

# CHAPTER ONE

## Self-Cultivation

Whenever one looks at ideas and concepts translated from another culture, the seemingly familiar language may contain implications that are quite different from one's own tradition. Surely one must ask how many of our assumptions must be jettisoned if genuine understanding is to be achieved. Furthermore, how is it possible to know whether one has, in fact, abandoned one's own presuppositions such that one is actually grasping the intended meanings in translation? The strength of our own presuppositions may actually override the genuine differences in play. Difficult as it may be to "read" another culture, the struggle to clarify can move us closer to grasping cultural differences, as well as similarities. An open-minded approach yields something of a fusion of horizons, at the very least, whereby one is forever changed by differences in approach, meaning, and life stance. To the extent that each of us will allow, our horizon of understanding merges with that of another culture resulting in a new and exciting way of looking at both their horizon and our own.

In engaging in the cross-cultural dialogue of this study, there are five key concepts that require some clarification to bring us as close as possible to speaking the same language, with minimal distortion. These five concepts are: (1) the bodymind and the unification of mind and body; (2) enlightenment; (3) meditation; (4) self-transformation (self-cultivation); and (5), *ki* energy. There is an excellent illustration of the importance of striving to ensure that the words in one cultural language are correctly translated into the appropriate words of another culture in the following dialogue that I had with Masuno Shunmyo, a Zen Buddhist landscape architect. The subject matter seemed straightforward enough, for it concerned the nature of the "mind."

## The Bodymind

Kenkoh-ji Temple, in Yokohama, Japan, is a quiet sanctuary in a busy neighborhood. The main temple hall is traditional in design and is now connected to a building that is quite modern. It was there that I waited to meet with Masuno Shunmyo. A Sōtō Zen Buddhist priest and head priest of Kenkoh-ji, he is also one of Japan's most distinguished landscape garden designers, one who still creates in accordance with traditional Zen Buddhist design principles. He has an international reputation, and his gardens "live" in many parts of the world. Chapter 3, further on, deals with Masuno and his work in greater detail. Here I only wish to make use of one of his comments in order to help lay the groundwork for what is to follow in this study.

Our discussion began in a simple meeting room adjacent to the main temple hall over a cup of green tea, and Masuno quickly affirmed that his designs are "expressions of [his] mind." The startling insight that he provided at the outset was the placing of his hand over his heart, in order to seal with a gesture the location of the "mind." I smiled broadly and remarked that most Western people would be surprised to see the heart identified as the seat of the mind. He and his assistant were surprised by this implicit critique of the obvious, and asked where the mind was thought to be located. "We would point to the head, to the brain," I replied, causing a moment of disbelief. "Why would anyone think that the mind was located in the head?" he asked politely.

A few weeks later, this scenario was repeated in conversation with two of the world leaders in the practice of the martial art of *aikidō* at the World Camp gathering that brings together each year a hundred or more of the most skilled *aikidōka* in the world. The camp was in Toshihige Prefecture, north of Tokyo, and I was honored with an opportunity to interview Tohei Shinichi, the son of the now elderly and ill founder of the Ki Society School of *aikidō*, together with a philosopher and holder of a black belt of high rank, Professor David Edward Shaner of Furman University. *Aikidō* will be one of the main subjects of chapter 2, where I will deal with *aikidō* generally and with the Ki Society in particular. At this meeting, we were discussing the spiritual and ethical implications of *aikidō*, when the subject of the nature and location of the mind came up. Tohei Shinichi (the

son) placed his hand on the left side of his chest and continued to speak of the mind as that faculty which leads the body in its activities. I remarked that what he took for granted with regard to the location of the “mind” contrasted sharply with the West’s assumption that the mind is in the head, directly associated with the brain. Again, there was shock and disbelief that anyone would assume that the mind was associated with the head, rather than focused in the heart and manifest over the entire body. Tohei Shinichi then turned to Professor Shaner, saying “now I understand why you had to coin the term ‘bodymind’ in order to emphasize what is meant by the oneness of mind and body.” Thus, it comes as no surprise, theoretically speaking, to find the Japanese understanding of the mind/body relationship to be quite different from the philosophical traditions of the West.

It was the philosopher René Descartes (1596–1650) in the West who solidified the radical separation of mind and body. Descartes wrote of the mind as a spiritual substance, whose essential characteristic was the ability to think. He divided the world into two kinds of objects: those which are extended in space, and those which are thinking things. The essential qualities of these two classes of things are mutually exclusive: bodies do not think, only minds do; and minds are not extended in space, only bodies are. The problem this left him was how something immaterial and nonspatial could have an effect on something nonthinking and material. Whatever mind is, it is not material like a body, and whatever body is, it is not mindlike in any way. The difficulties tied to trying to explain how two radically different things, mind and body, can interact, is still studied in philosophy courses as “the mind/body problem.”

