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Worms, Germs, and Technologies of the Self – Religion, Sword Fighting, and Medicine in Early Modern Japan



This article examines the unprecedented effort that was made to articulate the relations between knowledge of medicine, sword fighting, and Zen during the Tokugawa period. Focusing on the writings of Takuan Sōhō (1573-1646), Hakuin Ekaku (1686-1769), Kaibara Ekken (1630-1714), and others, this article attempts to show that intellectuals in early modern Japan began to idealize industrious behavior and self-discipline as a new ethos. To get a better sense of why these men began to espouse this new ethos, this paper will set their writings against the larger historical backdrop of the socio-economic changes that took place during the Tokugawa period with a special emphasis on the new *bakufu* policies toward military households and also temples and shrines. This article hopes to show how these larger historical forces inflected the experiences of the body (e.g. worms and stagnation) and how some men began to constitute themselves as self-disciplining subjects that are solely responsible for their own health and spiritual well-being.

Keywords: *ki* – medicine – Zen – worms – stagnation

When *ki* 氣 is pure and uncontaminated there is no illness. When the *ki* of a human being is orderly this *ki* will circulate throughout the entire body. When the *ki* is not orderly, here and there this *ki* will stagnate. If it stagnates in the mid-to-lower parts [of the body], the heat of *ki* will be generated, which will be forced to run upwards against its natural course and give rise to a headache. The heat of *ki* will also enter the waist, back, and joints and cause pain, and various illnesses such as coughing and vomiting will appear. This is [an instance of] an affair that arises from the absence of affairs (*buji* 無事). Furthermore, inside the body living things of various forms such as worms and accumulations will appear and torment the human being.¹

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1. *Kottō-roku* 骨董録: 2. Here and elsewhere, when I cite the *Kottō-roku* (colophon dated 1644), I follow the pagination of the critical edition in Takuan oshō zenshū kankōkai 1929, vol. 5.

In his *Kottō-roku* 骨董録 (Record of Curios) Zen master Takuan Sōhō 澤菴宗彭 (1573-1646) makes the above claim about the appearance of worms in our bodies. Few today, I suspect, would find this claim convincing. Indeed, it has now become more customary to think of intestinal or parasitic worms as problems not of stagnation but of contagion. When we now talk about worms in human bodies what we must address, in other words, is the problem of one body invading another. It is essentially a problem of intrusion.

But if we so hastily dismiss Takuan's claim about the appearance of worms (*mushi* 虫) and accumulations (*shaku* 積) from the stagnation (*todokoori* 滞り) of *ki* ("breath" or "vital energy") we would, I fear, fail to see what is really at stake here. Why, we should ask ourselves, did Takuan deem it necessary to speak of abnormalities in the body as a problem of stagnation? Whence this fear of stagnation? And what does this have to do with what Takuan calls "an affair that arises from the absence of affairs"?

There is, in fact, much we can glean from Takuan's claim above. Can we not, for instance, detect a concern about ethics – the self's duty to work on itself – in his claim that illnesses can result from our failure to keep *ki* in our bodies "orderly" (*junnaru* 順なる)? Can we not also detect a concern about movement, fluidity, and action in Takuan's reference to stagnation? And, can we not sense a fear of an incongruous and unwelcome presence in the reference to the affair that arises from the absence of affairs? I think the answer to all these questions is *yes*. That, at least, is what I would like to demonstrate in this article. But that is not all. By taking a closer look at these questions what I hope to have eventually established by the end of this article is that Takuan and his contemporaries in early modern Japan were trying to imagine what it would mean to be a productive subject in a tightly regulated, bureaucratized, and socially stratified world.

Takuan on stagnation

For Takuan, worms were the products of the stagnation of *ki*. But, worms do not and did not always provoke fears of stagnation. In fact, in ancient Greece and early modern Europe worms tended to provoke questions about something totally unrelated. What they tended to provoke were questions about the origins of life. When Aristotle, for instance, saw intestinal worms or helminths what he saw were signs of spontaneous generation. With no apparent living parentage certain insects, Aristotle observed, generate "spontaneously out of the dew which falls on foliage . . . others are produced in putrefying mud and dung; others in wood, green or dry; others in residues, whether voided residues or residues still within the living animal – an example is the so-called *helminths*." (Peck 1970: 173)

As influential as it was, the notion that life could emerge from non-life did not go unchallenged. When Takuan's contemporaries in seventeenth-century Europe saw worms they saw not spontaneous generation but evidence of preformation, that is, the emergence of life from a microscopic version of itself created and planted inside the testes of Adam by God.² In his book, *An Account of the Breeding of Worms in Human Bodies*, the French physician Nicolas Andry du Bois-Regard (1658-1742), for instance, declared that "In all male animals you shall observe, by the help of a microscope, in that humour which is contained in their testicles, and in other parts of generation, an incredible number of little worms, which for that reason I call spermatic worms." (Andry du Bois-Regard 1701: 177) He then went on to observe, "The spermatic worms in a man have a head much bigger than the spermatic worms in other creatures. Which agrees with the figure of the foetus, or humane birth, which when it is little, seems to be no more than a great head upon a long body, that seems to end in a kind of a tail." (Andry du Bois-Regard 1701: 178) For Andry du Bois-Regard, worms, in short, are the origins of life. Within them what we find are infinitely smaller but no less complete forms of all life in their respective state of maturity.

