Samurai Philosophy

Philosophies of Buddhism and Zen, to the lesser extent Confucianism influenced the samurai culture as well as Shinto. Zen meditation became an important teaching by offering a process to calm one's mind. Buddhism concept of reincarnation and rebirth led samurai to abandon torture and needless killing. Some samurai even gave up violence altogether and became Buddhist monks after realizing how fruitless their killings were. Some were killed as they came to terms with the realizations in the battle field.

Bushido, codified during Edo period, was the way of the samurai, yet its deceptive simplicity led to countless arguments over its interpretation. Hagakure: The Book of the Samurai by Yamamoto Tsunetomo is a manual of instruction into the way of the samurai. Even as it was published, it received a number of reviews that criticized strict and impersonal interpretations. If the lord is wrong, for example if he ordered a massacre of civilians, should he observe Loyalty to massacre as ordered or should he observe Rectitude to let civilians escape unharmed? If a man had sick parents but committed an unforgivable mistake, should he protect his Honor by committing Seppuku or should he show Courage by living with dishonor and care for his parents?

The incident of 47 Ronin caused debates about the righteousness of their actions and how bushido should be applied. They had defied shogun in ways by taking matters into their own hands but it was an act of Loyalty and Rectitude as well. Finally, their acts were agreed to be Rectitude but not Loyalty to the shogun. This made them criminals with conscience and eligible for seppuku.

The most famous book of kenjutsu, or sword fighting, dates from this period (Miyamoto Musashi's The Book of Five Rings, 1643). However, the larger part of the book is focused on the mentality of fighting. In an attempt to help develop the character needed to cope with moral demands that the practice of kenjutsu required, many kenjutsu books from the Edo period also focused on spiritual issues.

Weapons

The samurai used various weapons. Bushido taught that a samurai's soul is in the katana that they carried. Sometimes a samurai is pictured as entirely dependent on the katana for fighting. This is much different than the role of a crossbow in medieval Europe and the role of sword to a knight, here the weapon serves as a symbol of being samurai, which is of greater importance than the katana qua weapon. Upon reaching the age of thirteen, in a ceremony called Genpuku (元服), a male child was given a wakizashi and an adult name and became a samurai. This also gave him the right to wear katana though it was usually sealed with strings to prevent accidental drawing of a katana. A katana and a wakizashi together are called a daisho (lit. "big and small").

The wakizashi itself was a samurai's "honour blade" and purportedly never left the samurai's side. He would sleep with it under his pillow and would be taken with him when he entered a house and had to leave his main weapons outside. It was also the weapon used for committing sepukku. It was always worn with the edge facing upwards when stuck in the belt.
The samurai's weapon of choice was the *yumi* (bow) and it was unchanged for centuries until the introduction of *gunpowder* and rifle in the 16th century. A Japanese style compound bow was not a very powerful weapon in comparison with the Eurasia reflex composite bow. Its size made it possible to shoot various projectiles like fire arrows and signal arrows at an effective range of 50 meters or less, over 100 meters when accuracy was not an issue. It was usually used on foot behind a *tedate* (手盾), a large and mobile bamboo wall, but it could be used even from horseback. The practice of shooting from horseback became a Shinto ceremony of *Yabusame* (流鏑馬).

In the 15th century, the *yari* (spear) also became a popular weapon. It displaced the *naginata* from the battlefield as personal bravery became less of a factor and battles became organized. It was simpler and more deadly than a katana. A charge, mounted or dismounted, was more effective when using a spear and it offered better than even odds against a samurai using a *tachi*, a katana adapted to mounted combat. In the Battle of Shizugatake where Shibata Katsuie was defeated by Toyotomi Hideyoshi, then known as Hashiba Hideyoshi, the Seven Spearmen of Shizugatake (賤ヶ岳七本槍) played a crucial role in the victory.

One of the biggest controversies surrounding the weapons of the samurai is whether samurai ever charged on horseback. Horses of that time were smaller yet durable but it was questionable how well they would perform carrying heavily armored samurai. A traditional belief held that samurai mainly fought on horseback acting as heavy cavalry and charged through hapless foot soldiers. It is currently believed that samurai mainly fought on foot and used horses for transportation and only occasionally charged on disarrayed and retreating enemies. The Battle of Nagashino was one of such battle where samurai supposedly charged on horseback.

After the matchlock rifle was introduced from Europe, samurai started practicing this weapon. It became the favorite weapon of some samurai for sniping on the battle field as samurai were awarded for every enemy he took down himself, though commanding was an important aspect of samurai. Conscripted soldiers also used matchlock rifles but instead fired in volleys to break up enemy ranks. Toward the end of the feudal period, some samurai organized *dragoons* as part of their troops and some were reportedly used in the Battle of Sekigahara and later battles.

Some samurai were unarmed on the battle fields except for katana. Takeda Shingen was one such samurai. This did not mean that they fought using katana. Instead, they focused on commanding and were confident that they could trust those they commanded for protection. In the Battle of Kawanakajima, Shingen was almost killed. A plan went wrong and troops of Uesugi Kenshin charged Shingen's lines, who were unaware that his entrapment plan had been detected. With only half of his troops and completely surprised, Shingen himself had to defend his life with the wooden stick that he used to order attacks. The rest of his soldiers barely returned in time to save Shingen and the rest of his force from being completely wiped out.

Other weapons used by samurai were *jo*, *bo*, *grenade*, *catapult* and *cannon*. However, specific samurai sometimes favored others. In battles around Meiji restoration, more modern weapons like the *Gatling gun* and rifles were used.