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ANNOUNCEMENTS

2025 SMAA DUES

This is a reminder that SMAA membership fees were due on January 1, 2025. Your prompt attention to this matter is appreciated. Payments can be easily and securely made at www.smaa-hq.com.

We appreciate our members paying dues promptly. It makes life easier for the SMAA staff of volunteers, and it is representative of the type of self-discipline we are cultivating through the study of traditional Japanese martial arts.

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Do you have a new e-mail address? Have you sent it to hedavey@aol.com? If not, we also won't be

OBJECTIVES OF THE SMAA

1. To promote and aid in the growth of Japan's traditional arts and ways.
2. To assist the public in achieving spiritual growthand physical development through budo/bujutsu.
3. To further friendship and understanding between Asian and Western martial artists.
4. To establish goodwill and harmony among martial artists of various systems.
5. To offer Western martial artists access to legitimate budo/bujutsu organizations and teachers in Japan.
6. To give practitioners of authentic budo/bujutsu recognition for their years of devotion to these arts.

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able to send you SMAA publications, so please be sure to let us know if your e-mail address changes.

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The SMAA HQ is selling official SMAA patches for your gi. They're great looking patches that embody the spirit and honor instilled in members of our group. They won't fade or bleed when you bleach them, and yet we've been able to keep the cost down. Each patch is basically a 3 ½ inch circle featuring our logo below:

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These new patches are a great way to show your respect and enthusiasm for our group; we hope all of our members will order at least one. *And the best part is the patches are only $5.00 (US) each!* (E-mail shudokan@smaa-hq.com about special shipping for international orders.)

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Did you know you can pay for your annual dues at our website using PayPal or a major credit card? You can, and you can also pay for gi patches and promotions in the same way. This is a much faster, and in some ways more secure, means of sending money to our headquarters. We hope more of our members will make use of this feature. Just drop by http://smaa-hq.com/payments.php for more information.

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To see video of SMAA teachers and members, go to:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gg5NIka6Ge0&list=PLS11_XCH8RkI868tRKZ0fdJFSeFGyNZ0o

To see video of the amazing experts that trained leading SMAA officials and teachers, go to:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zcE7zBhv9Hs&list=PLS11_XCH8RkIV8IiNZoXl93Wl79BLe1NZ

NEW SMAA ONLINE LIBRARY

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HYPERLINKS

Since we live in the age of the Internet, we're trying to make the *SMAA Journal* more interactive. Look for words in blue and underlined. These are hyperlinks.

Click on them, and you'll connect to websites that can give you information about topics mentioned in this and future issues. Have fun surfing the web! Just remember to come back and finish reading the rest of this issue.

IN MEMORIUM: JOHN QUINN

John Quinn Sensei was an American member of the elite SMAA Board of Advisors. He passed away peacefully on January 10, 2025, in Falls Church, Virginia, at the age of 77.

Quinn Sensei lived in Japan for over 20 years where he studied karate-do, jodo, and forms of koryu bujutsu ("old-style martial arts"). In particular, Quinn Sensei was expert in the ancient Masaki Ryu.

John Quinn Sensei

In the tapestry of classical Japanese martial arts, Masaki Ryu stands as a unique and enduring thread, its origins woven nearly three centuries ago by the samurai Masaki Tarodayu Toshimitsu in the Mino Ogaki domain. This koryu bujutsu, passed down through generations, carries the weight of tradition and the distinctiveness of its chosen weapons.

At the heart of Masaki Ryu lies a mastery of tools rarely seen in other schools. Foremost among these is the manrikigusari, a seemingly simple short, weighted chain that becomes a formidable instrument in the hands of a skilled practitioner. Alongside this chain, students also delve into the techniques of the kusarigama, the pairing of chain and sickle, and the jutte torinawa, the arresting truncheon with its accompanying cord, a tool once employed for the apprehension of individuals in the Edo period.

The modern lineage of Masaki Ryu, known as Masaki Ryu Nakajima-ha, took its present form through the dedication of Nakajima Michio Soke, who studied under the tenth-generation headmaster, Nawa Yumio Soke. It was Nawa Soke who brought Masaki

Ryu to the awareness of the contemporary world, further enriching its curriculum by incorporating Edo Machikata Jutte Torinawa Atsukaiyo, the grappling and arresting techniques of Edo-era law enforcement.

