

35 Articles on Strategy by Miyamoto Musashi

Foreword

After many years of practice in my own school, whose strategic methods (“Heiho”) I developed through training with two swords, I wish to write down the main points of it for the first time. It is difficult to sufficiently explain the individual content with the appropriate words, but I will try to write down the main parts of the continuously trained strategical techniques, the path of the sword, the attitude of the spirit and other knowledge in the order in which they come to mind.

1. The Way of the Two Swords

I name this way the two swords (“Ni-To”) and let the students train with two swords in their hands. The left hand has less importance thereby. With this method they learn to wield the sword with one hand. The advantages of this style are apparent on the battlefield, when riding a horse, in a pond or river, on a narrow path, on a stony surface, in a crowd and when running, therefore when a man has a weapon in the left hand and it is impossible to wield the sword with both hands, he must hold it in one hand. The one handed handling of the sword may at first be difficult, but later it will be possible to use the sword freely without hindrance. For example: Through training the necessary strength for archery is attained and through training the necessary strength for riding. Also with regard to the skills of the people: the mariner attains the strength for the rudder and oars and the farmer the great strength for the plow and the hoe. In the same way we can, with constant training, attain the necessary strength to control the sword with one hand. But it is important that each individual chooses a suitable sword for his strength, because there are people of greater or lesser strength.

2. Understanding the Way of Strategy

The strategic principles (“Heiho”) should, in battles and single combat, always be viewed as identical. In the following I write about the strategy of single combat, but if we compare the spirit with the general, the arms and legs with the vassals and the knights, the torso with the infantry and inhabitants, the control over the country with that over the own body, it is understandable that in the way of strategy there is absolutely no difference between both. When fighting one should pay equal attention to the entire body from head to toe, namely not too much and not too little, not too strongly and not too weakly, so that no imbalance develops in the body.

3. How to Hold the Sword

To hold the sword correctly the forefinger and thumb should hold lightly, the middle finger with medium strength, the ring finger and the little finger firmly. As with the sword there is life and death with the hand. The hand is dead which, when holding, parrying or stopping, forgets the actual aim of cutting the opponent and becomes rigid. The living hand is always relaxed and calm, in harmonious balance with the sword in preparedness to cut. When holding the sword, the wrist should not be twisted, the elbow not stretched too much, but also not bent too much, the upper muscles of the arm should be relaxed and the lower muscles tensed. This should be carefully observed.

4. The Posture

The posture should be so that the face is not directed at the floor, but also not too far upwards, while ensuring that both shoulders are neither stiff nor slouched. At the same time, one should push the belly forward instead of the chest, not bend the hips, and not stiffen the knees, while also keeping the straight body turned towards the front of the opponent so that it appears wider. It is necessary to always behave so that the everyday posture is the same as it is during combat and the fighting posture the same as it is in everyday life. This should be carefully observed.

5. The Gait

With regard to the gait during combat, irrespective of whether one makes big or small, quick or slow steps, the usual gait should be adhered to. Such unreliable specific ways of walking as flowing, gliding, stamping, creeping as well as forwards or backwards gait are all to be avoided. However difficult the ground may be, it should be treaded on confidently. This will become more understandable later.

6. The Gaze

A lot was said about the gaze in earlier times, these days it is taught that the gaze should be directed in general to the face of the opponent. With regard to the gaze during combat, both eyes should be made narrower than in everyday life and the opponent should be calmly observed. It is important that one sees the opponent with unmoving eyes as if he were far away, even if he is very close. With this gaze one can not only perceive the beginning techniques of the opponent, but also see both sides. There are two kinds of gazes namely the gaze of perceiving ("Kan") and the gaze of seeing ("Ken"). In combat the first should be held strongly and the second weakly. There is also a gaze that shows the opponent one's mind. For this reason one should only direct the own external, intentional spirit ("I") at the eyes of the opponent, but under no circumstances the own internal, decision making spirit ("Shin"). This should be carefully observed.

7. Closing the Distance

There are various teachings regarding the choice of distance to the opponent in other schools. Because people are inclined to be entangled by one strategic teaching or the other and thereby become immovable in their spirits, I prefer to say nothing in particular about this now. Such things become easily understandable by themselves in various ways when we get used to them. Simply put: one should take care that the distance in which one can hit the opponent with the sword, is at the same time the distance in which one can be hit by the sword of the opponent. When attacking the opponent, people tend to forget their own body. This should be thoroughly tried out.

8. The Spiritual Bearing

The spiritual bearing during combat should be calm, fearless, straight and large, while staying motivated and truthful. Thereby the outer spirit should be held lightly and the inner spirit should be held heavily and one should adapt flexibly to each situation with a spirit like water. Water has various colors; it can be a drop in one moment and a blue sea in another. This should be carefully observed.

