

Mind and Body in Budo: Poems of the Way

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The first part of this article presents insights into the nature of mind-body theory and practice in modern Japanese budo in general, and Aikido in particular. Based on personal experience and observations as both a trained academic and a professional Aikido instructor, I suggest that modern *budo* retains elements of spiritual formation inherited in part from Buddhist thought and practice in Japan. The second part of the article is a sample of *doka*, “poems of the way,” that I have composed as a form of Zen inspired advice songs to foster confidence in the holistic practice of *budo* and to encourage further exploration in these areas.

2 Practice as Path, Path as Awakening

The compositions below can be defined as maxims, or aphorisms. I have written them with the idea of advice literature in mind. I have composed them naturally with the intention to reflect the spontaneous and unconstructed process of realization behind them. These compositions are inspired by and freely modelled on the style of the Japanese poetry tradition of *tanka* and *waka*. Unlike Japanese poems, however, these maxims are not structured metrically nor do they follow a consistent volume of syllables or lines. They do retain some similarities with the Japanese poems in that they are limited in length and concise in content in order to facilitate memorization. By virtue of their didactic and martial content, they are more in line with two other genres of Japanese traditional poetic composition generally referred to in Japanese as *kaden* or “transmission of teachings” and *dōka*, “poems about the way” [1]. These are short aphorisms that convey a message with an ethical and pedagogical intent to communicate the feelings and the ideals of the martial ways. In this case, these compositions reflect one’s aspirations in the practice of *budo* and they are meant to remind of the true essence of Aikido (*aiki*), which is its practice (*keiko*), while at the same time to help develop the ideal attitude of the *budoka* (martial artist) the immovable mind (*fudōshin*).

Because of their intuitive and spontaneous nature as well as their Buddhist context, I think of these *doka* as *zenki*. *Zenki* is a concept that according to the renowned Zen scholar and Japanese Zen poetry expert Dr. Lucien Stryk (1924-2013) represents “*the sense of a spontaneous activity outside the established forms, as if flowing from the formless Self.*” In his now classic *Zen and the Fine Arts*, the Zen Buddhist philosopher, scholar, and *chado* tea ceremony master Shin’ichi Hisamatsu (1889-1980) proclaims that the feature of *zenki* represented in all Japanese Zen works are among others “asymmetry, simplicity, naturalness, and freedom.” For one thing, these poems express the essential feature of *budo*, the power of the *mind* (*shin*) over the *sword* (*ken*). They also aim at evoking the benefits of a pure and simple mind in martial arts, devoid of excessive conceptualizations and attachment, even between the mind and the sword. The mind is the sword.

In the past several years, I have had the fortune to learn and practice the art of Aikido under the instruction of experienced teachers not only in Europe and the United States, but in Japan as well. Through frequent observation and conversations, I have pondered the essence of Aikido in its innermost meaning. Most of the fundamental aspects of the art are well

evident to any advanced practitioner, but they are also frequently misunderstood by many others. For instance, while in Japanese traditional martial arts (*kobujutsu*) the objective of fighting techniques and strategies was to cut down or maim an adversary either at war or in a duel, the modern combat disciplines (*budo*) aim at taming the Self, the Ego, and becoming a better person. They are ways to perfect one’s mind, behavior, and attitude. These are best evinced in the art of Aikido, where there is no competition, no desire to win over a partner. The confrontation in the practice of Aikido is meant to lead to perfecting the technique until harmony between body movement, mind, and breathing, but also that between two practitioners, reaches its pinnacle. Yet, the spirit of *budo* remains combat. Unlike in the past, however, *budo* is a way (*dō*) not preparing for lethal confrontations, but for forging a sharp mental attitude and the union of thought and action. My reading of O-Sensei Ueshiba Morihei (1883-1969) understood in the context of modern Japanese history, *budo* history, culture, and language suggests that his notions of harmony, peace, and universe refer exactly to this message. His abundant use of Buddhist terminology and concepts conveys this shift of purpose, from killing the other to subduing one’s self, by means of the cutting hand (*te gatana*). Additionally, it is important to keep in mind that O-sensei’s views were not at all unique at his time. They should be understood in the context of decades of philosophical and ideological change brought about by the modernizing winds blowing through Japan already in the Meiji era (mid-19th century).

Notes

- [1] I have collected 109 such *doka* compositions in a forthcoming publication titled *The Moon in the River: The Budō Path to the Empty Mind*.

3 Life and Death

Frequent themes in this selection of aphorisms include selflessness, flexibility and adaptation, spontaneity and naturalness, and formlessness. The attentive reader will notice in them a consistent reference to the classic dichotomies of human life and death. This juxtaposition is both inevitable and intriguing in *budo*. My understanding of *budo* is that no matter how metaphorical, allegorical, literal, or symbolic, the martial artist (*bodoka*)'s reality and sublimated ideal is to act with death in mind. Only when the adept faces a confrontation expecting his own death, can he work on embracing the action with complete naturalness, unconditioned by fear, and unconcerned about defeat. Although in modern terms, "death" (of the person) can and should be substituted with "subjugation" (of the mind), the idea at its core remains the same—emotions effect actions. Hence, the less we allow emotions such as fear, anger, rage, hatred, and expectations such as victory, defeat, and success to condition our actions, the purer and less artificial our performance. This is the way "empty mind" a classic trope and ideal in Buddhism theory and practice, should be understood. It is not about not thinking. It is about letting your mind accept thoughts without fixing on any of them, thereby maintaining equanimity.

