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Haskel/Sword of Zen

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1 An Introduction to Takuan’s Writings on Zen and Swordsmanship

Like many Zen priests of his day, Takuan was a literary as well as a religious figure. Besides extensive correspondence and quantities of poems in both Chinese and Japanese, the master produced a number of independent prose works in *kana majiri* (mixed kana and Chinese characters), the majority, according to Tsuji Zennosuke, probably composed for particular daimyo patrons. The most widely read of these writings, apart from the two works on swordsmanship, are *Night Talks at Tōkaiji* (*Tōkaiji yawa*) and *Knotted Cords* (*Ketsujōshū*), and a third work, *Tinkling Gems* (*Reirō-shū*). While occasionally touching on Zen, all three are essentially miscellanies, random collections of Takuan’s thoughts on a range of topics, Buddhist and non-Buddhist. By contrast, Takuan’s writings on swordsmanship focus from first to last on a single purpose—illuminating the principles of Zen through the exigencies of the warrior’s art. Indeed, of all Takuan’s surviving writings, only *Record of the Marvelous Power of Immoveable Wisdom* and *On the Sword Taie* (hereafter generally abbreviated *Record of Immoveable Wisdom* and *The Sword Taie*) deal so directly, thoroughly, and exclusively with Zen, and in particular with the practice and function of Zen mind. The texts are also to my knowledge the earliest surviving examples of a Rinzai master’s written instruction on Zen and the martial arts. Of the two, *Record of Immoveable Wisdom* is overall the more lively and detailed; but *The Sword Taie* retains a distinct character and flavor that make it a valuable companion piece to its more celebrated cousin.

It is not known if the title *Record of the Marvelous Power of Immoveable Wisdom* was assigned to the work by Takuan or—as seems more likely—attached to the text posthumously. (Takuan’s mid-nineteenth-century biographer Kudō Yukihiro remarks that the work went by a variety of titles.)
The text is organized under thirteen headings, which Takuan comments on, some at length, others with only a sentence or two. Many of the headings are or allude to phrases and concepts derived from Buddhist and specifically Zen sources. Obviously directed at a layman, Takuan’s language throughout is simple and straightforward, and technical Buddhist or Zen terms are explained clearly, using examples from both dueling and common experience.

While ostensibly Takuan’s thoughts on Zen and the Way of the Sword, Record of Immovable Wisdom also constitutes a sort of “owner’s manual” for the Zen mind—what it is and how one can use it not only in combat but at all times and in all circumstances. Thus, although much of Takuan’s discussion draws on aspects of swordsmanship, his work is above all an introduction to Zen, regarded not as a formal system of practice and study but as a reality that is central to and inseparable from daily life, from one’s intimate functioning at every moment. “The Way is simply our daily activity,” Takuan observes in Knotted Cords. “Apart from our daily activity, no Way exists. It’s not as if there’s something called ‘enlightenment,’ which you realize. What you call ‘being enlightened’ is delusion. Unless you’re deluded, there is no enlightenment.”5 In conformance with this view, Takuan’s presentation of Zen in Record of Immovable Wisdom is consistently down to earth, compelling yet matter-of-fact; or, as one modern Japanese scholar puts it, “powerful, matter-of-fact explanations of something itself matter of fact [i.e., Zen].”6

At the very start of his teaching, Takuan sets out the essentials of mind and how they apply to swordsmanship. When confronting an opponent, the swordsman must above all avoid “stopping” or “attaching” the mind (kokoro o tomeru). Whether it is his adversary’s movements or his own movements, his fears, thoughts, or expectations, whatever traps his attention, the instant the mind stops, it becomes confined, constrained, losing its freedom to respond; and once his mind is captured in this way, the swordsman can be killed. “The moment your attention is drawn to the slashing blade of your opponent, you rush to meet his attack at that place, with the result that your mind becomes attached there to your opponent’s blade, so that you lose your free functioning and can be slain. This is what is meant by attachment.”7 This stopping, attaching mind, Takuan says, is what Buddhism refers to as delusion. It is the cause of all suffering and ignorance, the fetters of birth and death. By contrast, the enlightened, non-stopping mind is like water, never staying in one place but always fluid, free to flow wherever it is needed. This is the original, true mind with which everyone is endowed, the mind that is the heart of both swordsmanship.
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and Zen. “Not keeping the mind in any one place is what practice is all about,” Takuan sums up. “Not attaching the mind anywhere at all is the main matter, what really counts.”

For the swordsman, this means confronting each adversary directly, without deliberation or hesitation: “When you see the opponent’s blade strike, just see it and don’t attach your mind there, parrying the attacking blade without any thought or calculation. The instant you see your opponent’s blade raised, without attaching to it for even a moment, move right in and capture his blade, seizing the sword that was about to kill you so that it becomes instead the sword that kills your opponent.”

Part of the problem with the stopping mind is that it creates an “interval” or “interruption” (ma, suki ma) in the mind’s flow, a potentially deadly gap between the opponent’s attack and the swordsman’s riposte. By contrast, both Zen and swordsmanship prize immediacy and directness of response. As in the lightning give and take of Zen dialogue, or mondō, what matters here, Takuan emphasizes, is not speed as such but naturalness and spontaneity, signaling the mind’s resilience and freedom from attachment. Takuan offers the example of a swordsman successfully battling a quick succession of opponents, meeting each attack on its own terms, unhindered by lingering thoughts of the previous encounter. If, however, the swordsman’s mind becomes trapped anywhere, even momentarily, his contact with the present moment is severed, leaving him unable to counter his next attacker effectively. As soon as the mind stops in any particular place, it misses all the other places. By not attaching the mind anywhere, it permeates everywhere.

This is the principle, according to Takuan, embodied in the image of the Thousand-Armed Kannon, the popular bodhisattva whose myriad arms wield a variety of weapons and other implements, symbolizing the limitless responsiveness of original mind. Precisely because Kannon is never “fixed” on any single arm or implement, all one thousand can function smoothly and simultaneously. This is a metaphor for the operation of the human mind. When the mind is attached in any particular place, Takuan says, it becomes “biased” (hen); while by remaining unbiased (shō) it is always supple and free, just as a wheel kept loose on its axle can turn but if fastened at any point immediately becomes stuck. Using several other examples, Takuan in Night Talks at Tōkaiji articulates this flexibility of the nonattached, “empty” mind:

When you direct the mind to take some particular role, no matter what it is, there’s no way the mind can then respond to the things that [actually] happen. Just leave the mind without any particular role and you can let it respond to
whatever comes along. As an example, the eye is the actor that sees; the ear, the actor that hears; the nose, the actor that smells; the tongue, the actor that tastes; the body, the actor that knows by touching; the hand, the actor that grasps; the foot, the actor that walks. And despite all these varied roles, the mind smoothly manages each and every one without missing anything. So if you avoid fixing the mind in one particular role, you won’t be lacking in all the various roles. That’s why we say that leaving the mind without any particular role is emptiness (kōmu). In employing a soldier, for example, a common soldier should be able to fight with each of various weapons—a bow, a gun, a spear, a halberd. But if the general who commands all the soldiers fixes on a particular weapon—the bow, the gun, or whatever—he’ll be deficient in everything else. A general, by not taking any single role, acts in all capacities. Not to be distracted by any single activity is what is meant by emptiness.

This mind that is never fixed but always in play, effortlessly shifting in response to circumstances, is what Takuan refers to as immovable, or un-moving, wisdom (fudōchi). Moving, here, indicates attachment to anything—to one’s hand wielding the sword, to one’s opponent’s attack. Immovable means that whatever presents itself, the mind doesn’t “move” and attach to it. In Takuan’s interpretation, immovable does not signify standing still but rather never moving from the mind’s intrinsic flexibility and freedom. “Immovable wisdom,” Takuan observes, “means the mind moving as it wants to move—forward, left, right, in all directions, without ever being attached.”

Takuan’s notion here contrasts with that of Mencius (372–289? BCE), for whom the immovable mind (Ch. budongxin) is also of key importance and whose teachings were among the “Four Books” (Ch. sishu, J. shisho), the four classic Confucian texts revered in Takuan’s Japan. The mind (Ch. xin), Mencius held, has an innate tendency to righteousness (Ch. yi), but it can be disturbed by the fluctuations of one’s vital force, or qi. The mind, therefore, must be nourished through cultivation of a “floodlike breath,” or “energy” (haoranzhiqi), an inner moral power that directs the mind to righteousness in all situations and lends one the fortitude to remain un-swayed, unmoved (Ch. budong) by whatever contravenes ethical behavior. Unlike Takuan’s insistence on a mind that is wholly free-flowing and un-fixed, for Mencius’ unmoved mind, as one modern scholar observes, “qi needs to be tightly constricted to serve moral ends.”

