

# The art of being honorable, bushido and the influence on samurai's view on life

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Throughout history warriors have died for a cause, whether it was defending their country, family, way of life, or their own interests. The Warriors of Rome would die for their emperor and the glory of Rome. The Knights who fought in the holy land during the Middle Ages died for their nation and religion. Living by a strict code of conduct, the Warriors of Japan would give up their lives for their honor and for the ones they served. These warriors were the Samurai. Before we can understand the Samurai's ways however, we must look at their history.

Historians know little about the root origins of the Samurai, however the ancestors of the Samurai began to rise up and fight through the early struggles in Japan. One of the first signs of warfare in which these warriors fought was the war with three kingdoms of Korea. During these battles, the Japanese were first introduced to the idea of cavalry, only having used horses as beasts of burden. Along with new advances in warring methods, during this period in Japanese history one of the clans of Japan, The Yamato, became more powerful than the rest, and thus became the ruling clan. There are many myths about how the Yamato came to power, but once they had, many of the uji, the ancient clans, tried to overthrow the Yamato but they were unsuccessful. During the Taika Reforms of AD 646, all clans were put under the rule of the emperor, which made the other clans dissatisfied. Any rebellions of the clans and the uprising of the Emishi people in AD 774, called the Thirty-Eight Years' War, were subdued by the early warriors of Japan who served the Emperor. In AD 894 Kyoto became the capital of Japan. The army of the emperor, the ancestors of the Samurai, had now grown

strong by then, riding horses and using a wide assortment of weapons including bows and arrows, swords, and spears.

In the ninth century Japan fell into a depression. Starvation and plagues were common and lawlessness, corruption in the government, riots and rebellions were also normal during these years. With the coming of the tenth century came the right for provincial governors to command and use the warriors that would soon be called the Samurai to stop disorder. Soon these governors, along with other rich landowners grew more powerful and they gained more control of the the warriors of Japan by hiring them for their own use. The word samurai, meaning “ those who serve” (Turnbull, 13), was first used in the tenth century when referring to the warriors of Japan. At first, people only used this word for those who served the Emperor, specifically those who guarded the castle. Later on, however, the term stretched out to include all those who were hired by a governor or important landowners.

As years went by, the Samurai began to be more respected and valued. Samurai families became prominent figures in the society. Some had gained this image by military feats, others by being descendants of uji. By the eleventh century Samurai clans were very powerful and influential, especially the Taira and Minamoto clans. Through the Hogan Rebellion in 1156, these two clans eventually were put in opposition. The Taira won the dispute and almost wiped out the Minamoto. After a few years however, the Minamoto rose again from their tattered remains and challenged the Taira once again. This new dispute led to the Battle of Uji and later to the Gempei War in 1180.

The Gempei War is a crucial part of Samurai history in two ways. First, the Samurai became even more respected, feared, and well known because of their feats and achievements during the war. Many tales, legends, and artwork about the Samurai came out of this war that were passed down through many generations and still are known today. In fact, most of the solid and well known facts about the Samurai came out of this war; Their loyalty, fighting styles, and rituals are only a few examples. The Second way the Gempei war affected the history of the Samurai was that this was the first time a Samurai would take the throne and rule over Japan. In 1192 Minamoto Yoritomo took on the title Shogun and became a the military dictator of Japan. The rise of the Shogun reduced the Emperor to the position of a religious and traditional figurehead under the Shogun., and not a position of a political and influential figure.

In 1199 Yoritomo was killed in a riding accident, which eventually led to the crumbling of the Minamoto Dynasty two generations later when they were replaced by the Hojo. Instead of a bakufu, a government run by a Shogun, the Hojo endeavoured to bring about an imperial restoration in 1221. The Hojo did not completely achieve their goal yet it still brought an end to the Shogun, thus leading the country into the thirteenth century, the age of the Mongols. Genghis Khan, with his Mongol army, swept down conquering land from Korea to Poland and in 1274 he invaded the Japanese island of Kyushu yet the Samurai held them off using many tactics. During this struggle the word "kamikaze" was used for one of first times in history, referring to a storm that wrecked the Mongol army and thus aided the Samurai in defeating the Mongols. This term was later referred to using oneself as a

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weapon by committing suicide to damage the enemy's forces, predominantly seen in the tactics of the Kamikaze pilots in WWII.

