

FAQ: A Gaijin's Guide to Bujinkan Budo Taijutsu

This article is the second in our "Gaijin Guide" series, as before it is written in a FAQ (Frequently Asked Questions) format. The goal is to answer some common questions about the Bujinkan and dispel (some) of the myths surrounding Budo Taijutsu. The Bujinkan is an international, cross-culture organization, many of the art's practitioners differ in beliefs and specific practices. With this in mind we will attempt to give an accurate picture of Bujinkan Budo Taijutsu.

About the Author

My name is Brian Fine. I am NOT a *master* martial artist. I have NOT been training for decades. I am NOT a famous scholar or sociologist. I am a martial artist. I've been training since 2002, 1 year in another art and the last 5 in Bujinkan Budo Taijutsu. I don't consider myself exceptionally "good" at my art, more average actually. I hold the position of "Dojo Cho" or director of the school, my primary responsibility is assisting new and prospective students with our martial art. As a result of my experiences with people just beginning a martial art, I'm compiling this article based on the questions I've been asked, and the people I've met. Any and all mistakes are my own.

The Bujinkan

What is the Bujinkan?

The Bujinkan is the organization created by Soke Hatsumi Masaaki to teach the arts of Budo Taijutsu. It is considered the last legitimate source of Ninpo or Ninjutsu training in the world. The kanji for Bujinkan translates to "Hall of the divine warrior." In the Bujinkan we strive to become divine warriors.

Who is this Hatsumi guy?

Dr. Hatsumi Masaaki is the Soke (pronounced So Kay) of the Bujinkan. There are many better places to find information on Soke Hatsumi, so I won't get into it too much here. Suffice to say he is the head of the Bujinkan, Budo Taijutsu is his art, and he is easily the most skilled practitioner of this art alive.

What is Budo Taijutsu?

Budo Taijutsu is the name for the 9 martial traditions (called ryuha) practiced by the Bujinkan. The (rough) translation of Budo is "martial way" or "martial art" and Taijutsu is (roughly) "practical body movement art." So...Budo Taijutsu could be translated as "Whole body martial way"...well you get the idea.

9 traditions? What does that mean?

Japanese martial art styles are called ryuha. Budo Taijutsu is made up of 9 ryu: 6 of samurai origin (called koryu) and 3 of ninja origin (called ninpo). These styles have many similarities, and their particulars are not usually studied until after achieving a black belt ranking.

How does ranking work in the Bujinkan?

Soke Hatsumi tells us that rank means nothing. In the Bujinkan rank comes in time, it's a side-effect of gaining ability, not a goal to be achieved (hope that makes sense). With rank comes greater responsibility.

The Ranking system looks like this:

10th kyu – white belt

9th-1st kyu – green belt

Shodan – black belt

While it varies greatly between instructors, it generally takes 2½ - 3½ years to get to black belt. Shodan (1st degree black belt) can also be called Shoden which means “beginner.” We often say that a black belt is when someone actually becomes a student of Taijutsu.

There are 15 degrees of black belt. To give rank, an instructor is required to be at least 5th degree (this requires a trip to Japan for a test in front of Soke Hatsumi) and an annually renewed teaching license called ‘Shidoshi-kai’

How long do I have to train to master Taijutsu?

The pursuit of true Budo (martial arts) like Taijutsu never ends. I know several 15th Degree black belts; they all say that they know nothing. Even Soke Hatsumi says that he is still learning. You can train in this art for your entire life and never learn everything...you'll never be bored either.

Are there any organizations that make use of Taijutsu?

Of course. In the US, the FBI utilizes Taijutsu methods in their training. Other law-enforcement and military organizations include: Department of Defense and the USMC. I have met individual practitioners from various military Special Forces groups as well.

Do I have to go to Japan for “advanced” training?

Going to Japan is highly recommended for any serious student. However, it is not *required* until you're ready for the 5th degree black belt test. I've heard it said that 1 week of training in Japan is worth a year of training in the US.

Taijutsu Training

What does Taijutsu training consist of?

The first thing everyone learns is ukemi. Other skills covered include: kamae, sanchin/go gyo, Kihon Happo, and lots of weapons.

Ukemi?

Ukemi means “to receive.” These skills are used to receive techniques in training without getting injured. Students study methods of falling, rolling, and tumbling. The training also teaches students to relax when a technique is applied, and to be flexible in all aspects of movement.

What about that other stuff I can't pronounce?

- **Kamae** (pronounced: come I) are ‘stances’ or ‘postures’; they are studied as reference points for movement.
- **Go Gyo** and **Sanchin** are methods of striking in movement.
- **Kihon Happo** (pronounced: key hone hop-O) are a group of joint lock techniques, considered vital to the martial arts.

What weapons are used in training?

