



Cutting with the Longsword



Michael Edelson
www.newyorklongsword.com

Cutting in the Liechtenauer Tradition

We should learn to cut so that we may learn to use our swords. Not the plastic ones, or the blunt ones, but the real ones.

Those of us who undertake the study of medieval combat have chosen a difficult path. On top of the challenge of reconstructing a martial art from static images and text, we have the fact that medieval fechtbücher were never intended to teach us the basics of combat, and thus a tremendous amount of what was once common knowledge has been lost forever.

"...so that every fencer who already understands fencing can understand this art." - Sigmund Ringeck Fechtbuch

"...so that anyone who knows how to fight can understand them." - Von Danzig Fechtbuch

The German masters did not tell us how to move, or how to strike, because in their time they did not need to. The fechtbücher were written for people who already knew the basics of fencing, including footwork, power generation and cutting mechanics.

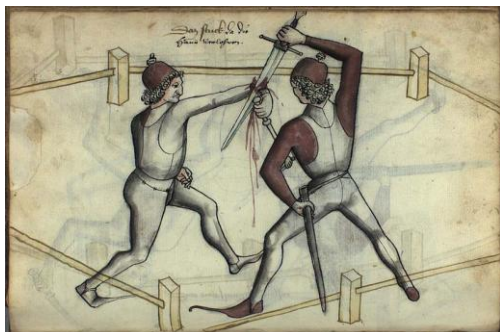
Unfortunately, that leaves us without much to go on, forcing us to interpolate and speculate as best we can. One option, and the one I have chosen, is to use arts with a living lineage and similar enough mechanics that we can borrow the material from them without the need to reinvent a perfectly good wheel.

Goals of Cutting

We do have some information, in the form of illustrations, on what we are expected to achieve with our cutting.



Decapitation, severing of limbs, splitting of the skull. These are difficult goals, and not easily achieved without sufficient training and an intuitive knowledge of how



swords cut.

These goals give us a glimpse into how the cutting mechanics of the art need to function in order to achieve what is required. We can dismiss the myth of the clumsy hacking strike because such a blow would be insufficient to do what is shown here in the illustrations. The swordsmen accomplishing these feats knew exactly how swords functioned and how to get the most out of them to no lesser extent than did the Japanese.

Why Cut?

There is no evidence that our medieval ancestors did any form of cutting as part of their training. While absence of evidence is not evidence of absence, we can assume that they did not do any form of cutting and still consider cutting a valuable part of our curriculum today. This is because whether they practiced cutting or not, they certainly knew how to cut. How they got that skill is largely irrelevant, because it most likely involved things we cannot do today without going to prison.

It may surprise you to learn that cutting tatami as part of a sword art curriculum is a relatively modern invention for the Japanese as well. During WWII, Japanese soldiers were returning from battle with bent swords. The instructors of the army school of swordsmanship decided that modern people were too far removed from the realities of the sword and instituted a cutting curriculum using bundles of soaked straw (which were later replaced with rolled tatami). Soon after, the number of bent swords was greatly diminished.

The most basic reason for why we should learn to cut is the same for us as it was for the Japanese—to learn to use our swords. Not the plastic ones, or the blunt ones, but the real ones. If you win every tournament you attend but cannot cut well, then what exactly are you doing when you strike someone with your sword simulator? If your training goal is sport fencing, then what you're doing is scoring points, and obviously doing it well! Bravo, keep up the good work. However, if the goal of your training is to learn to use a real sword in earnest and your free fencing serves as a training aid to accomplish this goal, then what you are doing is discovering a pretty serious flaw in your technique, a flaw that you need to correct.

One of the most important uses of cutting in a well rounded curriculum is to make sure that each and every one of your strikes, be it in free fencing or drills, are real strikes that can end a fight and not empty gestures.

Basic Cutting Theory

A sword is a sharp object designed for cutting and thrusting. To think that this weapon would have been used with a preference for blunt trauma makes little sense, thus we are forced to assume that swords were used with the intent to cause injury through cuts, slashes and thrusts, as indicated by the Drei Wunder, or three wounders, of the Liechtenauer tradition.

Cutting with the sword applies only to blossfechten—unarmored fighting—and not to harnessfechten.

Cutting is not an issue of power. Applying your upper body muscles can only hurt your ability to cut. Cutting is an issue of trajectory and velocity, which takes lower and central body power to achieve, and letting the sword do its job without getting in its way, which takes upper body fluidity and coordination. To know how to cut is to know just what it takes (force, trajectory, etc.) to cut the various things you will need to cut to destroy your opponent, so that you will apply only that which is needed, not too much, and certainly not too little.

All cuts are powered not by the arms but by the lower body, primarily the hips. When cutting, take care not to use your arms or shoulders. These should be relaxed at all times.