In the 14th century another movement for restoration of imperialism was established and led by the Emperor Go Daigo. It was just as successful as the restoration of 1221 but it brought fame to the Samurai that helped with the endeavour. Then came the Nanbokuchō Wars that brought fame to the Samurai Kusunoki Masashige for his undying loyalty to the Emperor, but because of his loyalty, he killed himself at the battle of Minatogawa in 1336. Although he knew the battle would be a disaster, he still let it take place for the sake of obedience. This attempt at restoration caused the Hojo to fall and the Ashikaga family to take their place, and the bakufu was reestablished. Soon however, there was unrest in the Samurai clans, which led to the Onin War that took place from 1467 to 1476, thus bringing about a new era: The Era of Warring States.

Also called the Sengoku Jidai, The Era of Warring States was a time of unrest and fighting between the clans of Japan each one led by a daimyo, a feudal lord or this time. During this era, only the strong would survive, and in order to be stronger than their opponents and daimyo had to first, create a numerous and capable army, and second, they had to have the latest weapon technology, bows and arrows, spear, and the newly discovered firearm. Because of the need to surpass the other daimyo in these areas, this era was one of great advancements in Samurai tactics and weaponry.

Typically, it was the the more wealthy and important daimyo who had access to an abundance of supplies, getting their needed items at first by trading

with the West, especially for firearms, and later manufacturing them on their own. At first the Samurai had trouble applying the newly attained firearms to their war tactics but soon volley-firing using firearms and infantry squads was introduced.

The struggle between the clans continued, but the first daimyo to take steps ahead of the rest was Oda Nobunaga. Nobunaga was the first to use the volley-firing tactic in the battle of Nagashino in 1575, which he won. Later on, he occupied Kyoto and destroyed the shogunate. After Nobunaga died in 1582, Toyotomi Hideyoshi, one of Nobunaga's trusted samurai generals, came to rule Japan. After hearing that his master was assassinated, Hideyoshi acted out of loyalty and did not let Nobunaga's life's work collapse; he took Nobunaga's place and after a few military campaigns was able to make his authority firm. During his campaigns he gained support from a few of the daimyo after they had failed to beat him in battle. Some daimyo, however, did not give up as easily but he finally was able to conquer the island of Shikoku and afterwards in 1587 was able to subdue the Kyushu and the Shimazu families. Once the rest of the daimyo in the north submitted to him in 1591 he control all of Japan. However, Hideyoshi did not reinstate the Shogunate and became the despot, although he was still more powerful than any of the Shoguns had ever been.

Even though he had power over the whole of Japan, Hideyoshi wanted more so he started a conquest of China and Korea. He started to conquer the peninsula of Korea but he was driven out and died. Since Hideyoshi was dead, his five-year-old son, Hideyori, inherited the throne. There were many

who supported Hideyori but they were still many who put their faith in a powerful daimyo named Tokugawa Ieyasu. There were a series of battles to decide who would rule Japan. Ieyasu won and became the Shogun. Thus ended the Era of Warring States and began the Edo Period.

During the Edo Period, the Shogun set up a caste system in Japan where the Samurai lords were the highest ranking caste. He gave each lord, who were the daimyo, a territory which they were responsible to rule over. The people under the daimyo would have to pay the lord, usually in rice, but the daimyo still had to answer to the Shogun. Under Tokugawa rule, and after the 1637 - 1638 Shimabara Rebellion, Japan separated themselves from European interaction by the Shogun's Exclusion Edict of 1639. This gave the Samurai lords even more power over their people.

Japan stayed in this state, cut off from the western world, until the early nineteenth century, specifically, Commodore Perry's arrival in 1853 and return in 1854. Knowing that to refuse Perry's trade request would be unwise, The Tokugawa's started to sign trading treaties with the western world, opening up their ports. Many of the daimyo were extremely angered by their government's decision, believing that they gave up the old Japanese values for trade with western "barbarians" (Turnbull, 24). These Japanese traditionalists, although awed by the westerner's might, believed they should overthrow the Shogunate, reinstate the Emperor, and grow an army to defeat the foreigners, instead of submitting. The slogan "Sonno joi" meaning "Honour the emperor and expel the barbarians" (Turnbull, 24) became popular with these rebels against the Shogun.

