

Way of Peace

Black Belt Checks in with One of Ninjutsu's Premier American Masters

Interview by Josh Sager. Black Belt Magazine, reprinted with permission.

Jack Hoban is one of the founding fathers of American ninjutsu. He rode the wave of ninja-mania that struck during the 1980s, and he weathered the drought that moved in when the art's popularity plunged. Other fads have come and gone, but Hoban is still there, steadfast in his belief in his art and the teachings of Masaaki Hatsumi, its 34th-generation grandmaster. In this exclusive Black Belt interview, Hoban brings his legions of followers around the world up to date on the philosophical developments in his interpretation of the esoteric fighting art. - Editor

Black Belt: Can you briefly describe your involvement with ninjutsu and your teacher, Masaaki Hatsumi?

Jack Hoban: I studied some karate and escrima and was a Captain in the U.S. Marines. I also boxed a little. I read about Stephen K. Hayes and went to some of his training [camps], including the Ninja Festival. It was Stephen who was my first sempai (senior) and who introduced me to Hatsumi Sensei in 1981 or 1982.

BB: What was your initial impression of Hatsumi?

Hoban: Well, he was very warm and friendly - very different from the image of a stern Asian martial arts master. His skills were absolutely awesome, and his approach to martial arts was apples to the oranges I had previously studied. The breadth of his knowledge was amazing, too. He talked about all kinds of things - from swordsmanship to meteorology, from esoteric Buddhism to rope tying, from exotic healing to how to kill a horse quietly. And he had this underlying hint of mystery - like a small waft of smoke that would appear at times. Kind of like a Ninja, I guess (laughs).

Masaaki Hatsumi Speaks Out

It's been almost 20 years since Masaaki Hatsumi first came to the United States to teach ninjutsu. During those decades, a plethora of changes have taken place.

"At the time I first came, there was a ninja boom," he says. "Everybody thought that ninjutsu was something mysterious, something bad. And I have gradually corrected this. Ninjutsu is really a genuine martial art. That's the one reason I changed the name from ninpo taijutsu to budo taijutsu. They are one in the same."

Hatsumi insists the American practitioners of Bujinkan budo taijutsu have represented the art well. "Jack Hoban is a perfect example," he says. "He is far better at expressing the art in an American way than I am. Jack will speak from his heart about the art - in an American way. In him you have the genuine article who will transmit to you my teachings. So even when I am back in Japan, you can continue to ask Jack."

BB: Has your impression changed much since then?

Hoban: Only in that I see him more as a human being now. In the beginning he was more like a character from my imagination. I can say this: In all the time I've known him, he has never once done anything but support and help me in an extremely straightforward manner. I have heard other people say different things, but that has been my experience.

BB: How would you describe your relationship with Hatsumi?

Hoban: I think of him as a mentor and father figure. Nowadays I see him maybe four times a year. He is also kind enough to write me letters pretty regularly; my wife can translate. As we both get older, I am starting to feel that I understand him better and am embarrassed at the trouble I have caused him over the years by being impatient, arrogant, and immature. I hope to be able to repay his kindness in future years by being more pleasant to associate with and less demanding of his time and energy - and his patience. I don't know what he would say, but all in all, the relationship has been a wonderful one from my point of view. When I first met him, there were not so many people training so I really got a lot of time alone with him. That is

impossible now for most new members of the Bujinkan, so I was lucky. Good timing.

BB: You talk a lot about the Life Values system of Dr. Robert L. Humphrey. What is your relationship to him?

Hoban: Dr. Humphrey was another father figure of mine. His impact on my life cannot be understated. I often say that I was such a bad boy that I needed three fathers – my real father, Dr. Hatsumi and Dr. Humphrey – in order to grow up into a man. I first encountered Professor Robert L. Humphrey in 1981 as a graduate student in San Diego, California. I was working on a master's degree in Business Administration, and he was one of my teachers. The things that he said and the stories he told touched me in a way that has changed me forever. I was stunned to hear him explain, clearly and matter-of-factly, the meaning of life. He called his theory variously "The Life Value," or Life Values, Dual Life Value or Balanced Life Value. I sometimes think of them, now, simply as "Living Values." His theories and teaching methods have been used successfully to stop violence and promote cross-cultural harmony worldwide.

BB: What is his background?

