

Four Death Poems, Written in Blood

by Con Chapman

The ultimate expression of a samurai's devotion to his master was his willingness to commit ritual suicide (seppuku). Seppuku was performed when the samurai brought disgrace to his master through failure; in sympathy for his lord's death; to avoid the disgrace of capture following defeat in battle; or if the samurai was found to have had illicit relations with another man's wife.



Seppuku was performed by slicing the abdomen open with a dagger (tanto), and moving the blade from right to left, a method known as hara kiri. It came to be performed in a ritualistic manner in front of spectators, if not on a battlefield following defeat.

The samurai was bathed, dressed ceremonially in white robes, and fed his favorite meal. When he had finished, his tanto was placed on a plate in front of him. The warrior would prepare for death by writing a death poem, or zetsumei-shi. Sometimes the samurai would begin the ritual and then write his poem in his own blood.



It is autumn now,
wind chills the bones. So like the
turn of the seasons,
my time has come. We are like
the wind, felt in the present,
forgotten once we are gone.

.....
I have known the wife
of Minamoto Dokan;
now I feel the shame
of a base philanderer.
I have brought disgrace to the
honor of my master's house.

.....
My Lord struck a man
in anger, in the presence
of the shogun. Now we,
his loyal samurai, must
perform *seppuku*. But first,
we shall lure the retainer
to his death, cut off his head.

.....

I set out to do
great things; it is evening,
the harvest moon peers through clouds.
A leaf falls, twisting
in the breeze that stirs the limbs.
Barren, I have borne no fruit.