By contrast, Thomas P. Kasulis writes that “Asian traditions typically do not sharply separate the mind from the body. Although the mind and body may be conceptually distinguishable from some perspectives, they are not assumed to be ontologically distinct” (Yuasa 1987, 1). The Japanese word *kokoro* means both “mind” and “heart,” where heart refers to the affective dimension of awareness, which is, of course, situated in the body, and the significance of a single term serving to identify both mind and heart is that it blurs the distinction between the two. In the Japanese language, mind and heart are one, and the metaphorical seat of the mind is the heart, and, thus, “mind” [*kokoro*], as

ordinarily understood in Japanese, is inclusive of both reason and emotion, both thinking and feeling.

Mind and body are everywhere intertwined, and it is in abstract thinking alone that we find them separated. The modern problem in the West has been how to put the two back together again. Abstract reason erected a radical gulf between the two which Western civilization has been seeking to bridge for centuries. However, mind and body are, and always have been, two sides of the same coin. Heads and tails do not need to be linked, for they are already one. The two sides can be distinguished, as can the edge, but together they form or constitute a single coin. And like a coin, we, too, are one, and not at all in need of being put back together again like Humpty Dumpty. Of course, one might ask why, if the two were never actually separated, it is necessary to reconnect them. It is one thing to resist separating mind and body conceptually, however, and another to learn how to act with mind/body oneness in whatever one does. Practitioners of *aikidō* and most Japanese philosophers insist that bodymind unity is our natural state, but we have forgotten this and have learned to treat the two as separate. We must keep in mind a distinction between the ego (the everyday mind) and the deeper self (the “true” self) which represents who we really are. At this deeper level, body and mind are one, but at the level of the ego, which is the reasoning self, we conceive of the material world as separate from us. Our bodies, as part of the material world, come to be thought of as “tools,” associated with but no longer an inseparable aspect of who we are. The body, we are often told, is corrupt, a hindrance, something to be endured. It is the arts and the martial arts, as well as Zen Buddhism in particular among the religions, however, that are best equipped to remind us of this deeper, natural state of being, and to help us return to that state through diligent practice. Thus, practice can be viewed as the process by which we come to know who we really are.

### Unification of Body and Mind

In Japan, it is not that the typical man or woman on the street does not think of mind and body as separate and distinct, just as we in the West tend to do, but that beneath this “commonsense”

belief is a long-standing tradition that the goal of living, and of discipline and practice, is to “reunite” what was already united at birth but was separated in the process of growing-up. In point of fact, mind/body unity has never been “severed,” else our digestive system would not function, and we would be unable to coordinate our limbs. But when the need to learn a new skill arises, we do not know how to act in a unified manner. For example, to learn to play a musical instrument demands practice, with the hope that eventually what we think or imagine is exactly what we can play. When this is achieved it reveals that unity, at least within the traditions of the ways in Japan. You come to discover your deeper self, its spontaneous abilities and its connection to the greater cosmos.

Mind-body oneness is evident in the act of a tiny infant grasping an adult finger with surprising strength and able to fling the attached hand and arm of the adult from side to side in the crib with seeming ease. Without thinking, without deliberating, the tiny infant achieves remarkable strength spontaneously. Of course, the ultimate aim of the practice of self-cultivation (*shugyō*) is not to become children once more, but to become childlike as an achievement of intense training which leads one to the wisdom which infants and wild animals display spontaneously. It is a regained effortlessness and spontaneity of movement resulting in remarkable swiftness and power, which can only come at the end of discipline, at the middle or end of one’s life, when one’s diligence and awareness operate from a state of being which has achieved both integration and wisdom.

