

Miyamoto Musashi

The Book of the Five Rings explores winning strategy in the context of Samurai swordsmanship, but it is valuable to any student of leadership or strategy today.

Musashi wrote that the book and its teaching would not only help warriors, but would also be useful to artists, laborers, merchants or bureaucrats, as an adjunct to their own separate, disciplinary study.

The Way of the warrior does not include other Ways, such as ... certain traditions, artistic accomplishments, and dancing. But even though these are not part of the Way, if you know the Way broadly you will see it in everything. Men [and women] must polish their particular Way.



Musashi defending himself, V&A Museum

History

Musashi was born in the Mimasaka province of Japan in 1584, and he died in 1645. His father was a Samurai, so not surprisingly Musashi had great interest in swordsmanship.

From youth my heart has been inclined toward the Way of strategy. My first duel was when I was thirteen, I struck down a strategist of the Shinto school, one Arima Kihei. When I was sixteen, I struck down an able strategist Tadashima Akiyama. When I was twenty-one, I went up to the capital and met all manner of strategists, never once failing to win in many contests.

From 1603 the Shogunate of Tokugawa Ieyasu brought an end to years of civil disorder and fragmentation of Japan by feudal lords and began the Edo era. Whilst violence was still common, broad scale war was a thing of the past, replaced by strict bureaucratic rules, and most of the big armies were disbanded. And, whilst Samurai maintained allegiance to their Lord (the *Daimyo*), their allegiance to their peers could change depending on circumstances.

Musashi became a Ronin (an unattached Samurai), seeking duels to test his skills. His appearance was reported to be unkempt, with differing interpretations as to why. Perhaps he wanted to be ready to fight without distraction, perhaps he wanted to lull his opponents into a false sense of

security, or perhaps he had an allergic skin disorder. For whatever reason, given the usual Samurai pride and discipline in appearance, he seemed to cut an unlikely figure.

Over his early years, Musashi developed a unique, two-handed sword fighting style, which became known as the *Ni Ten Ichi Ryu* school. Steve Kaufmann comments that this winning style was a step-change in approach, thus:

One thing does one thing; two things do four things.

Many details of Musashi's life are sketchy. Most authors believe that he fought against the Tokugawa forces in the early 1600's, as Ieyasu was taking control of Japan. He survived the massacre that befell the rest of the defeated soldiers.

Perhaps Musashi's most famous duel was against Ganryu (Sasaki Kojiro) in 1613. This Long Sword expert was beaten by Musashi with a wooden pole, after a certain amount of psychological outmaneuvering - Musashi's lateness made Ganryu lose his self-control. This combination of skill and psychology became a trademark for Musashi and helps explain his writing.

From this time on, Musashi became a legend in his own time.

Musashi was never an important General but seemed to have been a rather solitary warrior. Several writers do believe that the last major battle of his early life was at Osaka castle in 1615. It is reported that this time he joined the Tokugawa forces in victory against their long-standing rival, Hideyori (perhaps his own flexibility and his reputation eased this transition from one side to the other). Other writers deny this.

Little is known for sure of Musashi's next twenty-year history, other than that he independently wandered Edo. In 1638, at about the time he realized his *Heiho* (path to enlightenment, or *Way*), he once more took a post as a relatively minor field captain for the Daimyo Shimabara in Kyushu, helping to repress the Christian peasant uprising. From an historical perspective, this uprising greatly upset the Shogunate, who from 1640 expelled all foreigners, and closed Japan for the next two hundred years.

Zen

Throughout his life, Musashi continued to duel, to test his skills, and to teach. He increasingly spent his time seeking the wider truths of his *Way*. He continued his study of Zen Buddhism, although it is not clear whether he saw Zen as a pursuit in its own right, or as merely a way to improve his sword fighting skills. It is probable that he never fully realized Zen-enlightenment.

Nevertheless, Zen clearly played a major role in Musashi's life and writing.

Balance

Musashi's ability to achieve excellence in both martial and artistic endeavours shows an enviable and disciplined appreciation of balance. His eloquent mastery of both large- and small-scale strategy provides object lessons for today's leaders. And his combination of physical and psychological skills in fighting duels shows a real understanding of how to deal with other people.

