

## *Introduction*

I am not a Samurai, nor even a martial artist. It may seem strange for someone with no knowledge of these fields to publish a commentary to Musashi's 'Book of Five Rings'. For those who do not understand why, I will attempt to explain.

First, Musashi's text is pedagogical, and therefore it is not out of the question that it was intended to be read, and even commented on by a novice, such as myself.

Second, since it is pedagogical, it is not only open to critique from the perspective of strategy, but from the perspective of pedagogy.

Third, Musashi's pedagogy is not exclusively technical, but philosophical and psychological, and enough of this material is present to consider the work as a composite of all three. In fact, Musashi's thought invites commentary because of its brilliant and practical application of philosophy and psychology for the following reason.

Musashi's success in combat is legendary, and while he may just have been a unique talent, with many impressive stories, his text is not biographical, but pedagogical.

It is fair to assume on this basis that Musashi believed in the utility of the written word, and recognises the important role pedagogy played in him becoming a master in the art of war. **Mastery** is a key word to legitimising the following commentary, which would be nothing more than an example of hubris without it.

The reason for this, which Musashi attests to himself, is that mastery can be obtained in any craft, and more importantly, if we observe masters of various crafts, a clear set of practices and attitudes appears which is shared by all, independently to the specific skills of the respective vocations.

In a sense, it is on Musashi's own recommendation that he is read not only by budding strategists, but by anyone with ambitions of mastery, since in his work we are able to observe the thought, methods, and subtlety of a proven master. If observation of masters is a prerequisite to a mastery of strategy, it logically follows that observing a

master strategist is of benefit to those practising other crafts, too.

Though not a master myself, I do have ambitions of being one. And though not a master, I have achieved **fluency** in one or two crafts - in my teens I earned a fluency in surfing, in my early twenties as a yachtsman, and in my thirties as a geometrician.

In overcoming the obstacles faced by a beginner, and at times achieving something beyond the norm in these quite different fields, I have come to recognise that, while each craft required very different skill sets, the **principles** of achieving fluency in these skill sets were more-or-less the same. Musashi struck me as a man emphatically saying the same - proficiency is transferable, and rather than diluting one's knowledge, being well-rounded and seeing the commonality of the various crafts actually concentrates and uplifts one's proficiency.

The degree to which one succeeds in achieving mastery is a measure of one's intelligence as much as it is a measure of their dedication. For this reason, Musashi demanded further investigation, as not only is he a master in one of

the most demanding vocations imaginable, but is a learned and candid believer in the principles of achieving mastery.

However, it is not enough to say Musashi had interesting or intelligent thoughts, and therefore requires attention. Another key word to understanding this commentary is **empiricism**. Combat, and especially combat to the death, is not just extremely demanding, but extremely real. The results of combat are unequivocal - there is simply no need for debate to establish who is the victor in combat, or who was the greatest combatant of Musashi's day, because there is no ambiguity to a sword fight. This unequivocal empiricism gives us a clear starting point, with which we can dispel any and all doubts about the character in question, and his claims to authority. We are without question in the presence of a true master, and not only in his presence, but intimately so.

There is much more which needs to be said to do Musashi's thought and empiricism justice, but this will be handled in the due course of the commentary.

It is with great respect and humble admiration that I take advantage of this opportunity to dilate this wisdom, gratefully, and with faith in its power.

# *The Ground Book*

*“There are various Ways... each man practises as he feels inclined. It is said that a warrior’s is the twofold way of the pen and the sword, and he should have a taste for both Ways.”*

*“Even if a man has no natural ability, he can become a warrior by sticking assiduously to both divisions of the Way. Generally speaking, the Way of the warrior is the resolute acceptance of death.”*

Musashi begins by making his readers feel incredibly comfortable, pointing out, in a hospitable manner, that the reality is we are all different, and may live as we feel inclined to. This pluralistic attitude intimates a certain intelligence in the words of the author from the get-go.

In a similarly enlightened fashion, we begin by discussing strategy and warriorhood in the most sensible way; by defining these terms. Maybe without realising it,

Musashi reassuringly displays the hallmarks of a great strategist and pedagogue.

