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THE PATH OF THE BUSHI

By HERMANN BOHNER

A year ago, in January 1942, Professor Bohner contributed a remarkable essay entitled "Mirror, Sword, and Jewel," which aroused much interest among our readers. We are now publishing another article from his expert pen.

Professor Bohner came to Japan almost thirty years ago and was soon appointed professor at the then newly founded Imperial Institute for Foreign Languages of Osaka, where he is still working. His research has been devoted primarily to the basic factors of the history and character of Japan, and among other works he has published a profound, voluminous monograph on the central figure of early Japanese history, Crown Prince Shotoku.—K.M.

1.

EVERYONE knows that the Japanese are a people of fishermen and sailors. This is the maritime aspect of their lives. Naval battles are not fought and won suddenly or by chance: history, thousands of years of tradition, is behind them, is in the blood. In some districts every boy still has his own canoe, which he loves as he loves his sweetheart; sometimes he lies for days in it out in the open sea. The steaming ahead of the Russian fleet before the naval battle of Tsushima was reported first of all by a dugout of this kind. It was in such vessels that the earliest ancestors of the Japanese crossed thousands of miles of ocean; it has been proved that there was a connection as far as Madagascar; the South Pacific was very probably crossed by forefathers of the Japanese in these canoes. The Japanese seems to have grown one with his boat.

2.

Everyone knows that the ancient Germans loved horses and had a horse cult, that their gods rode on horses. But hardly any Westerner knows that the same applies to the Japanese. The horse has been known in Japan since ancient times as the highest, most powerful creature after Man. In countless houses all over the country there hangs or is stuck in the wall the bone of a horse, which is there to ward off evil spirits and

bring luck—the relic of bygone sacrifices whose purpose was to banish and to bless. In the home of the Kumagai family in Marikoyado (Suruga Province), the skeleton of the famous war horse Surumi has been hanging for centuries, and throughout all this time the house and family has been spared from fire and severe illness. Indeed, it is said that, when a sick horse was brought to the pillar for a short time, it recovered. Legends about horses are to be found all over Japan.

The greatest of all sacrifices is always that of human beings. But when it is no longer human beings that are sacrificed, not even those that have been seized by force, then the next greatest sacrifice is that of the horse. The whole life of Japan has always been permeated by this high estimation of horses.

In peace time the most important question in Japan, the one that affects her very existence, is rain. Without rain, no rice. With too much rain, no rice. Thus, even today, we have as the sacrifice in prayers for rain—the horse. The spotless white horse is the horse of the gods. The Emperor rides on such a horse. The god rides on such a horse. Go into an old shrine, and you will see the horse of the gods: in the form of a real horse or of sacrificial gifts of bronze or of stone, woven or painted. The divinity is always presented with the horse: "picture horse" (繪馬, e-ma) is the

Japanese name given to the votive tablet. The white horse is sacrificed when praying for precious rain; the black horse for banishing rain. The Imperial Regent, Crown Prince Shotoku (about 600 A.D.), the greatest figure in Japanese history beside the Emperors, had horses brought to him from all the provinces and chose the most perfect one, a black horse with white feet, on which he rode all around the dominion—here we have the old Germanic “king’s ride” on the occasion of the ascent of the throne. The Crown Prince’s horse rose into the clouds, soared around Mount Fuji, and returned after seven days—here we have the legends of Pegasus and the sun-horse.

The Crown Prince was born in or near a stable (*uma-yado*) and was hence called *Uma-yado*, which probably indicated, as in the case of the ancient Germans, the possession of horses. Many families consider themselves the descendants of horses. One could add to these examples ad infinitum. The Japanese have always been and still are riders and hunters; that is their original land aspect. Knight and horse are inseparable.

3.

Then agriculture entered upon the scene. With it came the ox and, to a certain extent, replaced the horse in southern and western Japan, where the regions were rich in culture. Through Emperor Jimmu’s foundation of the empire, Yamato became the center of Japan, the center of her history. There followed the Asuka Period (about 600 A.D.) and the Nara Period (710-784), the dawn of this culture. Kyoto was founded, and an increasingly rich, refined culture developed there. The people wrote poems, sang songs, went out to look at the moon or the blossom, wore gorgeous robes, reveled in gallant love affairs, intrigued for court positions. Over-refinement and effeminacy made their appearance. In those regions, the *kuge* (court noble) was the characteristic type.

In eastern and northern Japan there was an entirely different atmosphere: a

wild country with herds of galloping wild horses. The people there hunted and caught the horses and broke them in; the *bu-shi* or the *bu-ke* (which means the same) is the man of the east. *Bu* (武) means fierce, military, weapon; *shi* (士) means nobleman, official; while *ke* (家) stands for family, clan. Hence *bu-shi* (knight) and *bu-ke* (military clan).

