



# BLADE BARRIER

## The Hapkido Way of Knife Defense

by Robert W. Young

Photos by Thomas Sanders

If you know someone who's been to South Korea to survey the nation's martial arts, ask him which styles he likes best. Don't know anyone who fits the bill? Maybe I can help. I spent nearly four years in Korea delving into every art I could find. My faves are as follows:

- **Martial sport:** *taekwondo* because it demands athleticism, precision and endurance. Plus, it's fun to watch.
- **Martial art as a way to inner peace:** Korea's several related temple arts because they're intricately intertwined with meditation and Buddhism.
- **Cultural art:** *tae kyon* because it boasts numerous techniques that aren't found in any other style.
- **Self-defense art:** *hapkido* because it works.

That final selection should come as no surprise to those in the know because the whole concept behind hapkido's existence is self-defense. It's not a sport. It's not designed for flashy demos. It's not touted as a way to become one with the universe. It's about stopping an attack, pure and simple, and eliminating the threat by whatever means necessary.

Enter the Jang Mu Won Hapkido Association. Founded in Seoul, South Korea, in 1964 by Black Belt Hall of Fame member Chong S. Kim, it espoused as its mission the teaching of effective, no-frills self-defense. To that end, Kim devised a curriculum based on defense: kick defense, punch defense, throw defense, stick defense and, of course, knife defense.

That last topic is the subject of this article. For expert instruction in it, *Black Belt* sought out Alhambra, California-based Han Woong Kim, the 40-year-old son of Chong S. Kim, who passed away in 2009. >>





Han Woong Kim (left) faces the opponent (1). The martial artist steps backward as he grabs the wrist and elbow of the knife arm (2). Kim immediately swings the arm along a circular path (3) until it's high enough to pivot and maneuver underneath (4). Kim continues his clockwise turn, locking the man's right arm and wrist (5). The hapkido stylist uses the hold to leverage him face-first onto the ground (6), where he can be more easily disarmed (7).

### Before You Begin

Kim, a sixth-degree black belt, says anyone can learn his art's knife defense: "You shouldn't be limited by your belt color. It's OK to practice the fundamental techniques no matter what your rank is as long as you have an instructor who fully understands the blade and knows the curriculum that's needed to guide you the proper way."

Of course, if you're already a black belt in a different art, you need not approach the endeavor with such caution. "A student who has experience in just about any empty-hand martial art will be much better off," Kim says. "For example, if you have a black belt in karate, *taekwondo* or kung fu, you'll be able to more quickly understand the concepts of hapkido knife defense and the strikes that can be combined with the techniques."

Naturally, a background in hapkido will provide the best base for the execution of the techniques, Kim says, but *hwa rang do* and *kuk sool* are nearly as good because they focus on combinations that include strikes, joint locks and throws.

### Safety First

"If you're a beginner, you should start your training with a rubber knife," Kim says. Make sure you get one that's flexible; a rigid plastic blade can inflict injury almost as easily as one that's made of metal.

You'll also need mats. Why? Because many hapkido techniques end with a throw, which means sooner or later your partner will wind up on the ground. You might as well make it a soft landing.

Kim recommends going slow at first—whether you're a beginner or a black belt—because of the potential for injury that accompanies those throws. You can avoid much of the heartache by recruiting a partner who knows how to fall, he says. "Most hapkido knife-defense techniques consist of joint locks and throws, so it's beneficial if you practice with some-

## Style Overview: Hapkido

Renowned as one of Korea's most effective martial arts, *hapkido* includes a plethora of joint locks, chokes, punch and kick defenses, and weapons techniques. Its hand and foot techniques are self-defense oriented rather than sport oriented. In general, hapkido instructors do not teach forms; they do, however, sometimes encourage their students to take part in competition because it can help them prepare for unscripted altercations.

Many of hapkido's 3,000-plus techniques are similar to the moves of Japanese *ju-jutsu*, but the Korean martial art differs in the aspects of combat it emphasizes and the guiding philosophies it promulgates (water principle, circle principle and power principle). Now regarded as a distinctly Korean system, it remains popular in the land of its birth and commands a faithful following in the United States and around the world.

