

Japanese Martial Arts and the Foreigner

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I am at present conducting research into Japanese Martial Arts ('Kobujutsu' and Kobudo') and related forms such as Aikido, Judo, Karate and Kendo, but with particular reference to Shindo Musō Ryū Jōjutsu, a technique that was founded about four hundred years ago, and in which a round stick of about four feet is used to defend oneself against an individual armed with one or two swords.

Martial arts play an integral part in the history of many nations but in particular of Japan which, until one hundred and twenty years ago and for six hundred years before that, had been ruled by a military aristocracy. Their influence can be seen in almost all fields of human activity in Japan, in history, philosophy, art, music, drama and literature. World wide interest in Judo resulted in its acceptance as an event in the modern olympics.

Ironically banned immediately after World War II by the forces that are now urging Japan to spend more on defence, the study and practice of martial arts in Japan has largely been ignored by Japanese scholars, possibly because of the taint of the extreme right and ultra-nationalism, possibly because for them fighting, war or killing and the instruments used for such can not be thought of as art. Be that as it may, a sword is among the Imperial Regalia of Japan and as a weapon it is referred to in the earliest extant records. Sword-making has long been a highly respected trade in Japan, in fact closely connected with religion, and Japanese swords have long been prized throughout Asia,

thousands being exported during the Middle Ages.

Although Japan has experienced the same periods of peace and fighting that form the history of almost all countries the real history of the martial arts as they are known today can be traced back to the beginning of the twelfth century, the rise to power of the military class. In the *Gikeiki* we hear of Yoshitsune, the famous twelfth century warrior reading texts on strategy and of many other masters poring over and writing similar texts.

Over the past twenty years there has been an increasing Western interest in Asian martial arts, mainly in those like Judo mentioned above that originated or developed in Japan, and are referred by Donn Draeger, an expert on Japanese martial arts, as modern 'budo' (See Draeger Donn F. *The Martial Arts and Ways of Japan.*) What is the reason for this interest in Asian martial arts and not in the traditional Western sports, sports which often began with similar traditions ?

As deep as is our instinct to fight is our desire for peace. Music and art, which seem to have existed in most primitive societies, are no doubt expressions of this desire, and so too religion, which helps play a big part in the control by weaker, cleverer men of their stronger counterparts. Christianity, the dominant religion in the West, teaches that peace should be striven for at all costs. Consequently sports which had some warlike defensive or aggressive beginning have been purged of their warlike aspects and often made into games (We now even talk of manoeuvres as War Games). Running, boxing, wrestling and archery are some examples. Fishing is considered the most harmless of past-times (unless you happen to be a fish), but must originally have been one of the main ways of obtaining food for a hunting people, and still is for the Eskimos. Rules stop us from taking advantage of an opponent, of hitting a man when he is down. Our peace-loving scholarly, historian probably does not think of the origin of the chess game he is enjoying, the capture

of a real enemy king and the destruction of his army and people. Possibly these games were developed as safety valves in societies which had recently experienced war and wanted to control the basic fighting instinct in man to prevent further wars. Most children get it out of their system playing cops and robbers or cowboys and indians (I have no doubt there is an Indian equivalent) but as we mature we tend to try to avoid violence wherever possible. Two vicious world wars and a few even more vicious local ones have played on the basic instincts in many serious immature men and led to an increase in violence and breakdown of order in many large Western cities. Cities have in effect largely become again the jungle from which we once came. The Korean and Viet-nam Wars brought an increasing number of young Westerners into contact with Asia, Asian culture and especially Asian fighting arts and this contact, plus a sense of inadequacy with their own culture has made many of these young people turn to Asia for an answer to their problems. The long history of war between ostensibly Christian countries has turned many people away from Christianity. The increasingly competitive nature of international sports and games, which leave many young people physical or mental wrecks before they are out of their teens, is no encouragement, since there is now little emphasis in Western sports on philosophy or mental benefits. The object is to win, there is no thought for the loser, or even the winner once he or she stops winning. Of course in Asian martial arts the object is to win too, and it is because they think they will become stronger that many young Westerners take up some Asian martial art. But strength alone is not enough as they soon find out. Japan has proved the Mecca for most because of the state of the art there and the ease with which such students or trainees can learn or practice. What do they really get out of such training that they would not get out of a similar western sport, and what do they miss?

Aikido, Judo and Karate are the most popular form of modern

Japanese budo with Kendo arousing increasing interest but because of the expense, and difficulty at least outside of Japan of obtaining equipment, it has few adherents compared with the other three. From the practical point of view it is not so popular since no one nowadays wears a sword. In the modern sense all the above mentioned forms are essentially sports but differ from boxing, wrestling or running in that in their original form the object of the exercise was to kill or avoid being killed. They were perfected in a country which was at peace but had only a short time before known internecine war. The ideas and forms on which modern Judo, Aikido, Karate and Kendo were based were forms which until a short time earlier had been used in actual combat, by men whose skill or lack of it had meant the difference between life and death.

