Samurai: Cultured Warriors of Japan

In the annuals of military history, the Samurai warrior stands alone. There have been many fierce armies: the Huns under Atillia, the Roman legions, Rommel's armored divisions. But there have been few individual men of war as trained or as effective as the Samurai. They were deadly and brutal warrior-knights who eventually were able to fuse the aggression of battle with the serene contemplation of Zen Buddhism.

Samurai warriors

The "Age of the Samurai" refers to a long period during which Japan was ruled by its warrior class, which began with the establishment of a military government at the end of the 1100s. The Samurai were the warrior class of old Japan, arising from warrior bands formed to protect the Japanese imperial capital in Kyoto. The name derives from a Japanese verb *saburau,* which means "to serve," and that was the role of these men throughout history — to serve their warlords through peace and through war. They gained importance and political power through the Heian period (794-1185) and instituted a military government (shogunate) in the Kamakura period (1185-1333). The Samurai was expert in many weapons: bow and arrow, spear, even in unarmed combat. Eventually the sword was to become his principal weapon, but the sword became more than just one weapon in an arsenal of many; it became the soul of the Samurai, the embodiment of his spirit.

The samurai devoted most of his time to the art of combat. All his training was preparation for the battlefield. It was there that he and his brethren would stand shoulder to shoulder with their warlord and meet the enemy in mortal combat. The samurai was also the terrible, swift sword that put down peasant rebellions and imposed the law of the land. The enemy might be a common criminal, a terrified thief or an armed thug. The warlord, the daimyō, would give the order to execute, the samurai was dispatched to find and kill him; there was no mercy. It was the will of the daimyō.

The samurai was expected to be loyal in face of great provocation from enemies who would offer him rewards to turn traitor. He was expected to remain loyal in face of overwhelming odds on the battlefield that would probably result in his certain death. The Samurai would fight with everything they had to the last man because if their lord was killed they were also doomed. Each man was tied into one another, so much so that if there was no one else to fight and there were two people against a whole army, they would fight to the death.

The master for whom the samurai fought and died was called his daimyō. The samurai would serve the daimyō in life as well as in death. Daimyō means, roughly, "great landholder"; he was the high-ranking warlord. These warrior lords were subject to the authority of the supreme warrior known as the shogun. Daimyō authority was usually hereditary, providing political and cultural continuity during the warrior era. The shogun professed allegiance to Japan's emperor but the emperor's authority was cultural and ceremonial. The shogun exercised strict political control during the centuries of warrior rule.

Because it described warriors essentially as servants, the term "samurai" was not necessarily an honorable one. As their power grew, the warriors came to call themselves *bushi,* or "martial gentleman," a much more honorable appellation.

BUSHIDŌ, CODE OF THE SAMURAI

Like the knights of medieval Europe, the Samurai lived by a code of conduct that was rarely broken. In Europe it was called chivalry; in Japan the word was *bushidō.* But the code of *bushidō* was far stricter. It inspired the warrior to great heights of martial skill and it differed from chivalry in an important respect: *bushidō* emphasized absolute loyalty. Through *bushidō* the samurai was able to transcend the natural human impulse towards fear. It was the fear that an

ordinary soldier would experience in the heat of battle when faced by overwhelming enemies and probably faced by the certainty of death. The Samurai as the supreme warrior overcame this; he rose above it. *Bushidō* gave the Samurai the tools to become one with the weapon and not fear death. An opponent ready to die became the ultimate warrior. If the Samurai could overcome fear, then he had the peace and the power to serve his master loyally and to die for him without a moment's hesitation.

The samurai prized virtues such as honesty, courage, benevolence, respect, self-sacrifice, self-control, compliance with duty and unquestionable loyalty to one's master. These ideals brought balance and stability to the social organization.

The meaning of *bushidō* is to achieve something in the world and then be able to throw away this body and to accept death. But this concept is very easily misunderstood. It's really quite different from just going out and dying. If one fails to achieve something and says, "Oh I must kill myself," it's not a very productive way of thinking. *Bushidō* rejects that irresponsible way of thinking. If one has tried to perform some act and failed, there is also in *bushidō* the concept of continuing to live, even though one may have to live in shame. If there is a chance to right the wrong one has done, then one should do so; this is the real *bushidō*.

Under certain circumstances, bushidō also dictated that a Samurai commit ritual suicide, also known as *seppuku* or *hari-kiri* (literally "belly cutting"). A warrior who disgraced himself, either in a batter or in some other dishonorable deed, had little recourse except ritual suicide. According to *bushidō*, perishing in battle was an honorable way to die. But being taken prisoner was a shame that could not be washed away. The Samurai would then commit ritual suicide rather than surrender to the enemy.

There was a considerable ritual aspect to the performance of *seppuku.* The essential basis of the act that the samurai would release his spirit from deep within his belly and he would do it by cutting open his abdomen and dying a slow and very painful death. In later years a tradition developed of helping the victim on his way. A man, a trusted retainer who probably fought for the clan for many years, would be appointed as his second. As the samurai prepared to cut open his abdomen with his dagger, the second would swing his sword and lop off the man's head with one stroke. There are many accounts in the old chronicles of suicide in this way, often proceeded by the victim writing a farewell poem.

Minamoto Muramatsu, a famous Samurai, committed suicide in 1180 after the battle of Uji Bridge. His suicide poem was written with such finesse that it became the model for noble and heroic hari-kiri:

Like a fossil tree from which we gather no flowers
Sad has been my life
Fated no fruit to produce.

