

Professional paper

EASTERN MYSTICISM IN JUDO, KARATE AND AIKIDO

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Nikola Mijatov¹

Martial Arts Instructor -

College of Sports and Health, Belgrade, Serbia

MA Historian - The University of Belgrade, Faculty of Philosophy

Abstract: Japanese martial arts have gained immense popularity and have spread all over the world. They are a favored recreation, as well as a profession to millions of practitioners. However, the martial arts considered in the article – Judo, Karate and Aikido, bear within them the tradition and culture of their place of origin. The key question is this: are they liberated from their mystical, in fact religious past and ancient practice, in the form of philosophy and methods of training. The article gives a critical analysis of the ideas of the founders of the stated martial arts: Jigoro Kano, Gichin Funakoshi and Morihei Ueshiba and checks to what extent their very ideas and ultimate goals of martial arts are determined by Eastern mysticism, mainly in the form of Zen Buddhism and Shintoism. Besides that, the literature of distinguished domestic authors has also been analyzed in order to see whether the practice of the founders have been neglected or faithfully preserved. Judo has proved itself to be completely secular while the situation with Karate and Aikido is more complex. Funakoshi has preached modern methods of training, the road which is followed by the majority of Karate masters, while some have gone back to older practices: a mystical, irrational approach to martial art and to everyday training. On the other hand, in its essence, Aikido represents a religion and Morihei Ueshiba is its Prophet. In fact, the martial art is yields to the purpose of its final, completely religious goal. Still, by analyzing some Serbian authors, it is evident that this practice has been given up and that the practical part of Aikido as a martial art is dominant. Still, it is possible to also find Serbian authors who devotedly follow the path of Ueshiba and accept his philosophy in its entirety. This article aims to point out the significance of this problem, which does not only affect the philosophies of these martial arts, primarily in the form of defining the “ultimate goal” of the martial art

¹ ✉ nikolamijatov@gmail.com

itself, but also spreads its influence on the training methods. It is important to know for every practitioner whether his trainer or “sensei” views the martial art as a form of recreation, aiming to promote it as such, with modern training methods, or if there is a mystical approach to training with religious elements prevailing.

Key words: *Judo, Karate, Aikido, martial arts, mysticism*

INTRODUCTION

Originating from distant Japan, the martial arts and sports of Judo, Karate and Aikido in their essence have incorporated the tradition, philosophy as well as the religion of their native soil. Zen Buddhism and Shintoism, as traditional Japanese religions, have influenced the whole of society, and consequently, they left their marks on martial arts. All of the stated martial arts in their names have the word “Do” which points to the essence of the martial art itself, that lays not in the physical exercise or in the practical use, which actually only represent the path to a higher, philosophical goal (De Majo, 2010, 83). The sports aspects of Judo and Karate will be overlooked in this paper, minding the fact that these issues do not apply here. Considering that it was these martial arts that have spread all over the world and are practiced by millions of practitioners, the issue of the correlations of the philosophies of these martial arts and religiousness is surely significant. In Serbia, according to a 2011 census, some 6,779,319 (94.32%) citizens recognized themselves as believers of the traditional monotheistic religions. On the other hand, 84,063 (1.16%) citizens declared themselves atheists or agnostics (Republic of Serbia, the Republican Institute for Statistics: 2011 census). Also, the stated martial arts are greatly popular in Serbia which makes this topic relevant. For the individual practitioner of martial art, whether a believer or an atheist, the correlation of the chosen martial art and religion is surely important. A different approach, the correlation between Christianity and sport as a whole, has been the topic of former researches (Radoš, 2010).

In the end, every practitioner of martial arts individually opts for the level of commitment to the martial art itself, but he is obliged to know whether his martial art in its extremity is confronted with his religious beliefs. The major responsibility is on the coaches of these martial arts who are obliged to know the philosophical aspects of their martial arts and introduce it to their students (if there is a need, in fact, a religious orientation of the practitioners)

METHOD

Judo, Karate and Aikido carry the mark of their time, a time of deep social changes. Each of these martial arts was dominantly formed by the founder of the art who had his ideas, along with the philosophy, incorporated

in the martial art itself. Jigoro Kano, Gichin Funakoshi and Morihei Ueshiba were the individuals who founded, ideologically and practically formed and promoted their martial art all around the world.