9. The Lower, Middle and Higher Levels of the Martial Arts

Martial arts that display various sword positions with specific postures and thereby appear strong and fast are to be regarded as lowly.

Such martial arts that while concentrating on the smallest details bring various techniques in accord with special rhythms and thereby appear magnificent and exceptional are to be regarded as middling.

The martial arts of the higher level look neither strong nor weak, nor angular, nor fast, nor magnificent, nor bad, however they always appear large, straight and calm. This should be carefully deliberated upon.

10. The Thread and the Yardstick

One should always have a thread and a yardstick in one's spirit. When one joins the thread to the opponent at any time and measures him with the yardstick of one's own straight spirit, one can perceive the points where the opponent is strong, weak, straight, crooked, tense or relaxed and what intentions the opponent has in his spirit. With the flexible thread and the straight yardstick one should measure round, angular, long, short, crooked or straight things in the opponent and know the opponent well. This should be tested.

11. The Path of the Sword

Until the path of the sword has been adequately studied, it is difficult to freely wield the sword according to one's will. Such swings also lack the adequate strength. If the back and the surface of the sword are not known, if it is treated like a knife or a spatula for rice paste, the sword will not be attuned to the central aim of the spirit – cutting the opponent. In accordance with the path of the sword, one should always treat one's sword as if it were very heavy, and train with it calmly so that one can strike the opponent well.

12. Striking and Slashing

Striking and slashing are different. Striking means, whatever path the sword may take, one must have a definite target in mind and, as with practice-striking, strike the target with all one's strength and spirit. Slashing on the other hand means, if one is not able to strike properly, to slash with the sword any part of the opponent. However strong this slash may be, it is not the strike itself. Whether one hits the body of the opponent, or his sword, or even if one misses a target, slashing is not pointless. In short, slashing is a preceding attempt in order to carry out a real strike. This must be carefully practiced.

13. The Three Ways of Taking the Initiative

There are three ways of taking the initiative. The first concerns the situation when one attacks the opponent, the second concerns the situation when one is attacked by the opponent and the third when one and one's opponent attack each other simultaneously. There are no other possible situations besides these three. When attacking, one should advance seemingly strongly, but keep the spirit reserved, and upon reaching the enemy one should unleash one's reserves, taking the initiative. This is "to set him up". When an attack comes from the opponent, one should at first seem passive on the outside, holding the spirit back, and then, in the appropriate proximity release the spirit and attack even more strongly than the opponent, taking the initiative through the resulting disorder in his timing. This is "to wait for the initiative". And when one and one's opponent attack simultaneously, the body should be kept upright and straight and the initiative should be seized with the sword, body and legs as well as with the spirit. Seizing the initiative is of utmost importance.

14. Surviving the Critical Moment

When one is at a distance in which the swords of both sides can strike at any time and one realizes that one's slash would give the opponent an advantage and thereby allow him to overcome the critical moment before oneself, the critical moment should be overcome by sticking to the opponent's body with one's body and legs. After one has survived the critical moment, there is no need to worry about oneself anymore. This should be considered with the previous and following chapters.

15. The Body as Representative of the Sword

The body as representative of the sword describes the basic principle that, when slashing, one should not apply the sword and the body simultaneously against the opponent. To slash, the already prepared body usually advances as representative of the sword and after this the actual stroke of the sword follows. This slashing should be carried out with a free spirit of the void ("Ku"). While slashing, the sword, the body and the spirit do not emerge at the same time. One should consider that holding the spirit back inside also holds the body back inside. These relationships should be carefully observed.

16. The Two Feet

The two feet are the teaching that in a sword stroke one should make two footsteps. When pushing down the opponent's sword with one's own, when evading it, or when stepping forward towards the opponent, as well as when stepping back away from him, one should always make two steps with both feet. If only one step is made in a sword stroke, one can easily become static. Here, the word 'two' means the normal way of walking. This should be carefully tried out.

17. Treading Down the Sword

This is the strategic intention of treading on the point of the opponent's sword with one's foot. More precisely it is the intention of treading down the sword of the opponent with the left foot immediately before it stops when he swings it. If one takes the initiative here with the sword, body or spirit, one can easily win. Without this strategy an undesirable situation develops, in which attack and counterattack constantly alternate. The movement of the foot while treading down can also be slow, depending on the situation. The opportunity to tread down the sword does not occur often. This should be pondered carefully.

