

review by Joseph Caulfield, Esq.

Zen and the Way of the Sword *Arming the Samurai Psyche*

by Winston L. King

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In this fascinating book, Winston King, Professor Emeritus at Vanderbilt University, undertakes to explain what Zen Buddhism has done to and for the Japanese people — the only people for whom Buddhism, a religion teaching compassion, has become inextricably linked to a warrior class.

King's elucidation of the problem of Zen is divided into four parts: In the first, he describes Buddhism's arrival in Japan in the mid-sixth century. In the second, he discusses the samurai warrior, the creed of bushido, and various styles of swordsmanship and techniques of swordsmithing. In the third, he discusses what Zen did for the Samurai. In the concluding section, he discusses the legacy of the Samurai in the twentieth century. (The book also has a bibliography that directs the reader to other sources.)

As Buddhism spread around the western end of the Himalayas into central Asia and eastward along the trade routes into China, it developed its Mahayana forms, producing new scriptures and traditions. In China, interacting with Confucianism and Taoism, it produced several traditions that made their way into Korea and on to Japan. One of these was Ch'an, which is called Zen in Japanese.

As Professor King explains, when Buddhism reached Japan, it became politicized by a struggle between clans that supported it and clans that wanted to preserve traditional Shintoism.

King distinguishes two main currents in the development of Zen. One current, which stems from the writings of Nagarjuna (circa 150-250), an influential Indian Buddhist philosopher, is an emphasis on the emptiness of all phenomenon and of all intellectual distinctions — including the distinctions of true from false, right from wrong, and virtue from vice. The other current is Zen's meditative discipline, which it derived from Chinese Taoism. Buddhism incorporated many Taoist elements, imposing a rigid meditational discipline of "sitting in oblivion" and incorporating Taoism's wildness and its whimsical quality.

King also discusses the use of the koan — a "public statement" or "saying." When a koan is the center of one's attention for long hours of sitting in meditation, it becomes like a great hot ball of iron in one's belly that can neither be coughed up nor passed on through. Sometimes a "solution" to the koan's

puzzle is found — an exclamation, an action, a gesture, a look, or something else that satisfies the meditation master.

Insofar as Zen practice has an aim, it is enlightenment. Describing this desired result, King quotes D. T. Suzuki:

All your mental activities are now working to a different key, which is more satisfying, more peaceful, and fuller of joy than anything you ever had. The tone of your life is altered. There is something rejuvenating in it. The spring flowers look prettier, and the mountain stream runs cooler and more transparent.

Over time, Buddhism's message of non-violence was qualified to that of duty to the clan lord. For clan reasons, Buddhist warriors fought other Buddhist warriors.

King quotes one Samurai who counseled his son that "the duty of a warrior, like that of a monk, is to obey orders . . . [A Samurai] must consider his life not his own but a gift offered to his lord."

In the second portion of *Zen and the Way of the Sword*, King turns his attention to the Samurai and, in particular, to bushido (the Samurai code) attempting to describe the Samurai's obsession with death and with loyalty to superiors. Here King quotes authors who wrote during the Tokogawa period, a time of relative peace:

One who is a samurai must before all things keep constantly in mind, by day and by night . . . the fact that he has to die. That is his chief business.

And again:

Bushido comes down to death. . . . [G]reat things cannot be achieved by merely being earnest. A man must become a fanatic to the extreme of being obsessed by death. . . . [T]he martial arts require only an obsession with death. Both loyalty and filial piety are included within this.

Because the prospect of death was constantly before the Samurai, they were not attracted to the arduous scripturalism and

elaborate ritualism of the Tendai and Shingon Buddhist traditions. In the earlier years of warrior control in Japan, most Samurai were insufficiently educated to deal with such matters, and later in Japanese history they had scant interest in them. Such matters were not immediately relevant to those whose vocation required them to be ready for death at any moment.

Also, the physical context and environment of the Zen monastery appealed to the warrior's sensibilities. Like everything else in Zen, the Zendo was simple, sparse, and natural. There were no splendidly ornamented images of the Buddha, no gorgeously robed priests, no highly decorated walls or tapestries.