Analyzing their ideas at the very “source” or more precisely their written marks, the correlation with religion cannot be perceived well. Minding the fact that they were the founders of the then modern martial art, the very question of breaking or not with the former tradition of martial arts was present. Zen Buddhism, along with Shintoism, has deeply influenced the ideas of old martial arts as well as everyday training practice. The basic question is whether or not there are traces of eastern mysticism in the martial art itself. Not only can the philosophy of the martial art be marked with religious connotations but the concrete, practical methods of training can as well. In the paper, the attitude of the founders of these martial arts will be analyzed in light with the ultimate goal of the art and the methods of training.

Luckily, the founders have left behind significant written material, available to the broader public. Besides practical advice for practicing these martial arts, their works are rich with philosophical attitudes in the form of guides for practicing Judo, Karate and Aikido outside the training facility, in everyday life. Adding to this, the correlation will be analyzed in the works of distinguished masters of these arts in their written works. Minding the fact that religion and the religiousness of the individual also influence everyday life (depending on the level of commitment) a mutual interaction of the ideas of the founders, and consequently the martial arts themselves and religion is inevitable. The aim of the paper is, by analyzing these ideas, to perceive the correlation of these martial arts and religion and to indicate the problem.

From their founding, the stated martial arts have gone through various transformations and adjustments. The research would not be complete if it was to stop exclusively on the ideas of the founders. Consequently, the latest literature will be consulted, especially by Serbian authors, in order to spot any eventual traces of religiousness in the practicing of martial arts. Although the topic seems abstract at first glimpse, the concrete methods of the training process are impacted. In reality it is a question of submitting to the laws of the training process or the “belief” in the irrational, the mystical learning of previous martial arts masters and an uncritical acceptance of their method

RESULTS

Judo

Emerging in 1882 at the peak of the Meiji restoration and founded by an educator and a president of a higher school, Jigoro Kano, judo has

some special characteristics. The restoration itself was aiming to transform Japanese society in order keep up with history and make Japan a modern state (Stojanović, 2015, 57). Far from being a mystical “sensei,” Kano was a pragmatic intellectual who strived to adjust jiu jitsu (more accurately ju jutsu) to modern times, in the spirit of the ever-present restoration of the Japanese society.

The art of self-defense, which had as its goal the overcoming of the opponent at all cost, had been on the brink of extinction due to the fact that there just was no place for it in the emerging modern Japanese society. Kano, as a distinguished master of jiu jitsu, embarked on a mission to transform it into a modern martial art, not just for Japan but for the whole world. It was then that he founded Kodokan and judo began its journey as the first modern martial art of Japan (De Majo, 2010, 96). Jiu jitsu itself, which the name (“jutsu” – adaptable) itself implies, was orientated towards practical uses. The techniques were realistic, efficient with the aim of self-defense or even attack. Consequently, jiu jutsu itself was practically without a profound philosophy or religiousness.

Kano had not neglected the complex spirit of martial arts: “Judo is not just a martial art, it is a way of behaving... It is wrong to think that judo ends as a training facility.” As the final goal of martial art he took the principle of Maximum Efficiency, the principle which would impact everyday life. As Kano himself stated: “It can be said that judo is ‘the learning of the method,’ and its use is the learning of the best method in order to reach any kind of success” (Kano, 2007, 73, 110).

Still, are there traces of Zen Buddhism or Shintoism in the philosophy of judo? Kano had overlooked religiousness and mysticism in the techniques of martial arts. Being himself a scientist, he focused on concrete, empirically provable exercises with the aim of the physical development of the practitioner. Within its numerous techniques, judo also has katas, which are an integrated part of Zen Buddhism arts. On the other hand, Kano had constructed judo katas first and foremost as a form of exercise, a way of perfecting techniques and physical fitness, especially for older practitioners. Kato ignored the mystical and religious background of katas and formed them exclusively as a method of perfecting the technique, in fact a method of training which retained an esthetic element (Kano, 2007, 32, 126).

