A Book Report on

The Unfettered Mind

Writings of the Zen Master to the Sword Master

by **Takuan Sōhō**

Translated by ***William Scott Wilson***

Ting Vogel

UCMAP Yongmudo Club

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Introduction

The Unfettered Mind is a collection of three essays written by the famous Zen Master, Takuan Sōhō, and addressed to the Samurai class. The essays focus on the application of Zen not only in swordsmanship, but also in one's way of life.

Takuan Sōhō was born in 1573 into a Samurai family of the Miura Clan. His religious training began at the tender age of 10 when he started practicing Jōdo Buddhism, changing his focus at the age of 14 to the Rinzai sect of Zen Buddhism. By the age of 35, Takuan Sōhō was appointed abbot of Daitokuji, a major Zen Temple in Kyoto, becoming one of the youngest Zen abbots in history. Among his friends were such diverse and powerful figures as the abdicated emperor Go-Mizunoo, the shogun Tokugawa Iemitsu, the powerful general Ishida Mitsunari, the Christian daimyo responsible for Mitsunari's downfall, Kuroda Nagamasa, as well as Yagyū Muenenori, head of the Yagyū Shinkage School of Swordsmanship, and Ono Tadaaki, head of the Ittō School of Swordsmanship. He was also mentor to one of the most famous Japanese swordsman in history, Miyamoto Musashi, whose legendary *Book of Five Rings* continues to be one of the most studied strategy books in history by both martial artists and businessmen alike.

Takuan Sōhō was not only a Zen Master, but also a calligrapher, a painter, a poet, a gardener, and a tea master. He was even rumored to have been the inventor of the Takuanzuke Japanese radish pickle! Despite his fame, Takuan Sōhō remained true to the humble nature of a Zen Master. He dedicated his energy to the infusion of Zen into every aspect of his life, from the every day act of gardening to the artistic pursuits of calligraphy and poetry. On his death bed, he requested that no pomp or ceremony be held for him and only wrote the single Chinese character *yume*, meaning "dream", just before passing away.

The Mysterious Record of Immovable Wisdom

The Mysterious Record of Immovable Wisdom, also known as *Fudōchishinmyōroku*, was a letter written by Takuan Sōhō to Yagyū Muenenori, "head of the Yagyū Shinkage School of Swordsmanship and teacher to two generations of shoguns"[1]. This essay, divided into thirteen sections, explores the manifestation of Zen in swordsmanship and the importance of having a clear mind at all times.

In the first section, *The Affliction of Abiding in Ignorance*, Takuan Sōhō describes the state of an unenlightened human mind. "*Ignorance*" here means the "absence of enlightenment"[2] and "*abiding*" means stopping or to be hung up. Normally, something might become hung up if it is detained. The "*abiding place*" would then be a place where the mind is hung up on something. What might hang up the mind can be an opinion or a thought or too much focus on one thing. In Buddhism, there are 52 levels of attainment[3] before reaching enlightenment. If one's mind is stopped at any one of these stages, the place where it is hung up is called the "*abiding place*". To have the mind be hung up even before the first level of attainment would be "*abiding in ignorance*". Sadly, most of humanity is hung up at "Level Zero" of enlightenment.

When applying the Zen concept of the "*abiding place*" to swordsmanship, one must remember not to get hung up on any one thing during the engagement. The abiding place in swordsmanship can be a technique, one's own weapon, the enemy's weapon, the enemy, too much focus on oneself, or even the rhythm of the fight. Hanging up one's focus on any one part of the contest means that one loses focus in everything else, so an enemy could take advantage of the situation by attacking the neglected parts.

In the second section, *The Immovable Wisdom of All Buddhas*, Takuan Sōhō introduces the concept of "*immovable wisdom*". "*Immovable*" means unmoving and "*wisdom*" refers to the wisdom of intelligence.[4] At many Buddhist temples, the figure of Fudō Myōō guards the entrance. Fudō Myōō is a protector of Buddhism and the embodiment of "*immovable wisdom*".

