A Samurai Instructs His Son
by Hojo Shigetoki

In 1247 Hojo Shigetoki, a leading samurai in Japan, gave his 18-year-old son a set of instructions after the Kamakura shoguns appointed the son to a key position. What advice did the father give his son?

The men under your command . . . must be carefully chosen for your service. Do not take "difficult" fellows. If men under your orders, however loyal, are wanting in intelligence, you must not trust them with important duties, but rely upon experienced older men. If you are in doubt refer to me, Shigetoki.

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. Remember that the key to discipline is fair treatment in rewards and in punishments. But make allowance for minor misdeeds in young soldiers and others, if their conduct is usually good.

Do not be careless or negligent in the presence of subordinates, especially of older men. Thus do not spit or snuffle or lounge about on a chest with your legs dangling. This only gives men the impression that you do not care for their good opinion. Preserve your dignity. If you behave rudely, they will tell their families and gossip will spread.

You must treat all servants with proper consideration and generosity, not only your own people but also those of your parents and other superiors. If you do not, they will scorn you and say to one another: "He thinks he is very important, but he doesn't amount to much."

1. What are three ways a samurai SHOULD act, according to the author?
2. What are three ways a samurai SHOULD NOT act?
3. What sort of impression on subordinates must a samurai make?
4. How should a military leader behave, according to Shigetoki?
5. What is the danger of hasty judgments?
ADVICE GIVEN BY A SAMURAI (1348)

"There must be no negligence in the samurai's service. He must get up at four in the morning and practise martial exercises. Then he may have a meal and afterwards shoot with bow and matchlock and ride horseback. And those who are proficient in these exercises will be promoted accordingly.

If he wishes for diversion he may find it in hawking, stag-hunting and wrestling. With such things he must amuse himself.

His clothes must be of cotton and pongee. It is an offence to spend money on clothes so that one is embarrassed in other ways. Weapons must be provided in accordance with one's standing, and retainers have to be kept. And in time of war money has to be spent. In ordinary social intercourse there must be only one guest beside the host, and unhulled rice only is to be eaten. However, when military exercises are held there may be a large gathering.

Military rules and etiquette are what a samurai has to know. Those who are given to unnecessary luxury will be held culpable. A stop must be put to all frivolous posturing and sword dancing. When a sword is drawn it is to kill someone. Serious concentration is the secret of everything, so those who go in for these frivolous pastimes will be required to commit seppuku.

A samurai must be diligent at his studies. He must read military works and particularly pay attention to matters of loyalty and filial duty.

There must be no making poems and verse-capping. If a man is inclined to luxury and aesthetic pleasures he will become debilitated and no better than a woman."

Answer questions on a separate sheet of paper

1. What sorts of rules govern a samurai's life?
2. What happens when a samurai begins to enjoy luxuries and amusements?
3. What sorts of activities must a samurai avoid?
4. Why do you think this samurai wrote these words of advice?

negligence (n) - the failure to exercise a degree of care
martial (adj) - of or relating to war or fighting
proficient (adj.) - competent; skilled
stag-hunting - hunting a male deer
pongee (n) - lightweight silk
retainers (n) - assistants
etiquette (n) - manners; code of behavior
culpable (adj.) - deserving of blame
frivolous (adj.) - unnecessary; silly
posturing (v) - unnatural or affected attitude
seppuku - hara-kiri
diligent (adj.) - attentive and persistent in a task
filial duty - the Confucian ideal of respect for one's parents and elders
verse-capping (v) - making word jokes or puns
debilitated (adj.) - made weak or feeble
Like the knights of medieval Europe and some heroes of the American West, the samurai of medieval Japan represented an ideal of loyalty and courage that became legendary. The first excerpt below is from a set of instructions given by a real samurai to his teenage son in 1247. The second is from the Tale of the Heike, a collection of stories about the wars in the late 1100s between the Heike and the Minamoto families. Here the samurai Kumagai has captured Atsumori, a young Taira warrior.

Hojo Shigetoki, a samurai, to his son
Remember that the key to discipline is fair treatment in rewards and in punishments... . . . Preserve your dignity. You must treat all servants with proper consideration and generosity, not only your own people but also those of your parents and other superiors... . .

Remember, however, that there are times when a commander must exercise his power of deciding questions of life or death. In those circumstances since human life is at stake you must give most careful thought to your action. Never kill or wound a man in anger, however great the provocation. Better get somebody else to administer the proper punishment.

From the Tale of the Heike:
The Death of Atsumori
"Then you have made a good capture," said the youth. "Take my head and show it to some of my side, and they will tell you who I am."

"Though he is one of their leaders," mused Kumagai, "if I slay him it will not turn victory into defeat, and if I spare him, it will not turn defeat into victory. When my son Kojiro was but slightly wounded at Ichi no tani this morning, did it not pain me? How this young man's father would grieve to hear that he had been killed! I will spare him."

Just then, looking behind him, he saw Doi and Kajiwara coming up with fifty horsemen. "Alas! look there," he exclaimed, the tears running down his face, 'though I would spare your life, the whole countryside swarms with our men, and you cannot escape them. If you must die, let it be by my hand, and I will see that prayers are said for your rebirth in Paradise."

"Indeed it must be so," said the young warrior. "Cut off my head at once."

Kumagai was so overcome by compassion that he could scarcely wield his blade... weeping bitterly he cut off the boy's head. "Alas!" he cried, "what life is so hard as that of a soldier? Only because I was born of a warrior family must I suffer this affliction! How lamentable it is to do such cruel deeds."

lamentable (adj.) - regrettable; sad

Questions:

1. Besides behavior in battle, what kinds of advice does the samurai give to his son?
2. What are Kumagai's reasons for wanting to spare the young warrior's life?
3. Hojo Shigetoki gives instructions to his son about how a samurai should act. In what ways does Kumagai in the second story carry out the ideals of the samurai's advice?