



**To: SHUSEKI SHIHAN FRANK WOON-A-TAI**  
**In partial fulfilment of my**  
**HACHIDAN EXAMINATION**

**A step by step guide to successfully defend**  
**and survive a knife attack.**

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## Introduction

After giving many seminars across the country. I realised that many dojos barely teach knife self-defense. Even by reading in the newspapers about all the victims of knife attacks, many dojos don't even have practice rubber or wooden knives available for their students. The fact that many instructors are not comfortable teaching knife self-defense is probably the main reason.

So how can we make knife self-defense more a part of the syllabus in each dojo? This is why I have decided to share the knowledge I have acquired over the last four and a half decades. One of my students, who is a police officer, suggested years ago, after acknowledging the progression of my methods, that I write about knife self-defense. I am not much of a writer. I am more of a speaker. But since life is always filled with challenges. Here we go...

## Preface

I have been wanting to write about my views on teaching and training methods concerning knife self-defence for quite a while. I don't consider myself an expert at all but I do want to share my experience to help other traditional karate-ka to be more aware of the importance and need to incorporate knife self-defence in dojo training.

I started training in Shotokan karate-do for one reason only. It was to be able to protect my little sisters, my loved ones and myself. It wasn't for competition medals nor fancy jumping spinning kicks.

Before I officially started training in a dojo at the age of 14 years old. I started reading many different books on a variety of martial arts. It was the self-defence books that fascinated me the most. I remember when I first started reading the "Complete book of self-defence" by Bruce Tegner. I kept pestering my friends to be my Guinee pigs to test my new techniques. Today when I think back of all those techniques and tricks, I realise that a lot of them where not really practical although I still teach some of them. When I was 4<sup>th</sup> kyu my Sensei told my that there was a regional competition in Montreal. He said that every dojo that was attending would have to do a demonstration. He wanted me to do one. I nervously asked him: "What do I do?" He then said: "What would you like?" I answered knife self-defence right away, thinking that he would teach me a bunch of cool techniques. He had other things in his mind! He then told me I had two weeks to make up my own self-defence demonstration. I freaked out, I was only 16 years old! Well I managed to put together a pretty decent demonstration with the help of the few books and from a few different people from other dojos that were more advanced then I was. When the day came, I ended up competing in an adult category since there was no one my age. It was my first Kumite competition and my buddy and I were the only people doing a demonstration. We were both so nervous that my opponent forgot the timing and order of the attacks. He attacked me with a wooden "shoto" (small wooden sword that really hurt when ever I made a mistake) like a crazy man. Well to my surprise he did not touch me and we ended

up receiving a standing ovation from the crowd. That moment ended up giving me the confidence and desire to keep an eye out for any technique that seemed effective.

I will never forget many years ago at Master camp. I was finally going to do the instructor's training course # 20 that had a section on self-defence against weapons. I was so excited. I finally, was going to have a knife self-defence course by a master. Well after doing one hour and twenty minutes of review, we were told that we did not have enough time for the final subject. We were then told that knife self-defence is like defending yourself against a **punch**. You block as you get out of the way and then counter. Nothing else! I was shocked! I could not believe what I heard. I told myself...Hell no! You can't consider a knife attack the same as a punch. There is a lot more people that get kill by a knife then a punch.

For example, if a child hits me with a punch it will not have the same lethal effect that a slash or a stab by an edge weapon would have? Nothing was mentioned about the dangers of a knife attack and so on. That is when I really realised that I would have to rely on myself to make my students aware of the dangers of an being attacked by an assailant with a knife.

I read many years ago, that weak self-defence is better than none. In some way I agree because It is better to do something then nothing. But when it comes to knife self-defence, I believe it is best to run away then do anything. Unfortunately, you can't always run so I want my students to have a fighting chance.

The knife is not necessarily a weapon. For most people like myself it is a tool. I always have a knife on me or close by. What make the knife so dangerous is the person wielding it with the intent to maim or kill. In other words, somebody in a fit of rage may strike out at you with there hand or fist but, to grab a knife to stab you, that is a whole different thing. So, you will have to have a different mindset. It is no longer a situation where you can rely on your normal dojo training. You have to be physically and especially mentally prepared in the realities of knife self-defence. When do you face an opponent in the dojo or in a competition that really wants to hurt you or main you to the point of you dying?

## **Basics**

When I introduce my students to weapons training, I always take in to consideration their age and level. At a less advanced level and with younger I will train them more against a rubber club. Let's be realistic. To survive an knife attack, you need a certain amount of skills, physical and mental training. And the stronger your mental training is, the more chance you have.

The idea being that they have to learn to stay away from the weapon, in this case the club.

I will use the rubber club to make them move back faster and rely on their block more in their gohon or sambon kumite (Fig. 1a to 1d). With weapon defense training the students have to develop blocking the wrist and not the weapon!

I find that after a while, doing a lot of basic kumite a lot of students lose their fear of being hit cause they don't feel the danger aspect of fighting. When the rubber club (or eventually the rubber knife) is pulled out the defending person (uke) is put in a much more stressful situation which makes it harder to react. Having a club also makes the attacker (tori) more vicious.

