

The Samurai: Past and Present

Hiroaki Sato

February 2010

The British military historian John Keegan starts his book, *A History of Warfare*, by rebutting the Prussian soldier Carl von Clausewitz's famous dictum in *On War*: "War is a mere continuation of policy by other means."¹ Keegan goes on to point out that "the original German expresses a more subtle and complex idea than the English words in which it is so frequently quoted,"¹ but either way, Clausewitz' thought on war was "incomplete." People make or avoid war, not always for a rational *political* purpose as Clausewitz suggested. To illustrate his point, Keegan cites four examples: the Polynesians on Easter Island in the Pacific, the Zulus in South Africa, the "slave-warriors" Mamelukes in the Middle East, and the samurai (侍) in Japan.

Actually, the differences in historical circumstances and geographic positions may be too great to make these four groups comparable, but they did have one thing in common: in each, the warrior class at one time held the key to the fate of the society.

What is interesting to us here is Keegan's choice of the timing for the samurai, also called *bushi* (武士). He could have easily chosen the time when the ruling warrior class abolished itself, around 1870. Instead, he opted for the point when the samurai rejected the superior weapon that had recently become available and quickly demonstrated its destructive power, the gun, and reverted to their centuries-old weapon, the sword. The historian did so to show

¹ John Keegan, *A History of Warfare* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993), p. 3. "What Is War?" Dictum 24, *On War* (originally, tr. J. J. Graham, 1908; abridged ed., Penguin Books, 1968), p. 119. The German original for the dictum: "*Der Krieg ist eine bloße Fortsetzung der Politik unter Einbeziehung anderer Mittel.*"

that “war may be, among many other things, the perpetuation of a culture by its own means.”² The significance of the samurai “giving up the gun” is indeed unique. As the English professor Noel Perrin at Dartmouth College noted in *Giving Up the Gun* (1979) and the physicist Freeman Dyson at Princeton University argued in *Weapons and Hope* (1984), this decision tells us that we human beings are not necessarily predestined to resort to ever more sophisticated and destructive weapons.

By that act, at any rate, the samurai extended their survival for another 250 years, as Keegan says, from around 1600 to the mid-19th century. For our purpose, ironically, were it not for those two and a half centuries, we are unlikely to be talking about the samurai and their ethos today. It was mainly during the war-less, peaceful Tokugawa Period (徳川時代 1600-1868)—so called because Tokugawa Ieyasu (徳川家康 1543-1616) unified Japan and established his dynasty—that *bushidō* (武士道), “the way of the warrior,” began to be discussed and formulated.

Even more ironically, it was toward the end of the Meiji Era (明治時代 1868-1912)—three decades after the samurai, along with his symbol, the sword, became a thing of the past and Japan was rapidly turning to ever more advanced, destructive guns and other weapons—that *bushidō* as most of us know it as a Japanese moral, ethical system took shape and began to be known throughout the world.

But before we go further, a brief history of Japan is in order.

Japan set up its first proper government around 700, with a legal and regulatory system modeled after China, with the Tennō (天皇) as ruler with both political and military powers. In that sense, it was a government under

² Keegan, p. 46.

what we today call civilian control. (*Tennō*, the Chinese word meaning “heavenly sovereign,” is usually translated as “emperor,” which is misleading, but here I may use “emperor” and “imperial” where appropriate.)

However, the *Tennō*, and the aristocracy that provided him with bureaucratic support, gradually lost control of samurai, their armed servants. (*Samurai* is similar to “the old English *cniht* (knecht, knight), guards or attendants,”³ as noted by Nitobe Inazō (新渡戸稲造 1862-1933), whom we shall soon see more of.) In the end, from the mid-12th to the mid-19th century, the samurai or bushi ruled the land, with *shōgun* (将軍), originally the *Tennō*’s military deputy, as overlord.

Interestingly, during those 700 years the samurai never lost the sense that the *Tennō* was the legitimate ruler and they, the samurai, were usurpers. Largely because of this, as their own, *military* governance collapsed, the samurai restored the *Tennō* System (天皇制度), in 1868. That much is what the Imperial Rescript to Soldiers and Sailors (*gunjin chokuyu* 軍人勅諭), issued in 1882, frankly allowed.