Now to discuss these definitions, of the warrior as a man of both pen and sword, and a man who resolutely accepts death. I have made the decision to omit discussions of the terms 'Way' and 'pen and sword in accord'; though these discussions are important, I am not a Japanese linguist, and in any case, I believe anyone who was one would likely enlighten Musashi on the topic of the meaning of his own words. You could say this is the Way of the linguist, or etymologist, to discover fantastic meaning in everyday words, which may go beyond the way in which we used them - but I digress.

The dedication to warriorhood invokes a confrontation with death and a life of swordsmanship, of course. This is why I was surprised to see that the pen was the first object, or tool, with which Musashi defines our hypothetical warrior. I first wondered if this was embellishment, painting the warrior with a measure of mystique and intellect, in contrast to the image of the warriors as a primal, even animalistic existence.

However, this is not Musashi's style. As we come to realise in the next chapter, Musashi prides himself on his disdain for embellishments. His association between warrior and pen is to be read as completely sincere, completely literal.

Remember that the pen is mightier than the sword. Though I am not sure this would be a phrase Musashi was familiar with, it points to there being a cross-cultural correspondence, a kind of archetypal sympathy, going on. Whether pen is mightier or in accord with the sword is not as important as the simple fact that pen and sword are taxonomically linked under the umbrella of warriorhood. But why the pen?

First, not all warriors are combatants. This is particularly true when speaking of strategists. The sword on its own is a dangerous weapon, yet the swordsman is redundant without a strategy, which is to say without knowledge. Though he may master the sword, and resolutely accept death, there is no easily overcoming men without **knowledge**, without wit, without intelligence,



since such a warrior is defenceless against cunning, stealth, strategists, and conspiracy.

This is what the pen means to Musashi - intelligence. Being of a sharp wit, able to study, and being learned. A swordsman is no warrior on this very point.

Musashi has not excluded the role of the warrior from unlearned men. He has specifically said that anyone who follows the Way assiduously will be able to become a warrior. Therefore, to follow the Way of the pen is to make a habit of learning, rather than being gifted in learning. In other words, warriorhood is not only a life of heroism and warfare, but a life of reading, writing, learning. Thankfully, Musashi places this idea as conspicuously as possible, in the opening lines of the treatise. I believe this emphasis is intentional, and cannot be understated. No swordsman can overcome men relying on prowess in combat alone.

It, too, could be said that the pen, meaning intelligence, is a weapon. In fact, it is the ultimate weapon, which wields the ultimate power. The sword is feeble in comparison to the codes, the institutions, the contracts, the deeds, the constitutions and declarations which the

Samurai and every other warrior submits to. This too, cannot be understated.

Though not overly significant with regards to a mastery of strategy, it has been important to dwell on these details of Musashi's thought so early on in the book. They deserve such attention as they reassure us that our author held his own not just in combat but in ideas. This chapter beautifully intimates all the right things about its author, as someone we should take seriously on the topic of strategy. He is someone able to ruminate, reflect, and reason. He is a man of letters. Establishing the character of a teacher is crucial to profiting from their teaching. Musashi shows us to be both abstract and straightforward, while offering a little food for thought.

In short, this preamble gives me the impression that the author is not just a hero or virtuoso samurai, but a wise and interesting man, too.

“Generally speaking, the way of the warrior is **resolute acceptance of death**. Although not only warriors but

priests, women, peasants and lowlier folk have been known to die readily in the cause of duty or out of shame, this is a different thing. The warrior is different in that **studying the way of strategy is based on overcoming men**. Through victory gained in crossing swords with individuals, or enjoying battle with large numbers, we can attain power and fame for ourselves or for our lord.”

Beginning with the importance of the resolute acceptance of death, I would like to note that this is not only a moral requirement, but a practical one. Resolute acceptance of death is not only a philosophical attitude, a stoic strength. Though it inevitably will lend itself to stoic ruminations on mortality, these are not as fundamental to the warrior as his steady hand, calm nerve, and cool head. Being both a deeply empirical yet reflective and thoughtful man, I believe Musashi could not have anticipated how a modern westerner would need to elaborate on comments such as this to make himself understood.

Modern thought tends to polarise concepts rather than see the value in their ambiguity. To a modern, ambiguity

has the effect of obscuring simplicity, and often sends a polarised thinker into a vague and tangential waffling.