***NB During my report when I talk about the defender (UKE) or attacker (TORI) I will often use he but it could also be she.***

## Sambon-kumite using rubber club



(1a) Age-uke



(1b) Soto-uke



(1c) Gedan-barai



(1d) Counter: Gyaku-zuki

So even the basic kumite is more realistic, although I do not consider moving back in a straight line to be the best solution. That is why I prefer using ippon kumite because it enables the defender to work with so many more defensive angles (Side-way, 45<sup>o</sup> angles, going forward to intercept, etc). I like to teach them to learn how to get out of the way first with different tai sabaki (evading) drills. In the beginning I don't even want them to block, I want them to learn to see and evade the weapon without the use of their blocks. You can't block something you don't see!

## Examples of evading and distancing



Once they move and evade properly, I have them work on blocking the club.

We use pool noodles to start with. I know it is not the best thing to do. But it is better to get hit on the arm then on the head. The idea is to learn to block the bigger club and then try to develop the precision of blocking the wrist. Once you can block the wrist you can then control it. That is when we can start working with the rubber knives.

Like basic kumite in karate training I use predetermined attacks and defensives to give them ideas and work on their motor skills. I want them to get used to seeing a weapon go at them. It has to be basic and simple at first so as they don't panic too much in the beginning. Once they are more comfortable, I make them do drills at a pace that will make them panic and do mistakes

or just get cut or poked by the rubber knife. That is one of the most important lessons to learn about a knife attack. **Never be over confident, respect and fear that weapon.** Learn to control that fear and use it. The risk of being cut are enormous but it doesn't mean that you can't or won't survive.

**Students must develop a survival attitude and "MUSHIN".**

When I see karate-ka practice knife self-defence I find that they are not attacked in a realistic way. They are attacked oi-zuki style with the knife held out with no recoil. It's too clean. At a more advanced level the attacks must be more random, wild and messy. The defender must learn to react best he can in all the chaos. He must realise that he will probably get cut. By practicing in a very stressful situation the student will learn to control his stress, his breathing. He must master "**MUSHIN**". The ability to remain calm and alert. If he doesn't, no matter how good his technique could be is, if he doesn't stay calm, he will panic which could make him freeze and lose your abilities to react properly. Like I have already mentioned before he must realise that he will most likely get cut. And depending on the gravity of the cut there is always the risk of falling into shock.

It is important to use your distancing to stay out of the way. If you let your attacker get too close to you, he will be able to grab you and stab you with a multitude of angles.(see photos below)



From an attacking distance the attack will not always be at this perfect distance.





He most likely will try and get close by talking and distracting you and then go crazy on you.



So, it is important to try and keep your **distance**. Grab a weapon if you can or use what you have on you. When I travel, I have a second “travel” wallet that I keep old gift cards that don’t have my name on them and some money in it, If I am being attacked I can either throw it on the ground in back of my assailant and then run or if I feel I am being attacked I can throw it in his face kick and run. (see photos below).



Example of getting out of the way of the attack, block, grab and pull while kicking knee:



Side shift as you redirect attack



While controlling arm chamber leg



Destroy tori's knee with a trust kick

**Different grips**



Saber grip



Hammer grip



Ice pick grip



Reverse (hidden) ice pick grip

## Angles of attack

- Downward stab
- Direct stab
- Upward stab
- Downward diagonal slash (left to right, right to right)
- Upward diagonal slash (left to right, right to right)
- Horizontal slash (left to right, right to right)

## Principle Targets



Eyes



Throat



Neck/ Brachial Plexus



Chin and eyes simultaneously



Groin



Groin



Knee



Temple

## **Practice striking focus mitt while blocking knife attack**

In traditional karate, we practice blocking then countering. I believe that it is important to block and strike at the same time (like many kata techniques). But to develop power we can practice blocking the knife yielding arm and striking a focus mitt at the same time.



## Applications

Sometimes, if you are lucky, all it takes is a swift kick to knock your attacker of balance to enable you to turn and run away.



***Don't forget the best way to survive a knife attack is to run away!***

**But just in case you are not that lucky, here are some defense ideas against certain knife attacks:**

Please note that there are many different applications. I chose to show the ones I have been teaching for years. In many cases after striking the attacker multiple times, the defender may not even have to disarm if the attacker drops' the weapon. The disarming techniques are showed to give ideas on disarming. Like many martial art techniques, some people have an easier time then others with certain techniques.

