

The Humanistic Value of Martial Arts

Morgan Duchesney

The practice of traditional Japanese Budo or martial ways has great potential for enhancing human harmony. Budo includes Karate, Judo, Aikido, Jujutsu and Kendo. While the martial arts of China, Korea and Vietnam all rest on similar philosophical foundations, I will confine my comments to the Japanese tradition I follow and teach. Budo, an essentially humanistic activity, is based on an introspective discipline which may help internally-motivated people find peace in our world of external or material motivation. This is so because the dual goals of Budo are character refinement and the internalization of spontaneous but measured self-defense skills. Thus, Budo practice creates balanced human beings whose lives are informed by discipline, kindness and restraint.

The general public has come to perceive Budo mainly as a recreational activity rather than a comprehensive martial tradition with deep spiritual foundations. This may be the fault of commercial instructors who have realized the great financial potential of applying the logic of consumerism to Budo. Such misconceptions are problematic for Budo instructors who emphasize spiritual refinement and self-defense over profit and recreation. That being said, many ethical Budo instructors have learned to effectively balance their commercial and competitive pursuits with the teaching of practical skills and the spiritual introspection of meditation.

Sartori

The elimination or reduction of ego-related distractions is referred to as sartori by devotees

of Buddhism and such Buddhist concepts are integral to the practice of Budo. The lessons learned along the road to sartori are more important than the nearly impossible task of actually achieving the perfection of such a rarified condition. The path to sartori generally involves a monastic renunciation of material desire combined with martial training and intense meditation. The samurai, not quite so selfless, were generally content with achieving a practical state of mind referred to as mushin or empty mind. Persons in the state of mushin are perfectly aware of their environment and they cannot be induced to dedicate an inordinate degree of attention to anything. They respond with perfect appropriateness at all times without conscious effort. Like sartori, mushin can only be achieved after years of austere training and daily meditation.

East and West

People embrace Budo for many reasons but its greatest attraction seems to be the mystique of the martial arts. The new learner must navigate a world of ancient custom, arcane terminology and rigid hierarchy. The elaborate rituals and uniforms serve to civilize a potentially dangerous activity cultivated by a culture where formal patterns (kata) regulate every aspect of society from tea service to ritual suicide. While martial etiquette can be a little intimidating for the beginner, the dojo or training hall is actually a nurturing place where neophytes are treated with a familial regard as new children in the Budo family.

The Western learner may initially have difficulties with customs like bowing to photographs of deceased masters but eventually the respectful logic of these veneration becomes apparent. Serious Budoka (practitioners) will naturally seek to balance their original value set with whatever new input they receive through a process of experimentation, sorting, retention and/or rejection. Such processing is the wise habit of a self-aware person entering any new discipline involving “different” cultural practices and philosophies. This is equally true for the Oriental looking to the West or the Westerner seeking answers in the customs of the Far East.

While the inscrutable Oriental mind is merely a cliché, there is certainly a broad but navigable gulf between the ostensibly rational Judeo-Christian ethos of the West and the Taoist, Confucian, Buddhist and Shinto philosophies underpinning the traditions of China and Japan. Western consumerism has thus far had a rather negative effect on the cultures of the various East Asian societies now struggling to maintain their traditional identities in a world of instantaneous financial transactions and pop culture saturation. Exemplifying this situation are the current difficulties faced by Japanese youth trapped between tradition and the ubiquitous high-tech gadgets hammering their senses with pitches from corporate America. Mental illness and drug addiction are now rampant among confused Japanese teenagers who can't feel the vital sense of “Wa” or belonging so essential to Japanese identity. Wa sensibilities may be their legacy, but these youth are vulnerable to the double barreled barrage of peer pressure and relentless marketing

Budo practice can provide a sense of identity and security for such youth or anyone facing the unbalancing effects of harmful pressures. In any stressful learning environment, the identification of commonalities and the blending of strengths pave the path to achieving optimal results. The Karateka must always consider the simultaneously complimentary and oppositional forces that threaten his spiritual and physical equilibrium. To paraphrase the great martial strategist Miyamoto Musashi, “...to exist safely

in the world, one must maintain an everyday state of mind at all times and under all conditions, whether one is pouring tea or involved in a deadly fight.”

