

## **The Samurai Conductor Thoughts from Miyamoto Musashi's Book of Five Rings**

Miyamoto Musashi is considered the Kensei, or sword-saint of Japan. He lived during feudal times, and during his career he killed over 60 men in single sword combat—thus surviving by far more duels than any other fighter.

He later wrote, “When I was 60 years of age I looked back upon my life and in a flash of wisdom realized that all my victories were based on either great luck, my innate ability or perhaps on the fact that my methods were superior to others. When I came to terms with my own skills [I realized that I had] no choice but to depart from the commerce of the world, seek isolation and tear my soul apart so that I could examine what I already seemed to know instinctively. I practiced and meditated constantly until I came to understand the workings of the spirit. Although I was totally committed to my sword, I was also dedicated to learning painting, sculpture and poetry.”

The result of this meditation was a short book called *The Book of Five Rings*. In it, Musashi lays out what he believes to be the principles that allowed him to face death and still emerge victorious from mortal combat 60 times. The book itself is about how to kill efficiently—it is primarily applicable to fighting to the death. Some of Musashi’s principles, however, are applicable to any endeavor that requires great skill, mental poise and the ability to act quickly, decisively and instinctively in the face of great danger/opportunity. These can be helpful to a conductor.

The recurring themes of Musashi’s teachings are:

- Commitment
- Intention
- Letting go
- Staying in the moment
- The importance of substance (inner strength) over style (external characteristics)

There are five books, Earth, Water, Fire, Wind and No-thing. The book of No-thing summarizes the spiritual teachings of the earlier books and is reproduced here in its entirety.

## **The Book of Earth**

No man is invincible, and therefore no man can fully understand that which would make him invincible.

The warrior understands that the result of study is death (sublime, not necessarily physical) before the attainment of perfection. The only shame in dying incorrectly is to die a stupid and meaningless death. To die as a warrior means to have crossed swords and either won or lost without any consideration for winning or losing. There is not enough time and there is not enough strength in the resolve of any man to do otherwise.

The Way cannot be learned in frivolous contests. It can only be realized when physical death is a reality.

It is important to realize that technique is not the end of an art. Those good in technique, regardless of the art they pursue, are not necessarily able to teach the true meaning of an art. Beginning students...are not to blame so much as those who teach without understanding the true inner and outer worlds of their art.

It is useless for people who look good...to think in terms of being masters. Only through a constant search from within...can the truth be known. It is absolutely a personal thing.

To learn the sword, study the guitar. To study only the sword will make you narrow-minded.

[Bruno Walter: Anyone who is only a musician is only half a musician.]

It is essential for a leader to know the rules of the game: which rules work, which do not, which rules can be changed to suit a particular need; which rules, when changed will create additional problems and which will not.

Do not assume that what appear to be finely crafted goods will hold up under use. Strength lies in the interior.

An excellently crafted weapon is incapable of acting on its own—it must be wielded.

If a commander is unaware of the skills of his men how can he know to whom to assign tasks? Why would a commander want a spearman to join the line of archers?

Each weapon has its own spirit. The ultimate weapon is “thing-no-thing.” In addition to physical weapons consider the use of “empty hand” to be the ultimate physical weapon. Now consider the use of “empty mind.”

You must study with the idea of being able to function in any situation with any weapon.

It is dangerous for a warrior to know only one thing. What is the sense of knowing a thing to such a degree that you become oblivious to other things?

When you understand timing you also understand rhythm—they are one and the same thing, yet they are different. To understand them as one, you must understand them independently. It is absolutely essential to understand the timing of Universal harmony as well.

Timing can be altered. Rhythm can be altered. They can be altered individually or in unison. You must understand that in order to restructure time you should have a complete understanding and realization of the universe—or else your own substance will be infected with error and you will not be able to perform properly in battle. I cannot stress enough that this comes through constant practice. You should always practice with timing and rhythm uppermost in your mind, and realize that there are different types of timing and different types of rhythm.

It is to be understood that training is never completed. The warrior must never stop training. In this way the spirit of the warrior will continue to grow.

The Way of the Warrior is a way of life and can never be construed as a hobby unless you are seeking only to impress others.

The heart is essential in helping the intellect to understand the spirit.

If you do not have a map in unfamiliar terrain how can you hope to get where you want to go? Likewise, if you do not set your mind and heart on the required principles, how can you ever understand what you are trying to accomplish?

