed defined by one activity and so remain incomplete. One can become excessively protective of assumptions and myths in one's training environment, and so start neglecting to test any and all statements and activities for validity, thus not remaining vigilant in protecting the way of truth. With increasing rank and status, one can become lazy and no longer put forth the sweat that training should be generating, especially when one becomes a "teacher," necessitating the reminder to continue to work hard. One can become arrogant and insist on deference, neglecting the fact that courtesy goes two ways. And finally, one can become proud of one's "skills" and so seek out fights in a hot headed manner. All these failings come about through unbalanced and excessive focus on one's training, and so the karate Dojo Kun statements are there to warn the student.

Musashi's statements appear to be more grounded in blunt reality. Most especially, the first and the last one are critical, for without paying attention to these, death is a quick result. Many of the others can be fitted into the JKA Dojo Kun, and in reality, they are all simple rules for behavior that help define a social being. What is also of note are numbers 3 and 4 – from a martial perspective, this allows both some protection against being blindsided by another art in combat, and further allows one to learn about and judge the mental structure of all kinds of people. Further, they caution against the all too common practice of total "loyalty" to any one school, style or master. Practically, these statements prevent one from making assumptions about other folk too easily – the wider one's range of knowledge, the more resilient one is when confronted with new concepts. This is something that could be profitably considered even today.

Chapter 2: THE WATER BOOK

Musashi starts with the problem of words. He says that first off knowledge of martial methods are based on principles that cannot be stated completely, but only shown via examples. If you get hung up on the examples, you'll miss the principles. These principles are sufficiently general that they can apply to any tactical situation - numbers of opponents are irrelevant. In more modern terms, he could be said to consider strategy as fractal in nature – in even the smallest detail one can see echoes of the largest structures, since they are all recursions of the same principle, so too is strategy when applied to a single opponent or to armies.

The next section is titled Spiritual Bearing in Strategy. He actually has 2 separate meanings for "spirit" in this paragraph; the section is not unitary. The first section deals with how you feel your own spirit (uptight & sloppy are bad extremes). He ends this section with a flat out warning not to show your mind in any visible way, i.e. be utterly expressionless. The next section, however, deals with interpersonal or relative spirit. Note that the paragraph, which spills over onto PDF page 14, is filled with comparatives (large/small) and with social statements (the spirit of justice). The definition of spirit is different from the previous paragraph. The section does lead quite nicely into the next section on stance, since one's stance is an expression of not only one's own spirit, but of how one addresses the spirit of the opponent.

What I find interesting about the next section Stance in Strategy is that Musashi spends quite a bit of time on arranging one's own face, and only then follows this with an exposition on what Kyudo-ka call *tate-sen*, or the feeling of vertical stretching. Combined with a feeling of solidity in the lower stomach, one has a description of stance that echoes very well what is proffered as ideal in Shotokan karate sparring stances, with the exception of the stance height. An interesting sidelight is the phrase "make your everyday stance your combat stance." For karate, this is somewhat difficult, due to the nature of sparring, which requires a stronger base for percussive impact, than for the sword. Large stances are counterproductive with slicing types of swords, since you cannot effectively block a 3 foot long razor, but must instead evade and counter-cut (more on this later), nor can you take a blow to give a blow – the first cut wins. On the other hand, older forms of karate (compare JKA shotokan vs Okinawan shorin-ryu versions of the same kata, for instance) tend to have smaller and more mobile stances, since they tend to emphasize what might be called "rule #1: don't get hit" as well as including grappling types of applications at close ranges in their armamentarium. All in all, Musashi isn't talking about strength in the sense of muscle contraction and bulging biceps, or of a particular posture or arrangement of limbs. He's talking about a constellation of kinesthetic/proprioceptive feelings which act as a feedback loop into your spirit (mental attitude). If your stance is "down", so will your spirit be, and vice-versa. Fix your stance's internal aspects and you will strengthen your spirit, and again vice-versa.

Next there is a small section on the gaze (page 14 in the PDF). The Western world is much taken with the idea of visual acuity – in the eye doctor's office, the eye chart is predominant, and the measure of how good vision is gets defined by the smallest thing that can be seen. Only when something goes radically wrong, does the peripheral vision get checked in anything other than a cursory fashion. Such focus on small details can be deadly in a sword fight. Musashi notes this as the difference between seeing and perceiving. From a western point of view, he is

advocating not foveating nor attempting to focus on details. This is the “broad” gaze, and involves “strong” perception, by passing the narrowness and distractability of foveal “sight.” For karate, it is the same: one cannot stare at the opponent’s feet in hopes of seeing a kick start, simply because one is then blind to the punch. Further, one cannot let the eyes be drawn to the movement of, say, a hand, because then one loses the feet, and so on. One of the exercises I recommended for my students was simply to walk around, but with the eyes fixed on the horizon directly in front, not allowing the gaze to shift left, right, up or down. Place your attention within the field of view as required, but don't shift the eyes. Going down stairs is particularly difficult in this mode, but illustrates the difference between seeing and perceiving. He will come back to this point later on in various ways.

