

Exploring the Contemporary Significance of Yamaoka Tesshu's Thought

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Abstract

Since the Meiji Restoration in Japan, modern society, which adopted the Western perspective of modernization, has been materially fulfilled and has made long-lasting progress in a variety of fields. And now, people who are materially fulfilled seek spiritual fulfillment, and Eastern perspectives such as “Zen” and “mindfulness” are attracting attention. These fields, it is said that one can approach the fundamental spirit of Buddhism by thinking not only of one's own self-interest but also of the interests of others, or “altruism,” even though desire is the source of power. Western and Eastern perspectives can be considered complementary to each other, and rather than making a distinction between which is superior and which is inferior, it will be important to look at oneself from an Eastern perspective and coexist within oneself, even though we live in a western global society. This study focuses on pre-modern Japanese thought and spirituality, with a particular emphasis on the views of *Bushido* of Tesshu Yamaoka, who was called the embodiment of *Bushido*, and the philosophy of *Ken-Zen-Ichinyo* (The Sword and Zen are one), and examines the significance for modern society of studying Eastern thought and culture based on co-prosperity for self and others.

Keywords: *ken-zen-ichinyo* (the sword and zen are one), *bushido*, *shoyoku-chisoku* (don't want too much you can feel comfortable in life), *onko-chishin* (leaning new from the past)

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Introduction: Tesshu Yamaoka's *Bushido*

This chapter discusses Tesshu Yamaoka, a samurai at the end of the Edo period who later served as the emperor's chamberlain to the imperial court and strove to attain the status of *Ken-Zen-Ichinyo*. Tesshu Yamaoka (1836-1888) was a samurai in the Tokugawa government during the Edo period (1603-1868) and a chamberlain to the Emperor during the Meiji period (1868-1912). He had a great influence on society by practicing the spirit of *bushido* as Japan stepped out of the feudal era into modernization. Tesshu's path to mastery of *bushido* began with swordsmanship training in his childhood, and in the process of pursuing it, he entered *Zen* training, and after many years of rigorous training, he reached the state of Selflessness called "*Satori*". Abe states that Tesshu wrote about his sword training at the age of 23 in his book "*Shushin Yoho*," which reads as follow:

My attitude toward swordsmanship today is very different from others. People learn to use swords because they want to slay their enemies, but my sword training is different. I want to realize the truth of the Mysticism in the breath of the sword. Once I reach that point, my mind will be like a clear mirror. The secrets of heaven and earth will dwell in my heart as they are, and I will naturally realize that I and heaven and earth are one and the same. People say that I am like a ferocious tiger. But I have never killed, nor have I harmed a single person. (Abe, 1942, p. 160)

In fact, Tesshu never strayed from this path for the rest of his life and never killed any human beings. It can be said that the swordsmanship of simply competing to win or lose did not exist in Tesshu from the beginning. Also, on one occasion a monk asked Tesshu, "What is the secret of the sword?" Tesshu replied that the word "*Semui*" written on the temple plaque was the essence of swordsmanship. This word "*Semui*" is a sutra from the Buddhist Kannon Sutra, which says,

What we do all our lives is to give fearlessness, in other words, to grasp the place where there is no fear. No fear of sickness, no fear of dying, no fear of being poor. Fear nothing. (Abe, 1942, pp. 28-29)

And it can be said that Tesshu had reached this ultimate state of mind. Furthermore, Tesshu described this situation as the origin of *Bushido*, which he described in his 1887 lecture on *Bushido* to his students at the Yamaoka Residence as follows:

The *Bushido* of Japan is a path that all Japanese should firmly bear in mind. If you wish to know the origin of the Way, enter into a state of selflessness, understand the truth, and realize it. You will surely see the dark clouds of error dissipate and the sun and moon of Truth, which will immediately make the heavens and the earth clear, and you will realize for the first time that you are the Self of the Selfless. If we are prepared for this, then perhaps we will not hesitate to offer thanks for the virtues of the four blessings. This, in other words, is the ground of *Bushido*. (Katsube, 1971, pp. 29-30)