Use of the term “immovable” (J. fudō) is not confined to Mencius and Confucianism. It is widely used in Indian and Chinese Mahāyana Buddhism
to connote various states of transcendence, and its meanings include a state that does not violate or go contrary to reality. Takuan, as a cultivated Zen monk of his time, was thoroughly conversant with Confucianism, its classics, and its metaphysics, much of which he elsewhere discusses at length. It is in this general Buddhist context, however, that the master seems to speak of the unmoved mind, as when, near the opening of *Record of Immovable Wisdom* he invokes the familiar image of Fudō Myōō, the Immovable King of Radiance.

In his discussion of Fudō Myōō, Takuan emphasizes that this mind of immovable wisdom is not something alien but our existing, original mind (*honshin*). As such, it does not need to be learned or acquired but merely allowed to operate. The task of both the swordsman and the Zen student is simply to refrain from obstructing the mind’s natural freedom and fluidity. Like the swordsman distracted by his opponent’s movements or by his own strategy or stance, it is only when we are preoccupied, attached, or stuck in some particular place that the original mind turns into deluded mind (*mōjin*). Takuan compares this to water and ice. Water, like original mind, is formless, always changing but always the same. When it turns to ice, however, water congeals into particular forms and loses its fluidity, just as mind, when it stops or becomes frozen at some point, is no longer free to flow and accommodate itself to circumstances. The object for the swordsman, Takuan says, is to “melt” the mind whose response has been frozen by attachment, to let it flow unhindered through the body, returning deluded consciousness to its original, enlightened state.

Attachment, which impairs the mind’s freedom, is also a function of intention (*ushin*), literally, “having mind,” by which Takuan means harboring some particular thought. A Nō dancer intent on displaying his skill will find this very concern an impediment to his art, and the same is true of a dueling swordsman’s obsession with victory, speed, or the avoidance of defeat. What the accomplished swordsman as well as the Zen student must cultivate is the mind of nonintention (*mushin*), or “no-mind,” a familiar Zen expression that Takuan elsewhere pairs with the similar term “no thought” (*munen*). “By ‘thought,’” he explains in *Knotted Cords*, “we mean going back over what is past, thinking about it again and again without letting it go. By ‘mind’ we mean pondering this way and that about what is happening here in the present. You may imagine that as human beings we’re unable to keep from thinking about what is past or to refrain from thinking about what is happening in the present, so that no-thought and no-mind are not really possible; but such things exist all the same. What is called no-mind is something one needs.”
Similarly, the Buddhist concept of emptiness (kū) is interpreted by Takuan as having nothing in the mind, as the absence of all attachment or intention. Emptiness and nonintention, however, should never be confused with inertia. Quite the reverse, Takuan argues: inertia occurs when something is in the mind, blocking its spontaneous response. Nonintention is really noninterference with the mind’s natural free-flowing activity, and emptiness describes the state in which this occurs, a state where the mind remains fluid and wholly unattached, even to distinctions of subject and object. This, Takuan explains, is not only the core realization of Buddhism and Zen but the key to mastering swordsmanship. In the midst of combat, from one moment to the next, the swordsman must put the teaching of emptiness into practice by never allowing the mind to become mired or trapped at any point but leaving it always unconstrained, like a hollow gourd bobbing on a stream. In concrete terms, unconstrained means “You don’t attach the mind to the hand that is wielding the sword. Completely forgetting the hand wielding [the sword], strike and kill your opponent, [but] don’t fix the mind on your opponent. Realize that your opponent is empty, that you are empty, that both the hand wielding the sword and the sword being wielded are empty. Don’t even let your mind be captured by emptiness!”

In Night Talks at Tōkaiji, Takuan elaborates his view of emptiness as the absence of deliberate thought or calculation, the ground for the marvelous power of original wisdom. Whatever the changing situation, Takuan says, only emptiness can meet it appropriately because nothing is in one’s mind, nothing in the way, interposed between the immediacy of events and one’s response.

In whatever you do, it’s in the present moment that the marvelous reveals itself. You should not prepare for things in advance. By preparing for things in advance, you cannot respond to the actual situation before you. Emptiness alone can accurately respond in all circumstances; long, short, round, square, it’s always right on the mark. When you make the heart empty, holding nothing in your mind, whatever comes your way you’ll respond accordingly. [Whereas,] if you plan things out in advance, you’ll have what you planned for in your mind, and instead of responding to what comes along, the thing you planned to do gets in the way. With your mind already occupied, there’s no way it can receive what actually presents itself.17

Takuan goes on to compare the function of emptiness, its dissolution of subject and object in the present moment, to the movement of a cloud across the heavens or the flawless working of a mirror:
Before the cloud appears, the sky is perfectly clear and serene, without a trace of anything at all. Then the cloud arrives and drifts across the sky. But whether it drifts to the east or the west, once it’s gone, the sky remains as it was. Before the cloud appears, no place has been prepared for it; and similarly, after it’s gone, no trace of it is retained.

... Mind is also like a mirror. A mirror reflects the things that come before it. When nothing comes before it, it remains absolutely clear. Just so, if no things are kept in the mind, we call that emptiness. If there are things [kept] in the mind, its functioning is lost.18

Like the sky and the mirror, which retain no traces, original mind is endlessly responsive precisely because it is empty of thought or intention. However, empty mind is not to be realized simply by stilling or stifling mental activity. Deliberately trying to get rid of thought, Takuan cautions, only becomes another thought, another intention. To empty the mind by suppressing thoughts or keeping them in check only results in constraining the mind, interfering with its natural flow. Instead, Takuan calls on the swordsman to free the mind, to let the mind go, as if releasing a cat on a leash. For the warrior who is confronting an opponent to focus his mind anywhere—inside or outside himself—can be a deadly mistake, a dangerous narrowing and weakening of his awareness. Takuan is critical of any attempt to forcibly control or manipulate the mind, including concentrating attention in the *tanden*, or lower abdomen, a familiar training technique in both Zen and the martial arts and one closely associated at times with Daoism.19 Takuan identifies such mistaken approaches to the mind with certain Neo-Confucian techniques for self-cultivation centering on the practice of moral seriousness, or reverence (Ch. *jing*, J. *kei*). For the most part, such practices are extensions of Mencius’ “unmoving mind” and “floodlike breath,” referred to earlier, concepts revived in the Song by theorists such as the Cheng brothers and Zhu Xi as a basis for Neo-Confucian meditation. Single-minded concentration on reverence within, the Chens assert, will lead to righteousness without, a humane interaction and oneness with all things that avoids what they allege to be Buddhism’s moral ambiguity.20 A century later, a similar concept was elaborated by Zhu Xi: “The task of reverence is the first principle of the Confucian school,” Zhu Xi avers. “From beginning to end, it must not be interrupted for a single moment... Seriousness merely means the mind being its own master.... It is merely to be apprehensive and careful and dare not give reign to yourself. In this way, both body and mind will be collected and concentrated as if one is apprehensive of something.”21
While conceding some role for such practices as expedients for beginners, ultimately Takuan views them as forms of stopping the mind, when what is needed is to set it free. “In using the mind,” he instructs, “let it go where it wants. If you tightly restrain it, it becomes inflexible. Keeping the mind tightly reined in is strictly for beginners.”

The swordsman can let the mind go anywhere freely because it is originally pure, like a smoothly polished crystal that remains clear even if it falls into the mud. Accordingly, the way to deal with thoughts—with perceptions, intentions, notions, feelings—is by what Takuan calls “forgetting the mind” (kokoro o wasuru), being natural, free, and unselfconscious. The problem, after all, is not thoughts but our attachment to them by stopping the mind. The difficulty, says Takuan, is automatically resolved by allowing the mind to resume its natural nonstopping state, “flowing like a raging torrent.” Then, as he observes elsewhere,

Even though you don’t deliberately seek to keep things from lingering in the mind, to give them up or let them go, they’ll cease naturally, of themselves, and nothing will linger in the mind. That way, without cutting off or transforming your evil mind, you’ll simply occupy yourself with whatever is right before you: when happy, you’ll smile; when sad, you’ll sigh; when things from the past come to mind, you’ll just let them come. Since things in the world are always changing, [you recognize that these are] temporary thoughts, leaving no traces, so you don’t linger in these thoughts. . . . Just as when the wind blows, waves arise and splash, and when the wind ceases, the ocean is quiet and the water calm, so when the winds of one’s mind have ceased, no trace remains of the waves of mind, and the waters of mind are serene. Imagining you musn’t think, you try not to think about things so that whatever you encounter leaves no trace. [But] when you neither deliberately try not to think nor try to get rid of your thoughts, your mind will instantly find itself at peace.22

What interferes with this practice of letting go and freeing the mind to operate spontaneously is the very stubbornness of attachment. For the swordsman, whose opponent can instantly seize on any imbalance or lapse in attention, the “mind that attaches to things and is then pushed about and deluded by them” is a matter of life and death. In Record of Immovable Wisdom, Takuan offers a general approach to this problem but outlines no definite technique for untethering the mind from its particular anxieties and fixations. According to Buddhism, everything in the universe, our selves included, is in flux, impermanent, and therefore empty and insubstantial so
that any attachment is deluded. But actually unblocking the mind, overcoming its powerful tendency to "stop" and become mired in things in the passing stream, is clearly no easy matter. In *Knotted Cords*, discussing how to deal with nagging feelings such as anger or grief, Takuan suggests a practical way to shake oneself free of attachment and return to original, empty mind, flowing in the moment:

When you are mired in your anger, shut away in your gloom, your *ki* has no way to expand. What happens when you get angry about something is that your mind sticks to that thing and won't let go. And the harder you try to make it go, the worse things get. When that happens, you should look at something, a cloud or a mountain; the mind that had been stuck in whatever you were angry about will then be able to detach itself, shifting to the cloud or mountain.

