

THE BOOK OF FIVE RINGS¹

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In *The Book of Five Rings*, Thomas Cleary translates two separate works by two famous Japanese samurai warriors in which each teaches his philosophy on martial arts and combat. Mr. Cleary is no stranger to Asian studies. He holds a Ph.D. in East Asian Languages and Civilizations from Harvard University, but is probably most well known for his translation of Sun Tzu's *Art of War*. Mr. Cleary's translation of *The Book of Five Rings* includes Miyamoto Musashi's *The Book of Five Rings*, and Yagyu Munenori's *Family Traditions on the Art of War*. Each could be considered a memoir of its author, and a textbook for martial arts students.

While each warrior-teacher's goal is to teach the art of sword warfare, the thought process and methodology described has more far-reaching ramifications. Both advocate the idea of absolute mastery of one's skill, which leads to the ability to completely focus and concentrate in periods of stress. These skills are useful in any meaningful endeavor and are particularly useful to today's military members.

Musashi's goal in *The Book of Five Rings* is the student's mastery of the science of martial arts. It is not only a physical description of actual sword maneuvers, but also a manual on a methodology of achieving perfection. Essentially, Musashi preaches a "mind over matter" approach towards his science. The central theme of Musashi's philosophy is that one who has truly become a master at his skill is able to execute effortlessly, without ever really thinking about it. Musashi's teachings evolve through five "rings", or scrolls: the Earth Scroll, the Water Scroll, the Fire Scroll, the Wind Scroll, and the Scroll of Emptiness. Each scroll serves as a chapter in Musashi's philosophy text. When the student is able to learn

1. MIYAMOTO MUSASHI, *THE BOOK OF FIVE RINGS* (Thomas Cleary trans., Shambala Publications 1993) (1643); 115 pages, \$9.00 (softcover).

2. United States Marine Corps. Written while assigned as a student, 46th Judge Advocate Officer Graduate Course, The Judge Advocate General's School, United States Army, Charlottesville, Virginia.

the lessons contained within each of the scrolls, he has mastered the art of warfare.

In the Earth Scroll, Musashi presents the theme he unfolds throughout the remainder of the Scrolls: “The martial way of life practiced by warriors is based on excelling others in anything and everything.”³ He likens martial arts to carpentry. A carpenter, like a warrior, needs to master the use of many tools, and can not rely on any one of them. He also lays out his nine rules to learning his military science:

Think of what is right and true.
Practice and cultivate the science.
Become acquainted with the arts.
Know the principles of the crafts.
Understand the harm and benefit in everything.
Learn to see everything accurately.
Become aware of what is not obvious.
Be careful even in small matters.
Do not do anything useless.⁴

Clearly these rules have universal applicability, and Musashi recognized this. He believed that success in the martial arts led to success in all endeavors.

Musashi teaches the basics of warfare in the Water Scroll. Here he explains the various sword holds, footwork techniques, parries, and strokes. “Water” is an appropriate title as water is basic to all natural things. Musashi states that “[t]aking water as the basic point of reference, one makes the mind fluid.”⁵ The simple premise here is that one must learn the basics to a point that they become second nature, before true mastery is achieved.

Musashi focuses on battle and violence in the Fire Scroll. Here he evolves from the basic physical maneuvers described in the Water Scroll to more mental techniques essential for close-in combat with the enemy. In combat the key to success is preemption of the enemy. Musashi advocates putting one’s self in the place of the enemy and “becoming the oppo-

3. MUSASHI, *supra* note 1, at 5.

4. *Id.* at 16.

5. *Id.* at 9.

ment.”⁶ One who has truly mastered the martial arts need not think about his own actions but must focus on the actions of the enemy.

The Wind Scroll is a critical analysis of other teachers’ methods. Musashi is very critical of many of his adversaries’ methods because he believes that others take a simplistic approach to martial arts. They seem to concentrate on one particular phase of the martial arts (i.e., footwork or weaponry). He warns of the deficiencies of taking the easy way out and only focusing on one approach area of the art. A master swordsman with poor footwork will falter when matched against an opponent who has mastered both areas.

Musashi concludes with his Scroll of Emptiness, the shortest of the five. Achieving this “emptiness” is the pinnacle of the mastery of the martial arts. Musashi’s emptiness refers to the lack of confusion, achieving complete focus and comprehension. “Without any confusion in mind, without slacking off at any time, polishing the mind and attention, sharpening the eye that observes and the eye that sees, one should know real emptiness as the state where there is no obscurity and the clouds of confusion have cleared away.”⁷ When one achieves this state of emptiness, one acts without perhaps realizing it and is able to maintain complete control of one’s every movement. Musashi’s emptiness is almost a surreal state of complete euphoria, where one watches one’s own actions in slow motion.

Munenori’s goal in his *Family Traditions on the Art of War* is also that of complete perfection of the martial arts. His theme is very similar to that of Musashi, and he, too, advocates a “mind over matter” approach. His work however, unlike that of Musashi, incorporates much of the Chinese Zen principles into it. He summarizes Zen philosophy as “[f]orgetting learning, relinquishing mind, harmonizing without self-conscious knowledge thereof, [which] is the ultimate consummation of the Way.”⁸ His work is divided into three sections or “swords”: the Killing Sword; the Life-Giving Sword; and No Sword. Mr. Cleary explains to the reader that

6. *Id.* at 41.