The way of man as *Bushido*, as described by Tesshu, is not to practice each of the existing virtues of "righteousness," "courage," "benevolence," "courtesy," "sincerity," "honor," and "loyalty," which are widely known in Inazo Nitobe's *Bushido*, but to understand and practice the more fundamental principles that make these virtues possible. The fundamental principle is "no-self." Thus, it can be said that Tesshu's *Bushido* was taught and practiced from the state

of enlightenment that he attained through the severe and intense training he imposed on himself, but it is also true that not everyone can reach this state of enlightenment. Teshu's connection to Buddhism and *Zen* is that his father, Takatomi Ono Tyouemon, taught him to “study the martial arts and practice *Zen*.” Originally, the battlefield was the place where warriors were active, and death always accompanied them on the battlefield. With death comes fear. The most direct way to deal with this fear was to train the mind, and it was through *Zen*, the training of the mind, that the warriors tried to overcome their fear of death. According to Uozumi was a Japanese warrior and the German archer and philosopher Eugen Herrigel is said to have written:

Like the beginner, the master of the sword is fearless. Unlike the novice, however, the master is indifferent to the things that cause fear. Through years of tireless meditation, the master has realized that life and death are fundamentally the same and belong to the same horizon of destiny. Therefore, he no longer knows what the anxiety of life or the fear of death is. In other words, he is ready at any moment to part from this world without being distracted by the thought of death. (Herrigel, 1981, as cited in Uozumi, 2016, p. 157)

He is said to have stated. The *Zen* monk Souhou Takuan called the state of not being mindful of things “*Shikka no ki*” (Takuan, 1970, p. 57), where one gains freedom from the fear of death and lives a joyful and vigorous life. It is likely that *Zen* captured the spirit of the samurai because it contained a complete religious system for training the mind and spirit based on this view of life and death. To be free from the fear of death, in other words, is to be separated from life and death by realizing that life and death are one and the same. “Such is the state of mind of the master of the sword” (Herrigel, 1981, p. 158).

And that this is also the goal of *Zen*, indicating the state of sword/*Zen* unity. It is said that the truth of swordsmanship is not to cut down one's opponent but to intervene in enlightenment until one becomes one with heaven, earth, and space. Also, Teshu notes that:

The Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, heavenly deities, benevolent deities, the emperor, and the other eight million deities must understand this truth correctly, do their best for us, take various forms to show us the way, speak various languages, and remember the truth of selflessness, loyalty, filial piety, and humanity, excluding the three poisons and five desires. (Katsube, 1971, p. 39)

The honorific titles we honor as “God” and “Buddha” are only in form, but when it comes to the substance, it is a path of “*shin-butsu ittai*” (unity of God and Buddha), which seems to encourage us to view God and Buddha as one from a macro perspective rather than as separate entities. To summarize, Teshu's *Bushido* was to treat all affairs with sincerity, never forgetting the virtues of the four blessings, and to kill one's own greed (Katsube, 1971, pp. 29-30). Teshu Yamaoka was invited by Takamori Saigo to serve at the court as the emperor's chamberlain from 1872, but from the beginning he intended to serve for a period of 10 years, and submitted his resignation in May of 1882. Although he was related to the emperor by court order under the title of “Imperial Household Minister,” he officially served the court for only ten full years. However, it clear that Teshu's thought underwent a unique change and deepening during these 10 years that could only have come from being in the emperor's inner circle. Perhaps it is not unrelated to the fact that Teshu's enlightenment was triggered by his deep knowledge of the existence of the emperor and the imperial family. During his eight years of courtly life until 1881, Teshu's contemplation and seeking

