

## **The Truth Of The Samurai**

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Samurai: ruthless katana-wielding warriors with an unbreakable code of honor, unmatched in battle, particularly during Japan's Edo period (1603-1868). While there is truth in this picture, it also reveals how romanticized the samurai have become and oversimplifies their very complex lives; this is mostly due to media like video games, movies, and anime. Where many popular beliefs come from, such as the idea that samurai were always honorable "good guys" guided by bushido (code of honor), that they preferred the katana over all else, or that only men could be samurai, are misleading or outright false. Even the "unwavering" loyalty to their lords and the act of seppuku (suicide) are often misunderstood. In reality, the lives of samurai were far more complicated and shaped by politics, personal ambitions, and, most importantly, the instinct to survive. It's important for us to understand this reality so we can appreciate how complex and interesting their lives really were instead of the oversimplified fantasy we have today.

To begin revealing the truth, we have to start with Bushido, or the "way of the warrior." Often thought to be a universally followed code of honor, it is not as straightforward as it may appear. Inazō Nitobe in his book *Bushido, the Soul of Japan* gives us some key principles of Bushido. He highlighted rectitude, or justice, when he said, "The most cogent precept in the code of the samurai. Nothing is more loathsome to him than underhand dealings and crooked undertakings" (Nitobe, 1904). That is to say that the clearest principle of bushido is that the samurai should hate dishonesty or crooked actions. Bushido was not just a suggestion; it was a set of principles and ideals that samurai were required to follow by law. But later in his book, Inazō points out that even so, there were still many that were crooked. "In the name of honor,

deeds were perpetrated which can find no justification in the code of Bushido. At the slightest, nay, imaginary insult, the quick-tempered braggart took offense, resorted to the use of the sword, and many an unnecessary strife was raised and many an innocent life lost”. (Nitobe, 1904). In short, Inazō reveals that even though samurai were required to follow Bushido, there were young, quick-tempered samurai that would murder innocents in the name of what they called “honor”, but this is not honorable and goes against the principles of Bushido. But this is not to say that all samurai abused bushido, but only to point out that while samurai did have a code of honor, it wasn't universally followed. Samurai were not perfect warriors but humans who struggled like the rest of us.

The concept of bushido was required of all samurai, like I previously mentioned, so that begs the question, what exactly happens to a samurai that brings dishonor to himself? There was an option for samurai that wanted to restore his or his family's honor: seppuku, or (切腹) literally translates to “cutting the belly,” a method of suicide introduced in the 12th century. At first it was intended to be a way to avoid capture or torture, but later on it became a form of capital punishment for samurai that broke the law. Because seppuku is viewed as an honorable act, it has led many people to believe that this act was a common practice, but we have to keep in mind that samurai were regular humans who had the same basic instincts to survive and look after/protect their families. So, “contrary to popular belief, seppuku was not a widespread occurrence among samurai warriors. It was a highly regulated and controlled practice that occurred in specific circumstances and under certain conditions. Seppuku was typically reserved for cases of significant misconduct, disgrace, or political failure and was not a common means of death for samurai.” (Kurcina, 2023). Seppuku was a practice unique to Japan, deeply tied to the samurai’s cultural concept of honor and shame, which may explain why people are so deeply fascinated

with it, but this fascination has misguided people to believe that seppuku was a common practice, but this would be unrealistic, as samurai wanted to survive just as we do today.

Just like the misconception of seppuku, the loyalty samurai had for their lords is also largely misunderstood. It is portrayed that samurai would have had unwavering loyalty for their lords; even the code of Bushido would suggest this because samurai are supposed to be honorable warriors, and loyalty is considered an honorable trait. But there is more to the story than this. First, it is important to understand that samurai were hired men, this in itself would suggest betrayal due to human nature. Imagine they got a better offer. Would loyalty really get in their way of the pursuit of a better life? Second, it's just as important to understand the temperature of the land at that time, sections of Japan were owned by multiple different lords that were constantly fighting for land and power, and rebellion became common place. As Joshua Archer puts it in his article *Understanding Samurai Disloyalty*, "Military government was founded on the basis of rebellion and/or treachery. From the origins of Kamakura to the creation of the Tokugawa hegemony, betrayals were frequently perpetrated by samurai concerned for their own personal interest." (Archer 2008) So put yourself in the shoes of a samurai in an unstable political climate. Where you frequently have to risk your life fighting for money, with no guarantee that your lord will stay in power, wouldn't you want to make sure you're getting the most value possible? Would the idea of holding your honor by being blindly loyal to your "lord" be worth more to you than your life and your family?