It is important for the warrior to constantly meditate on these things:

1. Think honestly within yourself in your dealings with all men.
2. Constant training is the only way to learn strategy.
3. Become familiar with every art you come across.
4. Understand the Way of other disciplines.
5. Know the difference between right and wrong in the matters of men.
6. Strive for inner judgment and an understanding of everything.
7. See that which cannot be seen.
8. Overlook nothing, regardless of its insignificance.
9. Do not waste time idling or thinking once you have set your goals.

These nine basic attitudes are essential for freeing your spirit from negative thoughts that would interfere with your journey. Once you have accepted the need to study these attitudes, you can proceed with deliberateness, diligence and comfort. You will be able to beat many men by just looking them in the eye. They will realize that you are a formidable opponent and will not have the heart to attack.

Remember timing. Do not forget harmony with the Universe and with self.

Continuous study is essential for approaching perfection in an art. Although some people may appear to be “there,” they too must constantly deal with change—based on the rise and fall of timing and rhythm.

If you wish to control others you must first control yourself. This is why it is necessary to study continuously. This is the essence of my strategy.

So ends the Book of Earth.

### **The Book of Water**

There is no limit to a man’s ability once he understands the principles of an art, for he can then function in all situations.

I am not interested with your talk about my ideas. I am interested in your applying them to your life. If you do not, then you are not in accord with your own mind.

The manner in which a warrior carries himself is of the utmost importance both physically and mentally. You are undoubtedly familiar with men who are quiet and strong and who seem to be doing nothing.

- They do not appear to be tense and they do not appear to be in disarray. They simply appear. This is exactly the appearance for which they strive.
- When it is necessary to attack, they do so with complete resolve, sure of themselves, neither overbearing, nor with false humility. They attack with one purpose only—to destroy the enemy. They do not assume postures. They simply attack with all their heart and soul.

When you understand yourself and understand the enemy you cannot be defeated.

Be aware at all times of what is right and wrong among men.

Do not permit yourself to be intimidated by the size of your enemy. Do not be fooled by your own misunderstanding of what your purpose is.

Whether on or off the battlefield, there is no difference in spirit. The warrior sees all life as the battlefield.

If you are lax in your posture you will be unable to perform your technique effectively. Always fight with your spine erect and unbent. Keep your shoulders relaxed and lowered. Tighten your abdominal muscles and root yourself into the ground.

How often have you seen so-called experts with no form or balance? You think of them as clods with no style or grace. Think this through and consider how you wish to be seen should the time come for you to move. Think of being seen only by yourself and not through the eyes of others.

If you are a warrior then you are a warrior, and if you are not a warrior then you are not a warrior. The Way of the Warrior is the Way of the Warrior. To be a warrior, look like a warrior and stand like a warrior. Why would you want to appear as one thing and be another? Do not be false to yourself.

Look at the enemy as if you are looking through him. [soft eyes]

Force yourself to develop the skills needed to be the warrior you define yourself to be. As you submit to “the spirit of the thing,” “the spirit of the thing” will submit itself to you.

The grip should be both loose and tight at the same time. You should hold the sword firmly and resolutely, yet your hand and wrist must remain pliable.

Hold the sword as you would a fishing rod and strike with it as if you were casting a fishing line.

When a warrior draws his sword the intention must be to cut the enemy down. This is not a game to see who is stronger or faster. You must mean it when you strike. If you do not, you will certainly get hurt. The only reason to draw your sword is to kill the enemy.

There is no difference between using the sword in combat and in practice. Even in practice you must strike with all your heart and with all your soul—to do otherwise will result in your being unable to strike with full force and conviction in battle.

A bullet from a gun does not make a distinction between practice and combat. You are training to be one and the same way your entire life.

There is no difference between walking and running into battle or in everyday life. The feet carry the body and the body directs the feet.

Move in the manner of Yin and Yang. When you step forward, backward or sideways, the other foot is not to be considered apart from the whole.

It is always best to attack straight ahead, with conviction and purpose. Nothing fancy is involved. You go straight to the heart of the matter and defeat the enemy. There is nothing else. You either do it or you don't.

Go straight into the heart of the enemy. Do not be side-tracked by appearances of the enemy. Do not be conscious of the technique you will use. This causes hesitation. If you understand this mentality, you will never be beaten.

An attack originates from the center of the warrior and goes directly to the center of the enemy. Everything emanates from a central core.

Regardless of combat circumstances, you must always remain calm. Calmness is attained through meditation and belief in your own skills. It is not to be confused with egotistical technique, which generally fails in intense combat situations.

Attack with quickness, not speed. Attack with power, not strength. There is a great difference between speed and quickness, power and strength. Think this through very carefully.

