Miyamoto Musashi’s
Book of Five Rings
It’s relevance to modern day Close Combat

I decided to write this little offering to bring to light to some of the similarities, relating to certain principles of contemporary combat in comparison with the writings of the great swordsman Miyamoto Musashi. These similarities are there for all to see and for anyone who may have the interest and time to study the various interpretations of Musashi’s written work. Musashi’s main text formulated onto five ancient scrolls, related to his great understanding of strategy, tactics and philosophy namely ‘Go Rin No Sho’ or the Book of Five Rings. History suggests that Musashi began this written work in 1643, after retiring to a cave as a hermit and that it was completed some time in February of 1645 shortly before his death several months later, at the age of sixty two. In recent years there have been many translations and interpretations of this great work, by yet more great authors. Each of these has revealed more and more of Musashi’s little gems of wisdom in a way that is easier for the more international reader to understand. Musashi was a famous Japanese Samurai and was considered by many to have been one of the most skilled Swordsmen in history. Musashi became legendary
through his outstanding swordsmanship, which won him numerous victories in battle even from a very young age, fighting his first duel against swordsman, Arima Kihei at the age of thirteen. Musashi was somewhat of a loner and is still thought of by many as the true example of the Warrior and Poet. He spent many years studying Buddhism along with Swordsmanship and was also an accomplished artist, sculptor and calligrapher. Most historians are in agreement to the fact, that Musashi was one of the greatest strategists of all time. His tactics were born from the live experience of battle as he roamed Japan laying challenge to any and all who deemed themselves worthy. The 350 year old text, referred to as the Book of Five Rings, bellows principles of Perseverance, insight and Self-Understanding along with the pursuit and cultivation of inward calm, even in the midst of Chaos. The latter often manifesting itself as Swift, though Unhurried Action in the face of adversity. Many employ Musashi’s teachings within the field of business management with great success, but here my concern is it’s relevance to modern day violent confrontation and for that, many of the concepts within this tome are as applicable today as they were in the 1600’s. In fact they relate specifically to Close Combat during all phases of conflict, before, during and after such an event.

The Five Scrolls titled ‘Go Rin No Sho’
Here are some examples:

• You're everyday position is your fighting stance. (*This of course, where possible translates to your everyday natural fence, but is also relevant to striking from wherever your hands/weapons happen to be*)

• You must strike with intent and focus (*Mindset is of relevance here, particularly OFFENSIVE mindset which of course is in line with our Combative mentality, that being if we must fight, then we will fight until there’s nothing left to fight about. This is also relevant to the next point.*)

• “Think neither of victory nor of yourself but only of cutting and killing your enemy”. (*My understanding of this is the same as the term ‘MUSHIN’ or NO MIND. Thinking not of victory, nor defeat, nor of consequence of any kind relating to this conflict, instead think only of putting the man down! In combat your perspective should always be what you will do to the subject, not what he can do to you.*)

• Bear in mind *when* your opponent starts to fear, that he is being controlled by you during combat, “‘you have victory in your hands.’” (*I have had several experiences that relate directly to this point. In all cases when you face a potential aggressor, his/their immediate perspective of you is surely not one that makes them think, you might turn them into a little grease spot on the pavement, if it was they would surely seek easier pickings else where? At-least for the majority anyway. So it is at the exact point during any potential conflict, when you change their incorrect perspective of you of prey/victim into one that depicts you clearly as the PREDATOR. This might be via a strong verbal projection of your indignation, or as is often the case, once you’ve banged the f##ker!*
• An enemy will attack only if he feels sure of himself. (Again relevance to the above point, most predatory males or 21st Century career criminals seek victims, not someone that will create attention or cause them pain or injury from fighting back tooth and nail.)

• By perceiving your opponents mental condition, you will always gain victory.” (This comes from understanding the modern enemy, in relevance to what you are training for. Understanding body language cues and any pre-fight indicators associated to bad intent, also strive to perceive the subject’s state of mind, are they over confident, fearful, deceptive or aggressive? etc, anything that indicates the need to seize initiative on your part will go a long way toward assuring you victory.)

• Regardless of combat circumstances, you must always remain calm. Calmness is attained through meditation and belief in your own skills. (This refers to our ability to manage state and control your emotions under fight stress. Although some of the debilitating effects of adrenaline such as tunnel vision, auditory exclusion and the like are largely autonomic, they certainly appear to be directly related to the operator’s perception, of their ability to handle the perceived threat. In other words if your perception is in line with the self-belief that you can handle any Combative problem that your trained for, and is then enhanced further by successful experience in training and/or operationally, then the effects of adrenal stress will become hugely manageable this is de-sensitization and will allow you to attain calmness during a potential threat to life incident.)
Your attitude must be such that you can shift into any mode of combat without having to make a conscious decision. (This of course comes from gaining a significant level of unconscious competence in all aspects of combat, hand-to-hand, striking and grappling, integration of weapons along with the ability to adapt and flow at any range, employing simple skills that are easy to learn and retain under pressure, when thinking is impaired. Using gross motor options that will cover a vast array of scenarios.)