If life and family outweighed blind loyalty for male samurai, then it makes sense that women would step into the warrior role as well. Unfortunately, when we think of samurai, we often associate them with big, strong men because we often see them portrayed this way in movies, shows, and video games, it is much more common for you to see male samurai in these roles. But this is in fact a misconception; while it's true that most of the warrior class in Japan

were men, it's also not hard to imagine that women would have the desire to protect their home/family and the desire for a pursuit of a better life. There were quite a few very powerful and important female samurai that were called onna-bugeisha “In a time when men ruled the battlefield, onna-bugeisha fought alongside them as equals. They were highly skilled in the art of combat. While the number of female samurai was relatively small, they were broadly respected for their courage and prowess. They had impressive fighting skills, and they’ve become some of the most feared warriors in all of Japan.” (Travel Content Creators, 2022) Here are some prominent female warriors in Japanese history: Tomoe Gozen, Nakano Takeko, and Hōjō Masako. These women were powerful and feared, and they made an impact on Japanese history, so why are they not mentioned more often? Well while they did exist, they were not as common, and this was especially in an era where women were not as respected as they should have been, so it makes sense why the history of samurai is more known for its male warriors, but it's important that we recognize the efforts and the impact of the onna-bugeisha.



(Kuniyoshi, 1848)

But just like the idea that samurai were only men is misleading, so is the belief that they only fought with katanas. The katana has become a symbol of the samurai; movies, anime, and video games make it seem like this is their weapon of choice. While the katana was definitely important and respected, it wasn't always the go-to weapon. The truth is samurai often used weapons like spears, bows, and eventually even guns. You see, the katana was more of a last-resort weapon, not the first one pulled out in battle. In fact, "the spear's military history has a longer precedence than the katana. Its long length and wide variety of spear tips made it a common weapon of choice due to its versatility" (the infographics show, 2021, 7:53-8:00). But if this is the case, then why are samurai swords so popular? Well, this is because the Japanese take great pride in the sword; it was something passed down through generations and generations. It was forged in Japan and imbedded in their history because of this "The katana was also a symbol of social status, as only high-ranking warriors had the right to carry the katana. Over the centuries, the katana became a symbol of Japan's military power, and its role in battles forged the nation's identity and pride" ("Katana Symbolism and Tradition," 2023) Japan once had a powerful army, and the katana became a symbol for that. It was so symbolic of Japan's military power that there are even legends of famous swords such as the Kusanagi-no-Tsurugi A sword that was said to be "discovered by the god Susanoo in the tail of an eight-headed dragon, Kusanagi-no-Tsurugi, also known as the "Grass-Cutting Sword," is one of the Three Imperial Regalia of Japan. This sword symbolizes the emperor's legitimacy and divine right to rule.

(Katana Sword Art, 2025) Legends like these are deeply rooted in Japanese history and mythology, which explains why people are so obsessed with the sword.

I was also obsessed with the sword, but more so with the samurai than anything else. I remember when I was first introduced to samurai through video games; that's where my fascination began. To me, they were the coolest warriors I'd ever seen depicted. I was instantly hooked—they were so unique. But because my idea of samurai came from video games and movies, I believed the myths I've mentioned in my paper, from bushido to the obsession with katanas. However, learning the truth hasn't made them any less interesting; it's made them more human. And that, to me, is why the truth matters. So, the next time you see a samurai in a movie, show, or video game, remember that they had a complicated history and shared the same natural desires as the rest of us. They weren't blindly loyal and honorable warriors; they were human, just like everyone else.

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