Hoban: Robert Humphrey was a child of the Great Depression. Those were the days when life's lessons were learned in the school of hard knocks. He earned money as a semi-professional boxer. He rode freight trains, worked in the Citizens Conservation Corps and finally joined the Merchant Marines. Those experiences got him through his youth worldly-wise but morally sound. He transferred to the U.S. Marines during World War II. There, as a rifle-platoon leader on Iwo Jima, he passed the ultimate course in life-and-death values. Near the war's end, a gunshot-wound ended his hopes for a professional boxing career. He was discharged from the Marines, and for 12 years he passed through eight colleges and universities "searching, just searching." He was looking for answers to that eternal question of "why." Why had the Depression that devastated his peaceful little hometown? Why that insanity on Iwo Jima that killed most of his Marine friends? He took a Harvard Law degree and settled into teaching Economics at MIT. Then came the Cold War with the predictions that the Communists would win. He went back overseas to see if his global experiences would guide him in solving America's self-defeating Ugly Americanism. He taught culture-transcendent, win-the-people values in the most vital overseas areas – those surrounding the Communist bloc. The approach did overcome the Ugly Americanism. It did win back the foreign peoples. And it kept the lid on sabotage and violence in his assigned areas. It opened up a new social-scientific pathway to human conflict-resolution.

On Formlessness

We train as ninja, yet as human beings we are susceptible to cultural biases like everyone else. Remember that the goal of our training is to live. Many of us train in the martial arts up to a certain level of proficiency. We become comfortable there. We "fall in love" with a martial arts style of our own creation. Even though we may train for many years after that point, we never really progress. Style, like culture, is not of importance in matters of life and death. We will not progress unless we abandon our style for mu (formlessness). One might rationalize that it is foolish and dangerous to give up and tried-and-true method - our "style" - for formlessness. But the fact is that the thing that is most likely to kill you is anything except the thing you have trained for. --Jack Hoban

BB: How have you integrated Humphrey's Life Values with Hatsumi's Bujinkan ninjutsu?

Hoban: I teach martial arts not to take a life, but to save a life. So for me, there is no conflict. I also think of the Warrior Creed of Dr. Humphrey when I think of how to represent myself as a member of the Bujinkan. The Warrior Creed is:

Wherever I go,
everyone is a little bit safer because I am there.

Wherever I am,
anyone in need has a friend.

Whenever I return home,
everyone is happy I am there.

By the way, Hatsumi Sensei has awarded Dr. Humphrey an Honorary 10th dan in the Bujinkan.

BB: Does Hatsumi teach the same ideals as Humphrey did?

Hoban: That's an interesting question. I guess for me, they are very confluent. What Dr. Humphrey says in words, Hatsumi Sensei seems to mirror in his actions. I once asked Dr. Hatsumi what was the purpose of martial arts. He replied, simply, "To live." And that, in essence, is the simple but deep meaning of Dr. Humphrey's Life Values theory – at least in my interpretation of it.

BB: You taught a seminar in Slovenia during the height of the Kosovo conflict. What was the experience like?

Hoban: Naturally I was concerned because the bombing of Serbia was beginning just as we were training. It was a little tense, watching the bombers flying over our heads every day. But the experience was great. We proved that the Buyû (martial arts friends) feeling of the Bujinkan and the stories of Dr. Humphrey are a good way to make peace. We had members from Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia, Serbia, and Austria all together. And in our hearts, I think that we all felt equal as human beings. It's very hard to hate someone when you train together with the Bujinkan feeling.

BB: Is the training in the United States different from the training in other parts of the world?

Hoban: Basically not, except for the minor differences in culture. The training is the training. It's more fundamental than culture. That is why we could use it in The Balkans to overcome the cross-cultural differences.

BB: What is the most important aspect of martial arts training?

Hoban: Of course the most important aspect of the Bujinkan and of martial arts is to "keep going." Keep going in your quest to be a good martial artist, a good person, and a person dedicated to peace.

BB: What has helped you to keep going?

Hoban: Well, a sense of curiosity is one thing. I am constantly entertained by the thought of what Hatsumi will come up with next. He once told me that in order to be good at martial arts you have to practice three times as much as a normal person, spend three times as much on your training as a normal person would, and be three times as stupid as a normal person. Stamina, money, mule-ishness. I have at least two of those qualities. (laughs) But seriously, the Warrior Creed keeps me going – knowing that I can be one of "those people" who can be counted on when the chips are down. That's a good feeling. And I have a lot of Buyû, too, who are in the same boat as me. We move forward together, but alone. We inspire each other to keep going!

BB: Nowadays, what do you work on in your personal training?

Hoban: Whatever I think of to train on, I do. It is like being trained by Hatsumi, even when he is not there. It just comes to me and I go on. I just get out on the mat, close my eyes, and wait for the inspiration to come. It always does. And that's the most important thing: to keep going. People often ask me: "What should I be working on." I say, "Just keep going."

BB: Do you think anything is missing from the martial arts today?

Hoban: No, I think martial arts is just as it should be. They are a vocation that adapts itself for the times. The martial arts of today reflect the times. I think careful reflection on the Warrior Creed might help people focus more on the positive aspects of the warrior calling, but other than that, things are the way they are because that's the way they are. And that is fine.