

Aikido: A way of Living and Educating the Body through Budō¹

Aikido: una forma de vivir y educar el cuerpo a través del budo

Aikido: uma forma de viver e educar o corpo através do budo

[Research Article]

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Abstract

Our study aims at research what the meaning of practicing budō is and how it defines a way of living and educating the body in movement. Our research group was 11 Brazilians instructors of aikido. Created by Morihei Ueshiba around the year 1940, aikido is defined by Nippon Budokan Foundation as one of the budō martial arts, a physical culture that brings together Japanese tradition and spirituality. The concept of spirituality discussed in our study is based on Michel Foucault's understanding of the aesthetics of existence. For our research we conducted semi-structured interviews and made a literature review about the meaning of budō in different academic databases. All the material was studied in accordance with Michel Foucault's analysis of discourse approach. In total, 44 academic documents were analyzed, including research articles, doctoral and master's dissertations. As a result, we highlight the polysemic character of budō as a way of life, self-knowledge, self-improvement, body culture, spirituality, and education.

Palabras clave: Aikido, Budō, Aesthetics of existence, Education, Body.

Resumen

Nuestro estudio investiga qué significa practicar budo y cómo se define en una forma de vivir y educar el cuerpo en movimiento. Nuestro grupo de investigación fueron 11 instructores brasileños de aikido. Creado por Morihei Ueshiba alrededor del año 1940, el aikido es considerado por el Nippon Budokan como budo, una cultura física que configura tradición y espiritualidad japonesas. La espiritualidad se discute a partir de la concepción de Michel Foucault sobre la estética de la existencia. Hemos realizado entrevistas semiestructuradas y hemos investigado el significado del budo en estudios académicos de diferentes bases de datos. Todo el material se trató basándose en el análisis del discurso de Michel Foucault. En total, se analizaron 44 estudios académicos, entre artículos, tesis de máster y tesis doctorales. Destacamos el carácter polisémico del budo, referido a una forma de vida, autoconocimiento, superación, culto al cuerpo, espiritualidad y educación.

Palabras clave: aikido, budo, aesthetics of existence, education, body.

Resumo

O nosso estudo investiga o que significa praticar budo e como é definido como uma forma de viver e educar o corpo em movimento. O nosso grupo de investigação era constituído por 11 instrutores brasileiros de aikido. Criado por Morihei Ueshiba por volta de 1940, o aikido é considerado pela Nippon Budokan como budo, uma cultura física que molda a tradição e a espiritualidade japonesas. A espiritualidade é discutida com base na concepção de Michel

Foucault sobre a estética da existência. Realizámos entrevistas semi-estruturadas e pesquisámos o significado de budo em estudos académicos em diferentes bases de dados. Todo o material foi tratado com base na análise do discurso de Michel Foucault. Foram analisados 44 estudos académicos, incluindo artigos, teses de mestrado e dissertações de doutoramento. Sublinhamos o carácter polissémico do budo, referindo-se a um modo de vida, autoconhecimento, auto-aperfeiçoamento, culto do corpo, espiritualidade e educação.

Palavras-chave: aikido, budo, estética da existência, educação, corpo.

Introducción

Aikido can be defined as “the way of the harmonious spirit”, or even as the “way of *ai-ki*” (Nippon Budokan, 2011, p. 205), which is a practice that seeks to unite body, mind and spirit through the study of *ki* and specific techniques. Derived from a composite fighting system created in the feudal period of Japan, aikido seeks to develop what is called *ai-ki*, or a way to harmonize oneself with the vital force of the whole nature and cosmos by “annulling the ego and the negative traits of the person as a way of absolution and self-cultivation”. Aikido’s aim is not necessarily the technical perfection, but “the development of character and humanity according to the natural laws of the universe” (Nippon Budokan, 2011, p. 205).

Aikido is considered by the Nippon Budokan Foundation (2011) as one of the budō (martial arts), a form of physical culture that is practiced throughout life. The budō are judo, kendo, kyudo, sumo, karate-do, aikido, shorinji kempo, naginata, and jukendo. The Nippon Budokan (2011) states that its origins are in the traditions of the “way of the warrior”, or *bushido*, an expression that appeared in Japan after the Sengoku Period, specifically in the Tokugawa period (1600-1868).

