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# Zen and Judo

**By Jean-François Budo Viaud**

During sesshins, we often have the opportunity to meet zen practitioners who practiced or still practice martial arts. We hear there discussions between practitioners most often of judo, karatedo, aikido, but sometimes of kendo or kyudo. We can read on the Internet, in Newsletters or on blogs, some texts from zen practitioners who also practice a martial art. Often, they also talk about the closeness of body and mind and the importance of letting go.

The text "*Aïkido et zen - Du combat à la transformation de soi*", [1] an interview of Eric Grunewald on the blog of the Valence Zen dojo, shows us the complementarity of zen and aikido.

This link between the practice of zen and martial arts was also highlighted by **Frédéric Lenoir** in his book "*Le bouddhisme en France*" [2], which studies buddhism in French society through a sociological survey. This field survey is part of his thesis: "*Le bouddhisme en France: un laboratoire de la modernité religieuse*", defended in 1999 in Paris, EHESS. His work was carried out among the sangha of Tibetan buddhism and the sangha of zen buddhism. The author warmly thanks **Roland Rech** for allowing him to carry out his investigation within the AZI. In 1999, he revealed that 29% of zen practitioners discovered zen through martial arts. And he quotes the book of **Master Deshimaru** (1914-1982) "*Zen et arts martiaux*" [3], as complementary information about this statistic.

As a judo practitioner myself, I discovered zen when I read the book "*Zen et arts martiaux*". I was attracted by this book because I found interesting the parallel between the disciplines. It is with the practice of zazen that the link with the martial arts seemed obvious to me. This book tells details about the 1975 sesshin in Switzerland, during which Master Deshimaru alternated zazen with demonstrations and explanations about martial arts. The live demonstrations and the dynamics of the different disciplines must have been an unforgettable experience! The following sentences struck me:

"*Martial arts, plus zen, form Budo*" (page 29). This probably means that the two practices are complementary.

"*Martial arts and zen have in common the creation and concentration of energy*," (page 30). This means that the practices are linked.

This reading really challenged me. It was a revelation, in the sense that an intellectual reading spoke to me intuitively. I felt what zazen should be and that I had to experience its practice. So, I practiced zazen for the first time at the zen dojo of Romans in the Drôme, which at the beginning was also a karate dojo. **Philippe Coupey**, disciple of Master Deshimaru who dedicated a book to zen and the martial arts "*Zen et Budo*" [4] also refers to this sesshin, being himself a karate practitioner. His book relates his own experience of this sesshin.

The practice of zazen gave a new dimension to my judo practice. It must be said that it is the Japanese martial art that most developed its sporting character and therefore lost its martial character. It is through readings on judo that I found other links between zen and martial arts,

links that are complementary to those that Master Deshimaru demonstrates through practice in his book "*Zen et arts martiaux*".

First of all, I found a link reading the books of **Jean-Lucien Jazarin** (1900-1982), who was Vice President of the French Judo Federation and leader of the National College of Black Belts. This high-ranking member (7th Dan) who was passionate about zen buddhism wrote the books "*Le Judo école de vie*" [5], then "*L'esprit du Judo*" [6]. It is in this last book, subtitled "*Interviews avec mon Maître*", that he develops the spiritual aspect of judo through his own research about zen, after having obtained his first Dan. It is with a new master that he will perfect his judo skills and obtain the answers he wanted to his questions about zen. The purpose of this book is to present a judo practice where the body and the mind are in harmony.

At that time, when speaking about judo, one spoke about "Do" or "way". On this subject the Master says (page 43): "*I prostrate myself before the sign Do, because it represents the goal, the way to go, the Master who taught me and myself*". As during Master Deshimaru's sesshin dedicated to the martial arts, this book alternates the practice of budos and philosophical reflections. It is in this book that we discover a similarity of practice between judo and zen. In judo, the intensive summer practice or "*Shochu Geiko*", and the intensive winter practice, or "*Kangeiko*", could correspond to the long great zen sessions.

