

Tai Chi and Shintaido: Martial Arts for Individual and Social Transformation

by: **James Cumming and Stephen Billias** on October 3rd, 2013

Jewish folklore of the Lamed Vov calls for thirty-six just souls, three-dozen anonymous individuals in every generation who keep the world from slipping into chaos. In 2009 Stephen Billias and filmmaker Dennis Lanson made a documentary entitled *Seeking the 36*, in which they sought the thirty-six just men and women who would save our generation.

A turn of events led them to Rabbi Zalman Shachter-Shalomi, founder of the Jewish Renewal movement, and the film took on a deeper meaning. Billias mentioned to Rabbi Shachter-Shalomi that he practiced a less-known Japanese martial art called Shintaido that focuses on the spiritual, meditative, and transformational aspects of the martial arts rather than combat and self-defense. The rabbi was interested so Stephen showed him one of Shintaido's core movements. Instead of watching, Rabbi Shachter-Shalomi followed along. When Billias finished, Rabbi Shachter-Shalomi said: "Look, I want you to send me a DVD of this, so that I can get it into my body."

This is exactly how people in Shintaido talk about their practice. In the words of the founder of Shintaido, Hiroyuki Aoki, "The body is a message of the universe." Aoki Sensei and Rabbi Shachter-Shalomi are both focused on the ways in which spirituality emanates from human bodies in relationship to one another.

What does it mean to get Shintaido into our bodies? Might the principles of Shintaido and Tai Chi be able to contribute to *Tikkun's* mission of social justice?



The practice of "pushing hands". Credit: George Chiang

A key principle of Tai Chi is never to break the momentum of an attack through sheer force. In an activity called "Pushing Hands," practitioners learn how to undo their natural instinct to resist force with force by teaching the body to yield to force and redirect it. Unlearning the startle response takes

many hours of practice. The goal is that the momentum of the attack is allowed to continue, followed by a near-effortless push to keep the assailant off-balance. Study the photograph of two practitioners pushing hands.

They both have stable stances that allow them to relax, connect with the ground, and get in touch with their own bodies. The hands follow a form that allows them to sense each other's energy. Through practice one develops the sensitivity to feel the direction and strength of one's partner's intention, and to become aware of places where the partner's energy is blocked. The hands do nothing (no grasping or pushing), and each person's spirit seeks a non-oppressive relationship of love, caring, generosity, and nonviolence. Neither seeks to win nor to resist losing.



Metaphorically cut with *kiri*. Credit: Billias and Cumming

Shintaido's movements are informed by the principle of *kiri* (a spiritual notion of "cutting" derived from Japanese sword technique). We accept or receive attacks openly, allowing ourselves to be cut metaphorically, because to be open means to accept transformation and leads to change. This is Shintaido's understanding of the Japanese phrase "Katsujin-ken Satsujin-ken" (The Sword that Kills, the Sword that Gives Life). This type of receiving is evident in the interaction between Billias and Shintaido instructor Tomi Nagai-Rothe.

Both Tai Chi and Shintaido help people feel more connected to others and to experience the aliveness and vitality that are generated by that connection. A primary goal of both practices is to learn how to relax in the presence of aggression. True relaxation is like a quiet, peaceful river that flows beneath fear, anxiety, tension, depression, anger and guilt. These practices allow us to tap into that river.

However, it is not enough to believe that a spiritual practice alone will bring social change. In a recent blog post on Tikkun Daily, [Why the Dalai Lama is Wrong to Think Meditation Will Eliminate Violence](#) Be Scofield argued that the Dalai Lama is wrong to think meditation will eliminate violence:

The "raising of consciousness," as it's popularly phrased in today's yoga and meditation communities, doesn't raise *political* consciousness. It doesn't make people more aware of what is violent and what is not, nor does it make them resist violence. An increase in *presence* in the world does not increase justice. These two elements are all-too-often conflated ... inner transformation doesn't necessarily lead to social transformation.

Inner transformation takes work. One can't expect to gain it in a weekend workshop and as Scofield's blog post suggests, it is not enough to transform only oneself. One has to take that transformation into the world and transform others. This is akin to the "socially engaged Buddhism" of Roshi Bernie Glassman and other spiritual leaders. In the film *Seeking the 36*, Rabbi Zalman advises us to think of those who are trying to save the earth as The 36 Just men and women of today.

In a *Tikkun* editorial, Michael Lerner wrote:

The challenge ... is to bring spiritual practice into our attempts at tikkun olam, the healing and transformation of the world. One element of that spiritual progressive approach would be our insistence that we, all of humanity, need a universal repentance for the ways we've treated each other and the planet. We need to have love replace arrogance, and gentleness replace harshness, as we approach our tasks, and we need to include moments in which we accept collective responsibility for healing both ourselves and the world.