Fudō Myōō grasps a sword in his right hand and holds a rope in

[1] Sōhō, Takuan. *The Unfettered Mind*, 1986, Kodansha International, page 14.
[2] *Ibid*, page 19.
[3] http://www.buddha-teaching.com/glossary.htm
[4] Sōhō, Takuan. *The Unfettered Mind*, 1986, Kodansha International, page 20.

> *his left hand. He bares his teeth and his eyes flash with anger. His form stands firmly, ready to defeat the evil spirits that would obstruct Buddhist Law.*[5]

Immovable wisdom includes both an unmoving mind and an unvacillating body. *Unvacillating body* means that the body cannot be detained by anything. "*Unmoving*" does not mean "not moving", but rather that the mind does not stray from its purpose, whether the ultimate purpose is enlightenment or the cutting down of one's enemy. In a situation where one has to ward off ten enemies, if one stops one's mind at any movement, one will be cut down by the next enemy because the mind has not moved on. The mind that has the purpose to successfully ward off ten enemies must necessarily remain true to that purpose. It has to execute whatever action is necessary, move on to the next action, and so forth, without stopping at any one of them, until the last enemy is cut down and the ultimate purpose achieved.

In further illustrating the concept of not stopping the mind, the author presented its application to the Thousand-Armed Kannon and in the ordinary action of looking at a tree. The Thousand-Armed Kannon, also known as the Goddess of Mercy, has a thousand arms and a thousand eyes. This bodhisattva's mind does not stop at any one of its thousand arms or thousand eyes. If it does, then the other 999 would be rendered useless. When one looks at a tree, focusing on one leaf of the tree means that the rest of the leaves are not in focus. In order to see the entire tree, one cannot focus on any one part of it.

In applying immovable wisdom to any martial art, focusing too much on any one part of a technique would take away from the smooth overall execution of the entire technique. In executing a flying kick, one must not stop one's mind on the positioning of one's foot before take-off or the positioning of the body in the execution of the kick. That is not to say that one does not pay attention to these portions of the technique, but that one must not get hung up on them. When one gets hung up on the positioning of one's foot in the take-off, then one might forget to position the body correctly before the execution of the kick as the mind is still hung up on the foot positioning. The immovable wisdom comes into play when one can let the mind pass over the different points of the technique and immediately move on to the next point after execution and without stopping.

In the third section, *The Interval into which not even a Hair can be Entered*, the author describes how to determine that a mind has not stopped. For the mind to have not stopped, the interval in between two actions must be so small that one cannot even slip in a piece of hair (or a thought) in between. Take the simple action sequence of clappingyelling, in other words, clapping and immediately yelling with no gap in between. If a thought slips in, the sequence then becomes clappingthinking about yellingyelling. If one can go from one action to the next without allowing any room for even a thought in between actions, then one has succeeded in not stopping the mind in that sequence.

[5] *Ibid*, page 20.

The fourth section, *The Action of Spark and Stone*, elaborates further on the interval where the mind does not stop. In the old days, one might start a fire by striking two stones together to create a spark. The spark comes about immediately after one strikes the stone. There is no discernable interval between the action and the consequence of the action. Similarly, the interval between two actions should be so minimal as to hardly exist for the mind not to have stopped. The ideal interval, then, is no interval.

The concept of spark-and-stone as applied to Buddhism means that one should answer a question without thinking first about the answer or mulling over the meaning behind the question. Although in today's world, if one speaks out without thinking, realistically, one might become most unpopular to say the least!

The next section, *Where one Puts the Mind*, looks closer at the places where one might put one's mind and what that might mean. Taking into consideration the concepts introduced so far, it might be obvious that there really is no place one can "*put the mind*" without stopping the mind. There is a school of thought in Taoism that one can perhaps put the mind just below the navel, which is believed to be the center of *ki* or spiritual energy. However, if one puts the mind there, then it is not free to wander to the rest of the body. The enlightened mind should not be tied down but should be like water and free to flow to anywhere in the body where its presence might be needed. If the hand needs it, the mind should flow to the hand where the natural function of the hand is realized, but the mind does not stop there. If the foot needs it, then the mind should be there as well so the foot's natural function is realized. Wherever the mind goes in the body, the function of the place it flows into is realized, but it cannot stop there. If the mind is hung up on any one spot, then the rest of the body would not function correctly.

