



AFTERWORD

By the time Musashi moved to the cave where he would write *The Book of Five Rings*, his body was feeling the effects of nearly forty years on the road, and he was sick and progressively weaker with the beginnings of what would prove to be a fatal disease. Nevertheless, almost every day, he would climb to an open area above the cave and practice for several hours at a time, performing the same moves over and over again as he looked out over the Ariake Sea—the Sea of Dawn—from this “dojo,” an outcropping of rock, high on Mount Kimpo. The famous swordsman was well past his days of wandering throughout the country, meeting other men of his art in combat, and perfecting his skills. His techniques, on which he put secondary importance anyway, were well established; and in the last number of years, most of the performance matches that had been pressed upon him by host daimyos or other aspiring swordsmen were characterized by his simply leading his opponent around in circles, demonstrating that the latter would get nowhere with him.

Why, then, at the end of his life, would Musashi continue to practice every day in this isolated place, far away from the public, with only the priest at the nearby Buddhist temple as his solitary neighbor?

The Meaning behind the Structure of *The Book of Five Rings*

When the monk Kukai returned to Japan from China in 806 CE, he brought with him an understanding of a new, esoteric form of Buddhism that he called the Shingon, or True Word, sect. Kukai was not only a devout Buddhist but

a brilliant teacher and artist, and Buddhism could be conveyed not only through art. This notion of Truth through art, in general, and was one of the ties in general, and was one of the ties to life, found between the lines in

Most indicative of Musashi's title and structure of *The Book of Five Rings* is the assertion that the doctrine taught by Vairocana, the cosmic Buddha of the universe. Vairocana is manifested in many ways, often represented by the five-tiered pagoda or Tower of Five Rings. This tower's base stone at the bottom represents the physical element of physical being, the earth element, or permeation and fluidity of the water element, or purity and unobstructedness of the Wind element, or growth of the fire element, or space, or in Buddhist terminology, Vairocana himself, the very essence of the universe.

According to Kukai, these five elements are various manifestations of the universe, and this eternal interplay is impermanent, and no matter how small, large, earth, water, fire, or wind, that, with constant meditation, it will eventually result in unification.

The parallels of this system will be clear. Each chapter does indeed correspond to the Five Elements. One chapter is about the others, or the full meaning will be

“See Everything for Yourselves”

Do not ride another man's horse.
Do not draw another man's bow.



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a brilliant teacher and artist, and he taught that the esoteric meanings of Buddhism could be conveyed not in wordy explanations, but rather through art. This notion of Truth through Art had a direct appeal to Japanese sensibilities in general, and was one of the basic assumptions of Musashi's approach to life, found between the lines in every chapter of his book.

Most indicative of Musashi's understanding of Shingon Buddhism are the title and structure of *The Book of Five Rings* itself. Among the tenets of this sect is the assertion that the deeper esoteric teachings of Buddhism were taught by Vairocana, the cosmic Buddha, who in fact embodies the entire universe. Vairocana is manifested in a number of artistic forms, but in Japan he is often represented by the five-tiered pagoda, or *sotoba*, also called the *gorinto*, or Tower of Five Rings. This tower is usually constructed as follows: a square stone at the bottom represents the Earth element, or stability and the fundamental element of physical being; next, a round stone represents the Water element, or permeation and fluidity; a triangular stone represents the Fire element, or purity and unobstructed activity; a crescent-shaped stone represents the Wind element, or growth and perfect awareness; and at the top, a stone in the shape of a mani-jewel (wish-fulfilling gem) represents the Void element, space, or in Buddhist terms, Emptiness. Thus, the pagoda represents Vairocana himself, the very essence of the universe.

According to Kukai, these five elements are constantly interfusing to form the various manifestations of the universe, or Vairocana. The outward appearance of this eternal interplay is impermanence, but what is inherent in every single form, no matter how small, large, earthly, or ethereal, is Emptiness. Shingon teaches that, with constant meditation, these elements and their respective Buddhas will eventually result in unification with Vairocana, and thus in enlightenment.

