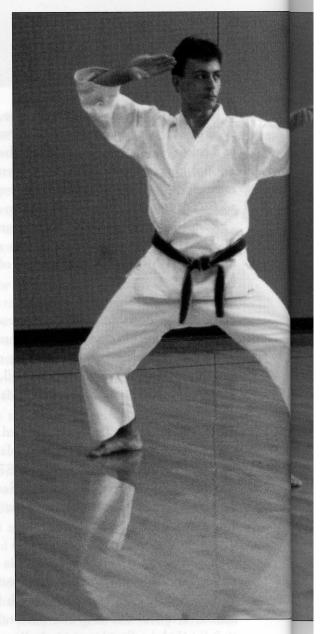
# IDEAL TEACHING

# JAPANESE CULTURE & THE TRAINING OF THE WARRIOR

WAYNE W. VAN HORNE, Ph.D.





tial arts (Befu, 1971:174-179; Beasley, 1975:11-13). Perhaps the most central theme is the strong emphasis on conformity and the subordinating of individualism to the norms of the social group (Befu, 1971:168-169). Yet, one prominent image in Japanese culture seems to conspicuously contrast with this emphasis on conformity—the idealized image of the lone samurai warrior.

Many of us are familiar with the idealized image of the lone warrior as depicted in the famous Akira Kurasawa/Toshiro Mifune samurai films such as "The Seven Samurai." The lone warrior of these films is an independent individualist, who is an ultimately competent, invincible, and technically superb warrior, who single-handedly triumphs in combat against the multitudes of adversaries who oppose him. Is this seeming anomaly of the heroic individu-



alist in a culture of conformity based on our erroneous Western interpretation of the Japanese warrior image, or is the individualism of the warrior actually prized in modern conformity-ridden Japanese culture?

One way to answer this question is to examine the relationship between the teaching methods of Japanese martial arts systems, the training ground of warriors, and key Japanese cultural values. Do the training methods teach individualism, or are they consistent with the cultural value of conformity?

My research indicates that although the teaching methods do indeed train martial artists to be highly skilled individual fighters who engage in one-on-one combat, the ultimate goal of the training is consistent with broader Japanese cultural values—to create individuals who contribute to the betterment of the collective society and who have a high degree of social responsibility—a conclusion that has also been drawn by other researchers (Befu, 1971:166-169; Jones, 1992).¹



WA, THE PRINCIPLE OF "GROUP HARMONY, IS DEMONSTRATED THROUGH THE SYNCHRONIZED MOVEMENTS OF STUDENTS PRACTICING A KATA IN SHORINJI-RYU KARATE-DO.

Photos courtesy of W. Van Horne.

The comparative analysis of martial arts training methods that I am presenting is based on data I obtained through participant observation and interviews as a student in three different systems of Japanese budo, or martial arts. In each of these arts—Sakugawa Koshiki Shorinji-ryu Karatedo, Aikido of Ueshiba, and Shinto Muso-ryu Jodo—the teachers I observed were highly ranked, had been trained through traditional Japanese methods, and likewise, train their students with traditional methods.<sup>2</sup> Two of the teachers are Japanese, and one is an American who learned his art in Japan.

The teaching methods and goals of all of these systems are strikingly similar, so much so that it is obvious that they are widely used, culturally based methods of teaching that embody Japanese cultural ideals. Their overt goal is to mold a student toward a specific end, the creation of a master *budoka*, a warrior who embodies not only supreme competence in the specific martial art, but also embodies many of the ideals of Japanese culture (cf. Jones, 1992).

In order to examine the relationship between Japanese culture, teaching methods in the martial arts, and the ultimate goals of warrior training, I will discuss several major Japanese cultural themes that serve as models for teaching methods in the martial arts. I will also use examples from my participant observation to illustrate the influence that these cultural themes have on actual martial arts teaching and goals.

#### THEME ONE: CONFORMITY (WA, MUSUBI, GIRI, & NINJO)

The first major theme is one of the most pervasive themes in Japanese culture—the importance of social conformity and the subordinating of individual desires to the needs of the group. This ethos of group conformity provides the model for the structure of group training in budo. Several uniquely Japanese concepts relate to this theme, specifically wa, musubi, giri, and ninjo.

Wa is the concept of group harmony, the subordinating of the individual to the collective functioning of the group (Whiting, 1979). Wa serves as a cultural model for group martial arts practice. For example, in karatedo, jodo, and aikido classes, students practice basic techniques (kihon waza) repetitively as a group. Students are required to achieve a remarkable degree of synchronization and uniformity in their collective movements, most strikingly seen in the group practice of elaborate kata, or patterns of techniques, in karatedo. Students are taught to act in harmony with the group, not to perform as individuals. Those who do act as individuals cannot move in synchronization with the rest of the group and are admonished by teachers for disrupting the group wa. In a perfect kata performed by a class of students, everyone moves not as individuals, but as a group entity, each individual a part of the collective wa.