Soon the shadow of civil war spread over Japan. After many bitter conflicts, this third attempt at imperialist restoration, known as the Meiji Restoration succeeded to restore the emperor and the Samurai's reign ended. This was a turning for Japan from the Edo Period to Modern times. Japan soon created a modern army and there was no more room for the Samurai in their ranks. Even though the existence of the Samurai ended, they still exist in traditions and legends of Japan and affected the way Japan's decisions in warfare, especially seen during WWII.

The history of the samurai was greatly affected by their beliefs, religion and traditions. The Samurai's followed the idea of Bushido and the religion of Zen Buddhism which taught loyalty, honor, and the the road to enlightenment. All these factors, which ruled a Samurai's life, influenced their actions and ways of war.

Bushido was a strict code of conduct the Samurai were expected to follow without exception. This code required two things of the Samurai. The first was to be loyal to his clan and fight for it no matter what the consequences. The second was to be loyal to his master in all circumstances. It would even require the Samurai to give his life in his master's place. The Samurai's master was usually the Shogun, but that was not always the case, it may have been another Samurai that he served or daimyo. If a Samurai failed to obey these rules, it was seen as a disgrace worse than death, something that was a blot to the Samurai's honor and name. Because of this the Samurai would commit suicide, because they saw death as more welcome than the shame of their behavior.



The name for the most well-known form of the Samurai's ritual of suicide is seppuku, but was also known as hara kiri meaning "belly cutting" (Turnbull, 72). This ritual could be performed at home or on the battlefield, either way it was seen by many as an act of bravery and was often seen as if it were a way of atonement for the Samurai's sins and his transgressions were said to have been wiped away because of his honorable death. Seppuku was extremely painful and it was often common for a servant or comrade to cut off the samurai's head when he was in agony. One of the first times this ritual was shown to have taken place was the suicide of Minamoto Yorimasa after the battle of Uji.

Even though seppuku was the most well-known form of suicide, it was not the only way that the samurai would commit suicide. There was also death by drowning or stabbing. Suicide could also be carried out as a group like a family, the remnants of an army, or a clan in times of failure or defeat. Also, suicide was sometimes carried out on the death of a samurai's master.

Death poems were often written before the act of suicide and left for others to find. For example, Minamoto Yorimasa left a poem on the back of his war fan just before his death. It read:

" Like a fossil tree

From which we gather no flowers

Sad has been my life

Fated no fruit to produce."(Turnbull, 73)

This was one of the first death poems ever written, and many others were written by samurai afterwards. The Samurai have been famous for their acts of suicide and their death was such an important factor of Samurai tradition that Yamamoto Tsunetomo, a samurai in the seventeenth century wrote, “The way of the samurai is found in death.” (Turnbull, 71)

Even though the Samurai were taken out of military ranks, the idea of Bushido remained and both Bushido and the idea of an honorable and glorious death affected the warfare during WWII. The Kamikaze pilots of WWII would commit suicide in order to not fail and to serve the emperor, much like the Samurai did. The Japanese belief that Japan was of a higher status than other countries also affected their viewpoint and also strengthened the practice of the Kamikaze pilots during WWII.

A Samurai's life was greatly influenced by their religion, Zen Buddhism. This religion focused mainly on spiritual growth through meditation. A Samurai would meditate as a source a relaxation to his mental, physical, and spiritual aspects. Believing that this religious view would ultimately lead the Samurai to enlightenment, the ability to live without care or worry, the Samurai would work hard to achieve this goal and understand his inner spiritual nature.

Not only would Zen Buddhism affect the Samurai's religious life but also his cultural and educational life. A common saying during this time was, “the warrior needs to master the bow and the horse as well as the brush and the word.” (University of Colorado, 2). Zen Buddhist monks became teachers to the Samurai in art, poetry, philosophy, calligraphy, and religion, as well as

being their cultural guide. Zen Buddhism also encouraged art as a way of meditation and relaxation.

Just as any country's past will affect their future, the history of the Samurai is an important factor in the history of Japan and greatly affected the road that has brought the Japanese to be who they are today. Samurai ways have been woven into their society and culture and influenced many aspects of the Japanese people's lives today. If we do not understand the Samurai, we can never understand their country or people. Their history is the foundation on which Japan has been built.