7. *Id.* at 59.

8. *Id.* at 69.

these titles “are Zen Buddhist terms adopted to both wartime and peacetime principles of the samurai.”⁹

In the *Killing Sword*, Munenori essentially describes combat and the use of force. Munenori is not a warmonger, but believes that combat and killing serve a necessary function. He states, “[i]t [killing] is a strategy to give life to many people by killing the evil of one person.”¹⁰ In his *Life-Giving Sword*, Munenori focuses on anticipating the enemy’s move, and preempting him. His ideas here are very similar to those of Musashi in his *Fire Scroll*. Munenori stresses the need to keep one’s mind on track, and not let it wander or fixate on any one aspect of a confrontation. In his *No Sword*, Munenori stresses the need to be able to act without a sword, and instead use whatever resources are available. Here he re-emphasizes that the key to the martial arts is not the weapon, but the mind.

In comparing the two works, Munenori seems a bit more flexible than Musashi. Musashi essentially advocates that only his way is the right way, and leaves no room for any deviation. He constantly focuses on “my” way, or “my individual school”, whereas Munenori seems to care less about the means and more about achieving the end.

From the limited introduction provided in the book, we learn that Musashi essentially lived in isolation, forgoing any of life’s pleasures, and dedicated himself to the study of the martial arts.¹¹ He was so enthralled in his cause, that he was likely oblivious to any presumption of self-centeredness in his work. Munenori, on the other hand, was actively involved in society with the Government.¹² Additionally, Mr. Clearly points out that Munenori also had not completely mastered Zen himself.¹³ This history might account for Munenori’s more tolerant attitude towards his teachings.

Musashi and Munenori lived in much simpler times, where a person’s place in society was more clearly defined. The “warrior” of today is dramatically different than the samurai warrior of the 1600’s. However, the ideas of Musashi and Munenori are still applicable in a metaphorical sense to almost any endeavor. Japanese businesses seem to follow practices similar to those advocated by Musashi and Munenori. They are an incredibly driven people, with a strong ability to focus on the task at hand.¹⁴ This

9. *Id.* at xviii.

10. *Id.* at 68.

11. *Id.* at xvi-xvii.

12. *Id.*

13. *Id.*

focus is of the sort advocated by Musashi and Munenori, and helps to explain Japan's economic success after World War II. While the importance of the martial arts in western society is not as pronounced as in the East, commanders and business leaders can learn much from acquiring the discipline necessary to practice them.

One of the most remarkable modern day parallels that I drew from Musashi's work was with our Marine Corps' current doctrine of maneuver warfare. The concepts these two gentlemen described over three hundred years ago are echoed today by the Marine Corps in one of its doctrinal publications: "Maneuver warfare is a warfighting philosophy that seeks to *shatter* the enemy's cohesion through a series of *rapid, violent, and unexpected* actions which create a *turbulent and rapidly deteriorating situation* with which he *cannot cope*."¹⁵

In maneuver warfare, the Marine Corps seeks to strike where the enemy is the weakest rather than confronting him head on, strength against strength. These weak areas are referred to as "gaps." Examples of gaps are areas such as the enemy's rear area or his supply compounds.¹⁶ Musashi calls these "gaps" "corners" in his Fire Scroll. He describes the tactic of "coming up against corners" and explains that, "[a]s the corner collapses, everyone gets the feeling of collapse."¹⁷ Musashi emphasizes causing "upset"¹⁸ to the enemy; "flustering"¹⁹ the enemy; and "knocking the heart out"²⁰ of the enemy. Musashi wrote his treatise back in 1643 aimed at the individual warrior, but we see today how his concepts are everlasting. They are applicable to those on the modern day battlefield.

The philosophies of each author are simple to understand, but difficult to master. Musashi himself acknowledges throughout his text that his science does not come easy: "This requires thorough training and practice,"²¹ or "Study carefully."²² As the book progresses, the reader is drawn to find ways to apply the ideas presented. Military attorneys can draw things out of this book that are useful in the courtroom. The ability to always preempt

14. I have observed this after living in Japan for three years.

15. FLEET MARINE FORCE MANUAL 1, WARFIGHTING 59 (6 Mar. 1989) (emphasis added).

16. *Id.* at 74-75.

17. MUSASHI, *supra* note 1, at 43.

18. *Id.* at 42.

19. *Id.* at 44.

20. *Id.* at 46.

21. *Id.* at 28.

22. *Id.* at 31.

one's opponent is vital in the courtroom. In order to achieve true greatness in the courtroom an attorney must be able to act almost solely on instinct (and do so correctly) without pause. To react in this manner would equate to actualizing Musashi's Scroll of Emptiness. This book of wisdom from the past is highly recommended because the principles presented can benefit anyone regardless of age, social milieu, or historical time period.