

Tea and Aikido

Tea was cultivated and developed in China about 2000 years ago - initially for medicinal purposes. Buddhist priests brought it as a medicine to Japan about 1500 years ago where the Japanese started to cultivate it not only as a medicine but also as a daily drink.

The Japanese Tea Ceremony developed from the 1300s through Zen philosophy. Matcha (pure tea) is used for the Tea Ceremony where as ryokucha (green tea) or bancha (dried tea) is used by Japanese people as a daily beverage. Matcha is rather expensive and so is normally used only for tea ceremony. Ryokucha (green tea) is for daily life but it should be drunk immediately after it is made. Bancha (dried tea) can be drunk several hours after brewing so it is more convenient than ryokucha. It is also cheaper than ryokucha.

I have been drinking matcha for several weeks in the morning and I have found out that it is actually easier to prepare than green tea or coffee. This is because matcha is made in the cup and has nothing to throw away. Green tea or coffee however has to be made in a pot with grounds and leaf residues to throw away afterwards. Also matcha is made in individual cups whereas green tea or coffee can be made for several cups. This means that drinking matcha is easy for one person and green tea or coffee is easier for several people. Matcha is best for health though green tea is also good. It must be said that coffee may not be good for health.

A fundamental question is whether one should live alone or in a group. In the tradition of meditation one should establish a way of living alone. This corresponds with the mentality of martial art. A martial artist is basically lone individual. This is why a martial artist cannot be considered as a soldier. A soldier is a member of a group called an army. Martial art is fundamentally against the army culture.

The mentality of Zen or martial art has something common with European aristocracy. European aristocracy is based on land ownership and a house. In England it was prohibited to divide land so the father had to choose one son to give his house and land to in its entirety. Daughters had to marry a man to live comfortably. Other sons had to join the army or church to make their living. Otherwise they had to be dependent of their landed elder brother. The landed gentry were alone in their position. This resulted in the mentality of a gentleman who has a similar character to a martial artist. Gentlemen had to practice sword and gun fighting in order to protect themselves.

Common people or farmers had to live together in order to produce food. It is much more logical and productive to work together in agriculture. It can be seen worldwide that the culture of common people or farmers is group based. In Japan the contrast of the group culture of farmers and common people versus the individual culture of Zen and martial arts is very strong. However a Japanese person can be a complete individualist like a martial artist or a practitioner of Zen but also can enjoy the more common group culture.

In the last 100 years agriculture has changed. It is no longer a group activity based on the community but has become an industry run by one owner. The use of machines and chemical products has changed agriculture. Life in a group was forgotten and people started to live as individuals. Living with others has become something that one has to tolerate. If one has money one prefers to live alone or only with someone one loves. If it then becomes difficult to live with others one always has the option to live alone. Living alone has become the philosophical basis of people. So everybody has in a way become gentry.

In Japan, martial artists pursued the way of living alone thus they liked Zen and the tea ceremony. After achieving the way of a lone life one understands that food is the only thing one needs in life. It is possible to produce food alone but it is much easier to produce food together with others. So even though the martial artists started to live alone, they ended up living together with other farmers. They finish their lives as farmers. This is the tradition of Japanese martial art.

The same thing happened with Aikido as well. Ueshiba Morihei started to practise martial arts. His teacher, Takeda Sokaku was a typical individualist. He travelled alone and had a bad character. Even though Ueshiba appreciated Takeda's techniques, he could not take to Takeda's way of life. Thus he stopped practicing martial art and instead went to a religion called Omotokyo. The basis of Omotokyo was to try to create a community based on agriculture. Unfortunately at the time the Japanese government in 1900 was trying to promote industry by destroying agriculture. Finally Omotokyo was prohibited and Ueshiba was forced to stay away from religion. This is why Ueshiba started to teach Aikido. His idea was to create a correct way of life through martial art. In 1930 he started to buy land in a countryside called Iwama. He did this in order to start producing food as a part of martial art practise. He called it Takemusu Aiki (Food producing Aikido). He actually built a dojo and house there and taught Aikido to a few students. Those few students who learned Aikido in Iwama between 1935 to 1950 became the main teachers of Aikido who then went on to teach and develop Aikido all over the world.

The logic of martial art is that of starting life as an individual and finishing it in a community way, a life of producing food. However there are two ways of living together. One is to produce food and the other is to form armies. Human beings need food. One can produce food or one can take food from others. One way needs agriculture to produce food and the other needs armies to take food from others. Thus, communities which produce food and communities which take food from others are very different. In industrial countries, governments choose to take food from others rather than produce food by themselves. It may be politically a correct idea because if one country only produces food then other countries will come with strong armies and take all food it has produced.

The basic question is to know whether one wants to live a life based on war or based on peace. If one wants to create a life based on peace, one must produce one's own food in one's own land. One's own land may be one's personally owned land or the land of one's community or country. If one's government is based on war, one is obliged to produce food in one's privately owned land because the government prefers to destroy agriculture and import food from abroad. Naturally the government needs a strong army to insure that it can do this.

In Japan there was no foreign invasion between 1350 (Mongolian Empire) and 1850 (USA). The Japanese culture developed without worrying about foreign invasion and thus the only way to get food was to produce it inside Japan. This is why martial artists end up to creating a community of agriculture. Conversely in Europe there were constant foreign invasions up to the present day. Naturally therefore governments had to try to develop stronger armies. In order to do this they had to develop industry and science.

For that purpose governments destroyed agriculture. It is not my job to say what governments should do. I am only concerned how I should live. I believe that this is the way of martial arts and meditation. So I drink tea every morning alone because my wife prefers to drink coffee in the morning.

Yoshigasaki Sensei, February 2006