Musubi, a related concept which means unity or harmonious interaction, is central to aikido theory. Musubi extends the ideal of group harmony to harmony with the attacker. Aikido students typically train in pairs, with one student attacking and one defending. Aikido technique is based on the defender blending with, or coming into harmony with, the motion and energy of the attacker—in other words applying musubi (Saotome, 1989:9).

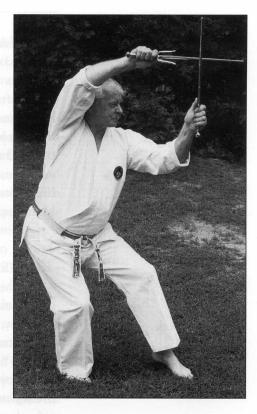
Giri is another core cultural concept that refers to the individual's social obligation or duty to act appropriately while interacting with others—in other

words, to conform to appropriate cultural rules of social interaction (Nitobe, 1979:24-25; Befu, 1971:168-169). Individuals must, therefore, suppress their personal, natural inclinations and desires, their individualistic tendencies, known as ninjo (Befu, 1971:169-170). This conformity to appropriateness of behavior also extends to the ideal of "correctness," the ideal that there are specific, correct ways of doing things. In Japanese culture, especially where ritual is used, the Japanese believe there is an optimally correct way for actions to be performed that can only be learned through exact imitation of a master of the art or ritual. There is, therefore, a high value placed on conformity with the approved method of doing something. For example, this can be seen in instructional methods used in the educational system and in arts such as Noh and the tea ceremony.

Students who practice budo are also admonished to imitate the techniques of their teachers exactly, without individual variation or expression, in order to master the technique correctly. In all of the arts I observed, the major emphasis was to drill students repetitively in individual techniques and combinations of techniques to enable them to perform with painstaking precision. In jodo, for example, students were required to spend hours mastering each individual basic strike with a staff (jo) before beginning to learn combinations

of techniques. The first several classes typically consist of practicing a strike over and over again for two or three hours, with the teacher correcting it until the student can do it precisely. My karatedo teacher often made this same point by telling students that as beginners they were like puppets, their goal being to imitate their teacher as precisely as possible. Another American aikido teacher I observed made this point by telling students that the process of learning aikido was similar to that of art. Students had to learn to draw basic shapes, such as squares, circles, etc., precisely before they would ultimately be able to create a painting of complex form.

The emphasis on conformity to the group and conformity in execution of techniques has multiple goals in Japanese training methods. Technical mastery is certainly foremost. Learning the techniques precisely ultimately allows the budoka to perform their techniques in the quickest, most powerful, and most efficacious manner possible and optimizes their ability to survive a fight. It also builds endurance, physical stamina, and strength. However, it also allows the teacher to observe and assess the personality of each student. The student's patience, natural aptitude, commitment, and to perseverance—all essential qualities to train and survive as a warrior-become apparent. Teachers look for weaknesses in these abilities and give individualized instruction to their students to point out their weaknesses and force them to improve. Throughout this process, apt students learn about their own character and personality and attempt to overcome their weaknesses. My karatedo teacher addressed this issue by saying that a shodan, or first-degree black belt, was only considered a beginner. All of the training prior to that merely allowed a student to learn some basics but more importantly allowed the teacher to assess the student's character. The most important training began after a student proved he had the qualities necessary to become a warrior.



Precision in Performing Techniques is emphasized in Budo Training.
Here, seventh-dan Thomas Cauley,
International Director of Sakugawa Koshiki Shorinji-ryu Karate-do, demonstrates the correct technique in a sai kata.

Photo courtesy of W. Van Horne.

This teaching method is also apparent in jodo training. New students are required to master each basic technique one at a time. This means that new students must practice the same technique repetitively for hours during a class, often practicing by themselves. Of course, many new students become bored and don't see the purpose of the tedious repetition. The jodo teacher would observe the way that new students dealt with the repetitive solo practice and would comment about weaknesses he perceived, such as not having patience, not concentrating, etc. In this respect, the initial, tedious basic practice serves as a sort of litmus test for gauging the personalities of new students. Many new students don't persevere through this initial phase.