—RWY

An assailant with a knife threatens Han Woong Kim from behind (1). Kim spins clockwise and uses his right hand to grab the man's knife arm (2). Continuing his spin, the hapkido expert moves into a position from which he can use his left arm to apply pressure to the opponent's extended limb (3). He steps back and maintains the armbar (4), forcing the man to the ground (5). Kim finishes by taking away the weapon (6).





The hapkido stylist (left) faces a man with a knife in his right hand (1). The man attacks with an overhead stab, and the martial artist blocks the blow before grabbing the opponent's wrist. He simultaneously punches a pressure point located in his armpit (2). He turns and places his shoulder under the assailant's arm, then applies upward pressure to break the limb (3). The hapkido expert finishes by twisting the arm to effect a throw (4), after which he pins his shoulder to the ground, locks his arm and disarms him (5).

one who knows how to fall, roll and relieve the pressure of a lock."

As you and your partner improve, consider moving on to the half-speed execution of the simplest knife-defense techniques using a dull aluminum training weapon. "Assuming your skills are very good, that can give you a more realistic feeling of the stress that comes with a real knife attack," Kim says. Make sure the opponent drops the knife before falling or rolling.

### The Techniques Themselves

To see how to perform Kim's favorite knife-defense techniques, refer to the accompanying photo sequences. Following in his footsteps will be easier—and more effective—if you remember the three components of hapkido's philosophy of fighting.

**Water Principle:** It teaches you to move like water, both offensively and defensively, Kim says. The offensive part entails enveloping and overwhelming your adversary. The defensive part revolves around yielding to his force and evading his stabs and thrusts.

**Circle Principle:** It helps you develop smooth, seamless movements and the capacity to quickly generate maximum power without telegraphing your intent with a straight-line technique. That might manifest itself as the circular redirection of a knife thrust or as an arcing blow that's delivered as a follow-up to a knife entrapment.

**Power Principle:** The middle character of hapkido is *ki*; it refers to internal power. The art teaches that power doesn't hinge solely on muscular strength. Instead, it stems from physical strength being amplified by position, leverage and technique. Armed with that knowledge, Kim says, you're able to direct your power against your foe and augment that by using his power against him. That will enable you to more easily control his weapon and end the fight. ✘

## The Eyes Have It

The most important attribute needed to successfully use a *hapkido* knife defense is concentration. If you can focus on your opponent's movements, weapon and eyes, you'll have the ability to win. If you fail to keep focused on those things, however, you'll get torn up no matter how fast or strong you are.

That's why hapkido teaches you to look at your opponent's eyes during most attacks. However, at the same time you should remain aware of other potential threats—such as a knife. If one is present, you must look at the back target "through" the first target. In other words, you must pay attention to the knife while looking at his eyes. If you focus on only the blade, you won't be able to see what his body is doing.

—RWY, Bill Darlas



Hapkido knife defense frequently entails using a joint lock to neutralize the threat presented by the weapon (1). Strategic positioning of the defender's body then permits the execution of a counterattack (2).

## Forgotten Weapons

If you find yourself fending off a knife-wielding attacker, you shouldn't neglect your legs as potential weapons. That's especially true if you're wearing hard-sole shoes because they can be used to block a knife thrust or slice, or to strike a vulnerable part of his body once you've taken control of the weapon.

—RWY, Bill Darlas



*Hand and foot strikes aimed at pressure points play an important role in hapkido knife defense. Here, Han Woong Kim uses a knee thrust to attack a nerve on his opponent's thigh.*

### *About the author:*

*Robert W. Young is the executive editor of Black Belt. To watch videos of Han Woong Kim demonstrating the techniques discussed in this article, visit [blackbeltmag.com](http://blackbeltmag.com). For more information about the Jang Mu Won Hapkido Association and its new DVD series, visit [jangmuwonhapkido.com](http://jangmuwonhapkido.com).*