This being a sword book, of course, Musashi cannot take long to get to the weapon, but not from the point of view of how to use it, but simply how to connect to it (as opposed to merely “holding” it). For karate, it could be a dissertation on the proper making of a fist, combining the hardness of a rock for the hand with the pliability of a whip for the arm. The emphasis especially on having strength in the smallest fingers applies as well to the fist – if the smallest fingers are tight, the larger fingers can be looser since the structure of the hand thus supported will compress correctly on impact, whereas having only the large fingers tight and the smaller finger loose can easily result in a broken wrist as well as moving the kinesthetically felt line of connection from under the arm through the armpit to on top of the arm and over the (usually elevated and disconnected from the torso) shoulder.

Finally, the section ends with the feet, and specifically how to move. Here Musashi specifically counters the guidance given in kendo and some schools of koryu kenjutsu as well as modern kendo – which is that the heel of the rear foot should be a “plover’s egg” height off the floor and the heel of the front foot should be a “paper’s width” up. This may be due to an emphasis on cutting strongly vs. moving swiftly. Speed oriented requirements can be enhanced with heels up, but stability can be preferentially enhanced with heels down. What does remain the same is that both feet should move, rather than one foot remaining locked to the floor and the other lumbering, Frankenstein’s monster-like, to its next position. This he again comes back to near the end of the book.

From here the chapter becomes more technique oriented, starting with [The Five Attitudes](#) (PDF page 15).

The attitudes described here describe where the sword is poised before action: on the midline either overhead, out in front or pointing downwards, and then also (point down) deflected either left or right. With regards to other sword schools, Musashi makes the sideways posture (waki-gamae) available on left side as well, and eliminates the normally right-sided shoulder posture (hasso-gamae). What is important is that he defines the midline postures as “decisive” - that is at being in essence attack positions – and the deflected positions as “fluid” – which implies greater movement in the initial stages of an engagement. With a sword in hand this is easier to see: a central posture lets you simply cut (or pierce) your opponent directly, and keeps the sword between you and the opponent. The deflected postures take your sword away from the opponent, putting it essentially behind you, and thus act more as an invitation for the opponent to strike, which can then be acted on. Here is where we can intersect with karate: the difference between a

standard kamae which exerts direct pressure onto the opponent, and one that opens an apparent target and so exerts a psychological pull on the opponent. The weakness of the deflected, or open, attitude is that the intent to strike can be weakened as well in favor of maneuver, resulting in lost opportunities if not defeat. Musashi warns against this, emphasizing that not only should one think only of the cut (“the one purpose of all of them is to cut the enemy”), but that one must first understand and internalize the most central of the midline positions first. This is a lesson in karate as well, and most especially in Shotokan karate, which emphasizes the decisive straight forward attack.

The next section – The Way of the Long Sword – states a pretty obvious fact: you need space for large techniques, and since the sword is a meter worth of razor sharp steel, you need a meter of space to use it. Attempting to do small movements will fail to produce any cutting power as the inertia of the sword will prevent developing any significant speed with the edge. Further, by advising one to “cut slowly” and calmly, one can use the entire edge to do the cut - think of slicing sushi. If one cannot touch the opponent with the hand holding the sword, one cannot use the whole length of the blade to cut; from farther away one can only hack with the last bit of the edge, what Musashi calls “short sword chopping.” This will not kill your opponent, although it may wound severely. And there is nothing more inelegant that to be killed by a dead man – one whom you thought you had just cut down. In karate, this translates directly into not playing “tag” with the attacks, as is sometimes (perhaps too often) seen in point matches, with the players performing overstretched lunges in the attempt just to touch the target zone. Such “attacks” would leave most street attackers laughing. Commit, move strongly and achieve a position where the attack could really pierce the opponent; this optimizes the “long fist” methods that e.g. Shotokan karate specializes in.

The next section - The Five Approaches (PDF pg 16) - covers straightforward combinations designed to take the initiative away from the opponent. They have analogues in *kumite*. Each of these combinations works from the postures previously described. But besides the technical aspects of how to use the sword, what is interesting from the karate perspective is that in each of these, Musashi starts by using the words “when he attacks ...” This is critical. Musashi intends, as he says, to “control any attack the enemy makes.” An immobile opponent (if not frozen by fear or indecision) is the most dangerous to simply attack, but once there is movement, there is commitment and a closing off of alternatives for the attacker. This movement can be sharply intersected by attacking into the attack, so timing remains a critical element. The five appear to be 1) smash a thrust down and strike a revealed opening; 2) as soon as the range closes, strike, and use the terminal position as the start of a second strike if needed, i.e. do not reset; 3) strike the attack upwards, and if you encounter resistance, change the attack vector; 4) strike the attack laterally and upwards; then if needed cover it and strike back along the same angle from above; and 5) evade the attack while raising the sword, then cut down. The fifth is clearly seen in the first kendo kata- Ipponme. Note that these are not only movements with the arms; the body must move in conjunction with these to support the strikes. These 5 tactics concentrate on making sure that each and every technique is a coherent part of the continuous combination of no more than 3 steps that should end with the sword embedded in your opponent. So, one should not block in order to block, for instance, but block on the way to striking remembering that one must not simply attempt to touch, but to truly strike with penetration intent. For karate *kumite*, simply substitute knife-hand strikes for the sword movements of the responder; then modify further

since in karate one has multiple weapons available and can use at least 2 of them simultaneously, e.g. parry with one hand and strike with the other.

