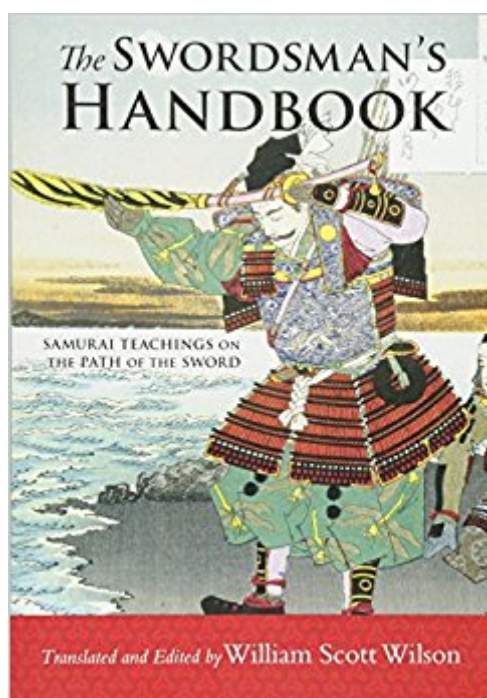


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The Swordsman's Handbook: Samurai Teachings On The Path Of The Sword



Synopsis

An anthology of the most influential writings on swordsmanship from the samurai era. There is perhaps no more potent symbol of the samurai era than the sword. By the seventeenth century in Japan, the art of swordsmanship had begun to take on an almost cult-like popularity.

Swordsmanship was more than a mastery of technique; it was a path toward self-mastery. The Swordsman's Handbook is the definitive collection of writings by men who saw the study of swordsmanship not only as essential to life and death, but as something that transcended life and death as well. Their teaching, that dealing with conflict is an art that requires grace and courage, speaks to us today with surprising immediacy and relevance. Included in this collection are writings by Kotada Yahei Toshitada, Takuan Soho, Yagyu Munenori, Miyamoto Musashi, Matsuura Seizan, Issai Chozanshi, and Yamaoka Tesshu.

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Customer Reviews

WILLIAM SCOTT WILSON is the foremost translator into English of traditional Japanese texts on samurai culture. He received BA degrees from Dartmouth College and the Monterey Institute of Foreign Studies, and an MA in Japanese literary studies from the University of Washington. His best-selling translations include Hagakure, The Book of Five Rings, The Unfettered Mind, and The Life-Giving Sword. He is also the author of The Lone Samurai, a biography of the legendary samurai Miyamoto Musashi.

Preface

Always place the sword in the sheath of the mind, and wear it in the sash of etiquette. What is it about the art of swordsmanship that makes it the popular practice that it is, not only in nearly every small village in Japan, but in many cities in the United States and around the world? Unlike karate, judo or aikido, it is not immediately practical for self defense. As opposed to marksmanship, the weapon it uses cannot be learned in a few weeks, months, or even years, and cannot be carried concealed on the street for one's own protection (1). Yet there is a grace, dignity and etiquette to swordsmanship, accompanied by techniques that demand both mindfulness and physical coordination, that seem to manifest the immediacy of the human condition both physical and spiritual. And this while handling a blade that symbolizes the fine line between existence and non-existence. Here is a story.

When Nennami Jion was only five years old, his father, Soma Jirozaemon Tadashige, the lord of the Soma fief in Oshu was assassinated, probably by a neighboring hostile landed family, and the boy fled on the back of his wet nurse to Bushu (2). Entering a Buddhist monastery to avoid being killed himself, he changed his given name, Soma Jiro Yoshimoto, to one more appropriate to a priest, Nennami. Nennami was given permission to study under the auspices of an Abbot Yugyo, but even as the good abbot's young disciple, he harbored only one thought (ichi nen *ichibu*), which was to someday take revenge on his father's enemy. To that end, whenever he was out of sight of the other monks and priests, he began to train himself in swordsmanship on his own.

