



Author of this essay:

[Shi Ming Zhen](#)

(March 16, 2006)

COMMENTARY ON THE HAGAKURE

A series of commentaries on selected entries

by Ming Zhen Shakya

Introduction

Much wisdom lies hidden by the leaves. We read the Hagakure as if we've entered an uncharted cave and find on the floor the scattered pages of an old and valued book; and then, as we explore the unfamiliar setting, to our delight we discover that the antique sheaves have concealed a cache of wisdom's treasures.

Wisdom is a universal gift. Knowledge and belief tend to be parochial favors; but wisdom is conferred ecumenically. However certain we are of this, we are still startled to encounter its presence in such an unexpected place - in a Buddhist monk's recollections of his days practicing the arts of war.

Forbidden by law to follow samurai tradition and end his own life when his feudal lord, or Daimyo, died, Yamamoto Tsunetomo retreated to a monastery where, had he not agreed to dictate his memoirs to a young correspondent, he would have remained in quiet obscurity until his death in the year 1719. For a better appreciation of his time, it may help to know that he was a contemporary of William Penn, who died the year before, in 1718.

Throughout several years of interviews in placid temple halls, the monk "Jocho" related his colorful morality tales of warlords and battles which became, collectively, the Hagakure.

Buddhism, the haven of non-violence, is an odd theater for these dramatic anecdotes of slaughter and suicide. It is as confounding as trying to find a justification for the Inquisition in Christianity's history, or a convincing motive for the Old Testament's account of Abraham's readiness to sacrifice Isaac. Yet within the motives of both human and divine actions there are sad but satisfactory explanations.

So, too, in Zen Buddhism there are reasons behind the militaristic approach to the enlightened conduct which the Hagakure references. What, after all, are the stages of development of the spiritual warrior? Are they any different from the stages of the spiritual seeker of peace?

In either case, before ascending through monastic or through military orders to reach the rank of master or samurai, one requirement has to be fulfilled: the ego must be slain. A man must be emptied of his own sense of self, his old material-world identity.

In Zen this requirement is colorfully illustrated in the following story:

A master has become famous for the delicious quality of the tea he brews. All who hear about his tea wish to sample it.

Affecting the air of superiority that we often find in those who are not truly ready to begin the spiritual ascent, a visiting cleric comes to the master's quarters, carrying a cup of tea that he casually sips as he inquires about the master's famous brew. "I'd like to taste that tea of yours," he says. And the master, smiling at the present impossibility, replies, "Before I can put my tea in your cup, you must empty your cup."

Emptying our ego - and all those old shreds of belief that cling to it - is always problematic. The desperation that moves us to consider such a "leaf-turning" experience is usually felt in secret, just as the action we take to accomplish it is usually quite public. We announce our commitment while quietly wondering if the enthusiasm we feel will last. And will we really be delivered? The death of the material-world ego does not automatically provide for the rebirth of a new spiritual identity. Many of us will simply find ourselves bereft of any meaningful sense-of-self, reduced to compensating the loss with drugs or alcohol or with any of the more respectable but equally useless Six Worlds' strategies known in Zen as Animal, Devil, Angel, Human Being, Hungry Ghost, and Titan forms of "false Zen."

Proving that we've truly been reborn in the spirit may require as bold an action as amputating an arm, as Second Patriarch Hui Ko taught us. And that may not be enough. The ability to imitate a correct demeanor is a common talent to the ambitious. We may convince ourselves that our performance is not acting at all - that we are genuinely enlightened. We may even fool a few masters.

As to these Six Worlds' strategies in military ranks, a genuine samurai was not a common and otherwise unemployable mercenary who worked in exchange for food and shelter; nor did he crave the thrill of being seen in the costumes of rank. He did not use his position to create an audience for his art, or seek approbation for his organizational skills. Neither did he pledge undying loyalty to one Lord and then capriciously affix himself to another. And he did not become a warrior in order to be brutal.

The monk or samurai-in-training underwent the disciplines of acquiring humility, of wiping his identity slate clean, called "dying to self" or "killing the fool." He accepted responsibility for his previous failures, and did not brag about his successes. In monastery or dojo he practiced the necessary skills: the chants, the prayers, the proper care and wear of clerical garb; the temple

protocols; or the drills in weaponless combat and in the arts of archery, sword, and horsemanship.

As he advanced spiritually, he no longer strove to receive the praise of superiors or the admiration of peers; but rather to please his interior Judge, an immortal who held out to him the reward of life in a realm of infinite bliss.

He acquired power over himself, suppressing any resurgence of ego by mastering his senses. He conquered his own preferences and aversions - all things in the material world that tried to entice or disgust him. All were stripped of their emotional value. He could readily tell the difference between good food and common rations; but he would not connive to procure one or to avoid the other. One meal had to be as acceptable as another. One bed had to be as comfortable as another. One day as warm or as cold as another. He conquered hunger, pain, fatigue, lust, and greed. He permitted no anger or envy to influence his actions. His own equanimity and poise served to maintain balance and harmony despite any material-world disturbances.

By depriving material objects and emotions of their power over him, he would attain power over them. Without the conscious ego's obstructive filters, his senses would grow more acute, his reflexes quicker. It would then be his inner Self who acted and reacted subliminally, automatically, unencumbered by the need to consult the hampering, prejudicial ego.

As a trainee, he may have served his Daimyo or master with devotion, the necessary phase of hero projection; but as he matured in his service, this projection would be integrated, assimilated to his inner Self; and with spiritual conviction he would fully and dispassionately discharge his duties.

The samurai, detached emotionally from earthly times and places and exposed to constant physical danger, viewed death differently from other men. Before he went into battle, he was already martyred to an unseen cause.

As to Japanese history, it is necessary only to know that during the time the Hagakure was written the Emperor had a purely spiritual function in linking the Japanese people to heaven; that Buddhism was introduced into Japan in the 6th Century; and that temporal power resided in a group of squabbling territorial lords called Daimyo - who each had a substantial military force, the cream of which was the largely aristocratic class of highly trained warriors, the samurai. Over these Daimyo ruled the political, all powerful Shogun.

In all of the pages of dictation, we discover that the Monk Jocho clearly recognized the universal character of causes and effects - that peculiar eternal quality which truth illuminates. The view of the enlightened does not vary with time and place; and knowing this we can better appreciate the eternal wisdom of Yamamoto Tsunetomo, the samurai monk called Jocho.

For these Hagakure discussions we will refer to William Scott Wilson's fine translation of the work of the original chronicler, Tashiro Tsuramoto, and also to Yukio Mishima's loving tribute, *The Way of the Samurai*.