Take a man trying to seize a biting horse. To get the horse away from its set of mind, he thrusts a flower in front of it, and, when it sees the flower, the horse is freed from the state of mind it was stuck in. Even the horse is then in the state of no-mind, and without any bother the man can seize it. . . . This is the expedient of using things to relieve the mind. The principle behind chanting *dharani* or mantra is to avert misfortune, to turn perversity into reasonableness, to order the wayward mind, and to free the mind stuck in some thing. Even magic spells and such have some reason behind them.

There was a woman whose *ki* was stuck in her chest, who was feeling ill with no inkling of why. A certain doctor declared, "This woman is lovesick. She is an adulteress."

The woman immediately flew into a rage. "I'd never be guilty of such a thing!" she protested. "This doctor's accusation is simply outrageous!"

As her fury rose like a black cloud, the *ki* lodged in her chest suddenly dispersed, and her illness was cured. The doctor cured her illness without using any medicine. He had a device by which, with just one word, he snatched away the gloom in her heart.

Takuan's advice on grief and anger accords with the instruction in *Record of Immovable Wisdom*, where the swordsman is exhorted to "melt" the mind that has become attached, to let it flow throughout the body without being trapped or constricted at any point. Freedom of mind is Takuan's pivotal message, the principle that underlies these teachings and, he insists, the key to all religion and art, including the Way of the Sword. Whether in Zen, swordsmanship, or any other endeavor, the path to realization lies not in
contracting and holding back the mind but in “just leaving it alone and freeing it to go anywhere at all.”

The insistence on freedom also dominates Takuan’s other work concerning Zen and the sword, *The Sword Taie*. The sword Taie (J. *tai’a*) of the title is a fabulous weapon drawn from Chinese legend, a sword that can penetrate anything and renders its owner invincible. As Takuan explains: “The sword Taie is the name of a famous sword without equal anywhere on earth. It freely cuts through [all] hard [substances], from gold and iron to gems and rocks. Nothing under heaven can resist its blade.”

The original story appears in the “Record of Precious Swords” chapter (Waichuanji baojian) of *The Glory of Yue* (*Yuejue shu*), a famous second-to-third-century compilation of texts concerning the rival Chinese kingdoms of Wu and Yue during the period 771–221 BCE. According to the account, the King of Chu dispatched his retainer Master Feng Hu to Wu with various treasures to gain that king’s permission for the acclaimed sword smiths Gen Jing and Ou Ye to make several swords for his personal use. On obtaining the King of Wu’s consent, the sword smiths produced three wondrous iron swords, among them the sword Taie (Great Riverbank). When the King of Chu asked about the sword’s curious name, Feng Hu explained, “Its patterning is majestic and vigorous, like the waves of a flowing river.” The King of Jin, hearing of these swords, demanded them for himself, and when the King of Chu refused to yield them, sent three armies to besiege a city in Chu. The siege continued for three years till all weapons and food in the city were exhausted. The King of Chu’s generals and ministers were unable to break the siege. Finally the king himself unsheathed the sword Taie, and brandishing it mounted the city walls. The three investing forces were defeated, “blood ran everywhere . . . and the King of Jin’s hair turned white.” Overjoyed at this victory, the King of Wu asked Master Feng, “Is this a result of the power of the sword or of my own strength?” Feng Hu replied, “It is the power of the sword, but this depends on Your Majesty’s spiritual power.” “The sword is only iron,” declared the king. “How can it have such spiritual power?” Feng Hu observed that earlier blades had been made of other materials such as jade. “Jade too is a substance with divine properties,” Feng explained, “but it only becomes so when it meets a sagelike ruler . . . At this time we make iron weapons, whose might can defeat three armies. When the world knows of this, no one will fail to submit. This is the spiritual power of iron weapons and Your Majesty’s sagelike virtue.”

The sword Taie is a kind of supersword, but the sword as such was itself an object with potent symbolism for Takuan’s Japan. For the Tokugawa samurai it was emblematic at once of his personal honor and his warrior
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caste, signaling his membership in Edo society’s hereditary elite. Besides being synonymous with weaponry and combat (the expression “sword fight” \([tachiuchi]\) signified any form of combat from archery to stone throwing), prized swords served as valuable gifts to and from the shogun, and ownership and display of such swords imparted power and prestige. The sword, moreover, had a long history in Japan as an object of reverence at shrines, a sacred vessel in which Shinto deities might manifest themselves.27

The sword was also an important metaphor in Buddhism and in the Zen school in particular. The bodhisattva Manjusri (J. Monju), whose image dominates the meditation hall (zendō) of many Japanese Zen temples, holds a naked sword representing prajñā, the intuitive wisdom that spontaneously annihilates attachments. In turn, the head monk who monitors meditation in the zendō is considered the personification of Manjusri, while the keisaku (also kyōsaku), or “warning stick,” he carries to rouse drowsy monks with a sharp thwack on the shoulders is conceived as Manjusri’s sword.28 The theme of the sword appears as well in many of the medieval Chinese phrases and expressions employed in koan study:

Where a sharp sword cuts, no wound remains. . . .

Two heads simultaneously lopped off: one terrible sword supported by heaven.

The keen-edged sword sweeps all away, heaven and earth are still; raise the chilling blade and even the constellations shiver.

Even the precious sword Taie started out as raw iron.29

Similarly, Takuan gives the sword Taie his own interpretation, identifying it variously as mind, buddhahood, one’s original face, seeing one’s nature, and so forth. The sword represents that which is intrinsic, possessed innately, “what is original to all persons.” It is what Takuan calls the “self of true self” (shinga no ga), one’s actual being as distinct from the false, ego-centered “self of self-and-other” (ninga no ga). Unlike his false self, which is readily apparent, the swordsman’s true being, originally empty and unattached, is without shape or form, invisible to his opponent. In the same way, the opponent is said to be invisible to the realized swordsman, who, transcending the false, limiting self, sees past his opponent’s ego-bound strategy focused on strength or weakness, victory or defeat.
A somewhat similar understanding of the sword of Zen was offered by the master Imakita Kösen (Kôsen Sôon, 1816–1892), a leading reformer and modernizer of the Rinzai school during the Meiji period (1868–1911). Kösen criticized as insufficient Confucius’ goal of realizing humanity by “overcoming the self,” a goal that, Kösen asserts, can be attained permanently only by “killing” the self with the sharp sword of the Zen koan. Kösen’s lineage descendant Sokei-an (Sasaki Shigetsu, 1882–1945), the first Rinzai master to settle permanently in the United States, offers a more extended explanation of the sword metaphor in Zen in comments on the following passage from the *Record of Linji*: “When a man tries to practice the Way, the Way does not function / And ten thousand evil circumstances vie in raising their heads. / But when the sword of wisdom (*chih chien*) flashes forth, nothing remains; / Before brightness is manifest, darkness is bright. For that reason a man of old said, ‘Ordinary mind is the Way.’” Sokei-an observes to his American audience:

> When the sword of wisdom comes forth, there will be nothing at all. . . . This sword, this diamond sword, will annihilate everything: time and space, beginning and end, true and false, good and bad. The negative and positive are aspects seen from the human angle, but from the universal angle there is just one aspect, and that is absolute. There is no negative or positive. . . . When this sword shines alone in heaven, all is reduced to nothingness. The sword of wisdom, the absolute sword, cuts out all relative conceptions. It is in silence that one attains this sword. When you reach this view, you have the sword of wisdom. Do you have that sword in yourself? . . . You must take the sword from its scabbard and cut the dust away. Then you will see the original sword.32

Because it flows naturally from the true self, Takuan says, the free functioning embodied by the sword Taie is spontaneous and easy, an expression of original, everyday mind. As such, it is not to be experienced in some remote or mysterious realm but in “all one’s ordinary activities.”33 This is what Takuan intimates when he speaks of never departing from the “ordinary” (*jinjô*) and when he exhorts the swordsman to “neither take one step forward nor one step back but secure victory remaining right where you are.”

All that prevents the unhampered operation of the true self on the field of combat is the swordsman’s clinging and calculating consciousness, his persistent attachment to intention. By contrast, Takuan says, the sword Taie is “the power of the marvelous function of acting without intention,” and, as in *Record of Immovable Wisdom*, Takuan cautions the swordsman
confronting an adversary against attaching even momentarily to thoughts or movements. Similarly, the swordsman must dispense with all rules, forms, and models, meeting reality head-on. “Laws and regulations that are like molds have nothing to do with the great function manifesting before you. . . . One for whom this great function is immediately manifesting is free and without obstruction, whether he goes this way or that.”

