

A Supplement to Stav – The Fighting System of Northern Europe

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Introduction

In 1995 I published a small book called: Stav, the Fighting System of Northern Europe If you are reading this then you have either purchased a copy and this supplement came with it or you purchased a copy in the past and I have sent you this because your name is on my records. I hope you found the book interesting and I have written this supplement because sixteen years is a long time and I have travelled a long way in life and in Stav during that time. I am still teaching and practising and I have learned a great deal more since the original book was committed to the printing press. As I say at the end of this supplement I should write another book, there is certainly a great deal more to say. But the problem with books is that they fix an opinion and ideas at a point in time. This is not necessarily a bad thing but it does mean that as the author moves on in learning and experience there is a sense that readers of the book are missing out on what should be included but cannot be. The purpose of this supplement is to try and give the reader some background into how the book came to be written, where I was at the time it was written and some idea of where things have developed since. And, yes it is time I stopped making excuses and wrote an up to date manual on Stav martial training.

Background to the writing of The Fighting System of Northern Europe

I first met Ivar Hafskjold in the fall of 1992. He had recently returned from Japan and had decided to settle in Beverly in East Yorkshire. I lived a few miles away and I had made contact through an interview I had read in Fighting Arts International. In the article Ivar had discussed his family tradition as well as his experiences training in Japan. At the end he suggested that he was willing to teach either from his family system or from what he had learned in Japan

Ivar agreed to accept me as a student and I began training regularly with him. From the beginning training included the sixteen runic stances. Apart from that most of the practice involved working with the Jo and Boken. With the Jo we used four basic strikes. Two simple strikes into ʃ and one into ʄ and a rotating thrust using ↑. The Boken was used as the attacking weapon. We practised five drills which involved defending against a Boken attack using the Jo. These particular drills Ivar said were basically what he had been taught by his grandfather and expressed the five principles of Stav. We also practised quite a lot of unarmed self-defence using the stances as the basis for various techniques.

Looking back we were certainly training in Stav,

or perhaps rather, training with Stav principles. The basic problem was that Ivar's family had never developed a systematic way of teaching Stav as a martial art. In fact it is unlikely that they would have recognised the modern concept of a martial art as such. They knew how to use weapons when they needed them but there was no specific training practice as such. During his time in Japan Ivar always made it clear to his teachers that he had a family system which he was trying to make sense of. He never hid the fact that this was the real reason for learning Japanese martial arts. The main thing he needed to learn was how to see the line and cut accordingly. Once he had that then practising and teaching Stav was going to make sense.

For the first year or so I trained intensely with the Jo and did cutting practice with the Boken. I also became interested in the traditional weapons which Ivar's family would have used before firearms. I was particularly interested in the use of the axe as an alternative to the Boken. Ivar sketched me a design which he said his family used for many generations and it is a wooden version of this that you can see in the pictures in the book. This design is actually based on a whaling fleische which is not really surprising since the Hafsjkold family were heavily involved in whaling until well into the 20th century. This became

my preferred practice weapon and over a period of time we worked out a set of drills with which to teach and practise the five principles. The same came of the cudgel and the spear and at the time the book was published we felt that we were creating a genuine European Martial Art backed up with Ivar's Japanese training.

What has changed? What has remained the same?

There is little in the book I really disagree with sixteen years later. The descriptions of the five principles for example are pretty good. But it is very much a snap shot of work in progress. Of course Stav is still work in progress, these kind of things always are. Once they stop developing then no one is really interested any more and that hasn't happened yet.

The axe still plays an important role in my practice and teaching. The design shown in the book which is made of a ply wood head on a hard wood shaft did not prove durable. Other variations followed until about five years ago I came up with a solid ash design which seems to be the most satisfactory yet. I have continued with regular practice of one hundred cuts straight down and another one hundred angled cuts. I encourage my students who are serious about making

progress to adopt this too.

I fairly recently began to include a low left cut (the attacking cut for the Trel drill into my cutting practice. I have found that it helps a lot with developing a low but balanced posture. We have also increased the number of basic two person drills with the axe to practice. These now include: Prepared (in a guard) and unprepared (from the belt ring) versions of each principle.

Over the years there has been a great deal of practice and experimenting with the axe and exploring ways it can be used. But the emphasis has always been on simplicity and focus on the lines. If just the three basic cuts are correctly practised on a regular basis the student will develop considerable strength and focus.