The nature of so-called mind-body unification or oneness needs to be further explained because it is not just associated with speed and strength. The *aikidō* master Tohei Koichi writes that mind-body unity means that “the body moves in accordance with the dictates of the mind and that the mind expresses itself through the body. The two are inseparable” (Tohei 2001b, 17). However, this crisp statement does not itself reveal the complexity involved in getting to that state where the body does as the mind dictates. It is Yuasa Yasuo who breaks new ground in dealing with the precise role that practice plays in this achievement. Thomas P. Kasulis, in his introduction to Yuasa’s *The Body*, writes that mind-body unity is a state achieved only after years of spiritual

and physical cultivation: it is “an achieved body-mind unity” (Yuasa 1987, 3). Such unity is not the normal or universal human condition, but rather it is an advanced state. Somehow, an opening, a pathway, a doorway has to be formed to allow passage between the conscious and the unconscious. Various breathing techniques seem to create such a pathway by taking over conscious control of an activity which is normally the work of the autonomic nervous system. This connection allows incredibly rapid response because there is no separation to overcome or to distract you from single-minded focus. Furthermore, such rapidity and spontaneity is enhanced by the unconscious mind taking control, as the conscious mind relinquishes control, yet remains fully aware. The years of practice allow you to act without thinking, without the slightest deliberation. Both the conscious and unconscious minds each benefit from this fuller harmony and integration. In fact, any of the Japanese Ways can bring about the opening of a pathway between the conscious and the unconscious, thereby allowing the body to respond with incredible rapidity to any challenge or situation. A swordsman in battle has no time to think of alternative paths to victory. To do so would mean death, for deliberation would create an “opening” for one’s opponent, an interrupted response inviting an instantaneous strike by the opponent’s sword. The response has to be instantaneous, purely responsive. The highly trained bodymind responds without the slightest thought or deliberation.

At first, the training of the body is awkward, and it seems uncooperative because consciousness is still in control, and we try to figure out how to hold our hands, our feet, when to inhale and exhale, and what to do about our rambling thoughts. But gradually there develops an “acquired naturalness,” consciousness fades into the background of practice, and the body moves unconsciously without thinking or deliberation, able to respond to any situation in the flash of a sword. Only then will one discover the incredible power and wisdom which such unification yields. Tohei Koichi reminds us that “people often display powers in time of crisis that they would never dream of in ordinary life. Women have been known to lift automobiles to drag injured children out from under them” (Tohei 2001b, 18). These are spectacular once-only examples of mind-body unification, but they represent that of which we are capable.

## Enlightenment

By training our breathing and our body we may achieve effortless movement and mind-body unity, but to what end? The increasing unification of mind and body achieved through the practice of controlling the breath and the moving of the body not only leads to great physical skills, it also leads to an experience of the unification of the individual with the greater whole. Mind-body unity is generalized to include an awareness of the oneness of self and other, and of self and universe. This is the Japanese understanding of enlightenment. Enlightenment is the direct experience of oneness with all that exists, and such a state of being is one in which one seems to become one with the flower, the rocks in a landscape garden, or the sorrows and suffering of others. With the expansion of power and the quickening of one's reflexes also comes the sensitization of the practitioner, resulting in the capacity for heartfelt identification with the wonders of existence itself. For the first time, one is truly at home in the universe. To be enlightened is to experience the world as a heartache, one is so in love with and so identified with whatever one beholds. As Dr. Sen Genshitsu (Soshitsu XV), a Grandmaster of the Way of Tea, expressed it, "there is now such joy in the moment, and you become so impressed by everything around you, that you could die!" The feelings are so intense, so enveloping: but the result is a heartache, and not a headache.

Living better and more mindfully as an increasingly harmonious and integrated bodymind is no small achievement. As exponents of Sōtō Zen<sup>1</sup> argue, every moment is an enlightened moment for one who has set out on a path, a way, and so rather than waiting for a blinding and perhaps isolated epiphany, every moment, every now, every flower, scent, and breeze becomes an epiphany, even if on a smaller scale. One's perception of self and

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1. There are three major schools of Zen Buddhism in Japan, two of which are dominant: Rinzai Zen and Sōtō Zen. Briefly, the Rinzai school emphasizes sudden enlightenment and underscores the indispensability of an enlightenment experience. Such experiences are clearly set apart from ordinary experiences. The Sōtō school deemphasizes the importance of the blinding epiphany of enlightenment and instead sees enlightenment as practice. To decide to follow a path is itself enlightenment, and in that context every moment and every experience is an enlightenment experience. This is the gradual enlightenment position.

world have been remarkably altered, and continued practice will both sustain that transformation and open the door to further developments. Self-transformation is the meaning-content of self-cultivation. To achieve excellence, to become what you are capable of becoming in and from your depths, is what self-cultivation and self-transformation seek. Cultivation means a development in personality, and it is from this that the strongest ethical insights arise. To see the “other,” whether human or not, whether sentient or not, as a source of wonder and delight, of worth and as a potential friend, is a profound foundation for thinking and acting ethically. It is a way-of-being-in-the-world which seeks to preserve and nurture, to embrace and assist whenever appropriate. It is a reverence for all that exists.

