

In medieval Europe, society was organized around a concept now called feudalism. Feudalism was a military hierarchy, or ranking system. Rulers gave their vassals, warrior lords who had sworn their loyalty, land in exchange for their military services if needed. The lords hired knights to help them control their land. Peasant farmers called serfs worked the land for their lords but had little control over their own lives or fortunes.

A similar system operated in Japan. Beginning in the 1100s, this system lasted until the Japanese government changed during the Meiji Restoration of the late 1800s. In feudal Japan, the emperor chose *shoguns*, or military leaders, to rule over the country. These shoguns, in turn, awarded power to the *daimyos*, or local lords. The daimyos hired *samurai*. In feudal Japan, samurai were the warrior class, much like the European knights. The samurai held and exercised much power and influence.

### Code of Conduct

Samurai followed a strict code of conduct called *Bushidō* that provided guidelines for all aspects of life. The written word for Bushidō is a mixture of two Japanese characters: bushi, which means “warrior,” and dō, which means “way.” Placing the two characters together gives the meaning of “the way of the warrior.”

The Asian religions of Confucianism, Zen Buddhism, and Shinto had a strong influence on Bushidō code. The seven virtues of Bushidō were based on the principles of these philosophies. The virtues were courage (*yu*), respect (*rei*), honesty (*makoto*), honor (*meiyo*), loyalty (*chugi*), rectitude or doing what is morally correct (*gi*), and benevolence or a desire to help others (*jin*). Discipline and filial piety, or respect and care for parents and elders, helped samurai fulfill these ideals.

Samurai were extremely dedicated to the Bushidō code. Should a samurai fail to uphold the code, he might commit suicide by *seppuku*. Seppuku came to be an elaborate ritual, often attended by others.

When the time came to die, the samurai would stab himself in the abdomen with his *wakizashi* (short sword) and make a crosswise cut. Sometimes he would then finish with an upward cut. Then, a friend or respected enemy would behead him



This is typical male samurai clothing and style of hair by the end of the 1600s. A samurai's status could be determined by the quality of his kimono, or clothing.

with a sword. This sounds quite shocking, but there was reasoning behind it. The soul or spirit was believed to reside in the stomach. Samurai viewed the act of seppuku as a way to purify the soul and to ease dishonor. A samurai's beliefs guided his actions throughout the day.

### **A Typical Day**

After waking, samurai dressed in traditional Japanese kimono robes. A light kimono or loincloth would be worn as the first layer, tied with an obi, a length of cloth that functioned like a belt. Over that layer, he would don a heavier silk kimono, worn open or tied with another obi. The colors of the kimonos were usually dark or neutral colors. Samurai children's kimonos were the one exception to this. These kimonos were colorful and showy. Samurai grew their hair long and twisted it up into a topknot or *chomage*. A clip or small hat secured the topknot. In preparation for battle, samurai shaved the top part of their heads. This kept their heads cooler under their heavy battle helmets. A samurai carried his *katana*, or long sword, and his wakazashi tucked in the outer obi.

Samurai usually ate a traditional breakfast of rice, vegetables, and fish. After finishing with dressing and eating, a samurai trained in the martial arts. He practiced with male members of his family or at a special training academy.

Samurai started their rigorous training in childhood. Girls participated in martial arts training as well. Samurai women might use their training to defend their homes, but they didn't usually participate in battles. Discipline was an important part of the Bushidō code of conduct. The discipline and skills of sword fighting were called *kendo*, which means "the way of the sword." Fighting practice also went beyond practicing with a sword. Military training also included mastering the use of a bow and arrow while riding a horse. This technique of mounted archery was called *yabusame*.

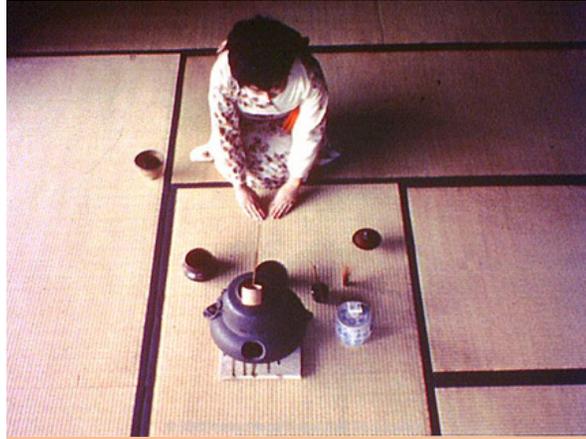
Samurai used the skills they developed in the service of the daimyo. A samurai was expected to be extremely loyal to his daimyo. Political conflicts among the daimyos sometimes erupted into military action, and they sent their samurai into battle against one another.

After finishing with their training for the day, samurai might have a traditional Japanese meal or go into town. A samurai who wished to travel without revealing his identity might wear a basket-shaped hat that completely covered his head.

### **Cultivation of the Mind**

A Bushidō motto stated, "The warrior needs to master the bow and the horse as well as the brush and the word." When they weren't working on their military

skills, samurai developed their minds. They studied Buddhist teachings, poetry writing, calligraphy, and painting. *Ikebana*, the Japanese art of flower arrangement, and the Japanese tea ceremony originated with the samurai arts culture as well. The tea ceremony is a ritual of tea preparation and serving to welcome and honor guests. Great care is taken in bringing out the teaware and in carrying out the traditional steps. It is a ceremony still performed and enjoyed in Japan today.



Samurai were fierce in battle, but they also practiced activities of refinement, such as calligraphy and the tea ceremony.

Samurai paid attention to their spiritual training as well. For example, the teachings of Buddhism prepared samurai to remain calm while in stressful situations. This was a skill that was useful in battle.

Samurai were no longer allowed to carry swords after 1876, and the samurai effectively died out. In Japan, however, their way of life is still remembered, and often honored. Many modern Japanese still take elements of the Bushido philosophy seriously, and some continue to practice the samurai cultural arts. The “way of the warrior” continues.

After reading the passage, answer the following questions:

- 1.** What was the purpose of Bushidō?
  - A.** to guide the samurai way of life
  - B.** to teach formal Japanese calligraphy
  - C.** to explain how to get dressed as a samurai
  - D.** to give instructions about archery from horseback
  
- 2.** Which statement is true of the origins of the Bushidō code?
  - A.** It came from medieval Europe.
  - B.** It began as a system of calligraphy.
  - C.** It was based on several Asian philosophies.
  - D.** It was based on the teachings of Christianity.
  
- 3.** When the samurai were not training, what other activities did they do?
  - A.** cooking and weaving
  - B.** traveling and fishing
  - C.** farming and blacksmithing
  - D.** flower arranging and calligraphy
  
- 4.** Think about what you have learned from this passage. What contributions did samurai make to Japanese society? Use details from the reading passage to support your answer.