

Roll Like a Ninja

by Josh Sager

One of the fascinating elements in the art of *Ninjutsu* is *taihenjutsu* (body movement skills), which is made up of *ukemi* (rolling, breakfalls) and *tobi* (jumping) techniques. *Ninjutsu* students learn *taihenjutsu* from the very beginning of their training, and continue to practice and use these techniques throughout.

History Lesson

If you look back to when the *Ninja* flourished on the battlefields of ancient Japan, you can find many situations in which *taihenjutsu* proved essential to the *Ninja*'s survival. They often fought against soldiers wielding long swords or various staves and spears. With others fighting behind or aside them, trying to move away from the thrust of a spear wouldn't always work. Obstacles on the ground could be tripped over, also creating a hazard. Thousands of soldiers were fighting at the same time, so there wasn't a lot of room to move around! A system needed to be developed to allow the *Ninja* the ability to move freely, and out of harm's way.

During a battle, many soldiers wore heavy armor, and it was very difficult for them to move quickly. *Ninja* incorporated rolling and jumping to get out of the way, and it would take the soldiers longer to adjust before being able to attack again. Sometimes *Ninja* would have to fight multiple attackers simultaneously. In this case, rolling techniques could allow the *Ninja* to confuse the enemy long enough to allow him to fight one at a time; or to create enough distance between him and the attacker to escape.

Taihenjutsu is very important in situations where a *Ninja* is thrown or falls. The use of *taihenjutsu* prevents them from injuring themselves. When being thrown by an opponent, the *Ninja* can easily roll out of the way and escape.

How to roll like a Ninja

To fully understand how rolling is used by *Ninja*, first it is important to learn the proper "*Ninja*" way to roll. *Ninjutsu* rolling techniques are different from *Aikido*- or gymnastic-style rolls. Keep these points in mind:

1. Stay low throughout the entire roll.

Before executing the roll, get as low to the ground as you can. The less distance between you and the ground, the less impact your body will have to absorb. This is especially important if you have to roll on concrete, glass, or rocks.

2. Keep the roll small and tight.

By rolling in a small ball-shape, you can roll faster and more efficiently, expend less energy, maneuver better, and make yourself less of a target for your opponent to hit.

3. Use your spine, keep your eyes on your opponent!

One method of rolling is performed by creating and releasing energy in your spine. Turn your spine and maintain constant eye contact while rolling. Try to roll at a 45-degree angle while keeping your eyes on the opponent.

4. Roll on the proper area of the shoulder.

Ninja roll over the muscles surrounding the shoulder blade. They never roll over the top of their shoulder, or over their head. Doing so can cause dislocation, or serious neck injury!

5. Roll naturally.

Let your body sink into the roll by bending your knees and dropping your weight. Don't force yourself to the ground to try and get out of the way faster. This actually hinders your roll. All of the techniques found in *Ninjutsu* are natural movements, so when rolling you should follow this same approach.

Ninja Jumping

Tobi (jumping) is another important part of *Ninja* training. Similar to the reasons for rolling, there were times when the *Ninja* had to jump to avoid a sword cut at the legs, or out of the way of a spear slash.

The “*Ninja*” way of jumping is unique. Remember these points:

1. Do not hunch over or squat down before the jump.

Some people believe that in order to jump high they must squat down first, then jump. What many do not know is that it's actually harder to jump high this way. Start your jump from a standing, relaxed position.

2. Watch your shoulders.

When starting the jump, don't shrug your shoulders. This is a certain giveaway that you are going to jump.

3. Tuck your feet in, not behind.

When you jump, try and tuck your feet up and into your body, not behind you. By tucking your feet up you can prevent being hit in the feet.

4. Keep your head level.

It is more important to get your legs out of the way than it is to be able to jump 10 feet into the air. Concentrate on bringing your lower body up to

your torso, rather than trying to jump high. This will also help prevent hunching over, or shrugging your shoulders.

5. Land with both feet at the same time.

When you land, make sure that both feet touch the ground at the exact same time. Also make sure that your feet are apart, not close together. If your feet are too close together you will lose your balance.

6. Be quiet!

Remember this is *Ninja* jumping! Let your legs absorb the landing so you don't make any noise.

Other Ukemi

Ninja ukemi also contains cartwheels, front and back flips, breakfalls and handsprings. These techniques were developed to prevent injury when wearing swords. Since it is very difficult to roll while wearing a sword, alternative methods of *taihenjutsu* had to be created. The *Ninja* of old were said to be masters of these techniques, and it surely helped to spread rumors of their superhuman strength and abilities.

Taihenjutsu Games

Here are some exercises and games incorporating *Ninja taihenjutsu* that are used in modern *Ninjutsu* training to help teach children the benefits of *ukemi* and *tobi*:

1. The instructor, using a padded weapon, swings downward at the students' head. The student must roll forward and out of the way of the strike, at a 45-degree angle. Students should remember to keep their eyes on the person swinging at all times before, during, and after the roll.
2. Try exercise #1 using back rolls and side rolls.
3. Place an obstacle (a 2-piece folding mat works well) upright on the ground. The student approaches the obstacle and squats low, then leaps up and rolls over the obstacle. For this exercise, students are encouraged to "think like a *Ninja*". The entire technique should be done quietly, especially the roll. Students can squat behind the obstacle so that someone in front won't be able to see them, and then quietly roll over the obstacle.
4. The instructor swings low at a student's feet. The student jumps in the air and lands softly. From there the student can roll out of the way using a variety of rolling techniques.
5. From the same exercise as #4, the student jumps back at a 45-degree angle, out of the range of the padded weapon.
6. The instructor horizontally swings (slowly) at the student's head. The student ducks (keeping their back straight and head up, always looking at the instructor). Then the instructor swings low horizontally. The student jumps over the second swing. This exercise can be repeated in many different

combinations of jumping and rolling, and will help students to learn to combine *taihenjutsu* techniques together.

7. Try jumping on to and off of a folding chair without making noise. This exercise will help to train the use of the legs to absorb the shock of the jump.
8. A favorite exercise among students is the *taihenjutsu* obstacle course. Several “stations” are set up, with each station consisting of a jumping, rolling, or a combination of techniques. Students are timed as they run the course, and the student with the fastest time wins. Incorporating running with *taihenjutsu* helps teach the student to coordinate all of the *ukemi* they have learned, similar to the way *Ninja* had to combine *ukemi* techniques on the battlefields of Japan.

The Benefits of Ninja Taihenjutsu

The wonderful thing about *Ninja taihenjutsu* is that it provides a safe way to prevent injury when thrown, tripped or when falling. Think of the reduction of schoolyard injuries if everyone knew to roll when they slipped or fell. Rolling and jumping are also great methods for developing leg and ankle strength, balance and improved coordination. Above all, *Ninja ukemi* is a great way to bring excitement into a schools current training program and teach something about the *Ninja* legacy.

For additional information on the history and techniques of the Ninja, visit the Ninja Kids! Web Site – <http://www.winjutsu.com/ninjakids/>