

SUIEIJUTSU - THE SWIMMING ART  
KAKUTO BUGEI - FIGHTING MARTIAL ARTS  
(the auxiliary skills)  
by  
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Japan. The mystical island of the Orient. The land of the rising sun, the home of the Samurai. Like most islands, Japan is surrounded and permeated with water. From the snow capped mountain heights to the rivers running into the ocean, water is an intricate part of the Japanese life.

It was influential in the development of the warrior skills, as well as, an essential part of daily life. Anyone who lives near a large body of water, be it a lake, a river, or an ocean, should learn to swim. When a person lives on an island, it is especially essential to learn how to swim. And when that person is a warrior it is mandatory that not only the art of swimming be learned, but also the ability to perform various skills regarding combat in the water.

In the Kakuto Bugei, fighting martial arts, of the Japanese warrior, there were two specific arts related to swimming. One is extremely specialized and deals with the techniques of swimming a horse across a body of water, this was known as Suibajutsu, the horse swimming art. It is of such a specialized nature that it was generally only taught to the higher level Bushi who might actually have a horse and face the opportunity to have to use the skills.

The other art was one that every warrior, from the lowly foot soldier, Ashigaru, to the highest level of Bushi, might have to use. It was known as Suiejutsu, and was the actual swimming art. It was swimming in it's most common sense and also in a specialized manner that included what might be termed power swimming, for crossing a body of water as quickly as possible, and stealth swimming, for crossing that same body of water as quietly as possible.

In regard to crossing a body of water in armor, the art was less swimming and more wading. If there was the threat of meeting an opponent while crossing the sword was already drawn and held in the right hand above the head. According to the depth of the water, the warrior would move basically sideways with a quick cross step, sometimes referred to as Yokoashi, side step.

If the water became very deep, though the Samurai would avoid water over their head when in full armor, the warrior placed all his weight on his left leg and kind of hopped along the water, using the left arm for balance, and the right leg for stability. The sword was still held overhead.

In this manner the right leg could be swung forward at any time and the sword brought down in a shoulder to hip (heaven to earth) cut. This method of wading through the water was especially useful in the old days of honorable challenge, when a warrior did not have to worry about being cut down before crossing the water to answer, or issue, a challenge with another warrior.

Stealth swimming was a method of swimming where the limbs were kept below the surface of the water, in order to make as little noise as possible. When done properly, the sound of the swimmer passing through the water is about the same as that of water lapping against the shore. This is a very

important point to remember about stealth moving, whether in the water or not. It is impossible to move absolutely silent. In the Ninja movies popular a few years back, the Ninja moved so quietly because they edited out the noise. One particular Ninja movie showed a master admonishing his student to imitate the quiet walk of a cat, and then sat a cat on a wooden porch, which the cat ran silently across. After training the young Ninja was able to duplicate the silent tread.

Obviously the people who wrote that part in the movie never lived with a cat. Cats running full bore across a wooden floor make as much noise as a herd of elephants. Maybe not that much, but they do make a lot of noise. When a cat jumps down from a counter or chair, if it is on wood, you hear it very plainly. When a full grown man, or woman, runs across a wooden floor they still make a great deal of sound.

The actual key to silent movement, isn't silence at all, it is relativity. If the background noise is loud, a person can move with a great deal of noise and still not be heard, if they stay beneath the background noise. This has always been the key to stealth movement as taught in Ninpo and Ninjutsu.

In example, using a scale of ten, if a person is, using the context of swimming, if a person is approaching a shore where a battle is going on, thus the background noise is ten, they can make as much as a relative noise of nine and still be silent to their situation. However, if there is no battle going on, and the only noise is the sound of the water lapping the surface of the shore, which might be a noise of only three, then the swimmer must move as quietly as possible and stay to the sound of two or less, not to be heard.

In stealth swimming, the limbs are below the surface, so that no splashing occurs, only the water slapping the shoulders and head of the swimmer. This type of swimming is in keeping the eyes above water so that the shore can be watched. Underwater swimming was used for special occasions, especially in regard to espionage, however, usually the head was kept above the water so that the opposite shore could be watched, or the eyes kept on a specific target. It must always be remembered that anytime the head is put under the water, moments will need to be taken to clear the water from the eyes, which in actual combat could be fatal. Thus normal swimming, with the idea of actually meeting an enemy, was performed with the head above water.

