



## The Storyteller and the Samurai

*Japan*

In ancient Japan, after the Warring States period, came a time of relative peace and the once dangerous adventure of traveling from one city to another became a much less risky undertaking. And so it was that an old master storyteller took the opportunity to tour around some towns and cities in order to take his stories to the locals. After all, maybe this would be the last tour he would be able to make in his life.

One day, his route was longer than expected, and he suddenly found himself in the middle of the mountains, the sun about to set, exhausted and with an empty stomach. If only he could find a roadside inn where he could tell a story in exchange for a bowl of soup and a bed!

Luckily, when he turned a corner of the path, he suddenly caught sight of a *dojo* that dominated the heights of a valley. It was the school of a samurai warrior, where the young aspirants to the service of arms were instructed and trained under the orders of the master. In those times, it was customary that anyone who was willing to fight a duel with one of the young apprentices, using wooden swords, could enjoy food and bed in the facilities of the *dojo*.

The old storyteller stopped and stared at the samurai school. He knew he was too old and too tired to face even the youngest apprentice. The punishment that a young man might subject him to could cause him to have to end his travel then and there.

But, suddenly, a mischievous smile crossed his lips and, without thinking more about it, he went to the *dojo* and knocked on the door.

A young disciple appeared.

‘Elder, what can I do for you?’

The old storyteller smiled peacefully and said:

‘I have come to challenge your master.’

The young disciple looked at the man from top to bottom and could not help but smile.

‘Honourable sir, would it not be better if you challenge one of the younger apprentices? There is one that arrived recently, at the end of winter, who maybe ...’

‘No.’ The storyteller answered calmly. ‘I have come to challenge your master.’

The disciple looked at him worriedly. The man was too old, and he seemed exhausted. Custom dictated that the duel with the master was not with a wooden sword, but with steel, and it was a duel to the death.

‘Think about it well, sir,’ insisted the young man. ‘Why do you not try it with a second-year disciple?’

‘No.’ The old man replied calmly. ‘I have come to challenge your master.’

Finally, the young man let the storyteller in and took him to the training hall. All the apprentices and disciples gathered there quickly. They did not believe their eyes when they saw an old man, so fragile, ready to fight with their master.

They also informed the master of the *dojo*, an expert swordsman recognised throughout Japan. The master came to the hall with his *katana* at his belt, bowed to greet the old man, and then made a sign for one of his disciples to give the storyteller a sword. The storyteller accepted the weapon with both hands and, without further delay, deposited it delicately onto the floor in front of him, and paid no further attention to it.

The master of the school, surprised, continued nevertheless with the ceremony.

‘I accept your challenge.’ He said. ‘Please, take your sword and let’s begin.’

And, slowly, the samurai put his hand on the hilt of the *katana* and, without removing it from its sheath, turned the edge towards the outside, ready to unsheathe.

Then, the old storyteller started talking.

‘Once, a long, long time ago, in a mountain village, there was a young peasant who longed to master the skills of the body and the sword. But, unlike other young people of his age, his longing was not to become a samurai to place himself under the *shōgun*. He did not even crave the rousing of courage or the glories of combat. What fascinated him was the beauty and harmony of the martial movements, the perfection and precision of the steps, the turns, the cuts and the assaults. He just wanted to master the epic dance of the warriors with their weapons and their agile bodies.

‘Then, one day, the young peasant ...’

At that very moment, the great samurai released the hilt of his sword and bowed to the old storyteller.

‘You have defeated me,’ he said humbly.

A loud stir crossed the hall. ‘How can it be?’ ‘What has the old man done?’ The low voices of the disciples were heard. ‘But he has not even touched the sword!’

Then, the master turned to his disciples and told them with a meek smile:

‘How many times have I told you that, to win on the battlefield, you have to be in the present, in the here and now?’

And turning to the storyteller, he added:

‘This man has taken me to a very distant time and place. If he had wanted to, he could have killed me at his pleasure.’

And the old storyteller was honoured with a succulent dinner, and was then taken by the master himself to the bedroom that he reserved for his most illustrious guests. □

Adapted by Grian A. Cutanda (2018).

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## Comments

This story is an adaptation of the story of the same name by Dan Keding (2008). Keding says that it is a very popular story in the most traditional *dojos* in Japan, especially among the disciples of iaido, the Japanese martial art of unsheathing and sheathing the sword in the face of a sudden attack.

## Sources

Keding, D. (2008). *Elder Tales: Stories of Wisdom and Courage from Around the World*. Wesport, CT: Libraries Unlimited, pp. 14-15.

## *Associated text of the Earth Charter*

Principle 16: Promote a culture of tolerance, nonviolence, and peace.

*Other passages that this story illustrates*

Principle 16b: Implement comprehensive strategies to prevent violent conflict and use collaborative problem solving to manage and resolve environmental conflicts and other disputes.