Musashi's next section - Attitude No Attitude – appears to be written almost as a reaction to the previous section to counteract the idea that the above methods are rigid and to be memorized exactly as written. So he implies that one must assume no set plan of attack, but remain flexible. Experiment in practice but concentrate on practicing in dead earnest. And again he reiterates that one does not block in order to block, etc. but does these things in order to get closer and kill the enemy (compare with the first paragraph above). That is, the purpose of blocking is to get closer, not as seen with beginners, backing away and swiping at the attack from a range at which the attack could simply be ignored. Blocks should pull the opponent closer to you, not push them away.

One thing that should be noted, and is noted by Musashi himself later in the book (PDF page 36): “This is the first time I have written about my technique, and the order of things is a bit confused. It is difficult to express it clearly.” So topics will get revisited, renamed, expressed in alternate words, etc., in different parts of the manuscript. Synthesizing this compilation of Musashi's thoughts into a personally meaningful coherent corpus is, as he likely intended, left as an exercise for the student.

From here to the end of the chapter, the book contains a mixture of physical techniques - how to use a sword, and of combat tactics - how to use the interval (space and time) between oneself and the opponent, essentially a long series of specific scenarios combining notes on timing, kinesthetic feeling, breathing and sword manipulation.

To Hit with One Timing can be framed within the current work on the OODA loop (observe, orient, decide, act – see https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/wiki/OODA_loop). From kendo and karate terminology this can be considered a form of *sen-no-sen*, or if you wish, *sen-sen-no-sen* timing – purely pre-emptive attack that launches before the opponent can decide what to do as you cross the distance threshold into striking range, thus stopping the opponent's OODA loop right at the “observe” stage. There can be no hesitation at the range boundary; the attack must happen immediately, without doing any setup motions or showing any signs of “getting ready.” It also needs to happen on one breath, since human actions will “break” into segments across breath boundaries (in to out, or vice-versa), opening a chance for the opponent to insert some technique of their own.

In the section Abdomen Timing of Two, Musashi inserts his attack at the “decide” phase of the opponent's OODA loop following one cycle of that loop. The timing tactic takes advantage of the fact that every tension will be followed by a relaxation, and that if one generates a tension that is not resolved by actual contact, the opponent will essentially feel “whew, that one missed” and thus be open for the strike. This is *go-no-sen-no-sen* (interceptive timing, starting later and finishing first) of a sort, to induce movement and take advantage of that.

The third tactic - No Thought, No Idea – rounds out the logical triumvirate of interpersonal timings: before, after, and now, simultaneous. You attack as he attacks (simultaneous techniques), but with greater conviction; what can be called *ai-uchi* (mutual striking). The

underlying concept is that the person with the more resolute and one-pointed mind will overpower the other, forcing them to cower in the face of the attack, weakening their own strike with thoughts of evasion, survival and the like.

Page 19 of the PDF brings us to The Flowing Water Cut. From Musashi's description, this appears to be a form of the 4th kendo kata (see the movement following the thrust at 20 seconds in http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3u6MdGxer_w). As the opponent withdraws from the failed thrust, the attacker continues to close and in essence tries to cut with the entire length of the edge as slowly as possible - think of slicing fish for sushi. Now the modern performance of these kendo kata is done at far too wide a range, but if the range were closed to touching (combat) distance, one could get a feeling of the entry. From a karate-jitsu point of view, one could consider those slow motion attacks that are successful because the opponent does not feel threatened until you are well inside their guard. Normally these are throws rather than strikes, but also could be entries that "ride" an opponent's punch during their retraction phase.

The section Continuous Cut warns against getting stuck into a shoving match. It means that you don't stop or stick with any one technique, but move smoothly from target point to target point as swiftly as possible. It's not over until it's over. Some schools of kempo also have this philosophy – that of accumulated damage from a series of strikes to a chain of targets – and this acts as a counterpoint to the *ikken-hisatsu* concept of a single overwhelming strike with no thought of follow-up or failure that is emphasized in e.g. shotokan karate.

On the other hand, the next section - Fire and Stones Cut – gives the exact opposite sense to the previous section: that of an overwhelming strike that simply smashes its way through any possible opposition. Placing these two concepts (continuous cut and fire and stones cut) right after each other gives another lesson – the tactics used must depend on the opponent faced. For karate, simply think of punching someone's torso THROUGH their guarding arm.

The Red Leaves Cut describes a method to deflect the opponent's guard and attack in the same movement. Think of a forward dropping slice with a whiplash smack at the impact, i.e. a cut that turns into a thrust. With enough impact, this can drop the opponent's sword out of the grasp. In karate, think of the "Chinese sword" hand shape, and use the wrist bone to break your opponent's lead forearm. Alternatively, use an inside block to a face thrust that immediately changes into a punch.

The next section is apparently doubly titled: The Body in Place of the Long Sword, and in the next line "Also 'the long sword in place of the body'." The paragraph defines ways of sequencing of one's own movement movements. Musashi lays out a spectrum from moving the body center first, this giving the movement to the sword (on one end), to moving the sword first with the body following. In karate, one could think of initiating a step, then having a punch ride on that movement, versus initiating a punch then completing the step as analogous.

The section Cut and Slash makes a strong differentiation between a forceful, committed technique and a half-hearted partial technique. Musashi is admonishing against the technique often seen in tournament: the falling away punch that just happens to break the opponent's nose. While touching types of attacks are not ruled out – Musashi remains practical here – they must

be completed with a fully committed kill; the spirit of cutting is what is important, rather than just the effect of a sword passing through flesh.