The ninth-generation headmaster, Nawa Toyotoshi Soke, also contributed significantly by integrating kusarigama-jutsu into the school's teachings. In a pivotal move in 1998, Nawa Soke transitioned the leadership structure from the traditional Soke system to a new Shihanke, or master instructor, framework.

The training within Masaki Ryu encompasses a diverse range of skills. Practitioners learn the practical applications of the manrikigusari and jutte, a forked metal truncheon, against both unarmed

Quinn Sensei using the kusarigama

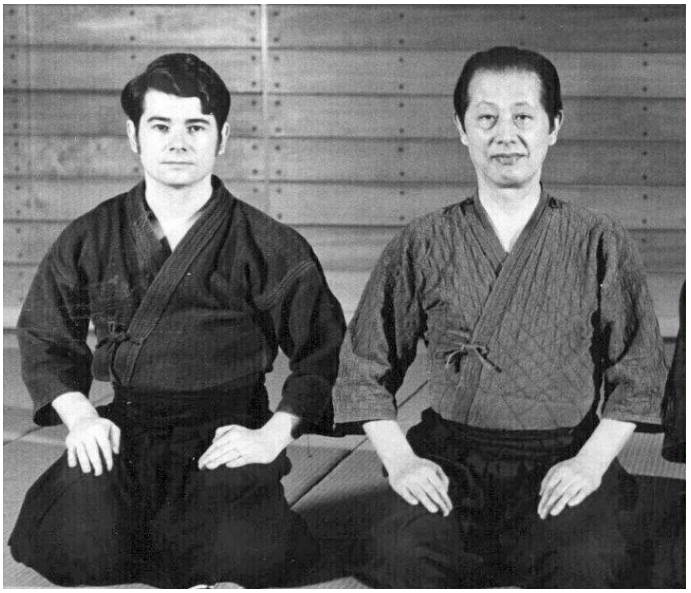
and armed adversaries, including those wielding knives and swords.

Notably, the Masaki Ryu Nakajima-ha syllabus boasts an extensive collection of approximately 300 kata for the manrikigusari alone, alongside dedicated forms for the kusarigama and jutte-jutsu. Interwoven within the weapon-based training are elements of jujutsu, particularly evident in the fluid movements of the chain art. Furthermore, the art delves into the precise methods of hojo-jutsu, the

Nawa Yumio Soke

techniques of restraining individuals using the jutte and rope, encompassing a variety of traditional ties.

Beyond the physical techniques, Masaki Ryu carries a distinct philosophical weight. The teachings often



Quinn Sensei and Nawa Soke

include a solemn pledge emphasizing the responsible and ethical practice and instruction of its unique weaponry. The very development of the manrikigusari is believed to have been partly driven by a desire for a method of subduing criminals without resorting to bloodshed.

Quinn Sensei was a direct student of Nawa Yumio Soke. He received high-level teaching certification from Nawa Soke, and he was the founder of the Masaki Ryu Bujutsu Kenkyukai in Virginia. He was also one of only a handful of people—anywhere in the world—licensed to teach Masaki Ryu. We'd like to extend our condolences to his family and students.

Core or Controversy: Examining Shu-Ha-Ri in Japanese Martial Arts

By Nicklaus Suino

Shu-Ha-Ri (守破離) is an over-arching concept in Japanese martial arts and other traditional disciplines, describing the stages of learning and mastery. It's meant to guide practitioners through a lifelong journey of discipline, creativity and, sometimes, transcendence. Derived from the words "Shu" (守), meaning to protect or obey; "Ha" (破), meaning to break or diverge; and "Ri" (離), meaning to separate or transcend, Shu-Ha-Ri offers a structured approach to growth that honors tradition while allowing for personal evolution.

Shu (守): Obedience to Tradition

The first stage, Shu, emphasizes strict adherence to established forms and traditions. In this phase, the student focuses on learning the fundamentals by imitating a master's teachings without question. This obedience is not blind but rooted in respect for the lineage and the belief that the techniques, kata ("forms"), and philosophies have been refined over generations for a reason.

In martial arts, Shu involves memorizing stances, strikes, and movements exactly as taught. It is a period of discipline, where students internalize the basics, cultivating precision and an understanding of the art's foundational principles. The goal of Shu is not creativity but mastery of the basics, ensuring that the practitioner's techniques become second nature.

This phase is also a time for the student to absorb the deeper cultural and philosophical aspects of the martial art, such as the values of humility, perseverance, and respect. The rigor of Shu builds a strong foundation for later stages of development.

