

MEMBER ARTICLE

Shugyo (1)

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The Japanese term “*shugyo*” is generally translated as “austere training,” and seems to originate with the training of the Samurai during the “*Pax Tokugawa*,” an unprecedented period of internal peace from the mid-1600’s through the mid-1800’s. The purpose of *shugyo* is to “forge the spirit,” remaking a practitioner’s character through hard physical and mental training. As the heirs of the feudal samurai, modern *budo-ka*, especially practitioners of *Aikido*, *Iaido*, *Jodo*, *Kendo*, and *Kyudo*, have *shugyo* built into their training regime; for example, *aikido-ka* have *randori* (free-practice in arts like Aikido, Jujutsu and Judo, which can include multiple opponents), *iaido-ka* have the practice of “one-thousand cuts,” *kendo-ka* have *godo keiko*, and all have *gasshuku* (long periods of intense training).

When reading the various biographical accounts (for example, see John Stevens’ books Abundant Peace and Invincible Warrior) of Morihei Ueshiba *O-sensei* (1883-1969), the founder of *Aikikai* or Ueshiba-*ha Aikido*, one cannot help but be awe struck by the accounts of his *shugyo*, even if you account for some amplification in the retelling of these stories. My personal opinion is that the very existence of Aikido is due to *O-sensei’s shugyo*: Aikido is his fusion of *waza* (techniques) from *Daito-Ryu Aikijujutsu*, his original art, and the philosophy of *Omoto-Kyo* (one of the new Japanese religious movements at the end of the 19th into the early 20th century, which he became a follower of in the early 1920’s) into a fundamentally new type of *budo*.

Although *shugyo* includes *waza*, *kata* (forms), *jigeiko* (free-practice in fencing), and *randori*, it also extends beyond them. For those who attended the “Aikido and Sword Movement” Seminar by Mr. Paul Smith from London at Shotokan Dojo (Salem, MA) in January 1997, we received first-hand experience with *shugyo*:

“... For us, austere training was 20 minutes of *shiko* [*sumo* leg strengthening exercise] on a hardwood floor; it was *ukemi* (falling practice) on a hardwood floor (we did *ryote-tori tenchi-nage* [“two-hands on two-hands, heaven-and-earth throw”] on the hardwood floor – back rolls are definitely preferred to back falls for *ukemi*); it was *ritsuzen* [a Japanese form of standing meditation]. It was an exercise we did

which I call the “Palsied Corpse” – lying in Savasana (Corpse Pose [of Hatha Yoga]), shaking from the *tanden* [the energy center just below the navel] for 20 minutes trying to keep relaxed and breathing through any tightness that occurs; in addition, being aware of sensations that occur during and after this exercise. Austere training is going beyond the ordinary (*emphasis added*). (2)”

Smith-s. exhorted us to remember the example of the late Masatake Sekiya (1917-1996) (3):

“The late Sekiya-*sensei* was certainly a man who taught by example. He was doing austere training to continue to develop his character at an age when most men are already retired from life (he was not just a “sweet old man,” and he probably would not appreciate such a sentimental remembrance according to Smith-s.). (2)”

Shugyo is embedded in programs at Zen Mountain Monastery (ZMM) in Mt. Tremper, NY, with morning *zazen* (seated meditation), *kinhin* (walking meditation), and chanting from 4:50 to 6:30 AM before breakfast, which is repeated in the evening from 7:30 to 9 PM after dinner; that is, three hours of meditation per day (there is also an “optional” fourth-hour from 5 to 6 PM before dinner). I attended a ZMM *Kyudo* (aka “Zen Archery”) program; we practiced for six hours per day over four days in September 1999 (4). With respect to *budo*, ZMM has also had Aikido, Aiki-ken and Kendo programs; other programs included *Chado* (the way of tea), *Ch'i Kung* (Chinese breathing exercises), *Ikebana* or *Kado* (“flower arranging”), *Shodo* (the way of Japanese brush calligraphy), and shakuhachi [or *Suizen* – “blowing zen,” aka “zen flute” (5)].

Undoubtedly *shugyo* has also played a major role in the development of the various schools of *kenjutsu* and *iaijutsu*. Most of the tales about Miyamoto Musashi (1584-1645) are connected with his *musha shugyo*, a *shugyo* pilgrimage to hone your skills by challenging other swordsmen to duels, which was a common practice for the swordsmen of his day. Closer to our times, the *shugyo* of Yamaoka Tesshu (1837-1888) in *kenjutsu*, *shodo*, and *zazen* makes for fascinating reading and contemplation (see John Stevens’ book The Sword of No-Sword). It is not surprising that a maxim common to both *Kendo* and *Iaido* is “*Ken Zen Ichi*,” that is, “The sword and Zen are one (and the same).” [This is analogous to the maxim “*Ki Ken Tai Ichi*” (“Spirit, sword and body are one”), because in Zen, we work in part to fuse our spirits (*ki*) and bodies (*tai*) into single entities without divisions.] *Zazen* is another form of *shugyo* (6), which found favor as a practice among many of the samurai.