The Chinese Monkey's Body is a warning against the person who tries to use excessive range, dancing around from outside contact range and attempting to tag the opponent from a safe distance. Never attack with just your arms (overextended attack), but when you enter into the attack, enter with your center, not just your arms. By keeping your arms reserved, you give the illusion that you are farther away than you really are, thus making the distance that you need to cover to close with the enemy that much smaller.

In the section Glue and Lacquer Emulsion Body, Musashi emphasizes a point taught in Aikido – that one's body center must become attached to and control the opponent, not just the hands that happen to be in contact. Once you start closing with the enemy, stay with him and stick with your center, not just with your arms and/or feet. One can see this in classical karate more than in tournament karate, since grabbing is generally frowned upon in the latter venue. But in the self-defense scenario, a grab is worthless and will only tie up a hand unless it is connected to the body weight and takes the opponent off balance – the judo concept of kuzushi.

To Strive for Height is a lesson in the physical expression of dominance. A perhaps useful, if somewhat cliché expression is “look down your nose” at the opponent (“stretch your neck”). This attitude provides the psychological "height" needed to attack.

The section To Apply Stickiness (PDF page 21) describes a feeling similar to the concept in Okinawan karate called muchimi or heavy/sticky power. To the opponent, it feels as if they have become entrapped in a very viscous space from which they cannot disentangle. So, when you cross arms (weapons) with an opponent who is executing an attack, don't bounce off the attacking limb (sword); maintain contact and (most importantly) take over control of the point of meeting by giving energy into that point, taking away the opponent's power. Without the taking of control, you risk simple entanglement and thus defeat.

In the section Body Strike, Musashi shows again his practical side. This is the irimi concept in aikido; i.e. enter on an angle: rotate your body with a step around the swords - which remain in place - and slam into his weak angle with your body edge. Do this with a coordinated breath, and if the opponent is not at least winded, they are put into a condition in which their defeat is essentially inevitable.

Returning to actual sword tactics, Three Ways to Parry His Attack shows two ways to deflect an incoming sword, and one evasion. For the first, in karate one can think of a punching block that crosses the incoming limb on the way to its own target in a single timing. The parry occurs simply because of the geometry of the situation, and the counter acts similarly to a ship's bow cutting through the water, deflecting the onrushing sea into a curling wave on either side. The second parry is more active in that it not only deflects but also reflects the opponent's attack back towards them to some extent. For karate, one could think of the initial covering blocks of the goju kata Tensho. The last technique is a 2 sword technique: the shorter kodachi is in the left hand, and is simple evasion coupled with a counter-thrust. This is then continued immediately with the suggestion of doing the same without the sword (i.e. with the fist): right hand intercepts

the attack while left hand delivers the counter, similar to the body strike described in the previous section.

To Stab at the Face is a direct use of the opponent's facial flinch reflex— threaten the eyes and their body will tend to uproot. Think of jabbing the face as you step into sweep; the opponent's face jerks up and back, uproots the front foot, which you then sweep hard. Follow-ups are as desired.

To Stab at the Heart is a particular lesson in that user of the Japanese sword are trained that the main attack with the sword is the cut with the edge. Musashi is advising to not forget the thrust, and further, to do such a thrust without any preparation or aiming type movements. Think of a kumite kamae - just stick your lead hand into the opponent.

The section To Scold "Tut Tut" tends to be more sword specific. He is advocating a method of parrying that includes an advancing of the sword rather than a retreating of the sword, so that the parry becomes the setup for the cut. See the kendo 5th and 6th kata, which show the parry as suri-age on the way to the counter-cut. For karate, a sliding inside-block on the way to a same hand thrust might be analogous.

The Smacking Parry is an interesting concept in that it is not really a parry, but a way of winning when both opponents cut with the same vertical trajectory simultaneously. Since the swords are both curved and have width, if both individuals cut for the center of the forehead, the swords must meet in the space between and above the heads. When this happens, one should not think of parrying (give no lateral impulse to the sword at all), but simply cut strongly as the geometry of the sword trajectories will let the stronger cut smack the weaker one out of the way. Thus Musashi gives the critical warning not to be pushed backwards even a little. In karate, this can occur with mutual punches when the fists meet, usually painfully. The harder fist and stronger punch will be damaged less, of course, and Isshin-ryu especially works on hardening the weapons in order to attack the attacking limb directly.

Self defense scenarios are rarely elegantly arranged duels, and Musashi recognizes this reality in the next section There are Many Enemies (PDF page 23). Here the advice is to attack the strongest first, keep mobile, try to line the attackers all up to one side of you so they interfere with each other, and keep attacking; do not allow them time to regroup and circle you. This applies just as obviously to the unarmed situation as well.

The Advantage when Coming to Blows cautions against book learning only. Learning about fighting is not the same as learning fighting. Further, one can only learn by doing big techniques (the "long sword"); application to real situations can adapt thereafter. This is a training idea directly imported into karate – large techniques and stances for beginners, smaller for advanced students and masters.

The section One Cut has as its main point not to "fence" with the opponent, i.e. don't spar with them, just kill them - simple, direct, and resolute. This is a perfect example of the JKA shotokan todome concept adopted from kendo – one clear overwhelming strike firmly onto target finishing the interaction almost before it can get started.

