



## ZEN AND MARTIAL ARTS: *A Brief Background for Birankai Members*

### *What is Zen?*

The Japanese word *zen* (禪) comes from the Chinese word *ch'an*, which is from the Sanskrit word *dhyana*: meditation. The Zen lineage was transmitted from India to China in the 5<sup>th</sup> century. It was later transmitted throughout Asia, and in the modern era to the West.

*What am I? What is this life for? Why is there suffering?* These are universal human questions. Some come to Zen when such questions can no longer be ignored. Zen, however, is not theistic or doctrinally centered, and is therefore not a religion in the western sense. Rather, its focus is psycho-physical practice which “directly points at the human mind”. Through such practice, essential human questions are resolved within realization arising as one's own experience. The authentic hallmark of such realization is compassion.

### *About Zen Training*

The essential point of Zen training - and its gate - is to be awakened through a direct seeing of one's own true nature. Open and free of fabrication, grasping or fear, beyond effort and dualistic habits of seeing, this is the realization of one's "original face."

Zen has many approaches to revealing and deepening this realization, used in accordance with the character and needs of each student. For superior students, a direct seeing of the nature of mind may be initially brought about through encounter within the *ba* ("field") of a qualified master; this approach is essentially methodless. More typical students must first remove various obstructions to realization. *Zazen*, seated meditation, is one of the most important practices for students of all capabilities, as are practices training the breathing and subtle energetic systems.

Zen is also well known for adapting a range of complementary disciplines to refine the human being and manifest wisdom in activity. Fine arts such as calligraphy and flower arrangement, and physical culture like martial arts, are traditional examples which facilitate Zen insight through the body.

Through practice of this kind one may swiftly gain a deep confidence in the realization of one's own natural mind as both path and fruit of the Zen way. Training ceaselessly, revealing this wisdom in the play of daily activities, freedom and liberation naturally unfold. Through Zen, one's entire life may be said to become the *dojo*: a place of enlightenment.

### *Zen and Budo*

In Japan beginning in the Kamakura period, the practice of Zen by members of the *samurai* class led to a distinct tradition of "warrior Zen". In response to their unique needs, both native Japanese and immigrant Chinese Zen masters devised spontaneous, and at times extraordinary, means to guide the practice of these warrior trainees. Historical figures like Hojo Tokimune and Yamaoka Tesshu are famous examples of those who mastered this kind of Zen.

The encounter between Zen monks and the warrior class over the centuries also revealed an interesting fact: certain *bujutsu* (martial arts), if practiced properly, could serve as disciplines with the power to cut through physical, mental and energetic obstacles to Zen realization. Likewise, it was observed that Zen practice not only served to further the goals of martial art training, but provided an ethical and spiritual rationale for their practice. In short, commonalities in spirit, training discipline, and mind-body usage between the two paths were observed and cultivated.

Eventually Zen contributed to the deepening perception that martial arts could offer much more to human society than simply techniques of offense and defense. The Jikishinkage Ryu, for example, came to state that the deeper purpose of swordsmanship was actually to "remove all bad habits and addictions acquired since birth and to restore the original pure and bright permanent body." A Zen way of saying this would be that such training cuts through one's *jikke* ("habit energy"), or karmic obstructions, which impede the full manifestation of wisdom. Within such statements we may sense the unified purposes of Zen and Budo.

Many prominent martial artists in Japanese history – Tsukahara Bokuden, Musashi Miyamoto, Ono Tadaaki, Tsuji Gettan, Yagyū Munenori, Harigaya Sekiun, Yamaoka Tesshu, and others – came to find in Zen practice a vital element that informed their *bujutsu*. Today we can still say that many qualities needed in our own training of personal development are indeed similar to those needed by the warriors of the past. The same fearlessness, energy and focus are needed to plumb the depths of one's own existence as they are in the midst of a conflict.

When practiced together with this rationale, the deepest meaning of the martial arts from a Zen standpoint may thus be revealed: this is the realization of *muteki*, the state of "no enemy". When the dualistic separation of "self" and "other" is transcended through the forging of deep mind-body training, it is seen that no one is an enemy. The finest and sharpest sword is not forged of steel and is not for harming others, but is the sword of wisdom we all have within us. Viewing martial arts in this light, we can understand how they may be truly beneficial "Ways" of self-realization, and even tools to establish peace.

Although much has been written in popular, inaccurate books concerning connections between Zen and martial arts, there are very few individuals today who actually undertake the extremely severe combined practice of both paths. And yet we are fortunate in Birankai to have Chiba Sensei's example. Beyond his own personal practice, Chiba Sensei has introduced *zazen* into his teaching curriculum and encouraged his students to explore this as a complement to their Aikido study.

#### *Benefits of Zen Training for Birankai Members*

Birankai supports Zen training for those members who feel called to undertake it. Because Zen points to a wisdom which is inherent within the student, it cannot be said that anything new is gained from Zen practice. Nevertheless, the following benefits of Zen practice which are relevant to *budoka* have traditionally been cited:

- The power of intense concentration (*yoriki*).
- Intuitive perception (*kan*).
- Energetic power or vibration (*kiai*).
- Sensitivity to the usage of time and space (*kokyu, maai*).
- Expansive vision ("ten direction eyes") and general sense acuity.
- Free-flowing and concentrated awareness in which dualistic fixation and conceptual fabrication is lessened (*zanmai/samadhi*).
- Usage of body and breath centered in the *hara* (the lower abdomen), unifying upper and lower body and allowing efficient absorption and transference of power to and from the earth.
- Cultivation of the body-mind's subtle energetic system, with profound effects on health as well as depth of training attainment.
- Compassion: the negation of "self" and the dedication of one's life to the welfare of others.
- Living each moment as the absolute moment: "Every day is a good day". Joyful acceptance of both life and death.
- Realization of the Way (*Do*) within one's own body and mind.

*For More Information on Zen and Zen Practice Opportunities:* please go to [www.birankai.org](http://www.birankai.org) for a listing of Birankai dojo which offer Zen training and a calendar of upcoming Zen training events. The article "Zen and Aikido" by Chiba Sensei is also essential reading.