

Sword and Spirit

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— Benefits of Budo —

Regardless of the times in which you live, or the circumstances of your life, success largely depends on things you can control:

- Building a foundation of strong relationships in a community of mutual support and achievement.
- Forging a disciplined and positive mindset.
- Enhancing your physical health and capabilities.

These are exactly the benefits membership in an authentic dojo provides.

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Koryu on the Battlefield

Editor's Note — A member of the Itten Dojo Nihon Jujutsu class, someone that happens to be an active duty Colonel and military historian currently serving as a professor at the U. S. Army War College, posed a question. He asked whether any extant koryu preserve teachings related to large-scale military engagements of the samurai. I said that I guessed that would not be the case, since most koryu that have made it into the 21st Century were formalized in the Edo Period, after the end of the wars of Japanese unification. But, to be more certain, I posted the question on the Koryu Bujutsu Facebook group, and received a detailed reply from a longtime student and instructor of Japanese swordsmanship, Jenyer Paez Sensei. He graciously gave permission to print his post here.

The question of whether any extant koryu (traditional Japanese martial arts schools) preserve doctrine for large-scale engagements requires some contextual understanding of the development of samurai martial arts, the social status of the samurai, and the evolution of military thought in Japan.

Contextual Development of Samurai Arts

The samurai originally arose as a warrior class during the Heian period (794–1185), primarily serving the aristocracy and later becoming the military elite under the Kamakura shogunate (1185–1333). The rise of the samurai coincided with the consolidation of feudal structures, and samurai martial arts evolved to meet the needs of warfare at the time—ranging from small-scale skirmishes to larger, battlefield engagements. As samurai were both warriors and landowners, their martial training was shaped by their social role.

Over time, martial arts schools (koryu) began to formalize combat techniques for samurai, typically focusing on individual combat. These schools developed techniques for the battlefield, such as kenjutsu, *sojutsu* (spearmanship), and archery. However, these were primarily focused on the samurai's role as an individual combatant rather than on large-scale, coordinated military tactics.



Large-Scale Engagements and Koryu

While there are schools that preserved military techniques, the development of specific tactics for large-scale engagements was not the primary focus of most koryu. Traditional martial arts schools generally provided training for one-on-one combat, with some emphasis on tactics involving small groups, such as for the use of the *yari* (spear) or cavalry. The samurai were trained in individual combat skills and leadership roles within small squads or detachments rather than for the battlefield as part of a larger military formation. Larger-scale tactics, especially the coordination of thousands of troops in battle, were not extensively formalized in the way modern military doctrine might be. While several schools (like the Tenshin Shoden Katori Shinto-ryu) did incorporate some strategies related to unit formations and battle tactics, this was typically not the main focus of the curriculum.

Military tactics at the time often relied more on personal experience and the leadership of high-ranking samurai or generals, rather than codified doctrine as we would see in later military history.

Training for Common Soldiers vs. Samurai

Martial schools in Japan were often developed based on the social status of their students. Some schools, such as those created for samurai, focused on advanced techniques and strategies suited for their high social standing, military leadership, and battlefield roles. These schools often taught not only combat techniques but also the philosophy of warfare, leadership, and martial ethics. In contrast, schools that trained common soldiers (*ashigaru*) developed more specialized techniques suited to their roles in a larger military unit. These schools focused more on practical skills for specific battlefield functions, such as spearmen in platoons or archers within larger regiments.

Alex Bennett's *Kendo* and "The Art of Killing"

In Chapter 1 of Alexander C. Bennett's *Kendo, Culture of the Sword*, titled "The Art of Killing," he discusses the transition from individual martial practice to a more philosophical approach to combat. He traces how samurai swordsmanship evolved from being a tool of individual survival to an art form emphasizing personal



discipline and spiritual development. While this shift occurred over centuries, it also reflects a broader trend where the role of samurai in large-scale combat was less about tactical formations and more about individual prowess, discipline, and leadership. Bennett's work highlights how martial arts disciplines, particularly those like kendo, became more focused on the development of character and philosophy after the end of feudal warfare.

The use of swords and other weapons became less about battlefield tactics and more about personal growth, a shift that reflected the changing role of the samurai from battlefield warriors to bureaucrats and administrators.

Conclusion

While koryu preserved techniques relevant for personal combat and small group tactics, few schools focused on the coordination required for large-scale engagements. Instead, samurai and their martial schools often depended on personal skill, leadership, and ad hoc tactics in battle, with large-scale military doctrine evolving more through military families, generals, and on-the-ground experience rather than through formalized schools. The focus of many koryu was shaped by the social status of their students—samurai for individual combat, and common soldiers for practical skills on the battlefield. Alex Bennett's *Kendo* illustrates how the philosophical development of martial arts reflects the changing role of the samurai from warriors to bureaucratic elites. 🌀

Illustrations, taken from antique Japanese post cards, are courtesy of Scott Harrington.





Jenyer Paez Sensei is a passionate martial artist and educator with over 25 years of experience in budo. As a social studies teacher at iMater Academy, he sponsors the Budo Club, where students study the historical development, culture, and practice of Japanese martial arts while exploring the impact of martial arts on contemporary American society. Paez Sensei began practicing budo at a young age. He now holds 5th-dan *Renshi* in Ryushin Shouchi Ryu and a *Shido-in* teaching license under Yahagi Kunikazu Sensei. Additionally, he trains in Muso Shinden Ryu under Kaneda Kazuhisa Sensei. As a member of the All-United States Kendo Federation (AUSKF), Paez Sensei is committed to advancing his practice and fostering a deeper awareness and appreciation of Japanese martial arts through iaido and kendo. He is also an instructor at the Miami Budokan, where he shares his knowledge and philosophy of discipline, respect, and continuous growth.

Books on the samurai and battles in feudal Japan:

Stephen Turnbull

The Samurai Sourcebook
The Lone Samurai and the Martial Arts
Samurai Warriors
Samurai Warfare
Battles of the Samurai
The Samurai

Thomas Cleary

The Japanese Art of War

William Wayne Farris

Heavenly Warriors — The Evolution of Japan's Military, 500–1300

Karl Friday

Hired Swords — The Rise of Private Warrior Power in Early Japan

Mitsuo Kure

Samurai — An Illustrated History