Bushidō called for the simple life. The samurai possessed few material things; his weapons were all he needed. Fancy clothing, expensive tastes, the high life were left to wealthy nobles. Japan's noble classes did not strive for military glory, that was left to the warriors. For the nobles, fame was achieved in the arts, in poetry, in painting. Eventually the samurai tried to match the nobles in their mastery of the arts while still pursuing the art of war.

THE STORY OF THE 47 *RONIN*

In life as in death, loyalty above all other ideals imbued the soul of the samurai. An incident that occurred at the end of the 18th Century perhaps best exemplifies this ideal. It is a story how 47 *ronin,* samurai without masters, went to extraordinary lengths to avenge the death of their warlord.

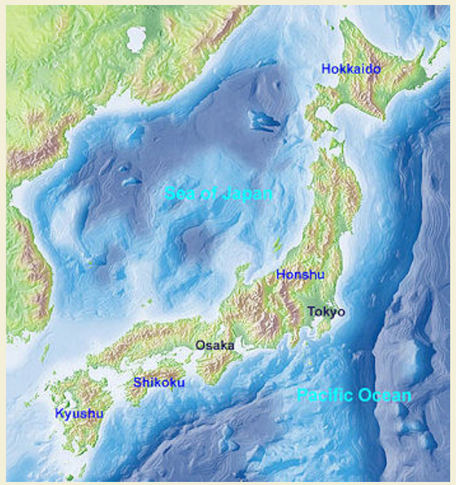
The lord of Akō had been required to commit suicide because of a plot by a jealous rival. His retainers, the men who worked for him as samurai, now had no leader or master to follow so they conspired together to destroy the man who had brought about their master's death. One snowy winter's night they struck,

Attack of the 47 ronin

broke their way into the man's house and cut off his head. This was a great act of samurai loyalty but it caused shockwaves among the Takanawa government. The *ronin* paraded through the streets of Edo, carrying their victim's bloody head. They assembled at the tomb of their master and placed the severed head appropriately on the grave. The law did allow someone to take vengeance against someone who had been responsible for the death of a master or father but in effect one had to apply to local authorities for permission to do that. It took the spontaneity out of it and also put on notice the individual who was the target of one's revenge. There was a legal split between those people who condemned their actions as wrong, and yet others (and a good deal of the citizenry felt that way as well) who sympathized with the honor that they were trying to avenge for their lord. The Shogun decided that the 47 *ronin* would be allowed to commit ritual suicide and be buried together. They left behind a noble legacy of samurai virtue which has inspired countless books, plays and films.

HISTORY OF THE SAMURAI

The swordsman-poet's origins can be found in ancient Japan when conscript armies gave way to the establishment of rival warrior families. The early warriors were mounted archers who engaged in fierce, ritualistic combat. Out of these battles emerged the samurai class.



Topographical map of Japan

War has scurried across the hills and valleys of Japan almost without pause for thousands of years. Japan consists of four major islands, the largest being Honshu. These islands are primarily mountains; valleys are few. Only one-fifth of the land is fit for farming. It was a struggle for land with rival clans, bandits and the first inhabitants of the islands of Japan that set the stage for the development of the samurai.

We first hear the word "Samurai" being used in Japanese history around about the 8th century A.D. By this time Japan already had a developing military tradition because the original immigrants to the islands that are now called Japan had to fight their way against the aboriginal natives living in the islands. The people that we think of as today's Japanese are not the first inhabitants. Scientists believe that the first settlers were a Caucasian people who had migrated from Asia around 4,500 B.C. They were called the Amishi (Omachi). They were fishermen, hunters and farmers. The Japanese who later settled the islands borrowed the concept of an emperor from the Chinese and soon set about setting up an imperial court, a government and a military. The early Japanese state tried to create a military power by conscripting the peasantry of Japan into a military army. They could be drafted, they could be trained, and they could be used on behalf of the state and turn back into citizen-farmers once again. By the 9th century, this army was fighting not only the original inhabitants, the Amishi (Omachi), but groups of bandits and rebels as well. But part-time soldiers proved to be not the best warriors. It ultimately turned out that conscript armies didn't work and that the people who were the most successful at fighting the Amishi (Omachi) were the leaders of these conscript armies, the mounted horsemen, the warriors of Japan who were the leaders really of this particular group. Over time, certain families or clans began to gain reputations as being accomplished in battle. These families passed on their traditions and became the warrior clans of Japan.

The early warriors were quite different from the later samurai who relied almost exclusively on their skill with the sword. The horse was an important part of the samurai's equipment; well-formed, energetic, and high spirited horses were much sought after among members of the warrior class. The early warriors did battle on horseback and were expert in the use of the bow and arrow, the art of *yabusama*. Mounted archery is a very difficult skill to acquire. Operating a bow and an arrow on the back of a horse is not easy; one has to steer the horse. It's hard enough to stay on a horse and it's hard enough to shoot a bow and arrow accurately in the first place. If you're trying to do both at the same time it's very difficult. People were given nicknames that gave a sense of how far they could shoot or how fast they could shoot, how powerfully their arrows could penetrate, how strong their bow was for example, that it took three to five persons to string the bow of Tametomo.

One of the most accomplished samurai archers was Minamoto no Tametomo (1139 – 1170), famous throughout the land for his almost miraculous aim. Once he is said to have sunk a ship with a single arrow. The ship was overloaded with enemy soldiers and low in the water. He fired an arrow with a massive head, striking the boat just above the waterline. The arrow split the planking just enough to let the water in, capsizing it.

