

SHINTAIDO: ANCIENT TEACHINGS, NEW BODY LANGUAGE

EXPLORING THE PRACTICE OF HOLISTIC MARTIAL ARTS, MEDITATION AND HEALTH

[Shintaido means "new body way" from d franklin on Vimeo.](#)

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The meaning of vulnerability: Shintaido as a subculture



Here is a paradox: sometimes you meet someone who, having tried some other martial arts, has decided to participate in Shintaido. Perhaps they are very enthusiastic at first, and because they are in good physical condition and have previous training, they are able to make relatively rapid progress from the technical point of view. But then something happens. There suddenly seems to be some obstacle that can't be easily overcome: a recognizable, yet difficult-to-define obstacle.

Sometimes— Aoki-sensei alludes to this in discussing Rakutenkai and the origins of Shintaido, and it also describes my own experiences— a person encounters some feeling of brutality in the martial arts, and this motivates them to quit and try something else. Even if there is no feeling of brutality or brutal behavior, martial arts practiced as self-defense often involve situations where one may experience pain inflicted by another person (one's sparring partner). This is a normal part of training in most martial arts (including some parts of Shintaido), and it is well-accepted that as long as the attitudes and motivations of the participants are legitimate, this is an aspect of the practice that one must put up with in order to progress and achieve competence.

In some martial arts, in addition to occasional pain, discomfort, muscle fatigue or minor (on hopes) injuries such as bruises caused by strikes, blocks, and falling, there is the additional issue of grappling, holds, joint locks or pins. Many martial arts such as Chin Na (Qinna), Jujutsu, perhaps Aikido etc. feature kumite (partner practice or sparring) techniques in which one may be put into various uncomfortable positions from which it is difficult to escape. Even when one is not being injured, the physical pain is minor, and one has consensually agreed to practice these techniques with a partner, the final result is— by definition, if it is a self-defense oriented martial art— being in a physical situation in which one is vulnerable, uncomfortable, unable to escape, and in which the threat of physical injury is present.



While all this (except for muscle fatigue) may strike the experienced Shintaido practitioner as somewhat alien to the more humanistic world of Shintaido, which emphasizes freedom and cooperation rather than fighting and self-defense, there is a certain common element. If we look at people practicing some of the most basic Shintaido kumite— for example Tenshingosho kumite or Kiri-oroshi kumite— we can often see that one of the partners is in a very vulnerable and open position, leaning almost awkwardly backwards with the wrists and elbows bent at angles that limit the possibilities of further movement.

Similarly, at least at first glance, if we observe people practicing joint locks or holds in a self-defense oriented martial art, we may see people (typically the partner who plays the role of uke, or attacker) in vulnerable positions. Sometimes they will also be leaning awkwardly one way or another, perhaps almost off-balance and about to be thrown, with the mobility of their elbows, wrists, and possibly legs, limited.

Before we discuss the details of the differences between these situations, that is, the technical differences between Shintaido, and for example the Aiki-jujutsu shown in the picture above, we will focus more generally on the theme of vulnerability. All of these pictures show people in vulnerable situations, and yet there are important differences that go beyond (and yet include) the merely technical aspects. I think that the meaning of their vulnerability is different in these different martial arts.

In order to make sense of this, we should take a short side-trip into the discipline of cultural anthropology. Anthropology is, of course, the study of human beings, including their biology, evolution, and culture. Anthropologists believe that the way humans use symbols is quite unique, and forms the foundation of cultural adaptations that have played an important role in our evolution. Concretely, they ask this question: how is it possible that humans, who compared to other animals

are slow and weak, without big teeth or claws, have become so spectacularly successful as a species? Our ancestors spread across almost every continent on Earth, arriving in the Americas relatively recently (approximately 20,000 years ago), and as a species we have come to dominate the planet so extensively that our own worst enemy is not hungry lions or bears (for whom individual unarmed humans make a tasty treat), but rather ourselves, either by war or ecological destruction.

Why (collectively) should lions or tigers be afraid of these slow, weak, virtually toothless and clawless animals, who can't even climb a tree fast enough to escape, rather than the other way around? The answer, of course (according to anthropologists), is our big brains. Our big brains made it possible for us not only to make tools (including weapons for defense and tools for hunting), but also for us to use language and other symbols. Language and other symbols made it possible for our ancestors to create culture, which is a symbol-based system of knowledge and values— a kind of coded information— that can be passed on from one person to another and from one generation to the next.

