



Code of the Samurai: A modern translation of the Bushido Shoshinshu of Taira Shigesuke

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Thomas Cleary's translation of this Samurai classic offers an insight into modern and old Japan, which is as relevant now as at its original time of writing four centuries ago.

Originally written in the 1600s as an instruction manual - its title translates literally as 'Bushido for beginners' – this is a text that was written in the early years of the Tokugawa Shogunate, an administration that had recently brought to an end over a century of civil war. It illustrates to the reader how the warriors of yesteryear were expected to, and did, behave, and as such, Code offers an insight into the psyche of the Japanese people, both then and now. The book is split into dozens of individually titled chapters, many of which are less than one page long, betraying the style of writing at the time.

The original, Bushido Shoshinshu, was written by Taira Shigesuke at the dawn of a new era, for a generation of Samurai who would never see a battlefield. This is noticeable throughout a text which gives instruction on every conceivable scenario in which a young warrior might find himself. Moreover, it also seeks to acknowledge and explain the differences between the readers of the time and the 'operational' Samurai of the past, who themselves would have had little time for education. Cleary precedes his translation with a detailed history of the rise of the Samurai class, from their origins as 'spare' sons of the aristocracy, gaining employment as retainers, to eventually becoming the ruling class themselves.

Ultimately, then, those looking for a practical insight into Samurai practice may be disappointed with this book, as it does not, nor is it intended to, offer specific information on the practical side of Bushido, i.e. martial techniques. Instead, it offers an insight into the behaviour expected of the Samurai in wider life, a field that is in my opinion at least as important in the study of martial arts as the techniques themselves.

8 sausages out of 10

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