

The Complete Student of Traditional Karatedo

Chapter 27

In order to become a consummate student of traditional Karatedo, many practitioners around the globe turn to the warrior class of feudal Japan, and endeavor to emulate the skills and the attributes of the samurai. Certainly, many of us admire these warriors and strive to adopt their fighting spirit. Additionally, many of us are aware that the warrior class of Japan embraced the teachings of Confucius, and adopted the ideals of virtue and fealty to our seniors. Many of us are also aware that the warrior of Japan gravitated toward the teachings of Zen: “Its simplicity and emphasis on self-discipline and meditation as the means to enlightenment particularly appealed to the warrior class.”[i] However, few of us are truly aware of all that was expected of Japan’s warrior class.



We are all aware of the reputation of the Samurai as accomplished warriors. Novels, movies, and television are replete with examples of their fighting prowess. However, fighting is usually the only aspect of the samurai’s life that is examined in our culture’s media. However, this obsession with the samurai’s fighting abilities gives us an incomplete and simplistic view of the complexities of the warrior class of Japan. It is true that the samurai were expected to be extraordinarily proficient in a variety of fighting arts, but they were also expected to excel in a host of other arts. It is this latter aspect of samurai life that is too often ignored in our society giving us a simplistic view of these warriors and the complexities of their lives.

The warrior class in Japan rose to power during the Kamakura Period (1192 to 1333) and remained in power through the Edo Period until the Meiji Restoration in 1868.[ii] From the earliest times, the literary arts and the fine arts were very much a part of the lives of the samurai. Akihiro Omi provides us with a more panoramic view of Japan’s warrior class: “In addition to refining their fighting skills, the Kamakura warriors were expected to be proficient in calligraphy, painting, poetry, music and other arts.”[iii]

As we can see, the warrior class of Japan was expected to be proficient in more than just the arts of war. They were also expected to be competent in the literary and the fine arts. This seems quite logical when you realize that the arts represent transient beauty, and in a similar manner the beauty of the samurai’s life could be quickly cut short. Consequently, for the samurai class, all of the arts were treated as necessary parts of a complete person.[iv]

It must be noted that the pursuit of all arts not was universally approved by the warrior class. While some considered Noh dancing to be inappropriate for a samurai[v], others warned that placing the pursuit of the arts above the pursuit of the ways of combat was a dangerous endeavor.[vi] Nonetheless, within Japan’s warrior class it appears to be universally held that there should be a harmonious balance between the pursuit of the martial arts and the pursuit of the other arts.[vii]

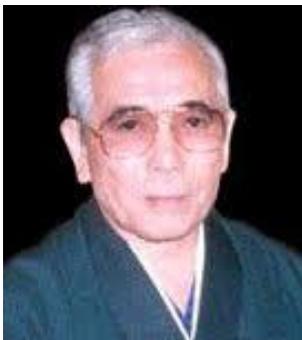
As we all know, Miyamoto Musashi was Japan's preeminent samurai and is frequently referred to as the sword-saint (Kensei). In his *Book of Five Rings*, Musashi explains the connection between the way of the sword and the way of the literary arts: "It is said that the warrior's is the twofold Way of the pen and the sword, and that he should have a taste for both Ways." [viii] Additionally, along with being the victor of at least sixty duels, he was an accomplished calligrapher, artist, poet, and writer. [ix] According to Musashi's words and deeds, the ideal Japanese warrior needed to be proficient in the ways of combat, the ways of the pen, and the ways of an artist.

Below: *Hotei Watching a Cock Fight* by Musashi (Ink on Paper)

Japan's modern era began with the Meiji Restoration, and the samurai class was officially abolished. However, the values of the samurai class did not disappear. This was in large part due to one of the objectives of Kokutai, Japan's National Essence policy. The Japanese government's goal was to instill the ideals and values of the old samurai class into all of the social classes in a modernized Japan. [x]



The samurai's fighting spirit was to be instilled into the entire population through this program, and in this manner all conscripts into the Japanese Imperial Armed Forces would possess the fighting qualities of Japan's warrior class. Additionally, the samurai's appreciation of transient beauty was to be emulated by the general public in Japan. In this manner, the both the samurai's fighting spirit and the samurai's appreciation of the arts continued into the modern period.



Left: Shuji Tasaki Hanshi

Karatedo's greatest masters also possessed these qualities. Gichin Funakoshi was not only a master of Karatedo, he was also a poet, author, and calligrapher. Shuji Tasaki, the founder of Goju Ryu Karatedo Seiwa Kai, was not only a fierce martial artist, but that he was also an Ikebana artist, a Chado (Tea Ceremony) master, and an accomplished musician. It appears that these masters of traditional Karatedo were keeping alive the spirit of Japan's warrior class which can be traced back more than eight hundred years. They were individuals accomplished in both the martial arts, the literary arts, and in the fine arts.

It seems clear that if we are going to be faithful to the values of Japan's warrior spirit, then each traditional Karatedo practitioner needs to ensure that the martial arts, the literary arts, and the fine arts are a part of their lives. If someone cannot become proficient in arts other than Karatedo, then at the very least they should cultivate a deep appreciation of them. Only then can we become a complete practitioner of traditional Karatedo.

Chapter 27

- [i] Omi, Akihiro: *Classical Fighting Arts*: Vol 3. No. 2 (Issue #52) Page 50
- [ii] Omi, Akihiro: *Classical Fighting Arts*: Vol 3. No. 2 (Issue #52) Pages 48-51
- [iii] Omi, Akihiro: *Classical Fighting Arts*: Vol 3. No. 2 (Issue #52) Page 48
- [iv] Wilson, William Scott: *Ideals of the Samurai*: Page 28
- [v] Wilson, William Scott: *Ideals of the Samurai*: Page 28
- [vi] Yuzan, Daidoji (Translated by William Scott Wilson): *Budoshoshinshu* Pages 51-55
- [vii] Wilson, William Scott: *Ideals of the Samurai*: Page 28
- [viii] Musashi, Miyamoto (Translated by Victor Harris): *A Book of Five Rings*: Page 17
- [ix] Musashi, Miyamoto (Translated by Victor Harris): *A Book of Five Rings*: Pages 23 – 32
- [x] McCarthy Patrick: *Bubishi*: page 52