

Aikido and Buddhism by John Turnbull Sensei

Mentioned in a discussion about Aikido on the Internet recently was this quotation from a book by Andrew Migot titled *Le Bouddha (The Buddha)*.

'There has been a lot of discussion about whether Buddhism is a religion or a philosophy, and the question has never been decided one way or the other. In these terms it is a question that only makes sense to a Westerner. Only in the West is philosophy just a branch of knowledge like mathematics or botany, and only in the West is the philosopher a person, usually a professor, who goes through particular doctrines during his courses but, once he goes home, lives exactly like his lawyer or his dentist without what he teaches having the slightest influence on the way he lives his life.

Only in the West is religion, for a large majority of believers, a small compartment that only gets opened on particular days, at particular times, or in certain predetermined circumstances, and is firmly closed again before actually doing anything. Although there are professors of philosophy in the East, too, a philosopher there is a spiritual master who lives what he teaches, surrounded by disciples who want to follow his example. His teaching is never based on sheer intellectual curiosity, for its value lies only in its realization.

In this light, there seems little point in wondering whether Buddhism is a philosophy or a religion. It is a path, a way of salvation, that which led the Buddha to enlightenment; it is a method, a means of attaining liberation by working intensely on the mind and spirit.'

This is also true of Aikido. Many beginners want to compartmentalise Aikido into some little box labeled 'self defence' or 'meditation' or 'philosophy' or 'exercise', but to do so is to miss its true meaning. For Aikido cannot be categorized alongside anything else yet developed in the Western world because it breaks through into a new dimension of understanding about the way we live and the way the Universe works. It deals, in an absolutely practical way, with concepts and forces which Western science (despite its amazing progress during the past century) has not yet even started to grapple with.



This is hardly surprising when we realise that three of the concepts at the roots of Aikido, Zen, Aiki and the Tao, were already highly developed before the Buddhist patriarch Bodhidharma introduced them in China in 490 AD. Zen has been evocatively described as psycho-therapy in the book 'Psychotherapy East and West' by Alan Watts', whereas the Western science called psychology only dates back to the 1800s. And the Tao, of which Aikido is part, was already ancient when Bodhidharma crossed the Himalayas.

It was out of this amazing cross-fertilization of tried and proven ideas from Zen, Buddhism, Taoism and Shinto that today's aikido amalgamated into a whole which is far greater than the sum of its parts. Western science is an infant in comparison; it has not yet even started to come to grips with these concepts.

Those who wish to truly understand Aikido need to especially study Zen and Ki, always remembering that the only way to genuinely understand them is from the inside - by doing them. Zen is a mind-spirit state which enables us to harmonise with - tune into - the surrounding environment, and thus comprehend and interact with reality better than is possible in any other state. The result is not only improved mental-spiritual-physical health, but an affinity with that life-force which can be seen to be so strong in an animal which is in good spirits and health, but which fades when the creature is ill or injured and disappears when it dies. In the field of human endeavor, it is the inspiration at the core of all creativity, the force which uplifts us in beautiful music and poetry, and the thing which inspires us about beautiful sunsets, verdant forests and fresh, flowing, life-filled streams. It is the concept which was simply called 'the Force' in the Star Wars movies.

It is not possible to put such things into a little compartment labeled psychology, philosophy, religion or whatever. To attempt and do so is to demean which wonderful "art" we call Aikido, so we shouldn't try.

What we should do is to attempt, in every way possible, to unlimit our limited minds and expand our spiritual-mental horizons in ways which open us to the Infinite Universe, its powers and its wonders, Aikido is a way for achieving this.