

# An Insider's Guide to The Real Japan!

Understanding & Dealing With  
The Culture & Character of the Japanese

*Boyé Lafayette De Mente*

Part II: Social Interaction with the Japanese

Copyright 2005 by Phoenix Books / Publishers and Boyé Lafayette De Mente.  
All rights reserved. Not to be copied or distributed by any means  
without written permission from the copyright holders.

Some of the material in this book originally appeared in *The Nikkei Weekly*, published by  
the *Japan Economic Journal*, and in *The Japan Times*.

This is an authorized online One Dollar Book edition.  
A full printed edition of the book,  
entitled *Japan Unmasked*,  
is available from Tuttle Publishing.



This e-book edition distributed by Moooo! Books  
Shiraishi Island, Japan 714-0036  
mooooten@yahoo.com

Other Books by the Author

(Partial Listing)

Japanese Etiquette & Ethics in Business  
Korean Business Etiquette  
Korean in Plain English  
Japanese in Plain English  
Chinese Etiquette & Ethics in Business  
Businessman's Quick-Guide to Japan  
Survival Japanese  
Japan Made Easy—All You Need to Know  
to Enjoy Japan  
Diner's Guide to Japan  
Shopper's Guide to Japan  
Etiquette Guide to Japan  
Instant Japanese  
Japan's Cultural Code Words  
Chinese in Plain English  
China's Cultural Code Words  
Mexican Cultural Code Words  
Mexican Etiquette & Ethics:  
Anticipating & Understanding  
Mexican Social & Business Behavior  
Korea's Business & Cultural Code Words  
There is a Word for it in Mexico  
KATA—The Key to Understanding & Dealing  
With the Japanese  
Asian Face Reading  
The Japanese Samurai Code:  
Classic Strategies Success  
Samurai Strategies—30 Keys to Success  
from Musashi Miyamoto's  
Classic "Book of Five Rings"  
Cultural Code Words of the Hopi People  
Cultural Code Words of the Navajo People  
Instant Chinese  
Survival Chinese  
Instant Korean  
Survival Korean

Japan's Suicide Syndrome  
—"Stomach-Cutting" to "Human Bombs"—

Suicide played a morbid but key role in Japanese history,  
and continues to influence attitudes  
and behavior today.

Japanese history is replete with dramatically told stories of suicide by trapped bandits, warriors and military commanders facing defeat, members of the royal family and fief lords who found themselves in untenable or shameful situations—even loyal retainers who killed themselves as a means of shocking their wayward masters into reforming themselves.

The infamous Japanese method of suicide by disembowelment with a sword or dagger was in response to their belief that the abdomen was the center of the body—the place where the soul resides, where anger, courage, knowledge, spirit, will, and generosity are centered.

Thus to the Japanese *harakiri* (hah-rah-kee-ree) or "stomach-cutting" with a sharp instrument was the modern day Western equivalent of blowing one's brains out with a gun. (In Japanese references to this form of suicide the more common term is *seppuku* (sape-puu-kuu), written with two Chinese ideograms that have the same meaning as *harakiri*, which is regarded as a vulgar term.)

During the generations following the ascendancy of the shogunate form of government in 1192 and the rise of the samurai as an elite ruling class with a stern code of ethics and behavior, seppuku became the samurai way of killing themselves because it required all of the attributes that the samurai lived by—discipline, courage, spirit, and strength of will.

Among the best known, and most gruesome, stories of self-disembowelment by a samurai warrior occurred in 1333. When Yoshiteru Murakami and his lord, Prince Morinaga, were trapped by enemies in a thatch-roofed house, Murakami climbed to the top of the building in order to distract the enemy while his master escaped.

Identifying himself as Prince Morinaga, he shouted taunts to the enemy in the garden below, bellowing out that he would show them how a true samurai dies. Murakami then set fire to the straw roof, removed his armor and robe, took his short sword, made a deep, wide cut in his stomach, pulled some of his entrails out of the gaping wound, cut them off and threw them at the enemy below. He then put the point of his long sword in his mouth and fell forward on it.

By the beginning of the long Tokugawa Shogunate in 1603 (made famous by the book and movie, *Shogun*), the practice of *harakiri* had become one of the five grades of punishment for wrongdoers among the samurai class (common people were tortured to death, decapitated, or crucified).

The act had also become formalized and ritualized. Every facet of the procedure was prescribed by regulations, from the type of clothing the individual was to wear, the time,

the place, the witnesses, the guards, the inspectors (to certify the identify of the individual and his death), and the doomed man's *kaishakunin* (kie-shah-kuu-noon) or assistant.

Since even the deepest and widest cut into the stomach does not bring a quick death, it had also become customary for a *kaishakunin* or second, to stand by the doomed man, and as soon as he had inserted the dagger into his stomach to cut his head off with one quick slash of a sword.

In keeping with established etiquette, the assistant attempted to leave the head attached by a sliver of skin, so it would not roll away from the body unceremoniously—a procedure that required extraordinary skill with the sword.

Soon after the beginning of the Tokugawa Shogunate the number of suicides among the samurai class grew at a rate that alarmed the government, which issued an edict prohibiting the practice. But the custom was so deeply ingrained in the warrior class that the prohibition was ignored, and the number of suicides continued to grow. Additional edicts over the next 200 years also failed to stop the practice.

Japan's most famous *harakiri* incident occurred in February 1703. Two years prior to that, Naganori Asano, the young lord of the Ako clan, who was taking his turn serving in the court of the Shogun in Edo (now Tokyo), was insulted by the Shogun's chief of protocol, a man named Kira. Asano drew his sword and slightly wounded Kira.