Here, the historians say, is the source of *bushido*, of the “path of the *bu-shi*.” *Do* (道) means path, or -dom (as in kingdom, officialdom) or -hood (as in knighthood). That which the *bushi* does and does not do becomes doctrine, form, standard. Soon things came to the stage when the capital, its bureaucracy, its manner of thinking and living, its ceremoniousness, no longer pleased the people. If it does not come to its senses, they said, we shall not bother about it any more. Soon the *kuge* could no longer exist without the *buke*. They called them out of the wilderness to help them in their quarrels, and soon the *buke* became the leading powers. The Kamakura Period (13th and 14th centuries) and, fundamentally speaking, all the subsequent periods up to the Meiji Era, were *buke* periods.

4.

It must be stressed that this close relationship to horses, this essence of horsemanship, went on and on through the centuries. Only recently a diplomat told me that he had been invited by Count Matsudaira to participate in a great horse festival deep in the interior lasting several days. Hundreds upon hundreds of horsemen, dressed in old armor and costumes, came from miles around from the villages and farms to take part in races and tournaments. On an open field, one *daimyo* group faced another as if in battle; the leading *daimyo* (feudal baron) was always—true to the *bushido* spirit—strikingly distinguished by banners and special armor and markings, as much as to say: ‘Here is the enemy, the leader! Come and do battle, those who are brave enough to oppose him!’

And to this day an individual cult is linked up with the horse in so religious a

country as Japan. Buddhism added its horse-headed Kwannon as a divine protectress; but after that it was Myoken and his cult who was the patron saint of horse and rider, as also of lovers. Knight, charger, beautiful maid, golden goblet, faithful unto death—that is the type of *bushido* old ballads sing of.

5.

Let us consider another aspect. In this country of more than two thousand islands (now the number has probably been doubled or trebled) there are some islands where one may not eat alone: one must always eat in company. Were this principle to permeate the world and to be developed to its utmost, it would mean the end of all want; there would be true socialism. When we look at the history of these small islands, we find that in early times they were liable to be suddenly plunged into extreme want. Pirates came in superior numbers, robbing, plundering, and killing. In some cases, a few men, ten or twenty or thirty, succeeded in overwhelming the robbers. I cannot recount all these stories here, and a single one is not enough. It is only in their multitude, in their almost identical repetition, that they make an impression, an indelible impression.

One need only make a vivid mental picture of this insular feeling, of this need of being armed, this union for life and death of the small community of men, to have *bushido*. Now one need only enlarge the small island till it embraces all, the whole Nippon Empire Island, to have the innermost feeling of the Japanese of today, the *bushido* of the present situation.

6.

In an earlier article we have spoken of Japan's "beehive structure": cell adjoining cell, each strictly partitioned from the other. If between the past—the tiny island, and the present—the Empire Island, we consider history as it has developed in its thousand branches in the manifold cells, the many little cells as they once were, as they grew,

came into contact, fought each other, and so on, we have *bushido* in its development. We cannot show this development here in detail. Let us sketch two or three of the phases of this development.

In the eastern parts of Europe the villages are walled, and the churches are like bastions. In the old days, a village had to be able to defend itself as a cell against invading hordes. It was no different in eastern Japan. There they had to stand together in each cell. They had to have a clear leadership and definite retainers. Without a distinct grading of society within a cell, no safe existence was possible. On every Japanese stage and in countless Japanese novels we meet with the "head bucket." Every Japanese child is familiar with it, and the *bushi* carries it with him on every campaign. At any instant the *bushi* is ready, if his lord so commands, to send him his head in the covered bucket, as a sign of complete obedience to his lord. This is meant neither in the sense of despotism nor of servility. It is the absolute fellowship in the cell which demands such *bushido*.

7.

As we have said before, the true land of the *bushi* was the wild colonial eastern and northern part of Japan. Here, too, cells or clans were formed, which were at first separated by the wilderness and later grew closer and closer towards each other till they touched. In the *Shih-ching* (史經), the Oriental canon of history, which is as familiar to the East as the Book of Kings is to us, one can read about the battles and feuds between the ancient Chinese states. What intrigues! And how they tried by every means to win over the most capable statesman of the opposing state, in order to gain "world dominion" under his leadership. What facts, what lessons! All this was continued a thousandfold in the Japan of the Middle Ages, indeed, even up to the Meiji Era. Even today, the counties still dispute with each other.

If in ancient days one cell possessed a good medicine, on no account could it be revealed to another cell. The history of

Japanese pottery is a history of secrets that were sneaked from each other with extreme cunning. In order to help his own home-cell, a man sent off to spy upon a foreign cell had to bear anything, had perhaps to wait there secretly for years, try to marry into the foreign clan and marry whomever he was given—all this only so as to elicit the secret and make it available to his own cell. That is the *bushido* of the small cell, and it can be applied to the Empire Island of today. There are innumerable examples of such *bushido* for the whole Empire.