One of the central insights of practice is the folly of egoism and the recognition of the many delusions which result from concern for one’s ego. It was the Buddha who taught that we will come to see the world as it really is through a practice which leads to a state of non-ego. Of course, Buddhist practice includes following the precepts and ethical norms for daily living, such as refraining from killing, stealing, lying, adultery, and the consumption of intoxicants, but the source of them all is the original insight of enlightenment. While the notion of cultivation is closely tied to Buddhism, its adaptation by the Japanese affected many aspects of their culture. Many of the artistic practices of Japan are methodologies of cultivation. Indeed, it would seem that any artistic practice taken in the broad sense can be viewed as a self-cultivational practice leading to enlightenment, for those with the dedication to pursue a practice with such diligence and seriousness of purpose. While the phrase “leading to enlightenment” should be taken to mean that it is enlightenment that is sought, enlightenment is to be found directly in the practice itself. Writing poetry mindfully, or being thrown by a partner in *aikidō*, is precisely where enlightenment is to be discovered. As a model of human living, the various practices can be taken to provide a general methodology for the living of all aspects of one’s life: each and every moment can be as rich and magnificent as celebrating Tea, or the momentary snapshot of the “now” in haiku, or the vigilance and centeredness of *aikidō*.

Most importantly, the insights and personal development achieved through a practice are not meant to apply exclusively to



the particular art through which they were learned but to one's life as a whole, by extension. One's whole bodymind is transformed by the specific practice, and one now walks and acts in the world differently. One will never see the world the way it was, for flowers are now more fragrant and exquisite than before, the bubbling of the boiling kettle in the tea room sounds like a remarkable symphony of nature, and one's "opponent" in *aikidō* has become a "partner" in mutual self-transformation. Each of these changes echoes throughout one's life experiences, changing whatever one sees, whatever one does, whatever one feels, like a shout bouncing off mountain peak after mountain peak, undoing the old rigidity and ushering in a new fluidity. To begin to see differently is to begin to act differently and to be different.

### Meditation as a Path

Although not normally categorized as a "Way," meditation provides a path to enlightenment and is almost always an essential ingredient in all of the other paths. Meditation can take the form of repetitive practice in the martial arts, or intense focus on precise movement in making tea, arranging flowers, or making pottery, or talking to the rocks and plants as one constructs a landscape garden. Self-cultivation through meditation "is a method of training that strengthens and enhances the function of the mind to a higher level than the ordinary state . . . and strengthen[s] the power which synthesizes the functions of consciousness and the unconscious, while learning to control the emotional patterns (the habits of the mind/heart) [and other] complexes [which are] characteristic of oneself, with the view to further transform the mind" (Yuasa 1993,19). Meditation is, therefore, a component of self-cultivation. One who becomes increasingly self-integrated emotionally is more likely "to become a person who can relate . . . to another with love and in calmness" (Yuasa 1993, 20). It can be argued, therefore, that meditation enhances bodymind oneness and harmonizes conscious and unconscious functions, and in doing so actually paves the way to ethical behavior.

Emotional integration and a loving and empathetic attitude toward others goes a long way toward relational enhancement. Meditation helps to move one toward this kind of maturity as a

person. And meditation is not only practiced in the customary sitting position that uses the body and its posture to control and expand the potential of the mind, but there is also a “meditation in motion,” or walking meditation, which overtly utilizes the body-in-motion. Moreover, the many activities and skills of the various arts in Japan are themselves forms of meditation. Learning to hold the ladle just right in serving tea is a form of meditation, as is learning a specific move in *aikidō*, or deftly arranging a vase of flowers in one’s home.

### The Resultant Transformation

One of the most interesting comparisons made by Yuasa is the significance of personal cultivation in Japan and participation in sports generally. Western-style exercises and sports do not emphasize, or even include, breath focus and meditation, control of the emotions, or advancement toward *satori*. Yuasa offers a summary of his comparison:

It would not be an exaggeration to say that, fundamentally, modern Western sports aim at competition in a game, or at winning over others in a match. This is true in all competitive games, and for this reason, the record becomes important. Also, competition arouses thrill and excitement in the viewers, from which is generated the idea of sports as a show, and we are now in the golden age of professional sports. Today, sports such as Olympic skiing and marathons have come to share a large market as a means for making money.