This unobstructed activity of mind, Takuan reiterates, is not only the secret of great swordsmanship but the very essence of Zen, the special transmission outside the scriptures that was passed down from the Buddha to his disciple Mahākāshyapa and preserved across the generations of awakened teachers. It is a principle whose mastery not only transforms the swordsman’s awareness but, according to Takuan, renders him invulnerable. Because his mind is always open and empty, like the polished surface of a mirror, the enlightened warrior assesses each situation instantly and intuitively, without betraying any intention of his own, without, as modern boxers might put it, “telegraphing” his moves. With no thoughts to slow or distort his response, such a swordsman, we are told, is able to act with lightning speed and matchless skill, immediately lopping off his opponent’s head. However, should two realized swordsmen join in combat and unsheathe their Taie swords, the result in both military and spiritual terms will be a “draw,” a true meeting of minds. This is compared to the encounters of enlightened teachers and disciples pictured in the Chinese Zen records, epitomized by the legend of Mahākāshyapa’s smile when the Buddha held up a flower before his assembly of followers, the genesis of Zen’s wordless transmission.

Even faced with an ignorant adversary, the enlightened swordsman, although he possesses the means to kill outright, no longer has the necessity to do so. At one with original mind, he naturally assumes command of any situation. And confronted with this principle manifesting in the master swordsman, the opponent’s false self perishes, freeing his own intrinsic wisdom and vitality. This, Takuan indicates, is the true working of the sword Taie, the reason the sword that kills is also the sword that brings to life. In turn, it reflects the Daoist-inspired views of early Tokugawa period military writers such as Munenori, who conceived the samurai not as killers but as protectors of the peace and regarded the enlightened avoidance of bloodshed and combat as ultimate manifestations of the warrior’s skill and virtue.34

While it obviously shares many themes with Record of Immovable Wisdom, The Sword Taie is a far shorter work with a more traditional and restrictive format, that of a textual commentary, specifically, Takuan’s remarks on a Japanese text of unknown origin concerning Zen and the art of
the sword. The text Takuan addresses is recorded in kanbun, or Sino-Japanese, and incorporates standard Buddhist terms, occasional references to Chinese history, philosophy, and culture, and numerous phrases from the *Blue Cliff Record* and other medieval Zen classics. Takuan’s comments, composed in a mixture of kana and Chinese characters, are presented in clear and simple language and seek to explain the text in terms of the nature and function of Zen mind.

There is no indication for whom *The Sword Taie* was prepared, but it can be assumed from the work’s subject matter and basic, simplified approach to Zen that it was intended for a warrior, presumably one of Takuan’s samurai patrons, such as Munenori or his son and heir Jūbei Mitsutoshi (1607–1650). There has even been speculation that the kanbun text itself was composed by Takuan, and a passage like the following recalls Takuan’s treatment of non-attachment in *Record of Immovable Wisdom* and elsewhere: “The point of such a man’s sword is never revealed. It is swifter than a streak of lightning, faster than a sudden storm. Lacking this sort of skill, the moment you attach anywhere, or intentionally direct the mind toward anything, you ruin the point of your weapon and injure your hand and will never be fit to achieve victory.” One possibility is that the kanbun text was written by Takuan as a transmission document (densho) for the martial arts of the type the master is reported to have furnished during his years in exile in Dewa to his host Toki Yoriyuki (1606–1684) and to Yoriyuki’s lance teacher Matsumoto Sadayoshi (n.d.). Conceivably, Takuan could later have been asked to explicate the often opaque kanbun text of *The Sword Taie* by way of a vernacular commentary, leading to the present document. Lacking further evidence, however, the source of the kanbun text and the background of the work as a whole are likely to remain obscure.

On the origins of *Record of Immovable Wisdom*, by contrast, we find ourselves on firmer ground. Until recently, there seems to have been general agreement that the text, together with the addendum, was addressed to Yagyu Munenori, the shogun Iemitsu’s sword master and one of Takuan’s principal champions at the shogunal court. However, recent research by Japanese scholars indicates that the work in its earliest form may have been prepared by Takuan specifically for Iemitsu at the latter’s behest, following a discussion of swordsmanship (heihō) that Iemitsu convened in autumn 1636. The meeting is mentioned by Takuan in a letter, which notes that besides himself and Munenori the participants were Iemitsu and his senior retainer Hotta Masamori (1606–1651). Iemitsu pronounced himself delighted with the meeting and asked Takuan to compile
a record of the discussion, a document that the master completed and presented to the shogun several days later. This is arguably the original source for *Record of Immovable Wisdom*, and, as it was intended for Iemitsu, it did not include the addendum section, plainly addressed by Takuan to Munenori, who was presented with a copy of his own the following day. In a later, undated letter to Munenori, Takuan reports compiling for him a clean copy of the treatise originally given to Iemitsu and says he intends to deliver it to Munenori when they meet at the shogun’s castle. Presumably, Munenori would then have passed on the final version to Iemitsu after having gone over the text. The addendum to Munenori would thus have been added later by Takuan along with the reference in the main text to “Mataemon,” Munenori’s early given name.

The issue is further complicated by the survival of different versions of *Record of Immovable Wisdom*. In an attempt to determine the ordering of these and the development of the work, Satō Rentarō has surveyed the various versions, dated and undated, hand-copied and printed. Of these, he has published three, which he considers key to understanding the text’s transformations.

1. The Kunaichō, or Imperial Household Agency, manuscript, the most simplified of the versions. It is written in formal style, probably with the title *Fudōchi*, “Immovable Wisdom,” abbreviated from *Mumyō jūji bonnō shōbutsu fudōchi*, “The Ignorance of Attachment as the Ground of Delusion and the Immovable Wisdom of the Buddhas.” Satō judges this to be a handwritten copy of the original text compiled by Takuan for Iemitsu following the fall 1636 discussion of the principles of swordsmanship referred to earlier. Consisting of eleven sections, it contains some differences from the text of the *Takuan oshō zenshū* (the basis for the present translation and for most postwar published versions and translations). Specifically, it lacks both the addendum and the headings that accompany the various sections.

2. The Tōhoku Library manuscript, an 1808 copy of a 1774 text. It contains thirteen sections with headings and is titled *Fudōchi*. There is some difference in wording from the Kunaichō text, of which it appears to be an expanded version, mentioning, for example, the fifty-two stages and Munenori’s childhood name Mataemon. Although it lacks the addendum, a colophon placed at the end states, “This was composed by Master Takuan and presented to Yagyū Tajima no Kami [i.e., Munenori].”

3. The Kokuritsu Komonjo Naikan Bunko (National Cabinet Library for Ancient Documents) manuscript, bearing the title *Takuan oshō Yagyū Tashū heihō mondō* (Discussion on the Art of Swordsmanship [by] the Zen Master
Takuan [compiled for] Yagyū Tajima no kami [Munenori]. Clearly directed to Munenori as a work of instruction, this version of *Record of Immovable Wisdom* contains the addendum; addresses not simply the “art of swordsmanship” but “Your Lordship’s art of swordsmanship” (*kidono no heihō*); contains the reference to “Mataemon” in section 4; and refers to the practice of “No-Sword” (*mutō*), a technique important to Munenori’s New Shadow (Shinkage) school of swordsmanship and one that Munenori terms “the exclusive secret of this school.” The addendum itself refers to the Yagyū valley (Yagyūdani), the ancestral Yagyū lands in what is today Yamato Prefecture, and to “Your Lordship’s son . . . the court steward,” court steward (*naizen*) being the honorary title conferred by the shogun on Munenori’s son Munefuyu (1615–1675). A hand-copied manuscript of the late Tokugawa period (1830s–1860s), the document contains thirteen sections and is composed in *sōrōbun*, the polite epistolary style of the age. Because this manuscript marks the first appearance of the addendum, it seems to have served as a model for later versions of *Record of Immovable Wisdom*. Interestingly, the manuscript omits the curious Chinese poem at the end of the work, indicating that the poem may have been added at a later stage.

Altogether, however, Satō admits that the form of the original text of *Record of Immovable Wisdom* is uncertain. The *Takuan oshō zenshū* version, commonly used today, could be a faithful transmission of some no longer extant manuscript, even with seemingly extraneous elements like the poem and story at the close of the text, but given the surviving evidence it is impossible to be certain.

The addendum, which in many respects appears to be a separate document, takes the form of a memo upbraiding Munenori for various types of selfish and overbearing behavior. Beyond the fact that it, too, is obviously addressed to Lord Yagyū, it has little apparent connection with the preceding text, apart from its perfunctory iteration of the symbolism of the Thousand-Armed Kannon and the closing poem on mind misleading mind. Instead, the addendum is largely given over to Confucian-morality-laced invective and advice, similar in tone to Takuan’s missive rebuking his younger brother Hanbei and to his 1634 letter to Munenori, which calls on the sword master to avoid extravagance in the administration of his realm and even takes him to task for smoking.