coincided with his reflection on the state of the imperial family among the people of Japan. This is what differentiates Teshu from Kaishu Katsu, who was active as a shogunate official at the same time. While Kaishu Katsu always critiqued the shogunate from the outside in a transcendental way and still retained some of the shogunate's vassal-like aspects, Teshu was immersed in the court, and his thoughts about the country and the sovereign were all the same, and he had reached a point where he considered all of them to be “children of the emperor” and had reached an awareness of the national polity, where the emperor, at the center, was the realization of enlightenment. He had reached an awareness of the national polity, in which the emperor, who was the center of the nation, was the realization of enlightenment. Furthermore, while Teshu's thinking was centered on the imperial family, it was characterized by his attempt to support it with Buddhism rather than Shintoism. He was a thinker who followed the trends of the times, but was not influenced by them. According to Katsube, in Teshu's thought, truth was the realization of enlightenment in Buddhism, the realization of which was often demonstrated in Japan's history as the loyalty of the people to the Emperor and the Imperial Household, and the realization of that enlightenment was the very essence of *Bushido* in Japan, and was conceived as being in harmony with the essence of the sword and *Zen* Buddhism (Katsube, 1971, p. 175). This realization of enlightenment was the very essence of Japanese *bushido* and was considered to the ultimate essence of swordsmanship and similar to the state of *Zen*. Buddhism with *Zen* as its core, the Way of the Sword, and the Imperial Family were the three elements that formed the prototype of Teshu's thought. It is quite natural and understandable that *Bushido* is understood as mediated by Buddhism and the sword, but the interpretation that *Bushido* has developed along with loyalty to the emperor since ancient times is highly questionable from the standpoint of historical analysis of thought. A common understanding of bushido would be that it developed with the emergence of samurai groups around the time of the establishment of the Kamakura government in Japan. However, Inazo Nitobe's *Bushido*, Tetsujiro Inoue's *Bushido*, and Yaichi Haga's interpretation of *Bushido*, all published in the mid-Meiji period, do not take *Bushido* in a narrow sense as simply the way of life of the samurai in ancient society, but as a general Japanese way of life. In a speech to the Japan Society of London in 1917, Yaichi Haga said:

You have probably heard that *Bushido* is the highest morality in Japan, and that it owes its origin and development to the feudal system of the Middle Ages. However, it would be inaccurate to assert that *Bushido* is a new morality that arose among the people of the feudal age. The basic conception of loyalty is nothing more than a continuation of the old loyalty to the emperor. In fact, it is merely a variant of something that already exists. The essence of the Japanese warrior, brave and humble, fearing nothing but the gods of the Emperor and the Imperial Family, has been handed down from generation to generation since the distant Kamigami period, and did not first appear in the Kamakura period. If it were not for such ancestral precedents, the development of *Bushido* would have been impossible. And there would have been no ardent loyalty to the lords of later generations. Those who happened to read only epics and plays of later times and had no knowledge of ancient literature misrepresented the origins of *bushido* as if it were the spirit of the Middle Ages. (Haga, 1939, p. 197)

He stated. Thus, today's scholarly common sense has been to assume that *bushido* is a way of life or an ideology that developed among the warrior class in ancient society that originated in the “practices of the samurai of the Kanto region.” However, such an academic view was formed by the Japanese after the disappearance of the samurai class from the Taisho period to the present day. *Bushido* was a daily, subjective, and practical concern. Unlike today's

modern preachers, who are only interested in the characters of “samurai style” and “samurai posture,” those who preached *bushido* in the Meiji era overcame the external aspects of posture, style, and strength and turned them into something internal, so that it could be conveyed to the General public as an independent and practical “way of life of the Japanese.” It was an attempt to treat *bushido* not as an antique of the past, but as the positive moral backbone of the nation, where there is no longer a preoccupation with “being a samurai,” but rather a townsman, woman, or whatever. As long we are concerned with appearances, we will eventually fall into formalism and lose sight of what is important internally.