#### THEME TWO: HIERARCHY (ON & AMAE)

The second major theme that pervades budo training is derived from the importance of hierarchy as a model for the structure of Japanese society (Beasley, 1975:3-4). Two concepts are particularly important in order to understand the effects of hierarchy in Japanese culture and behavior (Befu, 1971:31-32, 54, 166-168; Benedict, 1974:98-113). The first is amae, the tendency to depend on the approval or love of other significant people in one's life for one's own emotional happiness (Befu, 1971:159-161). The other, on, refers to indebtedness that can never be repaid. For instance, a child can never repay its parents for its birth and their love and effort to raise it. Likewise, a student can never repay a teacher for his knowledge and teaching, or an employee a boss for his hiring and employment. The best one can do is to fulfill to the best of one's ability any obligations to, or requests from, those people. These are examples of on.

On also functions between student and teacher in budo training. Students have strong obligations and bonds to their teachers, to the extent that traditionally teachers were supported, and cared for, by their students. The cultural importance of on, indebtedness, and giri, appropriateness, are such that together they create a strong sense of obligation in students to do whatever the teacher asks (Nitobe, 1979:37-41). Budo teachers are in a position of hierarchical status and authority over students, and they use their students' sense of indebtedness and need for approval to make ever-increasing demands for training time and acquisition of skills. They also use the students' sense of on to manipulate and motivate them during training.

This was most apparent to me in jodo training. Increasing demands were placed on students as they gained more seniority in the class. For example, students were typically shown a *kata*, or prearranged series of techniques, only once or twice by the teacher, and then were expected to know it by the next practice. Newer students would usually forget the kata. The teacher would seem to become very angry with the students and would tell them that since they had forgotten the kata they had wasted his time in teaching it to them. The horror of this to Japanese students is that they have both failed in their obligation to a person of higher status, someone to whom they are indebted, and have met with disapproval from a significant person in their life. They would then typically work extremely hard to learn what was required of them and not make this mistake again.

The students' sense of obligation also motivates them to tolerate a variety of severe teaching methods. In jodo, the teacher would often use anger to teach a variety of lessons—to show disapproval of failure to learn, to motivate students to learn faster, or to teach them to deal with their temper or a stressful situation. He would also use disapproval to the same end, sometimes walking away from a student in the middle of private instruction in apparent disgust, leaving the student confused and alone in the middle of the practice floor in front of the class. I also observed the aikido teacher become angry and threaten to walk out in the middle of a large seminar he was conducting with a hundred or so students—because they weren't performing a technique exactly the way he had showed it. The threat had the desired effect and motivated the students to perform the technique exactly as demonstrated. In each of these examples, the teacher used anger and disapproval to manipulate the students' sense of on and amae in order to motivate them to learn.

The students' sense of on also motivates them to endure teaching methods involving physical pain. For example, once the jodo teacher was reviewing with me a particularly long and complicated kata that I had failed to master. It entailed my attacking him with a wooden practice sword (tachi) and his defending with a short wooden staff (jo). Over a number of repetitions, he continuously increased the intensity, speed, and power of his techniques to make the situation more and more like actual combat. He interjected angry comments and looks of disgust at my incompetence throughout this process. This culminated in a very real, though expertly controlled, attack by him on the last repetition of the kata that resulted in my sustaining a split lip, a nearly broken arm, and a bruising blow to my solar plexus that caused me a momentary blackout and a wave of intense nausea. Needless to say, the reality and danger he instilled in the situation resulted in an increase in the intensity and skill of my practice from then on.

A similar experience occurred at a comparable level of my karatedo training. Over the course of an hour, my teacher repeatedly told me to punch at him and repeatedly threw me over his shoulder onto a wooden gymnasium floor with a series of impressive techniques. The pain and exhaustion I experienced from attacking and being thrown resulted in my attacking him as hard as I possibly could with every ounce of energy I had left in order to just keep going. Eventually, I ceased to give any thought to the consequences of my attacks. When he halted this practice, he told me that I had finally learned to perform a committed attack, which was necessary in order for my techniques to actually work in combat. I then realized that this had been his goal and was the lesson I was supposed to learn.

Japanese students endure many physically grueling lessons like these, and return to practice again due to their sense of on to their teacher. Again, teachers have multiple goals when utilizing a student's sense of on and amae. The students' sense of obligation and desire for approval motivates intense practice, which is characterized by the emphasis on the perfecting of techniques and consequently results in the attainment of a high level of mastery of technical skills (Befu, 1971:174). It also allows students to develop courage and calmness in the face of unpredictable, intense lessons in the dojo. The goal is ultimately pragmatic—the few students who endure to the culmination of

this process become master warriors, better than the vast majority of fighters (Nitobe, 1979:28-29).