From the surprisingly young age of ten, however, he began to travel the country on foot, passing through province after province, learning swordsmanship wherever he could. For a time, he stayed at Mt. Kurama - home of the mysterious tengu - on the outskirts of Kyoto, and studied from a man whom he described as "different and strange." He then turned his steps towards Soshu (3), where he received secret traditions of the martial arts from another unconventional swordsman, a venerable old priest at the Jufukuji Temple in Kamakura (4). Finally, in 1368 at the age of seventeen, Nennami journeyed to Kyushu in the far southwest and came to his deepest understanding of swordsmanship in a dream while living in a sea-eroded cave near the Udo Shrine.

At the age of eighteen, Nennami felt ready. Leaving the priesthood, he found his father's assassin, took quick revenge, and returned to his hometown, where he went through his coming of age ceremony. After three years of mourning

Toward the age of fifty-eight, Nennami felt that age was catching up with him, and in May of 1408, settled down in the village of Namiai in Shinshu (5), established the Chofukuji Temple, and ended his days in daily worship of Marishiten, protector of warriors. This Marishiten was venerated as a deity that would transport the warrior, through compassion and respect for others, to a higher spiritual level, one where victory and defeat, life and death, were unimportant. In this way, the warrior although necessarily involved in war and bloodshed achieved at once, both selflessness and a mastery of self.

Nennami Jion, whose personal history is not particularly unique among the early sword masters, is regarded as having been the very first of a remarkable number (6) of the Japanese great swordsmen (kengo), and his style, the Nen-ryu, has left its mark, not only on the Maniwa Nen-ryu, which is still practiced today, but on other important styles such as the Chujo-ryu and the Itto-ryu. Nennami, however, taught an art that is based ultimately on the intuitive grasp of repeated techniques, and he was highly influenced by Zen Buddhism as were many of the sword masters who came after him. This presented certain problems of communication. The repeated techniques, for example, used in teaching swordsmanship are patterns of movement with the feet and sword that are exercised over and over again until they are understood, not only by muscle memory, but far deeper in the student's subconscious. Thus, they are first memorized, and then learned - or perhaps better said, absorbed - until they can be forgotten and pushed out of conscious movement. Once this level is achieved, the student can move freely and intuitively. The technique is his, but not rigidly so. It is this level, however, that cannot be taught or transmitted, and at which, techniques may take flight. In the same way, in Zen, transmission of enlightenment is said to be isshin denshin (mind to mind), or, transmission from mind to mind, and is not to depend on written documents. What is taught cannot be put into words, and concepts expressed through words may only get in the way. In other words, our deepest perceptions and understandings can only be received or shared with the like-minded. Here is something else: When the warrior Hosokawa Shigeyuki (1434-1511) retired as daimyo of Sanuki Province, he became a Zen priest.

When Osen Kaisan(1429-1493), a scholar-monk, visited Shigeyuki, the aging warrior told the monk that he wished to show him a landscape that he himself had painted on a recent trip to Kumano and other scenic spots on the Kii Peninsula. When the scroll was opened, there was nothing but a blank sheet of paper. The monk, struck by the emptiness of the painting, offered these words of praise,

Your brush is as tall as Mt. Sumeru,

Black ink large enough to exhaust the great earth;

The white paper as vast as the void that swallows up

all illusions. Because of this - the difficulty of putting words or ink to an intuitive inspiration (as vast as the void that swallows up all illusions), coupled with the relatively uneducated level of some of the early sword masters much of what is left to us from the early schools such as Jion is either in the form of long lists of the names of techniques, vague sayings or poems hinting at concepts that might not be well-expressed otherwise. (7) Examples of the latter from the Itto-ryu are the following:

Examples of the latter from the Itto-ryu are the following:

When taking action
 do not restrict your feet,
 but mind your body.
 with ch'ei at peace,
 vigorously apply your technique.
 Swordsman'ship
 is like pushing a cart
 up a hill.
 If you waver once the cart returns
 to the bottom of the slope.

For all of the above reasons, although the style may still exist, it is difficult to know in many cases what the founder's original intentions were, how he expressed himself to his students, or if the style has indeed changed over the centuries. What prompts or handbooks still exist may mean very little to the uninitiated and sometimes even to the current teacher himself.

