

HISTORY BEHIND OUR ARTS

by Akihiro Omi

"It is doubtful whether the Japanese people and the country as a whole can really be understood or appreciated by anyone without a degree of knowledge of their martial culture." (Donn F. Draeger, Classical Bujutsu. New York: Weatherhill, Inc., 1973)

INTRODUCTION

Both Kendo (the Way of the Sword) and Karate-do (the Way of Empty-hands) are deeply rooted in a rich tradition of Japanese warrior culture. To understand the tradition and the philosophies that our sports and arts represent, we must first visit the origin of *budo*, Japanese martial arts, and trace the path on which it was formed.

1. The Birth of Japan

The land around the current Japanese islands was formed about 70 million years ago. According to archaeologists, humans lived on the land as early as 2.5 million years ago. During the last ice age (50,000 to 10,000 years ago), a massive movement of the earth separated the land from the Eurasian Continent, and the Japanese islands were formed. This geographical isolation from the continent provided the Japanese with protection and the opportunity to develop their own unique culture.



From 10,000 B.C through 300 B.C., the prehistoric peoples of Japan followed a hunting and gathering way of life. Collective farming began around 300 B.C., triggering the development of irrigation systems and iron-edged tools which increased harvests, in turn stimulating a massive population explosion. As social hierarchies and political structures developed, competition and warfare between villages intensified. Bronze and iron weapons were initially obtained from the continent, but soon the Japanese were making their own weapons such as swords, pikes, and spears. However, many of these early Japanese-made weapons were not practical; they were used for religious ceremonies and rituals, indicating a relatively peaceful island nation during its early years.

2. The Unification and the Earliest Military Actions

By the fourth century A.D., Japan was unified under the imperial family which continues to this day. The Yamato dynasty, centered around the current Osaka area, established official diplomatic relations with Paekche

(one of the three kingdoms in the Korean peninsula) in 367 A.D. Two years later, the Yamato dynasty sent soldiers to the Korean peninsula to defend Paekche against its adversary, Silla. This alliance continued until 663, when Paekche was defeated and vanquished by the powerful joint military forces of Silla and the Tang dynasty in China.

3. Acceptance of Buddhism and Confucianism

Although Shinto had been the indigenous religion of Japan, in 593 A.D., Empress Suiko declared her acceptance of Buddhism (which was introduced through the Korean peninsula in the mid sixth century) and encouraged the construction of Buddhist temples. In 604, crown-prince *Shotoku* issued the Seventeen-Article Constitution and instituted the court ranks, the first step in the process of establishing imperial authority, the social order, and a moral standard. Heavily influenced by Confucian ideals, Shotoku's constitution defined that civility, or courtesy, is the foundation of society.

4. The Earliest Martial Arts Competitions

The oldest documented form of martial art in Japan is "sumo." The *Kojiki*, Japan's first book on history, written in 712 A.D., describes a sumo match between two Shinto gods (*Takemikazuchi* and *Takeminakata*) on the beach of *Izumo*. *Takemikazuchi* won the match by twisting *Takeminakata's* arm and throwing him to the ground. By this victory, *Takemikazuchi* was awarded the right to rule the region.

The *Nihonshoki*, another ancient chronicle completed in 720 A.D., documents a sumo match held in front of Emperor Suijin in 23 B.C., where *Nomi no Sukune* defeated *Taima no Kehaya* by kicking and breaking Kehaya's ribs. In 726 A.D., Emperor Seibu hosted a sumo tournament in July, which then became an important annual palace ritual along with archery contests in January and May. The archery contest in January was without horses, while the contest in May involved mounted bowmen shooting arrows at targets while riding their horses at full gallop. These earliest martial arts competitions in Japan continued for 300 years. However, a major civil war between the *Taira* and the *Minamoto* in the 12th century put an end to that tradition.

