

A Life in the Day: Masaaki Hatsumi, grand master of the Togakure school of ninja
By Julian Ryall

Masaaki Hatsumi, 73, is the 34th grand master of the Togakure School of ninja, a training centre for Japanese warriors. He lives in Noda, north of Tokyo

I get up when I wake up, although I'm not much of an early riser, as I tend to work through the night. I don't know what time I'll go to bed or wake up on any day because, as a ninja, I make a habit of never having any sort of routine. It's bad to have a pattern to your life, because the three easiest times to kill a man are when he's on the toilet, when he's in bed or when he's eating. Nobody will catch me asleep or drowsy, as I have trained all my life to be alert. To let your guard down is tantamount to suicide.

But I always start the day with the same meal, mixing brown rice, tofu, red beans and mushrooms together. I'll also have a Japanese tea, blended specially for me. After breakfast I will do whatever I want to, but not what I did yesterday. Perhaps I will write for a magazine or work on one of my paintings. My oil paintings have been displayed in Manchester and Washington, DC. Or I might take a walk for two or three hours with my five borzoi dogs, the only exercise I do now.

I've been doing martial arts since I was a boy, although it is much deeper than the sort of physical training most people would understand. It's the way you live your life. I don't do push-ups now that I'm 73, though I don't have the body of a 73-year-old. It's not about technique it's about living. Anyone can take photographs, but only a few can be described as "art". And just as the world needs sculptors and artists, martial arts are equally important.

I never "became" a ninja. I was always it and it was always me. I had a tough childhood: my father used to drink and was violent, so I had to protect my family. I grew up in post-war Japan, when it was forbidden to practice any martial art other than judo, karate or kendo.

I became an instructor and in the 1960s I began teaching at US military bases. I quickly learnt that those disciplines don't work very well if your opponent is much bigger and stronger than you, so I began to study the ancient martial arts and became a student of Toshitsugu Takamatsu, the 33rd grand master of the Togakure School of ninja. When he died in 1972, I became the grand master.

I teach three times a week when I am in Japan, and I'm often invited to instruct or give lectures abroad. I've taught in 50 countries and have letters of thanks from five US presidents, Margaret Thatcher and Nelson Mandela. I have shared my skills with the SAS and SBS, as well as police and Special Forces around the world. Some people at my school will refuse to tell you their jobs if you ask them. One has just returned from six-month tours of Afghanistan and Iraq.

We train in the use of weapons: rope, swords, spears, chains everything is a weapon a piece of paper, anything that is nothing. I'm a walking arsenal. But being a ninja is more than just the physical. It's teaching awareness, the spiritual. You have to develop a real killing feeling, but with the ability not to kill. You have to have guts to kill, but also the physical and spiritual ability and strength not to kill, to give your opponent an out, an excuse to back off. In truth, I don't teach them anything. I show them how to lead their lives. It's up to them whether they grasp it or not.

What is a ninja? What is time? You are asking me to define something that by its very nature is not understood. Ninjutsu is based on deception, but it's a lot more than that. It's the use of weapons and the art of concealment, but there's a great deal more to it than throwing stars, and stealth.

One test for the higher-level students is for me to bring a sword down on the backs of their necks and they have to sense when to roll out of the way. I try to take them to the level when they act without knowing why, to transcend understanding.

There are many misconceptions surrounding ninja. Most started in the 14th century, and we were put in the same category as samurai, the salary men of the Middle Ages. A samurai was willing to die for his lord. But ninja were always independent of the government, and we had a philosophy that we had to live for the sake of our families. We believe we lead a blessed existence, but when it comes to our skills, it never hurts to have a bad reputation. It's part of our power, part of our mysticism.

At the end of the day, I'll open the fridge and grab whatever food is handy. Maybe I'll have a drink, but I'm not a big beer or sake drinker. Sometimes we have some of my students round for dinner, but I only give them short notice. I'll probably take the dogs for a walk again, but who knows if it will be at 5pm or 5am? I try to do some writing in the evenings, and I'm quite an accomplished dancer, or so they say. I like traditional Japanese dancing as well as ballroom dancing, as I'm pretty light on my feet.

When I feel it is time to go to bed, I will roll out my futon and go to sleep quickly, but I often dream of my master, Takamatsu, and the dreams are usually on the scary side, like he's attacking me in my sleep. On the first day I became his apprentice, I slept in his house, in the morning he asked me how many times he'd come into my room in the night and how many times I thought he could have killed me. For the next five years I never had a good night's sleep, as I was waiting for the slightest noise. In the end I had to ask him. He said he hadn't come in at all, but that I'd learnt a good lesson.