Ha (破): Breaking Away

Once the fundamentals are deeply ingrained, the practitioner enters the Ha phase. In this stage, they begin to explore beyond the confines of tradition, questioning and adapting techniques to suit their personal style and understanding. The word "Ha" signifies breaking away, representing a deliberate departure from strict imitation.

In martial arts, this might involve modifying techniques to better suit the practitioner's body type, strengths, or combat scenarios. It is also a period of experimentation, where the student tests the limits of their knowledge and begins to integrate insights from other disciplines or schools of thought.

Ha is characterized by a balance between respect for tradition and the desire for innovation. It reflects the realization that rigid adherence to established forms may not always serve the practitioner's evolving needs. This stage fosters individuality, as the martial artist begins to develop a unique

interpretation of the art while maintaining its essence.

Ri (離): Transcendence

The final stage, Ri, signifies separation and transcendence. At this level, the practitioner has fully internalized the principles of the martial art to the point that they no longer rely on established forms. Their movements become natural, intuitive, and spontaneous, guided by the art's spirit rather than its explicit rules.

In Ri, the martial artist transcends the need for external validation or rigid frameworks. They embody the essence of their discipline, contributing their own innovations and insights to its evolution. This stage is not the end of the journey but the beginning of a new cycle, as the practitioner may take on the role of a teacher, guiding others through their own path of Shu-Ha-Ri.

This stage also reflects the broader philosophy of self-mastery and enlightenment. The practitioner not only perfects their martial skills but also achieves a deeper understanding of life, embodying the harmony between discipline and freedom, tradition and innovation.

The author teaching traditional judo

When Transcendence is Controversial

The Ri phase of Shu-Ha-Ri, representing transcendence and personal innovation, can be a source of controversy both in Japanese martial arts and in other traditional practices. This stage, where practitioners separate from established forms to develop their unique interpretations, often raises questions about the balance between individual expression and preserving tradition. Several points of contention have emerged around this phase:

The essence of Ri involves breaking away from strict adherence to traditional forms. For traditionalists, this can be seen as a betrayal of the art's lineage and core principles. Many argue that altering techniques or creating new interpretations risks diluting or misrepresenting the martial art.

For example, in arts like kendo, judo, or karate-do, there is often concern that excessive personal innovation might stray too far from the original intent, undermining the martial art's identity and cultural heritage. Critics worry that what was once a disciplined practice rooted in centuries of refinement could become fragmented or overly commercialized.

Premature Transcendence

A significant and often valid criticism arises when practitioners attempt to enter the Ri phase prematurely. True transcendence requires a deep understanding of the fundamentals (Shu) and thoughtful experimentation (Ha). However, some individuals may rush to modify or reinterpret techniques without adequately mastering the basics. This can lead to superficial innovation, where the new interpretations lack depth or coherence.

In some traditional martial arts communities, such behavior may be seen as arrogance or disrespect toward the art, the teacher, or the lineage. Without proper grounding, critics argue, the practitioner's

"transcendence" is not genuine but an expression of ego or impatience.

Tensions Between Innovation and Standardization

Japanese martial arts often operate within structured organizations or federations that define the rules, forms, and techniques practitioners are expected to follow. For example, competitions and gradings often rely on standardized kata or techniques. A practitioner engaging in the Ri phase may create movements or philosophies that fall outside these standards, leading to conflicts with governing bodies.

This tension is particularly pronounced in arts like aikido or karate-do, where divergent schools have emerged as a result of individuals pursuing their own interpretations of the art. While some view these developments as a natural evolution, others see them as fragmentation that weakens the art's cohesion.

Cultural and Philosophical Conflict

The concept of Ri is deeply rooted in Japanese culture, where respect for hierarchy, tradition, and collective values is paramount. Practitioners from non-Japanese cultural backgrounds may interpret the phase differently, emphasizing individual creativity and self-expression over cultural fidelity. This can lead to clashes in interpretation, with traditionalists accusing some practitioners of cultural appropriation or a lack of respect for the art's heritage.

As martial arts have become globalized, some practitioners in the Ri phase have used their personal interpretations to create new schools, styles, or hybrid arts. While this can lead to innovation, it also raises concerns about the commercialization and dilution of traditional arts. Critics argue that creating "new styles" for financial gain can prioritize marketability over authenticity, reducing the martial art to a commodity rather than a disciplined practice. For example, the proliferation of mixed martial arts (MMA) has sparked debates about whether traditional martial arts are being overshadowed or misrepresented by practitioners blending techniques without maintaining the underlying philosophy or discipline.

