

# Japanese Fighting Mentality & The Bushido Code

## Japanese Military Culture

From the 1100s to the late 1800s AD, an elite upper class of **samurai** existed in Japan. They were warriors and their lives centered around training for battle. A religious and martial arts culture developed and became known as the **Bushido Code**. The **Meiji Restoration of 1868** resulted in the rapid modernization of Japan and her military. In order to centralize the command structure of the Japanese military, many of the most fiercely resistant Daimyo (major lords) and samurai were executed. However, the spiritual mentality of the warrior or soldier remained the same.

## Bushido Code

1. **Death before dishonor!** Surrender was not an option for Japanese samurai. Surrender meant that you dishonored yourself, your family, the emperor and your country. It was simply not considered acceptable. Japanese warriors often gave their prisoners of war an option of committing suicide. Unfortunately, suicide is not considered acceptable to most Christians. Good samurai warriors could either die gracefully on the battlefield or commit ritual suicide. Either would result in the samurai being delivered into the afterlife (Nirvana).
2. **No concern for pain or physical discomfort!** The samurai prided himself on supremacy of the mind over the body. The samurai's mind should be able to dominate his body. Thus, the samurai had the option of committing ritual suicide which was called **seppuku** or **hara kiri**. This was suicide by disembowelment. In samurai days, the samurai would take his sword, place both hands on the handle and the tip of the sword beneath his sternum. Then he would plunge the sword into his abdomen, sweeping it from side to side to disembowel. This was a slow and painful method of suicide and demonstrated superiority of the samurai's mind over his body.
3. **Loyalty!** The samurai was to be totally loyal to the Emperor, who was considered to be a god. The Emperor was a direct descendant of the Japanese sun goddess, **Amaterasu**. There was a strong emphasis upon this close tie between the individual soldier and the Emperor. (Similar to Codes of Chivalry in European Feudal Period)

Japanese ideas on death came from Buddhism. Buddhists believe in **reincarnation**. They consider death to be a normal part of the life cycle. According to Buddhism, bad people would have bad **karma** and would be reborn or reincarnated into a lower life form in the next life. Samurai believed that if they fought honorably on the battlefield, they would create good karma and would be reborn into a higher life form. Thus, the idea of death associated with battle was just a part of the life cycle and not as final as interpreted by Christians and the West.

The Bushido ideas on pain go back to Buddha himself in 500 BC. Much of the Bushido Code came from **Zen Buddhism** which preached no regard for the body - - the mind was the ultimate. The philosophy of Bushido means that you are going to die and you don't care about yourself, but are concerned about your Emperor and your country.

Japan was an authoritarian society. Every citizen had to obey the 4-5% of people who were samurai as a show of obedience to authority. Although the **Meiji Restoration of 1868** modernized Japan, the tradition of obeying authority remained. Officers always had the right to use corporal punishment with their underlings. It was common for an officer to order his subordinates severely beaten for minor infractions.

## Application of Bushido to World War II

Given the Bushido Code, it follows that the Japanese rarely took prisoners and when they did (Bataan Death March, Rape of Nanking), they were usually not treated well.

On the battlefield, when the situation was hopeless or when it was obvious that they were going to die, the Japanese would use **Banzai Charges** in which the remaining soldiers would rush the enemy with everything they had in order to take as many of the Americans with them as possible. **Kamikazes** came from the same mentality. Kamikaze means **Divine Wind** and dates back to 1281 AD when the Mongols (Genghis and Kubla Khan) were about to invade Japan. There was a huge storm on the night prior to the invasion, probably a typhoon, which brought extremely strong winds and saved Japan from invasion. The storm was referred to as the Divine Wind. Kamikazes were metaphorically like the Divine Wind in the sense that they swooped down from the sky to crash into American ships. Pilots did this out of loyalty to the Emperor and since they would be reincarnated anyway.

As a result of the Bushido Code, **casualties** in the Pacific War were very high. Early in the war American commanders were shocked at the high casualty rates. Japanese soldiers never surrendered and would always fight to the death. Not until very late in the war did Japanese soldiers ever surrender in large numbers.