In *The Right Mind and the Confused Mind*, the author distinguishes the difference between the "*right*" mind and one that is "*confused*". The "*right mind*" is one that is like water and can flow through the entire body and realize the function of each body area it flows to. The "*confused mind*" gets stopped by a thought, much like when water freezes into ice. Once frozen, it stays in that spot and the rest of the body does not benefit from its presence.

In the section *The Mind of the Existent Mind and the Mind of No-Mind*, Takuan Sōhō furthers explores the difference in the states of mind introduced in the previous section. The state of an "*existent mind*" is the same as the state of a "*confused mind*". The "*mind of no-mind*" is the same as the "*right mind*". The concept of a mind that exists denotes that it is fixed to something. The "*existent mind*" contains thoughts, which leads one to certain discriminations and biases. The "*mind of no-mind*" is not fixed anywhere and has no discrimination to tie it down. For example, if the mind gets fixed on a thought, the rest of the body does not function properly. Thus, one's ear may no longer hear correctly the words spoken by another because one's mind is fixed on an opinion. In this case, one listens without hearing because one's mind is "*existent*" or "*confused*".

The section *Throw the Gourd into the Water, Push it Down and It Will Spin* talks about how a mind that does not stop is likened to a gourd in the water. No matter how much one tries to push it down or hold it back, it will simply pop back up. Likewise, a mind that does not stop cannot be held by even the strongest deterrent.

In Buddhism, the mental state of "*seriousness*" is a mind without confusion. In the section *Engender the Mind with No Place to Abide*, the author distinguishes between a mind without confusion (in a state of "*seriousness*") and one that is not confused (the "*right*" mind). In a "*serious*" state, the mind is held in one place and not allowed elsewhere to keep it from being confused. By holding it in one place, the mind is not free to wander. The "*right*" mind is a mind that is free to wander and is not congealed in one place. The highest level of enlightenment is where one has trained one's mind not to stop anywhere, thus the section name "*engender the mind with no place to abide*".

In the section, *Seek the Lost Mind*, the word "*lost*" is understood in two different lights. In the first case, if a mind is lost and goes down a wicked path, then the owner should retrieve it and put it back on the right path. This concept of the "*lost mind*" was introduced by Mencius, also known as Mang Tsu, a philosopher from the 3rd century BC. In the second case, Shao K'ang-chieh, a 10th-century scholar from the Northern Sung Dynasty, said "It is essential to lose the mind"[6]. In this instance, the word "*lose*" means to "let go" rather than to "be confused" as in the first instance. Both cases are in line with the concepts discussed in this essay. Combining both concepts, one must not tie up the mind, but allow it to wander freely so it is not hung up anywhere. At the same time, one must not let the mind go down a wicked path. Should it wander down that wayward path, one should restore it onto the right path.

The section *Throw a Ball into a Swift Current and it will Never Stop* uses the same analogy as in the section *Throw the Gourd into the Water, Push it Down and It Will Spin*. A ball that rides on fast-flowing water cannot be stopped by anything trying to deter it.

Although the section *Sever the Edge between Before and After* is only one paragraph long, it introduces an important concept of enlightenment: the age-old Buddhist concept of "Live in the Now". Inasmuch as the mind must not abide in any one place, it also must not abide in any one moment in time. A mind that is hung up on a past event or experience tends to live the present in the shadow of that past moment and condemn the entire future to the same shadow from the past. Completely severing oneself from all past moments allows one to start in the present ("now") with a clean slate.