The Imperial Rescript spelled out ideals for soldierly conduct for a modern conscript military. In doing so, it became the first important document to shape today’s view of bushidō.

The second was a small book that Nitobe Inazō wrote in 1899, in English: *Bushido: The Soul of Japan*. Nitobe, who had studied in the United States and Germany and later an Under-Secretary General of the League of Nations, wanted to show that Japan had a moral, ethical system comparable to

³ Inazo Nitobe, *Bushido: The Warrior’s Code* (Ohara Publications, 1979), p. 14. *Bushido* is available on the Internet as a Google book and as part of Project Gutenberg <http://www.gutenberg.org/etext/12096>

that found in Christendom. To that end, he did not just sprinkle *Bushido* with homiletic anecdotes from the past but also filled it with an array of references to Western thinkers. The book turned into an international bestseller.

Among others, U.S. President Theodore Roosevelt (1858-1919), the promoter of “strenuous life” and imperialist causes, liked it. Nitobe noted this in his preface to the tenth edition of the book (May 1905): “President Roosevelt has done it undeserved honor by reading it and distributing several dozens of copies among his friends.” There was a touch of irony in this: Mary Elkinton, the American Nitobe was married to, was a member of the absolute pacifist sect, the Society of Friends or Quakerism. Regardless, by its tenth printing, *Bushido* had been translated into Mahratti, German, Bohemian, and Polish, with Norwegian and French translations under way and Russian and Chinese editions in the offing. (I am sure it was also translated into Spanish not long afterward.)

Then, Japan won its war with Russia (1904-1905). Its victory came about mainly because President Roosevelt as mediator sided with Japan. Like many Western observers, he was impressed by the bravery and readiness for self-sacrifice Japanese soldiers displayed, an impression no doubt reinforced by Nitobe’s book. He was far from alone. The English author, Socialist, and pacifist H. G. Wells (1866-1946), for example, obviously changed his earlier view of the Japanese as part of “the yellow race” and started to promote the samurai as “the ideal citizen of the Socialist State.” The Socialist weekly, *The New Age*, even held a conference on the subject in May 1907.

Years later the sculptor-poet Takamura Kōtarō (高村光太郎 1883-1956) would call the victory “the first nibble in Japan’s expansion tragedy” that led to the country’s militarism and ended, as you all know, in Japan’s crushing

defeat. But that was forty years afterward.⁴ The Japanese themselves were impressed by the victory. Japanese scholars and publishers started to vie in finding out and defining bushidō.

As a result, some have argued that much of what we consider bushidō today should really be called “Meiji bushidō” (明治武士道). Prominent among them in recent times is University of Tokyo professor of ethics Kanno Kakumyō (菅野覚明) who has written a book to argue exactly that: *Bushidō no gyakushū* (武士道の逆襲), 2004.

So what did the Tennō say in his Rescript to Soldiers and Sailors? What did Nitobe Inazō emphasize in *Bushido*?

In his 1882 military rescript, the Tennō told his soldiers, in a prose studded with ancient Chinese words and idioms, to adhere to the following five principles:

- Loyalty (忠節): In patriotism, “Duty (義) is heavier than high mountains, death lighter than a goose feather (鴻毛).”
- Etiquette (礼儀): Be always respectful to men of higher rank, but men of higher rank must be compassionate and loving to their subordinates.
- Bravery (武勇): Be brave in battle, but be genial and harmonious in daily conduct.
- Truthfulness & duty (信義): Be truthful to your words and carry out your duty.
- Frugality (質素): Avoid luxury as if it were a pestilence.

⁴ Hiroaki Sato, tr., *A Brief History of Imbecility: Poetry and Prose of Takamura Kōtarō* (University of Hawaii Press, 1992), p. 136.