18. Holding Down the Invisible Shadow

Holding down the invisible, negative shadow ("Yin") is a method by which one can hit the opponent at his presumable weak points. If the opponent is closely observed, one notices the points to which he pays sufficient attention as well as the points to which he does not. If one stays aware of the points to which he pays attention and at the same time, before they start moving, aims with the tip of the sword at the shadow of the points to which he pays insufficient attention, he will lose his rhythm, so that one can defeat him easily. It is important however to hold one's spirit back and never forget the actual aim - striking the opponent. This should be tried out.

19. Mobilising the Visible Shadow

Here the actually visible, positive shadow (“Yang”) is meant. If the opponent holds his sword behind himself so that only his body can be seen, the hidden sword of the opponent should be held down with the spirit and at the same time the own body should be emptied, while slashing at the protruding part of the opponent’s body. When doing this, the opponent’s body along with his sword, will doubtlessly begin to move. Once this movement begins, it is easy to gain victory. This theory did not previously exist. One should strike at the protruding part to avoid stiffening the spirit. This should be carefully tried out.

20. Removing the Bowstring

Removing the bowstring is a method of releasing oneself from a stalemate. During combat a situation sometimes develops in which oneself and one’s opponent both pull at the tensioned spirit string between each other, and thereby create a stalemate. In such a case, the string should be removed with the body, the sword, the legs or the spirit as quickly as possible. The string is best removed by doing something unexpected to the opponent. This should be tried out.

21. The Small Comb

The spirit of the small comb dissolves confusions. If the opponent confuses the battle-situation in any way, one should hold a small comb in one’s spirit and - depending on their form - untangle the confused parts one after the other and put them in order again. Viewed from the outside, pulling the spirit string and confusing are similar, but the former stems from a strong spirit and the latter from a weak one. This should be carefully considered.

22. The Perception of the Gap in the Rhythms

Whether fast or slow, the opponent always moves in a particular rhythm in every given situation. The perception of the gap in these rhythms means to see through the gap in the opponent’s rhythm or to cause it and then to use one’s own effective rhythm to attack him. An opponent who has a slow spirit should at certain proximity, without moving the own body, without hinting him the beginning of the swordstroke, with a free bearing of the void be struck quickly. This rhythm is called Ip-pyoshi. An impatient opponent should be hinted through one’s own body that one is about to attack him, and when he responds by attacking, he should be struck after his movement. This rhythm is called Ni-no-koshi. Munen-muso means: always holding the body prepared to strike, but at the same time holding back the spirit and the sword, and as soon as one sees an opening in the spirit of the opponent, to strike him strongly with a free bearing of the void. This rhythm is called Munen-muso. There is also a rhythm called Okure-byoshi. This rhythm means that, when the opponent tries to deflect or parry the sword swung at him, to make his intention fail with quite a slow movement and, while holding the spirit back inside, to take advantage of the resulting gap in his rhythm to strike him. This should be carefully practiced.

23. Holding Down the Pillow

Holding down the pillow is the teaching of perceiving the sign of the opponent's intention to strike and thereby suppressing the head of his strike, that is to say before the movement begins, with a free bearing of the void, reducing it to nothing. One should suppress the head with the spirit, with the body and with the sword. When one perceives the sign, it is opportune to strike the opponent, to invade the opponent's distance, to intercept the opponent's attack and to seize the initiative. This teaching applies to all fighting situations. One should practice this thoroughly.

24. The Perception of the Situation

The perception of the situation teaches that the actual situation, namely the given condition of the location as well as the condition of the opponent, whether he is high or low, deep or shallow, strong or weak, should be perceived with perfect clarity. The teaching of the thread and yardstick should be applied continuously during the fight, so that one recognizes the actual situation at any given time. When the situation is accurately perceived, one can always achieve victory no matter whether to the front or to the rear. This should be carefully tested.

25. Looking Inside the Opponent

One should look inside the opponent and feel the weaknesses of his spirit. He can retreat inside a house, fight against a large number of opponents, or confront an expert of the martial arts. As long as one does not see through the weaknesses of the opponent's spirit, one may mistake a weak opponent for a strong one, an inexperienced opponent for an expert, or insignificant small fry for a dangerous enemy. The opponent should be thoroughly studied from the inside.

26. Holding Back and Letting Go the Spirit

Holding back the spirit ("Zan-shin") and letting go the spirit ("Ho-shin") should be used appropriately according to the existing objective as well as the temporal circumstances. Whilst holding the sword, one should usually let go the outer spirit ("I-no-kokoro") and hold back the inner spirit ("Shin-no-kokoro"). But in the moment when one strikes the opponent in earnest, one should let go the inner spirit and hold back inside the outer spirit. The uses of this holding back or letting go the spirit differ greatly depending on the situation. This should be carefully considered.