Budō is understood in aikido as a martial art that resorts to techniques derived from the old Japanese samurais and different combat systems. Morihei Ueshiba states in his philosophy that the idea is to combine the “spirits of heaven and earth” (Nippon Budokan, 2011, p. 205), as well as to enhance the psychosomatic nature of human beings, based on an ideal of love for all things. The central concept for aikido is that of *ki*, which can be translated as vital energy. Under these precepts, aikido is understood as the “Way of Ai-ki” (Nippon Budokan, 2011).

Based on the above definition of aikido, the objective of this study was to collect arguments that support the discourse of budō as a way to live and educate the body in movement. The current article is the result of a research process that concluded as a doctoral dissertation in the field of sociocultural studies, which discussed budō as an aesthetic of existence, i.e., one of the manifestations of the way of living, composed of techniques of the self, which was a concept reappropriated from the reflections of French philosopher Michel Foucault. We use the concept to discuss how Physical Education can benefit from encompassing themes such as self-care, ethics, health, spirituality, the body in movement, its relationship with nature and other martial arts, as well as their impact on society.

Material and Methods

Our study is registered with the Ethics Committee under number 30983920.9.0000.5188, from the Health Sciences Center at the Federal University of Paraíba. The methodological procedures were: 1) Interviews with aikido teachers; 2) a systematic literature review conducted in academic databases; 3) analysis of the material collected through the interviews and the literature review; 4) elaboration of the discussion.

The interviews were recorded online using the OBS Studio software and later were transcribed. The names of the participants were replaced with the letter P and a number that indicated the order in which they had been interviewed to protect their identities. For example, T1 was the first teacher, T2 was the second teacher, and so on. The names of the interviewees and the interviewers, the names of any third parties, the institutions where they practice or work, their corresponding cities and states were also concealed in the transcripts of the interviews.

The participation criteria for our research established that only black belt teachers recognized by a responsible aikido organization from different regions of the country (Southeast, Midwest and Northeast) in Brazil were interviewed. The questions asked to the participant teachers were the following: Age, profession, time they have practiced aikido, whether they practice aikido with other martial arts, the meaning of martial arts for them, the meaning of martial artists, what is budō, the meaning of budō as a way of life, whether all martial arts were perceived as budō by them, the relationship between budō and education, the relation between master and disciple and veterans and newcomers in the person's

formation, how education in budō develops, the relationship of budō with their bodies, the impacts of budō in their lives, and budō's contributions to Brazilian education.

The following databases were consulted for the literature review: SciELO, CAPES Periodicals, Cochrane Systematic Reviews, Latin American and Caribbean Literature on Health Sciences (LILACS), Digital Library of Theses and Dissertations, Google Scholar, Ido Movement for Culture - Journal of Martial Arts Anthropology, Qualis Periodicals, Archives of Budo, Archives of Budo Science of Martial Arts and Extreme Sports and the Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) database. The criteria use to select the documents from the databases were the following: 1) The manuscript included the keyword budō as an exact term; 2) the title, abstract and keywords also included the term budō; 3) Only the documents that were published in Portuguese, English and Spanish were selected to be analyzed due to the language limitation of the researchers; 4) the documents that did not contextualize budō, its historical, cultural and philosophical process, or only defined it as the “way of the warrior” were excluded. The documents collected from the databases and the information gathered through the interviews were analyzed in accordance with the approach of the discourse analysis by Michel Foucault (1996).

Results

Eleven Brazilian aikido teachers, who ranged in age from 38 to 62 years old were interviewed. Their professions are related to the following areas: physical education, administration, medicine, integrative and complementary health therapies and practices, geology, civil service, public education, and public security. Regarding how they started at aikido, they reported that they had sought by themselves a space to practice martial arts, even though it was not necessarily aikido. They also mentioned the influence of other people – friends and family –, and the media, with fight movies and magazines of the time, as reasons why they felt compelled to practice aikido.

The teachers interviewed stated that before aikido, they had practiced *judo*, *karate*, *kung fu*, *kwang-do*, *full-contact*, *Hawaiian kenpo*, *jiu-jitsu*, *capoeira*, and other sports, such as swimming, running, and rowing. Most of them had had contact with martial arts during their childhood and adolescence, some of them

had had contact with martial arts only during adulthood and only a few had not had any previous contact before they started at aikido.

