

THE LIFE OF
MIYAMOTO MUSASHI

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The calligraphy found on the cover of this essay means “By matching a deity in skill, you can become superhuman.”

I borrowed this from page 53 of Shoshin Nagamine’s book The Essence Of Okinawan Karate-Do.

Musashi was considered in his own time and to this day “superhuman” or invincible. When you read about this man, you will come to find that this was as a result of his relentless training and perfection of his skill. The phrase so accurately describes him that I found it to be perfect for this cover.

As you read the essay, you will also come to find many of the philosophies, sayings, and methods used in our discipline were greatly influenced by Miyamoto Musashi.

INTRODUCTION TO MIYAMOTO MUSASHI

Why would a student of Matsubayashi Ryu pick a practitioner of Kendo, as the subject for his Shodan thesis? Who in fact was Musashi, and how is he connected to our discipline? It is my hope that after reading this essay, the answers to these questions will no longer be a mystery.

Grand Master Nagamine's book, The Essence of Okinawan Karate-Do begins with a foreword by Junji Nishime. Nishime states "There is a saying, one of my favorites, which reads, 'Be well versed in the arts of pen and sword.' The great swordsman Musashi Miyamoto devoted his life to seeking perfection in the art of swordsmanship; at the same time however, he developed a brilliant talent for painting. His way of life has always held a strong attraction for me."

In the same book, Nagamine Sensei quotes Musashi on page 47 under Precepts in the Mastery #4 where he states "Do not be dependent upon others for your improvement. Musashi Miyamoto, Japan's greatest swordsman, once said 'Pay your respects to the Gods and Buddahs, but never rely on them.'" Nagamine held the rank of Sandan in Kendo. As such, he was very familiar with the teachings of Musashi, and if we study Musashi, we can see how his teachings influenced Nagamine, and thereby, Matsubayashi Ryu.

Musashi is known to the Japanese as Kensei or “swords-saint.” He wrote a book called Go Rin No Sho (A Book Of Five Rings) while living in a cave in the mountains of Kyushu a few weeks before his death in 1645. Go Rin No Sho heads every Kendo bibliography and is used today not only by students of kendo, but even by Japanese businessmen who use it as a guide for running their businesses. As a matter of fact, in Musashi’s own words, it is “a guide for men who want to learn strategy.” With no further delay then, let us explore the life of Miyamoto Musashi.

Shinmen Musashi No Kami Fujiwara No Genshin, or as he is commonly known, Miyamoto Musashi, was born in a village called Miyamoto in the province of Mimasaka in 1584. When Musashi was seven, his father, Munisai, either died or abandoned the child. As his mother had also died, Ben No Suke, as Musashi was known during his childhood, was left in the care of an uncle. He was a boisterous youth, strong-willed, and large for his age.

Whether he was urged to pursue kendo by his uncle, or whether his aggressive nature led him to it, we do not know, but it is recorded that he slew a man in single combat when he was just thirteen. The opponent was Arima Kihei, a samurai of the Shinto Ryu school of military arts, skilled with sword and spear. The boy threw the man to the ground, and beat him about the head with a stick when he tried to rise. Kihei died vomiting blood. Musashi’s next contest was when he was sixteen, when he defeated Tadashima Akiyama.

About this time, Musashi left home and embarked on a pilgrimage which saw him victor in scores of contests and took him to war six times. This part of Musashi's life was spent living apart from society while he devoted himself with a ferocious single-mindedness to the search for enlightenment by the Way of the Sword. Concerned only with perfecting his skill, he lived as men need not live, wandering Japan soaked by the cold winds of winter, not dressing his hair, nor taking a wife, nor following any profession save his study. It is said he never entered a bathtub lest he was caught unawares without a weapon, and that his appearance was uncouth and wretched.

When he was 21, Musashi went to Kyoto, the capital, where he fought three members of the Yoshioka family, who were renowned fencing instructors. Yoshioka Seijiro, the head of the family, was the first to fight Musashi, on the moor outside the city. Seijiro was armed with a real sword, and Musashi with a bokken, or wooden sword. Musashi laid Seijiro out with a fierce attack and beat him savagely as he lay on the ground. His servants carried him home on a rain-shutter, where for shame he cut off his samurai topknot. Denshichiro was the second family member to fight Musashi. Seconds after the start of the fight, Musashi broke his opponent's skull with one blow of his wooden sword. The third member to fight Musashi was Hanshichiro, a boy not yet out of his teens. Musashi arrived at the dueling site well before the appointed time and waited in hiding for his enemy to come. The boy arrived dressed formally in war gear, accompanied by a large contingent of armed guards, determined to do away with Musashi.

Musashi waited concealed in the shadows, and just as they were thinking that he had thought better of it and decided to leave Kyoto, he suddenly appeared in the midst of them and cut the boy down. Then, drawing both swords, he cut a path through them and made his escape.

After that episode, Musashi wandered over Japan, becoming a legend in his own time. He had more than sixty contests before he was 29, and won them all.

