



Mugai Ryu, Zen and the Samurai

The Samurai were the Japanese Warrior Class, and an important facet of Japanese society right up until the time of the Meiji Restoration in 1868.

There is a popular conception that the Samurai followed a code of honour known as “Bushido” similar to the code of chivalry amongst European knights. In fact, Bushido is a late nineteenth and early twentieth century construct, applied retrospectively to the Samurai without much historical justification.

There is another popular conception that the Samurai all practised Zen Buddhism, which somehow shaped their Bushido, their mindset, their approach to battle (and particularly to death), and beyond that to all aspects of their lives. While it is certainly true that many of the most senior Samurai were involved with, and supporters of, Zen Buddhism, the conception goes rather too far.

Zen, which developed in China and came to Japan in the twelfth century, was not, and still is not, the most popular form of Buddhism in Japan. Other forms of Buddhism were practised more frequently amongst the Samurai rank and file, along with - and sometimes as well as - the native Japanese belief systems of Shinto. There were also some very senior and powerful Christian Samurai, at times when Christianity was not forbidden.

So, when we talk about Mugai Ryu as a Zen-inspired art of the Samurai, is that really true and what does it mean for people who practise Mugai Ryu today?

The Samurai at the Time of Mugai Ryu’s Founding

After centuries of warfare, at last the Tokugawa Shogunate established a situation of relative peace in Japan in the early 1600s. Left with a powerful class of warriors, the Shogunate was keen to keep them occupied, keep them from fighting each other, and still keep them ready to fight on the country’s behalf should that be needed. One of the things the Shogunate required was that the Samurai should study their martial arts - in helpfully time consuming detail with helpfully detailed rules of etiquette.

This gave a boost to sword schools, of course, and many proliferated, teaching all sorts of different sword arts. These kept the Samurai busy, but were also practical. The Samurai were allowed to carry swords (two, in fact), and though there was much less warfare, and warfare was becoming much more orientated to firearms, sword attacks and duels in everyday life were very much a reality.

Mugai Ryu's Founding

Mugai Ryu was founded by Tsuji Gettan Sukemoshi, who was born in 1648 and having trained for thirteen years in the sword was a master by 1674. He moved from his home in the region north of Kyoto to Edo (now Tokyo), where he set up a sword school. At first, the school was not very popular. This did, however, give Gettan the opportunity to spend plenty of time in his own training, and he pursued a personal interest in Zen, studying under a master called Sekitan. In 1693, at the age of 45, his Zen teacher gave him a poem:

Ippo jitsu Mugai
Kenkon toku ittei
Suimo hono mitsu
Dochaku soku kosei

*There is nothing but the one truth:
It is universal, constant.
The wind-blown feather truly obtains this secret;
To know harmony amidst confusion is to be
illuminated.*

From this poem, he chose the name “Mugai” - meaning roughly “nothing other” for his school (“Ryu” means school), and sought to develop it on principles from Zen.

Perhaps it was the Zen connection that made the school appeal to the most powerful of the Samurai, but in any case the school became very popular, with more than a thousand students including many powerful Samurai Daimyo (like a Lord, or regional governor).

How Do Mugai Ryu's Teachings Relate to Zen?

Some people suggest that when the Mugai Ryu school was established, all students had to first study Zen, but whether this is the case is not clear. What is clear is that the techniques taught, and the way they were taught, epitomised Zen principles, and though the teaching has without any doubt changed over the centuries, this approach to technique and the way of teaching has endured.

The techniques taught are based upon the student learning to defend against an attack, not to initiate one. They also, in their imaginary scenarios, build in opportunities for an attacker to withdraw, and time to show compassion for an attacker even once the imaginary fight is over, when the attacker is imagined to be struck down. All the techniques have a clean, essential simplicity. There is no florid, showy nature to them. They are “just as.”

Gettan, like many people since, was inspired by the phrase *Ken Zen Ichi Nyo* - that is, the *Sword and Zen are One*. Following this principle, a calm and “empty” mind is required, and the practice of the techniques become a means of ever deeper meditation, bringing a feeling of stillness and calm.

Does That Make Mugai Ryu Religious?

No. Though Zen has come from Buddhism, its essence is a belief that it is possible to find contentment, and perhaps enlightenment, through meditation, whatever your religious faith. This has given Zen a world wide impact far beyond Zen Buddhism as a religion. Principles derived from Zen can be seen nowadays in modern psychology, in concepts such as mindfulness, and even in training for athletes and business leaders.

The Zen influence makes Mugai Ryu not only fascinating as a sword art, but also of great benefit to students of all backgrounds around the world today.