Takuan, as we saw earlier, had a different take on worms. In his discussion of this topic, he had little, if any, interest in looking for the origins of life – at least not in his *Kottō-roku*. Takuan's interest in worms were, rather, an extension of his interest in the origin of illness, which he lays out neatly at the beginning of his work:

As for the ten thousand things, they are the illness of heaven and earth. With respect to the matter of things being produced from no-thing and affairs arising from the absence of affairs, if they are in heaven they are the illness of heaven, on earth they are the illness of earth, in people they are the illness of people, in grass and trees they are the illness of grass and trees, and in birds and beasts they are the illness of birds and beasts. In sum, the ten thousand things are the illness of heaven and earth. When the sky is clear and the day is bright there are no things and no affairs, so this is also when heaven is devoid of illness. Out of the blue, a cloud rises, lightning strikes, thunder roars – this is [an instance of] a thing being produced from no-thing and an affair arising from the absence of affairs, that is to say, the illness of heaven. As for clouds rising out of the blue, in people this is like phlegm suddenly accumulating in the chest-heaven. As for lightning strikes and thunder roars, this is like fire moving around in the abdomen and the intestines-thunder making noise. Cloud is water. As for the roaring of thunder, it is a thing [that appears] when the clouds [made of] water and *ki* of fire join together and the fire moves inside and cracks outside. The sounds of the intestines are also fire. Phlegm is caused by water becoming stagnant. Cloud is also water. There cannot but be clouds in heaven and phlegm in people. Although there is some difference in degree according to the person, there can be no such thing as a person without any phlegm

2. See Pinto-Correia (1977).

at all. As for clouds, we call them clouds because we see them rise above our heads; as for phlegm, we know there's phlegm when it accumulates in the chest-heaven. But phlegm is something that is always present here and there throughout the entire body. Clouds are also here and there, but they accumulate with the wind. Phlegm accumulates in the chest-heaven when *ki* rises up. The *ki* of heaven descends and the *ki* of earth ascends. When this ascending is off-track the sun shines for a long time and the rain falls for a long time. Similarly, when heaven and earth are not orderly water accumulates and becomes a cloud. When the *ki* of people is blocked and stagnates water congeals and becomes phlegm. Clouds are the illness in heaven. The sun and the moon are darkened by them. Phlegm is the illness of the human body. True *ki* suffers because of it. We should look at phlegm as we do clouds and look at clouds as we do phlegm. What we call illness is produced where *ki* is blocked and stuck because *yin* and *yang* are mixed up and the clear and the murky are jumbled together. (*Kottō-roku*: 1-2)

Just as an unexpected thunderstorm spoils a nice clear day, Takuan is arguing here that the emergence of phlegm disturbs the well-being of the body. Put simply, phlegm, like worms, is a cause for concern because its presence is a sign of one's failure to prevent stagnation and accumulation. But this, I think, is where the analogy between clouds and phlegm breaks down. Whereas heaven and earth cannot, as far as I can tell, willfully prevent accumulations like clouds from occurring, people can. In fact, as we shall see, they *must*.

This idea that one must prevent bodily fluids from getting stuck, stagnant, and turning into cesspools of putrid *ki* also appears in another short treatise by Takuan entitled *Isetsu* 醫說 (Discourse on Medicine).³ Takuan begins this treatise with a succinct but informative tour of the various parts of the body. Along the way we are also provided with a brief explanation of how each part works. All throughout this process Takuan offers few surprises: the body, a microcosm of sorts, consists of the five *zō* 臟 organs (i.e., liver, heart, lungs, and kidneys) and each *zō* organ corresponds to a certain season, color, taste, phase (i.e., wood, earth, water, fire, and metal) and so forth. Much of what he has to say about the body has actually been said before. In fact, Takuan frankly admits how deeply he and his contemporaries are indebted to the work of the Japanese physician-scholar Manase Dōsan 曲直瀬道三 (1507-1594) who himself built his medical theories upon the earlier work of the Chinese physician-scholar Zhu Zhenheng 朱震亨 (1281-1358), otherwise known as Danxi 丹溪.⁴ This is, perhaps, only to be expected given the fact that Dōsan and those who carried on his medical teachings did, indeed, play a pivotal role in the shaping of early modern Japanese medicine as the official physicians of the Tokugawa shoguns.

3. Here and elsewhere, when I cite the *Isetsu*, I follow the pagination of the critical edition in Takuan oshō zenshū kankōkai 1929, vol. 5.

4. See *Isetsu*: 17-18.

But let us return to the issue of preventing stagnation. What all three men – Takuan, Dōsan, and Danxi – use as the basis for understanding illness and stagnation is *ki*. Takuan could not be any less equivocal: “the various illnesses are all *ki*.” (*Isetsu*: 28) As he immediately goes on to explain in his *Isetsu*, illnesses materialize in the flesh, blood, *zō* organs, and *fu* 腑 organs (i.e., large and small intestines, ‘three burners,’ gall bladder, urinary bladder, and stomach) where *ki* becomes stagnant. Takuan then draws a rather unconventional analogy:

In the martial arts of the Yagyū [school] there is something called defects/illnesses (*yamai* 病). The defects/illnesses in the human body are the same. They refer to the defect/illness of stagnation. If *ki* is extended throughout the entire body and there is no stagnation, there is no defect/illness. If *ki* is dispersed and becomes diminished, there is defect/illness. Indeed, if *ki* is diminished, energy becomes weak, [*ki*] will not be able to circulate, [*ki*] will become stagnant here and there, and a defect/illness will form. (*Isetsu*: 28-29)

Some may immediately recognize the context of this analogy. What Takuan has in mind here is the sword fighting or fencing technique of his close acquaintance, Yagyū Munenori 柳生宗矩 (1571-1646).⁵ Among Takuan’s many acquaintances, no one seems to garner as much attention as this famed swordsman, samurai, and personal instructor to the shogun. This, no doubt, is due in large part to the famous letter that Takuan prepared for Munenori, which was later published as the *Fudōchi shinmyō-roku* 不動智神妙録 (Record of the Divine and Marvelous Power of Immovable Wisdom).⁶

5. Consider the following passage on illness found in Yagyū Munenori’s *Heihō kadensho* 兵法家伝書 (*Hereditary Letters on Martial Arts*):

To think only of winning is sickness. To think only of using the martial arts is sickness. To think only of demonstrating the result of one’s training is sickness, as is thinking only of making an attack or waiting for one. To think in a fixated way only of expelling such sickness is also sickness. Whatever remains absolutely in the mind should be considered sickness. As these various sicknesses are all present in the mind, you must put your mind in order and expel them. (Wilson 2003: 89)

For the reference in the original text, see Imamura (1982: 108) or Watanabe (1985: 51). For evidence of Takuan’s input in the formation of the *Heihō kadensho*, see Watanabe (1985: 183-184). For an introduction to this text, see Watanabe (1972: 648-667). As William Bodiford points out, however, we should not hastily take this relationship between Takuan and Munenori as evidence of some special connection between Zen and swordsmanship; see Bodiford (2005: 69-103). A similar argument can also be found in Hurst (1993: 47).