Among the more serious shortcomings noted by Takuan in the addendum is Munenori’s poor choice of retainers. He accuses Munenori of favoring samurai who are ignorant and depraved, so long as their company is congenial, while ignoring those who are sober-minded and virtuous. Takuan
attributes this to Munenori’s arrogance and denounces it as the ultimate disloyalty to his lord, the shogun. Takuan also implicitly accuses Munenori of abusing his access to Iemitsu to solicit bribes from various daimyo and urges Munenori to set a better example for his sons.

There is a distinctly formulaic character to much of Takuan’s censure, and perhaps in the context of the times such pointed remarks would have been regarded as a kind of reverse reproof, more a testament to Takuan’s intimacy with Munenori than evidence of the feudal lord’s actual failings. Takuan’s criticisms may also be the master’s attempt to inject into his work on Zen and the sword an ethical dimension, subtly prevailing on Munenori to extend his attainments in Zen and the martial arts into the sphere of his public activities.

Munenori’s close relationship with Takuan is nowhere more apparent than in his own *Family-Transmitted Book on the Art of the Sword* (*Heiho kadensho*, hereafter abbreviated *Art of the Sword*).49 Munenori’s work incorporates numerous elements that appear to have been transposed almost verbatim from *Record of Immovable Wisdom*. Takuan’s influence on *Art of the Sword*, especially conspicuous in the latter part of the text, has been widely noted by modern scholars,50 and it is tacitly acknowledged by Munenori himself, who observes at the close of the work’s part 2, “I have recorded here the instruction I received from my Dharma teacher.”51 Writing several years later, Munenori’s son and heir Mitsutoshi adds that his father, having studied koans under a teacher and realized their inner meaning, employed Zen phrases to elucidate the similarities between Zen and the art of the sword.52

Unlike *Record of Immovable Wisdom*, *Art of the Sword* is clearly dated, inscribed by Munenori for the ninth month of the ninth year of Kan’ei (roughly, October 1632), some two months after Takuan’s return to Edo from exile. Watanabe Ichirō concludes that in this period of no more than and perhaps much less than eight weeks following his return to the capital, Takuan, at Munenori’s request, inserted his own instruction into the draft of *Art of the Sword* as well as making assorted suggestions, revisions, and corrections.53 Because so many elements from *Record of Immovable Wisdom* are incorporated virtually wholesale in Munenori’s book, some scholars have suggested dating Takuan’s work to the period just before the compilation of *Art of the Sword*.54 While it is impossible to assign a firm date for *Record of Immovable Wisdom*, the many borrowings in *Art of the Sword* indicate that Takuan’s work, or at least some early form of it, may have been in existence by late 1632, available to be cannibalized by Munenori or to be used by Takuan himself to augment Munenori’s text.
Art of the Sword thus provides a rough dating for Record of Immovable Wisdom. But it also sheds a fascinating light on the manner in which Zen, and specifically Takuan’s teaching of mind, was integrated by the New Shadow sword school under Yagyū Munenori.

Munenori had received the teaching of the New Shadow school from his father, Yagyū Sekishūsai Munetoshi (1527/1529–1607), who had himself received the sanction of the teaching’s founder, Kamiizumi Ise no kami Hidetsuna. A master of both the lance and the sword, Hidetsuna had studied in his youth under a number of different teachers, among them Aisu Ikōsai Hisatada (1452–1538), progenitor of the Kageryū, or Shadow sword school. Hisatada is said to have formulated the principles of the Shadow school while observing a spider spin its web across the top of a folding fan and watching a swallow flit from willow to willow along a riverbank.

Hidetsuna’s family had been vassals of the powerful Uesugi clan of Közuke, an old province northwest of present-day Tokyo; but buffeted by the disordered conditions of the period, Hidetsuna found himself shifting allegiances and serving under various warlords, among them the Uesugi’s archrival, Takeda Shingen (1521–1573). Munetoshi, who was already an accomplished swordsman, was anxious to test his skill against Hidetsuna. But, when the two finally met in summer 1563, Munetoshi discovered he was no match for either Hidetsuna or the members of his entourage, and begged to become the master’s disciple. Impressed by Munetoshi’s sincerity, Hidetsuna accepted the feudal lord as his student and instructed him at the Yagyū domain until he left for Kyoto early the following year. Before departing, Hidetsuna asked Munetoshi to work on a problem that had interested him for some time. Once, Hidetsuna explained, he was at a temple in Owari (Aichi Prefecture) drawing Chinese characters in the sand of the temple’s garden, when suddenly he heard a loud shout and turned to find a madman bearing down on him with a drawn sword. Using his bare hands, Hidetsuna managed to stop the sword’s blade and subdued the man. Since then, however, he had been pondering the best strategy for disarming an attacker slashing with a sword when one is oneself unarmed. Munetoshi readily agreed to take on the assignment.

In Kyoto, Hidetsuna’s swordsmanship was praised by the Ashikaga shogun Yoshiteru (r. 1546–1565), who in recognition awarded Hidetsuna a higher court title, Musashi no Kami. A year later, in 1565, when Hidetsuna returned to the Yagyū domain, he asked Munetoshi to demonstrate his progress in mastering the “No-Sword” technique and watched in amazement as Munetoshi, weaponless, repeatedly bested one of Hidetsuna’s senior
students in a series of duels. In acknowledgment of Munetoshi's achievement, Hidetsuna awarded him his *inka*, or formal sanction, designating Munetoshi a master of the New Shadow school, together with a certification titled *Shadow Catalog* (*Kage mokuroku*), documenting the history and essentials of Hidetsuna's teaching.57

Writing in the *Catalog*, Hidetsuna states that he formulated the New Shadow technique by extracting the essence of his masters' teachings, emphasizing above all the ability to "shift in response to one's opponent . . . just as, observing the wind, one unfurls the sail; and, seeing the hare, one releases the hawk."58 In this regard, Hidetsuna is credited with originating the concept of *marobashi* (also *korogashi* or *ten*). Literally, "rolling," or "tumbling," the term expresses the realized swordsman's perfect naturalness and fluidity, a state compared to a smooth, round gem rolling in a tray or a boulder falling off a mountain.59 Munetoshi articulates the notion in a poem included in his *Hundred Verses on the Art of the Sword* (*Heihō hyakushu*):

> The art of combat is the sword in the depths of the mind
> The blade that responds shifting with the moment.60

The notion of *marobashi* may well have been adopted from Zen. There is a similar Zen expression, "rolling, rolling along" (*ten roku-roku*), a variant of which, "turning freely" (*ten rokurokuji*), appears in case 39 of *Blue Cliff Record*, "Yunmen's 'Flowering Hedge.'"61 The concept also figures in a well-known poem traditionally held to be the enlightenment verse of Zen's twenty-second Indian patriarch, Manorhita:

> My mind shifts in accordance with the myriad circumstances
> And this shifting, in truth, is most mysterious
> Recognizing my nature while according with the flow
> I've no more joy, nor any sorrow.62

Munenori even cites Manorhita's poem's first two lines toward the end of *Art of the Sword* as demonstrating the essence of both Zen and swordsmanship: the principle of letting the mind shift freely without attaching anywhere. In swordsmanship, Munenori explains, "myriad circumstances" refers to "the countless moves your opponent makes. Your mind shifts at each of these moves"; while "most mysterious" indicates that "your mind should not tarry here and there. If it taries in one spot, you will lose the sword fight. If it stays rather than keeps shifting, that would be a disaster. . . . If you intently watch
your opponent’s move and allow your mind to tarry there, you will be defeated. The purpose of my quoting this verse has been to say, ‘Don’t let your mind tarry.’”

Like Zen, Hidetsuna’s New Shadow style of swordsmanship claims mind as the pivot of its teaching, a conviction shared and amplified by the Yagyūs, Munetoshi, Munenori, and Mitsutoshi, who, following Hidetsuna’s death, became the school’s leading exponents. All seem to concur that a swordsman who masters only forms and techniques but fails to grasp the underlying importance of mind will never realize the essence of the art of the sword. As Munetoshi observes in another poem:

What use is there in any teacher’s inka
Without transmitting the art of the sword in the depths of the mind?

The term “shadow” (kage) in the name of Hidetsuna’s school underscores the teaching’s emphasis on the yielding, ever-responsive mind. The character generally employed in the school, read yin in Chinese and in in Sino-Japanese, is the ideogram for the female or passive principle that offsets the male principle, or yang (J. yō), in yin-yang cosmology. Here, it indicates the central role of intuition, the primacy of mind over mere physical strength, of the natural and resilient over the forced, studied, and contrived. Thus, a shadow instantly follows a moving form, just as a mirror or the still surface of a pool registers an object’s reflection. “The shield [i.e., defensive technique] of the New Shadow [Shinkage] school,” Mitsutoshi writes in his work Notes on the Moon (Tsuki no shō), “is the stance that has no fixed stance but follows the opponent’s movement.”