Grip

Proper grip is extremely important. First and foremost, whether you want to use a pistol grip or a hammer grip, your grip on the sword should be fluid and soft, as though you were holding an egg and didn't want to crack it.

When striking, you should tighten only the bottom two fingers. Start by tightening them only a little, and gradually tighten them more as your sword approaches its target. Fully tighten your grip (but do not tense your arms) as your sword impacts the target, then soften the grip immediately as it moves free.

The pinky is the most important finger for most strikes, the pointer finger the least important. The proper tightening and relaxing of your grip through the pinky and the finger above it is essential for knowing how to use a

sword.

In some strikes such as Zwerchhau and Krumpfhau, the thumb also plays a vital role. It is positioned on the blade and supports the sword when it is held at awkward angles. The tightening and relaxing of the thumb should work the same as that of the pinky.



Incorrect*



Correct**

* This photo shows a tense grip using all of the fingers.

** This photo shows the correct grip with only the bottom two fingers being just tight enough to hold the sword. The open top two fingers are shown for illustrative purposes only. You should not hold the sword with those fingers completely open, just loose.

Vom Tag

Vom Tag is the guard from which most strikes are launched. There is a variety of ways to hold Vom Tag that varies by master and time period.



Special thanks to Cory Winslow of MEMAG for providing the above compilation

Examine the image in the top row, fourth from the left, and the leftmost image in the second row. While it is not the intention of this class to debate the pros and cons of holding various forms of Vom Tag, there is an inescapable fact about holding Vom Tag in this manner (with your hands low). To cut from this position, you have to either strike low and not reach your full extension, or raise your hands as you cut, only to bring them down again. While the validity of this position cannot be disputed, we are never expressly told how to use this position to eliminate the above mentioned issues.

Therefore, when learning to cut, it is best to avoid holding the sword in this manner, or if you do, to raise the sword to a higher form of this guard prior to striking. Once you master striking mechanics and learn how a sword works, you can make your own decision about this position and your interpretation of it.

Timings

Timings describe the body mechanics of entering and striking. The Liechtenauer sources do not speak of timings, though it can be argued that they are sometimes hinted at when passages instruct us to follow the blow with a step in the opening verses (which actually implies striking and stepping at the same time), or to step (or spring) and *then* strike such as in the description of the Krumphau.

Discussing timings as a concept is largely academic and has little purpose on the training floor. There are no rules outside of context. This probably has something to do with the reason why timings are not explicitly spelled out in the manuscripts.

When learning to cut, start without a step. This is harder than cutting with a step and teaches you how to use your hips to power your strikes. Once you get good at this, learn to step first then cut. This will teach you measure while cementing your ability to cut from the hips. Skip these steps at your own peril. Only once you learn to use your hips properly should you practice other timings, such as cut and step at the same time or cut then step.

Edge Alignment, Tip Leading and Extension of the Arms

If you strike a target without your edge perfectly aligned with it, the cutting power of the edge will be pushed and pulled against the target at an angle oblique to the direction of motion. To understand why this is detrimental, take a wide but narrow piece of wood, such as a thin board, and place it on the ground. Align it so it is perpendicular to the ground, then push down hard. The board will want to sink into the ground. Whether it succeeds or fails depends on how soft the ground is and how hard you push.

Now take the board and tip it over slightly so that it is at an angle to the ground. Push it down again, but do so straight down from above as you did before. The board will want to fall over, as the direction you are pushing is not the direction along which the board is aligned with the ground. This is why proper edge alignment is important—without it your sword will just want to bend around the target.

An even extension of the arms is important not only because without it you cannot reach your full measure, but also because its absence will turn your sword away from its optimal trajectory. This is a concept best explained in the class itself, but suffice it to say that your arms should be fully and evenly extended for the most efficient strike possible.

Another important factor for proper cutting is to lead with the tip. A good cut is a balancing act between a hacking motion and a slashing motion. Leading with the tip provides the optimal balance for the longsword.

Center

Keeping your center means keeping your hands in the centerline of your body throughout the entire arc of your strike. For angled strikes such as the Zornhau, adjust the angle of your strike with the right hand while keeping the left perfectly centered. If you do not, your cut will be weak, and if an opponent who keeps his center cuts into your attack as described in the first play of the Zornhau, he will not need to use his point, because he will most likely cut through your attack and hit you.

Why Use Tatami?

Most people believe that tatami is used because its resistance to being cut is close to that of flesh and bone. This is only part of it. An important reason to use tatami is that it can tell us many things about our cut and what we did correctly and/or incorrectly. By looking at the surface of the mat after cutting, you can tell many things about what you did with your arms, your tip and your grip.

