NINJAS

Ninja were not evil assassins who killed for fun. Ninja did engage in guerrilla warfare and espionage when necessary, but for the most part they were ordinary people who developed certain skills in order to survive the difficult times in feudal Japan's history.

"Ninjutsu" is usually translated as the "art of stealth." The Japanese character, "nin" (also translated as "shinobi") has many meanings, such as perseverance, endurance, and sufferance. The term Ninjutsu is most commonly used to refer to the specific methods and techniques used by the Ninja. Ninjutsu as a way of life didn't happen overnight. It developed over the course of many years. The name Ninjutsu itself didn't come about until several generations after the Ninja lifestyle began.

Ninjutsu was created in central Honshu (the largest of the Japanese islands) about eleven hundred years ago. It was developed by mountain-dwelling families in an area not unlike the American Appalachians, where the terrain is rugged and remote. Ninja families were great observers of nature. They felt a close connection to the Earth, similar to the Native Americans, and their lifestyle was one that lived according to the laws of Nature, not against it. Ninja were also very spiritual people, and their beliefs became an integral part of Ninjutsu.

One of the spiritual influences was Shinto, "the way of the kami." Kami is the Japanese word for "god" or "deity." It implies, however, a feeling for a sacred or charismatic force, rather than a being. The early Japanese regarded their whole world: the rivers, mountains, lakes, and trees, to have their own energy and spirit.

Another spiritual influence on the Ninja was Mikkyo. Mikkyo, for the Ninja, was not a religion as much as it was a method for enhancing personal power. These methods included the use of secret words and symbols to focus their energy and intentions toward specific goals.

It is generally accepted that the methods found in Ninjutsu originated outside of Japan. After the fall of the T'ang dynasty in China, many outcast warriors, philosophers, and military strategists escaped to Japan to avoid punishment by the new Chinese rulers. It is believed that Ninja families were exposed to many of these exiled people's sophisticated warrior strategies and philosophies over the centuries, helping to influence and shape what became Ninjutsu.

The Ninja were also very much influenced by a group of people called Shugenja, who roamed the same mountainous sections as the Ninja. The Shugendo method of spiritual self-discovery consisted of subjecting oneself to the harsh weather and terrain of the area in order to draw strength from the earth itself. They would walk through fire, stand beneath freezing waterfalls, and hang over the edges of cliffs in an effort to overcome fear and assume the powers of nature.

It would be incorrect to say that these three spiritual methods were the actual roots of Ninjutsu, but there is little doubt that they were a large influence. Ninjutsu was and is a separate philosophy.

The Ninja were not particularly warlike, yet they were constantly harassed by the ruling society of Japan. They were routinely subjected to unfair taxation and religious persecution. The Ninja eventually learned to act more and more efficiently in their own self-defense. They used their superior knowledge of the workings of nature, as well as specific military techniques passed down through the years, as weapons against the numerically superior government armies. They used any ruse, harbored any superstition, and employed any strategy to protect themselves. If necessary, they would use devious political manipulations to ensure peace.

There were as many as seventy or eighty Ninja clans operating in the Koga and Iga regions of Japan during the height of Ninja activity. Most of these Ninja were descendants of, or were themselves, displaced samurai. Therefore, they operated on the sidelines of the political schemes of the government. Sometimes a Ninja family would use its military or information-gathering resources to protect its members from becoming victims in a power play between competing samurai clans. Occasionally, a Ninja family would support one faction over another, if they felt it to be to their advantage.

As with any society, there were renegades who misused the training they received. Occasionally, "Ninja" would rent themselves out for espionage or assassination work. Unfortunately these outcasts have become the stereotype of the "evil ninja" that we see today in the media. They were, however, a minority. The average Ninja worked very much in conjunction with his family and community goals.

Ninja were not always primarily soldiers. Of course, certain Ninja operatives, or genin, were trained from childhood as warriors. But this training was usually precautionary. Genin Ninja knew that they might be called to help protect the community at some future time, but, they often spent most of their lives as farmers or tradespeople. Ninja intelligence gatherers sent to live in the strongholds of potential enemies were rarely required to act openly.