27. The Impact as an Opportunity

When the opponent attacks with his sword at close distance, it is possible to knock it away with the own sword, to parry or to slash. The impact as opportunity means that this knocking away, parrying or slashing should be seen as an opportunity for a subsequent strike. Precisely because all countermeasures are - before all things - done in order to strike the opponent, whether one dominates the striking sword of the opponent from above, whether one evades it, or whether one makes it ineffective with a stroke of one's own sword - the body, the spirit, and the sword should always be prepared and positioned to strike. This should be carefully considered.

28. Sticking with a Body of Glue and Lacquer

Sticking with a body of glue and lacquer is a metaphorical instruction for fighting at close quarters. When one is struggling with the opponent in close quarters, one should stick to the opponent with one's legs, hips and face as if one had a body of glue and lacquer so that no room develops between oneself and the opponent. If there is space somewhere between both bodies, the opponent can use various techniques. The rhythm of sticking to the opponent is identical to that of holding down the pillow, namely it is to be carried out with a calm spirit.

29. The Body of an Autumn Monkey

The teaching of the body of an autumn monkey says: when trying to stick to the body of the opponent, one should act like having no arms. Without this mental attitude, the body easily separates from that of the opponent so that one necessarily has to stretch both arms. Therefore, when stretching the arms, the body will separate from the opponent. While sticking, one can sometimes use the upper left arm to attack. However, one should under no circumstances use the forearm. The rhythm of this sticking-to-the-opponent is the same as that of the previous article.

30. Comparing Heights

Comparing heights is the teaching that, when sticking to the body of the opponent, one should do this as if wrestling for size, that is to say one should expand the body as mightily as possible, so that one appears larger than the opponent at all times. The rhythm of this clinging to the opponent's body is again identical with that of the previous article.

31. The Teaching of the Folding Door

Viewing the body as a folding door is a basic principle of close-quarters combat. When sticking to the opponents body, one should make the body wider and straight and therewith cover the sword and the body of the opponent, so that there is no room between the own body and the body of the opponent. However, as soon as one hits the opponent with a body-blow, the own body should be made thin and straight and hit the opponent strongly in the chest with one's shoulder, so that he is thrown to the ground.

32. The Teaching of the General and Soldier

The general and soldier is a teaching according to which one should always see oneself as general and the opponent as one's follower. However, this teaching is only then completely understandable in its entire meaning when one has experienced the complete logic of the martial arts through training. At all events one should, seeing oneself as a general and the opponent as one's follower, not allow the opponent to do anything he wishes. One should only let the opponent swing his sword according to one's will, confuse him in any way one desires, and not let him forge any schemes. This is very important.

33. The Position of Non-Position

The position of non-position applies to the mental attitude when holding the sword. Though there are set positions in my school, one's sword and body would easily stagnate when consciously trying to assume a particular position. Therefore one should free the spirit from set positions and always hold the sword in the way in which the opponent can be cut most effectively in the existing surroundings and conditions. In the Jodan position there are three variations, and the Chudan and Gedan positions also have three different spirits. The same is true for the Hidariwaki and Migiwaki positions. Simply put, the sword should always be held with the spirit of non-position. This should be carefully considered.

34. The Body of a Rock

The body of a rock should, through uninterrupted training, by and with an unwavering, strong and large spirit be trained. A body that has realised the entire truth of the martial arts is boundlessly powerful, so that all living things voluntarily try to evade him. Even the soulless grass and trees naturally avoid spreading out their roots. Even the rain and the wind have the same tendency in his presence. One should strive eagerly after this body.

35. The Perception of the Inevitable Moment

The perception of the inevitable moment teaches that, in each respective combat situation, one should perceive with certainty the resulting fateful moment in which one is too early or too late to do something, or in which one can escape from something or not. Regarding the moment for striking with the sword, there is an esoteric principle in my school called Jiki¹ -tsu². The details of this will be handed down verbally.

36. The Attainable Void

The attainable void which can be reached by realisation of the entire truth is very difficult to convey in writing. It is the ultimate condition after which one should strive tirelessly through everyday training.

Epilogue

In the previous 35 articles I have described to a large extent the essence of my martial arts, from the application of the individual techniques to the spiritual attitude. The omitted small details are all very similar to the above mentioned teachings. I have consciously not put down on paper more about the sword techniques, which I try out myself in the school as well as the instructions that can only be verbally transmitted during training. If you have questions, I would be happy to answer them in person.

On the lucky day in February, 18th year of Kanei
Shinmen Musashi Genshin

¹ Jiki = „direct, straight, honest, rapidly, immediately, communication, quite soon“

² Tsu = „communication, without any stagnation, capacity for supernatural energy, supernatural, to be informed“