

3.2 Questions on the Oversea Deployment of ‘Martial Arts’

The Case of Aikidō in the West in the Post-War Period

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Aikidō is a school of *budō* or *bujutsu*, and is often placed together with other ‘martial arts’. However, in many ways it stands apart. This difference was recognised by the US Army in 1948 when the occupation rehabilitated aikidō, defining it as a public utility body. Nevertheless, from the 1950s, aikidō was subsumed into the general martial arts in the West. It was introduced to Europe thanks to Mochizuki Minoru (1907–2003) and Abe Tadashi (1926–1984). In the 1960s, it spread to France, thanks to André Noquet (1914–1999) and Tamura Nobuyoshi (1933–2010). Aikidō was introduced to Italy in 1964 by Tada Hiroshi (b. 1929), and in 1967, diffused in Germanic regions by Asai Katsuaki (b. 1942). All this happened before 1969 when the ‘founding master’ of aikidō, Ueshiba Morihei (1888–1969), died. This school of martial art practice was also recognised in the United States, first in Hawaii under the initiative of Tōhei Kōichi (1920–2011) and then in the mainland by Yamada Yoshimitsu (1938–2023).¹

Unlike most martial arts, aikidō is marked by performativity. Beyond mechanical imitation and repetition of learned corporal techniques, it implies generative and creative movement. It may be relevant that aikidō distinguishes itself from other practices such as *jūdō*, *kendō*, and *karate* in not being classified in the West as a competitive sport.² Competition implies rules which athletes respect and obey. Aikidō is free from this.

However, lack of competition also means lack of guidelines. This chapter will consider how aikidō has been transformed by contact with the West, and whether it has been ‘deformed’. That is, has aikidō experienced mutation, and if so, can this ‘metamorphosis’ be attributed to something inherent in Western culture?

Most aikidō schools worldwide do not practice competition, and there are three key reasons for this. First, techniques are too dangerous to apply to competition, as practitioners easily risk being injured. Secondly, competition distinguishes between winner and loser, but such value judgments are not necessarily relevant on a real battlefield. Thirdly, competition induces confrontation and provokes unnecessary resistance. But ‘resistance’ is precisely what aikidō would have us avoid, or ‘unlearn’, so as to invalidate conflict. What aikidō seeks is therefore not physical superiority over the opponent, but effacing and annihilating opposition itself.

Although visual etymologies are inherently suspect, it is worth recalling here that the Chinese character for ‘military force’ 武 (the *bu* of *budō* and *bujitsu*) is

made up of the sign 'stop' 止 and 'spear' 戈. This looks at first glance as if it were close to the idea of deterrence. Yet the idea of self-defence is alien to aikidō. Such a concept starts only when the beginner becomes aware of the meaning of self-control. One must avoid needlessly inciting the aggression of others. If, in return, we have nothing to defend, we have nothing to lose, and ultimately, we become invincible. Nobody can attack what is absent.

It should not be so difficult to understand this reasoning, and yet behaving according to this principle of 'nothingness' is not easy. In the West, individual free will is regarded as the core of the 'selfhood' on which human relationships are established. Daily life places intention and free will in antagonistic situations with other agents, requiring us to tack according to the circumstances, often inviting unfortunate consequences. Social obligations can prevent us from following the path that seems fair and just. Self-sacrifice for ethical reasons or justice is sometimes inevitable. The fighting spirit, encouraged in many schools of martial arts and competitive sports, cannot be helpful. The martial arts, not excluding aikidō, aim to offer preparatory experimentation in such eventualities, as training provides practitioners the opportunities to reflect on the inevitable aporias of life and death.

Annihilation of the self, which aikidō espouses, among other practices, has often been associated with Zen Buddhism. The easy confusion with an inchoate idea of Zen ideology risks being a stumbling block for some practitioners.³ 'Nothingness' seems an affront to personal freedom, but herein lies a paradox: we must maintain mental and physical freedom even when threatened and seized by force from our 'adversaries'. But if we are too wedded to the idea of freedom, we become its slave. And this is an aporia, for freedom consists of not being a prisoner of anything. How then is it possible to free ourselves from the fear of freedom? It follows that we have to reserve a field of action where we are freed from the very notion of freedom. This vacant field without an occupant, 'the void', which we might also call the 'margins' of the rules, functions as what in French is called the '*jeu de règle*' (play of rules), or a secret free space which lies tacitly beneath the 'rules of the game'.⁴

I cannot pass judgment on whether a redefinition of notions such as 'self', 'emptiness', or 'freedom' has come about as a result of aikidō's international expansion. The questions remain open. Each practitioner is faced with such questions from the moment of their initiation, and continues to reflect on them in their infinite search for 'emptiness'. This appears spontaneously during exercise, without being foreseen. Its 'advent' can be called an unexpected revelation. Practising aikidō means seizing opportunities for this revelation. This is discussed in François Cheng's classic book on Chinese aesthetics (1979). In this search for liberating vacancy, we experience a rare moment of life's fullness, both physical and mental: *Empty is Full*.

Is this another quest for the 'Inner Orient' that East-West contact provides? (De Smidt 1998) If so, the final question would be whether such a spiritual quest for 'vacuity-as-fullness' is present in the current practice of aikidō—which literally means the 'Way of Spiritual Harmony'—even after its contact with the foreign cultures.

Notes

- 1 On the testimonies of the first disciples, Aiki News ed., *Ueshiba Morihei to Aikidō*, 2006. Definitive version, I, II, Kanagawa: Aiki News. The official biography of Ueshiba Morihei, ‘founder of Aikidō’, Ueshiba Kisshōmaru. 1977. *Aikidō Kaiso, Ueshiba Morihei-den*. Kōdansha. A critical overview of Aikidō in the socio-cultural history of Japan can be found in Inaga Shigemi, “Aikidō no kindai” (The Modernity of Aikidō—rupture and succession before and after the war), in Edward Kroppenstein (ed.), 2005. *Nihon Bunka no Renzokusei to Hirenzokusei 1920–1970* (The Continuity and Discontinuity of Japanese Culture, 1920–1970), 297–321. Bensei Shuppan.
- 2 Let us leave aside *Jūdō* and *Kendō*, which are both classified in the ‘competitive sport’ category. On Karate, see in particular Kenji Tokitsu. 1979. *La Voie de Karate* (The Way of Karate: For a Theory of Japanese Martial Arts), Éditions du Seuil, Paris Among Tokitsu’s publications in Japanese: *Buteki Hassōron* (Theory on the Martial Arts) Fukusōdō; *Budō no Chikara* (The Strength of Budō, the Way of the Samurai). 2005. Yamato Shobō.
- 3 We know well that Ueshiba Morihei, modern founder of Aikidō, is known for his membership in *Ōmoto-kyō*, a Shintō sect which was the subject of a series of persecutions by the imperial state, then became a mystical Shintōist at the end of his life. We must not forget, however, that Morihei was of the opinion that if a Christian practises Aikidō, he (or she) will become a better Christian—and that this would be true even for Buddhists, although Zen and Buddhism have no direct link with the indigenous cult of the archipelago (not to mention their syncretism over time).
- 4 On this point see, among others, Shigemi Inaga. 2014. “A ‘Pirates’ View” of Art History,” *Review of Japanese Culture and Society*, vol. XXVI: 65–79. Josai University.

References

- Cheng, François. 1979. *Vide et plein (Empty and Full)*. Paris: Seuil.
 De Smidt, Marc, ed. 1998. *L’Orient intérieur*. Paris: Albin Michel. Originally published 1985.