6. The exact date of this text’s publication and its original title are unknown. The earliest surviving copies of this text – hand-copied manuscripts and printed books – date only as far back as the late seventeenth century. For an overview and photographic reproduction of the earliest copies of Takuan’s letter, see Satō (2001).

A brief look at this letter seems to be in order. Let us, in fact, focus on the remarkably simple point that is made in the letter, namely seeking immovable wisdom and avoiding the “stopping of the mind/heart” (*kokoro no tomaru* 心の止る). Not surprisingly, Takuan begins with an example close to Munenori’s heart. When an opponent moves in to strike you with his sword and the mind is stuck on the sword you will, Takuan warns Munenori, be cut down.⁷ If, however, the mind/heart does not stop and pause to think about the opponent, his sword, your own sword, or even the rhythm of the duel, then you will, Takuan claims, be able to seize the opponent’s sword and cut him down with his own sword. A skilled swordsman, in other words, does not allow his mind/heart to be taken away (*torareru*) by anything, not even himself. Imagine, as Takuan urges Munenori to do, pushing a gourd into water and trying to make it “stop.” Ideally, like this gourd, the mind/heart should be as difficult to “stop.” This mind/heart that does not stop is what Takuan paradoxically or perhaps ironically calls the immovable wisdom. As he reminds Munenori, the mind/heart must, therefore, not be placed below the navel as some suggest; rather, it should be extended throughout the entire body.⁸

But, wait, you say. Were we not talking about *ki*? Why are we now talking about the mind/heart? There may, in fact, be a good reason for this conflation. As Takuan explains in his *Isetsu*, the right kidney, which corresponds to the element fire, is called the gate of life (*meimon* 命門) and serves as the source of primordial *ki* (*genki* 元氣).⁹ If primordial *ki* does not circulate, then blood will not flow and the person will die. Through something called the ‘three burners’ (*sanshō* 三焦), the gate of life is connected directly to the mind/heart, which, needless to say, also corresponds to the element fire. The point that we need to bear in mind here is this: primordial *ki* and its circulation are thus directly related to the mind/heart.

Ki and the mind/heart, however, are not therefore equals. There is a clear hierarchy between them. The fire in the heart/mind, as we learn in the *Isetsu*, functions as the prince or sovereign and the fire in the right kidney functions as its retainer or minister.¹⁰ As their respective names suggest, ministerial fire’s primary function is to convey the commands of sovereign fire to the rest of the body. Takuan, then, seems justified in claiming, “the mind/heart and *ki* must not be taken as the same thing.” (*Isetsu*: 32) *Ki*, he adds, must not run ahead of the mind/heart. Rather, they should be in balance with each other while coursing through the body. But in his *Kottō-roku* Takuan renders explicit which of the two he thinks is in control of the other while in balance:

7. See Ichikawa (1982: 55-58). For an English translation, see Wilson (1986: 19-20).

8. See Ichikawa (1982: 72-74); and also Wilson (1986: 30-31).

9. See *Isetsu*: 7.

10. See *Isetsu*: 8. For more on sovereign and ministerial fire, see the discussion in Ahn (2008: 188); and also Despeux (2001).

Item: the mind/heart takes *ki* as its vehicle and labors by riding *ki*. If the mind/heart labors excessively, then *ki* will be depleted. If cogitation is excessive, then the mind/heart will be depleted. The mind/heart is diminished by deliberation and *ki* is diminished by circulation. To use the mind to render *ki* serene and prevent *ki* from becoming depleted is to nourish life.

Item: if the mind/heart rides *ki*, it will cause bad things to happen. To have *ki* ride the mind/heart is to walk the good path and have *ki* work as one wishes. [*Ki*] does not discriminate between using and discarding. The mind/heart deliberates and discriminates. It is good to have *ki* ride the discriminating mind/heart; if [the mind/heart] rides non-discriminating *ki* it will be drawn into frivolous places. (*Kottō-roku*: 43)

We need to pay close attention to what Takuan is saying here. What you will see, I believe, is a tension that cannot be readily resolved. First, take note of the fact that Takuan is trying to convince the reader that *ki*, which is literally indiscriminate, must ride the mind/heart and not the other way around. It is the mind/heart and not *ki* that must work and labor to discriminate between the various phenomena. But if this (cognitive) labor is excessive – and, given the pathological nature of all phenomena (“the ten thousand things are the illness of heaven and earth”), how can it not be excessive? – then there is depletion and eventually there will be, as we have seen, stagnation. No one arguably knew the dangers of this condition better than Takuan who claims to have suffered from “stagnation illness” (*utsubyō* 鬱病) in the winter of 1620.¹¹

If there is some truth to Takuan’s claims, then the mind/heart seems to be caught between a rock and a hard place. It must discriminate but not too much. It must maintain indifference but, again, not too much. Also consider the following. According to Takuan, stagnation appears when there is excessive *ki* or diminished *ki*.¹² The former can be treated by making *ki* work and labor and the latter by having stagnant *ki* disperse. As Takuan points out, for most of us our health problems are largely a consequence of our indulgence in food and sex.¹³ Worms and accumulations, for instance, usually retreat into their respective dwelling places in the body, but the consumption of fine cuisine and overdrinking produces heat – a sign that the fire of the heart/mind is laboring excessively – and causes a surge in *ki*.¹⁴ As a result, *ki* enters the nests of worms and forces them out of their nests. And there it stagnates. By reducing the expenditure of and loosening (i.e., dispersing) *ki*, however, worms can be made to return to their nests. Takuan hastens to add that medicinal herbs and acupuncture will be of little use in accomplishing this aim. Their use, he claims, may even lead to death.