Despite his warrior profession, there was art in Musashi's life, and his artistic output is highly prized today, not just as symbols of an historically significant individual, but as aesthetically attractive works in their own right.

Whilst Musashi says that his Way is purely about warriorship:

Cutting down the enemy is the Way of strategy, and there is no need for many refinements of it.

He also wrote:

It is said the warrior's is the twofold Way of pen and sword, and he should have a taste for both Ways. Even if a man has no natural ability, he can be a warrior by sticking assiduously to both divisions of the Way.

Here are two painted screens attributed to Musashi.



Miyamoto Musashi. Undated. RoGan-zu (Wild Geese & Reeds), Left Panel. Eisei-bunko Museum, Tokyo.



Miyamoto Musashi. Undated. RoGan-zu (Wild Geese & Reeds), Right Panel. Eisei-bunko Museum, Tokyo.

Rather than trying to resolve the relative weighting of warriorship, Zen and the arts to Musashi, it is more important to note that this complex man had several critical but clear themes in his life and in his writing. The balance of opposites itself is a key to understanding his work. That said, he was clearly a product of the value system of the Samurai.

Samurai Values

The Japanese, just like the Chinese, from an early time respected the combination of learning, the arts and military skill. The *Bushido* code is generally reckoned to have been formalized by the 12th. century, although the *Bushi*, who were Japanese warriors of the upper class were written about in 797. They were *literary men and warriors whom the nation values*.

The term Samurai came later. In the Tokugawa era, Samurai seemed to cover almost all men allowed to wear two swords, and not just the senior, regional leaders (the *Daimyo*). During the Tokugawa period, the instructions to the Samurai were extended, to include the need to study such things as the arts and the tea ceremony.

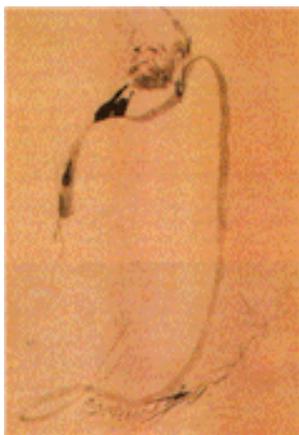
The most famous expression of the code, the *Hagakure* (meaning *hiding among the leaves*) was written in 1716 by Yamamoto Tsunetomo, in the midst of the Edo peace. Its famous first lines say that

The Way of the Samurai is found in death.

This acceptance of death was seen as essential to be able to carry out one's responsibilities as a warrior. A warrior who has no fear of death is a formidable enemy. That warrior would rather commit suicide (*seppuku*) than suffer defeat.

Unfortunately, if taken literally, these Samurai values would see us *going down with the ship* if we could not sail it to victory – honourable, but not necessarily a productive way of behaving.

Contradictions



Bodhidharma painting by Musashi, in Tokugawa Art Museum

Musashi thought nothing of killing. He would rather have died himself than break the *Bushido* code. He was an invincible swordfighter, with great strength, yet he was also an accomplished

sumi-e (Zen brush) painter, and a fine craftsman in wood and metal. Musashi was a man of enormous contradiction.

He was a man who preferred action, yet his writing shows great thought and penetrating analysis. Musashi was the archetypical loner, yet he clearly understood how to deal with other people.

Here was a man at peace with himself and with his surroundings, despite the dilemmas and apparent contradictions of his way of life. Interestingly, whilst it was most usual in those days to seek a Zen teacher or guide, Musashi appears to have been quite self-sufficient and, in many ways, he seems to have been his own guide.

Musashi's start point was that, unlike the *Way* of other disciplines:

The warrior is different in that studying the Way of strategy is based on overcoming men.

We view this somewhat belligerent statement as one of the keys to understanding of Musashi, as it underpins his almost total focus on the individual's role in war and strategy rather than some organisational approach.

Musashi lists nine essential attitudes and skills of good strategists.

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

Most of the items on the list are self-evident. The first four stress the need for training and broad learning and development of wisdom.

Point 5 really means to be discrete in one's dealings with others. The Japanese have concepts of *Tatemae* and *Honne* - truth, in relation to other people. *Tatemae* is what is expected to be done in a social setting or said and may not be what one really thinks. It prevents loss of face all round. *Honne* is the real truth, and you share that only with people with whom you have built a trusting relationship over time. Musashi would say stick to the *Tatemae* on the battleground, against your competitors.

