

Ninja and Ninjutsu

The Japanese characters that form the word “ninja” mean “one who endures.” An alternative reading is “the art of invisibility.” In some times and places, ninja were also known as *shinobi*.

Ninjutsu (occasionally spelled *Ninjitsu*) is a term for the entire collection of arts practiced by ninja. Among other things, these include disguise, climbing, evasion, spying, and armed and unarmed combat. *Taijutsu* (see right) describes a particular set of combat skills.

Ninja Weapons

Few of the weapons popularly associated with ninja were uniquely “ninja weapons.” For instance, Tokugawa-era police used the *metsubushi* (a kind of blowpipe) to distract suspects; samurai carried the *kusarigama* and *shuriken* as backup weapons; and the *tonfa*, *sai*, and *nunchaku* belonged to the Okinawan art of Kobujutsu (p. 178). Ninja generally favored the weapons of the samurai. This isn’t surprising – these weapons were readily available and would make it easier to blend in while disguised, and the ninja would be schooled in their use, because many (perhaps most or all) ninja were in fact members of samurai clans.

Ninja might have used more hidden and combination weapons than most people, though, as backup weapons or surprise tactics. An “unarmed” spy could conceal several deadly (or at least distracting) secrets! The poisoned weapons frequently suggested for ninja are unlikely, however – such things tend to be as dangerous to the user as to the victim. Like modern assassins, ninja probably knew that food was the best vehicle for poison.

Ninja Characters

Every ninja ought to know Taijutsu (see above). A historical ninja will practice one or more Japanese weapon styles as well; e.g., Kenjutsu (pp. 173-175), Kusarijutsu (p. 179), Kusarigamajutsu (p. 180), or Shurikenjutsu (pp. 195-197). Cinematic ninja should further add Kobujutsu (p. 178) – to use so-called “ninja weapons” from Okinawa! For suitable ninja templates, see *Assassin* (pp. 31-32) and *Spy* (p. 38).

Realistic ninja should equip themselves as described above. Cinematic ones might wear a “ninja suit” (the infamous hooded black outfit, which *isn’t* historical; see *The Ninja*, p. 13) or other martial-arts costume. Some might include firearms in their arsenal – especially comic-book super-ninja.

Ninja vs. Ninjas

In *Martial Arts*, we follow accepted English usage and use “ninja” for both the singular and the plural. However, many people prefer “ninjas” for the plural – and this seems somehow more appropriate for a cinematic game. When playing fast and loose with equipment and fighting styles, why fret over the English word for a Japanese concept? The true master of deception knows there’s power in names and *wants* people to get such things wrong!

TAIJUTSU

6 points

Taijutsu (“body combat art”) is the striking and grappling art of the ninja. This term *isn’t* synonymous with *Ninjutsu*. “Ninjutsu” encompasses all of the ninja’s skills – not just Taijutsu but also training at stealth, subterfuge, and deception, and a number of other armed and unarmed styles. These additional elements have nothing to do with Taijutsu!

Taijutsu has three main components, taught together and given equal emphasis:

1. Falling, tumbling, and acrobatics.
2. Striking, kicking, and breaking.
3. Grappling and joint locking.

Stylists use speed, flexibility, and quick movement to defend themselves and defeat their opponents. They remain mobile and seek to avoid a static fight. To accomplish this, the ninja makes regular use of Evade to skirt foes and Acrobatic Dodge to avoid attacks.

Taijutsu punches use both closed fists and Exotic Hand Strikes (finger strike, spear-hand, *shuto*, etc.). Kicks primarily connect with the heel, the ball of the foot, or the top of the foot. Preferred targets for all types of strikes are the groin, vitals, neck, and eyes, as Taijutsu aims to disable the enemy quickly. Deceptive Attacks that rely on sheer speed or changes of target are common. Conversely, Telegraphic Attacks (p. 113) are rare.

After weakening his opponent with strikes, the Taijutsu practitioner either piles on *more* blows or moves in with a grapple followed by a throw or a takedown. Once his foe is down, he may deliver a finishing strike, apply an Arm Lock to achieve submission, or follow his victim to the ground for a pin. Advanced students sometimes learn further ground techniques, but the art is primarily stand-up.

Modern Taijutsu schools teach a large number of weapons that would be part of other jutsu in historical times. Such training typically starts within the first few belts, although some schools reserve weapons for black belts. Weapons include the *hanbo*, *jo*, *katana*, knife, *kusari*, *naginata*, *ninja-to*, *shuriken*, spear, staff, and even the *tessen* (combat fan); see Chapter 6 for details. All of these skills are optional, but it’s unusual to learn Taijutsu without learning weapons. Some even say that the entire goal of Taijutsu is to learn to use anything as a weapon – whether it’s built for the purpose or improvised. Stylists use the footwork, tactics, and hand motions of unarmed Taijutsu when armed, and learn to regard a weapon as an enhancement to the body’s natural weapons, not a replacement for them.

Cinematic Taijutsu stylists are ninja in the grand folkloric tradition. They have access to a huge body of cinematic abilities. They can move without being seen, control bodily functions, walk without sound, and fight blindfolded. Their strikes are lethal, silent, and almost unstoppable. Tales of the ninja credit them with virtually every feat in martial-arts myth. Hollywood-style ninja frequently master Kobujutsu weapons, too – indeed, skill with the *nunchaku*, *sai*, and *tonfa* is practically required!