The parallels of this system with the title and structure of Musashi's work are clear. Each chapter does indeed echo, reflect, and fuse with the others, as do the Five Elements. One chapter cannot be read to the exclusion of the others, or the full meaning will be lost.

“See Everything for Yourself”

Do not ride another man's horse;
Do not draw another man's bow.

It is interesting that, while the structure and exterior make-up of Musashi's book is based on an esoteric form of Buddhism, its interior has a firm foundation on the very exoteric Buddhism of Zen. One of Zen's first tenets is that one never truly knows water to be hot or cold until he puts his hand in it, and this point is repeated over and over again in *The Book of Five Rings* with the phrase "you must investigate this thoroughly." Musashi, who claims never to have had a teacher for any of the arts he so excelled in, would have us "train in the Way of the sword *with your hands*." And, while many of the famous swordsmen of this period claimed to have learned their art from dreams, gods, or demons, Musashi insisted that we must learn each move and technique as though we had discovered it on our own. This is the iron law of Zen that we "see everything for ourselves" (*issai jikan*: 一切自観), rather than hearing it from another—regardless of how famous a teacher he may be—or reading it in a book. Thus, *The Book of Five Rings* is only a stepping stone to self-discovery, to be abandoned much like the raft after one has crossed the stream.

"See everything for yourself." Practice, in this sense, must mean acute observation, and observation without prejudice. With this kind of practice, Musashi said, we gain real knowledge, and real knowledge implies freedom. Something only half-learned or taken in faith from another only hobbles the practitioner or puts blinders on his gaze.

Musashi lived for sixty years by the concepts of Zen, and besides *The Book of Five Rings*, left us with a number of fine India ink paintings that point to these same principles. One of these paintings depicts a cormorant, *a bird that swims underwater*, perched on a small ledge, perhaps looking over an unseen river. Musashi would have observed many of these birds on his travels, and admired their skill and singleness of purpose. Did he think, as he painted his subject, of the old Japanese saying, "The crow imitating a cormorant will drown?"

Summary of the Text

Although Musashi was heavily influenced by Zen and took a number of cues from Shingon, he could hardly be defined or limited by these sects. And, al-

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though a number of documents exist describing his activities and personal-
ity, their contradictory statements make it a difficult if not maddening job for
the biographer to get a real handle on who he was. The best of all the origi-
nal documents continues to be his slender volume, *The Book of Five Rings*,
which was originally written down in five short scrolls.

As mentioned, Musashi was old (for that period in Japan) and terminally
ill, and understood that this would be his final statement. So while the book
is short, each section and each word was carefully deliberated upon and cho-
sen. A brief summary is as follows:

The Earth Chapter

In this beginning chapter, Musashi explains the significance of the martial
arts as he had come to know them over the course of fifty years, and stresses
the necessity of knowing the advantages of the weapons one uses, and the
fundamental principles of using them. He also insists that the martial artist
must be practical: that partiality towards or bias against any weapon can be
fatal. One should know what weapon is most fitting for himself, but should
also be able to use any weapon at hand.

The Water Chapter

Here, Musashi relates the philosophy and practice of his own style of swords-
manship, the Niten Ichi-ryu. Included are practical measure and practices for
mental attitude, body posture, use of the eyes and feet, and the various ways
of striking with the sword. In this chapter, the imaginative reader will almost
be able to visualize the bouts in which Musashi discovered these points for
himself.

The Fire Chapter

In this chapter, Musashi writes about the strategies and practical applica-
tions of combat, and develops the extrapolation of the "large" martial art
from the "small" martial art. It is here that he emphasizes the psychological
techniques that are the foundation of his own martial art and its very point of
departure: "In my martial art it is essential . . . that you bend and warp your
opponent, taking the victory by twisting and distorting his mind."

The Wind Chapter

Musashi firmly believed Sun Tzu's statement that "If you know the enemy and know yourself, you will not be endangered in a hundred battles." Thus, in this chapter, he exposes the failings and contrivances of the other schools of swordsmanship that flourished in his time. Musashi despised the schools that charged money to sell "performance art" and advised his students not to be led astray by flashy techniques that were fine flowers but poor fruit.