Other books on judo, and especially from its founder, show the link with zen, as for example the book "*Jigoro Kano, père du judo*" by **Michel Mazac** [7]. This judo teacher and translator of Japanese wrote this book about the life of Jigoro Kano (1860-1938), founder of judo. In particular, he develops the theme of "*kata*" (page 148) or "*form*": a codified set of attacks-defenses. Each Japanese martial art has its own. In this part, he evokes the awakening which - according to him - is based on the following formula: "*SHIKI SOKU ZEKU KUSOKU ZE SHIKI SHINMU KEIGEI*". This is a passage from the *Maka Hannya Haramita Shingyo Sutra* that we know well. It specifies that the kata involves body and mind and comes from the evolution of Japanese buddhism, in particular from **Master Dogen** (1200-1253).

Among his research works and books, **Yves Cadot**, lecturer in Japanese at the University of Toulouse, is the author of a thesis on judo: "*Kano Jigoro et l'élaboration du judo - Le choix de la faiblesse et ses conséquences*", thesis defended at the INALCO of Paris in December 2006. He is a high-grade judoka (6th dan) and he enlightens us on many points. I was attentive to the link he makes between judo and Japanese culture, but also between judo and religion in general and buddhism in particular. We find precious information in his books: "*Du judo et de sa valeur éducative comme pédagogique*" [8], which transcribes the message of the founder of judo, Jigoro Kano, a message he translated and commented. There is also "*Promenades en judo*" [9], which is a collection of his first chronicles published in the magazine "*L'Esprit du Judo*", chronicles that he still writes monthly today. We learn that the first dojo of the founder of judo, the *Kodokan*, was located in *Eishoji*, in an ancient Buddhist temple. This was not necessarily a religious choice, as Buddhist temples in Japan have a room dedicated to laymen. But Jigoro Kano was a scholar, coming from a family of samurai and Shinto priests and he had a deep knowledge of buddhists texts. It is interesting to discover that judo was founded in the spirit of a practice, *Shugyo*, and not as a sport, which it has become today.

In zen, we also talk about the practice, which is zazen, and then of the continuous practice or *gyoji*, which is extended to all moments of life. Another striking similarity concerns the content

of the teachings and practices of the two disciplines. For judo, Yves Cadot speaks of the four pillars of the method developed by the founder: "*randori*" or "*seizures without convention*", a free application exercise where each of the two partners tries to apply his solutions, "*kata*" or "*form*", which is a codified set of attacks-defenses, "*mondo*" or "*questions-answers*" and "*kogi*" or "*lecture/lecture*". In zen, we also find four of them, which we practice regularly in the dojo and in sesshin: "*zazen*" or "*sitting meditation*", "*kusen*" or "*oral teaching of the master during zazen*", "*teisho*" or "*oral teaching in the form of a lecture given by the master*", and "*mondo*" or "*questions and answers between disciples and the master*". However, if we attend many mondo in the context of a zen sesshin, I have only attended one mondo in the context of a judo course and it was Yves Cadot himself who directed it!

Among the principles defined by the founder of judo, we find "*Jita Yuwa Kyohei*", which means "*mutual help and prosperity*". This principle indicates that we can't progress alone and that partners are not opponents only, but also companions in our evolution on the way. I always wondered if this principle had anything to do with buddhism. In the same way, we do not practice zazen alone in the dojo and the Buddha said that he had awakened to share it with all sentient beings! I did not find a proven link between the origin of this principle of judo and zen. Another principle "*Seiryoku Zen Yo*", which means "*good use of energy*", includes the word zen. It seems that it is the word zen that corresponds to energy.

Finally, we can mention the first film of **Akira Kurosawa** (1910-1998) "*La légende du grand judo*" [10]. It is the story of the creation of judo, which the director romanticized on the basis of real facts. It features the character of Jigoro Kano, called Shogoro Yano, and one of his disciples, called Sugata Sanshiro, who made judo known during numerous fights against old jujitsu schools. What caught my attention was the fact that in Shogoro Yano's dojo, there was a bonze! That's what he is called in the credits and in the subtitles of the original version and he is a Buddhist priest that we see in several scenes wearing a *kolomo*. He has a moderating role with Sugata Sanshiro, the fiery disciple, whom he brings back to calm and reason, sometimes with philosophical reflections and sometimes with humor or irony.