The Connection Between *Zen* and *Bushido*

In this chapter, we will examine how the sword, once a fighting technique, came to be associated with Buddhism and *Zen*. *Ken-Zen-Ichinyo* (The Sword and *Zen* are one) is a phrase that is fraught with complications. Buddhism originally had the idea of non-violence precept called *Anhisa*, and in Mahayana Buddhism, the fundamental idea is to use the mercy of Buddha to help sentient beings and to help them live. How can *Zen*, a branch of Buddhism, or *Zen*, a form of Buddhist practice, be unified with the “sword,” a killing technique? It is believed that the way Buddhism was received in Japan has something to do with this. For example, there is a belief in *Fudo Myoo*, a widely established belief in Japan. According to Nakamura Tadashi's “How Japanese People Think,” *Fudo Myoo* holding a sword in his right hand and a snare in his left, is a figure of surrender and surrender, and in India he first appeared at the end of the Buddhist period, when esoteric Buddhism was established, and he rarely appears in existing Sanskrit Buddhist texts (Nakamura, 1989, p. 295). However, and this *Fudo Myoo* was accepted and worshipped in Japan. There is a phrase called “Midano Riken” which means “the sword of the *Fudo Myoo*.” The fact that the Japanese people believed that Amida Buddha, the Buddha of mercy, actually used the sword to punish the wicked, may have something to do with the fact that the national character of the samurai class influenced the way Buddhism was accepted by the Japanese people. In this light, it can be inferred that the spiritual influence of Buddhism, especially *Zen*, on the Way of the Sword, and the deep connection between the two, which is called “*Ken-Zen-Ichinyo*,” was made possible by the national character of the Japanese people, who valued the martial arts. Regarding *Ken-Zen-Ichinyo*, Nakamura quotes a passage from Souhou Takuan's *The Unfettered Mind*:

Here the act of killing in battle is grounded in Buddhism, which is probably found only in Japanese Buddhism. It is probably only in Japanese Buddhism that Buddhism aimed at being alive in battle. (Nakamura, 1989, p. 298)

Also, Yamaoka Tesshu was a master of *Zen*, and through *Zen* he perfected the concept of *Ken-Zen-Ichinyō*, or the unity of sword and *Zen*. Tesshu's *Zen* was so intense that Sougen Omori later declared it to be the “*Niou Zen*” of Syouzan Suzuki (Omori, 1983, p. 122). In addition, at *Shunpukan*, the dojo under Tesshu's guidance, in order seek “genuine victory,” the first thing they did was to take a vow to work for a thousand days, and after that, they conducted a unique practice called “*tachikiri-geiko*.” This practice was conducted over three periods the first period started early in the morning and lasted all day with 200 matches the second period lasted three days with 600 matches and the third period lasted seven days with 1,400 matches, a rough practice that squeezed out blood. To attain the Muto-style sword, one must go beyond the limits of the body and mind, dissolve one's ability to think, and attain the state of no-self-dreaming (Abe, 1942, pp. 191-192). This is the same boundless, undivided boundary between heaven and earth that is reached after rigorous practice, although various

religions have different names for it. Tesshu's *Zen* is the highest form of *Rinzai Zen*, of which everyone recognizes him as a master. Although he was not ordained and did not teach *Zen* at a temple, he personally taught *Zen* to those who believed in it, and contributed greatly to the development of today's *Rinzai Zen* in his capacity as an attendant. Tesshu's sword is a sword of the living person, which aimed at the formation of the character of *bushido* and its perfection. In his later years, he opened his own dojo and called it "Muto-style," which means "swordsmanship that does not rely on the sword." When facing an enemy, he would strike with his heart and mind, not with his sword. It was an attempt to apply the *Zen* teaching of not fighting to win, but to clear one's mind and develop one's courage in order to achieve natural victory.

The Japanese Way of Life in the Future

In this chapter, the author examines the message that Tesshu Yamaoka left behind for future generations of Japanese people, and discusses it in light of contemporary issues. The Meiji Restoration brought Western culture to Japan, and science and technology improved by leaps and bounds. Tesshu pointed out that humans, with their selfishness and keen sense of self-love, were so focused on discovering a scientific or technological breakthrough that they had no time to think about anything else, and that human affairs became complicated, as in the fields of law, science, and medicine, and that they had no time to think deeply about morality. In particular, he stated, "Although it is unavoidable for people to gather together in order to save their lives, we should not meddle with the spiritual principles of humankind" (Katsube, 1971, p. 102).