The first of these, “death is lighter than a goose feather,” was a willful twist on a sentence in one of China’s Grand Historian Sima Qian’s (司馬遷 145?-86 BC) books: “A man is destined to die. But his death can be as heavy as a great mountain or as light as a goose feather.” The fifth injunction to be frugal was originally religious, but it was added with a recent riot in the new army for higher pay in mind.

Yet, in the main, these principles were rooted in “the five normalcies (五常)” or the five basic virtues in Confucianism (儒教): humanity, duty, etiquette, wisdom, truthfulness (仁義礼智信). This came about because Confucianism was the state philosophy during the Tokugawa Period, and the men who wrote the rescript, such as Nishi Amane (西周 1829-1897) and Inoue Kowashi (井上毅 1843-1895), were inculcated in Confucian teachings from childhood.

For his part, Nitobe Inazō, a Christian convert imbued with Confucian idealism, was quick to recognize this in formulating what bushidō was. “As to strictly ethical doctrines, the teachings of Confucius were the most prolific source of Bushido,” he wrote. He then listed and discussed the primary attributes of bushidō: “rectitude or justice” (義); “courage, the spirit of daring and bearing” (勇); “benevolence, the feeling of distress” (仁); “politeness” (礼); “veracity and sincerity” (誠); “honour” (名誉); “the duty of loyalty” (忠義); and so on.

What makes bushidō so presented “Meiji bushidō” is, to simplify the matter, that it ignored the actual samurai, the actual bushi.⁵

The process of stressing abstract principles had happened, of course, during Tokugawa rule. While samurai were fighting and killing each other, the

⁵ Kanno Kakumyō, *Bushidō no gyakushū* (Kōdansha, 2004), p. 11.

matter was personal, family-centered, and “tribal.” They risked their lives for their honor, for the perpetuation of the family names, and for the group of which they were a part. When the country was unified and warriors ceased to be warriors, becoming bureaucrats instead, the *raison d’être* of being a samurai changed from personal to public or, we might say, administrative. Then, when the samurai class abolished itself to create a modern nation-state, what was public was turned into what was to be national and universal.

The most notable in this regard is the stress on what I have given as “patriotism” in the 1882 Imperial Rescript. In the original, the word is *hōkoku* (報国), the idea that you are indebted to your nation by the simple fact of your birth in it and therefore you must return the debt through your exertion. It was an idea either absent or not stressed in earlier discussions of bushidō. In earlier discussions, when loyalty (忠) was stressed, it was to one particular person, your lord and master.

In presenting his idea of bushidō, Nitobe had to make it national and therefore universal. His aim was to argue, for “the distinguished Belgian jurist” M. de Laveleye, that Japan did have an ethical system comparable to that in the West. Japan at the time was striving hard to prove to Western powers, “the advanced civilizations,” that it was a nation worthy of their attention and esteem. That explains why, of the 157 people listed in the index of *Bushido*, only twenty were Japanese, seventeen of them historical samurai.⁶

Bushidō or samurai ethos changed over time. To begin with an example whose source I have not been able to ascertain, the warlord and castle architect Tōdō Takatora (藤堂高虎 1556-1630) is famous for his observation, “A samurai cannot be called a samurai until he has changed his lords seven times.”

⁶ Kanno, p. 17.

This is supposed to be part of his “house lessons” (家訓) but his house lessons—consisting of more than 200 articles—that are fully cited and explicated on the Internet do not include it.⁷ Still, you can believe Tōdō Takatora must have said something like that; he actually changed his allegiance a number of times, finally allying himself with the ultimate victor, Tokugawa Ieyasu. He was a brilliant survivor in an era that saw ever-shifting violent hegemonic strifes.

Two and a half centuries later, Fukuzawa Yukichi (福沢諭吉1835-1901) wrote a tract to denounce two distinguished contemporary leaders for just that kind of behavior: Katsu Kaishū (勝海舟1823-1899) and Enomoto Takeaki (榎本武揚1836-1908). What did the two men do to win Fukuzawa’s ethical ire?