The last four points on Musashi's list stress how to work day-to-day, with economy of action, but with deep penetration of the facts.

Book of Five Rings

The *Book of Five Rings* (*Go Rin no Sho*) was the result of Musashi's lifelong search. It was published in 1645, the year of his death (believed to be of lung cancer).

It was written in the form of a letter to a pupil; it is his personal Zen *Heiho*. It is quite short, gives a lot of personalised advice, and features both tactical and strategic teaching. It can be read on several levels.

Firstly, it is a concise and practical guide to the Samurai code stressing both psychological and physical preparation, whilst highlighting specific sword strokes. As a practical guide, the book helps instruct many schools of the martial arts. It helps develop the stances, moves and anticipation the art demands. The Book can also be read as a day-to-day guide to Samurai behavior, although less clearly than the *Hagakure*.

It is outside the scope of this short paper to discuss in detail the martial art advice in *The Book of Five Rings*, and there are books in the bibliography which explore this further. Importantly, it is not necessary to have religious or political convictions to study the book to find it of value.

On a second level, *The Book of Five Rings* is a textbook for strategic decision making, and the advice has many similarities with Sun Tzu's *Art of War*.

For example, he offers classic advice on *injuring the corners*, or niche strategy, and on evaluating the terrain (or environment), just as Sun Tzu does. Like Sun Tzu, Musashi is very clear that the principles of fighting are constant, whatever the scope of the battle. One imagines him as equally at home planning global strategy in a transnational corporation, as planning his next duel.

If you master the principles of sword-fencing, when you freely beat one man, you beat any man in the world. The spirit of defeating a man is the same for ten million me.

Thirdly, *The Book of Five Rings* is a book about the personal qualities of strategists. We have seen that central to Musashi's *Way* is the need to develop one's personal value system. Like all Samurai, he views character development and self-understanding as critical to effective warriorship.

The Book of Five Rings divides into five sub-books. By Musashi's own admission, the flow is not linear, although the sub-books basically each illustrate a particular principle of Samurai philosophy.

The Earth Book sets the scene and lays out a framework for what follows. A critical passage in *The Earth Book* is about timing (also translated as rhythm by some authors). Musashi strongly underpins his strategic choices with the importance of timing.

There is timing (rhythm) in everything. Timing in strategy cannot be mastered without a great deal of practice.

Timing is important in dancing and pipe or string music, for they are in rhythm only if timing is good. Timing and rhythm are also involved in the military arts, shooting bows and guns, and riding horses. In all skills and abilities there is timing.

Timing goes beyond the simply mechanistic. Musashi's approach to timing and rhythm is an example of the need for harmonious action in whatever one does. He sees perfect timing not just as an essential tactical element, but as a desired personal state of being.

Musashi would appreciate short cycle manufacturing methods in car plants, but he would also expect to sense the harmony in the attitudes and spirit of the production workers as they go about their tasks.

The next three books (*Water, Fire, and Wind*) profile Musashi's techniques, his methods of choosing strategies, and conclude with his review of competitive approaches.

The Water Book then stresses the importance of the individual's winning attitude, whilst working towards the harmony of mind, body, and environment. *Water* symbolizes harmony, faithfulness, and wholeness to a Samurai. Water gets into every nook and cranny, ever crevice.

Like water, Musashi believes that the *Way* must totally permeate one's being. Throughout this chapter, he stresses that *cutting is all that matters* and that *the only objective is to win*. *Stopping one's mind at parrying* is failure. Thus, the cuts and strategies in *The Water Book* are offensive rather than defensive. Even his parrying or defensive moves are made with a view to being back on the offensive immediately. Here are some examples:

Attitude - no attitude: Be fluid & flexible

A given position is not really a position, as everything changes and is in continuous motion. Musashi's advice: stay on the alert, and be ready to cut whatever the means, keeping a fluid stance. Water, again.

There are many enemies: Fight the right one first

If you are facing many opponents, carefully judge who to fight first by evaluating their strengths and weaknesses. Then attack them one after the other, aiming to bring many down together if possible. Watch out for counter attacks from all sides as you do.