5. Heian Period and the Rise of the Warrior Class

Japan established its own cultural, political, and economic identity during the Heian Period (794–1185). Buddhism flourished, and the separation of religion and state was largely maintained. Literature and art thrived under the aristocratic civilian government rule. Until the 10th century, Japanese soldiers were mostly a combination of lower-rank aristocrats, their servants, and other civilians who took weapons whenever needed. However, the formation of specialized full-time warrior groups, consisting mostly of skilled archers, brought about the birth of a warrior class. In rural areas, warrior groups gained political power, and civilian

administrators could not control them. This threatened state control over lands, and the country was headed toward anarchy and corruption. Furthermore, major Buddhist temples recruited and trained warrior-monks for protection and used militant force to make political demands on the government.

In 1167, Kiyomori Taira, the first warrior to become a member of the high court, rose to dominate the court, and the Taira warrior clan controlled the government until 1185. This signified the beginning of warrior rule in Japan, which continued for 700 years.

6. Kamakura Period and the Rise of the Samurai

In 1185, the Minamoto clan, commanded by Yoritomo Minamoto, defeated their archenemy, the Taira clan. In 1192, the imperial court granted Yoritomo the title shogun (general) and gave him permission to start a government in Kamakura. Away from the hedonistic capital city of Kyoto, Yoritomo created a warrior society with a distinct military aristocracy. In the Kamakura Period (1192–1333), the term "samurai" indicated a specific rank of mounted warriors. In later years, the term came to denote all warriors.

Kamakura society exalted loyalty, honor, modesty, and frugality – ideals that later inspired the code of the warrior, or "bushido."

A sect of Buddhism that flourished in this period was Zen. Its simplicity and emphasis on self-discipline and meditation as the means to enlightenment particularly appealed to the warrior class. The Zen ideal of enhancing one's level of awareness to overcome the fear of death gave much needed mental strength to warriors who had to fight constant battles. Under the guardianship of the Kamakura government, many Zen temples were constructed in the Kamakura area, and Zen became the guiding philosophy for the Kamakura warriors.

In addition to refining their fighting skills, the Kamakura warriors were expected to be proficient in calligraphy, painting, poetry, music, and other arts.

The martial arts of the Kamakura period were rugged fighting skills and are referred to "bugei." The most important fighting skill was "yabusame," or archery on horseback.

7. The Mongolian Invasions

After overrunning Eastern Europe, the army of Kublai Khan invaded Japan in 1274. The Kamakura government brusquely rejected the Mongolian demand and fought off the invasion force of 40,000 men. Fortunately for the defenders, only a day after Khan's army landed near Hakata, a sudden storm arose, destroying their fleet and drowning many of the Mongolian soldiers.

In 1281, Khan attacked again with 150,000 men. After two months of fierce fighting, a typhoon again destroyed the Mongolian fleet and only 30,000 men returned to their continent.

The Mongolian invasions altered the way Japanese warriors fought in battle. Before the invasions, all battles were fought one-on-one, regardless of the number of troops on each side. When the battle began, a warrior from one side would step forward and announce his name, family, and title. A warrior from the opposing side with equivalent qualification and skill would then step forward to accept the challenge and announce his name, family, and title. If the opposition was considered fair and worthy, a face-to-face combat would begin. After the bout, the winner would return to his army, while the loser's remains would be withdrawn from the battlefield. The next warrior would then step forward and another bout would begin. This process was repeated until one side conceded defeat.

However, this traditional form of Japanese fighting etiquette did not work against the Mongolian army, which attacked with numbers. New tactics had to be implemented.

8. Japanese Immigration to Okinawa

Some of the surviving Taira warriors at the end of the Heian Period (794–1185) escaped the pursuing Minamoto army and immigrated to the islands of Okinawa, which was then an independent but divided kingdom (Okinawa was unified in 1429 by King Shohashi). Near the end of the Kamakura Period, some Minamoto warriors also immigrated to the islands.

These Japanese immigrants, along with immigrants from China, mixed into the native Okinawan population. The Japanese dialect spoken in modern-day Okinawa is rooted in the ancient Japanese spoken during the Heian Period, preserved without change in the isolated island environment.

