

The *Katana* is the Soul of the *Samurai*

Over the last 10,000 years of human existence, which civilization produced the deadliest warrior of history? How would a Roman legionary or a knight of the Middle Ages or a modern Navy SEAL do fighting against a Japanese *samurai*? This is an absolutely fascinating historical question. The evidence for the Japanese *samurai* is overwhelming. One-on-one the *samurai* was the most deadly and lethal soldier of history.

The *samurai*, also called *bushi*, were the professional warrior class of Feudal Japan 1200-1600. *Samurai* married *samurai*. You were born into this class and you would die in this class. Japanese *be*, also known as *eta* (literally meaning “the dirty” that is peasants, butchers, undertakers, craftsman-people who get dirty through labor) could never become *samurai* and *samurai*, no matter what, could never become *eta*. The European equivalent of the *samurai* was the knights of the Middle Ages. *Samurai* literally means, “to serve,” stemming from the ancient Japanese verb *saburau*. European knights and Japanese *samurai* both came from the noble class; both were considered to be aristocrats of noble birth; and both trained their entire lives to protect their lords in armed combat. Feudalism is a social, political and economic system of mutual protection and mutual obligation. Thus the *samurai* would protect their *daimyō*-the warlord of an *uji*- and the *daimyō* in turn would reward his *samurai* with a rice payment, called *kōkū*. One *kōkū* was enough rice to feed a man for an entire year. To qualify as a *daimyō* a minimum of 10,000 *kōkū* was necessary, called a *han*. Because the *samurai* were paid in rice payments and plots of land called a *fief*, the *samurai* held tremendous *on* for their *daimyō*, a debt that could never be paid fully in this lifetime. This would explain the fanatical loyalty the *samurai* held for their *daimyō* and why the *samurai* would prefer noble death in battle rather than disgraceful surrender.

Because of their noble social status, the *samurai* had a distinct dress code. The *samurai* wore their hair long, for the mark of the *samurai* was the warrior’s top-knot. However, to prevent their hair from getting tangled up in the heavy samurai war helmet the top of the head was shaved bald. The *samurai* top-knot was called the *mōtōdori* and its purpose showed much of the *samurai* mindset. Traditionally, *samurai* prayed to die a glorious death in battle. Should this happen, the *samurai* warrior would be decapitated by his victor. As a sign of respect, the *mōtōdori* would make it easier for the victorious *samurai* to hold the bloody head of the man he had just defeated in battle. At the end of each battle it was common to see victorious *samurai* carrying the heads of their defeated enemies by their *mōtōdori*. The heads would then be offered to the *samurai*’s *daimyō* in return for an increase in *kōkū* payments or land for the *samurai* fiefs.

When not in battle armor the *samurai* wore a silk dress called a *kimōnō*, worn by both *samurai* men and women. The *kimōnō* was loose fitting and extremely comfortable, especially during hours of martial arts training. The *kimōnō* was tied at the waist by a silk sash called the *obi*. In Feudal Japan only the *samurai* had the right to bear arms in public. The *samurai* would thus tuck the *katana* in their *obi*, blade (curve) always facing upward. The *samurai* also carried a rice-paper fan, tucked into one of the sleeves of his *kimōnō* and a small purse.



The *samurai*’s sole purpose in life was to train and to prepare for armed combat. Again this was the professional warrior class of Japan. Training would begin as soon as the *samurai* could walk. For six to eight hours a day, military arts training took place in martial arts schools called a *dōjō*. Each *dōjō* was led by a veteran warrior called a *sensei* who would train his *samurai* disciples called *deshi*. The training sessions were long and grueling. Each session began with hours of guided meditation. Broken teeth, limbs and bones were common, since training was accomplished with a cherry wood training sword called a *bōkū*. The *samurai* were encouraged to show *ai* for each other by fighting as hard as possible. A broken bone in the *dōjō* was preferable to a severed limb in battle or death. The *samurai* had a slogan that said, “The

katana is the soul of the *samurai*.” The warriors were trained hour after hour, day after day, in all kinds of weather and the emphasis was, “To become the *katana*.” Movement was to become automatic; fighting skills accomplished without thinking for, “The thinking mind is the enemy of *zen*.” Once a *katana* was drawn out of the scabbard, blood had to touch the blade, either your own or the blood of your enemy. (think about the scene in *The Last Samurai* when Algren is on his knees in the village and insults Kotsūmōtō!) It was unthinkable to draw the *katana* without, “washing the soul in blood.” Thus, never draw the blade out of anger. Stay completely focused and disciplined. Draw the blade only to protect and to serve. After battle the *katana* was slowly slipped back in the scabbard, blade up, sliding the gory blade between the thumb and pointing finger of the left hand to clean the steel from blood, brains and tissue.