In *budo* terms, the mind is manifest in one's breathing, attitude, demeanor, and mindful presence. The body is manifest in movement, posture, strength, flexibility, and physical prowess. A sword can cut the human body, but it can also cut the human mind. In Buddhism, the sword is often used to metaphorically cut one's Ego and one's attachment. Therefore, pondering the inherent interbeing of mind and body, breathing and moving, other and self is the essence of the advanced *budo* practice if one is interested in enjoying its full benefits. The intense and consistent practice of *budo* and the study of Buddhist doctrines help appreciate the intimate relationship among mindfulness, emptiness, interdependence, compassion, and nonduality in daily life. This can be best enjoyed fully by applying a holistic approach to the practice in which one's physical performance is intimately supported by appropriate breathing, movement, posture, mental attitude, and complete abandonment of attachment.

A pure mind in Buddhism is a mind devoid of uncontrolled emotional attachment. Such an attitude would be ideal for a warrior, and numerous works of ancient Japanese literature contain reference to such an endeavor. Buddhist thought contains the key to deconstructing the mystique that life is long, happy, and healthy and the human delusion that the

world around us is real, concrete, and we act independently in it. The core of the Buddhist message is to accept that our minds are the clue to human satisfaction. This is not an easy task and no Buddhist work offers an alternative. But it is possible; the way is to maintain constant vigilance and mindful attention. Just like in the case of physical fitness and prowess, mental prowess requires nothing else but long and constant practice and experience.

The essential message the Buddhist doctrine conveys is that the body and the mind are one and the same. No action can be performed without the guidance of the mind and no mental activity can exist without intention behind it. In brief, every action has an intention and every intention has a consequence. Likewise, the same understanding can be applied to the *budo* path. Perfection and success in *budo* are more likely to occur when the adept's mind is freed from craving for victory and instead surrenders to and accepts the flow of the opponent's action. Paradoxical as it may seem, the more we crave for victory, fear defeat or injury, and aim at a quick result, the fewer chances we have to be safe, let alone win.

True victory, even in combat, emerges first in controlling one's own mind and emotions. The physical response will only follow. In Aikido, effectiveness in a confrontation emerges when a pure mind is achieved. Here, again, Buddhism finds a useful application, as only with a pure or concept-free mind devoid of expectation and desire can one achieve realization and wisdom. Unconcerned with death or defeat, the *budo* adept's mind does not produce anxiety or worries, hence he can be himself. Winning a fight is first of all winning over one's own mind.

Ultimately, Buddhism and *budo* are both fundamentally aiming at the same goal: liberating the mind by appreciating being as it is. *Budo*, in its ideal level of perfection and as a consequence of assiduous practice, is meant to gradually induce the adept's abandonment of preconceptions, emotions, and ultimately all the techniques formally learned and memorized to thus enter a state of spontaneous and intuitive action with an empty mind. It is this state of equanimity and freedom from conceptualization as well as unbiased presence that both disciplines foster. This is not easy to achieve, but it is the path or the way to that goal that matters most than anything else. As Buddhism famously states, the nature of ultimate liberation is already in each of us, we just need to train ourselves to live it.



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3. Avoid laziness
and do not procrastinate.

The adept trains hard
even when tired,
and wakes up when sleepy.

Alertness leads to victory.
Torpor leads to defeat.



4. Do not be guided
by instinct and emotions
when engaging in combat.

Stay sharp
and maintain an open and intuitive mind.
Enter a combat as if
it were the last one.

Give all yourself in a confrontation,
and you will be victorious.

Hesitate and withdraw,
and you will always lose.



5. Everyone can easily see
the path under the sun.
But only the adept
can realize the way
under the pale light of the moon.

Rely on an illuminated path
and you will surely achieve nothing.
Let your mind guide you,
and you will reach your goal.



6. Form as the rule,
 Repetition as the standard.
Flow as the goal,
Letting go is the result.
These are the adept's fundamentals.

Technique leads to skills,
 but letting it go,
 as it is,
 is true harmony.



7. The virtue of the adept
 is patience.
As impulsiveness has no room
 in his mind.
Cherish tolerance, patience,
 and forbearance.

These shape the good attitude
 of any great warrior.

Prevent any irresponsible
 reaction
 and wait until possible
 to avert confrontation.

The hero sacrifices his life
 only when no more options are available.



8. If your mind is restless,
 so is your body.
If your mind is still,
 so is your body.

Control your mind and
 you will control your body.
Discipline your mind, and
 your body will act accordingly.



9. The waters of a river
accept the gliding leaf
on their surface,
with no clash or resistance.

No confrontation
but encounter.

The path to harmony
is thus union,
not opposition.

It is flow,
not interruption. (*Aiki*)

As the opponent assaults,
receive his action.

As the attack advances,
enter its flow.

Tension brings obstruction,
but movement leads
to harmony.

There is no enemy
but your self.

There is no fear
but your mind. (*shin*)



10. The goal of practice
is not to arrive
at the destination.
It is to refine the way
we walk the path.



11. There is a saying:
“If we sit for one minute,
We will be buddhas for one minute”
Likewise, *budo* is its practice.

When performing
and practicing *budo*,
the mind should not focus
on the end result.

The mind should be free
and unstoppable,
wholeheartedly empty.
Your mind, body, and movements are
free and unbroken.
This is the essence of *budo*.



12. The adepts who
study the Ways
perfect the path,
they do not rush to the destination.

This is true for
the calligrapher,
the meditator,
the tea master,
and the *budōka*.

There is no difference
between action
and result.
The nature of the flow
lies in the moon in the river.

A reflection on the mirror
of the empty mind—
as it is.