Finally, in his numerous journeys Kano had the opportunity to become acquainted with different religions, as well as their leading representatives. He considered them and their teachings as allies in the struggle to make a better world. Kano stated: “So, through judo we learn the principle which can be used and applied the same as the highest principles of Buddhism, Christianity or profound philosophical teachings – a principle which, like all the other great philosophies and religions, is applicable” (Kano, 2007, 78-79).

Today judo has not drastically changed in its essence from the ideas of its founder. The development of this martial art as a sport has especially influenced a definitive break with the “mystical” past and the implementation of modern training methods, as well as the philosophy which has made Judo a truly world phenomenon. In the contemporary works of some of the distinguished masters of the art, traces of religiousness can practically not be found. The most popular manual of Kazuzo Kudo (1969) is entirely orientated toward practical use. The same approach can be found in the works of distinguished Serbian authors such as Dragić (1980; n.d.), Mandić (1996) and Ćirković (1991).

Karate

Ginchin Funakoshi systematized and spread the ancient Okinawan martial art of “the empty hand” firstly through Japan and then all over the world. He dedicated his entire life to teaching karate as well as preaching. Karate itself, before Funakoshi, was an integrative segment of Zen Buddhist arts (De Majo, 2010, 47). Thanks to Funakoshi, the modern martial art emerged, later also a sport. In order to become just that, a radical break with old mysticism and religiousness was needed.

Born in the year of the turning point of Japanese history – 1868 (the year of the beginning of the Meiji restoration) the very life of Funakoshi represented the cessation with tradition. He cut off his chonmage (a unique samurai hair style), the symbol of manhood, tradition and social status, aware of the new era. He ignored his father’s objection: “What have you done of yourself? You, son of a samurai!” and bravely stepped into the new era, the era of modern Japan, in which he endeavored to find a place for karate (Funakoshi, 1988, 18).

A rational and scientific attitude characterized Funakoshi’s understanding of karate. He critiqued ancient legends, basically myths about deeds of karate masters. He also preached to his students: “There is not a living person who can, no matter how much he exercises and trains, overcome the natural limitations of the human body” (Funakoshi, 1988, 20). There was no place for eastern mysticism in Funakoshi’s karate, as he subordinated it to the laws of training methods: “It is true that a karate master has the power to break a thick board or several piled tiles with the blow of one hand, but I assure the reader that anyone is capable of doing the exact same thing after going through a sufficient amount of training. There is nothing unnatural in such an achievement” (Funakoshi, 1988, 21).

The very name of ‘Shotokan’ is also without a religious or mystical background. An admirer of the pine forests surrounding his native town of Shuri, Funakoshi enjoyed the melodies produced by the wind harmonizing

with the pine trees. The rustling of these pines for him was like “heavenly music.” The word ‘shoto’ in Japanese particularly signifies the hum of pine trees but is without “a profound symbolical meaning” (Funakoshi, 1988, 76).

Although he conducted Buddhist customs, Funakoshi himself had deeply accepted the Meiji restoration and to the end of his life remained a devoted patriot and admirer of the Japanese Emperor. Minding the fact that the restoration itself meant the secularizing of society, Funakoshi had accepted that aspect. He saw in karate the significance of physical exercise, the nurturing of the individual, and as the ultimate goal of martial arts he saw the very aspect of self-defense and the ability of the individual to protect himself in moments of danger. Consequently, it is no wonder that of the numerous masters of martial arts it was Funakoshi who was recognized as significant by the then already old Jigoro Kano who invited him to Kodokan for the purpose of demonstrating the art, surely having in mind their similar attitudes (Funakoshi, 1988, 27, 63, 65, 66, 86).

Still, karate is surely famous for its numerous katas, with a persistent training improved to perfection. Are there any traces of religious practices? Funakoshi himself looked upon katas as a part of training, both physical and mental, and practiced them without any religious connotations (Funakoshi, 1988, 91, 92).