Takuan Sōhō seemed to be addressing Muenenori directly in the last section, *Water Scorches Heaven, Fire Cleanses Clouds*. He advises Muenenori in many areas from filial piety to spousal duty to the fair treatment of subordinates. He recommends that one not let personal feelings and biases come before good

[6] *Ibid*, page 38.

judgment and to be steadfast in staying on the right path and not going astray through selfish interests. He also advises Muenenori not to judge the actions of his child without first making sure his own actions are correct. In all cases, Takuan Sōhō advises Muenenori to apply the "*right mind*" to all aspects of his life so that all his "thousand arms" may be of use to him.

The Clear Sound of Jewels

The Clear Sound of Jewels, also known as *Reirōchū*, looks at the fundamental differences between what is driven by "*right-mindedness*" and what is driven by more selfish purposes. The essay also takes a look at the karmic cycle and death as it relates to human existence.

"*Right-mindedness*" is one's core nature. Other names for "*right-mindedness*" are "virtue, the Way, humanheartedness, probity and propriety"[7]. As applied to human interactions, the function of rightmindedness would be benevolence. As applied to integrity or social interaction, its function would be clarity of judgment. The purpose that drives one to action determines one's right-mindedness. An example of right-mindedness is a warrior who dies defending a lord who has been kind to him. An example of someone without right-mindedness is one who throws one's life away over an insult or an argument. If one is in fact right-minded, one cannot be insulted by others. Reacting from an insult is an action from anger and not at all from right-mindedness!

The opposite motivation to right-mindedness is desire. Desire is not just desire for material things, but also desires stemming from the six senses of sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, and thought or from the six sensual attractions of color, shape, carriage, voice, soft skin, and beautiful features[8]. In the core of this body that is driven by desire in a world that caters to this drive is the "desireless and upright core of the mind"[9]. If one uses this core as a "plumbline" and does not stray from it, then one remains right-minded whether one fails or succeeds in an endeavor. One can only stay on the path to enlightenment by remaining right-minded.

The Lotus Sutra defines the Ten Essential Qualities of an entity as Form, Nature, Embodiment, Power, Function, Latent Cause, External Cause, Latent Effect, Manifest Effect, and Total Inseparability[10]. Anything with "*Form*" will also have "*Nature*". One's form can change depending on the entity that takes on the form, as can one's nature. However, in the core of all sentient beings is what is called "*Buddha-nature*". This nature exists before the existence of the beings themselves and is something that is inherited from the world as a sentient being comes into existence. "*Embodiment*" is the material out of which something is formed. Form comes out of Embodiment and can die. Embodiment cannot die. The example the essay used in illustrating Form versus Embodiment is that

[7] *Ibid*, page 49.
[8] *Ibid*, page 97.
[9] *Ibid*, page 54.
[10] *Ibid*, page 62.

of water and ice. Water would be likened to "*Embodiment*" and ice to "*Form*". From water, ice can be formed. When ice melts (dies), it once again becomes water. "*Power*" gives strength to an entity possessing of Form, Nature, and Embodiment to function in this world. "*Function*" causes action through effort. The essay uses this phrase to best describe "*Function*":

> *The journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step*[11].

"*Latent Cause*" and "*External Cause*" are interrelated in that "*Latent Cause*" is the root cause of an event and "*External Cause*" supplies the incentive for the "*Latent Cause*" to take effect. In the essay, the analogy used to illustrate "*Latent Cause*" and "*External Cause*" is a seed that grows when watered. In this example, the seed is the "*Latent Cause*" and water is the "*External Cause*". The seed only manifests new growth because of the water. "*Latent Effect*" is what happens when one applies External Cause to Latent Cause. In the same example of the seed and water, the "*Latent Effect*" would be the growth of the plant from that effort. "*Manifest Effect*" is the final result of the Latent Effect. In the running example, the resulting fruit would be the "*Manifest Effect*". "*Total Inseparability*" describes the entire cycle of Latent Cause/External Cause to Latent Effect to Manifest Effect. This cycle has to be complete.