## Downward (psycho style) stab



As uke sides forward, he jams, blocks and counter (simultaneously)



Grab wrist



Strike and grab back of neck



Multiple knee strikes as you pull on tori's neck



To disarm you can apply a shoulder lock



Uke now has the weapon



## Straight stab



Tori attacks with straight stab towards chest



Uke parries and redirects wrist (blade) as he slides slightly sideways



Counter to chin and eyes as the wrist is grabbed



Knee strike while controlling arm



Arm bar / elbow break



Finishing blow to the temple (Tekki shodan)



Uke's knee into side of tori's knee



Arm bar against elbow and wrist lock



Uke now has the knife

## Another variation



Block



Strike eyes as wrist is grabbed



Grab wrist with both hands



Twisting the wrist



Could use weapon against tori



Wrist break and preparation for throw. (Tekki Nidan application)

## Upward stab towards' stomach



X-block, keeping body away from knife



View of crossed arm block



Grab elbow and control wrist



Reverse (wrap around) arm bar



Hammer or forearm blow (Tekki shodan)



Controlling neck



Knee strike (Tekki shodan)



Arm lock



Disarming (could use knife handle to strike the back of neck)

## Reverse horizontal slash



Block



Grab and strike



Knee strike as head is pushed to unbalance tori



Pivot back to the side of tori as uke pulls arm



Arm bar/ elbow break



Disarming



Finishing blow (Tekki-shodan technique)

## Horizontal slash/stab



Block and strike throat simultaneously



Kick groin



Slide under arm as you strike with elbow



The blade could be turned against tori



Or a combination lock and throw...



Side view



Disarming



Throw using Bassai-dai technique...



To slam tori to the ground.

**The important points to develop like in traditional kumite, are timing, speed, distance, reaction, kime, Mushin and especially the will to survive.**

Basic knife kumite (use of the knife in): **To be elaborated more**

Sambon kumite

Ippon kumite

Jiu Ippon Kumite

Jiu kumite

Goshin jitsu (self-defense) using surprise attacks

While practicing weapon defense, I want the students to learn to block and to grab.



Then block, grab and pull/twist. To use hikite in the way I believe it was meant to be used!

Finally, evade, block, grab and strike at almost the same time so as not to give the attacker a second chance.

Use of a focus mitt while holding knife is good for learning to grab and strike simultaneously.

Uke block and grabs knife welding wrist while powerfully striking the focus mitt.

### **Practice striking focus mitt while blocking knife attack**

In traditional karate, we practice blocking then countering. I believe that it is important to block and strike at the same time. But to develop power we can practice blocking the knife yielding arm and striking a focus mitt at the same time.



At a more advanced level I make them practice with a tightly rolled-up face cloth is used.

With the rolled-up face cloth the attacker will less likely to hesitate when attacking. He is encouraged to attack in a fast and chaotic fashion.



#### Arm lock/breaks Examples



### **Mistakes that people do against a knife**

- they don't run away when they can
- they don't grab a weapon that they could use. Brief case, purse, bag, stick, rock, garbage can, etc.
- they grab the knife by the blade
- they don't control the arm holding the weapon
- they don't disarm the attacker when they can
- they try to remove the weapon without striking and weakening the attacker
- they ignore the fact that he is armed
- they are over confident and not cautious
- they panic, forget to breath, freeze up
- never train with a more realistic approach
- developing false confidence
- not realising the danger of being cut or stabbed
- do not rely on one single strike.

### **Things to help develop better defenses**

- keep it simple
- during a normal dojo training (not just during kumite but during kihon, kata, etc) have a few students make surprise attacks randomly at any moment, anybody with a weapon. Very stressful!
- use pool noodles.
- when going all out. Wear protective goggles.
- rub colored chalk on knife edge to uke where they got cut or stabbed.
- have students practice realistic club and knife attacks. The better they get, the harder they will be to defend against.
- teach students "mushin" to be able to control their fears better.
- once they have learned the basics of knife defense they must practice being attack with

random attacks from the front, the side, the back and lying on the floor.

-while wearing old clothes have tori go at you with a washable marker. Good luck on not getting marked on!

-always be aware

### **A way to make knife self-defense more realistic:**



Put on old clothes and have Tori go crazy using a washable marker. By getting marks on yourself It makes you realise what would have happened if the marker was a live blade.

## Conclusion

A few weeks ago in my home town, a gang of three teenage thugs attack and tried to rob another younger teenager. The young one pulled out a knife and stab one of the three. One blow to the torso. The thug died. The young teenager has been arrested for murder.

There is the legal aspect that I did not talk about. With every disarming technique and many redirecting techniques (I showed a few), once the defender has the knife there are many ways that the knife could be used against the attacker. I personally do not like teaching to use the knife against the opponent in dojo training, I do mention to my adult students that in a situation of life and death, things get messy and they might and probably will get cut but... there attacker might get cut also!!!

A knife is the easiest weapons to get. Every kitchen has a few. Not all knives are razor sharp like my kitchen and hunting knives are, but they are none the less very lethal. Convicts have been known to make shivs (hand made daggers) out of metal spoons or tooth brush handles.

Knife self-defense is often neglected or taught in a non threatening way in many dojos. It is important that every teacher (sensei) underline the seriousness and dangers of being attacked by someone armed with a live blade. It could make the difference between surviving, being mauled or worst being killed by being totally unaware of the risks of not running away. The more one develops the skills to survive the more one does not want to have to face such a dangerous attack.

Training in knife self-defense is challenging but can be exciting. The skills developed will be useful in many aspects of your martial art training. We have incorporated knife techniques in kata, enbu and bunkai. Which has made it even more fascinating.

## Acknowledgement

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And finally, I would like to bow to my lovely wife, Carmen, my mother, Virginia, my sisters and children that still have confidence in the “BIG GUY”.

Life is good, OSU!

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