9. The Age of the Civil Wars

Following the sudden fall of the Kamakura shogunate in 1333, a period of social disorder and civil wars lasted until 1590, when warlord Nobunaga Oda and his successor Hideyoshi Toyotomi reunified Japan. During this 250-year span, the imperial institutions of local control withered completely, and Japan was in a constant warring state. Each regional warlord (called "daimyo") lived in their own domains, devoting their full energies to improving their own military, political, and economic strength. Although the civil wars caused destruction, Japan witnessed a quantum leap forward in economic activity and the emergence of two powerful social forces: self-conscious merchants and increasingly rebellious market-oriented farmers.

Zen practices also spread rapidly in this period. Zen monks (some of them retired warriors) taught meditation, arts, and literature to the sons and daughters of provincial warriors. The philosophy and training of Zen, characterized by simplicity, serenity, and tranquility, not only gave samurai warriors the strength to overcome the fear of death, but contributed to the development of traditional arts such as *cha no yu* (tea ceremony), *ikebana* (flower arrangement), noh (dance), and sho-do (calligraphy). These arts were considered as expressions of the level of awareness that the individual had attained, and were widely practiced among samurai.

The first Westerner to visit Japan was a Portuguese merchant whose ship drifted ashore in 1543. The Portuguese introduced rifles to the Japanese, and within a short period of time, the Japanese were producing domestic rifles. The firearm changed the battle field strategies, and put an end to the traditional hand-to-hand combat with swords and spears.

In 1588, just before completing reunification of Japan, Lord Hideyoshi ordered all non-warriors to surrender their swords in an attempt to disarm the farmers, thus preventing a farmer's uprising which often threatened provincial daimyos. Hideyoshi also prohibited the transition between social classes: the samurai, the farmer, and the merchant were kept distinctly separate.

Lord Hideyoshi invaded the Korean Peninsula in 1592 with 150,000 men. The invasion force was withdrawn when Hideyoshi passed away in 1598.

During the Civil War Period ("sengoku jidai"), many of the martial arts techniques were systematically refined. Specialized martial arts instructors appeared, and warrior trainees, or "bugeisha," traveled across the country in search of a weapons expert under whom they could study. The rugged fighting form of "bugei" was slowly transforming into an art form, and "bujutsu" was forming.

Bugeishas tested their skill by engaging in a duel with well-known experts. Little or no safety gear was worn, and so many lost their lives or were crippled. The famed Musashi Miyamoto lived in this transitional period.

10. The Edo Period

After Lord Hideyoshi's death, Lord Ieyasu Tokugawa's army won a decisive battle in *Sekigahara* against the remaining Toyotomi clan in 1600. Lord Ieyasu received the title of *shogun* from the emperor in 1603, and opened his shogunate in Edo (current Tokyo). Law and order replaced chaos, and possession and use of weapons were strictly regulated. During the Edo Period (1603-1868), Japan isolated itself from the rest of the world, and prospered in peace for over two centuries through significant political, social, economic, and cultural developments.

The concept of "budo" was established in the early Edo Period. Although Zen has been the guiding philosophy for the samurai since the Kamakura

Period in the 13th Century, the peace and social stability of the Edo Period allowed bujutsu to be integrated with Zen. The transformation from "bujutsu" to "budo" occurred.

The persons who played the key role in this transformation were Zen Master Soho Takuan and Sword Master Munenori Yagyu who was the Tokugawa shogun's chief kenjutsu instructor. Takuan wrote in his *Immovable Wisdom* (a series of letters to Munenori) that the mind of a zen master is the same as the mind of a swordmaster; "the mind that does not stop at all is called immovable wisdom." Munenori defined his art as "the life-giving sword," and wrote in his *Family Book of Swordsmanship*, "No-sword is held to be the exclusive secret of this school."

Musashi Miyamoto also accepted Zen and wrote in his *Book of Five Rings*, "Then you will come to think of things in a wide sense and, taking the void as the Way, you will see the Way as void."

