

Sword and Spirit

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- **Forging a disciplined and positive mindset.**
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Kata in Koryu Bujutsu

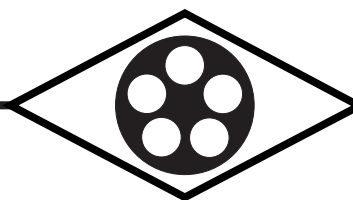
The Physical Embodiment of Edo-period Samurai Philosophy

The Cartesian mind-body split that has dominated Western philosophy since the seventeenth century has cast a shadow over the American interpretation of the classic philosophical treatises of the Japanese samurai class. While the Buddhist and Zen principles contained in such treatises are fundamental to the forging of the samurai spirit, they are also inseparable from the physical training of the warrior. And yet, until pre-modern Japan scholar Karl Friday published *Legacies of the Sword* (1997), the understanding American audiences had of the samurai preparation for combat was severely limited by the fact that philosophical principles were often treated separately from the physical aspects of martial training.¹

While Friday's study provides essential insights into the martial culture of the samurai, it mostly focuses on one *koryu* (old school)—*Kashima Shinryu*—and does not spend much time analyzing other schools and their respective understandings of *kata* practice (the study of “forms” in training). Other scholarship on samurai culture includes Donn Draegar's *Classical Bujutsu* and *Classical Budo*, and Diane Skoss' *Classical Warrior Traditions of Japan; Koryu Bujutsu, Sword and Spirit*, and *Keiko Shokun*.^{2 3 4 5 6}

This essay will focus on *Bushido* (Way of the Warrior) as it became codified in the *Edo* period (1603–1867), using three manuals on swordsmanship that explore the complex relationship between technique and philosophy: Miyamoto Musashi's *Book of Five Rings* (c. 1645), Yagyu Munenori's *The Life-Giving Sword* (1632), and Takuan Soho's *The Unfettered Mind* (17th century).^{7 8 9} Through these works (the first two written by renowned swordsmen of the *Hyoho Niten Ichi-ryu* and *Yagyu Shinkage-ryu hyoho* schools respectively, the latter from a Zen master), we'll examine how *kata* embody the physical and mental aspects of *Bushido*.

To truly understand the *koryu bujutsu* (old-style warrior arts), it is necessary to understand the environment in which these martial practices were born. The *koryu bujutsu* are a product of the *Sengoku jidai* (Warring States



Period). The Sengoku jidai was a period of over a century of nearly constant civil war that started in 1467 with the beginning of the Onin War.¹⁰ This series of wars stemmed from a weak central government under the Ashikaga shogunate. *Daimyo* (warlords) rose up across the country and gathered personal armies.¹¹ This led to warfare between numerous clans, factions, and alliances as they attempted to gather more power. Civil war finally came to an end in October 1600 with the Battle of Sekigahara. At this battle, Tokugawa Ieyasu, who had gathered together a force of daimyo from eastern Japan, defeated the allied lords of western Japan.¹² With this victory Ieyasu finally brought peace to Japan and was made Shogun in 1603.¹³

It is during this period of warfare that lasted for over 130 years that the *koryu* *bujutsu* came into being. The samurai, professional warriors in the service of a daimyo, were constantly looking for ways to improve their skills. Those warriors with reputations for excellence in the martial arts became teachers in the employ of the daimyo. These martial arts instructors passed on their knowledge and insights to their students, thus laying the foundation for the different *ryu* (schools) of the martial arts. This phenomenon was so pervasive that over “nine thousand different martial *ryu* have been catalogued, but not all are extant.”¹⁴



Even though the *Pax Tokugawa* had descended on Japan after the Battle of Sekigahara, and the samurai class was slowly being converted into bureaucrats, they held tightly to their past as professional warriors. One way of doing this was by maintaining their study of the military arts. Daidoji Yuzan (1639–1730) was a samurai from a prominent family and was employed as a military strategist. He wrote the *Bushido Shoshinshu* (*Code of the Samurai*) as a primer for young samurai on proper behavior, etiquette, and service to one’s lord. This text is filled with admonishments on the importance of military training.¹⁵ Daidoji says:

*One who is a samurai, even though only a retainer certainly should find himself a suitable instructor and study the traditional military arts so that he knows everything there is to be known about them. Some may say that this is not necessary for a small samurai, but I consider this to be a shallow view... In addition, study of the military arts will make one who is naturally clever more so and one who is born somewhat dull quite a bit less so. Therefore, all samurai certainly should apply themselves to it.*¹⁶

This attitude was so deeply imbedded in the psychology of the samurai class that even in the late Edo period, over one hundred years after the last major conflict, martial training was still considered necessary for one to be a proper samurai. Katsu Kokichi, a low-ranking samurai, describes his son’s virtues in his 1843 autobiography:

*My son, Rintaro, is serious and associates only with friends who are good and shuns the company of those who may be a bad influence. He studies the military arts, is devoted to me, and looks after his sisters.”*¹⁷

Clearly martial training was still an important part of life of a member of the samurai class. Katsu’s own martial training started in 1812 at the age of eleven.¹⁸ His advice to his descendants was to “aim to be strong of body. Eat



simple food and work at mastering the military arts. If possible, strive to excel in at least one art.”¹⁹

While the status of martial training as a requirement for samurai despite the peace that settled over the land was a constant, the martial arts that were practiced experienced an evolution in the period between 1600 and 1868 when the shogunate was overthrown and the laws of *Haitorei* Edict outlawed samurai privileges, such as the right to wear swords.²⁰ Before the Battle of Sekigahara in 1600, the martial schools tended to teach battlefield martial arts. Arts like *Maniwa Nen-ryu*²¹ and *Tenshin Shoden Katori Shinto-ryu*²² are exemplars of this style of martial art. These arts contained deeper stances, and their attacks targeted areas that would not be protected if an enemy was wearing armor.²³

As the threat of warfare evaporated under the Tokugawa shogunate’s tight rule, martial arts grew to fit the needs of the population. New martial arts grew out of the practices of older ones. The creators of these new arts studied at least one and usually several of the older battlefield arts. Armed with these teachings they went on *musha shugyo* (warrior’s journeys). According to Friday, during a *musha shugyo* a swordsman would “have traveled about the country seeking instruction and engaging in duels and sparring matches.”²⁴

During this intense period of training the founders of the new schools changed their arts. Fighting a duel in street clothes provided many more options for places to strike the enemy. Without the constraints of a heavy suit of armor and slick footing conditions on the battlefield, stances changed. Regular training and challenge matches were performed in dojo, while duels were generally fought on flat or level ground. This shift in the terrain of where fights took place led to stances becoming more upright, with the feet positioned more closely together.

These changes in stance allowed the swordsman to move more quickly. Speed became a significant factor now that swordsmen were typically fighting without armor. Good examples of this trend can be seen in schools such as the many branches of *Itto-ryu*, *Yagyū Shinkage-ryū Hyōhō*, and *Hyōhō Niten Ichi-ryū*.^{25 26 27} While all three of these schools have application to armored fighting, they were primarily designed to be used on dueling grounds.



Yagyū Munenori, the second headmaster of *Yagyū Shinkage-ryū Hyōhō*, and Miyamoto Musashi, the founder of *Hyōhō Niten Ichi-ryū*, were both master swordsmen that left behind documents for the instruction of their students regarding how to carry on their arts. These documents, *The Life-Giving Sword* by Munenori, and *The Book of the Five Rings* by Musashi, give us deeper insight to what training was necessary to become a successful swordsman.

The primary component to training in the *koryū bujutsu* is *kata*. Dave Lowry, an exponent of *Yagyū Shinkage-ryū Hyōhō*, explains:

*They were sequences of combat: attacks and counters; the exploitation of weaknesses in stance, weaponry, and armor; the manipulation of every facet, mental and physical, that increased the odds of destroying an enemy in close-quarter conflict. These sequences of fighting engagement are the kata of the bugei (warrior arts). For the bugeisha (one who studies the warrior arts), they are indispensable. They bring coherence to his study. Kata are the framework around which his training is organized.*²⁸

It is fair to say that *kata* are the *koryū bujutsu*. Without *kata* the various *ryū* would have lacked an effective container to hold the knowledge transmitted from teacher to student.



