

Practical hints and guidance for sword owners

Pulling muscles, Suburi and why you need a non-sharp sword

As with anything strenuous, especially things that we're not used to, there is at least some risk of injury. I found this out on two occasions whilst training although it took the second occasion a sprain, and a 4 month hiatus to convince me to be more careful and look into exactly what I needed to do in order to avoid future problems.

The first time this happened, I over extended during Gyaku Kesa Giri. The second time was me being stubborn and overdoing it one weekend, presumably with poor form. Both times have left me wondering how I could avoid this sort of pain in the future and I believe that one of the ways that can be achieved is pure simple repetition.

The real problem is that when I was practicing, I was swinging the sword too hard and thinking too much about the target and its position. I wasn't thinking about the angle of the sword, or the position of my hands or how my body was turned anywhere near as much as I should have been. With this in mind, I found that if I simply removed the target and practiced Suburi, my cutting improved. Unfortunately as you can guess, when I replaced the target my form deteriorated once more.

I decided that the trick lay in practicing more without targets than with them. 'Maybe I should be concentrating on my technique more, before I even considered placing targets', I thought. that is to say, basically, much more Suburi. This led me to a small revelation that I never thought I'd have when I first started cutting.. Maybe a training sword really is a good idea.

There are many different types of non sharp training equipment you can easily acquire. There are bokken, which are made out of hardwood and shaped like katana. These tend to be much lighter than katana and are generally considered to be an excellent choice for this sort of practice. There are also larger variants of the bokken called suburito. These come in a variety of shapes such as boat oars or heavy bats and can weigh as much as or much more than a katana. Finally, there are iaito, like katana but made from an alloy and unsharpened. These are best for practicing kata with noto and nukitsuke. They are also much more expensive which is an honest consideration for most people.

I have been told many times that in order to cut effectively, you don't actually need to be particularly strong and that the body is where the power for your cuts comes from. However true this is, I still feel that the idea that you don't need any real muscle is overstated. This whole area of trying to perfect the cutting technique as well as increase strength, especially in the wrists and forearms is where Suburi really shines. By repetition of the cutting motion with a non sharp weapon such as bokken or iaito, we can concentrate purely on the technique. You don't need anything overly heavy because rather than doing a few swings, the idea is to build up to fifty, or a hundred swings. As long as we make sure our technique is good for each one, we will be building the correct motor memory and when we come to pick up a live blade again, the strength and confidence will immediately show in our cutting technique.

Many people doing FSC or backyard tameshigiri, do dry cutting which is kind of the same thing. However, the emphasis I want to place on this particular style of practice is that of far greater repetition, less attention given to the strength of the cut and more to how the cut is executed. It has been said to not be the most interesting practice but this shouldn't matter. You can achieve the same sort of focus that you can during meditation, when you are running or even when you folding hishigami. True, maybe it's not exciting but you should know that every swing you make

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affords you the extra strength you need to be able to move the sword more effectively and reduces the chances of injury.

Suburi is like any form of exercise so this has to be factored in when you start. Do not set unrealistic goals, starting at a number you feel might be too easy is far better than starting with 80 repetitions and giving up after day 2. Remember, you can always increase the number when you feel comfortable doing so.

Concentrating on form and going slowly to start with is of paramount importance. By building the appropriate muscle memory you will get more accustomed to the movements and be able to gradually speed up your cuts without your technique faltering. This slower movement as well as correct Te No Uchi, or grip, will allow you to maintain good control over the sword and its start and stopping positions. Making sure you've got this down now will save you a lot of hassle when you're cutting actual targets.

Alternating the cuts you do from one day to the next will help you prevent any injury caused by the repetitive motions but it will also curb the boredom that can set in if you are doing the same thing every day. Start with straight downward cuts and maybe the next day, diagonal cuts. I won't mention any specifics on how to best perform the cuts that you'll be practicing. This is best left to you or your teacher. Whether you're learning in a school or you're self-taught, you will know what you need to practice. Consistency is the crucial element in your technique no matter how you are cutting.

Finally, I think it is undesirable to be focused on the end results of your practice, whilst you are practicing as this is distracting you from your primary goal. At least for the duration of your session, focus on the form, forget why you are doing it and just do it. Suburi is at least for me, an absolute essential in the long road to being a capable swordsman.

Unique solution ID: #1004

Author: Shad - The Samurai Workshop

Last update: 2014-03-15 19:46