Musashi does not say this, but I would imagine he would start by fighting the strongest first. If he can win there, it will have a major impact on the morale and attitude of the other enemies.

Red leaves cut: Attack the enemy's strategy

Attack the opponent's strategy (his Longsword), to force him to lower his guard, and then deliver your cut.

This is parallel to Sun Tzu's *Attack an Enemy's Strategy* as a first step. Sun Tzu says that the right sequence of choices is, in order of difficulty:

1. Attack an enemy's strategy.
2. Attack an enemy's alliances.
3. Attack an enemy's army.
4. Attack an enemy's walled cities

The Fire Book equates large-scale strategy with hand-to-hand combat, and as such is extremely powerful in evaluating broad strategic choices. Just as *The Water Book* is about cutting, *The Fire Book's* underlying theme is of valor and forward progress towards completing the task. This is classical Japanese military philosophy of striving for forward momentum above all else.

The Fire Book is thus a manual for evaluating strategic choices as one moves to engage the enemy. Students of Sun Tzu will be familiar with some of the ideas, although many are unique to Musashi.

Like *The Art of War*, the opening paragraphs of the book deal with the need to carefully examine the environment, and to define one's attack based on it. Warriors are urged to

take up your attitude on slightly higher places [and to] chase [the enemy] to awkward places.

With a slight re-ordering of the text, Musashi suggests that we should understand the enemy, plan the attack, be flexible on the battleground and change strategy as needed.

Understand the enemy – *To Know the times*

Know the trend of an enemy's disposition - where they are getting stronger and where they are getting weaker. Do not be content with point in time knowledge (advance intelligence) of their strengths and weaknesses. Stay current.

Manoeuvre - *To Move the shade*

Make a feint or a bluff, to learn about the enemy's plan and his strengths.

The commander knows the troops – on both sides

Know the enemy's troops as well as you know your own and use their strengths and weaknesses against them.

Be certain of victory - *To Penetrate the Depths*

Be sure that the enemy is not just loosing superficially - understand them well enough to know when their spirit is deeply cut.

The Wind Book discusses competitive position and strategy, and effectively de-bunks the approaches of other Samurai schools. The point is to closely study one's competition, as that is essential to beating them. Continued learning then takes place on the battlefield, where Musashi highlights several watchouts. His advice:

To become the enemy means to think yourself in the enemy's position.

Again, there is a similar quote from Sun Tzu:

Therefore, I say: Know your enemy and know yourself; in a hundred battles, you will never be defeated. When you are ignorant of the enemy but know yourself, your chances of winning or losing are equal. If ignorant both of your enemy and of yourself, you are sure to be defeated in every battle".

In reviewing the pitfalls of other strategies, Musashi reminds us that life is a balance of subtlety and of opposites. *The Wind Book* shows that the wisdom and principles of the Samurai are both the philosophical start point and the end result of strategic study. Musashi stresses the breadth of the study needed to be successful, rather than narrow-minded focus on one, right approach, and he continues to press for balance.

Some of the world's strategists are concerned only with sword-fencing and limit their training to flourishing the long sword and carriage of the body. But is dexterity alone sufficient to win? This is not the essence of the Way.

Musashi carefully analyzed the competing schools, to evaluate their strengths and weaknesses. This allowed him to measure his own attack. He did not boast of the superiority of his own school. Rather, he was content to advise, and then simply demonstrate his point by winning.

Don't get fixated with a specific weapon

His first analysis was about weapon type. Musashi, like Sun Tzu, contended that it is not the type of weapon being used, but the way it is being used. Many competing schools overly focused on using a certain kind of sword, yet the battle situation may not allow its proper use.

Don't focus on the same points of an enemy's activities

One should always fix eyes with the enemy, to gauge the real intentions, strength, and morale. Watching the weapons is going to distract one from the real need which is that of understanding the enemy in depth.

In large-scale strategy the area to watch is the enemy's strength. Perception and sight are the two methods of seeing. Perception consists of concentrating strongly on the enemy's spirit, observing the condition of the battlefield, fixing the gaze strongly, seeing the progress of the fight and the changes of advantages.

Don't pursue speed for the sake of speed.

