

STAR WARS

Jedi Lightsaber Techniques and the Samurai

A long time ago in a studio far, far away...

George Lucas wanted to make a science fiction film based on the early matinee serials like 'Flash Gordon.' He needed a fresh approach to the genre that would enthrall the American audience. His idea was to create a futuristic world by reaching back into the past. To an exotic place protected by the greatest warrior force our world has ever seen.

George was inspired by a story line he learned from a samurai film called 'The Hidden Fortress' made by genius director Akira Kurosawa. In it, Toshirō Mifune stars as a samurai general, who with the help of two bickering peasants (R2D2 and C3PO), rescues a Princess and brings her to safety. Mifune, the John Wayne of Japan, was the actor Lucas first wanted for the role of the Jedi General 'Obi-wan Kenobi', but because of scheduling problems it eventually went to Alec Guinness. He added Luke Skywalker as an apprentice to the wizard-like warrior to give it a European flair, and Han Solo as a futuristic western desperado.

George based his Jedi Knights on a sect of Samurai Monks. The Samurai had protected Japan for a millennium. So too, the Jedi were said to have protected the Republic for a thousand years. Along with much of the costuming and customs of the samurai, Lucas borrowed the fact that the Japanese sword is the strongest and sharpest in the history of the world and has been known to cut through steel. The fighting techniques, borrowed from kendo and classical sword styles, are used with one or two hands depending on the force needed to cut through its target. The Samurai Sword became the 'Jedi Lightsaber.' A two handed handle that emits a three foot laser beam. An honorable weapon created to protect the weak from the evil forces of the universe.

Lucas has also developed something of a religion called 'The Force.' The Japanese call it 'Ki,' and the Chinese refer to it as 'Chi.' It is the life energy that is within and around us. Few people outside the martial arts community have any awareness of it. Ki flows from the body's center and is something that is developed through decades of training in Japanese Swordsmanship or any of the old traditional fighting arts. George uses the myths and legends that have surrounded it for centuries. His famous line, "May the Force be with you" as an ambiguous reference to God that doesn't slight any religion. It's like, "Vaya Con Dios" or "God be with you."

In 1977, STAR WARS Episode IV A New Hope, burst onto the movie screen and into the imagination of people everywhere. In the first movie the techniques of the lightsaber were very limited. In later sequels the weapon became more important to the story line. In 'Revenge of the Sith' there are more lightsaber fights than in all five of the others combined. I believe this will add to the interest in Japanese Swordsmanship and the arts related to it. To understand the techniques of the lightsaber, you need to seek out instruction in how to handle the sword of the Samurai. I urge you to explore the many books and movies available today to find out more about the language, history, and culture of the Samurai.

Gordon Fisher, Sensei