

THOUGHTS ON SHIBORI*

For Historical and other Dimensions of Asian Martial & Movement Arts

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Abstract

Movement in a specific physical cultural activity inevitably reflects aspects of the culture itself. These are fundamental to the correct application of the movement with significant resonances that go far beyond the obvious. Attention to the details of the primary culture of the movement is a significant element in understanding and mastering the movement itself.

Zusammenfassung

Die Bewegung (in/bei) einer bestimmten körperlichen kulturellen Aktivität spiegelt unweigerlich Aspekte der Kultur selbst wider. Diese sind für die korrekte Anwendung der Bewegung von grundlegender Bedeutung und diese Bedeutung bzw. signifikante Resonanz geht weit über das Offensichtliche hinaus. Die Aufmerksamkeit für die Details der primären Kultur der Bewegung ist ein wichtiges Element für das Verständnis und die Beherrschung der Bewegung selbst.

IN the West, when squeezing wet from a dishcloth or towel, we grip the material in our fists, thumbs facing, palms down and we twist, separating our elbows. The Japanese, performing the same task, face their palms up, thumbs in opposite directions and twist, pulling their elbows into the trunk of their body.

And that makes all the difference.

To overlook or dismiss this observation is to take the first step in the wrong direction in trying to understand the somatic dimension of Japanese combat arts. It is to ignore resonances that may appear trivial on the surface but which have deep implications.

Late 20th century man and his slightly more naïve (and cheerfully ignorant) offspring in the current century have burdened themselves with a host of unexamined premises that make critical analysis challenging in many arenas of life. Surely among these is a belief, as stolidly held as it is inaccurate, that we are all, God's creatures, in all ways that are important, similar. The same, in fact, with only superficialities that separate us and which need not overly concern us in confronting civilisations other than our own.

To our point, the boxer, for example, according to this unexamined premise, is distinguished primarily from the *karateka* by the fact the former does not kick or use weapons like elbows, knees,

*[Editor's note]: *Shibori* – as a kendo concept/term – stands in tradition or reference to Japanese tea ceremony, where the term *chakin shibori* as wringing (*shibori*) a wet clothing, i.e. a tea-ceremony towel (*chakin*) is known. In Japanese martial arts dealing with the sword (Kenjutsu/Kendo are words maybe used here), *chakin shibori* could be recommend for holding the sword handle (*tsuka*) or *tenouchi* (>The World inside the Hands<) as a principle in the *Nakamura-Ryu* (see: Jinichi Tokeshi (2003): *Kendo: Elements, Rules, and Philosophy*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, pp. 5, 209, 264; John Maki Evans (2010): *Kurikara: The Sword and the Serpent*. Berkeley: Blue Snake Books, pp. 7ff., esp. 9, 123). But – and that's important to note here –, the emphasis of the author in this essay is not on the action of *shibori* but rather on the influences of Japanese culture overall on traditional Japanese arts and therefore, *shibori* appears as a term only once and it is not really necessary to dwell on the single example, as the author provides other examples that are more germane later in the essay.

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etc. Otherwise and in all important ways, boxer and karateka are simply two bodies engaged in different movement with similar aims. The grappler, whether attired in the singlet of the wrestler or the *keikogi* of the *judoka*, seeks to subdue the opponent through technically different moves but ones which again, have the same intentions.

These are understandable suppositions. There are, after all, only so many ways the human body can articulate. Physics, in the matter of leverage, timing, and positional interaction, places limits on what it can do. What is different, profoundly, though, is the perception of the practitioner, particularly in the way he is aware of his movement.

The matter of how one wrings out a wet cloth is not incidental. Much speculation attends the reasons why, but energy is organised in the movements of much of traditional Japan, by adduction of the elbows toward the midline of the body. This is in contradistinction to Western patterns of movement.

It's possible to determine, to a reliable degree, just by watching the silhouette from behind, of a diner using chopsticks, if he is Japanese or non-Japanese. The latter will use chopsticks as he would cutlery, i.e., elbows akimbo, away from his body. A Japanese moves the chopsticks to and from the food with a sawing motion that moves his elbow back and forth along his side. In using a knife and fork, the wrist flexes almost constantly. With chopsticks, it is nearly immobile, fixed. When writing, Westerners make a similar motion. The elbow of the writing hand is out, abducted from the midline. A brush for calligraphy, though, is handled as are chopsticks, drawing the instrument forward and back with the elbow in.

Again, why this distinction evolved is a worthy subject for inquiry and should be of interest to the anthropologist and others who wonder why humans do as they do. The fact is, whatever the evolutionary or cultural reasons, it is evident and consistent in activities as apparently disparate as handling a writing instrument or throwing a punch or wringing out a cloth and it is a particularistic and discrete phenomenon throughout Japanese-influenced kinesiology.

Adapting to this difference can be an obstacle to the non-Japanese attempting to gain proficiency in any Japanese art. Probably the most common error the beginner makes in the dojo is the tendency to focus too much power and energy in the appendicular skeleton. It's understandable; most Western-based athletic endeavors favor the shoulders. Throwing a baseball, swinging a golf club, shooting a basketball, all involve using the shoulders. Watching a beginner karateka punching is usually painful for the observer; the beginner's shoulders will be so stiff they're up around his ears. A beginner *kendoka* is stiff, inevitably for the same reason, hacking with his *shinai* rather than striking, and for the same reason. He initiates the movement from his shoulders rather than relaxing them and allowing gravity to move the sword.