11. See Funaoka (1988: 33-34).

12. See Funaoka (1988: 32).

13. See Funaoka (1988: 33).

14. See Funaoka (1988: 14).

If not medicinal herbs and acupuncture, what, then, is one to use? Takuan believes one should use not medicine but *ki*.¹⁵ Or, more specifically, he believes one should use *ki* to put *ki* in order (*totonou* 調⁵). This, he declares, is a technique that belongs to “us,” that is, to Zen. This technique must be used because, he adds, it is not good enough to just support *ki* or disperse it. One must, according to Takuan, “move” or “transfer” (*utsusu*) *ki* onto an object and, then, stagnant *ki* will be “taken away” (*ubawasu*). For example, when someone is upset this person should gaze at the moon and the moon will take away the tangled *ki* that is responsible for this physical and emotional condition. When tangled *ki* is thus taken away Takuan claims that everything will naturally be put back in order again. This, however, was not a permanent remedy. Quickly transferring your attention and thus your *ki* to another object, say, a distant mountain can only free the mind/heart (i.e., have “no mind”) and rid one of stagnation temporarily.¹⁶ Lest it become stuck on the object, the mind must continue to transfer *ki* from one object to the next. But imagine having a mind/heart that tends to get stuck on everything that comes its way. If *ki* follows the mind/heart and runs towards these objects, it becomes exhausted and diminished. (Funaoka 1988: 38-39) Rendering *ki* serene – imagine a clear sky without a cloud in sight – by controlling and regulating the mind/heart is thus key to nourishing life. But is it? How can *ki* remain serene while the mind/heart continues to labor?

Here, it might be worth taking a brief look at another work by Takuan entitled the *Riki sabetsu-ron* 理氣差別論 (Distinguishing Principle and *ki*), which he composed in 1621 a year after his bout with “stagnation illness.”¹⁷ The *ki* of activity and quietude, he tells us, is produced in the form of activity or quietude by objects.¹⁸ This *ki*, however, is not produced by “principle” (*ri* 理), which is neither active nor quiet. All principle offers is a straight and proper “guideline” (*kiban* 規範) – the Way (*dō* 道) – for objects to follow. When *ki* follows this guideline it becomes straight and proper.¹⁹ When it does not it becomes crooked. Inside humans and objects this guideline or principle is also known as “nature” (*sei* 性). When nature is activated it is called the great mind/heart, the mind/heart of the Way, or straight mind.²⁰ Conversely, what turns against nature is called the deluded mind. The point that Takuan is trying to make, of course, is that the mind/heart should try to follow the guideline, that is, the Way. This is how everything becomes peaceful.²¹

15. See Funaoka (1988: 22).

16. I say temporarily because this technique will, according to Takuan, eventually lead to exhaustion; see Funaoka (1988: 32-33).

17. As Bodiford (2005: 75) points out, Takuan’s *Riki sabetsu-ron* was widely cited by martial artists during the Tokugawa period.

18. See Ichikawa (1978: 100-101).

19. See Ichikawa (1978: 103).

20. See Ichikawa (1978: 105).

21. See Ichikawa 1978: 109.

Self-regulation

If we are to trust Takuan, there is a delicate balance to maintain. If the balance between the principle (*ri*) and *ki* or activity and serenity is lost *ki* stagnates and the appearance of worms is sure to follow. But what interests me about this balance is not whether it is possible, true, or even actually related to worms. What interests me is its historicity and its relation to the ethics of self-regulation.

How, indeed, did the balance of “activity” and “serenity,” affairs and the absence of affairs, or excess and lack of *ki* become an object of knowledge and experience for Takuan? How did this idea of a balanced mind/heart come to structure human experience during the Tokugawa period? And how did Takuan learn to sense stagnation in his body? There were a few notable changes that took place during the first half of the Tokugawa period that may help us understand how this happened. The first and perhaps most important development is the rise of what Kuriyama Shigehisa (1997: 44) calls an “anxiety about stagnation” (*todokoori no fuan* 滞りの不安). As Kuriyama points out, complaints about *kenpeki* 痲癖 and *katakori* 肩こり – manifestations of stagnation – were fairly common during the Tokugawa period. But, curiously, few before this period made such complaints. Kuriyama believes, and rightly so, that this anxiety may have something to do with what Hayami Akira and Miyamoto Matao (1988: 36-37) call Japan’s “industrious revolution” (*kinben kakumei* 勤勉革命) of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the growth of a cash economy and rhetoric of circulation (*junkan* 循環), and a newfound emphasis on abdominal diagnosis and massage therapy. In addition to these factors, what we should not overlook is the growth of print industry and influx of medical texts from Ming and Qing China – access to which had previously been limited to those who belonged to a lineage of physicians for centuries – during this period.

As I have already discussed these developments elsewhere,²² I will refrain from repeating my earlier arguments here. Suffice it to say that the wide dissemination of medical knowledge, made possible by the medium of print and access to medical knowledge, was an important factor behind the growing awareness of stagnation (mostly, it seems, among literate males) during the Tokugawa period. Rather than focus on these developments, in the remaining space of this article I would like to briefly investigate another possible way to understand the problem of stagnation during the Tokugawa period. What I would like to do here is pose a different and seemingly unrelated question: how did people experience themselves as productive subjects during this period? What were the conditions that made this experience possible? Allow me to jump straight to the conclusion. In a word, one could, it seems, be a productive subject as long as one could regulate (*setsu* 節) one’s self,

22. Ahn (2008); see also Yamada and Kuriyama (1997).

mind/heart, and *ki*. But the regulated self was neither a simple extension of the private experiences of the individual nor a social construct imposed from above. Rather, regulation in this context was both deeply subjective and thoroughly social.

In his discussion of the problem of “intestinal bloating” (*senki* 疝氣) – yet another instance of stagnant *ki* – during the Tokugawa period, Shirasugi Etsuo paints a different picture of stagnation. He approaches stagnation as a problem primarily of experience and representation rather than that of self-regulation and ethics. In developing this line of approach the writings of Takuan and Kaibara Ekken [or Ekiken] 貝原益軒 (1630-1714) proved to be crucial. Shirasugi, for instance, cites the following passage from Ekken’s immensely popular work, *Yōjō-kun* 養生訓 [Lessons on Nourishing Life] published in 1713: “There are two obstructions to nourishing life. The first is the depletion of primordial *ki*. The second is the stagnation of primordial *ki*. If food, sex, and labor are excessive, then primordial *ki* will be harmed and depleted. If food, rest, and sleep are excessive, then it will become stagnant and blocked. Be it depletion or stagnation, both harm primordial *ki*.”²³ Shirasugi (1997: 72), like Kuriyama Shigehisa (1997: 45), believes Ekken is trying to accomplish something quite novel here. Ekken, they argue, is challenging the old and well-established ideal of storing and guarding primordial *ki* against its depletion in tranquility (*sei* 静).