By the middle of the 900s the samurai warrior class operating in Japan already does most of the police dirty work for the state and again, for private parties as well. Professional soldiers replaced conscripts. They were men that the warlords could trust in times of trouble, and they were rewarded handsomely with status and privilege. By the 12th century, two major warrior clans — the Taira and the Minamoto — stood poised to do battle with one another for land and influence with the Imperial Court. The resulting conflict, the Genpei War (1180 – 1185), ended with a Minamoto victory and the establishment of the samurai class.

Wars between clans, usually over land, continued to rage across the countryside. Battles followed strictly prescribed rituals. The old tradition was that they would ride out upon the battlefield and call out their pedigrees to one another — essentially read out their résumé — and look for a suitable opponent. Once the battle ended, the individual fighters would gather the spoils of victory. The samurai was expected to present to the warlord the severed heads of the samurai he had killed. In the same way that combat battles were ritualized and formalized, so was this process called “head inspection.” After the victory, the warlord would seat himself in some state and the samurai who had done great exploits that day would bring to him the heads of their victims for his inspection and approval. The job that was traditionally done by the women of the warlord’s family was to make the heads presentable with cosmetics. They would apply makeup so that the head wouldn’t appear “dead” and they would comb and dress the hair very precisely. A little known fact is that after a head is severed, it continues to grow facial hair; therefore any subsequent beard growth was shaved during the head cleaning. The blood would be carefully drained so that there wasn’t a disgusting, dripping and gory trophy but with something as close to gentile as could be a severed head.

The way of warfare in Japan had been honed for hundreds of years as the Japanese fought among themselves for land, power and riches. But one day a new enemy appeared on the horizon, one who would force the samurai warrior clans to unite and fight as one. Because of this new enemy, the samurai way of battle was destined to undergo a profound change.

In 1274 fabled Mongol leader Kubla Khan packed several hundred ships with soldiers and set them off to conquer Japan. The Mongol invasions are a very interesting episode in Japanese history, the first time in recorded history that Japan was ever invaded and the last time that Japan was ever invaded by a foreign power until the Americans came in 1945. The battles that followed would change the course of Japanese history. Kubla Khan’s first initiatives against Japan were diplomatic. He sent out an invitation to the Shogun, the ruling warlord of Japan to join with him to become vassals of the Mongol emperor. The first response was to try to stall. There were several series of envoys in and out. Initially the Shogun tried to send back a vague “maybe”
reply but the Mongols persisted. Eventually the Shogunate realized that these people weren’t going to go away so their last diplomatic response was to behead the envoys and send them home in a box. This was not something that Kubla Khan, who would be master of the world, could possibly ignore. The invaders came ashore on an outlying island, putting people to the torch and burning homes and property. By the time the Mongols were ready to land on the Japanese mainland the samurai had a notion of what to expect. But what they didn’t anticipate was how the Mongols intended to fight.

Samurai were accustomed to individual combat — man to man, sword to sword. Kubla Khan’s troops, on the other hand, moved in large groups. Marching to the beat of gongs and drums, large numbers of Mongols, Chinese and Koreans packed themselves into phalanxes and advanced on the enemy, firing huge random showers of arrows. It was a deadly technique. The samurai and regular foot soldiers withered under the initial attack.

During the Mongol invasion the Japanese samurai were in for a rude awakening because their swords weren’t able to effectively combat the Mongols. The Mongols had armor that was thick leather. The samurai swords were breaking on their armor and getting caught in their armor, snapping in two. The first day of the Mongol invasion the samurai fought valiantly on the beaches, but were driven back by the sheer weight of numbers. The Mongols were notorious for being strong fighters. They used to wear silk shirts underneath their armor. Normally most of the arrow’s damage comes when one pull the arrow out, not when it goes into one’s body. But the silk shirts that they wore would carry through with the arrow into the body so they could pull it out, extract it and still be fighting in the battlefield five minutes later.

Mongol archer on horseback

The samurai quickly adapted their fighting skills to the situation and were able to force the Mongols to a tactical withdrawal. It was at this point that a storm caught the Mongol fleet, causing much damage and bringing this first invasion to a end. Anticipating the Mongol's return, the samurai developed more appropriate weapons to fight them. They fashioned new swords that were heavier and broader with larger points to cut through the thick leather armor of the Mongols.

In 1281 the Mongols again struck the coast of Japan. The samurai were well-prepared this time. They had built elaborate fortifications and defined a new battle plan which included guerilla raids. Armed samurai in small boats attacked the ships of the invading Armada at night. In one case, 30 samurai swam out to a ship, cut off the heads of its crew, and swam back. These tactics delayed the Mongols who waited on their vessels for a more opportune occasion to renew the battle. The samurai knew that the time of year that the Mongols had launched the invasion is the time when it's ripe for typhoons in Japan. After only a few days of the Mongul invasion a storm blew up. It was such a manifestation of an answer to prayer of the samurai that they immediately nicknamed the wind The Divine Wind, the *kamikaze* sent from the gods to destroy Japan's enemies.

Even as the Mongol fleet limped back to mainland China, it left behind samurai warriors who changed the way they did battle. Instead of the bow and arrow, the use of swords was on the rise. They left their horses to fight on foot and they adopted weapons like the *naginata*, a vicious single-sided blade on a long pole that could be used for slicing as well as stabbing. Later on as fighting became more intense and more close-up, swords came in and played a larger role in samurai life. The Japanese sword *(nihonto)* came into its own. No longer the straight blade adopted from the Chinese, the curved blade could easily be drawn on horseback in preparation for a match on the ground. Swordsmanship now overshadowed the way of the bow and arrow.