Taijutsu treats weapons as extensions of the body, not separate tools. With this mindset *anything* can be used effectively as a weapon. Here is a short list of weapons commonly encountered in Taijutsu training:

- Firearms – Handguns, long guns, and automatic weapons
- Jutte – a weapon used to capture swords and even break them
- Knives – all types
- Kusari Fundo – a length of chain with iron weights at each end
- Shiruken – these would be the infamous ‘ninja throwing stars’
- Sticks – all kinds, from a 3 inch kobutan to a 6 ft bo staff
- Sword – Primarily the Japanese katana. But also kodachi, tachi, nodachi, and shinobigatana

How long do I have to train before I can get weapons training?

Your first or second class, depending on your instructor's mood. Weapons' training is vital to the development of good Taijutsu. There is no high-level-only weapon. That said: some weapons will only be effective once a student's Taijutsu has evolved enough to make use of it.

Is Taijutsu appropriate for women?

Absolutely. First; because it requires no strength, and is extremely effective, it is perfect for self-defense. Second; from a physical aspect, women have wider hips and a different center of gravity. This makes it very simple for women to apply techniques that men find quite difficult to learn. Finally; most women have very little ego, because of this they pick up on the movements of the art very quickly, and become very skilled.

Can people with physical disabilities train?

Yes. The Bujinkan has several practitioners with disabilities, from blind to wheel-chair bound, and even some with missing limbs.

On one occasion I had the opportunity to train with one such gentleman: I had tire marks on my legs for weeks and could barely walk after his first technique...it's that effective.

Can Children receive training?

There are many Bujinkan instructors who will train kids. We ran a children's program for quite some time here in Pittsburgh. We found that the training can be great for them, they especially enjoy the ukemi.

Do I have to be in "good shape" to train?

Nope. The movements of Taijutsu do not require physical strength or speed to be effective. Anyone can do it.

Will Taijutsu training be good exercise?

The training builds stamina and flexibility. Beyond that, since it doesn't use strength, there is not much muscle development. Those interested in such things usually supplement their training with a work-out routine.

How often should I train?

That varies by individual schedule and availability of instruction. Generally 2 sessions per week is acceptable.

Are there any special requirements for training?

A student must follow the guidelines set down by Soke Hatsumi. They can be found here: <http://www.bujinkan.com/guidelines.htm>

In addition, most require an active Bujinkan membership, renewed annually from Japan. Typically an instructor will collect the necessary funds and purchase the memberships from Honbu Dojo in Japan.

Bujinkan History and Statistics

How many people are in the Bujinkan?

Hard to say...last census I heard was less than 10,000 practitioners worldwide. I'd venture a guess that more than half of that number are below Shodan (1st degree black belt.)

How old is Taijutsu?

While each of the schools has its own history and age, the oldest ryuha of the Bujinkan would be a little over 1000 years old. While the "youngest" would be just over 300 years old. The 9 traditions were unified under Soke Hatsumi's teacher Takamatsu Toshitsugu who passed on in 1972.

Where, When, and How were the techniques of Taijutsu developed?

For the sake of brevity, I'll keep this vague. Most of the ryuha were developed during Japan's Sengoku Jidai, or warring states period. From about 1250 to September 15th 1600, Japan was in a constant state of civil war. During this time, in a very Darwinian "only the strong survive", manner; the various techniques of the ryuha (and ninja methods) were refined and practiced.

Other Martial Arts & Misconceptions

I've seen several other -kan organizations, and a ton of other "ninja" groups. Are they related to the Bujinkan?

There is only one Bujinkan, One Hatsumi Sensei. If it doesn't say **Bujinkan** and report to be under **Soke Hatsumi**, it's not. Don't be fooled by marketing.

What other Martial Art is most like Taijutsu?

I've never understood the purpose of this question. All martial arts are related, the human body can only move in so many ways. I suppose that the ukemi is not dissimilar to that of Aikido or Judo, though the ukemi of Taijutsu has "smaller" movements.

Was Ninjutsu the first martial art?

No. As mentioned earlier, Ninjutsu methods were developed during the warring states period of Japan's history between 1250 and 1600. The first "formal" martial arts came to China from India around 600BC. Informally there are murals on a tomb in Egypt from about 2000BC depicting wrestling techniques.

This misconception comes from the various “ninja” strategies employed in most martial arts. True combat methods (shinken) are quite similar; there are only so many ways to poke out an eye...

Is the Ninjutsu of Taijutsu from the Iga or Koga ryu?

Iga ryu, the art passed through Momochi Sandayu and later served the Tokugawa Shogunate.

I've heard that Budo Taijutsu is not as effective as other martial arts for Pride/MMA.

That's right; the truth is that Taijutsu is illegal in any organized sport. That is not its purpose.

Then what is the purpose of Taijutsu?

To survive: each of the 9 traditions of Taijutsu has its own methods for this end; from utilizing pressure points (kosshijutsu), to escape and evasion (Ninjutsu), and many more. It can be summed up in the following quotes by Hatsumi Sensei: “Ninpo is a living art - an art for one's life, an art to live by, an art to preserve life and at the same time a fluid natural art.” and “The object is not to win or to become strong (once you do become strong and win, you realize just how vain an objective it was). Rather, it is to remain alive at the end.”