Be prepared to change the direction of your attack at any moment. You cannot take a certain plan and depend upon it entirely. There are too many variations in what can happen. You must be flexible and you must have no particular liking for any one technique.

Destroy the enemy any cost—even if it means that you may be hurt in the exchange. Think of nothing but of cutting the enemy down.

You cannot hope to attain perfection if you cannot go into the attack and destroy the enemy by becoming one with the attack. You must continue on, you must not hesitate and you must be resolute in your conviction. This takes great effort in practice and meditation, but it must be done.

Your attack must be relentless. And it must not be thought of as a thing in itself.

The whole idea is to hit the enemy and destroy him. You absolutely must learn to attack with your whole body using the sword as an extension—just as the arms and legs are extensions of the body. When you attack with your whole being there is little room left for thinking. You are committed to the attack and are not concerned about the possibility of failure.

By keeping yourself at more than arm's distance from the enemy you show that you are unsure of your own abilities. Close in on the enemy and cut him down.

Do not lead with your head, or with your legs or with your body. When you do, you are effectively throwing off your balance and giving the enemy a target. You must lead with your spirit—when you do, your head, legs and body will move as one.

Make yourself bigger than you are. Extend your spirit above and beyond the enemy. Never cringe in fear and never fight without your spine being straight. You first beat

the enemy with your spirit, then with your sword. Stretch out your body and your spirit. Go for the kill with utter resolve and commitment.

Do not think of possible outcomes until the battle is over. To do so is foolish, and takes your mind off the primary objective which is to destroy the enemy. Think only of this objective and the rest will take care of itself.

For whatever reason you have chosen to be a warrior you must understand your responsibility to your art and to yourself. They are one and the same.

This ends the Book of Water.

### **The Book of Fire**

There is a tendency among most would-be warriors to concentrate only on the development of their craft through skills developed with certain moves. Would-be warriors who use only the raiment of their profession and brag through their motions do not understand strategy. They overlook the all-important aspect of spirit.

To release the spirit one must accentuate the work with meditations of the heart and soul. Not doing so is the same as performing music note-for-note, with no emphasis on the feeling of the piece being performed. And so most warriors only perform tricks.

The only way to understand how to kill an enemy in combat is by actually killing an enemy in combat. Because this may be difficult to do whenever you may want to, proper practice is essential.

Anyone who truly wishes to master strategy can master strategy. Through constant practice you become free of your ideas of what and how things should work. When you learn a technique and apply your soul to it, you will find the technique reveals to you the best way to use it for your personal advantage.

You must have the courage of your convictions and the courage to act on your convictions. Without courage, you will become another man's pawn.

Through practice, you will eventually be seen as a man of great spiritual power.

Never be overwhelmed by the enemy. Should the enemy attack strongly and calmly, you must become one with the attack and through superior resolve cut him down swiftly.

To come to understand something that appears obvious, you must constantly probe the meaning of the words. When you think you understand something you have only made the first approach to it.

The warrior first understands being a warrior when he no longer concerns himself with being a warrior. The main thing to understand is that you must have no hesitation in killing the enemy.

Either you lead the enemy or he will lead you.

The reason the enemy is fighting you is because he thinks he will defeat you.

The main thrust of my teaching is training and contemplation on the Way of the Warrior; it is the only thing that should be in your life. It may appear that there is no room for anything else, but the reverse is true: When you are committed to a particular thing, everything else falls into place.

It is very hard to devote your life to something and not have anything else appear that provides you with the simple pleasures of life. On the other hand, pursuing perfection will give you the pleasure of "the spirit of the thing itself."

You have chosen to be a warrior for your own reasons. If you truly believe in what you are doing, you will be able to attain perfection.

The virtue of perfection is that it is always just beyond a man's reach. If perfection were attainable, there would be no reason to pursue it.

Always be aware of the easiest way to accomplish something. Do not strive to do something difficult because you seek favor in the eyes of others.

How do you feel about going into combat? Is your spirit correct at all times? Do you feel strong? Are you uneasy? It is important that you understand yourself with regard to the possibility of fighting.

It is difficult to attack the enemy if you are busy preparing your weapons for combat.

Denigrate the enemy constantly and with great spirit. Do not acknowledge the possibility that the enemy is stronger than you. Do not accept the possibility that the enemy is smarter than you. If you are aware of the Way of the Warrior then you are aware of the Way of the Warrior. This does not permit you to accept an inferior position to anything.

You are either the best or you are not. If you are the best you will win. If not, you will lose. There is nothing to argue about here.