Teacher-Student Dynamics

In the Ri phase, a practitioner may feel they have surpassed their teacher or no longer need guidance. This can strain relationships in traditional martial arts, where the bond between student and teacher (sensei) is considered sacred. A student's departure from their teacher's teachings may be viewed as disrespectful or ungrateful, even if the intent is not to reject the teacher but to evolve beyond strict imitation.

Despite these controversies, the Ri phase is an integral part of the Shu-Ha-Ri philosophy. It challenges practitioners to honor tradition while exploring their potential for creativity and self-expression. The key lies in achieving a respectful balance. True transcendence does not discard tradition but builds upon it, ensuring that the

Suino Sensei practicing iaido

martial art continues to evolve while retaining its core principles.

For practitioners navigating the Ri phase, the controversies underscore the importance of humility, reflection, and accountability. By remaining rooted in respect for their art and its lineage, they can innovate in ways that contribute to the martial art's legacy rather than detracting from it.

Beyond Martial Arts: A Universal Philosophy

While Shu-Ha-Ri is deeply rooted in Japanese martial arts, its principles extend far beyond the dojo. In fields such as art, music, craftsmanship, and even modern business practices, Shu-Ha-Ri serves as a model for skill development and mastery. It reminds us that learning is a journey, beginning with discipline, evolving through exploration, and culminating in transcendence.

Shu-Ha-Ri encapsulates the essence of growth in Japanese martial arts, offering a roadmap for learners to progress from discipline to mastery. By honoring tradition in Shu, breaking free in Ha, and transcending boundaries in Ri, practitioners not only refine their martial skills but also gain profound insights into the nature of learning, creativity, and self-expression. It is a timeless philosophy that celebrates the interplay of discipline and freedom, tradition and innovation, guiding martial artists and others toward a lifetime of mastery and fulfillment.

About the Author: Nicklaus Suino Sensei (hachidan) is the Co-director of the SMAA Iaido Division, along with Guy Power Sensei (shichidan). A seventh dan in judo, Suino Sensei also leads the SMAA Judo Division. He has decades of training in the United States and in Japan, where he lived for several years. SMAA members should be sure to check out his acclaimed books on budo.

Meditation and Spirituality in Japanese Martial Traditions

By H. E. Davey

A modern budo (武道) practitioner sits in quiet meditation beside his sword. It's not an uncommon scene in a number of dojo around the world.

The practice of mokuso (黙想, meditation, literally "silencing thoughts") before and/or after training is a reminder that Japanese martial arts aren't only about physical technique but also about cultivating the mind. In quite a few traditional dojo, students of classical Japanese budo and koryu bujutsu (古流武術, "old-school martial techniques") often begin and end practice with a moment of silence. Eyes closed and breathing steady, they emulate a custom that dates back centuries. This blending of martial training with spiritual cultivation might seem paradoxical at first. Why would warriors study meditation?

Well, it actually reflects a long-held understanding: mastering combat involves mastering oneself. Far from being a modern New Age addition, spirituality and meditation have been integral to Japanese martial arts since their inception, grounded in historical reality and practical necessity. And it's something that is often missing from Western classes.

Historical Roots

In some cases, Japanese warrior culture had deep connections with Zen Buddhism and indigenous spiritual traditions. Zen, introduced to Japan in the 12th-13th centuries, found a receptive audience among the samurai class. Many samurai (also known as bushi, 武士) saw in Zen a philosophy that

resonated with their own warrior ethos. Over time, the "Way of the Warrior" – bushido (武士道) – came to encompass not just loyalty and martial skill, but also spiritual depth.

Zen has had a deep influence on bushi culture and the martial arts of Japan, and at least some bushi in the Kamakura period (1185 to 1333) quickly adopted Zen concepts that enhanced their practices. While not every medieval warrior was a Zen monk, or even a Zen practitioner, the ideas of Zen – discipline, awareness, and acceptance of fate – permeated parts of the warrior culture. Bushi patrons supported Zen temples, and in turn Zen masters became teachers and advisors to some warriors. This exchange laid a philosophical foundation for martial arts that endures to this day.

One key concept that certain samurai learned from Zen is the emphasis on living in the present moment without distraction. Zen taught methods of seated meditation (座禅, zazen) to still the mind. Warriors discovered that such training improved their focus in battle.