They were both high-ranking officials in the last phase of the Tokugawa government. But Katsu, Minister of the Army, successfully persuaded his government to surrender to the approaching imperial forces. Then, after the new, Meiji government came into being, he served it in a round of important posts. Enomoto took a similar course. After losing a crucial, final battle as Deputy Minister of the Tokugawa Navy, he served the new government in even more illustrious posts.

Fukuzawa, even as he recognized their worthiness—especially of Katsu who saved the populace of the capital from a disastrous chaos of war—argued that both men should have withdrawn from society altogether, adding that, by not doing so, they trampled upon *shifū* (士風), the samurai way. He titled his tract *Yasegaman no setsu* (瘦せ我慢の説), “on pretending to be satisfied with what you have even though you know you can get something far better by

⁷ <http://blog.goo.ne.jp/ota416/c/f6c53dc92b7c97d7318f65f91137c977/1>

changing your principles.” In other words, he was complaining that the two gentlemen did not adhere to that honorable pretension.

What was remarkable about this was that Fukuzawa was a prominent advocate of “civilization and enlightenment” (文明開化) but was using as his guiding principle an ancient dictum that appears in the Chinese historian Sima Qian’s writings, “A loyal subject does not serve two lords; a chaste woman does not have two husbands.” The dictum might have worked, more or less, in peaceful times, but it would have been impractical for most samurai during Japan’s Age of Warring States (戦国時代). If every samurai had stuck with the first man he chose to serve, a great proportion of warriors would have lost their ability to function, at least in theory, by the time the country was unified in the early 17th century.

This is not to suggest that Tōdō Takatora’s conduct won unanimous approval from fellow warriors and warlords. But it was a time when a great many fiefdoms fought one another for local or national hegemony and warriors and warlords went to the other side or sought a different ally when their side was beaten or vanquished. The legendary swordsman Kamiizumi Hidetsuna (上泉秀綱1508?-1577?) was one such warrior. So let us look at him as another example of changing samurai ethos. Here I will make my case on the premise that samurai ethos or bushidō, like many such concepts, is partly a matter of retrospective interpretation.

Some of you must have seen *Seven Samurai* (七人の侍), the 1954 movie by Kurosawa Akira (黒澤明). In a sequence near the movie’s start, a middle-aged samurai borrows a monk’s robe, has his head shaved, and, with two rice-balls he has had prepared but without a sword, rescues a child taken hostage by a man who is threatening to kill him with a drawn sword. In that story, the

samurai kills the hostage-taker—by wresting the sword from him in a lightning move. I remember how, in my teens, my friends talked about Kurosawa’s astonishing use of slow motion in showing the man the samurai cut up tottering out of the shack and slowly falling to the ground.

That was Kurosawa’s version of a story told of the swordsman Hidetsuna. The setting of the Hidetsuna story and what happens in it are more or less the same, except that the swordsman, again approaching the hostage-taker without his sword, does not kill the man but wrestles him down.⁸ The assumption is that, if the swordsman kills him, he is not a good swordsman. In contrast, Kurosawa, in depicting a small group of samurai battling a horde of marauding bandits, had to present the leading samurai as a man of steely resolve. The fact that Japan had come out of a war and was being accused of war crimes and such may also have affected Kurosawa’s decision.

Hidetsuna’s story, in turn, harked back to a much older one, the one depicting a warrior-commander five hundred years earlier, Minamoto no Yoritomo (源頼朝 1147-1199).

One day one of his subordinates, a good warrior himself, comes to him greatly agitated, blubbing. Yoritomo asks why and learns that a burglar has taken hostage the subordinate’s son in his house and is threatening to kill the child.

“Let your little kid be stabbed to death, if need be,” Yoritomo tells his subordinate. “Only with that attitude could you call yourself a warrior. If you worried about yourself, worried about your wife or your child, you’d accomplish nothing. To be fearless means not to worry about yourself, not to worry about your wife or your child.”

⁸ Hiroaki Sato, tr., *The Sword and the Mind* (Overlook, 1986), pp. 2-3.

