Yamamoto Tsuentomo:
The Way of the Samurai

The samurai was a hereditary warrior class that dominated Japanese society from the ninth to the 19th centuries. Devoted to the principles of honor, bravery, and self-discipline, the samurai traditionally defended Japan’s aristocratic class from any threat. By the 16th and 17th centuries, many of the samurai had become aristocrats themselves. The samurai’s power was eventually broken during and immediately after the Meiji Restoration, when Japan embarked on an ambitious program of modernization in which the samurai played no part. In the late 17th century, a Buddhist monk and former samurai named Tsuentomo Yamamoto wrote this account, popularly known as The Way of the Samurai. An excerpt appears below.

The Way of the Samurai is found in death. When it comes to either/or, there is only the quick choice of death. When pressed with the choice of life or death, it is not necessary to gain one's aim. We all want to live. And in large part we make our logic according to what we like. But not having attained our aim and continuing to live is cowardice. This is a dangerous thin line. To die without gaining one's aim is a dog's death and fanaticism. But there is no shame in this. This is the substance of the Way of the Samurai. If by setting one's heart right every morning and evening, one is able to live as though his body were already dead, he gains freedom in the Way. His whole life will be without blame, and he will succeed in his calling. . .

Being a retainer is nothing other than being a supporter of one's lord, entrusting matters of good and evil to him, and renouncing self-interest. If there are but two or three men of this type, the fief will be secure. Loyalty is said to be important in the pledge between lord and retainer. Though it may seem unobtainable, it is right before your eyes. If you once set yourself to it, you will become a superb retainer at that very moment . . .

The person without previous resolution to the inevitable death makes certain that his death will be in bad form. But if one is resolved to death beforehand, in what way can he be despicable? One should be especially diligent in this concern. If one were to say a word what the condition of being a samurai is, its basis lies first in seriously devoting one's body and soul to his master. And if one is asked what to do beyond this, it would be to fit oneself inwardly with intelligence, humanity, and courage. The combining of these three virtues may seem unobtainable to the ordinary person, but it is easy. Intelligence is nothing more than discussing things with others.

Limitless wisdom comes from this. Humanity is something done for the sake of others, simply comparing oneself with them and putting them in the fore. Courage is gritting one's teeth; it is simply doing that and pushing ahead, paying no attention to the circumstances. Anything that seems above these three is not necessary to be known. As for outward aspects, there are: personal appearance, one's way of speaking and calligraphy. And as all of these are daily matters, they improve by constant practice. Basically, one should perceive their nature to be one of quite strength. If one has accomplished all these things, then he should have a knowledge of our area's history and customs. After that he may study the various arts as recreation. If you think it over, being a retainer is simple. And these days, if you observe people who are even a bit useful, you will see that they have accomplished these three outward aspects.

Activity I

After reading *The Way of the Samurai*, put the following excerpts into your own words:

1. The Way of the Samurai is found in death. When it comes to either/or, there is only the quick choice of death. When pressed with the choice of life or death, it is not necessary to gain one's aim.

2. If by setting one's heart right every morning and evening, one is able to live as though his body were already dead, he gains freedom in the Way.

3. Being a retainer is nothing other than being a supporter of one's lord, entrusting matters of good and evil to him, and renouncing self-interest.

4. Intelligence is nothing more than discussing things with others. Limitless wisdom comes from this.

5. Humanity is something done for the sake of others, simply comparing oneself with them and putting them in the fore.

6. Courage is gritting one's teeth; it is simply doing that and pushing ahead, paying no attention to the circumstances.

It is believed by many scholars that Buddhism had a profound influence on the beliefs and practices of the samurai.

Think about some of these tenets of different branches of Buddhism:

- Wisdom is the highest attribute.
- Compassion is considered the best way to gain salvation.
- *Nirvana* is one of the shared words; it means a state of transcendent freedom. The word literally means "stop." Stop the evils of passion, aggression, and ignorance, and stop struggling to survive. When a person has reached this state, often through yoga, or union, she or he has reached nirvana.
- The first truth is that life is *dukkha*, or suffering.
- The second truth is that suffering is caused by *tanha*, craving or desire. It is the craving or clinging to a dream that is unrealistic or unattainable that causes friction and suffering in the world.
- The third noble truth is that to end suffering, craving must end. If selfishness can be controlled, suffering can end.
- The last truth is that the way to end the selfish desires that cause suffering is to follow the eightfold path of Buddha for examining life, which focuses on understanding, thought or intention, speech, action, livelihood or work, effort, mindfulness, and concentration or absorption in the here and now.
- The central deity, so to speak, of Buddhism is the human spirit. The idea that a god would be in control of the chaos in the universe is foreign to Buddhism.

Assignment

Can you see any of these tenets of Buddhism in *The Way of the Samurai*? Write one or two paragraphs comparing the two philosophies.
Buddhism was a fundamental element in the culture of medieval Japan. It shaped the ideas and institutions of the political authority and the structure of the social order. It also shaped the categories of class and gender; the visual, literary, and performing arts; and the understanding of historical time itself.

The Buddhist tradition provided the terms, concepts, and practices by which the Japanese of the medieval period made sense of the world and their place in it. The teachings of Buddhism provided a code of moral behavior, a system of healing, a means to care for the dead and a cosmology (a picture of the universe complete with heavens and hells). Buddhist ideas and imagery were used to interpret the Japanese landscape, and those who practiced the tradition of Buddhism that came to be known as Shugendo saw the mountains of Japan as sacred areas that offered the perfect environment for those seeking spiritual development. Buddhist divinities were prayed to for protection, prosperity, and longevity. Followers of Buddhism also looked to the divinities for health in the present life and rebirth in paradise in the life to come. Buddhist monks and nuns played a central role in society, the state, and the ritual activities that marked the daily lives of all individuals.

Buddhism in Japan, however, never existed in isolation from the cults of local deities known as kami. In medieval Japan, these local deities were seen as the native forms of Buddhist divinities, and kami shrines and Buddhist temples together formed integrated religious institutions. There were many different schools of Buddhism in medieval Japan. Some had been established centuries earlier, while others arose in the Kamakura period (1185-1333). The older schools represented the mainstream of medieval religious thought, and their temples and shrines were powerful economic institutions that owned extensive areas of land and had their own armed forces. The schools of Buddhism that developed in the Kamakura period were based on the traditions of the older schools, but they also represented a radical departure from them…

…Enlightenment, according to the Buddhists, is a blessed state in which the individual transcends desire and suffering and attains Nirvana, a state of perfect blessedness attained through the elimination of all desires and passions.

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Activity II
Access the ABC-CLIO Ancient and Medieval History database and read the article on Shinto and answer the questions below in your notebooks. All answers must be in complete sentence or paragraph form.

Part I
1. According to Shinto tradition what are kami?
2. How can we understand the concept of saioi-itehi?
3. Write one or two paragraphs describing some of the changes that occurred in Japan after the arrival of Buddhism and Confucianism.
4. Explain the Shinto moral code and Shinto relationship to good and evil.
5. How is Shinto divided? Briefly identify and explain the differences between the main divisions.
6. What is the main religious text of Shinto beliefs?


Part II
You must also read the brief description of the Nara period and the Taika reforms. Both articles can be found on the ABC-CLIO Ancient and Medieval History database. Make sure you take detailed notes of your reading in your notebooks.