As a result, meditation and martial training evolved hand in hand. By the Edo period (1603 to 1868), martial arts texts often included spiritual instructions. For example, *Hagakure* (葉隠), an 18th-century samurai treatise, famously declares that "the Way of the warrior is found in death." It urges warriors to meditate on their own mortality daily, vividly imagining the worst possible fates – being torn apart by arrows, struck down by swords, consumed by fire – until they can meet death without fear. Such stark counsel wasn't morbid obsession, but practical mental training. By contemplating death calmly, a bushi could free himself from the fear of it, achieving the clarity and courage needed to act decisively in combat.

Meditation as Martial Training

From the standpoint of the classical martial arts, training the mind and spirit is just as crucial as training the body. Ancient sword masters understood that a distracted or fearful mind can spell doom on the battlefield. Thus, they pursued mental states through both rigorous practice and meditation that would optimize their performance. In Japanese, several terms describe the ideal mindset of a warrior:

- Mushin (無心, "empty mind") – a state of empty mind or absence of ego-consciousness. The swordsman acts without being distracted by many thoughts, free from doubt, fear, or hesitation. Expert bushi sought this state, where an "empty mind" liberated them from fear and allowed subconscious habits to take over. Achieving mushin requires disciplined training and is often cultivated through Zen meditation techniques, although depending on the school, other kinds of meditation have been used in conjunction with martial training. A famous Zen adage compares the mind to a moonlit lake – only when the water is still can the moon (of truth) be reflected clearly. In the same way, only a tranquil mind can respond flawlessly in the chaos of combat.
- Fudoshin (不動心, "immovable mind") – an enlightened state of mental fortitude and emotional stability. It describes a warrior's mind that can't be shaken; fear and anger don't penetrate. Fudoshin is a mind completely at peace, under all circumstances, free from fury, fear, and hesitation. It's capable of an (ideally) unbreakable courage. This concept, influenced by both Zen and Shinto principles, was exemplified by bushi, who maintained calmness even in the face of disaster. Fudoshin was (and is) cultivated by exposure to adversity: through austere physical training and meditation, warriors acclimatize themselves to stress until their composure becomes unassailable.

- Zanshin (残心, "remaining mind") – a heightened state of awareness and relaxed alertness before, during, and especially after an action. In budo, the practice of zanshin means that even after delivering a strike or winning a bout, the mind remains focused and ready for anything. This concept has obvious practical value: a warrior with zanshin wouldn't be caught off-guard by a surprise attack or a sudden turn of events. Meditation and breathing exercises have been used to sharpen this continuous awareness. In essence, zanshin is mindfulness applied to combat – a clear example of spiritual practice directly augmenting martial skill.

These mindsets—mushin, fudoshin, zanshin, and others—form the mental curriculum of traditional martial arts. Classical bujutsu schools (ryuha) often incorporated specific exercises to cultivate such states.

Archery schools, for instance, treated shooting as a form of moving meditation; the legendary archer Awa Kenzo described "true kyudo" as achieving selflessness such that the distinction between archer, bow, and target disappears. Sword schools

Suzuki Kunio Sensei (left), SMAA Senior Advisor, performing Nakamura Ryu

inspired by Zen teachings encouraged disciples to practice tanren (鍛錬, "forging" of mind and body) through endless repetition of kata until the motions could be done without conscious thought. The renowned Zen priest Takuan Soho advised swordsmen on freeing the mind from psychological attachments. In his 17th-century letters (later compiled as *Fudochi Shinmyoroku* (不動智神妙録), "The Mysterious Record of Immovable Wisdom," Takuan taught that the mind must not "stop" on any object – not on the opponent's blade, nor one's own technique. If the mind abides nowhere (a Zen ideal), it can respond everywhere. Swordsmen like Yagyu Munenori took these lessons to heart, integrating Zen philosophy into their martial arts writings. Yagyu's treatise *Heiho Kadensho* (兵法家伝書) echoes Zen principles, and he learned directly from Takuan. Another swordsman, Miyamoto Musashi, Japan's celebrated duelist, is said to have spent his later years in contemplation and meditation, writing that the warrior's mind should "be like water." Musashi's classic *Book of Five Rings* even includes a chapter on the void (ku, 空), reflecting Buddhist conceptions of formless awareness and the formless nature of ultimate reality.