When we asked them about the meaning of the expression “martial arts”, the answers revealed three categories: An art of living, a path and a fighting system for self-defense and combat.

Table 1

Categories present in the interviews about the expression Martial Arts.

	Categories	Reports
1	An art of living	T1, T2, T4, T6, T7, T8, T10.
2	A path (of austere training, to unite mind-body-spirit, of self-development, of improving relationships with oneself and with others)	T1, T3, T5, T7, T11.
3	A fighting system, a self-defense and combat system, the Western derivation of Mars (God of War)	T3, T5, T6, T7, T9, T10, T11.

(Source: Elaborated by the authors).

As far as the discourses that permeate the concept of budō are concerned, from the teachers’ interviews we highlight the following keywords:

Table 2

Keywords in the teachers’ discourses about budō.

	Keywords	Interviewee
1	Love	T8
2	Improvement (asceticism, personal refinement, truth to self)	T1, T2, T6 e T10.
3	Learning (Values and Virtues)	T2, T5, T9 e T11.
4	Self-Knowledge (inner strength, self-balance, body control, emotional control)	T2, T3, T4, T5, T6, T7 e T10.
5	Bushido (<i>bujutsu</i> , samurai)	T1, T2, T4, T5 e T9.
6	Martial Path Collective Development / Society	T1, T2, T4, T7, T9, T10 e T11.

7	Collective Development / Society	T2, T5, T6, T8 e T11.
8	Spirituality (Spirit, Spiritual Body)	T5 e T6
9	Happiness	T8.
10	Freedom	T2 e T8.
11	Manifestation of Life (living well and better)	T3, T4, T5, T6, T8, T9, T10 e T11.
12	Relationship with Nature/Universe/Divine	T3, T6 e T7.
13	Religion	T5.

(Source: Elaborated by the authors).

To conduct the analysis in the literature review, 104 studies were initially selected in the first step. The inclusion criterion considered the documents which included the term budō, which contextualized the term beyond the expression “the way of the warrior” and which accompanied the term with a conceptual and/or historical in-depth description. After applying the selection criteria, 44 studies were included in the second step.

Table 3

Documents included in the literature review in steps 1 and 2 in accordance with the selection criteria.

Search	Step 1	Step 2
SciELO	3	2
CAPES Periodicals	0	0
LILACS	7	4
Digital Library of Theses and Dissertations	11	2
Google Scholar	48	17
Ido Movement for Culture - Journal of Martial Arts Anthropology	4	4
Archives of Budo	24	11
Archives of Budo Science of Martial Arts and Extreme Sports	3	1
ERIC	4	3
TOTAL	104	44

(Source: Elaborated by the authors).

Table 4 references the documents included in the review organized by databases:

Table 4

Table of documents included in the literature review.

Source	Authors
SciELO	Martins & Kanashiro (2010), Mori & Oliveira (2019).
LILACS	Coelho et al., (2019), Espartero et al., (2011), Lage & Goncalves (2007), Sousa (2013).
Digital Library of Theses and Dissertations	Farias (2009), Fernandes (2011).
Google Scholar	Matsui et al. (2015), Sato (2017), Villamón et al. (2004), Cynarski & Obodynski (2007), Rogers (1989), Vila (2013), Dodd & Brown (2016), Honda (2003), Fujita (2018), Raman (2018), Weinberger (2008), Sato & Inoue (2019), Taisuke (2020), Robert (2015), Bonomo (2009), Edinborough (2011), Rafolt (2014).
Ido Movement for Culture - Journal of Martial Arts Anthropology	Light (2014), Nakiri (2015), Piwowarski (2019), Tomas and Saragoca (2018).
ERIC	Brawdy (2001), Choo & Jewel (2002), Miller-Lane (2001).
Archives of Budo Science of Martial Arts and Extreme Sports	Kalina & Barczynski (2013)
Archives of Budo	Sasaki (2006), Sasaki (2008), Tokarski (2006), Sikorski (2008), Kalina & Barczynski (2008), Kalina & Barczynski (2010), Barczynski et al., (2009), Shishida (2010), Tai (2015), Franco & Mendes (2019), Morvay-Sey et al., (2019).