If an operative was called to action it was as a result of a carefully plotted, and usually desperate, plan. The genin would be contacted and assigned a mission by his chunin superior. The chunin, or middle man, was a "middle-man" between the jonin family leader and the operative. Jonin made all philosophical and long-range strategic decisions for the clan. Often, the identity of the jonin was kept secret from chunin and genin, alike. Of course certain historical periods required more secret activity than others.

Eventually this activity virtually died out altogether but the legacies, in some cases, remained.

**The Roots of Ninjutsu**

Although there has been an evolution of Ninjutsu as a life philosophy over the centuries, the fundamental principles have remained virtually unchanged. Togakure ryu Ninjutsu is more than 800 years old. Except for a relatively short period of notoriety prior to the reign of the Tokugawas, the art lived quietly in the hearts of just a few people. The Ninja were a separate society from the urban centered ruling class and the non-privileged classes which served them. Consider the gulf that must have existed between the new American government and the American Indians during the first 125 years following the signing of the Declaration of Independence. Although this is an incomplete and potentially misleading analogy, it may give you a better understanding on how Ninjutsu may have developed as a counterculture to the samurai-dominated Japanese society.

For hundreds of years Ninja families lived in the mountains, practicing their esoteric methods of approaching enlightenment through gaining an understanding of the basic laws of nature. History had taught them that they must be prepared to protect their family and their lifestyle. They perfected a system of martial arts that has earned them the reputation for being the most amazing warriors the world has ever known. It is this reputation that initially attracts most people.

The Ninja's reputation is put into a better perspective when some facts are brought to light. First, Ninja were not wizards or witches, of course, but ordinary men and women with a unique and misunderstood philosophical viewpoint. This philosophy became a very important part of their combat method. Hence, we refer to our art as Ninpo, the "po" suggesting "a higher order", or "encompassing philosophy." The samurai approach to combat was called bushido; it evolved from a general set of guidelines for the gentleman warrior into a formal discipline. The Ninja philosophy, though sharing many of the same values as the original samurai, evolved along a different cultural path.

The Ninja's sometimes devious tactics were seen by some as cowardly and disgusting.\* From the Ninja point of view, however, guerrilla warfare versus a numerically superior force was plain good sense. The Ninja were outnumbered, as a rule, so they had to use unusual methods if they ever hoped to survive. Nevertheless, victory was not always ensured. Japanese history books tell of instances of entire Ninja clans being destroyed.

Many times, however, the unusual methods did succeed. Without a working knowledge of the Ninja philosophy, their opponents were unable to figure out the Ninjutsu strategies. The Ninja only seemed like wizards.

Second, stories which have created the modern image of the Ninja as thoughtless criminals, were written after the fact by historians who were sympathetic to the samurai point of view. Since Ninja were not bushi (followers of the samurais' strict code of martial ethics) they were looked down upon as being uncivilized.

Third, the exaggerations of Ninja abilities were started by the Ninja themselves as a deterrent to outside interference. The demonstrated prowess of the Ninja as warriors, as well as the fact that they were such a closed and uncommunicative society, combined to create an opportunity for them to exaggerate their own skills and surround themselves with an eerie cloak of mystery. It is very easy to be frightened of something that is not understood. Thus, this frightening and supernatural mystique was born.\*\* If, however, it was merely the guerrilla tactics of the Ninja that were useful, the lore of the Ninja would not be of interest to the wide range of people who enjoy practicing Ninjutsu today. Far more than stealth or assassination techniques, Ninpo, or the essence of the Ninja's outlook, is a physical, emotional, and spiritual method of self-protection from the dangers that confront those on the warrior path to enlightenment.

\* During the American Revolution, British Red Coats, accustomed to marching to battle in orderly phalanxes, were decimated by camouflaged Green Mountain Boy guerrilla forces shooting from behind trees. The Red Coats must have felt the same way. America won the war, however, so our history books do not stress the British side of the story.

\*\* In Viet Nam, many American soldiers were "spooked" by the thick, black jungles of Southeast Asia, and an enemy that was everywhere, yet never there. Thus the Viet Cong were able to use guerrilla tactics with great success. The Ninja, over the course of many centuries, made an art out of preying on the irrational fears and superstitions of their enemies.