There is no denying that something is going on here. The art of nourishing life had always been about replenishing depleted *ki* in the body by safely storing it in the cinnabar field (*tanden* 丹田), the tranquil ocean of *ki* below the navel. In the *Yōjō-kun* the focus shifts, however, towards the importance of moving the body, maintaining control, and circulating *ki*, that is, towards fighting stagnation:

The mind is the lord of the body. It must be calmed in quietude. The body is the servant of the mind. It must be made to move and labor. If the mind is calmed in quietude, the heavenly sovereign [of the body] will be replenished, pleased, and without suffering. If the body is made to move and labor, drink and food will not stagnate and [since] blood and vital energy will thus circulate there will be no illness. (Ishikawa 1981: 30)

As Kuriyama points out, stagnation was not unknown in earlier medical literature, but never before had it stood on equal ground with depletion as it does in Ekken’s work. This is what makes passages like the one above so unique. Shirasugi, however, contends that the same cannot be said about Takuan’s treatment of stagnation. Although Takuan may have shown some interest in the problem of stagnation, he still places a greater emphasis on the problem of depletion.

Shirasugi even ventures to offer an explanation as to why this is the case. Takuan, he explains, belonged to what he calls “a period of rapid growth,” which culminated in the efflorescence of the Genroku 元禄 period (1688-1704). Ekken, in

23. Ishikawa (1981: 30). For an English translation, see Wilson (2008: 42).

contrast, wrote his work on nourishing life as the bubble of this earlier prosperity was about to burst. This, Shirasugi claims, is why we see a greater emphasis on depletion in Takuan's work and stagnation in Ekken's. In other words, as Shirasugi (1997: 73) puts it, Takuan and Ekken "expressed the eras in which they respectively lived and the bodily experiences of those eras in the medical idiom of *ki*."

Shirasugi is right. What we are probably witnessing in the work of Takuan and Ekken is a reflection of their experiences, which were inflected by the changing socio-economic conditions of their respective eras. But I also happen to think that their work is more than just a repository of "bodily experiences," which is not to say that this is how Shirasugi himself understood the writings of Takuan and Ekken. Their work is as prescriptive as it is descriptive. They are also as much about aspirations and fears as they are about actual experiences.

The differences between Takuan and Ekken, I think, reflect a common concern. Takuan, as you may recall, is of the opinion that *ki* must remain serene while the mind/heart labors. Ekken, on the other hand, insists that the mind/heart must remain serene while the body and its *ki* labor. It is almost as if we are looking at the lateral inversion of Takuan's argument in a mirror. To be sure, there are obvious differences between Takuan and Ekken's writings on nourishing life and they should be given due consideration. It might, indeed, be the case that Takuan's emphasis on the mind's ability to distinguish right from wrong has something to do with his reaching intellectual maturity as efforts were made to bring order to the chaos of the Warring States period (1478-1568). Similarly, Ekken's emphasis on making the body labor may have something to do with the prosperity of the Genroku period. But both men clearly shared an interest in work (or labor) and concerns about how the individual (or his mind/heart) should relate to this work (or labor). Take, for example, the following passage from Ekken's *Yōjō-kun*:

For keeping the body/self (*mi* 身) in good condition and nourishing life there is an essential formula that can be summed up in a single word. If this is practiced, life can be kept in good condition for a long time and there will be no illness. There will be filial piety towards parents and loyalty towards the lord; and the house and body/self will be kept in good condition. In everything one does nothing will be inadequately done. What is this one word? It is the word "awe" (*osore* 畏). Awe is the mind-technique for guarding the body/self. In each and every affair it is to reduce the mind [i.e., focus], not leave it to *ki*, and seek to reduce mistakes; it is to always be in awe of the Way of Heaven and accordingly practice self-restraint (*tsutsushimi* つつしみ); and to be in awe of human desires and be willing to restrain oneself. This awe is the first step towards self-restraint. When in awe self-restraint is produced. When not in awe there is no self-restraint. In explaining the word "reverence" (*kei* 敬) late in his life Master Zhu [i.e., Zhu Xi 朱熹], therefore, said that reverence is close to the word "awe."²⁴

24. Ishikawa (1981: 29-30); cf. Wilson (2008: 42).

The original term for “awe” (*osore*) in the passage above is a difficult one to translate. It could also mean, for instance, fear, dread, respect, seriousness, and reverence. But the point that Ekken is trying to make, I think, is clear enough. *Osore* is a disposition or attitude that opens up a gap between the affairs (or work/labor) in which one is immersed and his mind/heart. This gap, as Ekken urges us to ponder carefully, is what allows an individual to practice self-restraint. This is not, however, a gap that is so wide as to amount to a form of radical withdrawal from the world. It is a healthy distance, if you will, that an individual must maintain between himself and his immediate reality so that this reality is neither too far nor too close.

Ekken, in other words, seems to thus be in agreement with Takuan that the key to nourishing life is regulation and self-restraint. As he puts it succinctly, “those who have the will to nourish life should always have the mind [serve] as the sovereign. If there is a sovereign, then one will be able to discern [properly] and not give rise to anger or desire in making decisions of right and wrong. No mistakes will be made.”²⁵ Similarly, Ekken’s contemporary, Zen master Hakuin Ekaku 白隠慧鶴 (1686-1769), also likens the mind/heart to a sovereign and argues that the mind/heart should focus on trying to accumulate *ki* in the lower part of the body (“the people below”). Having experienced the “malady of meditation” (*zenbyō* 禅病) first hand, Hakuin speaks about this matter with confidence. While practicing something he calls “silent illumination zen” (*mokushō-zen* 默照禅) he claims to have allowed the fire of his mind/heart rise up against its natural course, which gave rise to the malady of meditation. He took medicine but to no avail. Only after he engaged in another form of meditation known as inner contemplation (*naikan* 内観) was he able to cure himself of his illness.