#### THEME THREE: UNIVERSAL LAW (RI & JI)

A third major theme in Japanese culture, more focused in the areas of religion, spiritual beliefs, and the arts, is the belief that universal natural laws exist and can be manifested through the actions of a master of an art. Two concepts associated with this ideal are ri and ji. Ri is universal truth, the following of universal laws of nature, while ji is a particular action or expression of ri created by a master. In essence, ji is a depiction or manifestation of the universal truth, which can only be produced by someone with the insight to produce it. In budo, a technique or kata performed by a master is ji—it is perfect and follows the natural laws (Leggett, 1978:122-126). In order to master an art to the level that a budoka can express ji in his actions, every technique must be mastered, the principles of biomechanics and ki (energy) flow must be understood, calmness of mind in combat and invincibility of spirit must be mastered, the universal principles must be applied to all action, and all of these must be integrated within the budoka. With this high level of mastery, a budoka becomes not only a master fighter, but his actions become ji and manifest the universal truths.

Saotome, a disciple of the founder of aikido, discusses this through a related concept of *kannagara*:

Kannagara is a way of intuition. . . . The only laws are the laws which govern natural phenomena and promote harmony. Kannagara is a way of supreme freedom, for the action appropriate to function in harmony with nature occurs spontaneously. – Jones, 1982:124



A GOAL IN AIKIDO PRACTICE IS TO SPONTANEOUSLY APPLY TECHNIQUE.

Photo courtesy of W. Van Horne.

Saotome's words explicate the Japanese cultural model of mastery of an art—it is only after mastering the art that the warrior can truly become creative and spontaneous. The spontaneity will then be in harmony with the universal laws of nature, and the warrior will be invincible. Thus, the emphasis in teaching methods on precise imitation, repetition, and technical mastery. It is only with this level of exacting training that mastery can be achieved. For example, my jodo teacher would sometimes quip, "When you have a menkyo kaiden [or have mastered the system], you can perform this technique the way that you want, but for now we do it the way our headmaster teaches us." The point that this makes is that a student needs to imitate the teacher to reach the level of mastery and insight necessary to perform a perfect technique spontaneously.

Again, the ultimate goal of this training model is pragmatic for the warrior who faces combat and death. My jodo teacher told me that the ultimate goal of budo is to train hard to become as good as possible as quickly as possible, so that one will be able to defeat an opponent with one's spirit. His point is that, if you are a master, then your capabilities will be so apparent in your attitude and actions that any opponent will recognize that he will be defeated and, therefore, won't attack. This is perceived as the ultimate pragmatic goal of budo training—a warrior becomes invincible in art and spirit, and, therefore, violence is averted.

#### THEME FOUR: ENLIGHTENMENT & TRANSCENDENCE

The last theme, which is again more specific to spirituality and the arts, is that of enlightenment and transcendence through mastery (Suzuki, 1973). This is the ultimate goal of budo training. The training not only produces master warriors, but leads to the realization in the master budoka that he does not want to kill. Again, teaching methods are used to instill this lesson from the beginning.

My karatedo teacher once had an aggressive new student join his class specifically for the purpose of sparring with other students. The teacher asked him to spar with him before class, and the new student eagerly accepted. The teacher had no difficulty in repeatedly inflicting painful, although controlled techniques on him. Within five minutes the student was bruised and bloodied. He then proceeded to practice with the rest of the class for two hours.

This process of enduring painful sparring before class with the teacher was repeated at the beginning of each class for almost a month. The student became at first more determined to fight hard, then gradually became resigned to the fighting, and eventually realized that not only was fighting self-destructive, but that he no longer wished to inflict such pain on other students. Finally, when it was apparent that he was no longer interested in fighting, the teacher ceased to fight him in this manner. I must add that whenever the teacher sparred with other students he did not hurt them. When asked about his purpose in the brutal treatment of the student, the teacher answered that "some people need to be shown love the hard way."

A similar incident occurred with the jodo teacher. One new student who was aggressive in his practice with other students suffered repeated lectures and bursts of apparent anger from the teacher. Again, the teacher attempted

to teach him that budo training was not about aggression. The ultimate goal of budo training is to transcend violence and anger, again for multiple reasons. Pragmatically, a warrior who has emotional control during battle has a better chance of surviving. A warrior who is angry or violent is not in harmony with universal laws and will be defeated. More importantly, by becoming a master budoka a warrior is invincible, and, therefore, doesn't need to kill another human. With this ability comes the realization that killing is unnecessary. A master budoka with this realization is motivated to train others to this level of mastery so that they too avert conflict. The outcome of budo training is, therefore, the instilling of benevolence in the budoka as well as a sense of social responsibility to teach others for the betterment of society.