Then, saying that he just said what he had because he is expected to, Yorinobu picks up his sword, goes to the subordinate's house, and, near where the burglar is holding the boy, asks, "Did you take that boy hostage because you wanted to keep yourself alive, or because you wanted to kill the boy? Tell me what you think in no uncertain terms!" The burglar answers, Of course he did not want to kill the boy, he just wanted to live. Yorinobu persuades the man to throw away the sword. His subordinate wants to kill the burglar when he is dragged into the courtyard, but Yorinobu tells him that the man did what he did because he was so poor as to be desperate and mercy is what is needed. He then puts the burglar on a horse with enough food and a bow and arrow for protection, and lets him go.⁹

If this story, collected in the large 12th-century anthology of tales *Konjaku monogatari shū* (今昔物語集), was based on anything resembling a real event, it took place around the year 1000, a hundred and fifty years before the samurai class took over the land.

Perhaps the most famous statement on bushidō of all time is this: "The way of the warrior, I've found, is to die" (武士道と云は、死ぬ事と見付たり). Yamamoto Tsunetomo (山本常朝1659-1719) said it, and it appears at the beginning of a sizable collection of his remarks and observations, *Hagakure* (葉隠). By the time Yamamoto made the statement the Tokugawa rule was a century old, but the idea that a samurai must be ready for death at any moment, that he must always have death in mind, was common to any samurai who thought about the matter, whether in peacetime or wartime. But Yamamoto's

⁹ Hiroaki Sato, *Legends of the Samurai* (Overlook Press, 1995), pp. 72-74.

statement became particularly famous because he used the word bushidō, thereby giving it the air of a succinct definition.

During the Second World War, in fact, as the situation for Japan became desperate by the day, *Hagakure* became the book to read among the youth, along with *Le Sens de la mort* of the French author Paul Bourget (1852-1935), we are told. All young Japanese males, as long as they were healthy enough, expected to be drafted and sent to the front.

In any event, when you compare Yamamoto with the warlord Tōdō Takatora, you see the difference. Article 1 of his house lessons says, “From the moment you leave your bedroom [in the morning], you must think that today it’s your turn to die. With this ultimate resolve, you will not be perturbed by things” (寝屋を出るより其日を死番と可得心かやうに覚悟極る。ゆへに物に動する事なし) . Both Yamamoto and Tōdō talk about the need for a samurai to be prepared to die, but the difference between the two is clear. It becomes clearer with what they say next.

Yamamoto, who had no chance to fight on a battlefield and died a peaceful death, as far as we know, follows the deterministic first proposition with this: “In a situation with a choice, you can only choose at once to die.” He leaves no room for an alternative. In contrast, Tōdō, who went through a number of battles, definitely suggests, in the next three items of his house lessons, 2, 3, and 4, that the mental preparedness to die or be killed any moment does not mean that you should *not* be prepared for a different outcome. You may be beaten in battle but not killed, so you must be prepared to take the next step when you find yourself alive.

I must add one thing, however. Even though he advocated “frenzied death” (死狂い), Yamamoto had other, sometimes contradictory things to say. Here are two: (1) Only by keeping death constantly in mind can you be free;

(2) Because life is short, you must enjoy yourself as best you can, doing whatever you want to do. Yamamoto, while insisting on stressing single-minded devotion to one's master, also expressed impatience with (mostly Confucius) "ratiocinations" (理屈) such as "loyalty" (忠) and "rectitude" (義).

What is bushidō?

Mishima Yukio (三島由紀夫 1925-1970), the writer who chose to kill himself by disembowelment and decapitation, asserted that "invasionism or militarism had nothing to do with bushidō from the outset." He felt compelled to point that out because "Meiji bushidō" became inexorably blended into Japan's militarism and because he, who formed a small "private army" called the Shield Society (楯の会), was accused of trying to revive militarism anew. The student movement was at its height, and even as the general sentiment was turning against the movement's ready resort to violence, the Japanese were nervous about the militarism that destroyed their country less than a quarter of a century earlier.

In any event, Mishima, an admirer of Yamamoto Tsunetomo's *Hagakure*, defined bushidō as something personal. A man of bushidō is someone who, he said, has a firm sense of self-respect, takes responsibility for his action, and sacrifices himself to embody that responsibility. This probably comes closest to the essence of bushidō, at least in the abstract.