The conflicts among the cells led towards the end of the Middle Ages to a kind of struggle of all against all. But the three dictators Oda-Nobunaga (1534-1582), Hideyoshi (1536-1598), and Tokugawa Ieyasu (1542-1616) created unity and order with an iron hand. The Tokugawa rule (1603-1868) meant utmost control. Down to the "five-family group" everything was controlled, regulated, rationalized, and mechanized. This condition was not altogether pleasant; the natural, the free, the charming, the simple, were lacking. But how were these things to be given the Japanese nation? How was it, so to speak, to find itself?

The menace from abroad grew ever stronger, ever mightier; in the face of it everything else appeared of minor importance. It was this menace which united Japan in a free union. With the renewal of the Empire in 1868, the rationalized, mechanized *bushido* turned into something that was spontaneous, that was applied voluntarily. The lord and father, whom all knights and sons serve, is the Tenno. Justice, the great whole, the highest meaning and purpose of *bushido*, is today personified for the Japanese in him, the supreme ruler and priest. The struggle, whatever there is of it, is now directed outward.

8.

In all Japanese schools, fencing (*kendo*) is taught. Japan's wealth of bamboo makes it possible to manufacture excellent armor and weapons from bamboo. The face is protected by an iron grill.

When two men fence with each other, they first kneel down and bow deeply to one another. This is the case in all Japanese duels of arms. Originally, and even today, the fencer first bowed toward the divinity. What does this mean? I fight, and you fight—but the divinity decides. All fighting is divine judgment. That is essentially *bushido*. I recall a great mass held by the chief abbot of the famous temple mountain Koya, in the presence of a thousand priests and acolytes. In this mass, at which I also was present, he prayed for victory. As in an old prayer of the prophets, he recounted the entire happenings to the gods, how the war had come about. He soberly recalled fact by fact, like in a historical document or in a legal action; he did not press the matter for, according to Japanese ideas, the divinity cannot be pressed. "Pass Thou judgment, we shall only fight!" That was the attitude.

The history of law recognizes as an immeasurably far-reaching event Hugo Grotius' work *De jure belli ac pacis* (Paris, 1625). Through it war was for the first time included in the sphere of law. Grotius' work might be called the secularization of something that already existed, namely, that spirit which is expressed by the deep reciprocal bow at the beginning of the duel.

9.

Well then, should there not also be a bow at the end? There is: towards the divinity and towards the opponent. After the Great War, this bow was missing. That was the greatest mistake. English politicians in particular have said this. One might characterize the attitude of *bushido* something like this:

First, if divine judgment decides in my favor, I must also take possession of what has been adjudged to me. Pity and weakness are then out of place. As in Shakespeare's royal tragedies, wrongs must be righted and crime must be punished. In olden times this meant that the restless soul of a person who had been wrongfully killed had to be set at peace; the enemy killed for that pur-

pose, or his spirit, could not expect to be spared.

But secondly, this same enemy, especially if he has fought bravely, is worthy of respectful treatment. His opponent bows to him. This life—this is the idea—is not the only life. The enemy thus killed is now in a higher sphere, into which those who are still living ordinary earthly lives cannot enter. He is a *mi-koto* (*koto*: thing, matter, being; *mi*: classifier indicating something divine). During their lifetime, only the gods and the Emperor are called *mi-koto*. And furthermore—and this is probably a widespread historical development, parallel to that of law in the Occident—the strong fights only with the strong. Fairness forbids striking an opponent who is down. Above all, a strong man does not attack the weaker sex, or children and old men, or a people that subjects itself entirely. “Moderation, self-control!” *bushido* demands ceaselessly, especially at the moments of supreme strength. That is the standard, and every Japanese child knows it and has been taught it in practical cases. “Don’t be surprised,” the Japanese say, “if we sometimes treat our enemies better than our friends! That is spontaneous *bushido*.” Let me emphasize: that is the *direction* in which the *bushido* development of history is moving.

10.

And if, in the divine judgment, I am the defeated one? Then that is my part, given to me by the divinity. Here, too, we find in the thousandfold growth of history the most varied changes and phenomena. Western attention is attracted here especially by the solemn suicide, so peculiar to Japan, through disembowelment, *harakiri*, or, as it is usually called in Japan, *seppuku*. It has often been described. In a ritual-like manner, the man committing *seppuku*, in one stroke with an extremely sharp knife, cuts through the abdomen and the important nerve organ situated there, which is regarded as the seat or container of the soul. Since in olden times this was often done unskillfully and death sometimes occurred only after hours of

agony, the custom arose that a close friend or relative, or the most loyal vassal, cut through the neck with one swordstroke.