We know that Musashi practiced *zazen* later in life; however, we do not know whether he did so during his active dueling phase (ca. 1597-1614). Musashi’s contemporary, Yagyu Munenori (1571-1646), received letters from the Zen monk Takuan Soho (1573-1645) applying Zen to swordsmanship;

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they are published in English as The Unfettered Mind: Writings of the Zen Master to the Sword Master. Likewise, Zen philosophy is contained in the written records of Yagyu family swordsmanship (*Yagyu Shinkage Ryu*), written mostly by Munenori, and published as The Sword & the Mind in English by Hiroaki Sato. Tesshu, the *soke* of a branch of *Itto Ryu* and the founder of *Muto Ryu*, was also a *roshi* (Zen master). Musashi, Munenori, and Tesshu are all personifications of the maxim “*Ken Zen Ichi*,” and, as such, were experienced in *shugyo*.

In summary, *shugyo* is **experiential**. It is impossible to describe (like Lao Tsu's *Tao* [“the Way,” which is the same character as the *-do* in Aikido, Iaido, Kendo, etc.] in his *Tao Te Ching*), although we do try to, and extremely difficult to begin to explain it to anyone who has not experienced it. During the Edo period [aka the Tokugawa Shogunate (1603-1868)] in Japan, as the various *bujutsu* (martial sciences) were evolving into *ko-budo* (classical martial ways), *shugyo* became a developmental stage for the *bushi* (samurai), replacing the rigors of life-and-death combat with those of hard training and mental discipline (recall the strong bond between *koryu kenjutsu* [classical-style Japanese swordsmanship] and *zen* that is passed down to us). Today *shugyo* is a quaint anachronism to some, while still an absolute necessity to others. However, in order to “pierce the veil” into the essence of any *budo*, it becomes an essential “rite of passage.”

Notes:

- (1) This essay was originally called “What is *Shugyo*?” and submitted as a requirement for the rank of *shodan* to the Aikido Association of America; it was subsequently published in the Shodokan Dojo Newsletter, 2(5), May 2000, in its original form:
<<http://www.shodokan.org/02newslettermay.html#SHUGYO>>.
- (2) These quotes are from my article “*Inaba-ha* Kashima Shin-Ryu Kenjutsu and Aikido – A Study of Internal Principles: Seminar Report,” Journal of Japanese Sword Arts #85, 9(10), 9-17, October 1997.
<<http://collection.nlc-bnc.ca/100/202/300/iaido/1997/tin85.html>>.
- (3) The following quote is the **Dedication** in (2): “This article is dedicated to the memory of the late Mr. Masatake Sekiya, *nana-dan* [7th degree black belt] (Aikikai), and *deshi* of the founder of Aikido, Ueshiba *O-sensei*. Sekiya-s. died on 3 September 1996 at 1:10 PM (Japan time); he was just under a month shy of his 79th birthday. Although he died of acute liver failure, it was brought on by inoperable stomach cancer. He died peacefully at home, surrounded by family; he is survived by his wife, son and daughter (I don't know if there were other children). One of his last wishes [before he died] was to visit us here [at Northeast Aikikai] in Chelmsford and [Shotokan Dojo in] Salem, MA, one last time, which he did last summer, 27-28 July 1996, a little over a month before he died. He was a wonderful
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teacher as I can attest to first hand, having studied with him during his [last four] visits since 1993. He spent the last decade of his life studying with Mr. Minoru Inaba, the chief [Aikido] instructor of Shiseikan Dojo at Meiji Jingu (Shrine) in Tokyo. Besides the internal aspects of Aikido, Sekiya-s. brought us an unusual weapons practice [from Inaba-s.], which I will call *Inaba-ha* Kashima Shin-Ryu (KSR) Kenjutsu [in order to distinguish it from the *koryu* (classical style) from which it is derived].” [Author’s Comments: I consider the late Sekiya-s. to be one of my two Aikido mentors (the other is Mr. Mike Pabst, widower of my late T’ai Chi Ch’uan instructor, Ms. Mary Pabst). I also consider Inaba-ha KSR Kenjutsu to be a superior form of Aiki-ken. Sekiya-s.’s prior weapons training included *Katori Shinto Ryu*.]

- (4) See my article “1999 Kyudo Intensive at Zen Mountain Monastery with Shibata-sensei,” submitted to the [now defunct] Journal of Japanese Sword Arts.
- (5) A prime example of a non-*budo shugyo* is found in Ray Brooks’ Blowing Zen; see my book review at http://ejmas.com/tin/tinart_sosnowski_0203.htm. Since February 2003, I have been a shakuhachi student of Ronnie Nyogetsu Seldin, *menkyo kaiden*, whose *Kisuian Dojo*, headquartered in New York City with a local branch in Baltimore, is the largest shakuhachi dojo in the US. I was inspired to finally start training in the “zen flute” after rereading Ray Brooks’ book, and chose to train in the oldest known style, *Kinko Ryu*, founded by Kinko Kurosawa I (1710-1770) in the mid-1700’s. Nyogetsu is a 10th generation lineage holder.
- (6) Since February 2002 (after relocating to rural south-central Maryland in December 2001), my wife and I have been members of *Daedosah Zendo* in Rockville, MD, an affiliate of the Furnace Mountain [KY] Zen organization, and regularly attend weekly *zazen*. In October 2002 and July 2003, we have hosted at our home weekend-long *sesshin* [a *zazen gasshuku* so to speak, a long period of intense *zazen*, which has included *dokusan* (personal interviews with the Zen master) and *koan* training] with Zen master Dae Gak of Furnace Mountain. While previously living in southern NH, we were members of a *sangha* (community of practitioners) in Hudson, NH, in 1993-1994 before it disbanded, and later affiliated with the Cambridge [MA] Zen Center. Also all of our Kyudo Intensives begin with a morning session of *zazen*.

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