In daily training, the influence of these teachings is made concrete through ritual and routine. A typical dojo session might start with a brief meditation (often called mokuso) to clear the mind and prepare for learning. During practice, instructors remind students to control their breathing and remain centered – essentially a moving meditation. After a vigorous practice, kneeling in silence again allows practitioners to reflect and still their spirit. Far from reducing martial skill, these practices enhance it. In other words, meditation became another weapon in at least some warriors' arsenal – a tool to polish the mind that wields the sword.

Mental focus and spiritual discipline are developed alongside physical technique in authentic dojo. The early bushi recognized that victory in combat was

often decided in the mind before the first sword was ever swung. A mind clouded by fear or distracted by ego can lead to hesitation – a fatal flaw. Thus, for a complete warrior the inner state was as important as swordsmanship.

This holistic approach gave rise to the time-honored term shin-gi-tai (心技体), meaning "mind, technique, body," which are the three elements a martial artist must forge. Countless anecdotes in martial lore illustrate this balance: a swordsman remaining serene when surrounded by enemies, or a general using meditation to overcome panic. Through meditation, prayer, and philosophical study, Japanese warriors cultivated an inner strength that matched their outer prowess. The result was an ideal often sought in budo: heijoshin (平常心), a "calm, normal mind" able to meet any situation, whether on a battlefield or in daily life.

Shingon Buddhism and the Warrior's Path

While Zen Buddhism is often associated with the bushi, historical evidence indicates that many warriors were adherents of Shingon Buddhism (真言宗), an esoteric tradition emphasizing rituals, mantras, and meditative practices. Shingon, founded by Kukai (空海) in the early ninth century, focuses on attaining enlightenment through the realization of a person's innate Buddha-nature, a concept echoing some bushi's pursuit of self-mastery.

Practices like the recitation of mantras were employed by warriors to cultivate mental focus and spiritual strength. These rituals served not only religious purposes but also practical ones, preparing the bushi for the psychological demands of combat.

Mikkyo (密教), or esoteric Shingon Buddhism, encompasses a range of practices aimed at spiritual transformation. In the context of martial arts, Mikkyo techniques were integrated to enhance the practitioner's mental state and combat readiness. For instance, the use of mudra (hand gestures) and

John Evans, SMAA Senior Advisor, and Nakamura Ryu shichidan

seed syllables (梵字) were believed to invoke protective deities and concentrate the mind.

The Katori Shinto Ryu, one of Japan's oldest martial traditions, incorporates esoteric elements like the kuji-in (九字印), a series of hand gestures and mantra intended to focus energy and intention. These practices exemplify the seamless blending of spiritual and martial disciplines.

Facing Death to Transcend Fear

Perhaps the most profound reason spirituality entwined with Japanese martial arts is the reality of death. For those who live by the sword, death isn't an abstract concept – it's a constant companion. Bushi had to make peace with mortality or risk being paralyzed by terror when the arrows began to fly.

Here, Zen's teachings on impermanence proved invaluable. Buddhism preaches that life is ephemeral

(mujo, 無常) and that accepting this truth is key to enlightenment. The bushi likewise taught that only by accepting their inevitable death could they act with full freedom. A classic counsel in the *Budo Shoshinshu* (武道初心集, "Primer of Martial Ways," circa 1700) advises that the most critical thing for a bushi is to always keep death in mind, and by accepting the inescapability of mortality, the bushi could grasp what's really important in both life and combat. By keeping death ever-present in their thoughts, bushi sought to purge trivial desires and focus their spirit on duty and honor. This practice built a mindset that was fearless yet not reckless – a disciplined calm in the face of mortal danger.

The rituals of the bushi class reinforced this communion with mortality. When a bushi was forced to commit ritual suicide (seppuku, 切腹) to preserve honor, he was expected to do so with composed dignity – an ultimate test of his training. Many bushi composed death poems (辞世, jisei) in their final moments, reflecting on the transient beauty of life. This tradition was also borrowed from Zen monks, who often wrote poetry before dying as a meditative act of awareness.

The existence of jisei among warriors indicates that they approached death not only physically but with a philosophical mindset. An example by the warrior Shimazu Yoshihiro on the eve of battle muses, "Human beings are nothingness too… Everything goes back to the source," showing a clear influence of Buddhist thought on his acceptance of death. By ritualizing death and making it a subject of art and contemplation, the bushi stripped it of its power to terrorize.