A samurai should be resigned to his mortality as a draughtsman should be resigned to his steady hand and perfectionism, which is to say that to succeed as a draughtsman one must have a steady hand, to succeed as a warrior one must have accepted death. His vocation is having accepted death, in the service of overcoming men, because one cannot overcome men while worrying, in the same way that one cannot draft a technical drawing without being able to draw. From our perspective, there is a difference between this practical detachment and a more spiritual one, but that need not be the case. Further, I read Musashi as deliberately ambiguous here, in order to say there is no separation between the two, though this is neither important nor possible to judge, it simply pleases my intuition to believe this is the case.

This statement about overcoming men has value, too, in its incompatibility, and therefore provocative nature with regards to a modern sensibility. As a Brit, I can admit it is not common to be plainly exposed to the truth with such

emotionless honesty - especially when the truth would expose the instruments of power, such as the purpose of a warrior. Power has been so thoroughly propagandised that any discussion surrounding its purposes must be emotionally charged and morally biased. Musashi's ability to plainly state facts not only speaks to the Buddhist tendency of Japanese culture, but to the diaphanous perception befitting a strategist. Though Musashi makes it clear he has not followed the Way of Buddhism, it is not uncommon for Buddhism to evoke such an attitude in followers of its Way<sup>1</sup>, and this is useful to note, since there is always more than one route to a destination.

The Way of strategy of the *Niten Ichi* shares something psychological with this alternative Way of the Buddha, but to different ends. It appears that, though very different in both method and purpose, there is the shared objective of achieving a certain frankness about reality. I say this out of

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<sup>1</sup> See "Self-Liberation Through Seeing with Naked Awareness" by Guru Padmasambhava. Interestingly, Musashi, in claiming he finally mastered strategy at 50 years old on relinquishing devotion to any particular Way, is the perfect example for the teaching in "Self-Liberation."

having a speculative notion that a cultural cross-contamination is at work. It is not necessarily a fantastic coincidence to see impartial, penetrating clarity of awareness, and a fidelity to the way things *are* rather than the way one would *like them to be*, as attributes of the status quo in distinct fields, but encompassed by the same culture, when imagining the inevitability of a ‘cross-pollination’ of ideals<sup>2</sup>.

Musashi’s distinction between the Way of *Niten Ichi* and the varieties of spirituality has already been stated. This is quite interesting, and unfortunately, the reasons for this escape interrogation. Beyond his establishing a neutrality which would potentially muddy political and religious interests for a Samurai, it is possible that the reason could be the invocation of an idealised ‘Way of no Way’, setting the precedent for Jeet Kune Do. This is alluded to, and seems quite logical.

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<sup>2</sup> I believe a similar set of circumstances is responsible for the evangelical style of ‘western’, i.e. academic and secular, science, which has adopted some of the monotheistic evangelism of its native religion, Protestantism.

To make your code the absence of code, or your doctrine the absence of doctrine, has a controversial history, and is enough to induce anxiety in moralists and gate-keepers alike. To do away with ready-made containers is not a habit among the many, and is usually condemned as either a hubris, a flight of pure egotism, a petulant impatience, or a shocking disrespect. It is quite clearly the case that ready-made containers are preferred, as evidenced in the paternalism which is rife throughout societies, governments, religions, and institutions in all times. Paternalism is so readily accepted because it offers one of the most powerful intoxicants on the market; **certainty**.

Certainty is an intoxicant, to be sure. Certainty, being an illusion, is not something experienced by self-reliant, self-responsible individuals in the proverbial wild. Certainty, however, feels very, very intoxicating precisely for this reason - it is a completely alien sense of peace and reassurance in a world which completely denies the possibility of peace and reassurance.

Musashi *might* have argued that, **in adopting a Way, one seeks authority, but one finds illusions**, since handing over the responsibility of authority to a ready-made container is, in reality, just handing over the anxiety of uncertainty to an illusion. Certainty, being an illusion, is not sympathetic to having a firm grasp of reality and therefore, not conducive to the ability to decisively respond to real events. Likewise, endowing the various Ways with authority is a limitation suitable only for those wishing to concede defeat to reality - to those willing to admit that, rather than grasp reality as it is, they prefer to be intoxicated by a codified one.

In shirking the paternalistic motivations behind the appeal to codification, the strategist is liberated from the illusions and limitations which are inevitable consequences of codification<sup>3</sup>.

True mastery is only possible to those willing to overcome those limitations, and is possibly even defined by having done so.

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<sup>3</sup> See “Terra Occulta” in “A Fools Gnosis” by Ursuserpens Antivestacum.