My closest experience between the two practices of zen and judo was after a weekend sesshin. I went to judo practice on Monday night as usual. But that night, the practice was not as usual. I have a vague recollection of the practice, but an accurate recollection of my feelings. I would have thought at first that the connection between zen and martial art could be strong during the practice of *kata*, but then it was rather in the practice of *randori* that this harmony occurred. First of all, I felt fluidity in the practice. Even if one is in opposition during a fight, that evening it was a harmony with the partners that I met and without any real aim to win. I had the feeling that I practiced judo with a *mushotoku* spirit: without trying to obtain anything and without looking for any profit. My mind was neither blocked by the wish to win, nor by the idea of not losing! I also felt a harmony between my body and my mind, since my mind did not consciously direct my body in the movements. I felt that my judo was "*hishiryō*", "*non-thinking*" or "*beyond thinking*". There is an expression in martial arts that is "*mushin no shin*", or "*thought without thought*". **Marc Sanzier**, an aikido practitioner, defines this concept in his book "*Souffle du Budo*" [11]. For him, this state of mind allows to unite body and mind. We find again here the link between the practices.

It seems to me that martial arts and zazen allow us to experience two aspects of the practice. The interdependence on the one hand, because we cannot practice alone, or sometimes only - in addition to the usual practice - with the master in the dojo. Impermanence on the other

hand, because in disciplines like martial arts where gesture is important, movements are constantly changing and situations can be reversed by a simple "counter attack" or a simple "sequence". Just like during zazen, we let our thoughts pass, without holding them back or rejecting them, and they follow one another.

These impressions are confirmed by the text of **Mifune Kyūzō** (1883-1965): "*Quintessence du judo et du zen*" [12] of which Yves Cadot has made a translation (\*). This great Japanese judoka was 10th Dan and a disciple of Kano Jigoro. His own discovery led him to say that he found in zen the quintessence of judo that he was looking for: "... *The elders teach us that, in order to study the secrets of Budo, one must enter zen*". He insists on the importance of the practice for both disciplines and quotes Dogen: "The zen master Dogen says: "*The demonstration is in the practice*". He describes judo as "*dynamic zen*" that masters variations. Referring to judo as "*the way of adaptation*", he pushes his philosophical reasoning further, by defining practice as a state of ataraxia and a situation of emptiness. For him, the experience is that "*the paroxysm of adaptation is nothingness*". His experience makes him declare: "... *Zen and Judo are both a combination of rest and movement*. He adds: "*Zen allows us to experience cerebral illumination by means of zazen, a static practice situation, and in judo, by means of randori, a dynamic situation, the mind is educated in the heart of instantaneous movements*". And he concludes by opening to a question: "*As for the result, wouldn't the summum of judo and the summum of zen be the same?*"

This idea of linking the two practices is disturbing, because it could present them as opposites. Zazen is an immobile practice and martial arts are practiced with mobility. The common points are an understanding of the body and the practice! Yves Cadot confirms this in another of his texts: "*Like judo, zen is practice and not abstraction...*"

So, if this is the main thing, we must continue the practice, because it brings us to an intuitive and complete understanding of the way, body and mind.

(\*) *May I thank Yves Cadot here for his translation of Mifune Kyūzō's text "Quintessence du judo and du zen" which he made during our exchanges about this article "Zen et judo." I am very grateful to him for this fuse, made in the spirit of Jita Yuwa Kyohei and which allowed me to connect my two practices.*

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Yves Cadot published a translation of this work on his blog in February 2019:  
[https://corpsjapon.hypotheses.org/170#\\_ftn6](https://corpsjapon.hypotheses.org/170#_ftn6)