The void ("ku" or "mu") is the essence of Zen teachings. Both "immovable wisdom" and "no-sword" indicate the emptiness of the mind. This line of thought was further developed in the Meiji Period by Sword and Zen Master Tesshu Yamaoka with his Muto-ryu ("School of No-sword").

Throughout the Edo Period, "bugei," "bujutsu," and "budo" coexisted. "Bugei" was the variety of combat skill required of all samurai. Required "bugei" disciplines included the sword, spear, pike, archery, jujutsu, horsemanship, rifle shooting, swimming, and others, for the total of 18 disciplines ("bugei ju happan"). "Bujutsu" were the weapons arts for combat purposes which were more refined and systematically developed. "Budo" was the means to improve oneself through martial training.

Beginning in the mid-Edo Period, many kenjutsu schools geared toward character development adapted bamboo sticks, or "shinai," and protective armor, or "bogu," to reduce injury during practice. These schools were heavily criticized by other bujutsu-oriented schools as impractical.

In 1609, the Satsuma clan in Kyushu sent 3,000 soldiers to Okinawa to conquer the islands. King Shonei was captured and taken to Satsuma, but was later allowed to return to Okinawa to govern the islands. Satsuma maintained Okinawa's relative independence to enable foreign trade with China and Korea which was banned by the Tokugawa government. This independence ended when the Meiji government officially incorporated Okinawa into Japanese territory in 1879.

The arrival of Commodore Matthew Perry in 1853 ended Japan's isolation from the rest of the world. American gun-ship diplomacy reopened Japan's diplomatic and commercial relations with the Western world, and brought down the Tokugawa regime, along with 700 years of warrior rule.

11. The Meiji Restoration

Emperor Meiji declared the restoration of direct imperial rule in 1868.

Feudalism was abolished, and the modernization of Japan has begun.

The Meiji Restoration significantly altered the culture and lifestyle of the Japanese. The Meiji government's first priority was to strengthen the national defense by organizing a Western-style military force. The Military Conscription Ordinance in 1873 required all Japanese citizens to serve three years of active service and four years in the reserves. The class structure was eliminated, and the samurai class was phased out. The traditional martial arts were deemed as useless old-fashioned fighting techniques, and were all but abandoned.

As imperial rule was restored for the first time in 700 years, Buddhism (and Zen) was dismissed, and Shinto became the national religion. The samurais lost not only their privileges but also their guiding philosophy. Some former samurai became aristocrats while others became merchants or farmers to earn a living. Most of them abandoned the practice of martial arts altogether.

However, as Western sports such as baseball, gymnastics, and track & field were introduced, the once forgotten martial arts were gradually revived as native-Japanese sports. The Ministry of Education supported the movement to promote physical education among the nation.

Both Tesshu Yamaoka and Jigoro Kano opened their dojos in 1882. Yamaoka's Shunpukan was to teach kendo and Zen, while Kano transformed jujutsu to judo and taught the art in his Kodokan. Kano promoted not only judo but also sports in general. He established the Dai Nippon Taiikukai (Japan Athletic Association) in 1901 which governed all sports, and became the first Japanese member of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) in 1909. Kano participated in the 5th Olympics held in Stockholm, Sweden in 1912 as the head of the Japanese delegate.

The Meiji government's economic policies produced a rapid industrial revolution, and within a short period of time, Japan joined the industrialized nations. The Imperial Constitution, promulgated in 1889, declared the emperor "sacred and inviolable." However, the emperor himself reigned rather than ruled.

As a result of the war with China in 1894-95, Japan acquired the island of Taiwan and a large indemnity as well as its share of access to the Chinese market. In 1904-05, Japan fought a war with Russia and won. Japan gained recognition of its paramount interests in Korea, took back the southern Manchurian leases, and acquired the southern half of Sakhalin. Korea was formally annexed to Japan in 1910. In 1914, Japan took part in World War I on the side of the Allies.

The series of war victories promoted national pride, and the Meiji government decided to use martial arts as physical educational tools to improve the health of school-age children. Behind this decision, there was persistent lobbying by Tesshu Yamaoka and Jigoro Kano. In 1895, the Dai Nippon Butoku-kai was established as the governing body for all budo.

