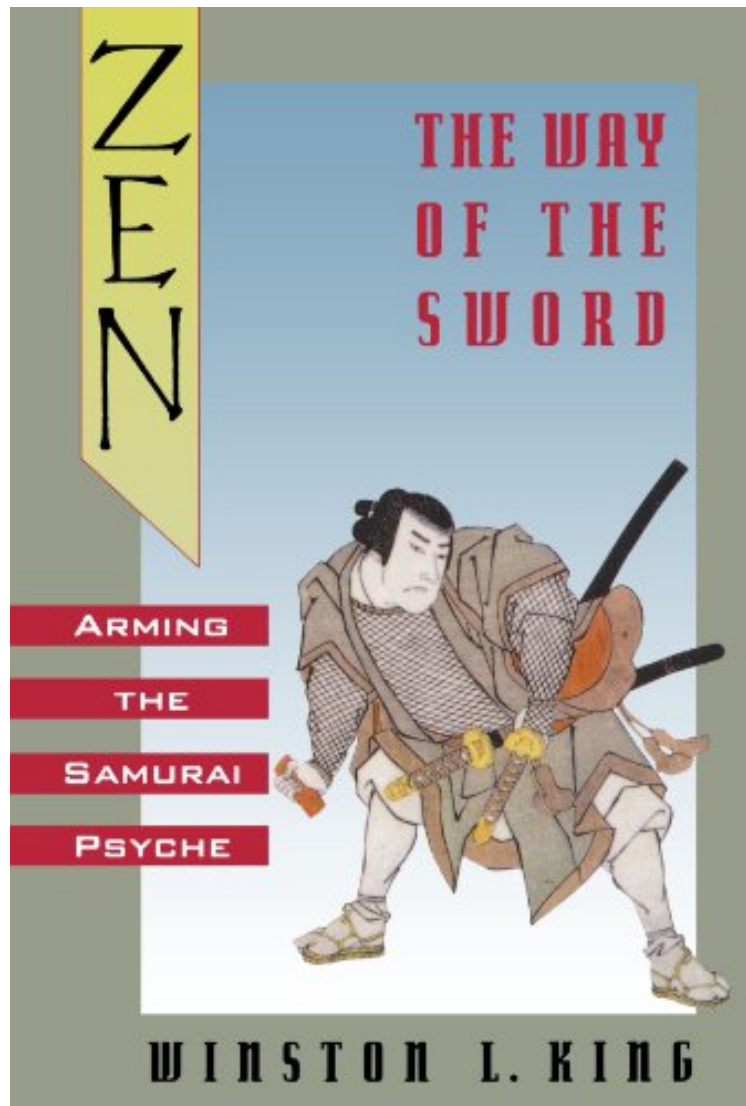


[E-BOOK] Zen and the Way of the Sword: Arming the Samurai Psyche

Zen and the Way of the Sword: Arming the Samurai Psyche

Winston L. King

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Zen--serene, contemplative, a discipline of meditation associated with painting, rock gardens, and flower arranging--seems an odd ingredient in the martial psyche of the Japanese samurai. "One who is a samurai must before all things keep constantly in mind...the fact that he has to die," wrote a seventeenth-century warrior. "That is his chief business." But the demands of that "business," writes Winston King, found the perfect philosophical match in the teachings of Zen Buddhism. In *Zen and the Way of the Sword*, King offers a fascinating look into the mind of the samurai swordsman in a far-reaching account of the role of Zen in the thought, culture, and the martial arts of Japan's soldier elite. An esteemed scholar of Eastern religions, King deftly traces the development of Zen and discusses the personal nature of its practice, its emphasis on individual discovery and attainment. He then presents an accomplished capsule history of the samurai class, from its rise in the middle ages to formal abolition in the nineteenth century--an account filled with details of wars, political maneuvering, and cultural achievements. King also looks at the arms and vocation of the individual samurai, placing the details of armor and weapons in the context of the samurai conception of warfare. In particular, King focuses on the sword--the soul of the samurai, as it was called--describing how it was forged, the honor given famous swordsmiths, the rise of schools of swordsmanship, and breathtaking feats of the great swordsmen. Throughout, King shows how the samurai cultivated Zen, relating its teaching of a free and spontaneous mind to the experience of a warrior in individual combat, and finding philosophical strength in Zen as they prepared themselves for death. "What mind can penetrate his opponent's mind?" one authority has written. "It is a mind that has been trained and cultivated to the point of detachment with perfect freedom....His mind should reflect his opponent's mind like water reflecting the moon." In other words, a mind trained by Zen. King goes on to trace the role of Zen in samurai life through the peaceful eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, examining the absorption of Zen into World War II psychology and broader Japanese culture. Throughout, he provides a thoughtful perspective, both sympathetic and aware of the ethical problems inherent in a school of Buddhism turned to the needs of a military class. A scholarly, absorbing account, *Zen and the Way of the Sword* provides fascinating insight into the samurai ethos, and the culture of Japan today.