The ideas of loyalty, filial piety, loyalty to one's father, father's relatives, and all other sentient beings are the ideals that emanate from the higher spiritual nature of humankind, and they are the manifestation of moral principles. These moral principles cannot be regulated by man-made laws. In other words, the unique Japanese *Bushido* must cover the areas beyond the reach of the law. However, this unique Japanese *Bushido* began to decline when the Japanese people began to interact with other countries and to come and go amongst themselves, and according to Katsube, Tesshu means this by stating the following:

It is good to seek knowledge from the world, but to take it in this way and that, without distinguishing between right and wrong, is like putting a poisonous insect into your body. In general, there are things in religious education that are suitable for the other person but not for oneself, and there are things that are not the same in terms of human feelings and customs. To try to immediately transfer them from the other person to oneself is as different as trying to transfer it from the other person to yourself immediately is like trying to stick bamboo to a tree. How ridiculous! In retrospect, the same is true of Chinese Confucianism, which our ancestors adopted, and which, after its arrival in our country, was adapted to the Japanese national character and became a source of nourishment for the Japanese people. (Katsube, 1971, p. 46)

He stated, "The rapid westernization and science overemphasis after the opening of civilization has alarmed the world." The progress of science is due to the Western idea of freedom, and that freedom develops without limit along with the study of abstract science. As a result, everyone felt that the right to freedom was a self-fulfilling interest, and this led to a knowledge competition, which in turn gave rise to scientific research and materialistic bias. And materialism leads to the creation of more and more differences between the rich and the

poor. Tesshu also referred to the way of life of the Japanese people in later generations, which was to have *Bushido*, which had been handed down in Japan from ancient times, as the brain, and the ideas of material and abstract science as the limbs, who must contribute to future society (Katsube, 1971, p. 106). This pecking order is absolute, and if science and technology, which are the limbs, grow in strength and advocate individualism without regard for morality, *Bushido*, which is the brain, must seize it under a single decree and carry out its dignity to the utmost. The encouragement of material science, which induces human greed and increases the degree of subsistence, clashes with *Bushido*, which encourages oligopoly, and it is conceivable that one or the other will decline in the future. However, the advancement of science and technology is by no means forbidden by *Bushido*, and it is good to observe the pecking order of *Bushido* and science and technology, and to study and operate science within the limits of this pecking order. What is important is that there are not two kinds of science and *bushido*, but that they are all *bushido*, and that no matter how greedy one may be, *bushido* includes the great path of honor and integrity. In the past, the samurai, or those of the warrior class and above, were allowed the privilege of life and death over commoners and below. However, it is a gift and the essence of *bushido* that we do not hear much about killing people unlawfully. Tesshu's theory of *bushido* is that only by combining mind and technique can the great principles of knowledge, virtue, and virtue be fulfilled. Furthermore, according to Katsube, Tesshu also taught the following as the great principles of education:

If we preach that the first priority of all people is religious faith, and if we glorify the new and denigrate the old, if we ignore the gods and Buddha, and if we deviate from the path of the Great Way and engage in unrestrained behavior due to our growing individualism, it is clear from the very beginning that we will be leading our nation astray. Furthermore, looking at society today, there is a world of animals that, with their money and power in everything, overwhelm others and do not consider human morality from the very beginning. In reality, they are unforgivable scoundrels who are unjust and frugal, using food, clothing, and shelter as their only means of livelihood. Looking at this trend, I am concerned about the future of our society. Not only am I concerned, but I also feel pity for future generations. I hope that all of you will keep this in mind and not stray from the path and make mistakes. (Katsube, 1971, p. 160)

