

A Book of Five Rings

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Introduction

Shinmen Musashi No Kami Fujiwara No Genshin, more commonly known as Miyamoto Musashi was born 1584, during a time when Japan was emerging from a constant state of civil war. The country had been dominated by feudal lords who fought each other for land and power. This series of small wars restricted trade and weakened the entire country, launching Japan into further disunity and turmoil.

By the end of the century, Japan was united under the Tokugawa shogunate, although internal conflicts continued. Musashi was born into the samurai class, a noble class of gentlemen warriors. From a young age, he was aggressive, headstrong, and cruel. Nonetheless, he was familiar with honesty and humility. He engaged himself in an endless and single-minded pursuit of “enlightenment through the Way of the sword.” He spent much of his life fighting in many contests, all of which he won. By this point Musashi believed himself to be invincible. But when he reached the age of thirty, he realized that his victories were not the result of a mastery of strategy. After that he began searching for the Way of strategy, which he claims to have found in 1634, when he was fifty. Musashi is still acknowledged as a legendary swordsman. In Japan, he is known as *Kensai*, or “sword saint.”

Like a true martial artist, Musashi sought to broaden his knowledge of every profession, learning not only from master swordsmen, but also from priests, artists, and craftsmen. He was a true follower of the Japanese philosophy of *Bunbu Itchi*, or “the pen and sword in accord,” and became accomplished in several arts. Nonetheless, he considered himself a warrior and not an artist.

Go Rin No Sho, or *A Book of Five Rings*, is Musashi’s guide to strategy in five parts: the Ground Book, the Water Book, the Fire Book, the Wind Book, and the Book of the Void.

The Ground Book

The Ground Book is the first book. It is designed to map out the body of the Way of strategy from Musashi’s perspective. In this book, Musashi makes it clear that strategy is the Way of the warrior. There are many Ways: Confucianism, Buddhism, healing, poetry, tea, dancing, and so on. The Way of the warrior does not include any of these other Ways. Nonetheless, when one understands the Way of the warrior, one can see it in all other Ways. This is a recurring philosophy in the Ground Book. It is important to understand everything thoroughly, so that from knowing one thing, one knows ten thousand things. In order to master strategy, one must look at everything, even small things, on a large scale.

Musashi offers nine broad principles that embody his strategy:

1. Do not think dishonestly.

2. The Way is in training.
3. Become acquainted with every art.
4. Know the Ways of all professions.
5. Distinguish between gain and loss in worldly matters.
6. Develop intuitive judgment and understanding for everything.
7. Perceive those things which cannot be seen.
8. Pay attention even to trifles.
9. Do nothing which is of no use.

By training with these principles in both mind and spirit, one can become a master of strategy. It is exactly this simplicity that captures the essence of Musashi's strategy. Small, simple things can and must be applied broadly.

The Ground Book is also concerned with timing. Timing is something that cannot be mastered without practice. To defeat an enemy, the strategist must perceive the timing of his surroundings and of his opponent, and then use timing that the enemy does not expect. Musashi points out that timing and rhythm are important in everything, not just in fighting. They are important to the musician, the merchant, and the military man. But for the warrior, timing is everything.

There is timing in the whole life of the warrior, in his thriving and declining, in his harmony and discord.

Although Musashi discusses timing primarily in the Ground Book, he also notes that all five books are chiefly concerned with timing.

The Water Book

Before going into detail, Musashi describes how the book should be read. The reader should not simply take in the words, memorize them, and try to imitate, but rather to absorb the principles with his body and his heart.

The Water Book describes the principles and spirit of strategy. The mind and the spirit of the strategist should be like water. Water takes the shape of its surroundings; similarly, the mind and spirit should be flexible and able to change according to the situation. Water is also clear and pure. The strategist should not let his mind or spirit be clouded by preconceived falsehoods.

The book describes the correct internal and external bearing in combat. Both in fighting and in daily life one should always be determined yet calm. The spirit should be controlled and not reckless. But even when the spirit is calm, the body should not be too relaxed. One should maintain a ready combat stance and blink as little as possible. At the same time, one should always appear composed and should not let the opponent see one's spirit. It is important to maintain the combat stance at all times – not just in battle.

The strategist should always maintain the appropriate gaze, both in combat and in general strategy. It is important to pay attention to both the larger scene and smaller details, but one should not become distracted by insignificant or extraneous things. The strategist should not be misled by himself; he should be familiar with other people's bodies and spirits:

Small people must be completely familiar with the spirit of large people, and large people must be familiar with the spirit of small people.

This concept exemplifies the teachings of the Water Book. The strategist's mind is not restricted to the reactions of his own body. Rather, he understands the reactions of all other people, and can change his own reactions accordingly. He should maintain this gaze at all times and should not vary it no matter what happens. The strategist should maintain flexibility in his grip on the sword as well. His hold on the sword should not be slack, but it should not be fixed either.

Only by taking on the spirit of water while studying strategy, one can change, improve and truly understand the Way:

Today is victory over yourself of yesterday; tomorrow is your victory over lesser men.

The Fire Book

The Fire Book is concerned with the spirit of fighting. Like fire, the spirit in combat can be either big or small, and it can change directions easily and unpredictably. The strategist must examine his opponent and his surroundings and be constantly ready to make quick decisions.

Musashi describes three methods of forestalling the enemy. The first, *Ken No Sen*, means to set him up. One must maintain a calm spirit but move in quickly and strongly. Alternatively, one can advance with a strong spirit and move more quickly once the enemy is close, unsettling him.