In Buddhism, Total Inseparability means that actions (Latent Cause) will always bring about the proper resulting effects (Manifest Effect). The cycle will complete even if it crosses lifetimes and worlds. This may be better understood as the Karmic circle. Fundamentally, if one does good and sows the seed (Latent Cause) of goodness, one will be rewarded with the fruit (Manifest Effect) of goodness. The reward may come in this lifetime or the next, but the cycle will complete itself eventually.

Human existence occurs in three parts. "*Present existence*" describes the state when one is alive. When one dies, this state changes to "*meta-existence*". From meta-existence comes "*later existence*" when one reincarnates. The five physical sense organs (eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body) die when an entity enters the state of meta-existence. The functions of these organs (seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, and feeling) continues to exist in the Consciousness even without the existence of the physical sense organs, similar to the fact that we have these functions when we dream although the physical sense organs are not involved. When a person passes into meta-existence, his mind and consciousness as well as all his sense functions continue to exist while his physical body dies. A person in the state of meta-existence can see the world as clearly as when that person is alive, but the world cannot see him as he no longer has form. However, if a person is deeply attached to the world somehow, his form may be dimly visible to those who are alive. That phenomenon manifests as ghostly presences. When a consciousness passes into later existence, then present existence begins again. Any unfinished cycle begun in a previous life will complete in this life or a later one.

[11] *Ibid*, page 65.

If we drive our life actions along the plumbline of right-mindedness, we will ensure that the seeds of Latent Cause we sow will bring about the Manifest Effect of goodness rewarded in the future.

Annals of the Sword Taia

Annals of the Sword Taia, also known as *Taiaki*, was a letter written either to Yagyū Muenenori, head of the Yagyū Shinkage School of Swordsmanship, or to Ono Tadaaki, head of the Ittō School of Swordsmanship. The essay is composed of six short and succinct paragraphs in Chinese interspersed with longer Japanese analysis of their meaning. It addresses the importance of having the right perception and aspiration for a martial artist.

The namesake of this essay is a legendary sword called "*Taia*" which can cut easily through any material, from steel to iron, from gems to stones. There is no other blade under heaven equal to it or that can withstand it in a contest. The symbolism of the Sword Taia refers to the Buddha-nature that is present in all sentient beings:

> *All men are equipped with this sharp Sword Taia, and in each one it is perfectly complete*[12].

To begin, a martial artist in combat is not thinking about winning or losing, about strengths or weaknesses. Rather, he makes sure that he sees the enemy for who he really is (the enemy's "*True Self*"), not who the enemy would like him to see (the enemy's "*Perceived Self*"). Likewise, the martial artist is concerned with withholding his "*True Self*" from the enemy, and presenting his enemy only with his "*Perceived Self*". The "*True Self*" is one's Buddha-nature that is free of the deception of the ego. If the martial artist's viewpoint is clear while the enemy is blinded, then victory should be natural.

The accomplished martial artist only kills when it is necessary. Going into any situation, he does not attempt to judge what is right from wrong. Without pre-assigning judgment, the martial artist can then clearly see what is actually right or wrong. This martial artist can tread equally on land or water because he does not need to think or analyze first before stepping in to know how to tread. If a martial artist has achieved this state of being, then he has gained the kind of freedom that would allow him to move freely and efficiently in any circumstance.

To get to this state, a martial artist cannot deviate from the path of enlightenment, no matter what he may be doing. Every step must bring him closer. This is the essence of the Essential Quality of "Function" defined in the essay "*The Clear Sound of Jewels*":

> *The journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step*[13].

[12] *Ibid*, page 85.
[13] *Ibid*, page 65.

The martial artist must work towards the state of enlightenment, one step at a time. There is no formula for enlightenment. It is not something that is taught or can be learned through books. Enlightenment is something that can only be achieved if a martial artist lives every step of his life with the right mind. When he finally reaches the state of enlightenment, then he has found the Sword Taia in himself.

Conclusion

Through these three essays, Takuan Sōhō instills the principles of Zen Buddhism into the swordsmanship of the Samurai. Even while brandishing a deadly sword, the martial artist can still stay true to his Buddha-nature by making sure his actions and intentions have the correct purpose.