

Sources of Japanese Tradition

SECOND EDITION

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INTRODUCTION TO ASIAN CIVILIZATIONS

TAKUAN SŌHŌ

Takuan Sōhō (1573–1645) was a commanding figure in Rinzai Zen at the beginning of the Tokugawa period. In 1628 Takuan, representing a radical group at Daitokuji in Kyoto, where he had received his training, protested the *bakufu*'s regulations and the government's intervention in temple affairs in order to enhance its administrative power. As a result, in the following year, Takuan was exiled to the province of Dewa in the northern part of Japan. In 1632 he was released, but for two more years was not permitted to leave Edo to return to Daitokuji. While he was in Kyoto, some of his admirers who were influential in the *bakufu* repeatedly asked him to meet the third shogun, Iemitsu. Finally, Takuan could no longer refuse their urgent requests and reluctantly went to Edo in 1635, staying with Yagyū Tajima no Kami (1571–1646), a great fencing master of that day.

The story has it that Iemitsu once asked Yagyū the secret of his knowledge of swordsmanship. Yagyū replied that he had mastered the art through the practice of Zen under Takuan. At their first meeting, the shogun was very much attracted to Takuan and therefore would not let him leave Edo. The Zen master, however, had no desire to associate with the shogun and other dignitaries of high rank. He complained to his students about his unfortunate circumstances, for his greatest desire was to be free to live out his life, unnoticed by the world, in a quiet mountain spot. In order to keep Takuan near him, therefore, the shogun built the Tōkaiji in Edo and installed him as its head.

MARVELOUS POWER OF IMMOVABLE WISDOM (FUDŌCHI SHINMYOROKU)

The instructions excerpted here were originally written in a letter addressed to Yagyū Tajima no Kami as Tokugawa Iemitsu's official fencing instructor. Takuan Sōhō's letter explains how several common Buddhist and Confucian concepts might be interpreted in terms of fencing to argue for the importance of cultivating a strong

sense of imperturbability, the immovable wisdom that allows the mind to move freely, spontaneously, and flexibly, even in the midst of the most frightening or difficult circumstances. It concludes by stressing that the purpose of all self-cultivation is to enable a person to better serve his lord by living a moral life.

Since it first appeared in print in 1779, entitled *The Marvelous Power of Immovable Wisdom* (*Fudōchi shinmyōroku*), Takuan's instructions have been included in innumerable anthologies addressed not only to martial art devotees but to general audiences as well, and thus they have helped promote the popular perception that Zen is an intrinsic element of martial art training. It would perhaps be more accurate to say that success in the martial arts demands mental discipline, a topic about which Zen monks (among others) have much to say.

Where to Focus the Mind

To what ends should the mind be directed? If you focus on your opponent's movements, then his movements will restrict your mind. If you focus on your opponent's sword, then his sword will restrict your mind. If you focus on cutting down your opponent, then the thought of cutting will restrict your mind. If you focus on wielding your own sword, then your own sword will restrict your mind. If you focus on avoiding your opponent's cut, then your intention to not be cut will restrict your mind. If you focus on a person's stance, then that stance will restrict your mind. In short, there is nothing on which you should focus your mind.

Someone might ask, "If focusing on any one object causes that thing to restrict my mind and thereby allows the opponent to defeat me, then wouldn't it be better for me to concentrate my mind in the area below my navel, to prevent it [my mind] from being moved by distractions and merely to respond automatically to the opponent's moves?"

Yes, this sounds reasonable. From the viewpoint of the highest techniques of the Buddha-dharma, however, concentrating your mind below the navel and preventing it from being moved by distractions is an inferior method, not the best one. It corresponds to a beginner's level of training, or to what Confucians refer to as reverent seriousness (*kei*) of purpose. It is no more than what *Mencius*¹ called "finding the lost mind" [of humanity]. It is not a method that leads to the highest realization.... If you strive to concentrate your mind below your navel and to prevent it from being moved by distractions elsewhere, then that very striving will restrict your mind; you will lose your ability to lead the encounter; and consequently you will have even less freedom of action than in other cases.

Reverent Seriousness in Neo-Confucianism and Buddhism

Neo-Confucian texts explain the word "seriousness" (J. *kei*, Ch. *jing*) as concentrating on one task without wavering (*shuitsu muteki*).² It means that your mind is devoted to one object without other diversions. The essence of seriousness lies in being able to unsheathe your sword and to cut without disturbing your mental composure. When you receive an order from your lord, it is especially important to serve him with this serious composure. The Buddhadharma also includes this serious composure. For example, Buddhists sound the bell of devotion when they strike a gong three times [and] place the palms of their hands together before addressing the Buddha. The serious composure in Buddhist chanting is the same whether explained in Buddhist terms as being single-minded without disturbance (*isshin furan*) or in Confucian terms as concentrating on one task without wavering.

In Buddhism, however, this sense of seriousness is not the highest teaching. Controlling one's own mind and preventing it from becoming disturbed is the practice of a beginner. Buddhists continue in this kind of training for only as many months or years as is needed

to attain imperturbability so that even when the mind is allowed to wander, it retains full freedom. This is what I referred to elsewhere as the free-flowing mind, which is the highest level. According to the Confucian teaching of seriousness, the mind must be kept in check. Because mental wandering is seen as a disturbance, the mind must not be given free reign even for an instant. While this practice is useful as a short-term technique for developing unflappability, if you train in this way constantly, it will result in a loss of mental freedom. For example, it is like pulling back on a cat's leash to prevent it from pouncing on a baby sparrow. When your mind lacks freedom, like a cat tied to a leash, then it cannot function freely in accordance with its needs. But if a cat is well trained, then it can be released from the leash to go where it may, even right next to the sparrow without pouncing on it. When the free-flowing mind is released and abandoned, like the cat off the leash, it can wander everywhere without distraction and without becoming harried.

Stated in terms of your swordsmanship, you should not think about techniques for striking with a sword. Forget all striking techniques and strike. Cut the other person, but do not dwell on the other person. Both self and other are emptiness. The striking sword also is emptiness. But do not let your mind be restricted by emptiness.

Personal Advice

Because you have mastered swordsmanship to a degree unequaled in the past or present, you now enjoy a good rank, stipend, and reputation. You must not be ungrateful for this good fortune even while sleeping but must always strive to totally repay this benefaction with the finest loyal service to your lord. The finest loyal service requires, first, that you think correctly, maintain your health, and be single-minded in your devotion to your lord. You must never resent or criticize others or neglect your daily duties. In your own family, you should be exceedingly filial toward your father and mother, avoid even the slightest hint of infidelity in your marriage, observe the

correct ritual decorum, and not love a mistress or practice pederasty. Do not presume on your father or mother but always observe social norms. In employing underlings, do not be guided by personal feelings. Merely promote good men so that they might admonish you for your shortcomings and correctly implement the government's policies, and demote bad men. When bad men see good men progress day by day, the bad men will naturally be influenced by your delight in the good, and they will abandon the bad and return to being good. In this way, lord and samurai (ruler and minister), superior and inferior, will become good men; their desires will weaken; and they will end their extravagant waste. Then the country's treasury will become full; the people will grow wealthy; children will care for their parents; the strong will be charitable toward the elderly; and the country will rule itself. This is how to practice the finest loyalty.

["Fudōchi shinmyōroku," in *Takuan Oshō zenshū*, vol. 5, pp. 12–27; WB]