In the three centuries that followed, the samurai would perfect the art of swordsmanship and other martial arts. Beginning in the 1400s the first schools were established to train the samurai in the way of *Iaido,* the way of the sword. Over 450 unbroken years this martial art has proved its value in battle and evolved in times of peace to promote the cultivation of a harmonious and active mind. The practitioner *(iaidoka)* wields a sword not to control the opponent but to control himself.

The samurai were about to enter a new golden age. But first the samurai would be introduced to a new weapon — gunpowder. It would be instrumental in bringing about this new golden age of the samurai.

In 1543 a Chinese junk struggled against the waves as a cruel typhoon forced it toward the shores of Japan. All aboard stared bleakly out and wondered if they would survive. Among them were several Portuguese traders. What they carried in their bags would change the course of Japanese history. One of the sailors who had a gun with him used it to shoot a duck. The
samurai who had never seen anything like this saw this Portuguese sailor pick up what looked like a stick, point it at a bird, this horrible noise goes off, fire flies out the end of the stick and the duck falls out of the sky. Being a bright military person the daimyō thought he had something here; this could be a useful weapon. Originally these weapons were looked down upon as "cowardly weapons," deliverable from a distance. It didn't involve a brave challenge so a lot of the samurai disdained them. However, many of the warlords who realized that winning battles was more important than fine points of samurai honor adopted the aquabus and made many of their foot soldiers into gunners rather than archers or spearmen.

Three great leaders — Oda Nobugawa, Toyotomi Hideyoshi and Tokugawa Iwatsu — in succession were about to bring a thousand years of warfare to an end, and they did it with the help of the musket. Odu Nobugawa was the most skillful at this, figuring out a way to employ the guns successfully to defeat his enemies. In 1575 at the battle of Nagashino, Nobugawa deployed his strategic use of guns against his most formidable enemy, the famous and feared Takada mounted samurai, renowned for their fierce and unstoppable cavalry charges. Nobugawa lined up 3,000 gunners behind a loose wooden palisade. They were placed under the command of one of his most trusted officers who ordered these soldiers to fire rotating volleys of bullets, 3,000 bullets every 15 seconds. This

Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1536-1598)

fusillade decimated the Takada horsemen. Nagashino represented a revolution in Japanese warfare, not simply because guns were used but because of how the guns were used. It was a real revolution for the samurai.

Within a few years Nobugawa, the super daimyō, the shogun, had managed to secure more territory for his military government. His followers, Hideyoshi and later Iwatsu,
continued in his mission; they systematically crushed the power of Buddhist monasteries which had been fiefdoms unto themselves with their own armies of warrior monks. They reined in the outlaw bands of rogue samurai and other fighters who roamed the countryside with no lord to keep them in check. Finally by the early 1600s Tokugawa Iwatsu ruled over a Japan of peace.

With the establishment of the Tokugawa shogunate in the early 1600s the traditions and the culture of the samurai would change yet again. The onset of the Tokugawa regime produces some very dramatic changes, little by little, in the samurai class. At the heart of this of course is the fact that they were no longer fighting; there were no wars. Here you have a class that is ostensibly a warrior class, and because they are the warriors who defend the state they are privileged and set in place as the ruling class, but in fact they're not fighting. Many samurai now had time to practice and perfect their martial techniques, not on the battlefield but in *dojos,* or schools of swordsmanship. Hundreds of these schools flourished. To prove the superiority of their techniques, the best of their swordsmen would challenge rivals to duels, often to the death.

SCHOOL FOR SAMURAI

All teaching sessions at the *dojo* begin with practice with the sword. It takes many years to gain speed and precision, to get the control to stop the sword instantly in a focused cut. Perhaps hardest of all is to obtain the relaxed balance the allows the body to spin so quickly. To practice the techiques of combat the school uses wooden swords *(bokken)* that do not cause injury or death. Their teaching is based on the weak points of Japanese armor, which for the sake of flexibility, do not protect the blood vessels on the inside of the arms and legs. Their purpose is very different from the sword-based sport of *kendo* where the strikes are aimed at the protected parts of the body.

The students practice many different sequences of strokes. Each sequence is called a *kata*. They never practice free sparing due to the danger of serious injury. They always aim the blows at the weak points in the armor although they don't wear armor except on special occasions. The first course of study is with single swords. They learn the basic types of cuts, slashes and parries first, then move on to the finer skills in the more difficult *katas*.

The school has always been located in the countryside. They have a tradition of practicing on rough ground to train themselves in real fighting conditions. They train with a great range of weapons: halbard, spear, short sword and others but always one of the pair has a sword. There are no formal teaching sessions. The students work in pairs, there being only room for two or three pairs at a time. Each pair works through a series of *katas* and then their place is taken by another pair. All teaching is individual and by demonstration. The students aren't allowed to forget that men died to learn what they are being taught.

Most of the students used to be farmers from the area. There are about 50 active members per school. Though all the teachings were once secret, there was never any question of limiting the training to the Japanese heritary samurai class.

New members must sign an oath before joining the school. The rules of the blood oath are:

- Do not lie;
- Be discreet, even among your family;
- Don't argue or fight or be impolite;
- Avoid bad places at all costs;
- Don't fight until qualified; and

- Keep your oath or be punished by the god of the temple.

The training session for advanced students covers all types of weapons. For each weapon there are special exercises. After the sword sessions they move on to single sword against short and long swords. They could, of course, choose to draw only one of their swords but once both were unsheathed special coordination had to be learned to use them effectively. Crossing the two blades is a way of blocking an attack without damaging the blades and from there either sword can be brought in to cut the opponent down.