Now, DNA is also coded information that is passed on from one generation to the next, but here is the evolutionary advantage of culture: DNA gets modified through evolution more slowly, and perhaps less flexibly, than culture. For example, in order for a lion to "invent" a better claw for, say, grabbing the haunches of an antelope running at high speed, it will take many generations. There must be some accidental mutation of the DNA that determines the structure of the claw that causes some improvement, and then this improvement must give the next generation some advantage in surviving and having more babies that survive, and then over many generations the improvement spreads through the population. This is the (oversimplified) essence of Darwin's theory.

An individual lion cannot deliberately "invent" a new claw (due to its mental limitations), but ancient humans could (and did) invent better spears, spear-throwers, bows and arrows, axes, agricultural tools— and on and on. When an individual invents something advantageous, the knowledge of how to make and use it can be quickly transferred to others and to the following generations by means of symbols (such as language), and in a larger sense by the whole symbol-system of the culture. The capacity for culture is in our DNA; but the actual details of specific cultures are learned. Therefore the descendants of the tribe that invents a better spear, or fire for cooking food, can learn it from their elders. They can enjoy the advantages within just one generation, without waiting for the much longer process of physically growing bigger claws or stronger stomachs. Anthropologists consider this evolutionary advantage of culture to be perhaps the most important and unique feature of our humanity.

The knowledge of how to make a better spear is an obvious advantage in an environment where spears are important for survival, but anthropologists believe that the same principle often applies to much more complicated and less obviously practical features of human culture such as religious beliefs, rituals, art, kinship and social structures, political hierarchies, etc., all of which we learn from the culture we grow up in.

The key to understanding the advantages of culture is that the meanings of things are flexible; they are encoded in the culture, but they are learned. Therefore they can change. The meaning of the same concrete thing can be different in different cultures; or within one culture, it can change over time.

For example, for the acorn woodpecker, an oak tree is its home and its source of food. That is the "meaning" (if we can use that word) of an oak tree for an acorn woodpecker. It has a special kind of beak adapted for pecking into oak trees and a specially adapted digestive system to eat acorns and so on. For that bird, "oak" means "food" and it will for as long as its physical traits are adapted for that environment. Its ability to behave towards that tree in any other way are quite limited.

But for humans, according to their cultural traits, the oak can be seen as a source of food (the acorns, at least); a source of fuel; material for making tools; a sacred tree that should be worshipped and never cut down; a symbol of the life cycle; a vital part of the ecological system; something useless that must be cut down to make space for farms or houses; etc. etc. These cultural traits allow the same oak tree to mean many different things for different groups of people (that is, people of different cultures). And according to their learned cultural traits, humans who are biologically identical will behave quite differently towards the same tree.

Returning now to our observations of the role of vulnerability in various martial arts, I believe we can say that different martial arts have different values about what is important, what is correct or not correct, and may attach different meanings to similar movements. Different martial arts may be considered different cultures (or sub-cultures). Without commenting further on other martial arts that I don't know much about, what we observe in Shintaido is that a positive value is placed on vulnerability.

This is clearly reflected in the language— both oral traditions and texts— that are part of the Shintaido tradition. For example, people in the Shintaido community often speak of opening up, being open, or allowing the other into one's space. The founder, Aoki-sensei, writes that "[i]n becoming a person who is totally defeated, you are admitting and approving your powerlessness, your helplessness. Accepting defeat and crying for help are stronger than the strongest form in the martial arts." Whether we take this as literally true or not is beside the point (personally, as a member of the Shintaido community, I do); but clearly it represents an endorsement of vulnerability.

While the above may seem to refer more to a kind of psychological or spiritual vulnerability, the positive value of vulnerability is clearly reflected in the actual techniques and movements of Shintaido. Students and practitioners doing the kinds of movements shown in figure 1 are encouraged to experience them as positive, perhaps to relax and even "enjoy" them (possibly in spite of some initial discomfort). They are encouraged to do so by the culture of Shintaido, as represented in its philosophies of "life exchange," "openness," "Ten-Chi-Jin hitobito ware ittai," ("unification of cosmos, earth, human and other people"), etc. The values of the philosophy (including our example of the positive value of vulnerability) are encoded in and transmitted by the symbolic tools of the culture (texts, oral transmission, practicing in a group, and so on).

