



Bushido

武士道

The History Of Bushido

Over the last thousand years Japans Bushido code has developed from a warriors' formal code of conduct to an all encompassing and often life changing religious doctrine. Although the origins of Bushido lie deep in Japans ancient history it was only in the 12th century that the code of bushido was fully developed. Bearing this in mind it seems strange that it would take four hundred years (During the mid 16th century) for the Bushido code to be written down and utilized as the stringent doctrine of the Samurai class.

Some scholars liken the Japanese code of Bushido to the Chinese warrior code of "Wu-Te" which translates as "Warriors Virtue". The Wu-Te code itself is believed to be the creation of the Indian monk "Bodhidharma" in around the year AD 520. The comparable similarities between the two codes are numerous; and as Japan had been steadily importing Chinese technology, style and philosophy since around AD 400, the possibility of a shared ancestry is quite acceptable. However strong feudal societies had existed in both China and Japan for thousands of years before the advent of Buddhism. One only has to look at the sheer enormity of the terracotta army of china's first emperor to realize just how organized, effective and disciplined these early warriors were.

Regardless of its early origins however, the Bushido Code was given a chance to develop along its own path during the centuries in which Japan closed its borders to the outside world. And to this day it is renowned worldwide as being something innately Japanese.

The Literary Pun

A great many literary scholars have pointed out that when the common name for Japans native religion "Shinto" is written out in the traditional Chinese Kanji it reads "The Way Of The Gods". Yet by adding the word "Bu" meaning "Warrior", the word structure instead reads as "Bushido" meaning "The Way Of The Warrior".

The multiple nuances encountered when translating Japanese words into the earlier Chinese letters is an interesting subject in its own right, and the most literal translation of the written word is often far more revealing than the modern translation. For example the literal translation of "Bushido" reads more accurately as "The Way Of Warrior, That Will Send You To The Gods"... a far more sobering translation by far.

Other examples of these literary variations are found in other words of military origin such as "Heiho"; which when written in Japanese letters reads "The Methods Of The Soldier" but when written in Chinese letters reads instead "The Way Of Peace", assuredly a joke shared by military tacticians throughout Japan for centuries.

Literature has always played an important roll in societies perceptions of Bushido especially so, during Japans more peaceful eras when ancient texts regarding the subject were studied as sources of truth. However many of these early texts were grossly misinterpreted and the Bushido based upon them in turn became an altered form. Such an example can be found in the Japanese literary classic "Hagakure" penned by a Samurai named Yamamoto Tsunetomo. Although a Samurai of rank, Yamamoto lived his entire life in peace and never took part in any battles or mass conflict. Regardless of this fact Yamamoto often makes references to the mentality of combat and how Bushido should apply to it. His most famous quote regarding the Bushido code is "The Way Of The Samurai Is In Death" something which later scholars of the subject; including the Kamikaze pilots of World War Two would deliberated heavily upon. As with any literary source misconceptions are rife and to effectively state that "To be a Samurai is to die" is a narrow sighted opinion at best. In truth however it is not known whether Yamamoto ever intended his book to be Sean, read or much less followed like a religious doctrine. As the various transcriptions of the Hagakure all differ slightly in their translations we should assume the quote to read something like "To be a Samurai, is to devote your life utterly to the will of your lord and master", as this would be far more in

keeping with the early Bushido ideals assuredly taught to Yamamoto in his youth.

The Written Code

Because the Bushido code is more than just a way of life, to state that it was an utterly inflexible set of rules and procedures would be utterly inaccurate; as Bushido was as individual to a Samurai as was the relationship between a lord and each of his attendants.

Whilst Bushido itself can exist in many varied forms, the majority of Japanese scholars generally accept that the following eight ideals are the basis for most visions of Bushido:

気功

Chi To enhance wisdom by broadening ones knowledge and perfecting ones earthly abilities

信義

Chu To show loyalty to ones lord and master

綱常

Gi To safeguard the correct ethics of courage and morality whilst always abstaining from greed and selfishness

人情

Jin To develop a sympathetic understanding of people

敬老

Ko To respect and care for ones parents

敬う

Rei To be patient, polite and respectful towards others

信実

Shin To be truthful and sincere at all times

気配り

Tei To care for the aged, infirm and those of a humble station

Only by adhering to these principles could a Samurai maintain his honour, as straying from this predetermined path would result in irrefutable shame upon the individual and their family. In some situations the disgrace was considered so severe that the offending party was obliged to commit Seppuku; in order to regain some small measure of personal honour.

In other examples however disgraced Samurai accepted their dishonor and underwent decades of hardship in an attempt to atone for their past mistakes. In the eyes of many great historical Samurai, the willingness to live on and lead a productive life regardless of ones mistakes is just as much a part of the Bushido ethic as a willingness to die. To further complicate matters Bushido itself contains numerous dualities that risked the very honour of those who wished to uphold it. A prime example of this duality is the adage of a Samurai commanded by his Lord, to assassinate another noble in cold blood whilst he slept. Whilst this undeniable act of cowardice would rob the obeying Samurai of his lifetime's honour, the very fact that the individual was willing to risk such a level of personal disgrace at the bidding of his master would expunge them of any associated dishonor.

Perhaps the most ironic fact surrounding the Bushido code is that ultimately it did not survive into modern times at the hands of Japans nobility, nor in fact did it truly survive amongst Japans martial arts fraternity; but rather it survived amongst the rank and file of the Modern Japanese Army; The successors to the same force that wholly ended the Satsuma rebellion and the rule of the Samurai caste in the year 1877.

Endnote

"No man dies with dignity and honour; but a man may accept the inevitability of his death with those same virtues. This is the way of Bushido"

Taran McCarnun Sensei.