The second method, *Tai No Sen*, means to wait for the initiative. One should wait for the enemy to attack. Always remaining calm, one should pretend to be affected by the attack and pretend to move away. When the enemy relaxes, one should move in and attack strongly, taking advantage of the "resulting disorder in his timing."

The third method, *Tai Tai No Sen*, means to accompany the enemy and then forestall him. When the enemy moves in, one should move with him as he comes closer. Then one should attack quickly and strongly, but always calmly.

These three methods, though seemingly very simple, highlight the importance of timing and flexibility. The strategist should always be aware of his opponent's timing and movement. The objective is not simply to attack as strongly as possible in a pre-planned fashion, but rather to move in response to the enemy's rhythms, to throw off his timing, and then to attack him. Like water, the strategist adjusts to his environment and to his enemy. Like fire, he can change

direction easily and quickly in order to disturb the enemy's timing. By recognizing the enemy's disposition, his school of strategy, his strong and weak points, one can determine his intentions and gain many opportunities to defeat him.

There are other methods of causing the enemy to lose his balance. Especially in large-scale strategy, it is important to know how to frighten the enemy. The strategist should take advantage of his body, his long sword, and his voice to make small forces seem larger than they are, thereby taking the enemy unawares.

When one has mastered the Way of strategy by following the principles of the Fire Book, one will have the "body of a rock." In other words, he who truly understands the Way will become invincible, as Musashi believed himself to be.

The Wind Book

The Wind Book is concerned with the traditions and strategies of other schools, and here Musashi points out their weaknesses. The traditions of other schools are not the Way, and Musashi discourages his students from deviating, even slightly, from his Way.

Musashi criticizes the "narrow spirit" of other schools. Many other schools had an inclination towards extra-long or shorter swords. He does not unconditionally dislike either, but he argues against an inclination towards a single style or weapon. Instead, he advocates a familiarity with many weapons and a dependence on none.

Similarly, the strategist should not worry about the strength of his long sword. If one is concerned that his sword is too weak, he will think only about compensating by cutting strongly. But wielding the sword too strongly causes one's cutting to be coarse and distracts one from strategy. The strategist should not think about the strength of his sword; he should think only about defeating his opponent. In strategy, especially in large-scale strategy, it is important not to rely on strength alone. In order to win, it is necessary to possess and utilize an understanding of the correct principles of strategy.

Just as the strategist should not rely on his strength, neither should he rely on his speed. Slowness is equally bad; but one should not think of strategy in terms of being fast or slow. The key is to maintain a calm spirit, even when the enemy is acting strongly and recklessly.

Other schools teach student swordsmen to fix their eyes on one thing. Sometimes it is the enemy's sword, the hands, or the face. But according to Musashi, paying attention only to these details will warp the spirit and confuse the strategy. The strategist should instead focus on the enemy's spirit and the condition of the battlefield.

Finally, Musashi points out that some schools distinguished between the "interior" and the "surface." This is not Musashi's Way.

The artistic accomplishments usually claim inner meaning and secret tradition, and "interior" and "gate," but in combat there is no such

thing as fighting on the surface, or cutting with the interior.

This principle, Musashi admits, is difficult to comprehend, and can be understood only through experience. Thus he does not try to explain deeply in words, instead encouraging his students simply to keep their spirits true to the Way of strategy.

The Book of the Void

The Book of the Void exemplifies the influences of Zen Buddhism in Musashi's philosophies. Here Musashi stresses the virtues of nothingness. The way to discover the void is through practice. Only by cultivating the spirit, heart, and mind can one attain a true understanding of the void.

In a fashion typical of Musashi's writings, the Book of the Void ends with a simple but enigmatic philosophy:

In the void is virtue, and no evil. Wisdom has existence, principle has existence, the Way has existence, spirit is nothingness.

The Book of the Void seems to emphasize the importance of discovering truth for oneself. Accordingly, this last book is the shortest of the five, being only a page long.

Summary

Musashi takes on a "no-nonsense" style throughout his teachings. He discourages excessive movements and flourishes, instead focusing on a few principles that are simple in words, but very difficult to master. First, one must always maintain a calm and flexible spirit that is unrestricted by useless distractions. It is important not to try to win by brute force. The strategist should pay close attention to his environment and to the spirit of his opponent and act upon the wisdom and spirit of strategy. Speed and strength are not as important as strategy.

Second, the warrior should not have preferences. He should not be dependent on any particular weapon or style, but be familiar with many different ones. At the same time, he should be familiar with all kinds of opponents. He should not assume that every enemy's reactions and rhythms will be the same as his own. The strategist is prepared for all situations and all opponents.

Third, the student of the Way must be diligent. Musashi ends nearly every passage with "you must research this well," or "you must learn this through training." The strategist should not deviate, even slightly, from his pursuit of understanding of the Way of strategy. Many of the techniques and principles in Musashi's guide can not be explained clearly in words. This can be seen particularly well in the Book of the Void. Many of the key concepts in strategy can not be understood simply by reading about them. It is absolutely essential to try to learn and absorb them through persistent training and personal research.

Lastly, the warrior is not just a strategist while engaging in combat. The warrior is a strategist at all times. One should maintain the correct bearing of a warrior

even in everyday life. One should approach everything with a clear and calm spirit without preconceptions or distractions.

A Book of Five Rings is Musashi's guide to strategy, not only on the battlefield, but in any aspect of life that involves plans and tactics. Thus his book is not just a study of swordsmanship, but also a study of life.