Musashi's last section in this chapter - Direct Communication – reiterates his dislike of secrets, tricks and obfuscation in the teaching of swordsmanship (which he expands upon in the fourth chapter). He simply and clearly states what he has to teach, and how one is to learn it. Moreover, one has to put the reading of this chapter into practice, element by element, patiently working the concepts from intellectual appreciation to kinesthetic reality. Further, he implies that his book is complete, and training in other methods will only detract from his direct way. Finally, he recognizes that the actual ability to kill cleanly and efficiently can only be obtained by doing exactly that. For karate – one can only learn how to hit things by hitting things; punching the air can produce only empty sound.

Chapter 3 - THE FIRE BOOK

The previous chapter used water as the basic analogy for the techniques described, and implied the qualities of water – being able to seep into anywhere, flow around any resistance, mount overwhelming pressure, etc. This chapter (PDF page 25) uses fire as its leitmotif, and covers aspects of the fight that are less involved with how to counter the opponent's blade, and more with how to dominate the opponent's mind, so it is somewhat more strategic than tactical in tone. As such, most of the methods described do not depend on the sword itself, or indeed any weapon, and can be directly used as written in empty-handed combat.

Musashi starts by decrying the pursuit of “trifles”, and explicitly excoriates kendo (“the bamboo practice sword”) with its emphasis on tournament tricks and small scale tactics that are unusable with a real sword. The kendo shinai is a light straight hollow bamboo stick with an overly long grip; a real sword has a curved and flattened blade with a single narrow edge, a shorter and flattened grip, and a completely different weight and balance. As noted in the ending of the previous chapter, if a person wants to learn how to cut with a real sword, they have to actually cut with a real sword and do so in earnest. In Musashi's day, since armored combat was still a reality, kendo style strikes would simply bounce off good armor and small scale techniques would barely scratch it. The warning for karate-ka is obvious: tournament point winning capability does not translate into the ability to put down a real opponent. Musashi also claims that this attitude will generalize from the particular - one person against several enemies – to the broader field of armies, but since melee combat is rarely practiced in karate dojo, this expansion is beyond the scope of these comments.

Moving now to particular strategies, Musashi starts with the environment - Depending on the Place. The instructions here are common to all militaries in all times and all places: first understand the terrain in order to take advantage of it. Take the high ground, maintain avenues for your own tactical retreat but close them to your enemy, force them into bad ground, etc. All these details apply to winning the fight; however, they are the antithesis of sport or kumite in any sense or the words. They are instructions on how to cheat in the most unsportsmanlike manner possible, or in other words, win, using every advantage you can find.

The next section - The Three Methods to Forestall the Enemy - reprises 3 sections from the previous chapter (see To Hit the Enemy "In One Timing" and the following 2 sections). In facing an opponent, there are three temporal relationships Musashi explains: pre-emptive (*Ken*

no Sen), interceptive (*Tai no Sen*), and simultaneous (*Tai Tai no Sen*); he ignores the remaining possibility: purely reactive (*go-no-sen*). This is simple physics - you are either before him, simultaneous with him or after him. In *Ken no Sen*, you are to attack first - fast or slow, it doesn't matter, simply enter in and kill the opponent. Next, in *Tai no Sen*, the opponent has actually launched an attack, and the job is to intercept it. Musashi splits this into two forms: the first when the enemy comes into range to launch the strike, and the second when the strike has in fact been launched. The first is a deception in that you change the range, thus inhibiting the actual strike. In that void is when the counter is launched. The second is a true interceptive strike, seen in western fencing as the stop-thrust. Finally, in *Tai Tai no Sen*, the opponent actually is in the process of completing their strike rather than just being in the initial launch phase. Again he describes two forms: *aiuchi* which is true mutual attack, but you are more committed, and a form of blending followed by a counter-cut, a mild reference to *go-no-sen*. As noted above, all these timings can be directly and easily translated to the empty handed case without modification.

In ethical self-defense, the primary rule is often stated as "do not lose." Note that this does not mean you necessarily have to win, just not lose. Musashi gives his version of this in To Hold Down a Pillow. He advocates that one check the opponent's every attack early, check every useful motion, but allow useless ones that waste energy and provide openings for you. In other words, simply frustrate the heck out of the opponent.

The section Crossing at the Ford is a counsel of self-reliance coupled with a clear vision of when times and places are advantageous, playing to your strengths and exposing the enemy's weaknesses. At that moment, act, even if others do not see the opening.

To Know the Times can be compared to Sun Tsu in the ART OF WAR: know both yourself and your enemy and you will win every battle. More to the point, cheat by knowing more about your opponent's methods than he knows about yours, and use that knowledge to win.

To Tread Down the Sword (PDF page 29) is another admonition to not spar with an opponent, taking turns and trading techniques. Don't bother with blocking first, don't deal with the opponent's techniques at all, just kill him. Frustrate his attacks, drive in, suppress him, and smack him. Literally, step all over him.

The section To Know Collapse is a fully logical follow-on to the previous section of treading down the opponent's sword, but set in the passive (recognize the collapse) than the active (step on him anyway). However, note that one must act instantly so as to not leave any time for the enemy to recover.

To Become the Enemy is to put yourself in the shoes of your enemy. Know that if you see him as a dangerous challenge, he probably sees you the same way. Recognize this and be confident. He is as scared of you as you of him. If you are aware of this and he is not, you win.

