



Journal of Buddhist Ethics

ISSN 1076-9005

Volume 3 1996: 73–76

Publication date: 1 March 1996

Zen and the Way of the Sword: Arming the Samurai Psyche, by
Winston L. King. New York and Oxford: Oxford University
Press, 1993, pp.265, \$10.95 (paper).

Reviewed by

Charles B. Jones

*Department of Religion
Carleton College*

© 1996 Charles B. Jones

Copyright Notice

Digital copies of this work may be made and distributed provided no charge is made and no alteration is made to the content. Reproduction in any other format with the exception of a single copy for private study requires the written permission of the editors. All enquiries to jbe-ed@psu.edu.

Winston King, professor emeritus of Vanderbilt University, has long had an interest in the way that Buddhist doctrines and values play themselves out in everyday life. His earlier books, *In the Hope of Nibbāna* and *Death was his Kōan: the Samurai Zen of Suzuki Shōsan*, both dealt with the movement from a theoretical worldview to the practical decisions that a Buddhist must make in the common social situations of life.

Now Professor King has written another book, in a way a follow-up to the one on Suzuki Shōsan, exploring the historical conditions that led to one of the oddest marriages in religious history: Buddhism, which espouses a basic attitude of nonviolence, and the samurai class of Japan, warriors who trained themselves to inflict death without forethought or hesitation, whose goal was summed up by Miyamoto Musashi thus: “Whenever you cross swords with an enemy you must not think of cutting him either strongly or weakly; just think of cutting and killing him. Be intent solely upon killing the enemy.” (p. 120). The central problem and theme of this book, then, is: How did this come about? How is it that the samurai of medieval Japan found in Zen Buddhism an ideology and a method of training that fitted them for such an un-Buddhist occupation?

In different sections, King tackles this question from a number of angles. He begins with historical considerations, outlining the early history of Zen in Japan as well as the conditions that led to the rise of the samurai as a self-conscious class. He then explores the culture of the samurai, centering his discussion around the image of the sword.

The sword for the samurai was the essence of his self-identity. The sword worn in public was his badge of rank, his skill in its use the index of his worth. King sets forth a comprehensive treatment of the sword, from the actual process of its manufacture, to the mystique of the master swordsmith, to the training of a young samurai in its use.

King also looks at the general ethos of the samurai, an ethos encapsulated in the word *bushidō*, “the way of the warrior.” This was an ethos that hinged on such values as selfless loyalty, courage, action without forethought or hesitation, and the acceptance of the ever-present reality of death.

The training in swordsmanship (or any other martial art) and the values of *bushidō*, King says, provided the point of entree, the nexus where Zen training and values could be put to use, and therein lies the explanation for the popularity of Zen among the samurai to the virtual exclusion of all other forms of Buddhism. Zen monastic training provided the warrior with the freedom of mind that allowed him to strike the lethal blow, to move beyond the confines of his meticulously-cultivated techniques and strategies when the occasion demanded them, and to do so from what King calls “a stable inner platform of mental control.” Zen training conditioned the mind to move in perfect freedom, to achieve a state of unity with the sword, the opponent, and the movements of the combat situa-

tion. By cultivating the “mind of no-mind,” the warrior made himself invincible by the paradoxical act of putting all thoughts of life and death, victory and defeat completely out of his mind, and by focusing completely on the present moment and the ever-changing tide of combat.

In terms of the ethics of *bushidō*, the training of Zen meditation helped in two ways: in the cultivation of selflessness, and in the dissolution of distinctions of life and death. The first aided the samurai in cultivating an attitude of complete submission and loyalty to his master. By realizing the truth of selflessness, the samurai could deny himself completely and live his life solely for his lord. The second enabled him to kill and be killed without complaint and without fear. One could strike without regret, and die without fear.

How did the samurai square their occupations with the general Buddhist principle of nonviolence? King tells us that this was based on the view of rebirth and karma. If one found himself born into a samurai family, then that was simply a manifestation of his karma to be accepted without rancor. They sought only to fulfil their duties within the bounds of present circumstances. Some hoped that by doing their best as a samurai and fulfilling class ideals, they might gain a better rebirth without the necessity of fighting and killing. Some, however, took their oaths of loyalty to the extreme of hoping for rebirth into the same samurai family so that they could continue serving their lord and his descendents.

King balances his account of the way in which Zen transformed samurai training and ideology with a symmetrical account of how adoption by the samurai affected Zen, particularly in the rise of “warrior Zen,” a form of Zen practice tailored to the needs of the samurai. Warrior Zen included meditation sessions set up for samurai trainees, and the development of “warrior *kōans*.” These were *kōans* in which the protagonists were warriors themselves, and which included “capping phrases” such as “Caught in the midst of a hundred enemies, how will you manage to win without surrendering and without fighting?”

King concludes his study with a survey of the ways in which the samurai ideal, by now steeped in Zen, carried over beyond the Meiji Restoration and the subsequent disenfranchisement of the samurai class, and from there into the twentieth century. He includes a detailed consideration of the perdurance of the warrior mentality into the Pacific War of the 1930s and 1940s, especially in the appearance of *kamikaze* pilots. In these King sees a continuation of the basic samurai values of loyalty, courage, and the ability to face death without flinching.

It must be said at the outset that this is not strictly an academic book. The bibliography is spare, and limited to secondary sources and primary sources in English translation. As a publication of Oxford University Press under its “Oxford Paperbacks” imprimatur, it is apparently not intended as high-level scholarship, but rather as a popular introduction to the place of Zen in samurai life and culture. It is written in highly accessible language, with copious illustrations of

swordmaking techniques, fighting styles, and core values. The illustrations bring the subject matter to life and perhaps correct some of the over-romanticizing of the warrior ideal and the aesthetic beauty of Japanese swords that Westerners are prone to. The illustrations remind us that, in the last analysis, the swords were very large, very sharp knives whose sole purpose was to maim and kill.

The spareness of source materials brings with it a potential hazard: by limiting his sources to only those things that have been translated into English, King hears only the voice of the samurai speaking to outsiders, and has access only to those ideas that appeal to a western audience. This potentially skews the conclusions. It seems, however, that King is aware of this and has done his best to read his sources intensively and comparatively in order to present as accurate an account as possible of samurai life and values.

It is this attempt to provide an analysis of the relationship between the warrior mentality and Zen that sets this book apart from most others in the “Zen and the martial arts” genre, books such as Herrigel’s *Zen and the Art of Archery* or Taisen Deshimaru’s *The Zen Way to the Martial Arts*. These latter books attempt to show martial Zen practice from the inside, by tracing the process whereby the practitioner, through engagement in some martial art, can attain to self-realization and the state of no-mind. King is not writing such a first-person account, but instead seeks to provide a sociological and religious account of the process by which martial arts came to be accepted as part of Zen training, and how the inter-relationship of Zen meditation and the warrior’s skills transformed both forever.

When all is said and done, this is a book that should definitely be on the shelf of any scholar interested in East Asian religion and culture. It is the only work currently available to my knowledge that attempts to address the relationship of samurai culture to Zen in a systematic, comprehensive way so as to understand the deep affinity that the two felt for each other. It is a good survey of the state of the field in western scholarship, and a good book for those teaching undergraduates who may have an interest in Zen and the martial arts.

Charles B. Jones