From a historical point of view, *seppuku* probably has several roots. In times gone by, people did not want to fall into the hands of the enemy alive: slavery and torture were waiting there. Above all, they feared the contamination and calumny of the soul, of the name (the eternal name “inscribed in Heaven”). Secondly, there were some things which could only be atoned for by sacrificing one’s life. Thirdly, consider mother and child, lover and beloved, husband and wife in ancient times! They are like one tree, one plant! When one dies, the other must perish too. This primitive, immediate unity of life appears in a very pronounced manner in Japan. Master and servant, lord and retainer, are bonds of a similar nature. On the one hand, there was the *command* that the lord should be followed in death by his nearest vassals; on the other hand, the nature of these bonds was such that death was sought for voluntarily. General Nogi and his wife, for instance, could not bear to go on living after their lord and emperor, Emperor Meiji, had died. And finally, if a noble should be condemned to death, he had the privilege of killing himself in this manner.

11.

In every fortress there is a room in which all knights will commit *seppuku* should the fortress be captured. It is there, like the well or the kitchen or the women’s quarters; everyone passes it every day. For the foreigner, this cold room with its stone-flagged floor where the blood will flow off, is a curious sight. The East sees death and goes to meet it. In the West we have infant care, child welfare, kindergartens, etc; but for the sunset of life we have no composed attitude, no prescript, usually not even the least knowledge.

Buddhism says simply: “Ordinary men see life. Look thou on the other side! Take it into thy life! Go thou beyond!”

In Zen Buddhism it is said: "He who still has anything of life and death in his thoughts cannot really fight, cannot be loyal, yea, cannot even really live." The "no-life-no-death" (無生無死 *mu-sho-mu-shi*) concept is one of the foundations of Buddhism.

"*Bushido*," a historian has said in his summary of it, "is the history and path of how to die." From the Japanese point of view, however, this does not mean the end. Even at the moment of its cessation, life is under the star of eternity; otherwise life at the moment of its beginning would also be a *nihil*.

12.

For the foreigner there is much that is strange in *bushido* as it appears to him now if he becomes closer acquainted with Japan and her art and literature. It is mainly the developments during the Tokugawa Period which are responsible for this. They mechanized and rationalized things which should not be mechanized or rationalized. The contemporary development in Europe showed much that was similar, especially in the French sphere (Voltaire, Baron Holbach, Robespierre). Even present times are very peculiar in this respect.

True *bushido* is in accordance with life. The following will outline some well-known lines of thought of the East.

When we are born, there are older people there who look after us and whom we should obey. They are above, we are below, or, as the East says, they are heaven, we are earth. All life is like this. Parents and child, older and younger generations, older brother and young brother, older, more capable friend and younger friend, master and disciple, these are the basic forms. In this respect, life cannot be mechanized, there can be no equality. Even husband and wife, lover and beloved, have something of this basic form.

It is easy to understand that, in the course of history, the basic form of master and servant, lord and follower, found its way more and more into the foreground.

Only a few centuries after Confucius, his followers interpreted the love poems of the Book of Songs allegorically, applying them to lord and retainer. This doctrinal element became increasingly pronounced; later ages turned it more and more into scholasticism, a *bushido* scholasticism of the relationship between lord and vassal.

Countless thousands of Japanese novels and plays are filled with this scholastic *bushido*. In order to save the child of the master or lord, which the enemies are about to kill, an affectionate mother, wife of one of the vassals, sacrifices her own child by secretly putting it in the place of the other. Long acts abound with such struggles of the soul. Or a master has been robbed of his precious sword and expresses his desire to his servant to recover it. The ruses employed by the servant in regaining the sword, his adventures, his devotion to duty even as far as sacrificing his life, fill thick volumes and hold theater audiences spell-bound. And how many films are based on this scholastic *bushido*, as we have called it.

In order to understand, one must go back to the basic forms, to that which is natural. It can perhaps be most easily grasped by the examples of father and son, mother and child, master and disciple. They belong to each other, they are a unit—as was the tiny island or, later on, the great Empire Island. Thus also in the case of master and servant, lord and subject. The true shepherd sacrifices his life for his sheep. The captain goes down with his ship. In December 1914, in the battle of the Falkland Islands, the commander, Count Spee, took the brunt of the attack upon himself in order to save the other ships, and went down. The strong protects the weak; the weak realizes whom he must follow. When a human community grades itself in this way, serving and leading each other reciprocally, when this spiritual attitude of *bushido* is made to come true, then, even in every extremity, supreme success is imminent.

Eighth-century guardian god of the Kaidan-in Temple in Nara.
A fine plastic expression of what was later to be known as the *bushido* spirit



