

## Review of *An Insider's Guide to the Japanese Martial Arts: A New Look at Japan's Fighting Traditions*, by Alexander Bennett

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Received: 01/06/2023; Accepted: 16/06/2023; Published: 19/06/2023

### REVIEW

#### Abstract

This review addresses *An Insider's Guide to the Japanese Martial Arts: A New Look at Japan's Fighting Traditions* by Alexander Bennett, published in 2023 by Tuttle Publishing. The Japanese martial arts and Japan have long attracted practitioners from around the globe travelling to Japan, hoping to further the knowledge of their chosen martial art. Far from being a recent trend, records of such travels have graced the martial arts literature for decades. This volume offers a neatly packaged representation of the Japanese martial arts written in an approachable manner by a bilingual, bicultural, academic, martial arts researcher and high-ranking exponent. Stocked with educational and credible material and delivered in an affable tone, this book provides a thorough coverage of the Japanese martial arts from their early past to the present day. In addition, practical and indispensable information for surviving and making the most out of one's stay in Japan is presented. Invaluable to the practitioner with their sights set on studying martial arts in Japan, this publication goes way beyond and presents a plethora of information, both historical and contemporary, which will captivate all those studying the arts, regardless of their domicile. This valuable contribution to the martial arts literature is an enjoyable and educational walk through the Japanese martial arts that will benefit the uninitiated, novices, and seasoned veterans alike.

**Keywords:** Japan; martial arts; Japanese martial arts; Japanese history; Japanese culture.

#### Revision de *An Insider's Guide to the Japanese Martial Arts: A New Look at Japan's Fighting Traditions*, por Alexander Bennett

##### Resumen

Esta revisión aborda *An Insider's Guide to the Japanese Martial Arts: A New Look at Japan's Fighting Traditions* de Alexander Bennett, publicado en 2023 por Tuttle Publishing. Las artes marciales japonesas y Japón han atraído durante mucho tiempo a practicantes de todo el mundo, que viajan a Japón con la esperanza de profundizar en el conocimiento de su arte marcial. Lejos de ser una tendencia reciente, los registros de este tipo de viajes han adornado la literatura de artes marciales durante décadas. Este volumen ofrece una representación cuidadosamente empaquetada de las artes marciales japonesas, escrita de manera accesible por un investigador de artes marciales bilingüe, bicultural, académico y artista marcial de alto rango. Repleto de material educativo y creíble y escrito en un tono afable, este libro proporciona una perspectiva completa de las artes marciales japonesas, desde su pasado hasta el presente. Además, se presenta información práctica e indispensable para sobrevivir y aprovechar al máximo la estancia en Japón. Inestimable para aquellos practicantes con la vista puesta en estudiar artes marciales en Japón, esta publicación va mucho más allá y presenta una plétora de información, tanto histórica como contemporánea, que cautivará a todos aquellos que estudien las artes marciales, independientemente de dónde residan. Esta valiosa contribución a la literatura de artes marciales es un paseo ameno y educativo a través de las artes marciales japonesas

#### Resenha de *An Insider's Guide to the Japanese Martial Arts: A New Look at Japan's Fighting Traditions*, de Alexander Bennett

##### Resumo

Esta revisão aborda *An Insider's Guide to the Japanese Martial Arts: A New Look at Japan's Fighting Traditions*, de Alexander Bennett, publicado em 2023 pela Tuttle Publishing. As artes marciais japonesas e o Japão há muito que atraem praticantes de todo o mundo que viajam para o Japão, na esperança de aprofundar o conhecimento da sua arte marcial escolhida. Longe de ser uma tendência recente, os registos de tais viagens adornaram a literatura de artes marciais por décadas. Este volume oferece uma representação organizada das artes marciais japonesas, escrito de maneira acessível por um investigador de artes marciais bilingue, bicultural, académico e expoente de alto escalão. Abastecido com material educacional, confiável e entregue num tom afável, este livro oferece uma cobertura completa das artes marciais japonesas desde o seu passado até aos dias atuais. Além disso, são apresentadas informações práticas e indispensáveis para viver e aproveitar ao máximo a sua estada no Japão. Inestimável para o praticante que deseja estudar artes marciais no Japão, esta publicação vai muito além e apresenta uma infinidade de informações, tanto históricas quanto contemporâneas, que cativarão todos os que estudam as artes marciais, independentemente de onde vive. Esta valiosa contribuição para a literatura de artes marciais é um "passeio" agradável e educacional

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que beneficiará por igual a los no iniciados, a los novatos y a los veteranos experimentados.

**Palabras clave:** Japón; artes marciales; artes marciales japonesas; historia japonesa; cultura japonesa.

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**Palavras-chave:** Japão; artes marciais; artes marciais japonesas; história japonesa; cultura japonesa.