It is often observed that the particular blending of spirituality and swordsmanship that emerged in early modern Japan reflected the samurai’s need to adapt to the new conditions of the postmedieval world and in particular to dramatic changes in the nature of Japanese warfare during the period. Earlier armed conflict had frequently centered on battlefield encounters between individual samurai or small groups of warriors, mounted on horseback, circling and shooting at each other with bows and arrows in a series of disorganized “galloping archery duels.” But by the sixteenth century, emphasis had shifted to the deployment of large formations of low-ranking foot soldiers, or ashigaru (literally, “light infantry”). The samurai’s role was further altered with the introduction of firearms by Portuguese traders in the mid-sixteenth century. While never displacing earlier samurai weapons such as the bow or lance, guns were a formidable asset to any warlord’s army,
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and strategically arrayed harquebuses, fired in volleys by common infantrymen, could decisively turn the tide of battle. Samurai identity was also affected by the stability and regularization of Japanese government and society following Ieyasu’s 1600 victory at Sekigahara and the inauguration of the new shogunate. In the largely peaceful conditions that accompanied consolidation of Tokugawa authority, the warrior class had little opportunity to employ its skills in actual warfare. With pitched battles between contending armies a thing of the past, swordsmanship became an end in itself, transformed, so the oft-heard argument goes, from a practical technique (jutsu or gei) for the battlefield to a “Way” (dō or michi), a path to perfection that was at once an art, a spiritual discipline, and even a form of moral cultivation. As revealed by recent scholarship, however, the actual history of the sword in Takuan’s Japan was considerably different, the facts both more revealing and more complex.

To begin with, the sword itself—hoary tales, military romances, wartime propaganda, and countless samurai films to the contrary—never occupied more than a minor combat role in medieval and early modern Japanese warfare.

In common with his medieval European counterpart, the Western knight, the samurai was mounted on horseback and protected by a helmet and body armor. But unlike the late medieval French or English knight, the samurai’s preference, from the twelfth century on, was for long-distance weapons, particularly the bow and arrow, and he saw no shame but rather considerable advantage in avoiding close combat with his foe on the battlefield. As it turns out, the redoubtable Japanese sword of legend, the “soul of the samurai” that has been cast as the principal weapon of countless wild, blood-soaked battles (J. chanbara), is essentially a myth.

The evidence derives from the age of samurai warfare itself, which extended roughly from the Middle Ages through Takuan’s lifetime. Warriors were rewarded by commanders according to their individual “deeds of valor” (kōmyō), recorded meticulously in documents known as “Records of Loyal Military Service” (gunchūjō). These documents detailed samurais’ battlefield performance, including ranks and names of enemies captured or killed—or, if the victims’ identities were unknown, whether they were on horseback or wore helmet and armor, all indications of warrior status. Also recorded were the precise circumstances in which deeds of valor occurred, including any eyewitnesses present and a list of all wounds inflicted or sustained.

Suzuki Masaya, who examined hundreds of such reward petitions from the fourteenth through the seventeenth centuries, determined that the overwhelming number of wounds in battle were caused by projectiles
and missiles. Even in the fourteenth century, in the wars pitting the forces of the Ashikaga shoguns against those of the Southern Court, sword wounds, by Suzuki’s reckoning, constituted only 8 percent of casualties. Roughly 90 percent of injuries were from projectiles, principally arrows (68.6 percent), but including rocks rolled down from hills or fortifications, stones hurled from slings, and spears. Overall, hand-to-hand combat with swords seems to have been rare.

The same essential pattern, Suzuki found, continued through the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, despite the new reliance on massed infantry, noted above. With the widespread deployment of firearms from about 1560, guns replaced arrows as the leading cause of casualties (44 percent), wounds from arrows being followed, in descending order, by those from lances, rocks and stones, and finally swords, the last constituting only 3.8 percent of the total.

With warfare now centered on long-distance weaponry—guns or bows manned by unmounted subordinates—the sword was, for the samurai, at best a weapon of last resort. If he himself was compelled to close with the enemy in combat, the samurai preferred the lance, or yari. The lance could lend a greater extension to his thrusts than a sword and could even be used to knock an adversary to the ground and then pierce him beneath his helmet or through a gap or suture in his armor. As was generally recognized, a sword was simply no match for a spear. A modern contest between two eminent prewar masters of the spear and sword, respectively, resulted in a series of swift victories for the former over the latter in thirty consecutive matches. Indeed, among the lists of wounds and exploits for individual warriors examined by Suzuki, the lance is mentioned continually, the sword scarcely at all.

It is true that the sword was a standard article of male attire in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Japan, worn even by commoners (and occasionally Buddhist priests). Visiting Portuguese missionaries noted as early as 1562 that Japanese men, including youths, carried swords at all times and even when sleeping kept the weapon beside their pillows. Samurai carried both a long sword (katana or tachi) and a short sword (wakizashi), and in war swords were apparently worn even by servants such as sandal-carriers and coolies. Nevertheless, a number of structural factors made the sword essentially unsuitable for most battlefield combat. Often brittle and always subject to rust, bending, and breakage, the samurai sword was virtually useless against an opponent clad in helmet and armor. Even so-called prized swords (meitō) fashioned by famous sword smiths were liable
to fracture after one or two encounters. And if sword blades failed to break outright on contact with helmets or with other weapons such as spears or even wooden staffs, they quickly became dull. (Conscientious samurai were known to carry their own whetstones onto the battlefield.) While presumably of service in close-quarter fighting and urban combat, in general lethal use of the sword in Takuan's day was reserved for specific non-battlefield situations. These included murder, duels, assassinations such as revenge killings, the execution of criminals and of offending samurai retainers (the latter a not uncommon occurrence), and the capture and killing of fugitives holed up in warrens.

On the battlefield itself, the sword in medieval and early Tokugawa Japan was identified with one function above all: the taking of enemy heads, or kubi tori (from kubi, “head,” and tori, the noun form of the verb toru, “to take”). Taking of heads in combat was central to the military reward system and figures prominently in surviving warrior records of the period. Such documents, like those for other deeds of valor, included the victim's name, rank, and any corroborating testimony, along with rewards subsequently received for the head, or heads, rewards that might include land, armor, and even valuable swords. For midlevel samurai, such certified lists of heads taken, termed “accountings of heads” (kubi no reki), served as a kind of warrior curriculum vitae. As such, they could be presented to a prospective employer should a samurai move on to another army or domain, or could be submitted to one’s present lord in petitioning for a promotion in rank. For daimyo and higher-level warriors, the taking of heads served to considerably burnish their own reputations for leadership and battlefield prowess. As a rule, quantity was outweighed by quality in the feudal reward system, and the taking of a general’s or warlord’s head in battle was a signal accomplishment. Enemy heads were taken during or after combat, frequently severed with one’s short sword, and prepared for display by specially trained women who cleansed the gore, arranged the hair, reblackened the teeth, and applied powder to the face.

Since heads were a kind of currency for warriors, the scramble for prize heads in the midst of combat could be intense and might even impede the successful prosecution of a battle so that leading generals like Ieyasu had on occasion to issue sudden orders to suspend the activity. Abuses, too, seem to have been common, and the warrior clan house rules of the 1500s are replete with injunctions against a variety of shameful practices associated with head taking. These include samurai quarreling over heads and stealing heads from one another, and even adding to their
toll of enemy trophies the head of a comrade in arms who had died in battle. This last was a grave offense that reflected badly on one’s commander and was punishable by the death of the offender’s wife and family, or, if he were unmarried, the execution of his parents. The deeds-of-valor system, as might be expected, placed a premium on heads taken in actual combat and discouraged taking the heads of those who had already expired from their wounds or the heads of women, children, or people who had died from disease—all apparently common contrivances.

By the time the samurai of Takuan’s generation had passed on—samurai of the generation that had witnessed and participated in actual battlefield combat—such aspects of the history of the sword tended to be forgotten, replaced by the eighteenth century with popular war tales that glorified the sword as the principal weapon of the samurai of old. This was attributable not so much to willful amnesia and romanticism about the past as to the fact that mid-Tokugawa Japan was essentially a nation at peace. The only instances of samurai violence the urban citizen was now likely to observe were brawls, duels, assassinations, executions, or vendettas, all of which involved the use of swords, reinforcing the notion that swords and sword fighting had always been crucial to samurai warfare.

At the same time, Tokugawa Japan saw a vogue for schools of swordsmanship representing different sword traditions, or bugei ryūha, each with its own secret techniques passed on from master to student. By the close of the seventeenth century, such schools, often under hereditary headship, had increased in both number and popularity, largely, but not exclusively, among the samurai class. These schools evolved elaborate curricula, charged for instruction, and issued diplomas and teaching licenses.