To become the enemy, see yourself as the enemy of your enemy. Think this over until it is clear in your mind.



If you do not follow yourself, you will certainly follow someone else. The strength and courage of your convictions will carry you through every time. Without hard study how can you ever hope to acknowledge yourself as your own supreme master?

If you stand strong and rigid your spirit will be easy to read and you will be easily beaten. The same is true of being too loose. Flexibility is a very important attitude. Things will not always go your way regardless of how much you practice.

The sky is your attack and the moon and stars are your methods. Both moon and stars are in the sky, but they are different things. There is no thought about there being just one or the other. You attack with one technique and it does not work. You try again and it still does not work. Switch! Never rely on just one technique to get the job done.

There is more than one path to the top of the mountain.

Men who act out techniques and who think they accomplish things without proper practice are fools. They try to impress their non-understanding upon the uninitiated. It is easy to practice this way. The true Way is becoming meaningless and will eventually be lost except through my teachings.

The only thing of importance in my Way is the willingness and ability to truly defeat the enemy in actual combat with the long sword. If you understand what I am saying in this book you will never lose to anyone.

So ends the Book of Fire

### **The Book of Wind**

Other schools rely on a combination of strength and techniques. My school is based on the development of the Way of the Warrior as an expression of the spirit.

I care not for the dressings of various uniforms or for the growing of small trees. If a school is interested in building up a clientele and displays trophies it gives its students the wrong idea about the Way of the Warrior.

Using the sword as a means to accumulate wealth is absolutely not the Way of the Warrior. The "spirit of the thing itself" revolts against this and reveals itself falsely to the practitioner who believes that image is the essence of art.

To be a warrior is one of the most painstaking callings you can choose in life. It is not a game. It is life and death.

You should study the ways of others to gain greater understanding of yourself.

Constantly reevaluate yourself.

The weapon itself is meaningless without proper application by the warrior.

Everything has its value, even if it is not apparent to you. Never close your mind to the possibility of other possibilities.

Your strength is not your own, nor is your speed. Strategy is based on quickness and not speed, power not strength. In practice you must remember to attack naturally. In developing technique you must practice naturally.

The spirit knows what it must do to protect the vehicle through which it is expressing itself.

Who cares how strong you are? You only have to kill the enemy before he kills you. You are not in a contest of strength.

The most important lesson: Non-commitment to yourself; total commitment to the Way of the Warrior.

The only reason a warrior is alive is to fight, and the only reason to fight is to win. Otherwise why be a warrior? It is easier to count beads.

To win fights you must rely on your intelligence and spirit more than your weapons. Stand straight and true with your spine erect and chase the enemy around to confuse him. Then kill him. There is nothing else. Early on in your training your teacher must impart this to you. If he does not, perhaps he is the wrong teacher for you.

Some teachers think that by impressing students with their own skills they can convert students to their way of thinking. I despise this.

It is foolish to think that someone who is untrained cannot kill. The Way of the Warrior is to kill as a way of being and not merely for the result. The point of a warrior's training is to learn the way to kill correctly and without hesitation.

Being a true warrior is never taken lightly by other true warriors.

The reason true warriors are fierce is because their training is fierce. Consider this carefully.

Do not bear false attitudes. False attitudes work best where there are no enemies. In real situations, they can get you killed very quickly.

Fancy armor, engraved weapons and the like only impress the untrained and irresolute. The warrior's attitude is that of taking the lead in a fight and winning with resolve.

Perceive the enemy's attitudes, but do not judge them. Instead, use them to your advantage. It is stupid to enter into a contest of wills—this is another form of bragging, and only deflects you from your true purpose: to go in for the kill.

You should strive to be neither offensive nor defensive. These ideas can force the mind to stop its flow and can get you killed in a fight.

Do not fix your eyes. Fixes your spirit in place and limits your flexibility. It takes the naturalness out of your actions and weakens your resolve. If a football player watches only the football, how can he run with it and evade tacklers? If the musician stares at a single note, how can he play the line of the music?

Your eyes should be fixed on no-thing (mu). Look through the enemy and think only of making the hit. Do not focus on details. Keep only one thing in mind: beat the enemy.

Why would you want to change your basic attitudes toward life simply because a new set of events is occurring? Eventually you are going to have to come back to your natural state. So why leave it in the first place?

You must maintain a natural rhythm and a natural timing. Anything that you add to or delete from this will cost you the advantage when in proceeding to destroy the enemy.