(Source: Elaborated by the authors).

The connection between spirituality and budō is one of the most studied topics in the selected documents. The analysis reflects that this is due to various elements that have been incorporated into budō from religious and philosophical bases such as Buddhism, Shintoism, and Confucianism. Spirituality and spiritual values appear in the following documents:

Table 5

Documents that include spirituality as an inherent theme.

Authors
Mori & Oliveira (2019), Matsui et al. (2015), Sasaki (2008), Kalina & Barczynski (2008), Franco & Mendes (2019), Villamon, Brown, Espartero et al. (2004), Cynarski & Obodynski (2007), Dodd & Brown (2016), Piwowarski (2019), Robert (2015), Brawdy (2001), Choo & Jewel (2002), Miller-Lane (2001), Weinberger (2008), Bonomo (2009).

(Source: Elaborated by the authors).

Budō as a way of living is discussed in the studies identified in Table 6:

Table 6

Documents discussing budō as a way of living

Authors
Sasaki (2006), Sasaki (2008), Franco & Mendes (2019), Cynarski & Obodynski (2007), Espartero et al., (2011), Robert (2015), Nakiri (2015), Tomas and Saragoca (2018), Lage & Goncalves (2007), Brawdy (2001), Miller-Lane (2001), Weinberger (2008), Farias (2009), Fernandes (2011).

(Source: Elaborated by the authors).

The link between budō and Education, specifically between budō and physical education can be observed in the studies identified in table 7:

Table 7

Documents discussing budō and its relationship with education and physical education.

-	Education	Physical education
Authors	Martins & Kanashiro (2010)	Honda (2003)
	Sato (2017)	Nakiri (2015)
	Piwowarski (2019)	Robert (2015)
	Robert (2015)	Sasaki (2006)
	Choo & Jewel (2002)	Kalina & Barczynski (2008)
	Sikorski (2008)	Franco & Mendes (2019)
	Cynarski & Obodynski (2007)	
	Honda (2003)	
	Kalina & Barczynski (2013)	
	Franco & Mendes (2019)	
	Dodd & Brown (2016)	
	Rafolt (2014)	

(Source: Elaborated by the authors).

Discussion

The Japanese martial arts are practices that were “initially intended to improve the military education of warriors” (Frederic, 2008, p. 89). However, during the post-war period in the 20th century, martial arts were transformed into sports. The title “martial arts”, in Japanese *Bugei*, comprises physical aspects (*waza*), a moral discipline (*do, michi*), the arts of defense, and values such as fear control, self-control, and character development of traits such as benevolence (*kokoro, shin*) (Frederic, 2008). To the above definition we can add the concepts provided by the teachers interviewed. For example, T7 stated that martial arts are “an instrument that apparently, superficially, is just forging your body, helping you sweat and teaching you a defense, leading you to internal situations of perception, of paradigm shifts, of self-knowledge that surprises you at every moment”.

From the above, Budō can also be defined as a way of living and educating the body in movement. Budō is a physical culture covered by a character of spirituality which, according to Robert (2015), is thought to promote stillness and a modest lifestyle aimed at enabling athletes to know themselves. Robert also affirms that the spiritual values inscribed in the budō practices are the following: the formation of the right character, of the spirit of justice, courage, persistence, goodwill, compassion, courtesy, sincerity, honesty, honor, fidelity, self-control, wisdom, a sense of duty, and preparation for death.

Budō includes techniques of the self-development spirituality, which are supported by the imperative of self-care and are defined within the aesthetics of existence or as a way of living. This subject is also discussed by Foucault in the *History of Sexuality* collection and in the *Hermeneutics of the Subject*.

On the relationship among subjection, asceticism, and morality, Foucault (2021) points out that there is no moral action without implications in the subject for the modes of subjection, and of the subject for his constitution and realization of the practices of the self on which these modes rely. In the context of budō, the notion of *Sei Shin Tanren* can be viewed as the student’s attitude in spontaneously submitting himself to the process of becoming spiritually forged (Brawdy, 2001).