The *budoka* must re-integrate his movement, adapt it to the principles that animate the art. He has to relax his shoulders, to allow them to become a conduit from energy that originates in the hips and passes without any tenseness into the hands and eventually into the weapon, either the fist or the *shinai*. The beginner hears so often that he needs to "relax," "quit tensing," and "loosen up," that he may come to imagine the apotheosis of Japanese budo can be found in a rag doll.

Likewise, when learning to kick, the karateka is most apt to use his legs as he would when attacking a soccer ball. He leans in the opposite direction of the focus of the kick, striking as if power is meant to be transmitted via the foot to a ball. In a karate kick, however, the power is transmitted almost entirely by driving the non-kicking leg into the target. The entire body pushes forward so the karateka's weight is behind the kick. It is a series of mechanics that involve the hips in ways that are distinct from the way one kicks a ball.

In a significant percentage of the cases where practitioners have trouble in learning, the problem is not lack of athletic ability or flexibility. Instead, it is that they continue to use Western somatics in an art that requires a different approach.

These purely physical divergences present their own challenges. The serious practitioner, however, must look even deeper into these differences. As noted above, it is not just a kinesiological contrast; it is also in the different perception of movement that must be investigated and understood.

In his occasionally turgid and often brilliantly insightful treatise, *The Impossible Nude*, Francois Jullien examines the question of why, among the world's civilisations, China's is the exception in having elevated the nude as an artistic expression. It's fascinating, isn't it? From the Greeks to Reubens to Weston, the Western world has a powerful and rich tradition of the artistic expression of the nude. Only China kept on its clothes for millennia. The reason, Jullien observes, has to do with the unique way in which the Chinese viewed the body itself.

In the West, the Greeks saw the human form as a series of mathematical formulae, as an articulation of movement between agonistic and antagonistic muscle groups, bone and sinew, all explicable through various equations. Look at DaVinci's Vitruvian Man and you'll see the apotheosis of the Greek mentality, the body is an interplay of proportions, all arranged perfectly with geometrical precision.

China, historically, saw the body less as a series of levers, fulcrums, and mathematical proportions than as a *repository*. The body, in Chinese thought, is a container for a constant flow of energy that swells and ebbs. Think of the body as a bag of sorts, into and out of which is breath, energy, and movement, all in flux. The evidence of this perception and its influence on Japanese and Okinawan combat arts is obvious in the illustrations of the *Bubishi*, the ancient instruction manual devoted to fighting. The older the example of the book, the more "bag-like" become the illustrations until, at the early end of manuscripts reduces bodies to roly-poly bubbles that look more like they're about to take a great fall than to do any serious fisticuffs. We see exactly this motif in Chinese medical texts, where no attempt at all is made to depict the body as it exists in a physiological sense but rather as a series of energy channels. In this very fundamental way, the Chinese perceived the body in a largely distinctive way from that of the way it has been in the development of West thought.

This approach to the body and its movement has a very long history in Chinese thought. The painter Zong Bing (375-443), who wrote the first treatise on painting, noted that "the dimension of the spirit is fundamentally without beginning or end. It lodges in the forms and sets into motion that which moves them."

While this might seem obscure or recondite, it is really quite simple. Think of it this way: The step-by-step photos, for example, of the movements of a kata or the application of a technique, are comparatively insignificant in trying to grasp the essence of the movements themselves. What is important, in Chinese and Japanese thought, is not Step #1 or Step #2 – it is what happens *in between* them. That is where the real meaning of the art is found.

How the body works is, from this traditional perspective, less important than the potential of its working as a receptacle of energy. The classical Chinese perceived the body in a different way from the perceptions of the Greeks and that understanding has been transmitted, we can see this in the Japanese approach to movement. Early *densho*, the scrolls devoted to transmission of technical, spiritual, and proprietary essentials of an art, invariably depict exponents in flowing *naga-bakama* or *kimono*. What appears to be artistic embellishment is an iteration of this same sensibility, however, if we view it as an expression not of likeness but of movement.

It is a dominant perception in the West for us to approach learning a technique or a kata as a task to be approached from a rational step-by-step process. That in no way suggests Chinese and Japanese approaches are not rational. (The notion that these approaches are supra-rational or meta-intellectual is one of the silliest misapprehensions originating in Western "interpretations" of Asian perspectives.) It is rather that they emphasize a different way of thinking about movement. In learning the kata, the goal is to integrate movement that is not a series of poses. Rather it is the sense of motion in which techniques are expressed, flowing into and out of the action. That's a

major reason why repetition is necessary. The practitioner seeks to see how the punch or the strike or the throw fits into the overall movement. The kata is approached as a whole, not as a series of individualized techniques.

It is also a mistake to think of the “Asian” way of perceiving movement is superior to Western concepts. It is simply different. The rules of soccer are not superior to those of American football. Rather they are different and one must adapt to these different rules if one is to be successful in participating in either. Imposing one on another is obviously fruitless. The same can be said in acquiring the skills of Japanese budo. If one wishes to enter into them seriously, he must be willing and open to the distinctive interpretation that underlie their principles and their cultural origins.

It doesn't mean he needs to start wringing out wet towels by inverting his grip. It does mean he ought to understand and appreciate why it's done that way.