Hakuin’s view on the inner contemplation technique is a topic that is too complex to summarize here.²⁶ For the purposes of this article, the only thing we need to note about the inner contemplation technique is the fact that it is essentially a technique for replenishing and storing *ki* in the lower part of the body or, more specifically, in the cinnabar field (*tanden* 丹田) below the navel. Hakuin, however, was also clearly aware that this technique could potentially result in the stagnation of *ki*. As Hakuin himself so eloquently put it, “if I control the mind and [fix] it to a single place, would there not be stagnation of *ki* and blood?” (Yoshizawa 2000: 126-127)

Hakuin tried to minimize or perhaps even eliminate this problem by arguing, not unlike Takuan, that in inner contemplation princely fire – the element associated with the mind/heart – governs quietude.²⁷ Like a ruler who cares for the people below, the mind/heart, Hakuin argues, must focus on accumulating *ki* in the

25. Ishikawa (1981: 40); cf. Wilson (2008: 55).

26. I have discussed this issue elsewhere. See Ahn (2008).

27. See Ahn (2008, esp. p. 199).

lower part of the body. This, I think, is a very important analogy. What Hakuin is trying to say is that the mind/heart may accumulate *ki* in quietude by focusing on the area that is located farthest away from the head, but in doing so the mind/heart, like a ruler who cares for the people, *never ceases to do its duty*. The same idea seems to be at work in the advice that Hakuin offered to the ailing Jōshōmei'in no miya 淨照明院宮 (Rishū nyoō 理秀女王; 1725-1764), abbess of the *monzeki* temple Hōkyō-ji 宝鏡寺, and her younger sibling Jōmeishin'in no miya 淨明心院宮 (Sonjō nyoō 尊乘女王; 1730-1789), abbess of the *monzeki* temple Kōshō-in 光照院.²⁸ As he tells the two abbesses, “Everyday, little by little, doing the kind of work that will gradually release sweat is an exceptional form of nourishing life. It is also an expedient means of significantly enhancing the power of concentration and thereby making the mind and body strong and firm.” (Yoshizawa 1999: 166-167) This advice to labor or cultivate what he calls “meditative powers of manual labor in activity” (*dōyō samu no jōriki* 動搖作務ノ定力) was not intended only for the eyes and ears of the two abbesses, who as members of the imperial clan would not have been accustomed to personally carrying out physical labor of any kind. Throughout his large corpus of writings Hakuin consistently maintains that a student of Zen should carry out such “meditative-work in the midst of activity” (*dōchū no kufū* 動中の工夫).

This idea that one can nourish *ki* in quietude without leaving the realm of activity, that is, the duties that one must perform in the hustling and bustling world of everyday life by practicing self-regulation was clearly on the minds of a number of the most noted intellectuals from the early Tokugawa period. For some of these figures, it was the ability of the mind-as-lord (*shushin* 主心) to regulate itself that prevented one from indulging oneself too much in food, sex, and even quietude. The necessity of self-regulation thus served as the implicit condition or frame for experiencing oneself as a productive subject during the early Tokugawa period. But how and why, we may ask, did self-regulation become a necessity?

Pax Tokugawa and the problem of identity

Stagnation – worms, accumulations, *katakori*, intestinal bloating etc. – was a historically singular form of experience that emerged during the Tokugawa period. It was an experience, however, that was filtered through and mediated by a very special kind of meditative-work, which one could practice while carrying out one's everyday duties in the midst of activity. Without the moral imperative to fashion a self (“the sovereign”) that could regulate and maintain a fair balance between activity and quietude stagnation, in other words, would not have become the kind of anxiety-provoking experience that it clearly became during the Tokugawa period.

28. *monzeki* temple refers to an important temple run by an aristocratic or imperial lineage.

Self-regulation, to be sure, was not a novel idea, but a curious partnership had developed during the Tokugawa period that reinvigorated an interest in this form of subjectivation or voluntary work of the self on the self. In its attempt to place the various religious institutions under tighter control, the *bakufu*, barely a decade old, quickly issued a series of legal directives (*hatto* 法度) that radically re-imagined the religious landscape of the newly unified realm. All temples and shrines were, for instance, encouraged and later forced to reorganize themselves into a rigid pyramid-like hierarchy that we now call the head and branch (*honmatsu* 本末) system.²⁹ As a consequence, what were once hazy boundaries became well-defined and tightly guarded borders between the various Buddhist sects. The question of identity thus became all consuming on both the meso-level of the institution and micro-level of the individual. It became imperative to know oneself.

The importance of meditative-work was re-discovered as this search for sectarian identity was about to come into full swing.³⁰ It proved to be a useful technology that one could use to wrest the mind/heart from the flux of affairs and phenomena and take charge of his or her own destiny. And, needless to say, it proved to be a useful means of delineating sectarian boundaries. In the mid-seventeenth century scholar monks from the various Buddhist sects raced to publish a meditation manual ostensibly composed by an important patriarch or ancestor of their respective sects.³¹ For monks like Hakuin, the need to clarify the legitimacy and effectiveness of their use of *koan* became all the more apparent and urgent with the arrival of the eminent *émigré* Chinese monks whose lively and seemingly authentic form of *koan* practice allowed them to draw a large following in Japan. These *émigré* Chinese monks, now more commonly known as the Ōbaku 黄檗 sect of Zen, posed an even greater threat to Rinzai Zen monks because they traced their spiritual lineages back to the same Zen ancestors.³²

Hakuin passionately defended the legitimacy of his own Ōtōkan 應燈關 lineage – that is, the lineage that stems from Nanpo Jōmyō 南浦紹明 (Daiō kokushi 大應國師; 1235-1309), Shūhō Myōchō 宗峰妙超 (Daitō kokushi 大燈國師; 1282-1337), and Kanzan Egen 關山慧玄 (1277-1361) – in Japan and tried to demonstrate that this lineage's understanding of meditative-work was more faithful to the orthodox *koan* practice pioneered by the eminent Chan masters of the Song dynasty such as Dahui Zonggao 大慧宗杲 (1089-1163).³³ Similar efforts were made by monks who belong

29. The work of Tamamuro Fumio 圭室文雄 still remains the most authoritative source for this topic; see especially Tamamuro (1971) and (1987). See also Nosco (1996) and Williams (2009).

