

# Ninja Bôjutsu

## By Josh Sager

*The attack comes much sooner than expected. A Samurai from the enemy clan is charging from your left, katana raised for a men uchi head strike. Without thinking you step to the side and raise your yari (spear), hoping to block the fatal attack and counter with a strike of your own. Your weapons crash together in a violent impact, knocking you both backward and off balance. Recovering first you see an opening in your opponent's defenses and thrust hard! You have performed this technique flawlessly many times during the four-day battle, and this time is no exception.*

*Or so you thought...*

*Something is different this time; something is wrong! He is rushing in for another attack! But that's not possible – your technique was perfect! The countless hours of practice have paid off every time in the past, why not now? How could he still be alive?*

*You look down and realize that your yari is missing its blade. There is no time to draw your sword; retreat is out of the question. With no other foreseeable options available you re-grip the shaft of your yari and prepare for the second attack, determined to walk away victorious once again!*

Stick fighting dates back to the earliest forms of combat, from the time when man first picked up a stick to hunt for food. It has been used in virtually every civilization and period of history, from the prehistoric hunter-gatherers to the tribes of the Amazon Rainforest to Native American scouts and the Filipino warriors of Cebu. Of the different styles and varieties of stick weapons found in these cultures, the *rokushakubô* (six-foot staff) has made perhaps the most indelible mark on the martial arts community. It has become the staple in many different styles, and continues to be a preferred weapon of competitors on the tournament circuit.

Many martial arts instructors believe that in order to master weapons such as the *yari* (spear), *bisentô* (large halberd), *naginata* (halberd), *hanbô* (three-foot staff) and *jô* (four-foot staff) you first must become proficient in *bôjutsu*. As with all weapons you should have a solid foundation in the basics before moving on to advanced techniques.

### **The Basics**

Because there is a natural progression in learning any weapon, the *bô kamae* (postures) are a great starting point. In the beginning it is important to practice the *kamae* individually, concentrating on balance and feeling comfortable while holding a *bô*. Keep your back straight, and your feet, knees and hips in alignment with one another.

Try to think of *kamae* as transitional “reference points,” and not as static fighting positions. In some instances they are used to create false openings for an opponent's attack; in other cases these same *kamae* prevent openings in your defenses so your opponent cannot attack. Each of the *kamae* can express a certain physical and mental “attitude” or “posture,” from which your defense can develop and evolve.

## **Kamae**

The following represent some of the *kamae* used in *ninja bôjutsu*.

### **Seigan No Kamae (“Taking the Eyes Posture”)**

*Seigan No Kamae* is a defensive posture. Make sure that the front tip of the *bô* is pointed directly at your opponent’s eyes, so they cannot determine its length.

### **Ichimonji No Kamae (“First Posture”)**

Make sure that the *bô* is held evenly and balanced between both hands. Stand with your feet shoulder-width apart.

### **Hira Ichimonji No Kamae (“First Flat-Line Posture”)**

Similar to *Ichimonji No Kamae*, but face sideways towards your opponent.

### **Gedan No Kamae (“Lower Posture”)**

Your body is positioned similar to *Seigan No Kamae* but in this posture the *bô* is behind you, again making it difficult for your opponent to determine its length. Your hip is used as a fulcrum when striking from this posture.

### **Chûdan No Kamae (“Middle Posture”)**

Similar to *Seigan No Kamae*. Place the *bô* under your rear armpit and parallel to the ground.

### **Hassô No Kamae (“Eight Apparitions Posture”)**

Stand with your feet together in an L-shape. Hold the *bô* vertically at your side, gripping it close to the bottom.

When you are comfortable with the *kamae* individually, you then can practice moving from one *kamae* to another. Concentrate on fluidity of movement, body alignment and posture. The goal is to use the *bô* as a natural extension of your body. If you are not comfortable holding or moving with a weapon then you will have a hard time defending yourself or others against a threat. Remember to hold the *bô* lightly in your hands. If your grip is too tight when an opponent hits your *bô* you are likely to lose your *kamae*. By keeping the *bô* light in your hands you won’t lose your *kamae*, even if your weapon is hit hard.

There are also a variety of strikes used with the *rokushakubô* in *ninjutsu*. When striking, tighten your grip on the *bô* at the moment of impact, and then loosen your grip immediately following the strike. A few of the basic strikes are:

- *ashi barai* – a sweeping strike to the leg.
- *men uchi* – a strike to the temple.
- *hane age uchi* – an upward strike, usually to the groin or under the chin.
- *do uchi* – a sideways strike to the torso.

- *tento uchi* – a strike to the top of the head.

### Applying What You Know

Once you have an understanding of the *kamae* and strikes, you can integrate them with movement forms. The goal at this point is to work on body integration to create the proper distance, timing, and angles. These principles are essential to understanding *ninjutsu*, with and without the use of weapons.

**Distance:** Remember that the *bô* is six feet long! Use its length, along with your body movement, to control the distance between you and your opponent. Being too close or too far won't put you in a good position to defend yourself.

**Timing:** Action is always faster than reaction, so it is important that you control when your opponent will attack. This can be achieved by adjusting the rate of speed at which you move to receive the threat. If you move too soon the opponent will readjust. If you move too late you'll be hit!

**Angles:** The use of proper angling, combined with good distance and timing, allows you to disrupt the opponent's balance and *kamae*, essentially putting his body in a position so he can't attack or defend.

When all of these principles are combined effectively with the *kamae* and strikes, you will begin to develop the use of *kyojitsu* – the “illusion” that your opponent can successfully attack you when in reality, he is either too far away or off balance to correctly engage. This gives you a strategic advantage.

Here are two examples of movement forms with the *bô*, taken from the *Bujinkan* system of *ninjutsu*:

#### ***Bô Furi Gata* (“*Bô Spinning Pattern*”)**

- Start in *Hira Ichimonji No Kamae*.
- Step back with your front foot into *Hassô No Kamae*.
- Step forward into a form of *Chûdan No Kamae* and strike from below.
- Continue the *bô*'s rotation to the other side of your body and repeat.

Once you are proficient in this spinning pattern you should be able to move in any direction while varying the speed of the *bô*'s rotation.

#### ***Goho* (“*Five Ways*”)**

- Begin with *Bô Furi Gata*.
- With your right leg forward strike *ashi barai* to opponent's front leg.
- Without stepping forward, strike *men uchi* to opponent's head.
- Step forward with the left foot and strike *ashi barai* to opponent's leg.
- Without moving the feet perform an overhead *ashi barai* to opponent's other leg.
- Draw back and rotate the *bô* to perform an overhead *ashi barai*.

**Where Do We Go From Here?**

This article has only touched upon the intricacies of using a *rokushakubô*. You should have a better understanding of how to work with this popular weapon, but by no means should your work stop here! The *bô* (or any weapon for that matter) takes countless hours of practice to achieve proficiency. The ultimate goal in weapons training is to have the weapon become a natural extension of your body. It shouldn't feel like you are "using a weapon." Let the weapon become a part of your movement. If you become preoccupied with "having to use the weapon" then you won't be able to adapt to a confrontation's natural flow.

And as you train, don't forget to follow the Golden Rule of martial arts – "Keep Going!"