Funakoshi’s students have faithfully followed the road of their founder and have spread karate across the world. Furthermore, by doing so, they made it one of the most popular martial arts and sports. A scientific view of the martial is also a characteristic among the distinguished domestic masters. A strict denial of mysticism and religious influences can be found in the works of Mudrić (1987), the brothers Jorga and Đurić (1985) as well as Jovanović (1992). Still, traces of the irrational, in fact, an abandonment of Funakoshi’s methods, can be found in the works of Gigov and Janjić: “In the karate technique, a person is always an individual, eye to eye with himself, striving to identify himself for what he really is... This refers to a liberation from national, religious, professional, biological affiliation, to the state of the ‘empty mind’... In that case, the karate technique represents a method” (Gigov & Janjić, 1984a, 12). As well as this: “The essence of a human is meditative and returning to its original, and not expressing actuality is one of the goals of karate” (Gigov & Janjić, 1984b, 45).

Aikido

It shares the same origin as judo, forming itself in the same years as Funakoshi’s karate, but in fact, in the aspects of religiousness, aikido is quite different. Mastering a couple of jiu jitsu styles, among them also the brutal style of Sokaku Takeda, the founder of aikido Morihei Ueshiba decided to form a radically different martial art.

The very coming to life of aikido (or “the way of peace”) is shrouded in the veil of mysticism. Ueshiba stated that in that moment, “...suddenly the Earth began to tremble. Golden dust was rising from the soil, engulfing me. I felt I was transformed into some kind of golden statue and my body was as light as a feather. I could understand the language of birds. In a moment I understood the nature of creation: the way of the warrior is to manifest divine love, a spirit that spans through everything and nurtures all existing.” He saw the origin of martial art in the “divine form and the divine hearth of existence” as well as “the divine works of Odo” (Ueshiba, 2008a, pp. 18, 54; Ueshiba, 2008b, pp. 29, 57). Ueshiba did not overlook Shintoism and Buddhism but incorporated them in aikido in a specific way.

Ueshiba devoted his life to the way of the warrior (Budo) transforming it into aikido, a unique martial art. Still, Ueshiba did not view aikido or “the way of peace” as merely a martial art or even as a way of life, but a specific (in fact religious) path to a better world (“an upcoming era”) – the creation of the Kingdom of God on Earth itself, and by so denied the Hebrew, Christian and Islamic teachings, and at the same time, paradoxically, coincided with the teachings of Communist revolutionaries. To the journalist’s question “Is aikido the path to peace?” he answered the following: “The final goal of aikido is to create the Kingdom of God on Earth” (Ueshiba, 2008b, 144). He went beyond the title of sensei by giving himself the role of a “Prophet” (Ueshiba, 2008a, 25). He looked upon the martial art as a way of cleansing, which itself is the work of “the divine Odo” (Ueshiba, 2008b, 94).

Systematizing the brutal techniques of jiu jitsu, Ueshiba came up with a new martial art, whose very techniques are merciful and focused on overcoming the attacker in such a mode that the attacker himself remains uninjured yet defeated. Also, the characteristic of aikido is a lack of katas, about which the founder himself stated: “In aikido there are no forms. And since there are none, aikido is therefore the study of the soul” (Ueshiba, 2008a, 45).

However, are there in every-day practice of aikido traces of Ueshiba’s “divine plan”? At training, the practitioners meditate in a specific position called seiza, which is followed by the bowing to the founder himself, and in fact his picture is a necessary detail of aikido training facilities. The very training facility, or dojo, is recognized by the founder as a place of “cleansing” which leads to the fulfillment of the “principles of the Universe” (Ueshiba, 2008b, 91). Ueshiba was direct by saying the following: “Practicing ‘the way of peace’ is an act of faith”, “The way of peace is a form of religion which produces light and warmth.” In the techniques of self-defense, Ueshiba saw the manifestation of the “merciful deeds” of the goddess of mercy Kanoni (Ueshiba, 2008a, 43, 56, 105). Ueshiba did not just recognize the significance of every-day training in the sole improvement of techniques or similar, but in order to “...remain on the divine path of Odo for the sake of the whole world

and the Universe. Aikido is a divine work of Odo, or more accurately, a divine work of Izanagi, Izanami and Takami musubi.” He accepted Zen meditation as an ally in practicing aikido. For that very goal, he chose “the unification of God and humans, the same in quality” (Ueshiba, 2008b, 47, 91, 104).