The Emptiness Chapter

This chapter provides, in very few words, a frame of meditation for the preceding four chapters. In it, we sense Musashi struggling to put as succinctly as possible the summation of not only his swordsmanship, but of the Great Way in general. Emptiness is Existence, Existence is emptiness, and any attachment at all is the great heresy. It would seem that Musashi may have meant it as a sort of mantra to end his short work, similar to the mantra at the end of the *Heart Sutra*. "The Emptiness Chapter" brings *The Book of Five Rings* around in a full circle; it is the perfect *enso*, giving the work a center that is everywhere and that cannot be pinned down.

We may read *The Book of Five Rings* to study the insights that Musashi gained throughout the sixty-one years of his life. There are hundreds of martial artists, a number of Japanese businessmen, and at least one professional baseball player (a pitcher) in Japan who do so every year. Or we may read it to fill in the blanks of his life and to imagine how he worked through the most difficult and problematic matches of his years as a wandering swordsman, meeting others on the road and walking away having defeated yet another opponent. But we may also read this book in an attempt to grasp the mind of a man who lived his life with an intensity that few of us can equal, a man for whom discomfort and material poverty meant nothing compared to his art, and who has been held up as an inspiration to the Japanese people like few others. *The Book of Five Rings* is this man's brief but concise statement, and, after nearly four hundred years, it is still available to us today.

Go back now to Musashi, old and infirm, alone on the outcropping of rock,

still practicing the moves of observation and training part of himself as his flesh enlightened art. "You must a hundred times, but all you becomes Art itself.

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still practicing the moves he had learned for himself through his long career of observation and training. Each move he makes is as much an integral part of himself as his flesh and blood, and each posture a mudra of his own enlightened art. "You must investigate this thoroughly," not once or twice or a hundred times, but all your life. If you can do this, your life, like Musashi's, becomes Art itself.

As the thirteenth-century Zen priest Dogen wrote,

To study the Buddhist Way is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self. To forget the self is to be actualized by everything in the universe. When actualized by everything in the universe, your mind and body, and the minds and bodies of all other selves drop away.

—Genjo Koan

The seventeenth-century Zen priest Takuan, to whom Musashi seems to have been well acquainted, added to this.

Presumably, as a martial artist, I do not fight for gain or loss, am not concerned with strength or weakness, and neither advance a step or retreat a step. The enemy does not see me. I do not see the enemy. Penetrating to a place where heaven and earth have not yet divided, where yin and yang have not yet arrived, I quickly and necessarily gain effect.

The student and Musashi are on the same Path. The signpost that Musashi left is *The Book of Five Rings*. What the student will leave is yet to be determined. But the means is right there, held in his hands.

The life of Miyamoto Musashi has been portrayed countless times over the centuries. Soon after his death, imaginative versions of his life were created by professional storytellers, and not long after his character began to appear in bunraku, kabuki, and even Noh plays. More recently, he has been the

subject of numerous movies, his part interpreted by such prominent actors as Chiezo Kataoka, Toshiro Mifune, Tatsuya Nakadai, Kinnosuke Nakamura, and the great Ichikawa Raizo. Television, of course, has followed suit. Of the many novels that have been written about Musashi, the most famous is *Musashi*, by Yoshikawa Eiji. Written first as a serialized novel for the *Asahi* newspaper, and over four thousand pages in paperback, it has remained the high watermark of the fictionalized Musashi, the basis of many of the movies and television shows about the man, and has never been out of print. Finally, in the 1990s, the manga *Vagabond* appeared, and by the year 2000 there were over twenty-two million volumes of the series in print.

Now, with this manga version of *The Book of Five Rings*, we are provided for the first time with an artistic look into what Musashi wrote himself, insightfully adapted by Sean Michael Wilson, and illustrated with the dignity due the original author by Chie Kutsuwada. To those interested in Musashi, his art, and/or Japanese culture in general, I hope this engaging volume will prove interesting, instructive, and entertaining.

—William Scott Wilson