A single *katana* took over 100 hours to make and today are considered to be invaluable pieces of art. The blade was made of steel that was heated, folded, pounded and cooled over and over again, making the blade virtually impossible to shatter. With an overhead swing, a *katana* could cut through five inches of cherry wood. Imagine what this stroke could do to flesh and bone! Since the blade of the *katana* was steel, an incredibly sharp cutting edge could be produced (imagine running your hand along the edge of a surgeon’s scalpel or along the edge of a razor blade.) In each Japanese *uji*, the swordsmith was considered of utmost importance. Once the blade was finished, the sword smith would chisel in his name, as an artist would sign a piece of art, he would chisel in the rating of the blade, a number from one to ten determined by slashing the blade over the limbs and body of condemned criminals, and he would chisel in an inscription which would be the “song of the *katana*.” Because the *katana* was such a deadly weapon and the *samurai* were such superbly trained and disciplined warriors, *samurai* combat was horribly bloody. Imagine battle between hundreds of warriors armed with chain saws. Following the battle, the survivors would cleanse their *katana* blades with *saki* and then they would wash off the blood and gore from their own bodies by spending hours in the *jakuzi*. The fighting age of the Japanese *samurai* was 16. What is amazing is how young most *samurai* were in combat.

This has much to do with the difficulty of surviving *samurai* warfare. After years of fighting, many of the older veterans were either dead or crippled.

The way of the warrior was called *bushido*. Again, *bushi* was another word for *samurai*, thus the warrior’s commandments of *bushido*. *Bushido* to the *samurai* was like the *Bible* to a Christian, the *Torah* to a Jew or the *Koran* to a Muslim. The *bushido* was an extremely strict moral code that encouraged absolute discipline and moral behavior. For example, sexual activity was restricted for the sole purpose of making babies. People who took pleasure in sex were considered weak and unable to discipline their own animal urges. Alcohol was for the weak and *saki* was only consumed during religious ceremonies. While most of us imagine the *samurai* in combat all the time, this was not the case. Hours every day were spent in meditation to achieve one-mind, or *zen*. Days were spent sitting in a grove of blossoming cherry trees, thinking about *The Perfect Petal* or sitting beside a river trying to determine the language of running water. The *samurai* believed a strong mind was just as important as a strong body. The Japanese board game of *gō* (imagine chess played in three dimensions!) was used in the *dōjō* to teach military strategies. The *samurai* loved thinking about and writing poetry called *haiku* or drawing scenes of nature on rice paper. The 15 hour *Tea Ceremony*, where each drop of tea and each tea leaf and each pot of boiling water required hours of meditation and ritual, was also an important part of *samurai* training. These were incredibly refined, polite and cultured warriors, equally trained for brutal combat or sipping tea.

The greatest honor of any *samurai* was to die serving their *daiymō*. Only through death in battle could 1/1000th of *on* be repaid. If death in battle was the greatest honor, surrender in battle was the most unthinkable disgrace. To avoid dishonor, *bushido* required *seppuku*, or ritual suicide. This was accomplished through disembowelment, or cutting out your own stomach and intestines, with the final cut slashing upward to the heart. Because *seppuku* was so painful and required such discipline, each *samurai* would appoint his best friend as his Second. At the appropriate time, after you ripped through your own heart, your Second would chop off your head with a *katana* dripping in *saki* and send you on your journey. *Seppuku* was also considered appropriate for women of the *samurai* class who, for whatever reason, felt dishonored or ashamed. While this practice horrifies most westerners, to the *samurai* *seppuku* was a beautiful and honorable way to preserve *on* and *ai*.