The practices performed in budō as a way of life can be understood as forms of subjectivity production, of subjectivation. In the context of budō, the practices of self-knowledge are the primary goal. T10 stated that practicing budō means using a martial art with the goal of “finding yourself, finding your truth, being better than yesterday, more and more, every day, with every training, every technique,

every contact with people. Improve a little bit more, a little bit more, improve yourself a little bit more”.

Self-knowledge appears in the studies of Sousa and Robert. According to Sousa (2013), Eastern martial arts are “allied to a set of philosophical practices, being strongly influenced by religion, which sustained from morality and laws to social stratification and hierarchy” (p. 335).

In our study, besides being body practices, the martial ways are understood as tools. In the words of Foucault (2010), for the Greeks the term *paraskeue* meant an equipment that allows the subject to perform his asceticism, that is, his transformation in ethos, in his way of being through the incorporation of the true discourses that are based on moral behaviors. In T7's account, the discourse of budō is intertwined with his life: “it is when you are walking a journey in a free, spontaneous, disciplined way and there is no way you can ever be out of it. You are living it 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. It's all the time, no slack, no slack”.

Asceticism, in Foucault (2014), “comprises a certain number of exercises, in which the subject puts himself in a situation to verify whether or not he is able to face events and use the discourses with which he is armed” (p. 282). Regarding asceticism, we highlight the study by Cynarski & Obodynski (2007) that addresses the expansion of the concept of budō in its meanings and functions by Jigoro Kano, Gichin Funakoshi, and Morihei Ueshiba, in the sense of elevating health, internal harmony, morality, ascetic form of education and psychosomatic training.

Budō is considered an art of living or life for fostering an ideal of honest and fair living, or at the very least, based on principles, such as stopping violence, promoting peace, mastering the ego, and being master of oneself. Other studies reinforce this personal development perspective, such as Brawdy (2001), Martins & Kanashiro (2010), Miller-Lane (2001), Morvay-Sey et al., (2019), Sasaki (2008), Taisuke (2020), Piwowski (2019), Robert (2015), Bonomo (2009) and Edinborough (2011).

The budō way of life enables its practitioners to know and improve themselves, either physically, emotionally, or spiritually through ethical practices? Through ethics? This is corroborated in the interview of T4, when he said that “budō still symbolizes this, that it is a practice for the rest of life. You don't have a point to reach. It is a continuous practice that will always yield results as long as you practice”.

The concept of aesthetics of existence considers life as a work of art, and it refers us to the care of the self. We find here arguments to think that martial arts are a device, in the sense of a bio-aesthetics, which consider experience and life as a work of art (Bentes, 2010). This means that they are arts whose spiritual values are codified in techniques, spaces, rituals, in the relationships between master and disciple and in other subjects to promote a way of living the body. According to Bentes (2010), based on Foucault's thought, bio-aesthetics is a “moment of experimentation of biopower itself and its counterfeiting to biopolitics, seeking to invent new forms of sociability, new forms of post-disciplinary and biopolitical life”. We can say that Bentes’ statement reinforces our argument because budō is a way to educate the body and, at the same time, enabling the subject to realize, through the techniques of the self, what has been institutionalized to free himself.

The principle of self-care, the basis of budō’s education, points to important work to make self-care (*epimeleia heautoû*) a condition that modifies the pedagogical relationship and reconfigures it into a lifelong occupation of self-learning (Carvalho, 2014). T11 states that budō education is complex, it does not segment the subject into dualities such as body or intellect, theory or practice. In his conception, “budō is a way to educate, but it is a way to educate not only a part of the individual, not only the theory, only intellect, it educates the body, it educates behavior, the way the person behaves with others, within a group, with society.” Governing oneself and the others in budō can be interpreted as similar to the concept of *Ningen-Kesei*, or self-improvement (Morvay-Sey et al., 2019).

The educational model called *Shu-ha-ri* is linked to body practices and focuses on students and their internal processes, such as perception, ruptures, breaks, overcoming, and learning the technical aspects of the model (Espartero et al., 2011). We perceive that physical education is the field of research and action that enables us to apply the principles of budō as a practice in the art of living.