By way of contrast, the standpoint of the performer or competitor has been valued as most important in Japanese artistry and the *bushi* way. . . . The goal of Japanese artistry and the *bushi* way is for the competitor or performer to discipline one’s spirit by using one’s body. And by transforming one’s mind, a flower blossoms, whereby one achieves the state of “no-mind.” The self ascends to the height at which it is no longer one’s self, but is the self which harmonizes and accommodates others; it becomes one with the world and with the universe. (Yuasa 1993, 34–35)

Once more Yuasa hints at the ethical significance of cultivation when he asks, “isn’t the most truly important thing for human beings the act of enhancing one’s own mind and heart, while nurturing the soul which harmonizes with others?” (Yuasa 1993, 36).

Rather than asking what the relationship between mind and body is, “Eastern mind/body theory takes the attitude of asking how the mind-body relationship *becomes* or *changes* through training and practice” (Yuasa 1993, 62), with a view to comprehending the deeper or “original” state of being human. Theory and practice are inseparable, as are mind and body. To train the body is to train the mind, and, as will be seen particularly clearly in *aikidō*, to train the mind is also to train the body. There is only bodymind.

### *Ki*

*Ki* is the Japanese translation of the Chinese *qi* (energy, spirit), as in *Qigong*. Yuasa tells us that in order to make clear the Japanese understanding of being-human-in-the-world, it is necessary to discuss *ki* energy (Yuasa 1993, 70). According to practitioners of the martial arts, the ultimate secret is the unification of body, mind, and *ki*. *Ki* can be thought of as an energy that flows through the body (and through the entire universe), and it is referred to as “mind” and is centered specifically in the lower abdomen (*seika tanden*). Paying attention to and developing the *tanden* (also referred to as the “ocean of *ki*”) is fundamental to the martial arts, according to many practitioners. It is not unimportant that this area, just two or three inches below the navel, is referred to as “mind” or “consciousness.” It points to a central aim and capacity in the martial arts; the unification of mind and *ki*. The flow of *ki* cannot be apprehended empirically, although meditation training can make one sensitive to the ebb and flow of *ki* as it courses through the network of meridians of the body. Eastern medicine is based on this meridian system, and whether it is acupuncture, acupressure, traditional herbal medicine, or *kiatsu*, they all base their practice on unblocking or regulating the flow of *ki* in the body and/or balancing that flow in the patient. *Ki*, the body, and the mind are one thing: the access point is through the body.

### A Brief Map

In the chapters that follow, it will become evident that each and every one of the *dō* is a “moving meditative” path, the experience of which can be enlightenment, *satori* (also known as *ken-shō*, the seeing into one’s own nature). While Zen Buddhism is often thought to be the straightest path to *satori*, it is not the only one, nor is it for everyone the most efficient. Of course, enlightenment is an end which is not an end, since what one discovers in enlightenment is just how far there is still to grow, and that to continuously pursue a practice is itself enlightenment. “The Buddha is only half-way there,” is a familiar quotation in Japan, even amongst non-Buddhists. The point of the saying is that even the Buddha is still on the path, still self-cultivating, still improving.

There simply is no final end, only the endless path with insights of profound significance along the way, each of which is an aspect of being enlightened. Even then, one still has to put what one has learned into everyday practice. To be able to put into practice what one thinks or knows is to apply one’s insights and understanding to the moment-by-moment decisions of everyday living on an ongoing basis. To know that one is inextricably a part of the entirety of existence is not necessarily to act as though one were, or to see the same worth in another. To see another person as one’s spiritual brother or sister is not necessarily to treat them well, as the history of siblings dating back to Cain and Abel will testify. To know how to make tea in the sunshine, when conditions are perfect, and one has the protection and seclusion of the tea hut or the Zen monastery, is one thing. But to be able to make tea properly when conditions are less than ideal and not at all as planned, when the guests or members of the audience are disinterested, already holding grudges against each other, grieved by an illness or a death, financially overwhelmed, and all of this taking place in a noisy gymnasium for purposes of demonstration, requires a master who is able to rise above the difficulties and the conflicts to create an atmosphere where the tea spirit is as evident as ever. Real life is unpredictable, complex, and unexpectedly difficult at times, and it is then that real mastery can become apparent: many can make tea in the sunshine, but it takes an accomplished master to make

tea when it rains, when the unforeseen threatens to disrupt one's anticipations and one's plans. It takes practice, deep concentration, a centered and imperturbable demeanor, a remarkable flexibility, and a steadfast sense of humor. Mastering the living of one's life, particularly in one's relationships with others, is no less demanding and, at times, seemingly overwhelming. The living of one's life is a never ending journey through self-cultivation, understanding, and steadfast compassion. Hopefully, there will come a time when one will be able to live honorably and compassionately even in the worst of storms. A true master can act on all occasions with grace, beauty, and compassion, even when it rains.