

TRADITIONS OF THE BUSHI

Bushi is a general term used to describe the warrior class of feudal and pre-feudal Japan. This term described the aristocratic warrior of the ninth century to the nineteenth century.

The "Samurai" were only one such rank among the Bushi and was by no means the highest. Only through Western ignorance have we classified all Japanese warriors as "Samurai" when the term Bushi is technically more correct.

The term "Samurai" originally referred to servants who waited on nobility. Even later when the term became extended to include a certain kind of warrior, the connotation of service was not completely removed.

The ranks or levels of a Bushi depended upon social status, his martial merit and position of the Shogun's favor.

Though no particular class of the Japanese nation had a particular monopoly on "Yamato-damashi". There was perhaps no segment of Japanese society so filled with this pride as the warrior class. This was the Bushi. So militarily linked was the term Bushi, that those born as Bushi, but unskilled in the combative arts did not receive the title.

In the 9th century, a truly professional soldier emerged. He made weapon and unarmed fighting arts a condition for survival of society. It was a hundred years later in the 10th century that the military profession became a hereditary privilege. Fathers passed on their knowledge of fighting and skills to sons with training of the young "Bushi" starting at a very early age. The curriculum included fencing, archery, yawara, horsemanship, and use of the spear, tactics, calligraphy, ethics, literature and history.

"Bushido" or "Warrior's Way", is a system of codes and traditions followed by the warrior class of Japan. The code placed particular emphasis on Justice, Courage, Benevolence, Politeness, Truthfulness, Honor, Loyalty, and self-control.

Justice or rectitude, is the most cogent precept in the code of the "Bushi". Nothing is more loathsome to a Bushi than underhand dealings and crooked undertakings. Some popular thought by warriors in regard to Justice are: "Rectitude is the power of deciding upon a certain course of conduct in accordance with reason, without wavering...to die when it is right to die, to strike when to strike is right". Others speak of it in the following terms: "Rectitude is the bone that gives firmness and stature. As without bones the head cannot rest on top of the spine, nor hands move, nor feet stand, so without rectitude neither talent nor learning can make of a human frame a "Samurai". With it the lack of accomplishments is as nothing".

Courage is a virtue only in the cause of righteousness. Death for an unworthy cause was termed a "dog's death". The young "Bushi" were continuously drilled and indoctrinated in courage. When young, they were often led to un-nerving places as execution grounds, graveyards, and houses reputed to be haunted. This system of "drilling the nerves" was what often gave the Samurai their "nerves of steel".

Benevolence is thought of as a feminine trait. It was thought an essential part of nature to counter-balance rectitude and stern justice, two masculine traits.

The trait of benevolence includes love, affection for others, sympathy and nobility of feelings. These were considered the highest attributes for the soul.

Politeness is a poor virtue if one does it for fear of offending good taste. The casual visitor in Japan immediately observes politeness, courtesy and excellent manners. They are part of the Japanese way of life. Etiquette is an important part of life in Japan. Bowing, walking, standing, table manners and tea serving were developed as ritual ceremonies. Etiquette harmonized the total being with himself and his environment and expressed mastery of spirit over the flesh.

Gracefulness represented economy of force and provided a reservoir for force. Fine manners meant power in repose.

The tea ceremony directed a person's thoughts away from the world and as such, was a method to achieve discipline of the soul.

Politeness is activated by tender feeling toward the sensibilities of others. As such, the warrior would weep with those who weep; and rejoice with those that rejoice.

Untruthfulness according to Bushido was deemed cowardly. As such it was dishonorable. Honesty was very important to the Bushi. Honesty was an extension of the Bushi's vision of courage, so the Bushi endeavored to be honest in all situations.

A vivid consciousness of personal dignity and worth is implicit in the word Honor. Honor was conveyed by such terms as "na" (name) "men-moku" and "guai-bun" (external bearings). Any infringement upon a Samurai's honor was felt as "ren-shi-shin" (a sense of shame). Disobedience to a code or to a superior produced a feeling of guilt and shame.

According to a Samurai legend "Dishonor is like a scar on a tree, which with time, instead of effacing, only enlarges".

To avoid over-reacting to small slights, the Samurai chided each other for being too short-tempered. They would comfort themselves with the adage "To bear what you think you cannot bear your sword". Patience and forgiveness formed an essential part of the meaning of honor.

Life was thought cheap if honor and fame could be had by giving it up. However, if a cause presented itself that was deemed dearer than life, with serenity and speed, life was ended.

Loyalties to the state or one's feudal lord were the most important aspects of the trait of honor. School children were taught to sacrifice everything for the Emperor. In Japan, a personal being, the Emperor, represented the laws and the state. Loyalty was an ethical demand stemming from this political theory. A Samurai was obliged to appeal to the intelligence and conscience of his sovereign by demonstrating the sincerity of his words with the shedding of his blood.

Self-control was an important trait for the bushi. It was considered unmanly for a Samurai to betray his emotions on his face. Being stoic is in reality a masking of excitability and emotions. Long years of discipline and self-repression are believed to have created a fertile field for institutionalizing the self-destructive tendency thought essential to regain honor.

To break one area of the "Warrior's Code" was dishonor. When a Samurai was dishonored he would commit "Seppuku" or death by self-disembowelment. Popularly known as "hara-kiri" (ripping the abdomen), the ritual was carried out in witness of Japanese officials in the following manner:

The condemned man would enter the temple and bow to the witnesses and walk slowly to a raised platform in front of the altar. He then sits back on the altar with the "Kaishaku" crouching on his left side. An official would then come forward bearing a stand holding a short sword, nine and a half inches in length. The condemned receives the sword and reverently raises it to his head with both hands, placing it in front of him. The condemned makes his confession bowing again to the officials. Allowing his garments to slip down to his girdle and remaining naked to the waist, carefully according to custom he tucked his sleeves under his knees to prevent himself from falling backward. According to custom, a noble Japanese gentleman should die falling forward. He then takes the sword in his hand and then stabs himself deeply below the waist on his left side. He would then slowly pull the blade slowly to the right side and then turning the blade in the wound would cut slightly upwards. By law, in order to restore honor he should never show any facial expression. Drawing the sword out, he leaned forward and stretched out his neck. At that moment, the "Kaishaku" still crouching, stands and severs the head with one swift stroke of his sword.

This is the ceremony of "seppuku". As this article indicates, the traditions and duties of the Bushi began at his birth and ended with his death and all was focused on personal honor.

In feudal Japan, often the Bushi were the only device of law and order around. These men of valor, and dignity, often compared to the European Knights were governed by their code: "Bushido". It is through this that BuJutsu or Martial Arts developed and finally Budo or "martial ways".

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