Next, To Release Four Hands is a way to avoid getting stuck. When you have reached an impasse where neither you nor the enemy has an advantage, dramatically alter your strategy. Win through an alternative, unexpected technique.

In the section To Move the Shade, Musashi gives a rationale for feints. However, the warning given in the final phrase is critical: move as soon as you see the shadow move. Once your opponent has seen that it is a feint, you will have lost the advantage that the feint gives you, and so echoes the admonition in the section to Know Collapse.

To Hold Down a Shadow is an appropriate follow on to "to hold down a pillow," but expressed in a *go-no-sen* fashion. Frustrate the initial parts of an attack so convincingly and completely that you insert confusion. At that moment, smack him from an unexpected direction. If you know your enemy's intentions, use that knowledge to defeat him. The purpose of studying strategy is not only to plan yours but to know that of your enemy.

Musashi's next item is To Pass On, and is the first of 3 that are concerned with moving the opponent's mind. In Karate, this is easily seen in sparring matches: give an impression of wanting to "play" slowly, and then jump your opponent. The opponent's impression is that you've cheated by transgressing the unwritten agreement to go slow. So you can "infect" your opponent with slowness, bounciness, heaviness, whatever you want. Then unexpectedly, take advantage and attack with the opposite feeling.

To Cause a Loss of Balance is a special case of the preceding. Do an unexpected move, suddenly change timing etc. which may break the enemies focus, essentially another version of the previous ("make a show of being slow").

To Frighten (PDF page 32) is to break his concentration by startling him with a sudden body movement, a shout, or an unexpected attack to his flank. More simply, use feints and false attacks to get the opponent messed up.

Musashi then moves from a focus on the opponent to methods one can use oneself to gain advantage. In To Soak In, he provides a way to deal with the interval between oneself and the opponent. This is more commonly seen in grappling than in long-weapon stuff, but the intent is the same. It is the strategy that shorter folks must use to overcome the reach advantage of longer folk. It is the feeling of having a constant pressure on the perimeter of your opponent's "force field" and taking advantage of any fluctuation in it to come closer. It is a way to think about jamming attacks, but not by banging into them, but by bypassing/deflecting them with the intent to get closer.

Logically, the next step is to deal with the situation in which one cannot soak in. To Injure the Corners means to attack the extremities. In self-defense that would be the joints. Jake Lamotta, the boxer, had a routine where he would batter the arms of his opponent so badly that he would not be able to hold up an effective guard. Then The Raging Bull would beat the heck out of his opponents face. If you cannot break through and just kill the opponent, cut his fingers off. Even a paper cut will unsettle someone enough that you can easily defeat them. In knife fighting, it is accepted that the first cut, no matter how slight, usually wins.

Next, To Throw into Confusion (PDF page 33) is to attack with numerous varied techniques, timing, rhythm and distances, thus the enemy is always left guessing. Just be wary that you don't throw yourself into confusion as well.

There are 3 kiai in classical kenjutsu: "Eh", "Ya", and "To" which Musashi refers to as The Three Shouts. He uses "Ei" for "Eh", and refers to "To" (the shout in the wake of the sword). He decries the use of "Ya" (during). His objection may be the same objection as many have with a common interpretation of "focus" (kime) as being a total muscular lockdown: It sets you up for being killed if you've missed even a little. You will have lost all flexibility and have great difficulty continuing to move, which in multiple combat and without a judge to yell "Yame" is fatal.

In To Mingle, Musashi is saying that one should take out the leaders, one after the other, in turn. This is true with a multiple opponent fight, as well as with a single opponent fight (in which case the leader is the opponent's main technique, so one should deal with the first technique, then the second etc.

To Crush: if the enemy shows any weakness, broken timing, or retreat, follow in and destroy him. Do not allow him any breathing room to recover. And there is no "if" about it. View the enemy as a cockroach, and stomp on him. Give him no chance to scuttle away.

In the section Mountain-Sea Change, Mushashi actually handles 2 concepts – one referring to the enemy and one to oneself. First with regards to oneself, do not repeat techniques. Never try a technique more than twice. If you can get the enemy to think you are trying the technique a third time and then surprise him with a different technique altogether, he will fall (a mountain/sea change). For a specific example, jab face, punch chudan, jab face, punch chudan, jab face, punch face. So while the first point is non repeating attack methods; the other is fitting your attack into your opponent's mind. You cannot win easily by exchanging kicks with a kicker or punches with a puncher. Play to his weakness and against his strengths. You cannot win easily by trading kicks with a kicker, or punches with a puncher – mountains should be fought by the sea, and vice-versa. You might also think you are a puncher, but when facing another puncher, if you fail, you must change.

To Penetrate the Depths is a follow-on to the section To Crush. He means that you must remove the ability to even think of resistance, i.e. win not just the battle, but the war.

In To Renew (PDF page 35), he is saying that if you reach in impasse in a fight, abandon the current approach and attack as if you are starting a whole new fight. He is referring to how you view yourself. In zen, this is referred to a "beginner's mind" - for in the beginner there are infinite possibilities, while in the expert's there are few. So he is referring to the ability to cast off your preconceptions and start fresh. I would note that this is not easy.