Longsword Training

Another innovation which followed fairly soon after the book was published was the teaching of the two handed long sword. This is a long, two edged and two handed sword based on the European design of the hand and a half sword. Ivar introduced it on the basis that he kept being asked why we didn't teach the European Sword. This was very early in the days when interest in European martial arts were

developing. It is important to make the distinction between European Martial arts and re-enactment which has been around for generations. There may be some overlap in the interest between the two but in the past fifteen years there has been a huge increase in interest in European martial arts as authentic fighting systems. Initially it began with a guy called Terry Brown who wrote a rather handsome volume called the English Martial Arts and taught what he believed to be authentic English sword fighting in North London. Since then there has been a lot of interest in studying the classic texts written and illustrated by people such as Talhoffer and Fiore which show 15th and 16th century fencing techniques. There are now events like Fight Camp where a whole range of European Martial techniques can be studied. I attended last year and found it most interesting. In most cases those who practice “European Martial Arts” have had to work it out from the books by trial and error. Some have got very good and if you are interested in the mechanics of sword fighting you may find training with groups such as the Schola Gladiatoria very interesting.

Stav sword training is concerned, as is all Stav martial training, with working with the lines and it is as good a way to practice line awareness as any other. There are no drills as such, just cutting from one guard position to another. Then the defender uses

another transition as an effective defence. It is all good line practice and the sword is good for developing strength and fitness too. Sword work also looks good for demonstrations as we were able to show at events such as the Rotary Martial Arts Festival in Bath in 2010. The concept of working with the guard positions had implications which became very important as I will explain in a short while.

The Staff Exercises

If you have been involved in any Ice and Fire Stav training in recent years you will probably have been expected to learn a set of staff exercises. Yet in the book there is almost no mention of the Staff at all. As I said earlier we had begun with the Jo which is a short Japanese staff and for various reasons I had been keen to move away from it and make the axe more central. Not long after the book was published I moved to Oxford and began teaching a new group of students there. My classes were based quite rigorously on the axe and the stances and that was what I expected my students to train with and practice. This was fine for some people, especially if they had some background in martial arts already. But if they had no background and needed to develop their fitness in order to train seriously then the axe was frankly a bit

of a shock to the system. So, one Saturday morning we were having a training session and we went around a circle asking for suggestions for staff exercises based on each stance. The staff in this case is the European walking staff or sometimes known as a thumb staff. Just under an inch in diameter and shoulder height. It can be made of Hazel, Ash or Oak. Or even just a good quality broom handle. Most of the Jo training which I had received during my first year or so of Stav training found its way into the various staff exercises. The idea was to have a set of exercises which would reinforce awareness of the stances, develop fitness, flexibility and co-ordination, provide a basis for two person training.

It took a few years of refining and developing the set of exercises but it seems to have worked very well. It certainly provides something for beginners to work with. Issues like weak knees are addressed by the \sphericalangle and \wedge exercises and shoulder mobility by ∇ and \diamond . Basic strikes are learned from several of the exercises as are thrusts and evasion movements. From these very basic movements the student can move onto doing simple two person training. Initially just using a partner to provide a target and feedback but then moving onto simple attack and defence drills which teach the five principles of Stav. All the time the emphasis is on simplicity and safety and a reasonably

large group can be taught and supervised at once using these exercises and the drills derived from them.

The Nine Guards

The next innovation grew out of a combination of the staff exercises and the idea of using guard positions with a sword. This was the concept of training with the nine guards. The basis of guards is that there are nine basic positions in which to hold any weapon. Some weapons are more effective in some guards rather than others and the purpose of training is to discover which is which. There are of course variations in each guard position such as a high right guard with a sword could have the blade pointed forward and down to stab or back and high ready to cut. In Ice and Fire Stav the nine guards with staff or spear are the next level of training after the five principles drills with staff against staff. We would begin to teach the axe after a few months training and, as well as going on to the axe against axe training, the student learns how to use the staff to defend against an axe attack. The basic skills to do this are in the staff exercises and the student learns to work from each of the nine guard positions. It is also important that the cuts that are given are of a good standard so that the student learns how to see the lines. The five

principles are all explored in one way or another through the nine guards. Some guards are specific to one principle. But several can be used to explore more than one level with subtle variations in the technique. There is a great deal to learn and practice with these drills.

Cudgel and Sax

The cudgel and sax are still taught pretty much as they are shown in the original book. I use a sax a lot as a practical tool for working green wood and clearing vegetation. This is a very effective way of learning to see the lines. Walking sticks are useful for practising self-defence too. At Fight Camp in 2010 I attended a Bartitsu workshop taught by James Marwood which was about using a walking stick for self-defence. Again I found my understanding of the lines to be most helpful but we were not working against a two handed weapon cutting directly on the line. This is usually the test we are most interested in. When we do survival/bush craft training then I see the sax coming into its own. For martial training it has its place but we haven't developed it beyond the five basic drills.