Passing through Izumo province, Musashi visited Lord Matsudaira and asked permission to fight his strongest kendo expert. Permission was granted against a man who used an 8 foot long hexagonal wooden pole. The contest was held in the lord's library and Musashi used two wooden swords. He defeated the lord's champion, and to his surprise, Lord Matsudaira asked Musashi to fight him. The fight commenced, and Musashi proceeded to break Matsudaira's sword in two with the 'Fire and Stones Cut." The lord bowed his head in defeat, and Musashi stayed with him for some time as his teacher.

It was about this time that Musashi stopped ever using real swords in duels. He was invincible, and from then on he devoted himself to the search for perfect understanding by way of Kendo. According to his own writing, he came to understand strategy when he was fifty or fifty one. He and his adopted son Iori, a waif whom he had met in Dewa province on his travels, settled in Ogura in 1634. Musashi was never again to leave Kyushu island.

After six years in Ogura, Musashi was invited to stay with Hosokawa, lord of Kumamoto castle as a guest. He stayed a few years with Lord Hosokawa and spent his time teaching and painting. In 1643 he retired to a life of seclusion in a cave called Reigendo. Here he wrote Go Rin No Sho, addressed to his pupil Teruo Nobuyuki, a few weeks before his death on May 19, 1645.

Go Rin No Sho is unique among books of martial arts in that it deals with both the strategy of warfare and the methods of single combat in exactly the same way. The book is not a thesis on strategy, it is a guide for men who want to learn strategy, and, as a guide always leads, so the contents are always beyond the student's understanding. The mentioning of this book in such detail is because not only is it a book of martial arts and strategy, but it is Musashi's last will and testament, the key to the extraordinary path he trod.

When at 29 he had become such a strong fighter, he did not settle down and build a school, replete with success, but instead became doubly engrossed with his study. In his last days even, he scorned a life of comfort with Hosokawa and lived two years alone in a mountain cave deep in contemplation. The behavior of this cruel, headstrong man was evidently most humble and honest.

Musashi wrote "When you have attained the Way of strategy there will not be one thing that you cannot understand" and "You will see the Way in everything." He did in fact become a master of arts and

crafts. He produced masterpieces of ink paintings more valued by the Japanese than ink paintings of any other artist. He was a fine calligrapher and a sculptor of wood and metal. He is said to have written poems and songs, but none of these survive. His paintings are sometimes impressed with his seal "Musashi" or his pen name "Niten." Niten means "Two Heavens", said by some to allude to his fighting attitude with a sword in each hand held above his head. In some places he established schools known as "Niten Ryu" and in other places known as "Enmei Ryu" (Clear Circle).

He wrote "Study the Ways of all professions." It is evident that he did just that. He sought out not only great swordsmen but also priests, strategists, artists and craftsmen, eager to broaden his knowledge. Though Musashi appears at first glance to have been a horribly cruel man, a deeper look into his life and writings would show that he was following logically an honest ideal. Musashi's life study is thus as relevant in the 20th century as it was in Musashi's own time, and applies not just to the Japanese race, but to all nations.

The ideals that Musashi believed in and practiced, are as applicable to our study of Matsubayashi Ryu as they are to Kendo or any other martial art. I find it inspiring that once Musashi considered himself invincible at the age of 29 after having sought out and defeated the best fighters and samurai of his era, rather than rest on his laurels, he intensified his own study and search for perfection in his Way. The life he led, giving up fame, fortune, and even comfort, to train and to teach, symbolizes the epitome of what a warrior and student should

be. As we are taught the difference between karate and karate-do, we can see in Musashi a man who pursued the “way.” During Musashi’s time, Japan had a rigid class structure. The four classes were samurai, farmers, artisans, and merchants. The samurai were the highest, in esteem if not in wealth, and included the lords, senior government officials, warriors, and minor officials and foot soldiers. Next in the hierarchy came the farmers, not because they were well thought of but because they provided the essential rice crops. Their lot was a rather unhappy one, as they were forced to give up most of their crops to the lords and were not allowed to leave their farms. Then came the artisans,, and last of all the merchants, who, though looked down upon, eventually rose to prominence because of the vast wealth they accumulated.

Musashi belonged to the samurai class. When the great provincial armies were gradually disbanded under Hideyoshi and Ieyasu, many out-of-work samurai roamed the country without masters. These samurai were known as ronin, and Musashi was one such samurai.

The education of samurai was by means of schooling in the Chinese classics and fencing exercises, from where Kendo was born. Where a Westerner might say “The pen is mightier than the sword” the Japanese would say “Bunbu Itchi” or “Pen and sword in accord.”

Musashi was a ronin at a time when the samurai were formally considered to be the elite, but actually had no means of livelihood unless they owned lands and castles. Many ronin put up their swords

and became artisans, but others, like Musashi, pursued the ideal of the warrior searching for enlightenment through the perilous paths of Kendo. Duels of revenge and tests of skill were commonplace, and fencing schools multiplied.