30. For the “rediscovery” of meditative-work in China and Japan, see Mohr (2006).

31. See Iwanaga (2005: 121) and Mohr (2006).

32. For Ōbaku, see Baroni (2000).

33. For Hakuin's arguments, see the collection of his letters to Nabeshima Naotsune 鍋島直恒 (1701-1749), otherwise known as *Oradegama* 遠羅天釜 [Orade Tea Kettle] in Yoshizawa (2001a); and the English translation in Yampolsky (1971). See also the discussion in Ahn (2008).

to what is now known as the Sōtō sect. Menzan Zuihō's 面山瑞方 (1683-1769) *Jijuyū zanmai* 自受用三昧 (Samādhi of Personal Enjoyment) is a good case in point. In this "manual" Menzan offers a list of meditative practices that he deems inadequate: seated meditation, *koan* meditation, having no mind, and making the mind labor while looking for the perceiving subject etc.³⁴ In lieu of these practices and in keeping with what he considered to be Dōgen's 道元 (1200-1253) understanding of meditation, Menzan simply recommends the realization of the inherent purity or mirror-like nature of the mind, which he underscores should not be confused with discriminations (i.e., thoughts or the reflections on the mirror) or their absence (i.e., the absence of thoughts or no mind). The purpose of publishing the *Jijuyū zanmai* in 1737 was, in short, an extension of Menzan's efforts to establish the writings of Dōgen as the orthodox fountainhead of his own Sōtō sect.³⁵

The question of identity was not raised only in the realm of religion. Other regulations prepared by the *bakufu* ensured this. Regulated tightly by the directives for military households (*buke shobatto* 武家諸法度), the numerous daimyo and their samurai vassals, for instance, were also forced to consider these and other similar issues related to ever intensifying bureaucratization and social stratification.³⁶ The need for a more effective means or technology with which to establish a sense of autonomy and control over one's own destiny in the growing bureaucracy of the *bakufu* and local government was apparent and texts such as the *Fudōchi shinmyō-roku*, *Yōjō-kun*, and *Hagakure* 葉隠 (Hidden Behind Leaves) written by an alienated samurai vassal of the Nabeshima house of the Saga *han* 佐賀藩 named Yamamoto Tsunemoto 山本常本 (1659-1719), met this need. What these texts offered was an effective means or technology through which one could fully participate and be productive in a rigidly regulated, stratified, and impersonal world without being totally consumed by this world. This, I think, is how we should understand Ekken's declaration that samurai, farmers, artisans, and merchants can nourish life and be productive by devoting themselves to their respective family trade.³⁷

It is important that we not understand the repeated references to self-regulated labor, that is, to the voluntary submission of oneself to the perfection of one's family trade and duty as instances of social indoctrination. It is equally important, however, that we not conversely see these references as reflections of a deeper conflict, tension, or contradiction between the autonomy-seeking individual and the conservative realities of a bureaucratic state. What we have in the aforementioned texts, in other

34. See Iwanaga (2005: 115); and also Riggs (2009: 257-258.)

35. See Riggs (2009).

36. See Hurst (1998: 71-75). But, as G. Cameron Hurst III (1998: 183) also points out, martial arts during the Tokugawa "functioned as arenas of social mobility"; see also Hurst (1993).

37. See Ishikawa (1981: 35); cf. Wilson (2008: 48-49).

words, are not stories of *resistance*. Instead, what we can witness in these texts, I believe, are vivid examples of a new subjectivity – a subjectivity defined by self-regulated labor – in the process of its formation. The significance of this claim may become clearer if we take a brief look at a different take on this material.

The sociologist Ikegami Eiko succinctly and eloquently describes the predicament that Tokugawa samurai faced this way:

The lively samurai culture of honor, deeply rooted in the emotional subjectivity of individual samurai, was cramped within the constraints of the institutional arrangement of state-centered honor. The relation among men had become a relation among objects of honor symbols such as seating, dress, and the amount of koku (income in rice units) that displayed a person's attributes of honor to the outside world. The traditional honor of the samurai, based upon their sovereign pride, was losing its spiritual and socioeconomic foundations. Its connection with the samurai's emotional wholeness and dignity was weakened. The objective criteria of honor presented to the samurai as external norms, forcibly imposed, compelled serious samurai to construct new approaches for making internal sense of these conditions of life.³⁸

I wholeheartedly agree with this reading. I also agree with her reading of the book, *Hagakure*, as an example of such an approach. But I hesitate to say, as Ikegami (1995: 279-280) does, that “[t]he book represents one of the most acute reflections of the samurai's self-understanding, expressed by a man who internalized and wrestled with the tensions of samurai existence in the early eighteenth century.”

The reason why I hesitate is because the tension of which Ikegami speaks here is the tension between the moral autonomy of the vassal and the absolute authority of the lord or the *han* polity. To put it bluntly, I find it difficult to believe that Tsunemoto's arguments in his *Hagakure* reflect the *continuity* of a structural tension between autonomy and authority, efficacy and reliability, and human agency and social structures.³⁹ According to Ikegami (1995: 291), Tsunemoto tried to alleviate this tension (or these tensions) by providing a “logical reconciliation between the samurai's sentiment of honor and the authority of the lord.” This enabled the Tokugawa samurai, who were “compelled to accept the reality of their subordination in a hierarchical government structure,” to reframe the “absolute loyalty that was forced on [them] by the social and political structures of their society as the vassal's free moral decision.”⁴⁰ Ikegami (1995: 291) also puts it this way: “In

38. Ikegami (1995: 276-277). Ikegami (1995: 282) also describes the tension as “the cultural double bind of Tokugawa ‘vassalic bureaucracy’ in which the Tokugawa samurai were caught.”