## 1. Introduction: Japanese martial arts and life in Japan

Instructional texts related to the Japanese martial arts (*budo*) are copious, and English language works combining the author's personal experiences with *budo* have also long contributed to the field's literature. One of the earliest of these appearing at the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century with *The Fighting Spirit of Japan and Other Studies* (Harrison, 1913; see also Harrison, 1982). Closer to the present day, one notable example is *Moving Zen: Karate as a Way to Gentleness* (Nicol, 1975). Such books can take the form of autobiographies or expository works and present stimulating and educational content to the reader. Rarely, however, does one see a book delivered through the eyes and experiences of a long-term resident of Japan and *budo* authority, providing not only objective content on an array of Japanese *budo* themes, but practical information for those wishing to follow a similar path.

Dr Alexander Bennett's *An Insider's Guide to the Japanese Martial Arts: A New Look at Japan's Fighting Traditions* brings the world of Japanese *budo* to the uninitiated. For veterans, it offers concise coverage of martially related Japanese history and reminders of the principles that have traditionally paved the *budo* journey. Although not strictly an academic publication, Bennett, a long-time resident of Japan, martial artist, and renowned *budo* scholar, presents the informative content from authentic lived experiences, complete with credible historical material and practical information. Published by Tuttle Publishing, this book printed on high-quality, durable, coated paper is aesthetically pleasing. The publication's artwork is of supreme quality and the images are as memorable as they are educational.

## 2. Book contents: A realistic guide to Japanese *budo*

Bennett's book comprises six chapters, mirroring a chronological progression of the Japanese martial arts. The initial chapters forward the reader with an enquiry into the Samurai, their ethos, and other concepts that embody the often-misunderstood lives and roles of this warrior caste. In the opening chapter, Bennett forwards a professional, educational, and enjoyable representation of the eras of Japanese history relevant to the subject at hand, beginning from the Heian period (794–1185) and culminating in the present Heisei period (1989–present). The Samurai arsenal and other necessities of battle are discussed, notable historical figures introduced, and the subjects of women warriors, ninja, and *ronin* are addressed. The Samurai enquiry finishes with a list of scarcely known facts about these warriors which the reader will find illuminating.

*Bushido*, never too far from discussions concerning the Samurai, Japanese martial arts, or Japanese philosophy, is handled with efficient adroitness by Bennett and is testimony to his profession as a scholar and his practicality as a martial artist. The term *Bushido* is generally handled with an uneasy ambiguity by Japanese nationals, Japanophiles, and martial artists of all colours and creed. Definitions may come from emotional/ideological biases or result from confused transmission. Therefore, the word remains at large to be used in a way that satisfies the messenger, free from any absolute demarcation. Bennett walks us through domains where concepts of *Bushido* resided without compelling his or any other definition on the reader. Forwarded with the tenet of the Samurai and an introduction to a number of texts portraying the Samurai ethos penned by such well-known warriors as Miyamoto Musashi (1582–1645) and Yamamoto Jocho (alias Tsunetomo, 1659–1719), the reader is presented with invaluable steppingstones to learn more about the lives of the Japanese warrior and the ideals to which they aspired.

The history-focused sections of the book are supplemented with brief sidebars related to historical figures, concepts, and other educational tidbits existent in Japanese history. These easily



digestible formats provide ready accessible snapshots of this complex field. Assorted tables, callouts, and other artwork help paint a brief, although comprehensive, encapsulation of this subject area.

Succeeding the sections on history is a spanning of the old and new and how the martial arts developed from their killing origins to tools for self-perfection, sports, and education. Further explanation of the Samurai and their related spheres lay a solid platform as Bennett escorts the reader to *budo* in modern day Japan via significant topics as the martial arts and Zen, reinventing tradition, and *bujutsu* (martial techniques) vs *budo*. Included in this section is a brief glimpse into some distinctive masters of classical and modern martial arts such as Tsukahara Bokuden (1490–1571) and Ito Ittosai Kagehisa (1560?–1653?).

As our advance continues, a succinct summary of nine modern Japanese *budo* is presented, chosen in Bennett's words as "disciplines that come under the umbrella of the Japanese Budo Association" (p. 69). Other arts which are affiliated with the Japanese Budo Association through parent organisations are also introduced. This section includes introductions to such modern maestri as Kano Jigoro (1860–1938) and Yamaoka Tesshu (1836–88) and concludes with enlightening content related to *budo* in the Japanese education system and in present-day Japanese society. In the latter, Bennett quotes The Budo Charter (see *The Budō Charter / ENGLISH GUIDE / 日本武道館* [Nippon Budokan], n.d.), offering a relaxed but instructive commentary on each of its six articles.