Traditionally, the fencing halls of Japan, called Dojo, were associated with shrines and temples, but during Musashi's lifetime numerous schools sprang up in the new castle towns. Each daimyo or lord sponsored a Kendo school, where his retainers (servants) could be trained and his sons educated. The hope of every ronin like Musashi, was that he would defeat the students and master of a Dojo in combat, thus increasing his fame and bringing his name to the ears of one who might employ him.

Dueling and other tests of arms were common, with both real and practice swords. These took place in fencing halls, in the streets, and within castle walls. Duels were fought to the death or until one of the contestants was disabled. To train in the Way of the sword meant not only fencing training, but also living by the code of honor of the samurai elite. Warfare was the spirit of the samurai's everyday life, and he could face death as if it were a domestic routine. He who realized the resolute acceptance of death at any moment in his everyday life was a master of the sword. This is the ideal to which Musashi was committed.

He states, " From my youth my heart has been inclined toward the Way of strategy. My first duel was when I was thirteen, I struck down

a strategist of the Shinto school, one Arima Kihei. When I was sixteen I struck down an able strategist, Tadashima Akiyama. When I was twenty one I went up to the capital and met all manner of strategists, never once failing to win in many contests. After that I went from province to province dueling with strategists of various schools, and not once failed to win even though I had as many as sixty encounters. This was between the ages of thirteen and twenty-eight or twenty-nine.

When I reached thirty I looked back on my past. The previous victories were not due to my having mastered strategy. Perhaps it was natural ability, or the order of heaven, or that other school's strategy was inferior. After that I studied morning and evening searching for the principle, and came to realize the Way of strategy when I was fifty."

Here Musashi paints a picture for us of the life of the ronin, traveling from province to province, dueling with the champions of various dojos, but not with the intent of getting a job, or obtaining a master, as it were, but rather seeking perfection in his study of kendo and strategy. Though he doesn't mention it here, most of his battles were won using wooden swords against real swords, Musashi having come to the conclusion that if he were to use a real sword, the opponent would have absolutely no chance against him.

It is noteworthy that between the ages of thirteen and thirty, a total of twenty-seven years of training, it is only then that Musashi begins

what he considers his serious training and pursuit of his Way. He then spends the next TWENTY years of his life vigorously seeking perfection in Kendo and strategy. At the same time, he becomes an expert in painting, calligraphy, sculpture, poetry and song writing.

When you look at your own training in karate-do, what you put into it, and the time you invest, take a look at the life of Musashi. He epitomizes what I would call commitment to his discipline. However he found balance in that he also mastered the artisan's crafts.

Musashi states "It is said the warrior's is the two-fold Way of pen and sword, and he should have a taste for both Ways. Even if a man has no natural ability he can be a warrior by sticking assiduously to both divisions of the Way."

Musashi attempts to explain at the end of his life the philosophy that he has formulated over almost fifty years of training by showing the Way as five books. He states in the Ground Book "It is difficult to realize the true Way just through sword-fencing. Know the smallest things and the biggest things, and the shallowest things and the deepest things. As if it were a straight road mapped out on the ground, the first book is called the Ground Book.

Second is the Water Book. With water as the basis, the spirit becomes like water. Water adopts the shape of it's receptacle, it is sometimes a trickle and sometimes a wild sea. If you master the principles of sword-fencing, when you freely beat one man, you beat

any man in the world. The spirit of defeating a man is the same for ten million men. The principle of strategy is having one thing, to know ten thousand things.

Third is the Fire Book. This book is about fighting. The spirit of fire is fierce, whether the fire be small or big; and so it is with battles. The Way of battles is the same for man to man fights and for ten thousand a side battles. You must appreciate that spirit can become big or small. What is big is easy to perceive: what is small is difficult to perceive. In short, it is difficult for large numbers of men to change position, so their movements can be easily predicted. An individual can easily change his mind, so his movements are difficult to predict. You must appreciate this. The essence of this book is that you must train day and night in order to make quick decisions.

Fourth, the Wind Book. By wind, I mean old traditions, present-day traditions, and family traditions. Thus I clearly explain the strategies of the world. This is tradition. It is difficult to know yourself if you do not know others. To all Ways there are side-tracks. If you are following the true Way and diverge a little, this will later become a large divergence. You must realize this.

Fifth is the Book of the Void. By void I mean that which has no beginning and no end. The Way of strategy is the Way of nature. When you appreciate the power of nature, knowing the rhythm of any situation, you will be able to hit the enemy naturally and strike naturally. All this is the Way of the Void.

Who, having read the above, cannot see the influence of Musashi not only in our own study of Matsubayashi Ryu, but in all martial arts as well? At the beginning of this paper I asked, why would a student of Matsubayashi Ryu pick a practitioner of Kendo as the subject of his shodan thesis, who was Musashi, and how is he connected to our discipline? I hope that these questions have been answered, and that along the way, a little has been learned about the life of a samurai, and that the journey has been an educational as well as an interesting one.

This essay is respectfully submitted on this 11th day of March, 2000.

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