In practical terms, a warrior who'd reconciled himself to dying could charge into battle with unmatched boldness. This fearless resolve was the bedrock of the bushi spirit. It wasn't nihilism, but rather a profound freedom from the fear of demise, which paradoxically often enhanced a warrior's capacity to survive. Enemies found it hard to intimidate a man, who considered himself "already dead," and thus had nothing to lose.

In psychological terms, that mindset prevented panic and allowed strategic thinking even in dire straits. This attitude, born of feudal battlefields, transcends its era – it taps into a universal truth recognized by warriors and sages across cultures.

Spiritual Discipline in the Dojo

Even after the age of the bushi ended in the late 19th century, these spiritual facets didn't disappear from martial arts. They were preserved and even codified in modern budo like kendo, judo, karate-do, and aikido. The emphasis shifted from life-and-death combat to self-improvement and character building, but the core idea remained: true martial arts cultivate the whole person – body, mind, and spirit. And seishi o choetsu (生死を超越) is still central in dojo that are teaching authentic budo or koryu bujutsu. But what does that mean?

Let's break down each character:

- 生 (sei / sho): Life, birth, living
- 死 (shi): Death, die
- を (o): Direct object particle
- 超越 (choetsu): Transcendence, surpassing, exceeding

Therefore, the literal translation of 生死を超越 is "to transcend life and death" or "to surpass life and death." Now, let's go into its significance within the context of budo.

The concept of "seishi o choetsu" is a profound and often misunderstood aspect of traditional budo philosophy. It doesn't necessarily mean a literal detachment from the physical realities of life and death. Instead, within the rigorous training and mental discipline of budo, it points towards a specific state of mind cultivated to overcome fear, hesitation, and the like in critical situations.

Here's how it relates to budo . . .

In combat, the fear of death can be paralyzing. Budo training, through intense physical and mental conditioning, aims to cultivate a psychological state where the practitioner isn't dominated by this fear. By facing simulated life-or-death scenarios in training (sparring, kata with a strong sense of realism), the practitioner gradually desensitizes themselves to the immediate panic associated with danger. This isn't about wanting to die, but about achieving mental fortitude that allows for clear thinking and decisive action even when facing potential harm.

This requires training on the edge: practicing as vigorously as possible, but always stopping just short of injury. It's not easy to do, but the real spirituality of budo lies in mentally placing ourselves on that knife's edge between life and death during practice. Excessively simulated training won't accomplish this. On the other hand, repeatedly injuring yourself or others isn't smart.

And this is why each student needs to find the above-mentioned "edge" for themselves, while not deluding themselves with samurai fantasies. As an example, a 50-year-old beginner shouldn't train the way a 25-year-old black belt does. They each have to find the point at which they experience the greatest intensity of combat, while remaining free of crippling injury. That point varies from person to person, but it's still essential. It's what makes budo a means to transcend fear at its deepest level, which is ultimately something very spiritual and potentially very scary.

And that's why meditation has historically been embraced by some budo and koryu bujutsu, to deal with mortality and fear. Without that transcending of fear, the capacity to use martial arts on the feudal battlefield or in modern self-defense is largely make-believe.

That probably accounts for the famous saying in kendo circles is "Ken zen ichinyo" (剣禅一如), meaning "the sword and Zen are one." It highlights that progress in sword technique is inseparable from spiritual growth. Contemporary kendo practice still uses devices like meditation and the recitation of the dojo kun ("dojo principles") to remind practitioners that the ultimate goal isn't just to win matches, but to develop traits like self-control, respect, and a calm mind under pressure.

Likewise, Funakoshi Gichin Sensei, the founder of Shotokan karate-do, famously said, "The ultimate aim of karate lies not in victory or defeat, but in the perfection of the character of its participants." Such statements echo the old bushi insight that the fiercest opponent we face is ultimately ourselves.

For some folks, training becomes a form of moving meditation: the dojo is likened to a temple and the kata to sutras to be recited with the body. Even the etiquette – the deep bows, the cleaning of the training hall, the Shinto-inspired clapping in some traditions – carries a spiritual significance of purifying the heart and showing humility. Koryu

Wayne Muromoto, SMAA Senior Advisor, teaching Takenouchi Ryu jujutsu

bujutsu styles that survive today (like Tenshin Shoden Katori Shinto Ryu or Kashima Shin Ryu) often retain explicit religious elements. Students may undergo esoteric rites, offer prayers to guardian deities, or practice meditation as part of their curriculum. This is because historically the martial instructor in such systems was often as much a spiritual mentor as a technical teacher, guiding disciples in matters of ethics and mindset.