The chapter titled "Life in a Japanese Dojo" is one that provides an extremely crucial service to anyone wishing to further, or start, their study of *budo* in Japan. The *dojo* is where most martial artists, novices and veterans alike, will spend a considerable amount of their time. It is a domain where visitors will want to thrive, as it is inextricably connected to their chosen art and identity in Japan. Failure to assimilate into the *dojo* could see the potential *dojo* student quickly disheartened and their presence come to a rapid halt. As a long-time resident of Japan myself, I have seen visitors discontinue because of a complete ignorance of the *dojo* or a failure to assimilate to the norms expected in such environments. Alternatively, I have seen lifelong friendships created and maintained as those from different cultures and backgrounds share this learning space together. Far from being a strict directive, Bennett offers readers a sensitive and informative description of situations they are likely to face.

The final chapter related to survival in Japan comprises a concise collection of aspects related to Japanese life valuable to those interested in spending some time in Japan. Topics covering practical issues such as insurance, accommodation, and language learning are included in addition to cultural insights and suggestions to assist visitors in piloting the cultural milieu that all must experience if they are to benefit from their stay. While modern technology can afford some support to the new arrival in the form of language apps and finding information in one's native language, nothing can replace a basic understanding of practical and cultural features that does not require Wi-Fi and of which an ignorance of could have serious consequences. The final two chapters would no doubt interest those wishing to attempt a 21<sup>st</sup> century *musha shugyo* (travels to acquire martial skill).

Information is presented throughout the book in an easy-to-understand manner and is laced with much welcome humour. Martial arts material is not usually associated with humour, and I believe this approach allows readers to relax and ingest material that is often solemnly delivered. This approach also offers a human side to the Japanese martial arts and could not be interpreted as ridiculing the subject or the culture. A point that is made more evident as Bennett is unquestionably culturally competent in Japan, in addition to being a high-ranking aficionado in more than one Japanese martial art.

A strength of Bennett's book is that it makes Japanese martial arts material educational and thought-provoking, not only to those interested in taking up a Japanese martial art but also to seasoned martial artists. Written in an informal register, the book would serve as a reference for martial arts instructors of the Japanese arts who no doubt field enquiries into the historical background of their art and its place in modern-day Japan. Many modern-day martial arts enthusiasts can develop an interest in the history, culture, and language of the birthplace of their chosen martial art. This is an area that cannot be ignored by teachers of the art and is crucial if the art is to deliver a holistic educational experience to its students. In addition, the growing presence of martial arts in academia demands that valid martial arts content must be disseminated to a wider audience.



Sidebar under the title *Key Budo Concepts* are interspersed frequently throughout the book and offer educational explanations of terms and concepts related to Japanese martial arts. Topics such as *Kigurai* "Gravitas" (p. 26) and *Ningen-keisei* "Personal Cultivation" (p. 77) are included, and these Key Budo Concepts will benefit all practitioners with a deeper understanding of their art and its embodying culture. *Budo Calligraphy* is the title of another section of educative snippets highlighting representative terms related to *budo*. Although these sidebars include the relevant Japanese *kanji* (logograph) with each term, they are not instructional steps in how to write the *kanji*. Rather, they include explanations, background, and a breakdown of the *kanji* components.

Both the Key Budo Concepts and Budo Calligraphy sidebars offer the reader and Japanese *budo* practitioner a holistic exemplar from which to further investigate and comprehend their chosen art. This view into the philosophical underpinnings and linguistic representations of commonly accepted aspects of Japanese *budo* may most times be difficult to access or comprehend for the everyday exponent. Such models may not be readily available in instructional manuals, and Bennett's inclusion of these items, complete with their descriptions, creates a rounded view of the Japanese martial arts, inclusive of its accompanying precepts.

While an index would be welcomed, it is difficult to aim any criticism at this book, as it befittingly fulfils the purpose for which it was obviously created. I use the book as part of a *budo* course I teach for visiting exchange students at a Japanese university. Most of these students have not experienced Japanese *budo* or Japan before, and Bennett's book presents the perfect accompaniment to such a course.

### 3. Conclusion

Bennett has created a highly educational and enjoyable book on an all too often misunderstood subject. This book does not claim to be an in-depth academic enquiry or technical manual, rather it is an amicable but precise introduction and explanation of Japanese *budo*. For the unversed, it opens the door to Japanese *budo*. For the martial artist/researcher, it offers platforms to further enquiry via a convenient compilation of martial arts history and present-day *budo* scenarios.

In the final Key Budo Concepts entry (p. 142), Bennett introduces the concept of *Heijoshin* (A Normal State of Mind). This is fitting, as if we are skilfully to navigate the meandering pathways that all martial arts can take us, then it is imperative that we do so in a suitable frame of mind. For those wishing to traverse Japanese *budo*, Dr Alexander Bennett's *An Insider's Guide to the Japanese Martial Arts: A New Look at Japan's Fighting Traditions* makes the task just that little more easier.

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### Author's biographical data

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