Tatami is also used because, like human flesh, it is remarkably easy to cut through with proper technique. If you are using a good, sharp, cut optimized sword, then getting through the mat should be very easy and almost taken for granted. Only with bad technique or with a bad sword (or a good sword not made for cutting) is tatami at all difficult to cut through. This ease of penetration makes it a good choice for a target medium, as it allows us to focus on technique and not worry about using too much force and over committing our strikes.

Tatami Forensics

One of the best things about tatami is that it can teach you what you're doing wrong. The following is a list of common faults to look for and learn from:



Scalloping: this happens when your edge alignment is not consistent throughout the cut and/or the cut is not straight through the target. Because tatami is easy to cut, this doesn't usually result in any damage to the sword. However, if you strike this way into a heavy target, such as a human torso, your sword will likely bend, and probably get stuck. This is one of the most common faults displayed by people just learning to cut, though usually in beginners this results in a failed cut. This could also be indicative of a bad grip (too tight, too loose, etc.).



Slanted Cuts: although some cuts (Krumphau, Zwerchhau, etc.) do this intentionally, normal cuts such as the Zornhau, Unterhau and Mittlehau (the only cuts you should be doing when starting out) should appear flat from the point of view of the cutter. A slant either towards you or away from you indicates one of several problems. For Mittlehau, it means your strike was not flat and would probably have gotten caught on the pelvic bones or ribs (the most common use of Mittlehau is a cut across the abdomen). For Zornhau and Unterhau, it means that one of your hands is either pushing or pulling, which results in a cut in which the hilt is leading (the tip should always lead the cut).



Pushing: if you cut clean, the severed fragment should fall directly to the side and down. The cleaner the cut, the longer the piece stays up before it falls. When the piece flies off violently, it can mean one of several flaws, but essentially it means the cut was not clean. The direction it flies determines what you did wrong and where most of your force was directed. Force directed anywhere but along the line of the cut means the force is wasted and worse, acts against you. Mistakes you can get away with when cutting tatami would not be so forgiving in combat.

How Can Cutting Help Us Reconstruct an Extinct Martial Art?

Our ancestors had a connection to the realities of the sword that we do not. The closest we can come to sword fighting today is free fencing, which is full of artifacts that render it almost useless as a simulation of combat. There is no intent to kill, there is no requirement that the point scoring touch inflict any degree of injury (quite the

opposite), there is no way to use realistic simulators without extensive protection that distorts movement.

This is why cutting, in conjunction with free fencing and drills, can be used to keep the art “honest.” The ultimate goal is to move the same way in cutting, free fencing and drills, and use each of the three to validate the others. Was that match winning touch an actual fight ending strike, or just a ineffectual bash? When you’ve thoroughly ingrained cutting into your curriculum and learned how to use it to validate your interpretations, you will be able to answer that question and make your free fencing that much more realistic.

Tips and Pitfalls to Avoid

- Don’t get discouraged if you receive negative feedback or harsh criticism. People will often speak of the shortcomings of cutting, how it is artificial, how mats don’t fight back, how cuts you use in cutting would get you killed in combat. These criticisms seem valid, but they show a lack of understanding of the purpose and use of cutting in the curriculum of a combat art. No one tells boxers to stop using speed bags because people’s heads don’t really bounce like that, or to stop using heavy bags because they don’t punch back. Cutting teaches a set of skills that is not meant to stand on its own, but to be used in conjunction with skills taught in other types of training, such as free fencing or drills.
- Be very careful. Sharp swords are deadly. They are designed and made to kill. Never forget that.
- Don’t rush. Avoid the temptation to start with small, half cuts from an approach with perfect timings. This is the road to discouragement and failure. Realize that cutting is a skill that has to be learned slowly. Start with simple cuts, even grossly unrealistic ones, until cutting through the mat is second nature. Then add realism and complexity in small doses. Baby steps.
- Use a good sword. A bad sword will distort your technique. Even if your school or club has to chip in to buy a “dojo cutter,” make sure that you have an effective cutting sword available. Remember the advice to use baby steps. Learn to cut with a sword that doesn’t get in your way, and you’ll be able to cut with any sword eventually. No matter how good your sword is, make sure it is sharp, or it won’t work correctly.
- Roll your mats tightly and soak them properly (at least 12 hours, 24 is better). Use rubber bands instead of cord.
- Every movement of the sword should be trained as a proper cut. Even short edge deflections or parries. You never know when a target will present itself.
- Don’t forget breathing. Inhale before your strike, exhale as you strike.
- Don’t use your arms or shoulders. All power comes from your hips.
- Practice cutting as much and as often as you can. It can be expensive, but also very rewarding.
- Do not try to turn cutting practice into a simulation of combat. It isn’t, and can never be. It is a skill learned in isolation that is applicable to combat, just like technique drills and free fencing.
- Don’t be afraid to ask for help if you’re not sure what to do.
- Most importantly, enjoy yourself and be safe!