With that noted, it isn't always necessary in the 21st century to use meditative disciplines associated with Buddhism or Shintoism, especially in modern budo. A number of dojo incorporate "non-sectarian" types of meditation, ways of calming the mind and relaxing the body that aren't connected to any particular religion. An example of this is Shin-shin-toitsu-do, the "Way of Mind and Body Unification," launched by the legendary Nakamura Tempu Sensei in Tokyo in 1919.

An expert in Indian yoga and Zuihen Ryu samurai swordsmanship, his mind-body teachings and nonreligious methods of meditation have attracted top martial artists in Japan for over 100 years, including Tohei Koichi Sensei (aikido 10th dan), Tada Hiroshi Sensei (aikido ninth dan), and others. And in recent years, these meditation techniques have spread to the Western world too as seen at www.TempuYoga.com. This is just one example of meditative disciplines that can enhance budo.

Is This Still Relevant?

Why do these practices persist in an era when swords have long been laid to rest? Simply put, because the human challenges of fear, ego, distraction, and mortality remain the same. The context of combat has changed, but the value of a disciplined mind hasn't. The same can be said for handling the issue of death, which lies at the heart of many forms of spirituality, which classical martial arts have much in common with for this reason.

Martial arts provide a laboratory for developing concentration, emotional control, and ethical judgment – benefits that extend to daily life. Meditation and spirituality in martial arts also preserve a link to the arts' cultural roots. They remind practitioners that when they bow to an opponent or assume a meditative posture, they're participating in a continuum that, in certain cases, stretches back to Zen monks tutoring samurai in the 13th century.

This continuity is a point of pride and meaning. It differentiates true budo from mere fighting skills. As Japanese sensei have long asserted, anyone can learn to strike or throw; but to do so with wisdom, honor, and an indomitable spirit – that's the mark of a martial artist shaped by spiritual discipline.

While the spiritual side of martial arts is most famously developed in Japanese budo, the underlying principles are far from exclusive to ancient Japan. In modern times, scientific research and military experience have started to validate what these warrior traditions long held. Elite soldiers and athletes increasingly incorporate mindfulness techniques to improve performance under stress.

The U.S. Army, for instance, has studied and implemented mindfulness meditation training for troops to build what psychologists call "mental armor." The rationale is familiar. In essence, modern soldiers are learning the same lesson as the bushi of old – that a calm, present mind can be a decisive edge. The terminology has changed to "stress inoculation" or "mindfulness-based resilience," but the core practice of meditating and cultivating focus is similar. Even the most technologically advanced military recognizes the power of what is sometimes called the "inner weapon." As one Marine Corps program concluded, mindfulness training can improve mental toughness and decision-making in chaos, just as it steadied the bushi in the turmoil of battle.

The author teaching jujutsu

Finally, beyond the realm of combat and competition, the continued relevance of meditation in martial arts speaks to a universal human quest: finding meaning and mastery in life. Some bushi pursued enlightenment on the battlefield, but their insights apply to anyone facing the battles of modern life. Stress, fear, and anger are adversaries we all encounter. The martial arts offer a path to confront those foes within ourselves. As the saying goes, "true victory is victory over oneself."

Meditation and spiritual reflection are tools to achieve that victory. They teach us to remain calm in adversity, to focus on the present, and to act with integrity. These lessons are as valuable in the boardroom or the hospital ward as they were on the feudal battlefield.

In conclusion, the spiritual dimensions of Japanese martial arts – the meditation, the philosophy, the code of honor – aren't ornaments placed atop the "real training;" they're part of the very DNA of the warrior's path. Historically, they arose because the stakes of combat required extraordinary mental toughness and moral clarity. Practically, they continue because they consistently prove their worth in forging better martial artists and better people.

The image of a meditating swordsman captures this truth: the stillness in the dojo prepares one for the storm of battle. As long as martial traditions are kept alive and authentic, the old teachings will live on, reminding each new generation of practitioners that the strongest sword is guided by a peaceful, fearless heart.

About the Author: H. E. Davey is one of the founding members of the SMAA. Holding the rank of Shihan and hachidan in the SMAA Jujutsu Division, he has over 50 years of training in Japan and the USA. His books on Japan and Japanese art forms are available on Amazon and at a bookstore near you. More information can be found at www.MichiPublishing.com.

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