

# Spiritual aspects

The essence of budo training is refinement of the spirit. That is certainly true for its sword arts as well. Any book on the Japanese sword arts would be incomplete without some mention of the spiritual aspects.

The sword is a mighty symbol in Japanese culture, since legendary times. The sharpened and polished steel represents a pure spirit and a straight path. There is no point in training iaido, aikiken, or aikibatto, without that in mind.

This book has no room for going through all the spiritual aspects in depth, but I will try to present some of the fundamentals. They should be the core of your everyday training.

## Do – the way

道

Before the 19<sup>th</sup> century, most martial arts in Japan had the suffix *jutsu*, meaning technique, skill, or art. The sword arts were called kenjutsu and battojutsu, the unarmed arts jujutsu, and so on. The essence of those arts was the ability to apply them to battle.

In the Meiji restoration of 1868, the emperor took over the power from the shogun, thereby ending the samurai era. When the samurai lost their elevated position in the country, so did their arts. They had become obsolete as methods of battle, and they lost their importance as skills for a ruling class, since that class no longer ruled.

But Japanese society appreciated the value of those old arts, and soon made measures to have them preserved and

practiced – though not just by the samurai, but by any Japanese citizens, and not for their martial aspects, but for the good they did to the souls and bodies of those training them.

The latter called for a change of attitude to the martial arts. They were not to be trained for martial skills, but for personal refinement and development. So, one after the other was modified, and changed suffix from jutsu to *do*, way or path – also pronounced *michi*. Jujutsu became judo, and so on. The old forms were still around, but rather seclusively, whereas the new forms soon became popular sports.

This transformation is important to be aware of, when training the Japanese martial arts. Of course, they should still be relevant and functional in their martial aspects – such as self defense. But there is something else that is of far greater importance: They should refine the minds and bodies of their practitioners, and help them on their paths of personal development.

One needs a *do* by which to pursue one's self-realization, one's personal growth. Without it, one can only think about it. In the Eastern mind, thinking is not enough for a person to develop. One needs to act, as well. The mind must join with the body, for the whole human being to evolve.

In sword art training, we struggle to develop the practical skills, but in this process we also sharpen our minds and refine our spirits. That's what the training is really about.

One could say that the technical skills are *omote*, on the surface, but the spiritual development is *ura*, what happens inside. Another way of putting it is that the physical training is *shoden*, the first mediation, whereas the mental training is *okuden*, the inner mediation. But that is little more than playing with words. No matter how it is described, the students must understand that the whole point of training is the mental and spiritual development.

It will lead to better skills, as well, but that is secondary.

To remain true to the path when training, means that one should not regard winning over others as any significant progress. It is far more rewarding to think of the others as



*Scene from the kabuki play Chushingura, about the 47 ronin who sacrificed their lives in order to avenge their master. Wood print, ukiyo-e, by Kunitaru (Sadashige), 1855.*

fellow travelers on the path, helping each other along the way. In a *dojo*, the place where a *do* is practiced, every member of it should develop, or none of them can reach any height.

Being true to the path also consists of not settling with having one's mere technical skills improve, but to search inside for what is really expressed through them. Although it is a martial art, it should be trained with peacefulness in mind, and a beneficial spirit. Even when swinging the sword in a mighty strike, one should do it in a spirit of perfection, rather than destruction.

### **Attitude**

There are countless ways in which one's attitude influences one's martial art. Therefore, it is always important to work on refining one's attitude, and not be blinded by focusing on the physical results. It is an inward process, not an outward one.

For the beginner, the sharpness of the sword helps the mind to sharpen, but for the advanced student it should be

the other way around – the sharpness of the mind is what makes the sword sharp. The aim of the training is to create and improve the sharpness of the mind, whereas the increased sharpness of one's sword should be regarded as little more than a side-effect.

Attitude is a good concept to consider, when pursuing one's path. The general attitude should be one of relaxation and clarity, with no particular goal in sight, nor anything specific that one is desperate to protect. Just being, *ima* (the first 'i' in iaido), and perfectly free to adapt to any circumstance. You could call it empty mind.

Then, through the movements of a kata or exercise, one's attitude changes according to what is done at the moment. It is a kind of mental process, going through several stages:

In the first step of a iaido kata, or an aikibatto solo exercise, nothing happens. This step should be taken with the original attitude of empty mind, complete openness, with neither plan nor goal.

At the next step, the attacker charges, and you go for your sword. Here, the attitude immediately changes into one of complete awareness and focus. You should have a strong spirit forward, as if intending to walk right through the attacker.

The following step is where you do your *taisabaki* evasive movement, and you draw your sword. Here, you should actually have an attitude of letting the attacker's force through, of sort of helping the attacker along. This is the *aiki* choice, not blocking the attacking energy but joining with it. Even if you strike the attacker in this step, you should have the same attitude.