Japanese martial arts consist of many ryū (schools), all teaching some form of attack with one or more of the innumerable weapons available and defensive forms for use against other schools. All Japanese teachers teach that the mastery of one school is absolutely essential before one embarks on the study of another. By starting young one could become proficient in more than one. As there were men in the West who had to prove they were quicker with a gun than the next man so there were men in Japan who had to prove that they were better swordsmen. Many of those that survived and built up a reputation collected followers or disciples and founded schools where they taught and by doing so earned enough money to live. The confidence and knowledge that they had in their own skill or form made many feel that killing alone was a waste and achieved little, far better to convince your opponent you were better without having to kill him, which was against the law anyway. Thus a certain philosophy developed of practising until one was so good it was not necessary to fight, one could win by 'ki' or a kind of will power. Examples of this can still be seen in Sumo, a kind of Japanese wrestling that embodies forms and a spirit

akin to actual combat. After various ritual introductory movements the wrestlers face each a number of times in threatening poses during which one's own 'ki' is pitted against one's opponent's even before they touch, as part of the contest. It is said that an expert can often tell who is going to win just by studying the attitude and mental state ('ki') of both wrestlers. Obviously wrestlers cannot win by 'ki' alone but it is a very important part of the wrestler's make up. In a fight to the death between swordsmen it must often have been the deciding factor.* In the West the closest we come to 'ki' is probably concentration and force of will, plus supreme confidence in oneself. As an example I would like to relate here the story of a kind of contest that was ordered by the Shogun, between a famous swordsmith and an equally famous helmet-maker, to determine whose product was the better. The swordsmith was ordered to make a sword that would cut through any helmet and the helmet-maker to make a helmet that would withstand a cut from any sword. The day of the contest arrived and both men duly turned up with their respective products. The helmet was placed on the ground and the swordmaker told to cleave it in half. The swordsmith raised his sword and immediately the helmet-maker realized that he was going to lose so he suddenly asked if he could move the position of the helmet a fraction. This was enough to distract the swordsmith and give the helmet-maker the contest.

Stories like this of course fill the pages of the innumerable books that both stimulate the interest of would-be exponents and in turn make money for those who have realized the commercial possibilities. They also help create confidence in one's ryū or teacher and confidence is one of the objects, as mentioned above. Of course the commercial aspect is seen by men in both East and West. The men who founded many of the Ryū were

*An extension of this is 'kia!', an accompanying sound somewhat like a shout which will also tell an expert how good an exponent is even in a situation where he cannot be seen.

probably aesthetes who had few material needs and could always get the food and clothing they wanted from some aristocratic patron. But purist in any form or art are rare, and martial arts, with all the ideals incorporated in them is no exception. "Dōjō-yaburi", literally the destruction of a 'dōjō' was not uncommon, and was carried out by men who would challenge the Master or one of his chosen pupils to a duel and if he won demand compensation or a kind of bribe to go away and leave everyone in peace. Of course this often meant the spiritual and financial ruin of the 'dōjō', since the Master and form must be invincible to attract students. The importance of this invincibility can also be seen in the Western approach to the art, and in the stories of invincibility that one finds not only in the available books but in the stories and legends told by those practicing some form or other. When disillusioned both Japanese and Westerner go from one form to another and end up mastering nothing. The twentieth century, in particular is the age of instant foods and instant courses. There is no possibility of instant success in martial arts. It is in this respect that the Western trainee finds most difficulty and becomes most frustrated.

In the West it has now become essential to start a sport young if one is to become a master and we find talent scouts at youth club and juvenile sports meeting picking up would-be champions who in fact might become just that before they are twenty and by the time they are twenty-five have been forgotten. Maureen Conolly (Little Mo), the former tennis champion, is a good example. Although a tennis phenomenon only twenty years ago few people nowadays even remember her name, no one under thirty-five has probably heard of her. At nineteen or twenty she gave up tennis because there was no one in her class and tennis had become boring. Others give up because they cannot maintain a level or are superceded by younger, faster sportsmen or women.

Many trainees start judo, aikido or karate young too, but

the nature of the art precludes anyone from becoming very good before they have developed physically, and the attitude to training, at least in the West, makes it absolutely necessary for a would-be champion to train or have trained in Japan. There they must come into contact with the spiritual aspects of the art and the fact that one cannot completely master the martial arts, even modern budo, which are in a sense sports but sports that can help one defend oneself or just carry oneself in modern life. The fact that one can always improve means that they can never become boring, if one is seeking perfection or anything near it.

The traditional attitude to this training in Japan is that time does not matter, all forms have a meaning but only through constant practice can one understand this meaning. In other words the study of martial arts themselves can become a kind of religion.

Few foreigners have the time and even fewer the patience to spend hours, days, weeks or maybe years practicing just one movement in one 'waza' (form or technique), even with detailed explanations as to why such practice or such a movement is necessary, and in any case such explanations are seldom forthcoming from a Japanese master, in many cases probably because he can not explain why himself. He knows by instinct. One must have complete confidence in the master who in turn has complete confidence in what he is teaching. One never questions and more important never contradicts. When given a set of facts one week and a completely different set the following week the western trainee will generally give up in disgust. Very few teachers would really care. 'Riai', 'knowing' or maybe the instinct that such training develops is as important as 'kiai' or 'ki' and is just as difficult for the Westerner to understand. Maybe it develops an instinct in man that he used to have when simpler weapons or no weapons kept him alive in the jungle.

Some written aids exist in Japanese but these are scarce

and very obtruse, since they are not meant to be basic teaching aids or guides but often just observations, possibly warnings committed to paper by men who were not scholars but men only trying to pass on experience, and what they often considered to be the essence of life itself. One can not begin to understand unless one has some of the same experience. Can this essence be grasped by someone from another time and culture? Obviously to many Japanese it is just as foreign as it is to a foreigner but I think that the basic instincts and reasons that make people study Japanese martial arts are the same for all peoples. There are common themes in American westerns and in Japanese 'chanbara' (samurai movies), in Japanese and Western chivalry, and basic similarities in the ideal and the reality.

I intend to continue my study with the translation of a manuscript by a past master of one martial art.

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