The “Do” and “Jutsu” of Budo: Two Faces—One Coin

Budo incorporates two related and mutually supportive concepts likened to the two faces of a coin: Jutsu and Do. Today, most Budo systems contain elements of both Jutsu and Do. The older Jutsu suffix indicates its application for practical self-defense. The suffix “Do” generally refers to the more modern, competitive and recreational approach to Budo developed on the Japanese mainland after the Meiji period (1868-1912). During this period Japan relinquished its feudal past and embraced Western thinking. Japanese martial arts underwent a radical transformation after the samurai officially lost their status and warrior privileges. The samurai arts were transformed into a cultural and even recreational link to the past. Suddenly, once secret practices were available to the general public on a commercial basis and also through government programs in public schools and universities. Books of martial philosophy, like Miyamoto Mushashi's *Book of Five Rings (Gorin No Sho)* became available in Japan and eventually the West. Ironically, Mushashi's famous tome of self-mastery is now required reading for corporate strategists.

While serious Budo training does prepare students to successfully negotiate physical violence, a thorough Sensei (teacher) will encourage students to complement their physical training with the practice of meditation-based introspection and research. In this way students may follow the spiritual Do or Tao of Budo and thus complement their hard-earned fighting skills with serenity and spiritual harmony. Concerning philosophical matters, it is a truism that one's inner battles must be fought and won before the external world may be clearly discerned. This is a classic example of the humanistic Buddhism that has become the dominant philosophical trend among progressive Karateka the world over.

Meditation (Mokuso)

Much has been spoken and written about complex mediation techniques involving elaborate postures and mantras and certainly there is value in these methods. However, the great benefit of regular meditation is its power to remind us that we are alive. Hence the expression: breath is life. After considerable research the author has distilled the essence of mediation to be mainly a matter of methodical nasal breathing with a straight spine in a quiet place. Intruding thoughts will naturally cross the mindscape like an irresistible slide show and the secret seems to be just accepting their passage and continuing with deep abdominal breathing or Tandien ibuki. While air cannot physically reach your lower abdomen, applying slight muscular tension upon exhalation creates a cyclical sensation and induces a calm and perceptive state of mind after only a few minutes.

Budo and Moral Duty

Progressive Budo instructors are committed to a process of continual testing and adaptation of Budo technique to reflect the reality of interpersonal conflicts at both the physical and psychological level. To this end they recommend the use of technique as a last resort and then only within flexible and reasonable limits of force that reflect the level of threat to the defender. The Karate student has an enhanced social responsibility to use minimal force during self-defense. This reality is exacerbated by the legal risks presented by our increasingly litigious society.

Such instructors hope to encourage, by example, a high standard of physical fitness and responsible citizenship. Budo training involves years of intense interaction in a courteous and structured environment. Such training is intended to have a positive affect on students' affairs outside the dojo. All students are tempered in the same fire and thus develop solid relationships of trust and mutual respect. This positive outcome ripples into society as the students interact with others outside their own dojo.

Budo as Counterweight to Rampant Consumerism

Budo training may be a useful counterweight to our consumer culture because of its spiritual nature. Meditation and spiritual study is combined with rigorous physical training to help the students ascertain their genuine strengths and failings. This takes time and hard work and many students become discouraged and quit before realizing the fruits of their labor. Budo teaches patience, restraint and introspection. These concepts only become real after the student is forced to grapple with the frustration of constant correction, physical duress, rank delays, injuries and the difficulty of acquiring and polishing complex skills.

In a world of instant gratification, rampant consumerism and nihilism, the Budoka can do much to restore balance to social relations by setting a positive example of kindness, fairness and courtesy. Through Budo training an internally-motivated person may find peace in our world of external motivation and gain a measure of self-acceptance. Canadian Karate master Masami Tsuruoka extolled the social benefits of Budo when he spoke of Samurai philosophy, "Giri to ninjo is a statement that encompasses all concepts of loyalty, dedication, respect etc., through enforcing a sense of obligation. This obligation (giri) becomes a binding ideal dedicated to the betterment of humanity (ninjo), whatever the cost to the individual." The notion of mutual dedication and personal sacrifice need not be taken to the samurai extreme to be of use in our society. Each small act of kindness, courage and nobility ripples outward and lightens what darkness there may be.

Morgan Duchesney is a Canadian writer and martial artist with an interest in social justice and international affairs. He has published work on the war in Afghanistan, Canadian democracy, Canada's banking system and martial arts. He holds an MA in Political Economy from Carleton University and various instructor credentials in Karate. His published work also appears at: www.honeybadgerpress.ca