Speed is not part of the true Way of strategy. Speed implies that things seem fast or slow, according to whether or not they are in rhythm. Whatever the Way, the master of strategy does not appear fast. Musashi stresses, once again the need for a constant rhythm, and repeats the need for consistency.

Very skillful people can manage a fast rhythm, but it is bad to beat hurriedly Of course, slowness is bad. Really skillful people never get out of time, and are always deliberate, and never appear busy.

The Void, the fifth book, brings everything together with a statement of Musashi's personal beliefs, albeit somewhat mystically. This is without doubt the most difficult part of *The Book of Five Rings*, especially for the reader not versed in Zen or Japanese thought. Nevertheless, it is instructive as central to Musashi's thought process.

The book's focus is on the Zen concept of *being one with the moment*.

Zen Buddhists have neither a subjective nor objective view of what is real. In other words, they do not analyze things from within their own subconscious, or seek some underlying, but separate reality. Rather, in Zen, things are real only in relation to everything else. Consciousness and external reality only exist in relation to, and because, of each other.

Everything is in the process of *becoming*, as it relates to something else. Nothing is forever, as everything changes. This flow or process is called *ku* (or emptiness, Void), and the Zen aim is to be in tune with this flow.

If one does not understand that life is a process, and so overly focuses on things which have no independent reality, one's mind has stopped. If one's mind has stopped, one will surely lose the battle.

In the Way of strategy, those who study as warriors think that whatever they cannot understand in their craft is the Void. This is not the true Void.

To attain the Way of strategy as a warrior you must study fully other martial arts and not deviate even a little from the Way of the warrior. With your spirit settled, accumulate practice day by day, and hour by hour. Polish the twofold spirit heart and mind and sharpen the twofold gaze perception and sight. When your spirit is not in the least clouded, when the clouds of bewilderment clear away, there is the true Void.

Thus, being at one with the world, the power of one's personal, coordinated energy (in Japanese, ki) drives one's own reality. Things are, literally, what one makes them.

Musashi concluded:

The essence of this book is that you must train day and night in order to make quick decisions. In strategy, it is necessary to treat training as part of normal life with your spirit unchanging.

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Of necessity this is a shortened version of the points raised in the five books by Musashi and does not do justice to the depth of his thinking. There is an outline of the structure of the book and its lessons in the appendix to encourage further study.

Musashi was a unique individual. He firmly understood his own value system and saw it as the basis for everything he did. His life exemplified striving for excellence and balance in all he did - a state of mind that today we all too often discuss and very rarely achieve.

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Quotes from *The Book of Five Rings*

Earth Book (outline of what follows; skills and tools needed – compassion and service)

It is said the warrior's is the twofold Way of pen and sword, and he should have a taste for both Ways. Even if a man has no natural ability, he can be a warrior by sticking assiduously to both divisions of the Way.

The Way of the warrior does not include other Ways, such as Confucianism, Buddhism, certain traditions, artistic accomplishments, and dancing. But even though these are not part of the Way, if you know the Way broadly you will see it in everything. Men must polish their particular Way.

Like the foreman carpenter, the commander must know natural rules, and the rules of the country, and the rules of houses.

The carpenter uses a master plan of the building, and the Way of strategy is similar in that there is a plan of campaign.

The foreman carpenter must know the architectural theory of towers and temples, and the plans of palaces, and must employ men to raise up houses. The Way of the foreman carpenter is the same as the Way of the commander of a warrior house.

The foreman carpenter allots his men work according to their ability. Floor layers, makers of sliding doors, thresholds and lintels, ceilings and so on. Those of poor ability lay the floor joists, and those of lesser ability carve wedges and do such miscellaneous work. If the foreman knows and deploys his men well the finished work will be good.

The foreman should know their morale and spirit and encourage them when necessary.

The true value of sword-fencing cannot be seen within the confines of sword-fencing technique.

If we look at the world, we see arts for sale. Men use equipment to sell their own selves. As if with the nut and the flower, the nut has become less than the flower. In this kind of Way of strategy, both those teaching and those learning the way are concerned with coloring and showing off their technique, trying to hasten the bloom of the flower.

Although not only warriors but priests, women, peasants, and lowlier folk have been known to die readily in the cause of duty or out of shame, this is a different thing. The warrior is different in that studying the Way of strategy is based on overcoming men.