From Library JournalIn this engaging examination of the development of the Samurai and their relationship to Zen, King (Divinity Sch., Vanderbilt Univ.) covers a lot of ground. He discusses the martial arts, Zen history, Japanese cultural history, the art of sword making, and kamikaze pilots, among other topics, in terms of the thread of Japanese spirituality that runs through them all. He examines the influence of Zen on the warrior ethic and handles deftly the difficult issue regarding the alignment of nonviolent Buddhist philosophy with the training of warriors. In addition, King carries the discussion up to the present, drawing illustrations from World War II and current Japanese business practices to strengthen his contention that the way of the Samurai and Zen are inextricably woven into the fabric of Japanese behavior. Included is an excellent bibliography. Recommended for academic collections and those with a more than basic interest in Asian studies.- Mark Woodhouse, Elmira Coll. Lib., N.Y.Copyright 1993 Reed Business

Information, Inc. From Kirkus sA superb analysis by King (Religion/Vanderbilt University), a renowned scholar of Far Eastern religions, of the curious marriage between Zen Buddhism and samurai fighting. The contradiction is glaring: Zen emphasizes tranquility and meditation, whereas the samurai code deals with bloodshed. How then did Zen become the religion of the Japanese warrior? King locates the roots of Zen in Taoism, whose influence led to a form of Buddhism that emphasized practicality, surprise, and irreverence. By the 13th century, Zen had been adopted by the Japanese ruling elite, and most Zen monasteries boasted their own large standing armies (this despite the Buddha's injunction against killing). Meanwhile, the samurai class rose to power under the aegis of the shogun, valuing absolute obedience, spartan self-control, and precision in killing--a perfect match for Zen's own emphasis on exactness and ``visceral awareness." King expands at fascinating length on Zen/samurai swordsmanship, including the startling variety of sword strokes; details of how Japanese blacksmiths produce the incomparable samurai sword (the best in the world); and a cut-by-cut account of seppuku, or ritual suicide. As he points out, the Zen/samurai spirit still flourishes in Japan, finding recent manifestation both in the kamikaze attacks of WW II and in the authoritarianism of large corporations. In a controversial but persuasive argument, King suggests that D.T. Suzuki, the most famous interpreter of Zen to the West, sanitized the Zen/samurai connection and that Zen, because it rejects the scriptural and literary traditions of more mainstream Buddhism, lacks ``intrinsic ethical quality" and thus can be adapted to fit any orientation- -whether for peace or war. Daring and stylish--a true Zen/samurai stroke of religious scholarship. (Illustrations) -- Copyright 1993, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved. "It is written in highly accessible language, with copious illustrations of swordmaking techniques, fighting styles, and core values....This is a book that should definitely be on the shelf of any scholar interested in East Asian religion and culture."--Journal of Buddhist Ethics"This work examines afresh the connection between zen thought and warrior discipline--both of which are distinctive of Japanese tradition."--James F. Lewis, Wheaton College"A superb analysis by King, a renowned scholar of Far Eastern religions, of the curious marriage between Zen Buddhism and samurai fighting....Daring and stylish--a true Zen/samurai stroke of religious scholarship."--Kirkus s"Informative and balanced. Gently suggestive of legitimate critical questions throughout yet sympathetic. Good for college courses on Japan or Zen."--Douglas A. Fox, Colorado College