Among the most famous of these organizations was the Yagyū clan’s New Shadow school. Like many other prominent contemporary sword schools, such as the Ono and Ittō, by the eighteenth century the New Shadow school came under attack from military scholars for its emphasis on choreography, its stress on the mastery of set postures and routines. Such a curriculum struck many of the school’s critics as effete and wholly unrelated to the exigencies of actual combat. Scholars like Ogyū Sōrai (1666–1728) argued that this sort of instruction, often mixed as it was with mystical and ethical elements borrowed from Chinese religion, philosophy, and cosmology, constituted a distortion of samurai training as it had existed in the now-legendary age of warfare. As such, it was alleged, traditions like the New Shadow school contributed to the weakening of the spiritual and moral fiber of the entire samurai class, which in an age of peace had degenerated into a warrior
caste with no wars to fight. Often consumed as they were with bureaucratic duties, the Tokugawa samurai, it was charged, were reduced to justifying their continued military status by participating in what were essentially finishing schools for gentlemen warriors. In addition, critics bemoaned the fact that sword schools like the New Shadow school were wont to emphasize the avoidance of bloodshed and injury, and to champion the sort of mind training that made confrontation between “realized” opponents wholly unnecessary.86 Swordsmanship, critics contended, had been fatally compromised, transformed into an art, a “Way,” at once a form of realization and a kind of aesthetic display, like calligraphy or the performance of Nō. The only means to reverse this degradation of the true warrior spirit, it was maintained, was to return to the allegedly original, purely pragmatic sword techniques of the fighting samurai of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.

This sort of argument can still be heard, denigrating martial arts swordsmanship as a form of spiritual exercise or leadership training and calling for a revival of combat-proven sword-fighting techniques from the classic age of samurai warfare. The argument, however, fails to take into account the fact that the samurai sword, as has been seen, was at best a minor asset on the battlefield. More important, such negative views of the Tokugawa schools of swordsmanship arose from ignorance of their origins in the age of warfare itself. Scholars now estimate that already by around 1500 such schools had begun to take form, propounded by individual and often eccentric itinerant masters like Aisu Ikōsai and Kamiizumi, men who regarded themselves as artists rather than combat technicians. These schools of swordsmanship, from the start, incorporated spiritual elements, and their curricula were neither derived from methods of battlefield combat nor intended in any way for use on the battlefield. As such, they were at times distinguished as “naked” (kyōha) styles, as opposed to those styles involving helmet and armor, which focused on such rough-and-tumble tactics as devastating blows with the side of the sword along with slashing cuts to the opponent’s sword hand, carotid artery, windpipe, or even legs. The celebrated swordsman Miyamoto Musashi, for example, began his career as a helmet and armor warrior, garnered combat experience, and later became a master in his naked two-sword style (nito-ryū).87

The naked sword styles were generally reserved for controlled exhibitions and demonstrations, which stopped just short of injuring one’s opponent. Thus, the martial arts schools of swordsmanship existed as an alternate form of sword training, developing separate from and parallel to the evolving modes of practical combat in late medieval Japan.88 Even as battlefield use of
the sword further declined in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, as individual combat played an increasingly minor role and large-scale battles became the norm, the martial arts sword schools grew in popularity and prestige, not in spite of the spiritual elements they incorporated but precisely because of them. Swordsmanship was an accomplishment for any aspiring gentlemen and particularly for members of the rising warrior classes who sought the veneer of refinement associated with other aristocratic practices like Nō, Zen, and tea. It was this aspect of the sword schools that their later critics so badly misconstrued. While far more numerous, structured, and institutionalized in their Tokugawa period manifestations, organizations like Munenori’s New Shadow school represented not transformations of or deviations from the helmet-and-armor techniques of the samurai of old but a natural extension of the martial arts schools’ own sixteenth-century counterparts, blending the physical and the spiritual, and distinct from actual battlefield techniques. Sword schools like Munenori’s were no more intended to transmit practical modes of killing and combat than the tea ceremony was intended to convey utilitarian procedures for the brewing and consumption of powdered tea.

This sort of approach is evident in *Record of Immovable Wisdom*, where Takuan invokes both Zen and Confucianism to convey the true meaning of swordsmanship, and it is also a prominent feature of the Yagyūs’ expositions of the New Shadow teaching. Confucian elements are notable in Munetoshi’s verses on the martial arts, and numerous direct and indirect references to Zen characterize Munenori’s *Art of the Sword*. Another intellectual influence on the Yagyūs’ teaching of the sword may be the classical Japanese dance-drama Nō, particularly the Konparu school, with which both Munetoshi and Munenori were associated. As a kinetic art that combined elaborate and often demanding postures with a Buddhist-tinged philosophy and vocabulary, Nō may have provided a template for Munenori’s synthesis of Zen and swordsmanship.

To modern sensibilities, *Art of the Sword’s* conjunction of religion and fighting techniques aimed at eviscerating or maiming one’s opponent may appear odd if not downright sinister. But the incorporation of a Buddhist teaching like Zen in a manual like *Art of the Sword* would not have seemed at all out of place in Munenori’s Japan. From the time of its introduction in the Kamakura period (1192–1333), the Zen school had been closely linked with successive Japanese military dynasties and with the powerful clans and individual warlords who were often the nation’s actual power brokers. Zen priests served Japan’s warrior elite in a variety of secular and spiritual
capacities, and Zen temples were the beneficiaries of often lavish patronage bestowed by the shoguns and leading warrior houses. While the teaching itself was unconnected with warfare or the martial arts per se, certain aspects of Zen would have made it attractive to a professional swordsman like Munenori: its stress on directness and instantaneousness of response, on immediately “sizing up” others’ capacities; and its insistence on flexibility, on meeting each situation free of preconceptions and expectations, even in the face of death. Moreover, the combat arts in Munenori’s day, as in our own, involved not only strength and agility but also psychology—an awareness of the mind’s moment-to-moment functioning in any encounter. In premodern Japan matters concerning mind were generally the province of religion, and a Buddhist school like Zen, which made mindfulness and mind practice the basis of its teaching, was in this respect naturally suited to the swordsman’s art.

While borrowing freely from Record of Immovable Wisdom, Art of the Sword, unlike Takuan’s informal instruction, is primarily a secret transmission document for the New Shadow school of swordsmanship. As such, much of the content is technical, detailed if occasionally elusive descriptions of methods of combat in Munenori’s sword tradition. However, philosophical elements also figure prominently, in particular the Zen-influenced mind practices and theories in which Munenori seems to have tutored his sons and Tokugawa Iemitsu. Such materials, at times recalling or simply paraphrasing passages in Record of Immovable Wisdom, occur especially in the latter half of chapter 2, “The Blade That Kills,” and in Munenori’s third and final chapter, “The Blade That Brings to Life.” (Chapter 1, “Shoe Presentation Bridge,” is a catalog of sword postures and techniques handed down by the New Shadow school’s first and second patriarchs, Hidetsuna and Munetoshi.)

A distinctive feature of Munenori’s discussion of mind is his frequent reference to the diseases or illnesses that impair the swordsman’s functioning. Among these are the swordsman’s straining after victory, his desire to display the full extent of his skill, and his impetuosity, his eagerness to go on the attack. All, Munenori explains, are diseases of the mind, and underlying each is the primary disease of attachment, the false mind that stops or becomes stuck at any point. Like Takuan in Record of Immovable Wisdom, Munenori admonishes the swordsman not to let his mind stay where he has struck: to do so leaves him vulnerable, his attention arrested at its temporary destination, like a servant dispatched on an errand who remains where he is sent and never returns. Attachment is the swordsman’s deadliest adversary
because as soon as the mind fixes anywhere it loses its freedom to shift with
the moment. "Swordsmanship," Munenori declares, "agrees with Buddhism
and is in accord with Zen in many ways. It abhors attachment, the state of
tarrying with something. This is the crucial point. Not tarrying is of vital
importance. . . . No matter what secretly transmitted technique you may use,
if you allow the mind to tarry on it, you will lose your fight. Be it your oppo-
ponent's move or your own, in slashing or in thrusting, the important thing is
to train your mind so that it may not tarry in anything."100 The disease of at-
tachment is experienced as a disabling self-consciousness, an artificial tens-
ing of the mind that cripples and distorts the warrior's response so that the
archer will miss his target and the swordsman's attack falter. "If you are con-
scious of swordsmanship while employing it," Munenori warns, "that is a
disease. If you are conscious of shooting an arrow while doing so, you are
diseased with archery."101

How, then, is the warrior to eliminate the disease of attachment? At
first,102 he practices forcibly regulating his mind, keeping it from becoming
stuck at any point or being lost in distraction. But eventually he realizes
that the attempt to rid oneself of disease is itself a disease, another form of
attachment. Rather than trying to control or concentrate the mind, there-
fore, the experienced swordsman, Munenori says, releases it and sets it
free. This plainly resonates with Takuan's views on freeing the mind, ar-
ticulated in Record of Immovable Wisdom. Describing the final stage of the
swordsmen's cultivation, Munenori even borrows Takuan's metaphor of
turning loose a cat that has been restrained on a leash.103 Ultimately, the
to attacking the disease of mind, Munenori claims, is to "let yourself
go with the disease and relinquish the mind; then you can let the mind go
wherever it wants."104 Instead of a frontal assault that aggressively seeks to
exterminate the disease, Munenori counsels an absolute resilience: "Let your-
self go with the disease, be with it, keep company with it: that is the way to
get rid of it."105 The warrior advanced in his practice does not seek con-
sciously to banish disease but, as one Japanese scholar sums it up, just lets
the mind take its own way and be as it is—attachment and all.106