In the same way that the same oak tree can mean many different things to different people according to their culture (their system of learned beliefs, attitudes and practices), the meaning attached to being in a vulnerable position can be quite different in different martial arts. Furthermore, as we have seen, there is a connection between the meaning of the oak tree and one's actual behavior towards it, which may be influenced or modified accordingly. Correspondingly, our actual behavior concerning being in vulnerable positions is influenced and modified by the Shintaido philosophy.

This brings us back to the technical details of Shintaido movements. There are no joint locks in the basic Shintaido curriculum. When we observe the kinds of Shintaido kumite mentioned above, we can see that the person in the vulnerable position is gripping the other, rather than being gripped. As we can see from the illustrations, this is quite different from most other martial arts, and certainly from those that are intended as practical self-defense. Therefore, the Shintaido practitioner in an awkward, exposed, backward-leaning, vulnerable position can modulate from moment to moment the degree to which, through their own act of gripping, they freely enter into that situation; and of course they can release their grip entirely whenever they want to.

This aspect of the technique may reflect the positive value placed on vulnerability in Shintaido; or the priority placed on entering freely into the situation; or the importance of the leader (the one who is being gripped) encouraging their partner by leading responsibly and sensitively rather than by force; or all of these, and many others in addition. What becomes clear from our analysis, though, is this: just as culture in general is not only values and ideas, but also behaviors (towards oak trees, for example), likewise the sub-culture of Shintaido is not only words and philosophy, but is embodied in the movement techniques.

This may help to explain the situation of the person who, even though their physical condition is quite good, encounters some obstacle in Shintaido practice. It is not only a question of physical talent, nor even of the individual's psychologically sensitive areas or psycho-physical energies that may be stirred up by experiences of vulnerability (though this certainly can happen). In some cases, I believe it goes beyond the individual and actually represents a clash of cultures.

As a sub-culture, Shintaido embodies values that may be at odds with the dominant culture. A person raised in the dominant culture, who then enters a sub-culture with somewhat different values and a different view of the world, may actually experience culture shock. Culture shock is well-documented by anthropologists, and is frequently experienced on a physical or visceral level, sometimes including extreme feelings such as nausea, disorientation, sudden loss of energy, and aversion to all sensory stimuli.

What does it mean for us the Shintaido community to recognize ourselves as a sub-culture? It is much more than a question of some kind of identity, such as "we are the Shintaido people, the Shintaido tribe." We can think of Shintaido as a new technology, an new invention— which in fact it is. It's true that the invention of a new technology by an individual or a small group can lead to new and different cultural identities. "We are the bow-and-arrow users, they are the spear-

throwers" also becomes "we are the deer-hunting people, they are the mammoth-eating people" and possibly "we are the totem-pole-carving people, they are the cave-painting people." Depending on the fate of the mammoth, it can also become "we are the people-who-are-here. They are the people-that-were."

Therefore archeologists may identify ancient groups of people (who were biologically identical) by the differing types of arrowheads and pottery they made, and then correlate these with cultural traits, and through this map the fates of whole past civilizations (sounds glamorous, doesn't it?). But this can only happen if the new technology becomes embedded in the culture— if it becomes part of the cultural identity— and is then transmitted from person to person and generation to generation.

So, while the technology of Shintaido has been (mostly) invented, the process of embedding the technology of Shintaido in a viable sub-culture is just beginning. How can we nurture this process? I think we have barely begun to articulate the core values of Shintaido. "Core values" refers to something more than concepts or ideas. They are perhaps principles that operate in the background, flavoring and giving reason to our behaviors. For example, if we hold that "vulnerability has positive value," it changes the meaning of certain techniques. It influences our attitudes and approach to practicing those movements, and also serves as a guideline to help us know if we are practicing correctly.

In order to make a viable Shintaido sub-culture, I believe that part of our task is to uncover or unpack the values that are hidden within the practice of Shintaido. To do this we have to first, of course, practice Shintaido; then we experience the world of Shintaido; then we start to articulate the experience of our Shintaido world, to make the structure of a Shintaido sub-culture. Hopefully a structure with a door, so that others can enter.

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ABOUT SHINTAIDO

Shintaido (新体道, literally "new body way") has been called an "avant-garde martial art." Developed in Japan in the 1960s by Hiroyuki Aoki and the Rakutenkai group, it draws on a number of traditional martial arts. However, it is also inspired by fine arts, tea ceremony, theatre, etc. Thus the purpose of Shintaido goes beyond the confines of fighting or self-defense: as a meditation in motion and a way to express our creative intelligence, Shintaido aims to be a comprehensive art of human growth and development.

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