12. Introduction of Okinawan Karate in the Japanese Mainland

An Okinawan karate master, Gichin Funakoshi (1870-1957) came to the Japanese mainland in 1917 for the first time to give a demonstration of karate at Butokuden in Kyoto. By the invitation of Judo-founder Jigoro Kano, Funakoshi returned to the mainland in 1922 to perform another karate demonstration at Kodokan in Tokyo. For this demonstration, Funakoshi hand-stitched white uniforms for himself and for his partner Shinkin Gima, an Okinawan native and a member of Kodokan.

The demonstration was attended by over 350 people, including newspaper reporters, and was a huge success. This demonstration by Funakoshi and Gima marks the starting point of modern-day karatedo. The newspaper articles on the demonstration raised public interest in the art and generated massive number of requests for additional karate demonstrations and instruction. Funakoshi postponed his return to Okinawa, and started teaching karate in Meisei-juku, a dormitory for Okinawan students in Tokyo.

13. Transformation of Karate in the Early Showa Period

The Keio University Karate Club was the first to change karate (China hand) to karate (Empty hand) in 1929. However, the substitution meant much more than a mere cosmetic change. One of the founding members of the Keio University Karate Club, Goro Shimokawa was a member of the Enkaku Temple in Kamakura (the garden of which contains a monument commemorating Funakoshi with the inscription written by Zen master Sogen Asahina which reads "There is no first attack in karate"). After studying Zen at this temple, Funakoshi was persuaded by his students at Keio to change the character to Kara (Empty or Void) which contains profound meaning in the Zen context.

The adaptation of Zen signified that the Chinese/Okinawan fighting art of karate had transformed itself into a Japanese *budo*.

14. The War

After only 15 years of Emperor Taisho's reign, Emperor Showa (known to Westerners as Emperor Hirohito) acceded to the throne in 1926 at age 25. However, increasing right-wing movement and military intervention into politics pushed Japan to gradually move away from democracy and parliamentarianism toward militarism, totalitarianism, and expansionism. By means of assassination and intimidation, the Japanese military took control of the parliament.

In 1942, the military regime took over the Dai Nippon Butoku-kai and restructured it as a military-dictated national *budo* organization.

However, the new Butoku-kai (also referred to as "Tojo Butoku-kai") failed to obtain the support of individual budo federations, and expansion of the War made it impossible to hold seminars or competitions.

To escape the U.S.-lead economic sanctions and to establish military dominance in Asia and the Pacific, the military-lead government of Japan attacked Pearl Harbor in December 1941 to destroy the U.S. Pacific Fleet. The War came to an end with the blast of atomic bombs over Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945. Japan's unconditional surrender brought an end to World War II.

15. Post-War Japan and Budo

The Allied Occupation directed by General Douglas MacArthur pushed through a sweeping series of reforms including a new constitution, land reforms, the dismemberment of zaibatsu (plutocracy), and major changes in legal codes. The Dai Nippon Butoku-kai was ordered to dissolve, and all martial arts were temporarily banned, with the exception of sumo.

Kendo was the first of the Japanese budo disciplines to be revived, once again, as a sport, followed by Judo, and then Karate and other arts. As liberated Japan opened up its economy and culture to the rest of the world, these traditional arts attracted global interests, and spread throughout the globe.

The Budo Charter, established in 1987, defines the object of budo trainings as "to cultivate character, enrich the ability to make value judgments, and foster a well disciplined and capable individual through participation in physical and mental training utilizing martial techniques."

The 14th Century Zen Master Takuan and his friend, Yagyū Munenori, the shogun's sword master, defined that the trainings of the Sword and Zen share a common goal. Dr. Jigoro Kano, the father of Judo, dreamed, in the 17th Century, that the good aspects of traditional Japanese culture would one day play a contributing role in the formation of global culture and sports.

Now it is up to us to make use of the arts so that our budo trainings can help us build stronger and more compassionate character, and enable us to provide those around us with much happiness, comfort and peace of the minds.