Self-defence

Speaking of self-defence there is not a great deal about this in the original book. Ivar came back from Japan with a good deal of unarmed combat skill as well as his weapon expertise. As well as training in Aikido he had also trained in Aki-Jutsu a more aggressive and combat orientated version of the same tradition. We would train and Ivar would demonstrate very effective ways of dealing with an attacker. He still can. He also said that really he was only interested in teaching people who were already black belts or close to that kind of standard. Each of his four original students were pretty much at that level so we hardly needed teaching much in the way of new techniques. What we needed was Ivar's guidance so that we could learn to see the lines and then make what we already knew really effective. When you work with the lines and the principles you can make virtually anything work. But without that background you are just doing techniques without really understanding what you are trying to achieve.

Unfortunately this has created a bit of a dilemma ever since. If someone takes up Stav with a few years training in another martial art behind them then as they develop their understanding of the lines and the web they begin to see how to make their existing knowledge actually work. We still tend to put the emphasis first on the stances, as should always be

the case in Stav and then on building up weapon skills. There are good reasons for this. Not least of which is that training with the staff teaches the lines much more readily than unarmed training. We are also looking to teach distancing and timing and working with big sticks is a relatively safe and effective way of doing it. As the student develops confidence in staff training with a partner he or she can start looking at the same principles applied to unarmed training. But this still leaves the problem of how to teach the total beginner the essential martial arts skills of how to strike, kick, grapple and throw someone. Even before that there is a need for basic exercises which teach the student how to move in ways which will be useful to self-defence and unarmed combat.

I have looked into this issue over the years and developed training methods which will be suitable for teaching beginners unarmed skills. A comprehensive attempt to do this has been developing the eighteen animal exercises which is a sort of equivalent to the staff exercises but using the animals associated with each rune as an inspiration for simple exercises. The problem is always time to teach the material. I have come to the realisation that what is probably needed to teach Stav properly is a rolling Twelve week beginners programme where total beginners would learn the stances, staff exercises and some very basic unarmed

exercises. Then two classes per week, one for advanced weapons and one for practical unarmed with the expectation that students would attend both. The reality is that it is always hard enough to keep a single class open. So I don't know when or if the opportunity to do this is likely to arise.

In the past year I have, with the help of my student Nigel Smith, developed a set of nine really simple exercises which seem to provide a good basis for developing, if not full blown fighting skills then the kind of body awareness which provides the basis for learning such skills. Such teaching as I have been able to do so far with these exercises looks promising.

What I do know is that with an understanding of the web control and restrain techniques become relatively easy to implement. The five principles also provide a sound basis for conducting oneself in a conflict situation. Knowledge of one's fylgia is an invaluable guide to discovering the best approach for learning self-defence for yourself. There have been occasions when Alex Fell-Bowers, Ivar and myself have conducted cat, dog and bear unarmed combat workshops. You really had to be there.

David Watkinson, one of Ivar's other original students, has made a speciality out of teaching Stav for self-defence and his work is well worth looking at.

Conclusion

So what have I learned in the past sixteen years since I wrote the book? And why haven't I written another one? I keep promising to write another one and I get asked regularly when it is going to be. Part of the problem is that Stav, as is one's life, is always work in progress. So at what point do you write your autobiography? It really needs to be after you are dead and it is a bit late by then. Strangely I was much more certain that I had grasped what Stav is all about when I wrote and published the Stav the Fighting System than I have ever been since. Writing a manual on how I might suggest training in Stav could be useful but I now know there is never a right time to do it.

Other things I have learned. If you keep practising there is a point when you see the lines. It happened to me after about eight years just as Ivar said it would. I realise that there are three aspects of training, personal practice which needs to be maintained if any real progress is to be made. Partner practice so that you learn how to work safely and effectively with another person. Some of that training should be with someone whose cuts are good enough to be teaching you the lines of the web. Then there is the level of intuitive response where you are sufficiently sure of your own foundation that you can

freely interact with any training partner and any system.

All real progress in martial arts comes from:

- Dedicated personal practice.
- Disciplined training under a good teacher in the system of your choice.
- An open minded approach to learning where ever you can and experimenting whenever you get the opportunity.

These may sound contradictory and obviously there is a tension between them. But I can state with confidence that thanks to Ivar's teaching, which was the best anyone could have hoped for, and my willingness to practice with dedication I now find that I have a freedom to experience and learn which I certainly didn't have when I started training in Stav.

I have also discovered how important the other non-martial aspects of Stav are, these I do teach sometimes and, yes, they deserve a book as well.

I hope you enjoyed Stav the Fighting System and I hope you found this supplement useful. But remember there is no substitute for actual training face to face. So grab the opportunity while those of us who know Stav are still young enough to teach you.

Graham Butcher, March 2011