Next is the movement where you strike down the attacker. This should be done in an attitude of returning to the attacker what he or she released in the attack. Giving back – not as a revenge, but as a kindness, bringing things back to order. One could also say that you bring the attacker's intention to completion. The attacker intended to strike, therefore you do, so that not even the intention is lost.



*The moment before the draw. From a 2002 seminar in Plzen, Czech Republic. Photo by Larry Kwolek.*

You accepted the charge in the previous step, and you accept the underlying intention in this step.

It should be done without any aggression. That does not mean without power, but completely without aggression, without a destructive will.

Ichimura sensei used to talk about ‘the sword that gives life’, by which I believe he referred to the attitude in this step. You should not strike with the desire to stop the attacker, but with the will to bring him or her to completion.

Nishio sensei had another way of treating this step. He stopped the strike right before it would hit, as a way of showing the attacker the consequences of his or her action, but still giving the attacker a chance to reconsider and retreat. He talked about this very often, and *aikido toho*, his own iai system, was full of examples of it.

For your development in this *do*, it is extremely important not to see the strike as a way of striking down the attacker, but as a way of bringing him or her back to order. Back to square one, so to speak – as if there had not been an attack at all. You can also say that this is a way to free the attacker from any guilt or *karma* of what has passed.

Either the strike ends in one or other *kamae*, guard posi-

tion, or you move your sword to one. This kamae is held for a little while, in a spirit of expanding one's awareness all around. No doubt, the spirit has been focused on the attacker up to this point. So, it is important to open up and spread one's awareness, in case other attackers might follow – but more essentially, this is a first step back to the empty mind attitude.

During this moment, you look down at the fallen attacker. Traditionally, this is to check that he or she is completely incapacitated – or dead. In modern training there is nobody there, of course, so the best way is to look down to conclude that no one has been harmed, and that things have indeed come to their conclusion. You brought things to their conclusion in the strike, so at this moment you simply ascertain that you did.

Still, you should remain alert in your extended awareness. It is like a sphere that you expand all around you. Make the sphere as big as you feel that you manage. Do not stare very intently on the floor in front of you, but gaze with an open mind. If you remain in the focused spirit you had at the previous strike, you will be ignorant of anything else happening around you, and that is a weakness.

When you have ascertained that completion is reached, and no other attackers approach, you can do *chiburi*, the movement for shaking off the blood from the sword. The original intention of the movement was just that: to shake off the attacker's blood, although the blade also had to be wiped. In modern training, though, another shaking off is intended: that of the deed, of what just passed. You need to let it pass, get it out of your mind, so that it does not disturb you onward. Symbolically, any guilt or *karma* is washed off by this movement. You open up, and become peaceful again.

It is evident in the actual movement. Your right hand makes *chiburi* to the right with the sword, and your left hand goes to the *saya*, scabbard, on your left. Your belly, more specifically your center, is exposed. You show yourself, instead of your sword. The high energy that you had charged yourself with for the battle, is released and flows

out of you. You remain in the middle, and become calm. Just like you clean the blade with the *chiburi* movement, you clean yourself from the battle, as if it never happened. Forget it, so that you can move on. Otherwise, the only one harmed by the exercise is you.

*Noto*, shielding the sword, should be done with the attitude of bringing everything back to *tanden*, your center. It is a peaceful thing, bringing you to completion. At the strike you brought your attacker to completion, and by *noto* you do the same for yourself. Therefore, whatever *noto* you do, make sure that it is full of the spirit of returning to your center. So, it is good if the *tsuba* and the *saya* meet right in front of your center.

Then you put your left hand thumb on the *tsuba*, and let your right hand slide up to *kashira*, the end piece of the hilt. At the same time, and in the same tempo, you look up. Also, you push the sword slightly to the left, so that *kashira* gets in front of your center – the same position it should have when you start an exercise. Both hands cooperate in pushing the sword firmly into the scabbard.

Looking up, it is like you see the world anew. What preceded it, you have forgotten, and what's ahead of you, you are completely open to. When you lower your right hand, you should delight in this sensation of fresh openness. Continue in this spirit as you go back to your starting point.

When your left hand releases its grip on the scabbard, and slides down to your side, you should have forgotten the previous events completely. It is like you have just woken up to a new day. You are back in empty mind.

These changes of attitude through the movements of the exercise, apply not only to the sword arts, but relate also to how you should learn to live your life as a whole. So, don't worry about things before they happen, but immediately focus and move to action when they do. Bring things to completion. Bring yourself to peace afterward, and let go of what has passed as if it never did. Again and again through life, it is the same. The cycle is repeated – sometimes like thunder, sometimes like a whisper. If your sword art train-

ing makes you increasingly competent at handling such cycles, it is indeed your path.

I should mention that in *kinagare* aikido training, where there is no stopping, the steps and attitude changes above are not relevant. In short, you should remain throughout in the third attitude, that of letting the attacker's spirit pass, of helping it to pass. In *jutai* training, though, you follow approximately the same steps as described for the sword arts above.