Speed is relative. Quickness gets inside speed and enables you to control the situation. If you are always moving fast you will have no time to maintain your poise.

When you are skilled in your art, you will have the understanding of rhythm and timing required to perform flawlessly.

Perfection can only be based on true calmness within the soul.

Move naturally and gracefully. Execute correctly. Think about this.

The difference between a warrior's victory and exemplary artistic performance is that artistic outcomes do not include the death of the musician or dancer. In combat, the outcome is decided by your death or the death of the enemy.

When I teach beginners, I concentrate on developing technique and make little mention of deeper principles. Only later will I go into the deeper meanings of things.

In the beginning you seek a teacher. Then you come to understand the realities of what you are studying. When you feel that something is missing or that you are not learning anything further, you must of your own volition seek the next level of instruction.

There is no such thing as Yin-Yang. This is not to say that Yin-Yang does not exist.

So ends the Book of Wind.

## **The Book of No-thing**

My Way of strategy is recorded in the Book of No-thing. The spirit of the universe is emptiness, which is no-thing. Man can have no understanding of this place. It exists and is, but yet it is not. **If you know something, you know something. If you do not know something it does not exist in your world.** In the universe, no-thingness is not a thing that is true and it is not a thing that is not true.

When men of the world look at things with incorrect perception and do not understand what they see, they say it is the place of no-thingness. This is incorrect thinking. To say, however, that men who study strategy and do not understand no-thingness do not understand their craft is not correct either. **Everything is revealed to all men as they desire it to be revealed to them, and by their own definitions alone.**

If you hope to understand my strategy you must study as many of the martial arts as you can and never veer from your chosen course. Your everyday practice, as it accumulates, will eventually reveal true no-thingness as “the spirit of the thing itself.” When you have truly understood the universe in relation to your art and your art in relation to the universe you will come to understand no-thingness. This may appear to be a difficult concept to understand, but it is quite simple. **Do not take anything for granted and do not put emphasis on the things of men.** In this way understand my strategy.

No matter how hard you study, if you do not become one with the art you pursue you can never truly be one with the universe and “the spirit of the thing itself” will always elude you. Things will never appear to be what they truly are. But if you look at things with no attachment to them you will come to understand your place. **The work is more important than the worker.** When you come to see things in a broader perspective, taking no-thingness to be the truth, you will see truth as no-thing.

There is virtue in the universe but it should not be confused with good and evil. Wisdom exists, principles exist and the Way of the Warrior exists, but spirit is no-thingness.

Based upon my own understanding of the Way of the Warrior and my own understanding of the universe, I am presenting the entire matter of the Book of No-thing as one idea.

**Let me repeat it again: The Way of the Warrior is based on No-thingness.**

No-thingness is not to be understood as a thing because it then would be based on a conception of something, which would not be no-thing. The Zen term for no-thing, which is the closest we can come to defining no-thing, is “*Mu*.” to understand *Mu* is to understand no-thing. It is essential to be careful with intellectual definitions at this

point. The issue is clear and I explain it as well as anyone else. Even without the literal translation of my *Book of Five Rings*, you can come close to understanding no-thing by realizing that **there is nothing outside of yourself that can ever enable you to get better, stronger, richer, quicker or smarter.**

[MV Corollary: There is nothing outside of yourself that can ever make you worse, weaker, poorer, slower or less intelligent. You will either catapult yourself forward or hold yourself back. You must choose.]

**Everything is within. Everything exists. Seek nothing outside of yourself.**

If you understand what exists then you can understand what does not exist. This means that although it is impossible to know that which does not exist, it is possible to know that **“if anything is anything then everything is everything.”**

In the Way of the Warrior there is no such thing as thought (other than the intellectual powers you need to come to understand this terminology). The spirit of *Mu* means that there is no such thing as relying upon anything at all outside of your own mind.

Zen masters use little stories to bewilder their students. These are called *koans*. They are specifically inane in their presentation, but when students come to understand *Mu* they also come to understand the *koans*.

I could go on forever trying to explain no-thingness, but that would be exactly the wrong way to approach it.

The Zen point of view suggests that you stop all conceptual thinking. **Stop thinking about what you “feel” is right or wrong.** Quite frankly, because the entire universe is *Mu*, **there is no reason to pursue any attempt at perfection. Perfection is all there is and when you come to realize this, you will have understood my Way of strategy and the Way of the Warrior.**

**At this point, you can forget everything and just be “it.” Best to put it this way: Simply be. YOU are “the spirit of the thing itself.”**

Thus ends the Book of No-thingness and the Book of Five Rings