Despite kata having the outward appearance of rote memorization, it was a vehicle to learn how to break patterns and be able to respond freely in the most stressful of situations by freeing the mind. While both *The Book of the Five Rings* and *The Life-Giving Sword* take some time to address details of how to deal specifically with a particular situation in a duel with swords, the majority of these works talk about what the mind should be doing during a fight. For example, Musashi says:

*In the martial arts of one-on-one as well, you should think in terms of Becoming Your Opponent. If he thinks you have understood the martial arts well, that you are strong in technique and that you are an expert in the Way, he is surely thinking that he is going to lose. You should investigate this thoroughly.*²⁹

Musashi was investigating ways to get inside the head of his opponent. This is something that he understood well, as he fought over 60 duels, the first of which was at age thirteen.³⁰

Yagyū Munenori, who held the position of one of the fencing instructors to the Shogun's household, also focused on the training the mind receives in kata training. Munenori said, "The enlightenment of this mind is difficult to obtain by looking at books, or to reach by listening to sermons."³¹ In other words, the only way to find enlightenment is through thorough exploration of kata, which will enable the swordsman to reach the proper mindset needed to cut down an opponent.

Takuan Soho, a Buddhist priest from a samurai family, wrote a letter to his friend Munenori on the Buddhist interpretations of the mind, and how that relates to swordsmanship, in *The Unfettered Mind*. Takuan argues that it is necessary for the accomplished swordsman to have a beginner's mind. Takuan said:

As he studies various things and is taught the diverse ways of how to take a stance, the manner of grasping his sword and where to put his mind, his mind stops in many places. Now if he wants to strike at an opponent, he is extraordinarily

*discomforted. Later, as days pass and time piles up, in accordance with his practice, neither postures of his body nor the ways of grasping the sword are weighed in his mind. His mind simply becomes as it was in the beginning when he knew nothing and had yet to be taught anything at all.*³²

By returning to the beginner's mind, Takuan is suggesting that the swordsman will not think about the myriad of details that go into properly cutting with the sword; he will simply cut.

Ultimately, the most important thing for the swordsman is to let go of attachments, such as thought. Focusing thoughts on details of a fight will create a beat of time that one's opponent can exploit. Takuan says:

*If we put this in terms of your own martial art, the mind is not detained by the hand that brandishes the sword. Completely oblivious to the hand that wields the sword, one strikes and cuts his opponent down. He does not put his mind in his adversary. The opponent is Emptiness. I am Emptiness. The hand that holds the sword, the sword itself, is Emptiness. Understand this, but do not let your mind be taken by Emptiness.*³³

By studying kata in depth, by rote memorization of the sequence of attacks and responses, one learns form. By reaching the deeper meanings of these kata one learns the mindset needed to break form and be able to move freely in an engagement with an opponent.

According to Takuan:

*It cannot be transmitted with words, no matter what method one may take, it cannot be taught. Therefore, this is called the doctrine of "a special transmission beyond instruction." This is a doctrine outside the teachings of an instructor, a doctrine that particularly requires self-enlightenment and realization on one's own.*³⁴


Ultimately, the teacher of the koryū bujutsu can give the student the tools needed to set out on the path to



enlightenment; however, the teacher cannot lead the student to enlightenment. Enlightenment in the martial arts starts with kata, but the final destination is something that the student must find on his or her own.

The koryu bujutsu have a long history. With the origins of these combative methodologies tracing to the mid-1400s they have evolved from battlefield arts into arts that focused on dueling. They became an integral part of the psychology and lifestyle of the samurai class.

When viewed by the outsider these archaic methods of striking down an opponent with a sword seem to be an exercise in rote learning. However, they contain much deeper levels of meaning, and have the power to transform practitioners of the koryu bujutsu, allowing them to break free of the patterns of kata and to be able to move with the freedom of the Beginner's Mind.

The koryu bujutsu have had a lasting effect on Japan and its culture, one that can still be felt today. 

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- ²² Skoss, ed., *Sword and Spirit*, 67–69.
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- ²⁴ Skoss, ed., *Sword and Spirit*, 162.
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- ²⁹ Miyamoto, 107.
- ³⁰ Miyamoto, 37–38.
- ³¹ Yagyu, 113–114.
- ³² Takuan, 34.
- ³³ Takuan, 54.
- ³⁴ Takuan, 129.

