

侍 SAMURAI

THE SAMURAI AND THEIR USE OF BUSHIDO

In Japan the warrior class was known as samurai, also called bushi (hence bushido). They formed a class in and of themselves during the 9th and 12th centuries. They emerged from the provinces of Japan to become the ruling class until their decline and later total abolition in 1876 during the Meiji Era.

The samurai were fighting men, skilled in the martial arts. Samurai had extensive skills in the use of the bow and arrow and the sword. They could just as likely have killed you with their bare hands. Samurai were also great horsemen.

These warriors were men who lived by Bushido; it was their way of life. The samurai's loyalty to the emperor and his overlord, or daimyo, was unsurpassed. They were trustworthy and honest. They lived frugal lives with no interest in riches and material things, but rather they were interested in honor and pride. They were men of true valor. Samurai had no fear of death. They would enter any battle no matter the odds. To die in battle would only bring honor to one's family and one's lord.

Samurai usually would rather fight alone, one on one. In battle a samurai would call out his family name, rank and accomplishments. Then he would seek out an opponent with similar rank and do battle. When the samurai has killed his opponent he severs his head. After battle he takes the heads of his enemies back to show proof of his victory. Heads of generals and those of high ranks were transported back to the capital and displayed for the officials and others. The only way out for a defeated samurai was death or ritual suicide: seppuku.

Seppuku--or disembowelment or hara-kiri (belly slicing)--is when a samurai stabs a knife into his abdomen and literally disembowels himself by cutting out his guts. After the samurai disembowels himself another samurai, usually a kinsman or friend, slices his head off. This form of suicide was "performed under various circumstances: to avoid capture in battle, which the samurai did not believe to be dishonorable and degrading, but generally bad policy; to atone for a misdeed or unworthy act; and perhaps most interestingly, to admonish one's lord" (Varley, 32). A samurai would rather kill himself than bring shame and disgrace to his family name and his lord. This was considered an act of true honor.

The samurai became the ruling class during the 1400s and the 1500s. In the 1600s there was a time of unification; warring in Japan had ceased. Then toward the end of the Tokugawa Era (the late 1700s), Japan began to move towards a more modernized and Western way of life. There was no need for fighting men, for warriors, for samurai. The samurai and their way of life was officially abolished in the early 1870s, but it was not forgotten.