Many fighting arts use a staff, called a *bō* by the Japanese. It is a brilliant weapon when handled by a master. The problem for a swordsman fighting a longer weapon is how to get past it and reach his opponent. A well-placed blow from an oak staff can shatter a sword blade or a helmet but a sword can make a lethal wound with the lightest of touches. Encircling the sword blade with the tip of the staff can flick the sword out of its owner's hands. The fighter with the staff, however, must always stay out of reach of the swordsman since he has no close quarters defense.

Sword against halbard are some of the most complex and elaborate *katas* of all. The halbard is a deadly weapon — heavy, as sharp as a sword and able to reach the weak places in armor from a distance. No good swordsman would permit this and yet he must move in to attacking range. Because of the length and weight of this weapon it is held in the middle for balance. To counter these powerful strokes demands great skill from a swordsman. He only has a slight speed advantage, and the halbard has the butt end of its shaft to parry blows.

The warrior's problem when fighting with the long spear is different. The man holding the spear will always try to use it at a distance, and the problem for the swordsman is to prevent its powerful momentum from striking him. The warrior must attack past the spear point but his opponent can draw it back quickly. Although a samurai uses his full willpower to fight his way through it still can be difficult to close with a spearman who retreats.

The *dojo* teaches many other secret techniques, including unarmed combat using particularly dangerous techniques since they were designed for the battlefield. Yet at the heart of the teaching, in spite of the concentration on the art of killing, the founder's message is one of peace. He taught that fighting is the last resort and that to kill is evil.

A true samurai despises a warrior who goes around searching for fights, triumphantly killing. Such warriors lead distorted lives. The balance between the art of killing and following a moral way of life is one that many masters of fighting arts maintain. For them the arts of war are also the way of peace.

MIYAMOTO MUSASHI, EMINENT SWORDSMAN

There is a saying in Japan that once only every 500 years a great swordsman is reincarnated. Out of the handful of great swordsmen, perhaps the greatest was born in 1584. Miyamoto Musashi was the most famous swordsman of his day in Japan. He won renown by developing a style of fencing using two swords. He was considered the embodiment of the samurai spirit and of the ideal military man; he was also an accomplished painter. Like many other samurai whose lords had fought and died on the losing side in the Battle of Sekigahara in 1600, Musashi became a masterless samurai *(ronin)*. While a wandering samurai he engaged in duels when challenged and is said to have defeated 68 rivals without being vanquished. The important thing about Miyamoto Musashi is that he is one of the last of the incredibly intrepid warriors that lived at the end of Japan's warring states period. In the subsequent Tokugawa period when peace settled over Japan for two and a half centuries, it was virtually impossible for anyone to come along who had anywhere near the martial qualities that we attribute to Miyamoto Musashi. He was an excellent swordsman and he seems to have been quite a tough kid ever since he was a young teenager. When it came to wielding a sword, no samurai came close in ability. He killed his first opponent in a duel at age 13, finishing off a master swordsman with his own short sword and a 6-foot-long wooden pole.

Miyamoto Musashi

One of the things that stands out about Musashi on the literary descriptions of his life was the kind of psychological warfare that he employed in a variety of duels. It was fairly common at that time to say "We're going to have a duel; show up at X o'clock at such-and-such a place" but it seems to have been his custom not to do that. Either he would show up early and

ambush people when they arrived or frequently show up late to disturb the psychological preparation of the individual he was going to fight, which seems to have been a fairly common technique of Musashi.

Miyamoto Musashi saves a woman by Ando Hiroshige

No contest contributed more to the myth of Musashi than his famous duel with Ganryu, the celebrated swordsman. The match was to take place in the small straits of Fujiyama. A small flotilla of boats crowded with spectators awaited the arrival of the combatants. At the fixed time Ganryu appeared. A three-foot sword hung at his side. But Musashi was nowhere to be found. Ganryu furiously paced back and forth; Musashi finally arrived, carrying a wooden sword. Ganryu, outraged, drew his sword. Musashi stared at Ganryu and smiled tauntingly. Raging with anger, Ganryu bore down on Musashi with his sword. Calmly, Musashi brought his wooden sword down on Ganryu's head, catching him off-balance. Ganryu fell to the sand and Musashi delivered the death blow. Using a cunning bit of psychological swordsmanship, Musashi had provoked Ganryu's rage, and that rage had sealed his fate.

Miyamoto Musashi really lived on the fringes of Japanese samurai society. He was, after all, a person born into a very low-ranking samurai family. He really was a kind of lone wolf. It is one of the attractive features of his life in film and literature. He was a kind of an individual in a society in which individualism is many times difficult to express. He is therefore somewhat romantic. Eventually Musashi hung up his sword. He committed his secrets to paper, producing a book on swordsmanship and strategy, The Book of Five Rings. He is said to have written it in a mountain cave in 1643. It's a strange and complex work that summarizes the principals behind which Musashi operated. It was the way in which he translated his expression of swordsmanship into life itself. It has become quite popular as a guide for businessmen in terms of dealing with strategy with competitors and clients, the idea being that a similar approach is required to that of taking on an opponent with a sword as taking them across a boardroom table. On his deathbed Musashi gave the book to his trusted disciple Terao Katsunobu. The original is lost, but a copy made by Katsunobu has survived. Musashi's final years are considered by many to be one of the best examples of the *bushidō* way of life, the balance that all true samurai sought to achieve: to make peace well and to make war equally well. This dual goal would inspire the creation of some of the finest swords ever made, as well as the perfection of practices such as the tea ceremony and Zen meditation.