The section Rat's Head, Ox's neck warns one to not get preoccupied with small details and specific techniques. Have a view of the big picture and the only goal: victory. When you fight with someone, don't get stuck on the details of technique, but keep in mind the goal - sinking your sword into your opponent. Proper technique of course has details, but you don't worry

about them in combat. In Chanoyu (Tea Ceremony), Rikyu said that if the charcoal heats the water correctly, then it has done its job – one need not worry overmuch about the exact laying of each piece to conform to some dogma. So the concept is not unique to the martial arts.

One mind trick Musashi recommends is shown in the following section: The Commander Knows the Troops. One should think of the enemy as your own soldier: control him throughout the fight. Think of your opponent as a marionette puppet; your movements pull his strings. This analogy works well in teaching sparring using your own movements to induce reactions that you have preplanned for.

To Let Go The Hilt (PDF page 36) reemphasizes Musashi's demand for mental flexibility. Break the rules. Always remember a good sucker punch. This is of course the complete antithesis to sportsmanlike behavior and vitiates any rules set by tournament styles.

Finally in The Body of a Rock, Musashi deals with the final and deepest fear – death. When you fight, do not be moved by thoughts of mortality, merely focus on victory at any cost. It is very difficult to kill a dead man. Know that you are dead; if not now, then soon. When you fight, fight and do not be moved by thoughts of anything else, like survival.

Chapter 4 - THE WIND BOOK

The wind book chapter (PDF page 37) is really a critique of common practices of his day that Musashi found contrary to practical real swordsmanship. His rationale is that one must have an understanding of different ways to approach fighting techniques in order to not only not fall into traps due to ignorance, but also to know how best to counter them using the methods he has laid out. In the first paragraph, he also alludes to schools that pride themselves on number and variety of techniques, as well as those who train too narrowly.

He starts by decrying the schools that rely on Extra-Long Swords, seeking to gain an advantage by never really coming into range of the enemy. This is a reflection of a criticism that is levied at the JKA style: that it is exclusively a long fist style. Further it uses linear evasions and long-range techniques while having very few answers to someone who grabs you efficiently, i.e to fight in a confined (or very cluttered) space. The implied objection is that this is essentially an excuse for cowardice, and will result often in techniques that can tag an enemy, but not really dispatch them in the sense of “ippatsu” one strike, one life, or “todome” - finishing/killing blow. Further, Musashi cautions against concentrating on one, narrow spirit of strategy, to the detriment of others.

The Strong Long Sword Spirit in Other Schools deals with schools that concentrate on "strong" or "powerful" technique rather than just hitting appropriately. One can see schools that break a ton of boards and bricks, as well as those that work almost exclusively on pressure points, but cannot get close to an alive, aware, and moving opponent. Additionally, Musashi is cautioning that pure muscular power and speed are not conducive for effective combat. Quick and proper technique with appropriate timing is more important. It is said that smooth beats fast every time, and if you never see the opponent start moving, then it is difficult to counter. Everything is relative to circumstance. Sometimes your strength can be used against you, so you must also

have cunning. Your opponent can be as good as you are, so victory lies in the facing the reality of the situation. Let the circumstances shape your methods. Mix strategy and formulate one that has all the best qualities.

A counterexample to over-long swords is described in the Use of the Shorter Long Sword in Other Schools section. Musashi's point is that the student of the short sword depends on the response of the opponent to allow him an effective defense followed by counter-strike. This is too narrow a view of combat. The student of the true way always is intent on just cutting the opponent. He must strive to control the opponent, sometimes attacking, sometimes defending and countering, but always in control. Create openings, do not wait for them. "Go no sen" in the karate sense is a weak strategy. Even with a short sword (or in a karate tournament sense, even if you are a short person facing a tall one), "sen no sen" is appropriate and preferred. The short sword (go no sen) depends too much on surviving the first attack. All it really guarantees is a longer fight and lack of initiative on your part. Confusing your opponent is key. Sometimes defend, sometimes attack; always be unpredictable. You can get led around by the belief that the "safe" or "correct" way is best. Lose these ideas and be in control at all times. A concept oft spoken in karate circles is Funakoshi Gichin's dictum "karate ni sente nashi" (literally, the first move does not exist, or there is no advantage to having the first move). This is here explicitly contradicted in favor of taking and keeping the initiative.

Many Methods of Using the Long Sword deals with some that schools advocate numerous and varied methods of using the long sword. Musashi claims that they do this mostly to sell their way but in fact are rarely experienced in real combat. Anyone who had been in true combat knows there is only a few ways to use the long sword effectively and they all concentrate on just cutting the opponent. One should look for substantial techniques and an underlying strategy to every school. I am reminded of one boast made by a certain school, to wit (paraphrasing), "We teach over 200 kicks! How many does your style teach?" Focus on things that produce the desired result, but without losing flexibility, avoiding the "favorite technique" trap. Running throughout the section are comments on the "use of attitudes" which I take to mean stances or postures, as seen in many films just before a climactic duel. Musashi says to not emphasize attitudes. Attitudes are good for demonstration and situations where there is no enemy, but in real individual combat just think about cutting the enemy. Taking an attitude is a defensive posture, waiting for attack rather than creating victory. So (taking extreme and ludicrous examples) one should not stand on one leg while flapping the arms imitating a bird nor assume deep squat stances while wiggling the fingers and hissing, both of which have been cinematographic staples. On the other hand, especially on fortress situations, one should set up in an organized manner but without limiting available options. This way the opponent will think you are conventional, but be thrown off by unconventional tactics.