This yielding, pliant response is not simply a technique but the expres-
sion of the warrior's intrinsic being, which Munenori calls "natural mind" or
"the mind in a natural state."107 The term, like "disease," part of Munenori's
special vocabulary in Art of the Sword, is described as the Way (Dao) and
ultimate reality,108 the mind that is originally fluid, free, and unat-
tached, "the state where you mingle with disease while remaining free of
disease."109 Natural mind, in Munenori's conception, is a kind of default
mind that is at once the warrior’s “original face” and the key to perfection in all his activities. Throughout *Art of the Sword*, Munenori stresses the importance of always using one’s natural, unself-conscious mind and defines a master as “someone who does everything with his mind in a natural state.” Such a person’s mind is said to be immovable because it never “moves” out of its natural state, never departs from its authentic, spontaneous response. To illustrate this, Munenori points to the blinking reflex, challenging the stereotype of the unflappable samurai in total mental and physical control:

Thrust your fan in front of someone with his eyes open, and he will blink—that is a natural state of mind. Blinking doesn’t mean the person is upset. Repeat your thrust twice, three times to surprise him. If he doesn’t blink at all that shows he is upset. Not to blink, refraining from doing so, trying hard not to do so, means that the mind has moved. . . . Someone with an “immovable mind” remains natural, and when something comes before his eyes will blink, unthinking. That is the state where you are not upset.

The point is not to lose your natural state of mind. When you try not to move, you have already moved. . . . To move is not to move. Turning is the natural state of the waterwheel. If the waterwheel does not turn it has gone against its nature. For someone to blink is natural. Not to blink shows his mind has moved. Not to change your natural state of mind . . . is good.

Because the true mind is natural, Munenori instructs, it accomplishes everything easily, without straining or difficulty. The warrior has only not to alter it, not to assert a “new” mind by deviating from his original, intuitive response. Any attempt at control or manipulation betrays the mind’s natural state and engenders a false mind that noticeably impairs the swordsman’s movements. This false mind contrasts with no-mind, or mindlessness, the state in which all attachments are, as Munenori puts it, “slashed away,” leaving the mind empty, like a mirror, receiving whatever comes without hesitation or bias.

Rather than concentrating on strategy or technique, or struggling to focus his errant thoughts, the accomplished swordsman locked in combat with an opponent must abandon any sort of calculation and simply refrain from interrupting the mind’s spontaneous functioning. Munenori refers to this as “becoming one with original mind.” The warrior must be able to ground himself in the mind’s natural wisdom, which without any added prompting or direction is always available, always on the mark. This cannot
in the end be realized through deliberate effort, but only by a complete letting go.

Someone with nothing in his mind is a man of the Way. If you have nothing in your mind you can easily do whatever you do. . . . No matter what you do, if you do it single-mindedly, trying to control your mind correctly and not allowing it to be distracted, you will end up becoming muddleheaded. . . . When you are not aware of yourself, and your arms and legs do whatever they are supposed to without your mind contriving things—that is when you do right whatever you do ten out of ten times. Even then, if you allow your mind to interfere if only slightly, you will miss it. If you are mindless you hit it every time. “Mindlessness” does not mean having no-mind whatsoever; it simply means the mind in a natural state.  

Given the many similarities between *Art of the Sword* and *Record of Immoveable Wisdom*, and the fact that Munenori was Takuan’s devoted pupil and patron, can it be inferred that the Zen-related portions of Munenori’s work offer additional examples of Takuan’s teachings on Zen and swordsman ship? In all likelihood, yes, in view of Munenori’s acknowledgment of Takuan as his Zen teacher and of Takuan’s assistance in composing the Zen-related portions of the manuscript. Of course, except where elements are borrowed directly from *Record of Immoveable Wisdom*, it cannot be claimed with certainty that those parts of the text dealing with Zen are attributable to or inspired by Takuan. Nevertheless, it is reasonable to recognize Takuan’s influence and voice in various aspects of *Art of the Sword* that cannot be traced literally to *Record of Immoveable Wisdom*, such as Munenori’s constant emphasis on the mind’s free functioning, identified with Buddhist concepts like no-mind, original mind, and immovable mind. One can hear Takuan, for example, in a passage like the following, which dismisses a “supernatural” interpretation of Buddhist terms for a Zen-type reading that extols freedom of mind: “The marvelous divine power of transformation,” Munenori writes of the Buddha’s power to change and shift at will, “has nothing to do with gods and demons dropping from the sky to perform miracles but means that in whatever you do, you act with complete freedom.”

It may never be possible to verify the full extent of Takuan’s impact on *Art of the Sword*, to document conclusively every instance of his influence on the text. Yet Munenori’s work, in its attempt to apply certain of Takuan’s principles to the practices of the New Shadow school, provides at the least a valuable perspective on the Zen master’s versatile teaching. Observing
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how Munenori restates, amplifies, and elaborates ideas presented in *Record of Immovable Wisdom* and *The Sword Taie* enlarges our frame of reference for Takuan’s works and broadens our appreciation of these two singular classics that merge the art of the sword and the wisdom of Zen.

Enthusiasm for Takuan’s two sword writings was not limited to his contemporaries and later Tokugawa readers but was rekindled in Japan during the modern period, albeit for at times questionable purposes. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the country’s rulers promoted an extreme nationalism in which the alleged uniqueness and racial superiority of the Japanese were expressed through worship of the emperor and commitment to the nation’s imperial destiny. Although inspired in part by the West and the West’s own versions of jingoism, the government tended to employ elements of traditional Japanese culture to justify its efforts. Among these was *bushidō*, the Way of the samurai warrior, or *bushi*, whose legendary fighting spirit was constantly held up as a paradigm of the enduring “soul of Japan,” *yamatodamashii*. Linked with this cult of the premodern warrior was a stress on the importance of the samurai sword, both constituting vestiges of a storied past resurrected on the basis of often dubious history to serve the state’s propaganda campaign as Japan sought to claim a larger role on the world stage.

Every part of society, from Buddhist sects to public schools, was expected to absorb and impart such official indoctrination unquestioningly, and generally these institutions and their leaders readily acquiesced in the government’s program. A spate of books concerning Takuan and his works on the sword appeared at this time, culminating during the period leading up to and during the Pacific War. While “hijacked” may be too extreme a term to describe the fate of Takuan’s sword writings under the successive waves of ultranationalism that engulfed Japan in the early part of the twentieth century, “distorted” would surely characterize the manner in which Takuan’s teachings were exploited to advance the government’s wartime agenda.

As the 1937 invasion of China gathered steam, the tone of official propaganda grew increasingly strident. One egregious example is that of Ishihara Shunmyō, a Sōtō priest who was publisher of the popular Buddhist magazine *Daihōrin*. Lending his hand to the government’s efforts at whipping up patriotism on the eve of war, Ishihara invoked Takuan and his writings on the sword to rouse patriotic Japanese to sacrifice themselves in the name of the nation and the emperor:

*Zen is very particular about the need not to stop one’s mind. As soon as flint-stone is struck, a spark bursts forth. There is not even the most momentary*
lapse of time between these two events. If ordered to face right, one simply faces right as quickly as a flash of lightning. This is proof that one's mind has not stopped.

Zen Master Takuan taught . . . that in essence Zen and Bushidō were one. He further taught that the essence of the Buddha Dharma was a mind which never stopped. Thus, if one's name were called, for example “Uemon,” one should simply answer “Yes,” and not stop to consider the reason why one's name was called . . .

I believe that if one is called upon to die, one should not be the least bit agitated. On the contrary, one should be in a realm where something called “oneself” does not intrude even slightly. Such a realm is no different from that derived from the practice of Zen.

Sadly, such sentiments, emphasizing the “oneness of Zen and the sword,” were hardly unique but were echoed by many prominent Zen masters, Rinzai and Sōtō, during this turbulent period in Japan's modern history.

Even after Japan's surrender, books on Takuan and his writings on swordsmanship continued to proliferate, soon outnumbering those published during the war years. This was particularly true of the 1970s and 1980s, the pinnacle of postwar Japan's economic boom. This was a period when the Japanese businessman was sometimes regarded as an “economic soldier,” when subordination of individual needs to corporate identity recalled to some the old samurai virtues of selfless loyalty and dedication to one’s clan—though even at the time such parallels were seriously questioned.

Each subsequent period in Japanese history seems to have discovered some message in Takuan's writings on Zen and the sword, often reflecting its own needs and the prevailing ethos of the moment. Yet, across the centuries, something in these two works has transcended the particular circumstances of the age in which they were written and the manner in which they were received by each succeeding generation. The heart of Record of Immovable Wisdom and The Sword Taie, after all, is Takuan's striking presentation of the problems of mind and its functioning, problems that today remain unanswered and will likely continue to intrigue students of the human condition, East and West.