The samurai could not hope to achieve excellence in war if he did not understand art. It was all about balance. A man who only understood aggression was not just a brute but a man destined to die at the hands of a true samurai. Culture and arms were likened by one samurai scholar to the two wings of a bird, representing on one hand, authority, and on the other, generosity. Its practical aim was to elicit friendly behavior from the people but at the same time to intimidate them so that they would be obedient and easy to control.

THE SACRED SWORD

The balance that defined the samurai's way of life found its focus in his sword. It was both a work of art and a weapon of death. The sword was the soul of the samurai, deemed sacred as the symbol of the warrior. He ate with it, slept with it; he would never be without it. The sword was so precious to him that if he had to leave it somewhere he had a secondary sword to go inside people's homes. He could not be without an edge weapon. It was something that identified him and from which he could not be separated. Accorded the highest status among the daimyō's luxurious possessions, swords were the items most frequently given as gifts among the military houses of the shogun, the daimyō, and their retainers.

The wielding of the sword was the art of the samurai. The making of a sword was an art equally as skilled and equally as precious, an art performed by the master sword makers of Japan. All samurai sought perfection with the sword, not only in the fighting techniques but in the weapons themselves. The samurai and the sword smith worked together to develop the exquisite, deadly Japanese sword.

Sword making reached its peak of skill by the 14th century. Working solely with a forge, Japanese sword smiths were able to craft steel into some of the finest blades the world has ever known. The process starts with a lump of crude iron. It is purified by hammer blows and by pouring a liquid made from ash over it. The art in making a Japanese sword lies in the folding of the metal. They would hammer and fold the steel thousands of times until they had created a blade

composed of numerous laminations of steel. Out of this process comes the lightness and strength of the blade. After the folding the lump is beaten into its final shape.

Everything about the sword is practical. The beauty of its shape exists because an elegant curve is stronger and cuts well. A groove is cut into it to lighten it without weakening it, and prevent suction gripping the sword in a wound. The smith would take the almost-finished blade and begin a long and painstaking process of polishing, scraping off the grime and the grit from the outside, and with a succession of finer and finer stones, bringing out the beauty within the metal of the Japanese sword. The swordsmith makes only the blade; other craftsmen finish the polishing and sharpening, and make the scabbard hilt and guard. It could take many months to produce a single sword, and a renowned smith's work was revered by samurai across Japan.

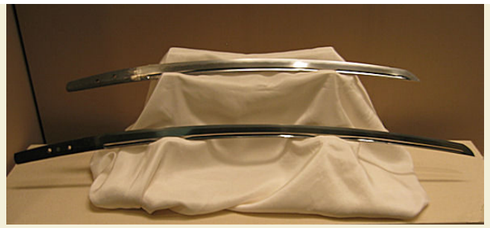
Sword Type	Blade Length	Orientation of blade when worn	How worn
Tachi	Long	Blade downward	Hung from belt by loops
Katana ("dispenser of enemies")	Long	Blade upward	Inserted through belt
Wakizashi	Short	Blade upward	Inserted through belt

Japanese swords are very unique because they are one of the cultures that developed the sword to such a high level, and the high skill was developed through hundreds of years of trial and error, making new swords, destroying old swords that were destroyed in battles and creating new ones. Here we have three swords from different centuries. The one on top is from the 15th century, the one in the middle is from the 18th century and the one on the bottom is from the 20th century. You'll find that the shapes of the swords are different. The sword at the top has a very strong curvature while the one in the middle is straighter.

Three samurai swords

Samurai of the Edo period (1615-1868) wore two swords, called *daisho*, meaning "large and small." These swords were thrust into a sash. This pair of a long and short sword became the samurai's symbol; to wear *daisho* was the samurai's exclusive right and privilege.

This set of swords is an early example of *daisho* from an era before their use became the formal custom. Their makers are both of the Osafune school — one of the great schools of sword making. These swords were probably paired around 1479, when they were fitted with identically decorated sword guards *(tsuba)* and scabbards.



Short sword, 1479
By Osafune Tadamitsu, Japan, Muromachi period (1392-1573), steel
Long sword, 1462
By Osafune Norimitsu, Japan, Muromachi period (1392-1573), steel

SUITS OF ARMOR

To protect against a hail of arrows, the point of a spear or the sharp edge of a sword, artisans and craftsmen built elaborate and highly stylized armor. Japanese suits of armor were constructed chiefly of leather and small iron plates. Lacquer is applied to the leather to strengthen and waterproof it. Arrows were much less likely to penetrate that particular kind of armor. The earlier elite warriors' armor *(oyoroi)* developed starting in the 900s. Cuirass *(domaru)* armor evolved around 1000 to 1100 as lightweight protection for the lower classes of infantry. In the Edo period (1615-1868) a suit of cuirass-type armor *(domaru gusoku* or *domaru yoroi)* emerged as an amalgamation of these two distinct earlier types of armor. This new type of armor gained high status during the Edo period, becoming the most formal protective gear for men of the warrior class. Since actual battles were rare by this time, it would have been created primarily for ceremonial functions. Ancient components, such as the bowl of a helmet fitting over the crown of the head, were often used in the armor which imbues the new work with a powerful sense of the legacy of that particular samurai clan.

Suit of armor
Japan, Edo period (1615-1868)
Lacquered iron plates, leather, textile, and silk cord

The suit of armor in the photograph at right is of the so-called modern type *(tosei gusoku).* It came into vogue in the late sixteenth century, replacing the earlier, elaborate, and far more cumbersome style. A full set of *tosei* armor consists of a body protector, a helmet, and an iron mask.

The body protector consists of a breastplate, a skirt, shoulder guards, arm covers, thigh armor, and shin guards. To allow those parts covering the body to flex with the wearer's movement, many portions were made of thin strips of lacquered iron joined to each other with braided silk lacing. The cord's colors and their lacing and knotting style give the suit a distinctive character.