Zen's Spartan discipline was another attraction for the Samurai. The meditation periods were long and arduous, standing monks looking for the restless, inattentive, or drowsy to strike (after, of course, securing consent). And the relation to the meditation master also required discipline: the Roshi, must be obeyed.

In the third section of the book, King discusses what Zen did for the Samurai, quoting extensively from D. T. Suzuki and Takuan.

According to King, the perfect Zen swordsman is one indifferent to the drama of life and death, neither anticipating nor regretting, facing a sword without emotion. To attain this total detachment, King suggests, everything must be turned over to the unconscious / subconscious visceral awareness, the *hara* or center:

Those who cling to life die, and those who defy death live. The essential thing is the mind. Look into this mind and firmly take hold of it, and you will understand that there is something in you which is above birth-and-death and which is neither drowned in water nor burned by fire . . . those who are reluctant to give up their lives and embrace death are not true warriors.

King doubts that the average Samurai experienced spiritual transformation through Zen practice. Rather, the basic attraction of Zen meditation for the Samurai was its assistance in conquering the fear of death that was an integral part of his calling as a warrior. As much as meditation might improve a Samurai's swordsmanship, what he most desired was the strengthening of his will to die when and if it became necessary. If such a result appealed to the Samurai, it also appealed to his lord. Samurai trained in death-readiness would be the better warriors.

In the concluding section of the book, King discusses the heritage of the Samurai in the twentieth century.

Although the Meiji restoration (1876) stripped the samurai of their two swords, it did not end the Samurai code of *bushido* or completely establish the European ideals of technical progress and parliamentary rule. On the contrary, by this time, the code of *bushido* had become the very essence of the Japanese spirit.

Zen, which had the role of coaching medieval Samurai for combat, took up a similar role in the 1920s and '30s, supporting the rising Japanese militarism. Zen practice for soldiers was directed as preparation for combat.

In the Army manuals of the Pacific War period, three principles were set forth: 1) that in war offensive is always preferable to defense, 2) that an honorable death in battle was a thing of glory, and 3) that one should never live to be humiliated as a prisoner of war. Outgrowths of these principles were "*banzai*" charges, in which foot soldiers were reduced to *nikudan* or "human bullets." Professor King points out the futility of such tactics. He writes, for instance, about a *banzai* assault at Bloody Ridge in which women armed with bamboo spears — some with babies strapped to their backs — participated in a 400-strong charge, spearheaded by soldiers rigged as "human bombs." As the assault was made, Japanese mortars put down a heavy fire on attackers and defenders alike.

After Japan's surrender in 1945, Samurai militarism was found mostly in right-wing elements and romantic "Samuraists" such as Yukio Mishima. King asserts, however, that the Samurai social structures, patterns of thinking, and ways of acting that had been dominant throughout Japan's past persisted in post-war government, business, education, and social life. The modern Samurai businessman, for example, has translated a spirit of total devotion to his lord into unflinching loyalty and effort for his immediate superior and his company. Whereas the Samurai warrior was willing to die for his lord, the modern Samurai business employee is ready to devote nearly the whole of his life to his company. Larger companies reciprocate by guaranteeing employees lifelong employment, pensions, and other benefits.

King points out, however, that this close bond between employer and employee was *not* a direct Samurai inheritance. In the early 20th century, Japanese workers were not loyal, but changed employers at will to suit their own economic interests. To counter this, the present "Samurai" system was initiated and promoted by employers. The present worker/company bond therefore should be seen as a contrived, rather than a cultural or hereditary, "Samurai-ness."

Addressing the little progress that feminists have had in the Samurai system, King notes that the term for wives, *kanai*, literally means "inside the home, or family." And he quotes from an unknown author of the Tokugawa period:

It is better for women that they should not be educated, because their lot throughout life must be one of perfect obedience . . . to a father before marriage, to a husband when married, and to a son when widowed. . . . For her, no religion is necessary either, because her husband is her sole heaven and in serving him and his lies her whole duty.

The Samurai system was not always a system of liberation.

At the end of *Zen and the Way of the Sword*, Professor King asks where warrior Zen can be found today. There is little of warrior Zen, he finds, in modern martial arts such as Kyudo (archery), Shorinji Kempo, or Shim Gum Do. Accordingly, Professor King leaves us with a question: What future circumstances might cause the latent warrior Zen to find turbulent new expression?