It was a capital offense for anyone to draw a sword in the Shogun's castle. Asano was ordered to commit seppuku, which he promptly did, and his fief was confiscated by the Shogunate. Forty-seven of Asano's retainers, outraged by the fact that Kira was not punished, and that their lord was unfairly forced to commit suicide, privately swore to take revenge against Kira.

For two years the 47 *ronin* (masterless warriors) plotted their revenge, misleading Kira's spies and Shogunate police by spending their time drinking and visiting red-light districts. Finally, on a snowy night in 1703, 46 of the men raided Kira's home, cut his head off and took it to the grave of their master so his spirit would have peace. One of the 47 warriors, who was 80 years old by this time, did not go on the raid.

The 46 samurai, one of whom was only 15, then gave themselves up to the Shogunate authorities. For the next two years the fate of the masterless samurai was hotly debated by members of the Shogun's court, by outside scholars and by the public at large. The public and most scholars maintained that the samurai had upheld the ancient code of avenging their master, and that they should not be charged with a crime.

Ultimately, the Shogunate accepted the view of Sorai Ogyu, a noted Confucian scholar, who said that although the 47 *ronin* had upheld the samurai ideal, they had violated the law of the land by creating a public disturbance and should therefore be punished.

Forty-six of the men, including the 80 year old who had not participated in the raid, but minus the 15-year old who was excused because of his youth, were condemned to death. Rather than execute the *ronin* in the manner applied to ordinary criminals, the Shogunate proclamation allowed them to commit *harakiri*, thereby preserving their honor as samurai.

The 46 men were divided up into groups of five or six, and were placed in the hands of several of the leading clan lords who were ordered to oversee their *harakiri*. The men performed the time-honored ritual of suicide as ordered and were buried near the grave of their master on the grounds of Sengaku Temple in what is now Tokyo's Shinagawa Ward.

The 46 men, always later described as the 47 *ronin*, became instant heroes to the people. A few months after their death, a play extolling their act of revenge opened in an Edo theater but the authorities quickly closed it down. In 1706, Chikamatsu Monzaemon, the Shakespeare of Japan, wrote a puppet play based on the incident.

Afterwards, dozens of other plays retold the story of the 47 *ronin*, and in more modern times the saga was depicted in numerous novels and films.

The first Westerners to observe a seppuku ritual were seven foreign consuls stationed in Tokyo in 1868. That year, a group of samurai soldiers fired a cannon barrage onto the foreign settlement in Kobe. The samurai in charge of the group, Zenzaburo Taki, was ordered by the Shogunate to commit seppuku.

The seven foreign consuls, including Algernon Mitford from Great Britain, were ordered to witness the suicide so they could report to their governments that the man who had ordered the samurai to fire had been suitably punished.

Mitford, who later became famous for his books on Japan, described the ritual in precise detail, observing that the young samurai was very handsome and that he performed the ritual perfectly, inserting the dagger into his abdomen on the left side, drawing it horizontally across his stomach to the right and then pulling it upward to ensure that all of his primary intestines were severed. Only then did he lean forward and stretch out his neck so his *kaishakunin* (second) could sever his head with a sword.

Over the next several decades there were numerous incidents of seppuku by military men and others. During the last months of World War II, thousands of young Japanese pilots, invoking the spirit of their samurai ancestors, volunteered to become "human bombs," crashing their planes into American ships in a vain effort to halt the American advance toward Japan.

Shortly after Emperor Hirohito announced Japan's surrender to the Allied Forces in August, 1945, dozens of people gathered on the grounds in front of the Imperial Palace and committed *harakiri*.

In November 1970 Yukio Mishima, one of Japan's most brilliant novelists and playwrights who was also a Rightist with his own private army, forced his way into the headquarters of Japan's National Defense Force in central Tokyo, went out on a balcony, and in a long speech beseeched the soldiers who had gathered around the building to reject all things modern and go back to the old ways, then committed *harakiri*.

Mishima had selected a famous old sword for his *kaishakunin* (aide) to use to decapitate him after he made the first cut in his stomach. The sword must have been quite dull or the *kaishakunin* a very inexperienced swordsman because it took him three strokes to completely sever Mishima's head.\*

There have been no reported incidents of formal *harakiri* in Japan since Mishima dispatched himself in 1970, but by 1997 the number of people killing themselves each year by other means had reached 24,391 and was growing at a rate of more than five percent a year.

Almost every age group in Japan is represented in the annual suicides, from high school students to the elderly. Reasons for committing suicide range from bullying by classmates in schools, to disease, debt, alcoholism, psychological problems, personal relationships, business failures, and corporate managers and government officials caught up in financial scandals.

The dedication and sacrificial spirit symbolized by *harakiri* continues to play a significant role in present day Japan, encouraging students to study and workers to sacrifice themselves, and often their families, to the survival and growth of their companies. It is still common for bureaucrats and politicians alike to invoke the spirit of the stomach-cutting samurai in their efforts to serve Japan.

---

\*Some three years prior to this, I met Mishima in the lounge of the Imperial Hotel, where he held forth on his political views for more than an hour, but gave no hint of what his future might be.

---



### **Dollar Books**

Do you think you got your dollar's worth reading this book? Get your next dollar book at the Dollar Book Store <http://moooshop.com/MooooBooks/order>

Want to be the first to know about new releases of One Dollar Books? Join the "Ousider's Guides" free newsletter to receive updates on new books and authors at the One Dollar Bookstore. To subscribe, send a blank email to [OutsidersGuides-subscribe@yahooroups.com](mailto:OutsidersGuides-subscribe@yahooroups.com)