The armor protecting the torso is made of two large, leather-lined iron plates (front and back). Painted in lacquer on the front plate is the Buddhist guardian deity Achala (Japanese: Fodo Myoo) running over rolling waves. This image suggests that Fodo is charging to protect the wearer. The side flaps of the helmet each bear a gilt family crest.

The half mask consists of a lacquered iron face plate and a throat guard.

Distinguished samurai from the 1500s to the 1800s wore flamboyant helmets designed and produced according to their specifications. The creation of such helmets emerged from a desire by the wearers to be noticed; a helmet's distinctiveness identified the wearer on the battlefield and ensured that his actions were visible to all. Clearly in charge, those who wore such headgear were held morally accountable for following the samurai code.

A two-lobed superstructure has been added to the top of the helmet bowl pictured at left. This feature appears to have been built up first with leather then

Samurai helmet with a half-face mask
approx. 1615-1650
Japan, Edo period (1615-1868)
Iron, leather, laminated paper, lacquer and textile

with laminated paper which was coated with layers of dark-brown lacquer. The back of the helmet was finished with red lacquer and the front was coated to look like oxidized iron.

The neck guards on the helmet at left consist of six horizontal iron plates. After being coated with lacquer, the plates were laced together with braided turquoise-colored silk cords.

The iron mask in the photograph seen at left — which has wrinkles, teeth and whiskers along with an aggressive expression — is designed to cover the face below the eyes. The nose was made from a separate piece of iron and secured with pins, which allowed for its removal. The throat guard, fastened to the edge of the face cover, consists of four iron plates coated with brown-black lacquer. The plates are laced together with braided cords of dark blue silk.

In a complete suit of samurai armor from the 15th century the helmet exists basically to protect the skull. These plates are all iron with lacquer on them. The arms are all chain link with little plates of iron that are also lacquered. The sword will not really be able to cut through this chain link. The hand is all protected. This whole suit of armor looks very bulky but it's so lightweight and functional that this man could actually run for a mile quickly and turn around and fight a battle, and he wouldn't be as tired as one would think he would be because this is not as heavy. It is all very well-made and made to be extremely flexible.

Armor also served a crucial public relations function. The dramatic helmets and face covers project an almost superhuman image of power. When slain in battle, warriors were often buried in the armor they had been wearing at the time of the deaths, so they went to their deaths in style. Armor construction changed alongside developments in weaponry. Though the earlier design of lightweight interlocking plates for mobility is ingenious, the introduction of firearms led to armor with heavier, more solid plates for added protection.

Six-plate courtier's hat-shaped helmet, 1600s
Edo period (1615-1868)
Iron, silver, gilded copper, copper-gold alloy, silk, gilded wood, gold lacquer, leather,

gold leaf

From the collection of

Larry Ellison

Swallowtail-shaped helmet,

1600s-1700s

Edo period (1615-1868)

Iron, Lacquer, papier-mache,

and silk

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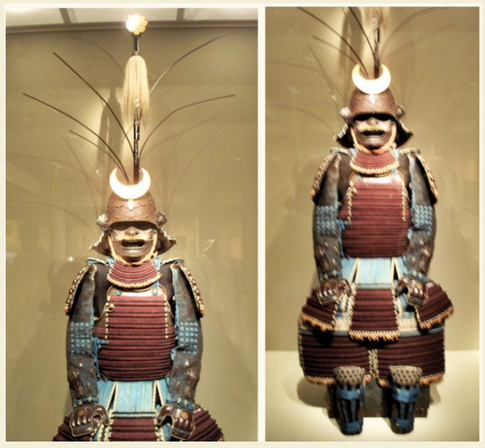

Gusoku-type armor with purple and light blue lacing, 1700s

Edo period (1615-1868)

Iron, lacquer, leather, silk, copper alloy, wood,
gilding, animal hair, hemp
From the collection of Larry Ellison

The Gusoku-type armor shown above *(tosei gusoku* means "modern-style complete body armor") was developed for foot soldiers armed with swords in the 1500s and was lighter than that worn by archers fighting on horseback. It was made during the somewhat peaceful Edo period, probably never saw actual combat and was doubtlessly worn in ceremonial situations or put on display.

The viciously grimacing mask with a mustache of stiff animal hair is crowned by an extraordinary helmet capped by a half-moon crest. The helmet has an unusual inverted lotus flower bud shape created of iron and lacquer calculated to draw attention to the wearer with great effect upon the battlefield. The armor is constructed of many components of various substances meant to safeguard the wearer and provoke dread in the enemy through habiliment of "Shock and Awe." With this style of full-body armor, even the calves have protection.

This armor is decorated in several places with the nine-planet crest identified with the enduring and elite Hosokawa samurai clan. A battle standard soars above the helmet finished with the gold Hosokawa crest and festooned with whalebone bristles meant to represent a leafless tree. This powerful tribe was a top warrior family during the Edo period and tracks its ancestry back to a ninth-century emperor.

RELIGION AND CULTURE

The samurai considered his sword to be the vessel of his soul. It represented the sublime balance between the opposite forces of destruction and creation, of war and beauty. However, to be a great swordsman required more than physical skill and will power. Among the subjects that they studied was a special mystical form of Buddhism. They used it in a practical way, weaving spells to cure illness and to defend against death in battle.

