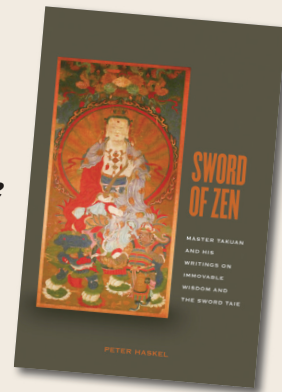


BOOK REVIEW

***Sword of Zen:
Master Takuan and His Writings on
Immovable Wisdom and the Sword Taie***

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There is something appealing about the Zen warrior ideal associated with Japanese martial arts. The Zen monk Takuan's (1573–1645) two short exegeses on swordsmanship, *The Record of the Marvelous Power of Immovable Wisdom* and *The Sword Taie*, can be considered the apotheosis of this ideal, insofar as they espouse an unusually profound connection between the physical and philosophical approach to the practice of martial skills. The impact of Takuan's thought, however, seems to have been limited mainly to Yagyū Munenori (1571–1646)—the sword instructor of the third Tokugawa shogun Iemitsu and recipient of *The Record*—and the Yagyū Shinkage Ryū school of swordsmanship until much later.

Takuan's influence has been most keenly felt during the modern period, when works like Eugen Herrigel's *Zen and the Art of Archery* (1971) and Taisen Deshimaru's *The Zen Way to the Martial Arts* (1982) helped popularize the Zen warrior ideal. But Takuan's connection to it undoubtedly got its biggest boost from Yoshikawa Eiji's novel *Musashi* and Hiroshi Inagaki's titular films, both of which depict Takuan as an omniscient tutor to the rusticated Miyamoto Musashi. Subsequently Takuan's importance to the development of martial philosophy has been taken as a matter of course and the subject of little critical analysis. I am happy to report that Peter Haskell rectifies this oversight, satisfying the desire of both the scholar and the martial artist to learn more about the monk whose ideas would become a fundamental part of Japanese martial arts philosophy.

English language works dealing with Takuan include William Scott Wilson's *The Unfettered Mind* (1988) and *The Life-Giving Sword* (2003), Sato Hiroaki's *The Sword and the Mind* (1988), and Nobuko Hirose's *Immovable Wisdom: The Art of Zen Strategy: The Teachings of Takuan Soho* (1992). Of these, only Hirose's *Immovable Wisdom* and Wilson's *The Unfettered Mind* deal directly with Takuan; the others are concerned with Yagyū Munenori's *Heihō kadensho* and Takuan's influence on the master swordsman. I do not wish to compare the quality of those translations (though I must say I prefer Haskell's for the way in which it replicates Takuan's liveliness and vigor). What truly distinguishes Haskell is his exhaustive interpretation of Takuan's thought on swordsmanship, meticulously culled from and compared with his other writings, as well as Haskell's analysis of the monk's life, which gives the reader valuable insight into Takuan's development as both an individual and member of the broader medieval Zen community.

Since Haskell's knows that the personal nature of enlightenment makes it nearly impos-

sible to transmit any sort of concrete method for its attainment through the written word, his attempt to interpret Takuan's writings in Chapter 1 is valiant. Like *mondō* (Zen-based dialogues) and *kōan*, writings such as Takuan's provide a handhold for the unenlightened in a tradition that favors direct mind-to-mind transmission (*ishin denshin* 以心伝心). It is here that Zen overlaps with swordsmanship: enlightenment, like mastery of the sword, cannot be reached without personal experience, and yet it is acknowledged that the written word can be an effective tool for impelling the aspirant toward it.

Haskel also spends considerable time discussing the development of swordsmanship before moving on to the translations in Chapter 2. While it has generally been accepted that it transformed into a spiritual exercise during the Tokugawa period, Haskel argues the opposite, that during the sixteenth century "sword schools grew in popularity and prestige, not in spite of the spiritual elements they incorporated but precisely because of them" (p. 26). In other words, swordsmanship was from the beginning an aristocratic art in the vein of tea ceremony and flower arrangement, and the men most associated with it were "eccentric itinerant masters like Aisu Ikōsai and Kamiizumi, men who regarded themselves as artists rather than combat technicians" (p. 25). This is a provocative reconsideration of the notion that a dramatic increase in attempts to cultivate philosophy around the sword occurred during the Tokugawa that was in direct proportion to a decline in skill accompanying the "bureaucratization" of the samurai.

Nevertheless, I believe that Haskel has exaggerated the artistry of these "naked" sword schools (*kyōha*), when he writes that "sword schools like [Yagyū] Munenori's were no more intended to transmit practical modes of killing and combat than the tea ceremony was intended to convey utilitarian procedures for the brewing and consumption of powdered tea" (p. 26). This statement ignores the many individuals who were wounded or killed in duels that utilized the very techniques which men like Aisu and Kamiizumi developed in actual combat (Hurst 1998, pp. 41–44); Munenori himself demonstrated his mastery of the blade in front of the second Tokugawa shogun Hidetada (1579–1632), saving his life during a raid (Wilson 2003, pp. 14–15). Still, Haskel's point remains accurate insofar as it relates to the spiritual component of swordsmanship.

Chapter 3 deals with Takuan's life. Particularly important is Haskel's analysis of the Purple Robe incident, the outcome of which had a causal relationship with Takuan's decision to write *The Record*. Haskel's investigation of this incident elucidates the nature of the influence of temple politics on Takuan. For instance, as abbot of Daitokuji he was compelled to defend its prerogative to have abbots appointed directly by the emperor (receiving from him the namesake Purple Robe) against the Tokugawa shogunate's abrogation of that right following the enactment of the "Various Points of Laws for Temples" (*Jiin shohatto* 寺院諸法度). What Haskel does well here is to accurately connect the Purple Robe incident, Takuan's subsequent exile, and his redemption following the deaths of his tormentors Hidetada and the architect of the *Jiin shohatto*, Ishin Sūden (1569–1633). Indeed, Haskel makes it quite clear that this chain of events gave Takuan the opportunity to influence both Munenori and Iemitsu through discussions and writings such as *The Record*, which would in turn benefit Yagyū swordsmanship, and later, martial arts philosophy in general.

I also appreciated Haskel's inclusion of an appendix of popular tales about Takuan. Such tales challenge more formal hagiographies by presenting the eccentric monk "in action" and thereby constitute his "informal Zen legacy" (p. 118).

There are three minor flaws, one bibliographic and the others stylistic. First, it is surprising that Haskell has not cited G. Cameron Hurst's *Armed Martial Arts of Japan*. Haskell's argument is not necessarily harmed by this oversight, but it might have prevented him from overstating *kyōha* swordsmanship's lack of utility, as well as provided a sounding board for his ideas about swordsmanship's esoteric origins. Second, he might have included section dividers in Chapter 1, to aid the reader in processing Takuan's elliptical thought. Third, it would have been helpful had Haskell provided Japanese characters for terms like the aforementioned *kyōha* either in the text or in the endnotes. In any event, none of these issues is enough to mar what is otherwise an enlightening read.

Medieval Japanese swordsmanship was waiting for one such as Takuan who could give an authoritative and ennobling voice to the fusion of sword and spirit. If not for Haskell's efforts, modern readers of Takuan's works might not have the opportunity to contemplate the true tenor of that voice. *Sword of Zen* will appeal to anyone with an interest in Zen, the martial arts, or Japanese history. I recommend it enthusiastically.

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