#### **CONCLUSION**

The teaching methods that I have described budo teachers using are obviously derived from important Japanese cultural themes such as conformity, the importance of the group, correctness, indebtedness, harmony with nature, and transcendence. They are indeed focused on the pragmatic goal of developing a superb fighter, but this is seen as necessary for the ultimate goal of creating insight which leads to the development of a personal ethos of benevolence and social responsibility.

This brings us back to the question I posed at the beginning: Is it the individualism of the warrior that is actually prized in modern conformity-ridden Japanese culture, or is this an erroneous interpretation of the idealized warrior image by Westerners? The answer at this point is apparent: the ideal of the budoka is that of an invincible warrior who is able to overcome all adversaries, but who ultimately embodies a deep sense of social obligation and is strongly motivated to better society by training others to be able to avoid violence through their own mastery of budo. The warrior image, therefore, embodies the cultural ideal of the individual's obligation to put society's needs above his own. Like the hero at the end of Sanjuro and other Kurasawa/Mifune films, the master warrior in Japanese culture ultimately shuns violence and killing as personal weakness and social evil.



#### **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

This paper is a result of the outstanding training I have received from the following teachers: Thomas Cauley, David E. Jones, David Adams, Norio Wada, Mitsugi Saotome, and Edward Baker. I thank them all for their efforts.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> The conclusions presented in this paper are my own and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of any of the martial arts teachers whom I observed during my fieldwork.

<sup>2</sup> My participant observation consisted of five years direct training with Thomas Cauley, *shichidan* (seventh-degree black belt) in Sakugawa Koshiki Shorinji-ryu Karatedo, two years with Norio Wada, *godan* (fifth-degree black belt) in Shinto Muso-ryu Jodo, and attendance over a twelve-year period at numerous seminars taught by Mitsugi Saotome, *shihan* (master teacher) of Aikido of Ueshiba.

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#### **COVER ILLUSTRATION**

"HIDING THE BABY AMONG INNUMERABLE SOLDIERS."

DETAIL OF A SCENE ON A CHINESE PORCELAIN VASE SHOWING A FAMOUS BATTLE THAT OCCURRED AT CHANGBANPO.

#1931.140
HEIGHT 73 CM (28.25 IN.)
QING DYNASTY, KANGXI REIGN
EARLY 18TH CENTURY.

COURTESY OF THE TAFT MUSEUM.

• The Rev. Shannon K. Phelps is the only non-Saito in the 1000-year history of this rare family art (Shorinjin-ryu Saito Ninjitsu) to be awarded the rank of "Saito Ninjitsu Master." Rev. Phelps is a Vietnam combat veteran (5th Special Forces Group). He later spent eight years as a Navy SEAL, was a member of the U.N. Peacekeeping Forces in Palestine, and spent several years as a CIA counterterrorist officer. An ordained Episcopal priest, Rev. Phelps' academic work includes an M.A. degree in comparative world religions from Harvard University and a Master's of Divinity from Yale University. He instructs at his school, the Temple of the Full Autumn Moon, in Del Mar, California.

SHANNON KAWIKA PHELPS, M.A., M.DIV.

• A pioneer in Asian martial arts research in America, Robert W. Smith is well-known for his many contributions in the field. His experience in martial arts practice and research, spanning over fifty years, is complemented by a well-honed skill in writing arts as well. The *Journal of Asian Martial Arts* has published four previous articles by Mr. Smith.

ROBERT W.
SMITH

• Lt. Col. Michael Taint is stationed at Wright-Patterson AFB in Dayton, Ohio, where he is chief of strategic planning at Air Force Materiel Command. He has studied karate-do since 1987, including three and a half years of Shorin-ryu under Kyoshi Robert Scaglione in Florida. He holds master's degrees in computer science from the University of Dayton and political science from Wichita State University.

MICHAEL H.
TAINT, M.A.

• Dr. Wayne Van Horne received his Ph.D. from the University of Georgia and is currently an assistant professor of anthropology at Kennesaw State University. Dr. Van Horne's research focuses on the anthropological study of martial arts and warfare. His doctoral dissertation, "The Warclub: Weapon and Symbol in Southeastern Indian Societies," examines the relationship between warfare, martial arts, status and religion in pre-Columbian and early historic southeastern American Indian societies. During his more than twenty-two years of involvement with Japanese martial arts, he has received a third-degree rank in Sakugawa Koshiki Shorinji-ryu karate-do and has also studied aikido and Shinto Muso-ryu jodo.

WAYNE VAN HORNE, PH.D.