The entries included in this anthology are of a very different stripe. Although the same struggle for clarity is necessarily apparent, and lists are included as a matter of course, the men who wrote these treatises – Kotada Yahei Toshitada (fl. 1653), Takuan Soho (1573-1645), Yagyu Munenori (1571-1646), Miyamoto Musashi (1584-1646), Matura Seizan (1760-1841), Issai Chozanishi (1659-1741) and Yamaoka Tesshu (1836-1888) – were not only highly literate, but were literary men as well. Nevertheless, they came from very different walks of life: one was a renowned scholar as well as a swordsman; another a life-long Zen Buddhist priest who was probably just as happy experimenting in the kitchen as grasping a wooden sword in the dojo; yet another was a dedicated and confirmed ronin, a master painter and sculptor; and yet another spent much of his life dealing with politics. Their works are just as different in style, but are all thoughtful, to the point, in some cases humorous and fanciful, but never frustratingly vague. These were men who could and wanted to write well. Why this change? In short, by the seventeenth century, the art of swordsmanship had begun to take on almost a cult popularity, and students began to be attracted to masters and their dojos in ever-increasing numbers. In contrast to Ito Ittosai, who had only two disciples when he decided to retire into the priesthood, and Nennami Jion, who had fourteen, the Yagyu dojos were filled with students, Matura Seizan was a member of a dojo that would become one of the most popular in the capital of Edo, and Yamaoka Tesshu, despite his strict teaching methods, was never without applicants. It is true that at the end of Musashi's life, he had only a few disciples, but his reputation was already such that he likely felt it necessary to set the record straight – not only for his disciples, but for posterity as well. Add to this that the times had changed from those of chaos and war to relative peace and prosperity, and this provided a certain leisure, for those who wished, to write these treatises.

Regardless of their reasons for writing down these words, however, all of these men saw the study of swordsmanship as essential to life and death, but as transcendent of life and death as well. All of them taught that dealing with conflict could be a matter of art, grace and courage; and in this way, their words speak to us with surprising immediacy.

It has been my extreme good fortune to have had the opportunity to work on these materials for nearly thirty years. At times, the work has gone unexpectedly smoothly; at times, I have nearly pulled out what is left of my hair in frustration. But each and every book has been, again, a remarkable opportunity, and has always made me sit up a little straighter in my chair as I worked. Moreover, any translator, I think, will agree that, in working with a writer's original choice of words, phrasing, quirks of style, and even what has not been said, the translator is given the fortuitous chance to know more intimately not only what has been written but a good deal of the writer himself. In this way, the work has involved the meeting with a number of remarkable men.

But a work does not stop with the completion of the translation, and a book is not produced with the last closing of a dictionary. Thus, I owe an enormous debt of gratitude to the many people who have labored so hard to put these translations into print, or who have encouraged me along the way when the goings got rough. To my former editors at Kodansha International who initially welcomed me on board, Homer Neal, Kuramochi Tetsuo, Barry Lancet, Elizabeth Floyd and Ginny Tapley; to my ever-patient and tireless editors at Shambhala Publishing, Beth Frankl and John Golebiewski; to my friends and morale providers, Thomas Levidiotis, Ichikawa Takashi, Kate Barnes, Gary Haskins, Jim Brems, John Siscoe, Jack Whisler, Dr. Laura Nenzi, Dr. Daniel Medvedov, Dr. Justin Newman and Robin D. Gill to name only a few; to Frank Nieves Sensei, who demonstrates in the dojo what cannot be written in books, and to all my sempai at the at the South Florida Kendo Club; to my wife, muse and wordsmith, Emily; and to my late professors, Hiraga Noburu and Dr. Richard McKinnon, whose humor, erudition and encouragement can never be repaid. Although it is the translator's name that goes on the cover when a book is finally published, it is certainly not his work alone. Any and all mistakes, however, are my own.

This is an outstanding book for modern swordsman. Zen Buddhism carries throughout the swordsman's training in Edo Japan and carries through to today. If you want one handbook instructing the mind of a samurai, this work consolidates all other writing into one.

Excellent book. Worth the money. Some of the technical jargon is a bit difficult. Once you get through it, however, you discover that all the teachers are saying the same thing - empty your mind and flow choicelessly with what is.

Much of the book is contained in Wilson's full length translation of some of the sources found here, but there are also works of other less known swordsmen. Even though I have read and continue to re-read them, this compilation is recommended to those starting out in study of the sword as the instrument in encountering The Way.

thoughtful read

Perfect

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