In this respect, many of the problems we see in the today's Society in its excessive pursuit of convenience, rationality, and desire may be applicable. In particular, the desire for money and honor makes us want more when we want more. Tesshu called this “bestial desire,” and said that it is unworthy of humanity, which possesses a higher spirituality and spirit (Abe, 1942, p. 159). However, desires are sometimes the driving force behind actions, and desires themselves are not necessarily bad, but we must change this tendency by taking the initiative to control ourselves. Those who seek endlessly, saying, “I don't have enough of this or I want more of that,” will never be able to satisfy their desires. So, as the Buddhist saying goes, “*Shoyoku-chisoku* (Don't want too much You can feel comfortable in life)”, If we can know that we are already full, we will be able to live a life of abundance. It is not to extinguish all desires, but to honestly accept the reality given to us as much as we need without being greedy, and Tesshu called this “human desire”. In his later years, Tesshu told his disciples, “If you want to reach the state of selflessness, you must be sincere, never forget the four virtues of gratitude, and treat all things with unselfishness” (Katsube, 1971, pp. 29–30).

Urging restraint from excessive desire. This “less greed and more knowledge” was not an acceptable concept in a society in a period of rapid economic growth, and it did not fit the

times because it conjured up images of a very lofty and stoic way of life. However, now that society has passed a period of maturity, and further economic development is no longer possible, there is a trend to seek a “way of life that is true to oneself,” without being driven by greed. This is a sign that the times are catching up with the way of thinking *Shoyoku-chisoku*.

Conclusion and Discussion

The tendency of modern thought says that there is a tendency to look at things from a single criterion, or to try to complete the whole story (NHK Educational TV, 2015). The “winner” and “loser” mentality that we often hear about today, which completely distinguishes between the top and the bottom of a subject, can be said to be creating its own enemies by separating itself from others. In today's internationally competitive society, it is no longer possible to live without making distinctions, but there may be more than a few harmful effects that result from such distinctions. In order to achieve balance, it is important to learn and incorporate into our daily lives such ideas as Tesshu Yamaoka's “*Satori*” (enlightenment), in which the self, the world, and nature are one and the same, and in which we can separate ourselves from distinctions, I think it is very important. In addition, in contemporary Japanese society, the “decline in self-esteem” is seen as a major problem, and articles and writings on how to increase self-esteem can be found on the Internet and in books, but this idea itself is probably due to the fact that is attached to the notion that “self-esteem must be increased,” that “we must do this.” This is probably because they are clinging to the notion that they “must” do so, that they “must” raise their self-esteem. By not getting caught up in distinctions and attachments, but by distancing oneself even a little from such ideas and looking at the world from a different position, new discoveries may be made. Before the development of information technology as we know it today, people in the past thought and refined and penetrated various problems, producing many wonderful discoveries, medical knowledge, and ideas that are still talked about today. However, in today's information society, the skill to manipulate information widely and quickly seems to be more valued, and the importance and weight of deep thinking about problems seems to be neglected. The scientific and technological advances that have flourished to date have begun to show negative aspects, and those who cannot keep up with the speed of the information society are being left behind without mercy, and differences in skills in handling information equipment are leading directly to social and economic disparities. This is true not only for individual disparities, but also for the disparities between developed and middle-income countries, where computers and other information equipment and the Internet are generally widespread, and developing countries, where they cannot take advantage of them. Any classic or famous book, after 100 years, will naturally have parts that do not fit into today's society and lifestyle. However, there are always eternal truths hidden within them that are clearly applicable to the modern age. It would not be surprising if we believe that there are “universal truths” hidden in the *Bushido* theory left behind by Tesshu Yamaoka that are applicable to the modern human society. This is not to say that we should revive knowledge, ideas, and *bushido* theories accumulated in the past as they are, which are different from those of today, but rather to “cherish what is still relevant today. As the old Japanese saying “*Onko-Chishin*” (Learning new from the past) suggests, delving into the wisdom of our predecessors and the ideas of Tesshu Yamaoka and other philosophers can evoke what has been lost of today's society, which is burdened with internal and external troubles, and can be a guidepost to solving the “crisis of human nature” that the world is currently facing.

Author's Note

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