

The Way of the Samurai

DIRECTIONS

The following question is based on the accompanying documents. (The documents have been edited for the purpose of this exercise). The question is designed to test your ability to work with and understand historical documents. Write an essay that:

- Has relevant thesis and supports that thesis with evidence from the documents.
- Uses all of the documents.
- Analyzes the documents by grouping them in as many appropriate ways as possible and does not simply summarize the documents individually.
- Takes into account both the sources of the documents and the authors' points of view.

ESSAY PROMPT

1. Analyze the fundamental values of the life of the samurai in medieval Japan (1185-1600). What additional documents would you need to further analyze the fundamental values of the Japanese samurai?

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The samurai were the warriors of pre-modern Japan. Wealthy landowners towards the end of the Heian period (794-1185) initially hired samurai to protect their lands. During the Genpei War (1180-1185), the samurai gained considerable influence. After the Genpei War, a military government called a shogunate dominated Japan; further increasing the influence of the samurai. As a result of their increased importance, the samurai became one of the highest ranking social classes in Japan. As their status increased so did the expectations of the samurai. The result was a code of ethics called the Bushido ("the way of the warrior").

Document 1

Source: From the *Taiheiki* (Chronicle of the Grand Pacification), about the defense of the Akasaka castle by Kusunoki Masashige, who is admired in Japan as the personification of samurai values

Assuredly I will not cherish my life in the hour of need, from the beginning having been steadfast for His Majesty's sake...But the true man of courage "is cautious in the face of difficulties, and deliberates before acting."* I will flee this castle for a time, causing the enemy to believe that I have taken my life, so that they may go away rejoicing. When they are gone I will come forward to fight; and if they return I will go deep into the mountains. When I have harassed the eastern hosts four or five times in this manner, will they not grow weary? This is a plan for destroying the enemy in safety.

*Quotation from Confucius' *Analects*

Document 2

Source: From Japanese Zen master, Dogon (1200-1253 CE) sermon on life and death; Zen Buddhism often appealed to the samurai class

Now, to conduct: in life identify yourself with life, at death with death. Abstain from yielding and craving. Life and death constitute the very being of Buddha. Thus, you should renounce life and death, you will lose; and you can expect no more if you cling to either. You must neither loathe, then, nor covet, neither think nor speak of these things....

There is an easy road to Buddhahood: avoid evil, do nothing about life-and-death, be merciful to all sentient things, respect superiors and sympathize with inferiors, have neither likes nor dislikes, and dismiss idle thoughts and worries. Only then will you become Buddha.

Document 3

Source: Instructions from Hojo Shigetoki, a leading samurai, given to his 18-year-old son in 1247 CE, after the latter's appointment to an administrative post

In dealing with subordinates do not make an obvious distinction between good and not-good. Use the same kind of language, give the same kind of treatment to all, and thus you will get the best out of the worst. But you yourself must not lose sight of the distinction between good character and bad character, between capable and incapable. You must be fair, but in practice you must not forget the difference between men who are useful and men who are not.

Document 4

Source: *Hagakure* (In the Shadow of Leaves); teachings on the bushido by a samurai turned Zen monk, Tsunetomo Yamamoto

The Way of the Samurai is found in death. When it comes to either/or, there is only the quick choice of death. It is not particularly difficult. Be determined and advance. To say that dying without reaching one's aim is to die a dog's death is the frivolous way of sophisticates. When pressed with the choice of life or death, it is not necessary to gain one's aim.

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

Document 5

Source: Excerpt from the *Tale of Heike*; the most famous account of the rise of the samurai; in this passage Yoshinaka, leader of the Minamoto clan fights one last fight

Tadayori tried to seize Yoshinaka by surrounding him with his many men. Yoshinaka fought desperately, urging his horse into the six thousand... When he had dashed through the enemy he found that his three hundred men had been cut down to fifty... He continued on, attacking several other small bands of one or two hundred here and there, until at last his men were reduced to four. Tomoe was among survivors.

Yoshinaka called her (Tomoe) to his side and said: "You are a woman—leave now for wherever you like, quickly! As for me, I shall fight to the death. If I am wounded, I will kill myself. How ashamed I would be if people said that Yoshinaka was accompanied by a woman in his last fight.

Document 6

Source: St. Francis Xavier, Jesuit missionary to Japan, 1506-1562 CE

The Japanese have a high opinion of themselves because they think no other nation can compare with them as regards weapons and valour, and so they look down on all foreigners. They greatly prize and value their arms, and prefer to have good weapons, decorated with gold and silver, more than anything else in the world... Never in my life have I met people who rely so much on their arms.

Document 7

Source: *The Seventeen Article Injunction of Asakura Toshikage* outlined the house laws to Asakura's successor Ujikage in 1480 CE

A famous monk once said that a master of men must be like the two Buddhist deities of Fudo and Aizen. Although Fudo carries a sword and Aizen carries a bow and arrows, these weapons are not intended for slashing or shooting, but for the purpose of subjugating devils. In their hearts, they are compassionate and circumspect. Like them a master of samurai must first rectify his own way, and then reward his loyal subjects and soldiers and eliminate those who are disloyal and treacherous. If you can discern between reason and unreason and between good and evil and act accordingly, your system of rewards and punishments is deemed compassionately administered. On the other hand, if your heart is prejudiced, no matter how much you know the words of sages and study the texts, they all come to naught.

Document 8

Source: Japanese samurai, by Italian photographer Felix Beato, picture taken c. 1860

