

## Zen and the Way of the Sword

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Although modern kendo can be regarded as an exciting sports and physical exercise, it is also deeply associated with moral and philosophical aspects. The proper code of practice is influenced by Zen philosophy, and emphasised as a means of cultivating one's mind: the primary goal is to improve oneself through the study of the sword. An ancient swordsman or a modern kendoka can "wield a sword not to control their opponent, but to control themselves".

The earliest swords in Japan were Chinese swords in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC, referred to as *ken* (or *tsurugi*). Curved swords started to appear during the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> centuries and were called *kanto tachi*, but the first Japanese swords (*Nihon-to*), of the curved type, appeared in the 8<sup>th</sup> century, at the same time as the more centralized state was being formed during the Nara period. In the ancient times, the lords and warriors maintained their own sword fighting schools, and the earliest reference to the use of wooden sword *bokken* in fighting and training dates back to the 5<sup>th</sup> century. It was during the Kamakura and Muromachi periods (about 1200-1500 AD) that formalized schools (*ryuha*) began to develop, and by 15<sup>th</sup> century five regional traditions existed: in Kashima-Katori, Kyushu, the capital (Kyoto), Kamakura area, and north-east. The warrior courts fostered Zen studies, as the austere principles suited well to warfare. Effective fighting strategies included quick and spontaneous acting while at the same time maintaining one's calm and fearless mind, and Zen practice assisted the fighters to achieve this realization.

During the Tokugawa period (1603-1867), formalization of Japanese culture took place further. The philosophical principles, which had earlier encouraged the warrior to face death in fierce combats, elaborated into the moral code of the samurais. The Way of the sword does not only include training in the techniques but also living according to the code of honour: the three virtues of a samurai were courageous mind, faithfulness, and sense of duty. The fighting techniques thus became a vehicle in advancing the way of Zen. The one who understood and accepted death at any moment in his everyday life was a master of the sword. However, since there is no separation of mind and body in the Zen philosophy, the cultivation of the mind is, in fact, improvement of the techniques, and vice versa.

Most of the teachings were preserved in secret and confidential scrolls that introduced devoted disciplines to the mysteries of the master's school. The teachings were often written at the old age of the master as a kind of testament to transmit his wisdom of the essence of swordsmanship to the posterity world. The famous swordsman Ittosai Ito Kagehisa, who lived in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, was also famous for his philosophical thoughts concerning the fundamental frame of mind and the particular sword-wielding technique *musoken* ("dream stroke"). He named himself Ittosai, or "one sword (stroke) man", and founded Itto-ryu, the school of swordsmanship which emphasizes the concept of a single

stroke of the sword as the key element that decides the result of a match. (The school still exists, and the kiri-otoshi technique has greatly influenced modern kendo.)

Probably the most famous Japanese swordsman in the Western world is Miyamoto Musashi, from Kyushu, who collected his thoughts in *Gorin no Sho* (Book of Five Rings) as "a guide for men who want to learn strategy", just before his death in 1645. The book consists of five chapters entitled Earth, Water, Fire, Wind, and Air, and provides an account of Musashi's swordsmanship from practical knowledge to proper mental attitude. Yagyū Munenori, contemporary to Musashi, has been called the Zen apostle as he emphasised that swordsmanship was not a skill learned to kill people but rather, to realize one's personality and to develop one's inner self. As a fencing instructor to shogun, Munenori attained a high position in the society, and the Yagyū Shinkage School flourished under the shogun's patronage. One of the main principles of the school, still important in modern kendo, concerns perception of an opponent's intention: a swordsman should aim at perfection in perceiving the signs which occur before the opponent's actual movements. Munenori's *Book of Swordsmanship for the Posterity of the Yagyū* compiles his theories on swordsmanship and mental control, and emphasises that swordsmanship was more than the art of developing fighting techniques: it was the life itself. The spiritual advisor of Munenori was Takuan Soho, a Buddhist priest of Daitokuji temple in Kyoto, who also earned the shogun's respect and was later invited by the shogun to move to Edo. Especially one of Takuan's letters to Munenori, *Fudochishinmyoroku* (Mysterious Record of Immovable Wisdom) has become a classic account of unifying the spirit of Zen with the spirit of the sword: Takuan applies Zen teachings of how to become a unified Self to swordsmanship and addresses the practical and spiritual question of where to put one's mind during confrontation. His writings had great influence on Munenori's thinking as well as on Mushashi's *Gorin no Sho*.

Since the late 16<sup>th</sup> century, the sword became the symbol of the samurai. Only samurais were allowed to carry two swords: while the short sword (*kodachi*) was allowed for everyone, only the samurai were also allowed to carry the long sword (*daito*). The sword became an object of reverence and respect (through the respect for the samurai class), which must be treated appropriately, in a graceful and dignified manner. According to Zen, one must treat one's fellow beings (enemies included) as honoured guests, and the respect naturally applies to the sword too.

The sword is often called "the soul of a samurai", and the respect for the sword thus symbolises respect for the owner: e.g. one does not step over somebody else's sword or touch it without the permission of the owner. The respect also includes appreciation for the maker and the blade itself, e.g. when bowing to one's sword. Forging of the sword is a religious-like ceremony that requires skill and long apprenticeship, and thus a swordsmith as a creator of the powerful sword is highly respected. The blade itself is the actual weapon and thus requires reverence as such. However, the rule that one must not touch the blade with one's fingers is not only to prevent one from cutting oneself, but it also has a more practical reason: the salt and moisture on one's hands can cause rust marks on the blade and thus damage the valuable blade.

Zen aims at the true nature of things, but not only is the goal important, also the way one takes in order to achieve the goal. The end point is the beginning, knowledge a full circle, and great understanding can only be expressed as nothingness. In modern kendo practice, the continuous training of thousands of cuts leads towards spontaneous knowledge of every situation, the sword becomes “no sword”, and eventually results in a realisation of nothingness.

#### References

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