39. See especially Ikegami (1995: 28 and 39-43).

40. Ikegami (1995: 291). Needless to say, I agree with this reading of *Hagakure*. What I find problematic, however, is Ikegami's understanding of “the vassal's free moral decision” as his “individualistic and assertive ego” (see below).

exalting the ideal of submission to the absolute authority of the master, Tsunemoto was paradoxically constructing a moral framework for restoring and reasserting the individualistic and assertive ego of the samurai, which was a legacy from the medieval tradition of samurai honor.”

There is only one part of this assertion that I think is in need of a caveat. Although it is true that the explicit message of the text – daily meditation on death, cultivating the willingness to commit honorable suicide, and maintain absolute loyalty to one’s lord – appears to be a nostalgic one of yearning for the now lost violent warrior past, I do not think we should take this message for granted. If we examine *Hagakure* in context, I think it is clear that Tsunemoto, the author, was trying not so much to go back to the old way of the warrior (*bushidō* 武士道) as forge a new one.⁴¹ Tsunemoto, in other words, did not restore the individualistic ego and moral autonomy of the samurai that had originated in the sovereign pride of the landed military elite of medieval Japan (which was, to use Ikegami’s own expression, a cultural “resource”).⁴² Rather, what he did was articulate a new subjectivity and capacity for action (i.e., agency) that was both desirable and viable (perhaps only) in the bureaucratized and centralized world of Tokugawa Japan.

Hagakure, in fact, is not just about death and honorific individuality.⁴³ Tsunemoto also spends a great deal of time talking about the proper decorum of the samurai, referring even to such seemingly mundane things as the inappropriateness of yawning in front of others and the virtue of reading as if others were listening. Tsunemoto’s book also praises the virtue of honesty, courage, and seeking advice from others. In other words, the aim of the book is not to have its reader become obsessed with death but to have the reader discipline and regulate himself and his actions, not for the sake of truth or beauty but for the sake of the lord and the *han* polity in general. Self-mastery, not death, was the primary concern of Tsunemoto’s *Hagakure*.

As Ikegami correctly points out, *Hagakure* was written when the bureaucratization of the Saga *han* reached its apex. The implicit hope of the book, however, was – *pace* Ikegami – not that samurai would live with the reality of death as they once did before Pax Tokugawa but that they would use the daily meditation on death as a way to function within the bureaucratized and stratified world without

41. Ikegami (1995: 278) duly notes the fact that this term, “the way of the warrior,” was coined in the early Tokugawa period. See also Hurst (1990).

42. See Ikegami (1995: 42). Cultural resources (e.g. samurai honor culture) are, according to Ikegami, persistent and regulative patterns that can be utilized for change. Although I find this notion of a cultural resource helpful, what I would like to emphasize here in this article is the need to distinguish what Tsunemoto thought he was doing (maintaining a cultural tradition of honor) from what he actually did (breaking with tradition to fashion a new subjectivity defined by self-regulated labor).

43. For an English translation of the book, see Wilson (2002).

being totally consumed by it.⁴⁴ That is to say, Tsunemoto did not restore or regain a moral autonomy that he believed the samurai lost. What he did was create a new capacity for “autonomous” action. Tsunemoto’s message did not, in fact, find a large audience, that is, not until recently (thanks to the suicide of the infamous Mishima Yukio). But Tsunemoto’s efforts to forge a new subjectivity and capacity for action – one that was imposed by the self on the self for the sake of doing one’s duty more efficiently – was by no means an isolated one. As I have tried to demonstrate in this article, the idea of regulating one’s own thoughts and actions as a way to achieve self-mastery was one that Tsunemoto seems to have shared with many others during the Tokugawa period.

Conclusion

In his fencing manual the aforementioned Yagyū Munenori claimed that the will (*kokorozashi* 志) is the lord (*shujin* 主人) and *ki* its servant; naturally, the will, which must be planted firmly in the lower body while practicing martial arts, must be in charge of the movement of *ki* and not the other way round.⁴⁵ According to Suzuki Shōsan 鈴木正三 (1579-1655), samurai can enter the Buddha Way by devoting themselves to their profession with a firm grasp of what he calls “the original mind” (*honrai no kokoro* 本来の心).⁴⁶ A samurai who possesses this “immovable” (*fudō* 不動) mind is neither scared, startled, dismayed, nor swayed easily. Such a man, Shōsan claims, is “the lord of all” (*issai no shujin* 一切の主人). Similarly, Hakuin claimed that:

If all possessed this true meditation, the lords in their attendance at court and their conduct of governmental affairs, the warriors in their study of the works on archery and charioteering, the farmers in their cultivation, hoeing, and ploughing, the artisans in their measuring and cutting, women in their spinning and weaving, this then would at once accord with the great Zen meditation of the various Patriarchs.⁴⁷

To fully appreciate the significance of these and other similar claims about the need to practice meditative-work in the midst of activity and cultivate the mind-as-master we need to extend our discussion to the commercialization and professionalization

44. For a discussion of the transformation of combat techniques (*beihō* 兵法) into martial arts (*bugei* 武芸) under Pax Tokugawa, see Hurst (1993). As Hurst observes, what were once techniques for self-protection largely became techniques for self-perfection and cultivation during this period. Furthermore, as Hurst (1993: 49) also points out, late eighteenth century reactions against this “unrealistic form of martial arts” may have had a role to play in the fall of the Tokugawa.

45. See Watanabe (1985: 31-32).

46. See his *Banmin tokuyō* 萬民徳用 (Right Action for All) in Suzuki (1988: 65).

47. Yoshizawa (2001b: 254-255); transl. by Yampolsky (1971: 54).

of work and other developments such as Sekimon Shingaku 石門心学 during the Tokugawa period. This, however, will require more than what the limited space of this article will allow.⁴⁸ In fact, Takuan, Ekken, Hakuin, Shōsan, Munenori, and Tsunemoto all deserve a closer look than what I have been able to provide here, but, hopefully, what I have presented here is enough to convince the sympathetic reader that complaints about stagnation during the Tokugawa period was more than just a bodily experience. It was a new way of life.

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48. For instance, see the discussion in Sawada (1993 and 2004).

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