Ueshiba was not immune to other religions, as he had to look upon their teachings as well: “We cannot rely any more on the external teachings of Buddha, Confucius or Christ. The era of organized religion which controls every aspect of human life is gone. No religion individually has all the answers. It is not enough to build churches and temples. Become a living embodiment of Buda. We all should transform ourselves into goddesses of mercy and victorious Buddhas” (Ueshiba, 2008a, 105). He went even further, trying to interpret religions through martial art practice: “The path of great religions, including Christianity, has for its goal love, whose essence lies in the practices of martial arts” (Ueshiba, 2008b, 91).

The ideas and with them also the ultimate goal of aikido were not abandoned with the death of Ueshiba in 1969. His son Kisshomaru Ueshiba continued to spread aikido according to the conceptions of his father. Except for him, faithful to the ideas of the founder were his famous students who spread aikido through the world: Hiroshi Tada and Tadashi Abe (De Majo, 2010, 90, 91).

But what is the situation today, primarily in Serbia? In the works of distinguished masters there are those which are orientated exclusively towards the practical aspect of aikido, without any religiousness (Stanojević, 1985; Jovandić, 2000). Still, it is possible to find works that faithfully follows and interprets the teaching of Ueshiba, as for example: “When a man unites his mind and body and harmonizes it with the spirit of the Universe, perfect aikido is achieved” (Šturanović & Dimitrijević, 1994, 18).

DISCUSSION

By analyzing the ideas of the founders, as well as the practice of later masters, judo and karate can be characterized as secular. Modern methods of training were the main feature from the very beginning. Even in their philosophical extreme, their teachings do not confront the possible religious attitudes of a practitioner.

However, due to their “mystical” past, certain karate masters made a step back (from the ideas of Funakoshi), and reestablished an older training practice. Still, the stated is marginal due to the development of karate as a sport whereupon every training method is put to the test. A problem still exists with religiousness, mainly in the form of Zen Buddhism, which surely should not be found in modern Shotokan karate. It is the works of such masters, which insist on the irrational, which harm karate as a sport as well as a martial art.

The situation is even more complex in aikido. Morihei subordinated everything to its ultimate goal, the Kingdom of Heaven on Earth and techniques are just a method for the accomplishment of that goal. Faithfully spread by its followers, the philosophy of aikido, in its essence, remained the same. Even with Serbian authors, speculation about the “Universe, “Spirit” etc. is obvious. Still, there are some who are orientated toward the practical aspects of the martial art and strive to proceed in that direction. The final conclusion is hard to form, as it, in reality, depends on each club, trainer and individual practitioner.

CONCLUSION

The correlation between religion and judo, karate and aikido has proved itself complex. While it could be said for judo that it is completely rational, certain authors find a dose of mysticism and religiousness in karate. In its extreme, aikido represents a religion, with its teachings and a Prophet. However, it is up to the individual to choose the level of commitment.

The research itself is not complete as it is just the tip of the iceberg. The further direction of researches should surely consider some kind of field research, examining clubs, interviewing trainers as well as practitioners, and a statistical analysis of the gathered data. By doing so, a clearer view of the martial art, can be perceived by the ones who practice it. It would be wrong to accuse every aikido club, every trainer or practitioner of denominationalism, as a deeper understanding is needed.

The analysis of other martial arts popular in Serbia would be a step beyond, such as other styles of karate (Shito-ryu, Goju-ryu, Wado-ryu, Uechi-ryu, Kyokushinkai, etc.) as well as aikido (Ki aikido). Special topics are Chinese martial arts like Wushu or Kung fu, who never had their ‘Meiji restoration.’

What is surely important, and this is something this paper aims to point out, is the significance of this problem. It is up to every trainer to explain the chosen martial art to his practitioners, and in the case of dealing with children, to their parents or guardians. Adding to this, every individual has the right to devote himself to a martial art in the manner he chooses, to accept or not its philosophical teaching, as long as his decision does not affect his progressing in the martial art itself.

The method of training remains as a practical problem, or the possibility of the irrational element prevailing in it. The solution is in the educating of trainers, as well as practitioners. By systematizing trainer licenses, a stricter control of national martial arts associations and providing the possibility of adequate trainer education, modern training techniques would surely prevail in the “mystical” training processes of ancient Japan.

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