Power swimming was very similar to freestyle swimming, but the biggest difference is in the head action. Modern freestyle swimming has a person duck their head under the water, keeping the body more streamlined and giving faster speed. But the modern swimmer is only concerned with crossing the water, not being able to fight once on the other side.

In Suiejutsu, the swimming is performed with two different head actions, and it must be remember that the object of the quick swim is to get to the other side of the water fast, not quiet. Yet at the same time with awareness and cognizance of the other side. In combat, whether swimming, walking, or running, it is extremely important to keep Zanshin, literally the surviving mind, thought usually translated, awareness.

If the warrior was performing a quick swim, yet with the idea of entering an enemy's territory surreptitiously, they would have their sword strapped to their backs, in a Saya, sheath, that was disposable. Many times they would carry a Chokuto, straight sword, which many people have incorrectly called a Ninja To. The Katana, were very expensive and needed special care to maintain their sharpness and quality. Thus on a water mission, where the practitioner was going to have to let the blade become submerged, he would carry a cheaper straight blade, which could be thrown away if it were damaged or rusted.

Swimming with the head above the water takes a strong full arm stroke, which tends to be very powerful. If there was a distinct destination or enemy warrior to focus on, the head was kept straight, so that the eyes could keep watch on the area or person being swum towards.

If there was no one specific, or no particular, destination aimed at, then the warrior would allow his head to turn left and right, which allowed for a stronger stroke. Still the head was kept out of the water, so that the eyes could scan the area being approached. One of the most important aspects of this type of swimming was learning not to blink the eyes during the turning of the head. People scanning from left to right, generally blink their eyes at the mid point of the turn, which means they do not see what is directly in front of them. This is what causes many traffic accidents.

When a person pulls up to an intersection and scans the area, they many times blink their eyes at the mid point of the scan, which means if there is a car pulling from across the intersection, or a car in that spot, or a person crossing the walk at that point, they miss seeing them. Many times when police officers are talking to motorists who have just hit someone, the person will say they never saw them, they are telling the truth. Thus the scanning lesson from Suieijutsu is a skill which can be applied to daily driving skills very effectively.

Many people wonder why some of these ancient skills should be preserved, since they see them as useless by modern standards. Today war is fought with the push of a button, or with high caliber machine guns, or explosive devices. Why, some people wonder, learn an ancient art of swimming which is archaic? Yet the lessons which can be learned from these skills are many times very pertinent, for they are skills developed by people seeking skills of survival. If they are learned properly, they can increase the ability of a martial artist to survive in his/her daily life, or at the very least avoid accident and injury.

One last story may also illustrate the quality of skill which is contained in the ancient auxiliary arts, of which Suieijutsu is but one. Years ago two martial artists who went to the same college met in the institutions swimming pool. One had been a competitive swimmer, while the other had trained in a form of Kempo which taught many of the ancient skills, including Suieijutsu. The Kempoka was practicing his Suieijutsu when the other student started telling him how 'wrong' he was swimming, and instructing him in dunking his head in appropriate Olympic form.

The Kempoka thanked the other martial artist and said that he was practicing traditional combat swimming which was a part of the martial arts. The swimmer laughed and said he was a martial artist and had never heard of such a thing. Then he continued to berate the Kempoka for his 'bad swimming

form'. Finally, the Kempoka said that Seiko Fujita had said that proper Suiejutsu was superior to Olympic swimming, at which point the swimmer challenged him to a race. The two men lined up at the end of the pool, while a third party yelled go. While the two men were approximately the same size and weight, the Suiejutsu practitioner handily beat the other person across the pool, proving the value and worth of the ancient art.

All of the ancient skills of the martial arts are of great value. Plus each system has it's own contribution. Presented in this article was only one method of Suiejutsu. There are minor, and in some styles major, differences between the swimming techniques utilized by different Ryu. Hopefully, this article will increase the interest in the ancient martial arts and encourage the teachers of these skills to share their art with more students, and encourage martial artists of all styles to be more open to the many wonderful arts contained in the Bugei curriculum.