If you master the principles of sword-fencing, when you freely beat one man, you beat any man in the world. The spirit of defeating a man is the same for ten million men.

The warrior is different in that studying the Way of strategy is based on overcoming men.

- 1. Do not think dishonestly.*
- 2. The Way is in training.*
- 3. Become acquainted with every art.*

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

In large scale strategy the superior man will manage many subordinates dexterously, bear himself correctly, govern the country and foster the people, thus preserving the ruler's discipline.

There is timing (rhythm) in everything. Timing in strategy cannot be mastered without a great deal of practice.

Timing is important in dancing and pipe or string music, for they are in rhythm only if timing is good. Timing and rhythm are also involved in the military arts, shooting bows and guns, and riding horses. In all skills and abilities there is timing.

Water Book (personal technique - harmony)

In strategy your spiritual bearing must not be any different from normal. Both in fighting and in everyday life you should be determined though calm. Meet the situation without tenseness yet not recklessly, your spirit settled yet unbiased.

Even when your spirit is calm do not let your body relax, and when your body is relaxed do not let your spirit slacken. Do not let your spirit be influenced by your body, or your body be influenced by your spirit.

In all forms of strategy, it is necessary to maintain the combat stance in everyday life, and to make your everyday stance your combat stance.

With your spirit open and unconstricted, look at things from a high point of view. You must cultivate your wisdom and spirit. Polish your wisdom: learn public justice, distinguish between good and evil, and study the Ways of different arts one by one. When you cannot be deceived by men you will have realized the wisdom of strategy.

Be neither insufficiently spirited nor over spirited. An elevated spirit is weak, and a low spirit is weak. Do not let the enemy see your spirit.

It is important in strategy to know the enemy's sword and not to be distracted by insignificant movements of his sword.

The spirit is to get in quickly, without in the least extending your arms before the enemy cuts. If you are intent upon not stretching out your arms you are effectively far away; the spirit is to go in with your whole body.

Cutting down the enemy is the Way of strategy, and there is no need for many refinements of it

When the enemy attacks and you also decide to attack, hit with your body, and hit with your spirit, and hit from the Void with your hands, accelerating strongly. This is the No Design, No Conception cut.

Fire Book (equates large scale strategy with hand-to-hand combat – valour & progress)

Take up your attitude on slightly higher places ... [and to] ... chase [the enemy] to awkward places.

To become the enemy means to think yourself in the enemy's position. In the world people tend to think of a robber trapped in a house as a fortified enemy. However, if we think of becoming the enemy, we realize that the whole world is against us and that there is no escape. He who is shut inside is a pheasant. He who enters to arrest is a hawk.

Wind Book (Competitive position and strategy – wisdom and principle)

To become the enemy means to think yourself in the enemy's position.

Some of the world's strategists are concerned only with sword-fencing and limit their training to flourishing the long sword and carriage of the body. But is dexterity alone sufficient to win? This is not the essence of the Way.

In large-scale strategy the area to watch is the enemy's strength. Perception and sight are the two methods of seeing. Perception consists of concentrating strongly on the enemy's spirit, observing the condition of the battlefield, fixing the gaze strongly, seeing the progress of the fight and the changes of advantages.

Speed is not part of the true Way of strategy. Speed implies that things seem fast or slow, according to whether or not they are in rhythm. Whatever the Way, the master of strategy does not appear fast.

The artistic accomplishments usually claim inner meaning and secret tradition, and interior and gate, but in combat there is no such thing as fighting on the surface or cutting with the interior.

Book of the Void (being One with the Moment – self understanding)

In the Way of strategy, those who study as warriors think that whatever they cannot understand in their craft is the Void. This is not the true Void.

To attain the Way of strategy as a warrior you must study fully other martial arts and not deviate even a little from the Way of the warrior. With your spirit settled, accumulate practice day-by-day, and hour-by-hour. Polish the twofold spirit heart and mind and sharpen the twofold gaze perception and sight. When your spirit is not in the least clouded, when the clouds of bewilderment clear away, there is the true Void.

The essence of this book is that you must train day and night to make quick decisions. In strategy, it is necessary to treat training as part of normal life with your spirit unchanging.

Structure of *The Book of Five Rings*