You must go into combat with the attitude of absolutely destroying the enemy. If you do not develop this attitude, what are you doing there in the first place? Combat is never employed for fun. Even in practice sessions you must have the attitude of going in for the kill. (Again you will notice the commonality between a lot of these points. Think only of putting the man down! In combat your perspective should always be what you will do to the subject, not what he can do to you! You should carry this focus into your training, by incorporating visualisation every time you hit the pads. Remember train in state, operate in state!)

You must train hard to be able to move into the attack and stop it before it even occurs. This takes great courage. (This first comes from having the WILLINGNESS and PREPARDNESS to step up when the need to fight becomes necessary and in a physical sense might apply to an interception of the physical attack in progress, via some kind of stop hit, or as is more likely, it might come from you perceiving the individual’s bad intent and pre-emptively striking him down even earlier.)
• Every strike must be done with full authority and full intensity. (If the physical is unavoidable, then we will hit first and keep hitting until the threat subsides, this must be done with full speed, power and ferocity.)

• Energy is always directed forward and focused on the purpose. (This of course applies to our Combatives principle of forward pressure, maximised by speed, surprise and aggression.)

• Use your environment well; always strive to keep your opponent back peddling into the obstacles to limit his foothold and movement. (This relates again to forward pressure integrated with the use of our environment, one example being to drive the subject into a wall followed with or during your assault.)

• In Hand-to-hand combat, when your opponent makes an aggressive move, you should respond with an even stronger movement and suppress his fighting spirit. (We strive to take initiative, but when initiative is lost, our counter response must be immediate and explosive, defending is not in our vocabulary, if we must react then we will do so offensively.)

• Overwhelm your opponent with the INTENTION of completely destroying him. (Willingness/preparedness/mindset.)

• The ‘Way’ cannot be learned through frivolous contests in which the outcome is for the name of a school or a large trophy. It can only be realised where physical death or injury is a reality. (Combatives are not about sport or art for art sake, instead purely designed as methods to counter violence. There really is no better training for the event, than the event, nor any substitute for live experience. (Padded assailant scenario training in state goes some way toward gaining such experience.)
• You can only fight the way you practice. (How you train is how you will fight, train in state, operate in state. This quote from Paul Vunak says it all; “In a crisis we will not rise to our expectations, but fall to our level of training”)

• Peripheral vision is of utmost importance. It is a skill that is developed over a period of time in training. It should be used in everyday life as well. (As we know, one of the side effects of adrenal stress is tunnel vision; this makes us vulnerable to an attack from the flanks, thus creating the need to break tunnel vision by turning the head and actively scanning our immediate environment.)

• When you understand yourself and you understand your enemy you cannot be defeated. (Sun Tzu said it before him and many have said it since. Part of your overall awareness and combative functionality comes from knowing the enemy’s M.O, how he/she will operate and how that might affect you. In addition to this is the importance of knowing how you, will react under the affects of stress, fear and confusion? How you will deal with the fear and how you will control your emotions are all relevant to knowing yourself.)

• Do not permit yourself to be intimidated by the size of your enemy. (Again think only of what you will do to the enemy, outward appearance is no fool proof indication of ability, yes size, strength, ability and most of all intention do have a bearing, but we must not clutter our mind with consequence, think only of cutting down the enemy.)

• The truth is that strength lies in the interior of the warrior: in his heart, his mind and his spirit. (Chances are that it will be the adversity of live experience and/or hard, hard training and pressure testing of what you have, that will reveal this truth to you, so prepare yourself for the truth.)
Several artists' impressions of Miyamoto Musashi...
Such comparisons are made from my own observation and interpretation of Musashi’s great work. Many others have come to similar conclusions after reading the Book of Five Rings. It is recommended that you seek out the work for yourself along with many other such great works made publicly available through the written word and those who have taken on the painstaking job of translating such texts. Within the pages of such texts, there are nuggets of gold to be had, of which the above is just a look. The main thing that strikes a cord with me is the fact that commonality has remained firmly in place over the Centuries since Miyamoto Musashi’s time, similar conclusions have been reached via similar experience, from the warrior’s of yester year to those of the present, from the battle grounds of the Samurai and Ronin to the microcosm of Urban warfare today.