Recently we had an opportunity to discuss the ideas in this article further with Rabbi Shachter-Shalomi. The rabbi immediately connected the concepts of movement and prayer that are inherent in the martial arts of Shintaido and Tai Chi with the concept of *davening*, which he described as having four levels. Our interest focused on the first level, removing all which inhibits our soul from being one with God. A good deal of the practice of both Shintaido and Tai Chi is about awakening and being fully present through movement. "The ego is the way we present ourselves," Rabbi Shachter-Shalomi said. "The universal self is hiding behind the ego. People who want to be ego-less don't have a social presentation."

The Shintaido practice known as *wakame*, "seaweed," embodies this ego-less "it." Wakame is a creative visualization and sensitivity training exercise. One person imagines him or herself as a strand of seaweed rooted on the ocean floor. The other person imagines him or herself as the ocean current. The ocean current person moves toward and through the seaweed person, causing them to react as a piece of seaweed would, softly moving, waving, pliant, returning to a still center point after each wave passes. In advanced forms of this exercise people get so sensitive that no touching is needed; the mere act of moving toward the other person creates a response. This might not seem much like a martial exercise, but to a martial artist the applications are clear. It's about timing and intuition. Like the two-person practice called "Pushing Hands" in Tai Chi, it's about communication, through the body. In the best examples of pushing hands and wakame, the distinction between attacker and defender, between leader and follower, disappears. Both are attacking, both are defending, both are leading, both are following, neither is leading or following.

The practice of a non-violent martial art such as Shintaido or Tai Chi could help individuals and organizations learn how to address conflict without resorting to violence. Wakame expresses strength through softness. People in Western culture are trained to meet aggression with aggression, to "stand up against the other guy." But there is also great strength in pliability, flexibility, "going with the flow", being like seaweed in an ocean current, or bamboo in the wind. If the bamboo tried to resist the wind, it would be snapped easily. Instead, it gives, but it does not break, and when the force is no longer applied, it "returns to center", upright and still. In our human relations, applying this guiding principle of pliancy immediately reduces conflict between people. In an office setting, this might mean, for example, not confronting a rude co-worker who makes disparaging comments about one or one's work in a meeting. Instead one might receive the attack with soft evasion, and show strength by being unflustered and "returning to center" when the attack is exhausted.

Shintaido embodies karate master Gichin Funakoshi's principle of "No First Strike" and expands on it, saying, "We will be completely open to each other. We will unify with each other." The same idea is expressed in Tai Chi. We cannot access the universal energy that permeates everything around us (chi), if we use hard force.

The principle of no hard force is the opposite of the “Stand Your Ground” law that came to prominence in the recent trial of George Zimmerman. His acquittal on July 13, 2013, for shooting and killing Trayvon Martin in February 2012 resulted in an outcry of injustice from many people, including the editor of *Tikkun*. Cornel West asks: if Trayvon Martin was of age and armed, could he have stood his ground on that sidewalk? Would he have been justified in shooting Mr. Zimmerman, who had followed him in a car, because he felt threatened?

The interaction between Zimmerman and Taylor could have played out differently. For example, the Stand Your Ground law, which is part of the fabric of a violent ethos that pervades some strata of American culture, encourages individuals to face each other and fight it out. Martial arts such as Tai Chi and Shintaido can have an immediate and direct impact on changing the way people relate to each other in the world. If the culture had been one of conciliation, perhaps George Zimmerman would have waited for the police, or spoken to Trayvon Martin with respect and explained his concern rather than escalating the situation into tragic violence and death. If we are to create a world where “all forms of exploitation, oppression, and domination have been eliminated and where our institutions have been reconstructed on the basis of love, generosity, nonviolence, social justice, caring for nature, and awe and wonder at the grandeur of the universe” (the vision statement on *Tikkun*'s website), then our imperative duty is to educate the people so they have the wisdom needed to transform the world.

Confrontation with death lays bare the spiritual core of the human condition, and this is a key aspect of the martial arts. We try to make some meaning of our experience, strengthen our relationship with others, and feel part of something larger and more unified than our isolated selves.

We need to act and be like the thirty-six just souls, not only to keep the world from slipping into chaos but also to transform it for the better. Martial arts like Tai Chi and Shintaido can contribute to both inner and social transformation. Internally, we need to remove all that inhibits our soul from being one with God. But it is not enough just to have a spiritual practice. It's time for the peaceful warriors of the world to apply their practice in everyday life, to oppose violence non-violently, wherever they encounter it, to work actively to create the world envisioned by *Tikkun*.

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