Fixing the Eyes (PDF page 40) is a problem, especially for beginners. There is a probably apocryphal explanation for why a cat twitches his tail just before striking at a mouse. Mice (and most prey animals) have a fixed distance at which the switch from "freeze" to "flee" types of behavior. If they see movement beyond this distance, they will tend to freeze; within that distance, to flee. For a cat/mouse interaction, since the tail is further away than the claws, twitching it will fix the rodent's attention and keep him frozen long enough for the stealthy claws to successfully attack. In karate terms, if one can get the opponent to fixate on the hands, the feet

become essentially hidden, and vice-versa. Musashi promotes having no fixed view. One must train enough that one knows the intentions of the enemy just by his carriage and can see his complete strategy without looking at any one thing. Do not fixate on the details, but as has been written elsewhere, see the opponent as if looking at a far distant mountain. Similarly, get the opponent to do the opposite (fix on details) and victory is more easily assured.

The section Use of the Feet reprises a similar criticism to the use of attitudes, above. Avoid complex stepping patterns: they do not adapt well to inclement conditions and they are unnecessary and unnatural. In specific, this can be seen in some karate tournaments, in which the opponents bounce up and down (Musashi's jumping or perhaps springing foot) almost continuously before launching attacks (usually flying backfist strikes or kicks). Alternatively, there are heavy footed encounters, in which the two opponents seem locked into place, unable to move. Move naturally in or out of combat; train enough that your fighting stance is as natural as walking. Musashi also attaches this to large scale (army tactical) strategy – advance not too quickly nor too slowly, so as to neither fall into disarray, nor lose opportunity.

His comments on Speed follow, and point out that it does not exist as a concept in isolation in combat, but is always relative. In karate, blocking too quickly will miss the attack as surely as blocking too slowly. Do not depend only on your speed to overcome the opponent. Timing and rhythm are more important. A quick, appropriate decisive movement is best. Sometimes the environment will limit your speed and if you only depend on speed, then you will be unable to fight effectively. The examples he gives (music, dance) demonstrate that no matter the objective speed of the performance, one who has mastered the craft never seems either busy or hurried, nor out of a smooth rhythm. Approach combat with the attitude that you will seize the moment - the right moment, and use only the speed that is appropriate to both the circumstance and the chosen weapon, and do not let the opponent influence or disrupt you.

The section Interior and Surface on Other Schools completes this chapter. One must beware of schools that claim to teach all the secrets once you pass a gate (e.g. sign a contract, earn a certain belt, etc.) Musashi says there are no secrets. He believes in taking a beginner and teaching them simple techniques appropriate to their ability and then through experience and training the student will come to see the deeper meaning and strategy of the true Way. There are no secrets that can be told and no diploma or pledge will make them clear - only experience and training. His way has no esoteric meanings attached to it. Further one must avoid wholesale criticism of other schools. Every school has its own way and every student has his own understanding of that way. No school can be accurately evaluated on one man's understanding. Individuals, on the other hand, can be. But more to the point, Musashi is warning against dismissing an opponent just because of his school. Even a fool can kill you.

Chapter 5 - THE BOOK OF THE VOID

The final chapter in Musashi's book is the shortest, and the closest he comes to what might be termed the spiritual. And he makes very clearly the point that the "void" is not simply that which one does not understand – that he labels bewilderment. The true nature of any martial art can only be understood by training and experience. One must start by learning the techniques and

practicing strategy. Eventually, through lots of diligent training the art ceases to be a series of techniques, stances and strategies and becomes a single entity : The Way. In Western terms, this can be referred to “chunking” - beginners do techniques serially, element by element, more or less well coordinated. Simplistically, this is a left-brain method of learning, and all must start at this point. With training, the elements begin to fuse and arise together spontaneously, and the technique is not longer move the feet this way, the hands that way and the breath at this time, etc., but a complete unified technique. When a student has got there, he no longer has to think about The Way, it is just part of him. You have to do the training to know The Way; you cannot learn it by lecture or reading. Then the performance (as opposed to the learning) of a technique is right-brained; it is released rather than done. I would add to this a quote from the perhaps maligned Bruce Lee: you can only throw away form once you have some form to throw away. The process of Shuhari is sequential and steps cannot be skipped. Moreover, your training in detail is not to work the detail itself, but to extract and interiorize the principles that underlie the details. Seek not what the master can do, but what the master sought himself. Once you have simplified your practice to the point where all your techniques are variations on a basic principle, then new variations will spontaneously arise (form the Void) and do not need to be studied ahead of time, a statement made also by Uyeshiba of aikido fame. If the principle is sound, your technique space will cover all the techniques possible. If your understanding is only partial, so also will be the space of technique that you can deal with, thus leaving holes through which you may be killed.

Final Words

In Japan, the Book of 5 rings is often recommended to every profession for study, especially including business. Similarly to how I have analogized the sword to the empty hand, one can take Musashi’s dictums and translate them into the language of any human interaction that might involve winners and losers. His world was harsh, and death common. Modern life is perhaps more varied but situations arise in which his practicality should not be undervalued. Even if one removes the “unsportsmanlike” aspects of his work, much remains that is applicable to friendly competition.