In truth, it is a little dangerous to bring up Mishima here, because his own case is too complicated for the subject at hand. Still, we can say his judgment that bushidō ended with Gen. Nogi Maresuke (乃木希典 1849-1912) was somewhat odd. As some of you know, Gen. Nogi's disembowelment on the day of the funeral of Meiji Tennō (明治天皇 1852-1912) touched many people in the world. If the ultimate expression of responsibility was to kill

oneself, preferably by disembowelment, a number of commanders during and following the Second World War expressed their sense of responsibility by taking their own lives. Foremost among them by rank was Minister of the Army Gen. Anami Korechika (阿南惟幾 1887-1945), who killed himself to apologize for Japan's defeat. He did so after the Tennō sided with those who argued for surrender, rather than for fighting it out to the last man, in August 1945.

The soldiers in the modern conscript military created in the Meiji Era had little to do with samurai. Nonetheless, some samurai ideals persisted. For one thing, a soldier going into battle was expected to be willing to die—becoming a soldier meant accepting death. Also, in the 1882 Imperial Rescript, the Tennō ordered his men to treat their life as lightly as a goose's feather. That partly accounts for, it is fair to say, the inordinately high casualties in the Japanese army and navy in the Second World War.

That, plus the fact that Japan's military ventures ended in utterly devastating the country, explains why even those who want to see admirable things in bushidō tend to avoid the half-century period, from 1895 to 1945, in discussing their martial past. You might say that it is since the advent of Wikipedia that the Japanese started to talk more freely, openly, about the generals and admirals of that period.

Instead, if they want to talk about bushidō or anything resembling it, they tend to reinterpret and present the people and events before the mid-19th century—before, that is, Japan opened itself to international commerce and diplomacy, thereby, we must add, joining the imperialist *Zeitgeist* of the period. One clear example of this bias, if I may call it that, is the Japanese broadcasting corporation NHK's "great-river drama" (大河ドラマ) series: the year-long TV drama series, each weekly segment lasting for 45 minutes or

longer. Most of the almost fifty dramas since the series started in 1963 have dealt with people of the pre-Meiji samurai class, but none with warriors since.

Does bushidō or the samurai spirit survive in Japanese society today? To answer this question, I did several informal surveys, some through my young friends, via the Internet.

The responses I have received make it clear that there is no clear definition or concept of bushidō, which is understandable. Some respondents were knowledgeable enough to posit, correctly to a great extent, that it is a system of thought heavily influenced by Confucian ethics. Some have suggested that the samurai spirit is manifest in such things as the single-minded dedication to a cause, whatever the cause may be (including the *otaku* phenomenon), and the willingness to sacrifice personal desires and such for the greater good, be it for a group or a corporation.

The association of bushidō with the single-minded dedication to a cause comes from the *dō*, “the way” (道; *dao* in Chinese), of bushidō—the originally Buddhist idea, I understand, that one may attain enlightenment by dedicating oneself to just one thing. In this regard, I wish to cite the response of my own brother Masamichi (政道), although in this instance the dedication has to do with working with a group.

Masamichi worked for Toyota Motor for forty years until his mandatory retirement age last year; but then one of Toyota’s subsidiaries asked him to work for it, so he continues to do the job he did for many years. Over the years at Toyota, he advanced from a section chief, a group chief, to a factory chief.

Reflecting on how the spirit of bushidō may have influenced the work at Toyota, he concluded that it may manifest itself in spontaneous mutual help within a group. There is always someone who lags, either because he does not

understand his task well or because he is not as competent as some of the others. When such a person is noticed, those who are ahead or more capable help him voluntarily, without being asked.

Toyota is a notoriously tough place to work, my brother wrote me. The company's reputation is that, for the continuous improvement of productivity and the effort for perfection, it drives its workers in the manner of "squeezing the mummies for blood." But without voluntary, spontaneous teamwork and voluntary, spontaneous efforts to improve in each group, Toyota would not be where it is today, Masamichi said.

Thank you very much.