

Silent Stalker

by Hatsumi Sensei

Taken from *Ninja Magazine*, December 1985

In any martial art, including ninpo, the most important aspect is footwork; therefore I will discuss footwork and the background of certain techniques.

Everyone dislikes the cold, including the ninja; so even in the summer ninja wear tabi, Japanese socks, to keep the feet warm. The feet are the key points of the body for retaining heat and health. In Oriental medicine, it is called zukan no kunetsu, meaning: "Keep the head cold and the feet warm". This is essential for staying in good health as well as curing illness. I, personally, will always wear tabi no matter how warm the weather.

In order to increase strength and virility, the ninja massage their feet by holding the first three toes and rotating them. Even kunoichi (female ninja) practice this technique to ensure good health of the whole body. It is particularly good for the liver; pancreas and the entire intestinal system. Part of the technique includes rubbing the bottoms of the feet to maintain good blood pressure and a balanced nervous system.

Ninja will also train by walking on beans scattered on the ground; this helps massage pressure points as well as toughens the bottoms of the feet. More advanced ninja eventually learn to walk on tetsubishi (sharp-spiked caltrops) without injury; this is accomplished not only because the feet are toughened, but because the ninja has learned to walk with perfect balance and lightness, distributing his weight so that he barely touches the thorny caltrops.





Walking is an excellent exercise, and one can do it anywhere at anytime. When I walk my three dogs every day, I walk them briskly for three hours, making sure I take small, quick steps. It is a good lesson to learn, even on the street for, occasionally we will encounter a cat or something that will excite the dogs. However, since I am always walking properly, I am always in control; I am never pulled too fast or tripped by a tangled leash.

Two years ago I held a ninja seminar in Daytona Ohio. Most of the American students I met there seemed to walk more like "Frankensteins" than martial artists. They found it extremely difficult practising the small, quick steps. Many of them felt I walked too quickly, but I explained that in Japan, the foot is considered the "second heart", and to have a strong heart means to have a strong mind. So, walking properly also develops the mind.

Walking is the most important thing in one's life. Even classic Japanese No plays emphasise this.

When this technique of walking is mastered, when one "walks like a ninja", one feels as though their feet never touch the ground. It is as though the ninja walks on air. In fact, one of my students, after observing the demonstration, said, "Sensei, your feet are not touching the ground. You seem to be floating in the air". Another student, a professional soldier whose nation was at war, told me that training of the legs (in his country) was essential; that even while in Japan he always climbed stairs, never took the elevator. When I heard this, I knew he was a good warrior.

Walking is the basic body movement of martial arts. When you are learning the martial arts, be conscious of walking at all times; always train in the aspect of taijutsu (body techniques). It will leave little chance of your being attacked successfully. I know a professional gunfighter who wears gloves all the time. This is a type of thinking that is important to all martial arts: One should always be training and caring for one's self. Training is an everyday thing, just as walking is an everyday thing.

Side-walking (yoko aruki) ninja technique involves lowering ones center of gravity and stepping one foot over the other. It also requires a dance-like arm movement in order to maintain balance.

When carrying a weapon, one walks according to the environment and one's relationship to it. It is important to practice side-walking in different environments. With a sword, especially at night, the sword can be drawn and the scabbard used to "feel" what lies ahead.



Next is shizumi araki or low position walking; a technique especially useful in narrow areas. On a narrow path for example, a lower position is better, making you less visible to a potential attacker. Another low side-walking technique is called ninpo uzuru gakure. Mokuton means to hide in the trees; sooton - to hide in the grass; and sekiton - to hide in the rocks. These can all be developed once the basic walking technique is mastered.

Whether the ninja walks alone or with others, he and they can progress undetected if everyone walks "correctly". The obvious advantage of walking in numbers while on a mission is that, when you are three ninja, you are six eyes, six ears and three noses, each focused in a different direction so that all areas are covered.

In shoten no jutsu (going up to heaven), ninja practice walking up large plants placed at various angles, increasing the incline to as much as 80 to 85 degrees in order to master the art of walking and climbing in the forest. Training eventually advances to climbing plants or tree trunks situated at 90-degree angles. After reaching the top, the ninja then learn to tumble back down to their original position (kamae). Often, when carrying a sword, both sword and scabbard are used to maintain balance. Side-walking is also used while up in the trees crossing from branch to branch. In koto ryu koppojutsu (which includes side steps and other body techniques), the ninja can easily move backward while facing forward simply by crossing one leg after the other. This is particularly useful when eluding an opponent's attack and positioning ones self for a counter attack.

Ninja no shinobi kobashiri means running in small steps with the body leaning forward. In the night, while in the mountains, you can see the sky between the trees. This is your path. You must also use care when near the water or anything that might give off a reflection, lest you be detected. (Moonlight can be an enemy as well as an ally.)

In Japan, the martial arts are not only "offensive orientated", but very defensive as well. The Japanese are basically agricultural land oriented people; and our martial arts have developed out of that tradition. I hope these illustrations of basic footwork and ninja body movement and techniques have been helpful to you.

It is good to start from the ground up. It is important to have good feet on the ground.

