

## Samurai and Bushido

When the word samurai is heard, more often than not words such as honor, loyalty, respect and strength immediately come to mind. We come to associate many of the words with samurai because of how samurai are generally portrayed in modern media. Movies like “The Last Samurai” show the last remaining samurai fighting honorably against the wave of western influence changing Japan, the beginning of the Meiji Restoration. Mostly all anime show samurai as being fearless warriors seemingly capable of super human feats of skill and strength. Another large contributor to how we perceive samurai, is a book called “Bushido: The Soul of Japan” by Nitobe Inazou. Over their long history, samurai have gone from being hired body guards and mercenaries, to large military clans and families fighting for control of Japan, and eventually the ruling class of unified Japan. During their peak, the samurai lived mostly in peace, not fighting against one another, but against the occasional peasant rebellion. Without all of the wars and battles samurai had a much more time to focus on philosophical thoughts, rather than combat techniques. Some even wrote guides and books on how they believed samurai should live and conduct their daily lives.

Samurai were generally very loyal to their lords and would even follow them in death by committing suicide. Samurai would follow their leaders and charge into battle for them. These leaders had a set of rules for their troops to follow. One of these sets of rules was written by Lord Sōun and was titled “Lord Sōun’s Twenty-One Articles”. He writes about the ideals that every samurai should live their life by. He writes that a samurai should have faith in Buddha and in Shinto deities. A samurai should also wake up early in the morning and go to sleep not too late into the evening and lists a few reasons for following this routine such as setting an example for your servants and it helps prevent your home from being robbed. Also, a samurai should be modest

and humble, not wanting for fancy clothes and possessions, being satisfied with your clothing as long as it's presentable. The style in which a samurai should conduct himself when reporting for work and responding to their lord. It's never okay to tell a lie, even when joking around. These rules and the others not mentioned here make up one set of rules for one lord, other lords may have had similar rules, while some may have had completely different ones.

During the Edo Period when the samurai were mostly at peace with one another, would still get into fights amongst themselves. These were in the form of one on one battle however, instead of the massive scaled combat of the warring states period. For different reasons, samurai would have one on one duels, some were restless wanting to fight someone, other times a samurai would feel offended by another and for the sake of their pride challenge them to a duel, and then there were samurai who wanted to prove they were the best and make their name known across the lands. One of these famous samurai was Miyamoto Musashi. He was well known for never having lost a duel in over 60 fights, and for his particular style of using his katana. He wrote about his philosophy for life and his school of swordsmanship. Miyamoto Musashi's book, "The Five Rings" or "Five Elements", gives Miyamoto's thought on his school, other schools, and a general philosophy and how a warrior should live their life. The five elements on which the volumes are based on are the basic elements from Buddhist teachings.

There were samurai during the Edo Period that through various reasons, became Ronin, samurai without a lord. These samurai would wonder around and do what they could to survive, some would become monks, others would travel around and find any work they could to survive. The only set of rules these samurai needed to follow were the rules set by themselves. With no set of rules from a lord, some of these Ronin became criminals, using the martial skills they had to rob and murder people. While not a historical source, the artistic film by Akira

Kurosawa, "Yojimbo", depicts a Ronin coming across a town being ruined by two rival gangs essentially destroying the town and destroying both gangs. While these is a very honorable thing to do, Sanjuro, the Ronin, also seemingly lacks some of the more stereotyped qualities of a samurai, he's very rude at times and lies, albeit this is done to help defeat the gangs.

I believe that most samurai during the Edo Period considered the traits that are associated with samurai today in high regard. Keeping their loyalty to their lord, even when going through hardships. Striving to be strong both in martial skills and intellectual skills. Respect for both their fellow samurai and for all others. Conducting themselves in an honorable way so as not to bring shame to their family and lord. Most samurai strived to live their life under these beliefs to the best of their ability, but being human, there were also those that were corrupt or greedy and disregarded these beliefs.