Within the teaching of the arts of war we find the writing of the nine signs or characters; the drawing is a shorthand for a complex set of gestures. The practice is a major contribution of mystical Buddhism to the arts of strategy. There are nine such signs. These nine signs came originally from India and they are mantras. Clasping the hand in a certain way creates a mantra, for example *Rin*. Each sign has a chant with it. All the characters have a significance related to the spell. Each position of the hands is another prayer and all nine together make the spell. There are two ways of making the spell, either by making the hand prayer shapes or by drawing lines, each line representing one of the hand positions. It is then necessary to focus the spell and that is why the tenth character is used. This is called "the method of the tenth character." This sets the spell. This method can be used when one is going to sail on a ship. Even if the ship capsizes the one utilizing this method will survive. So for protection from drowning in a shipwreck the warrior drew the spell on his hand and then wrote a tenth "water" character, a dragon. In battle, the warrior did the same to protect himself.

Many samurai, raised to face the enemy without fear, sought serenity in the spirituality of Zen. They felt an affinity for Zen, which more than some other schools of Japanese Buddhism emphasized self-reliance. The great swordsman Musashi maintained that a warrior's spirit should achieve a condition of nothingness. He wrote: "In the void is virtue, and no evil." At the heart of Zen was meditation. Meditation developed a calmness of spirit necessary when facing the innumerable threats of the outside world. But it served a larger purpose as well; it told the samurai who he was and of his place in the universe. Both Zen practitioners and samurai warriors were urged to be mindful of death, and both stressed individual responsibility. Zen meditation was often performed in a place of beauty. In those days, when people needed a very peaceful moment, they went to the Zen temple or had tea.

The Zen aspect of tea commended itself to the samurai. Among the daimyō, tea was often drunk in social settings. The art of hosting and participating in such events was essential knowledge for any lord of the samurai. Oda Nobugawa gave many tea ceremonies, and there are few daimyō from then onward about whom there is no tale of something happening during a tea ceremony. The tea ceremony, like the rock garden, created a focus for inner contemplation. When samurai people are in the tea room, they feel they are most peaceful. They can forget war and they don't have to face any enemy. They need that moment. The ceremony usually took place in a specially-built small room or hut in the garden of the host.

It took up to two hours to prepare the water, the tea and the bowls. The host for the ceremony entered through one small door, his guests through another.

Like other Japanese rituals, this had a practical purpose. With such a small entrance, the samurai could not bring his sword with him. In the same way as he left his weapon outside, he also left thoughts of war or intrigue at the door, for in the ceremony guests and host were only allowed to discuss the tea-drinking itself. The appreciation of a simple tea bowl, a flower arrangement and the vase that complimented the ritual were as important to the samurai as the drawing of his sword in battle. They are known to have rewarded success on the battlefield not with land or status but with prized utensils for the tea ceremony. There was a time when a single tea utensil could be more cherished than the finest sword and valued as highly as the land comprising an entire province.

Tea ware for use in Japanese tea ceremony

Japanese warriors also cultivated an appreciation of incense, using it to perfume their armor before going into battle. They participated in *Kumi-koh* competitions (incense guessing games) as did their elite contemporaries.

Successful daimyō had to be able to move gracefully in sophisticated literary and artistic circles, and to encourage similar levels of artistic achievement in their domains. They were not only patrons of the arts but artists in their own right. So it's not really surprising that the expressions of Zen which the samurai sought in the tea ceremony, in calligraphy, in their gardens, in their appreciation of incense, would be eagerly seized upon as one more way of living the samurai life. That is what makes the samurai such unique warriors, who were at the same time both killers and artists. They consciously strove to embody the ideal characteristics of the warrior elite by pursuing achievements in two realms: culture *(bun)* and arms *(bu)*.

Throughout the centuries of warrior rule, Kyoto was Japan's center of culture. No matter how distant the domains they governed, the lords of the samurai always kept an eye on Kyoto, which they regarded as the ultimate political prize. A warrior lord's essential goal in life was to gain supremacy, and if the chance arose, he would try to gain control of Kyoto. But without understanding Kyoto's unique culture — which centered on the imperial court and the aristocracy — the daimyō would never be able to successfully rule the city.

A ceramic samurai figurine in a market stall

As the great shoguns began to reunify Japan during the late 1500s, relative peace descended on the country, and with peace samurai schools combined literary skills with the traditional martial arts. The intention was to create an individual who could quote from Chinese classics as deftly as he could use a sword or lance. The very first article of their law code they quoted an ancient Chinese saying: "From of old there has been the practice of following the arts of peace on the left hand and the arts of war on the right hand. Both of these must be mastered." So we find samurai who write excellent poetry, samurai who find themselves in calligraphy, and ultimately samurai who are also artists. Warrior rule continued into the second half of the 1800s, when a series of reforms known as the Meiji Restoration changed the way Japan was governed. Military domains were converted by newly appointed (later elected) governors into civil prefectures that remained at peace with one another.

The samurai have a fascinating legacy a part of which is real and a part of which is simply image of cultured killers, men who on the one hand were brutally efficient warriors and on the other hand, highly literate men of culture and refinement. They were among the most highly trained warriors in the world. Beginning as conquerors of an inhospitable island, they adapted to the dangers they confronted by becoming expert warrior horsemen. They were masters of several weapons: the spear, the bow and arrow, and the lance. They were also skilled at unarmed combat. The sword became their greatest tool, the truest extension of their fighting soul. The samurai legacy remains alive in Japan. The traditional Japanese martial arts are still practiced vigorously and taught with determination by many skillful teachers. The samurai spirit has never died. Japan's martial artists continue to carry on the tradition of *bushidō*. Their unique approach to honor and discipline made an indelible impression on Japanese society and changed the course of a country's history.

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