Our understanding of physical education is based on Mendes (2007). He considers that such education entails “the art of taking care of the body, health, and life. For this, body practices are necessary, such as games, dances, gymnastics, sports, and in our case, fights, different forms of *tekhne*, as in the Greek sense, of subjectivity production through the experiences of self-techniques” (p. 133-134). This understanding of physical education, as a work of art, is capable of “awakening creation, without having the intention of dominating human beings” (Mendes, 2007, p. 134), and, as a dialogical educational process, values subjectivity in the construction of knowledge.

We defend that education should have a framework of working on oneself as the education of the body in movement offered by budō. The educational system of budō is described by Sato & Inoue (2019) as a philosophy that makes it tangible to have sensations of fruitful ideas through the body in movement. They emphasize on the fact that the body seeks pleasure by avoiding discomfort, which teaches the body to empirically be sensitized to discomfort through movement.

As far as the master/disciple relationship is concerned, it is not a teaching relationship of discovery and reinvention. The role of the teacher is to stimulate the student to think with his own body. The teaching environment of aikido tends to be of a silent practice, and transmission/learning is done through the attitude defined as *ishin denshin*, a notion of Buddhist origin that means transmission from spirit to spirit or from heart to heart (Espartero et al., 2011; Brawdy, 2001). For T11, “this hierarchical relationship doesn't change in this sense. The teacher is always aware that he has to direct the student, but aware that maybe by observing the student he will understand some things in another way and learn other things” (T11). The master/disciple relationship is considered essential within martial arts and *budō*.

On the topic of mastery, in Foucault (2010, 2012), we come across the figure of Socrates as the director of consciousness. Amid the discussions of the care of the self, we see that the master is the one who incites others to take care of themselves, they are mediators of the individual's relationship with himself in constituting an ethical subject.

Budō education is always experienced by the body through many different elements. As Silva (2016) argues, the master/disciple relationship is influenced by tradition. Whether it be orally, by commands, in silence or gestures, tradition is manifested through the education that takes place in the experience as learning culture. As the master allows the student to be free to occupy himself, or rather, to occupy himself in order to be free, the cultural transition is made and the disciple, nevertheless, no longer imitates his master. Thus, he takes his place in this context of tradition and in its maintenance. The path is a search for one's own truth and happiness, as T7 points out: “We are working on our inner self, collaborating, so that conflicts may have a solution, so that people may reach happiness.”

Conclusions

The interviews and the literature review conducted for this research revealed that Aikido is an ascetic format of constitution and a mode of subjection that constitutes the moral subject. The practices that are present in aikido are linked to a diversity of themes, but are centered on the idea of knowing oneself, self-improvement, and the interaction of the subject with himself and society.

When we state that budō is the imperative of aikido, we are considering the set of rules and values that foster budō as a way of living. That is, as the aesthetic of existence intertwined in aikido and in several other martial arts. This paper has allowed us to define that aikido is a form of education of the body in movement.

Budō is a way to live and educate the body. This thesis was affirmed as we achieved our goal of identifying the meaning of budō from the speeches of aikido teachers and as we understood it from solid theoretical and philosophical bases, such as the aesthetics of existence, spirituality, education from self-care and care of the other. The literature review that we conducted, which allowed us to define the concepts above, was an arduous and extensive task, due to the complexity of the term, its historical context, its sociocultural representativeness in Japan, and the conceptual contradictions we encountered along the way.

The concept of art appears throughout this research in the teachers' interviews and in the authors' reflections in more than one sense. One of them is the idea of drawing from within, of exposing subjectivity, uniqueness, externalizing the creativity of practitioners and materializing it in the world through movement. Another meaning comes from the idea of practicing a craft, of working incessantly towards perfection. A third meaning is linked to the notion of life, an art of living that is based on the practices that constitute the subject and express their values and behaviors in their way of being.

To build such aesthetic of existence demands that the subject delivers its very being, in an ethical occupation with himself. To recognize his limitations and work to overcome them and to improve himself and, thus, better fulfill his role in society. Benefiting himself and others. Due to their assertiveness, commitment, decision-making capacity, and respect for others, it is not rare to find practitioners in positions or situations of group leadership.

From the literature reviewed and the interviews conducted, we can state that there is no separation between budō and life, they are one and the same. Budō is aimed at uniting body, spirit, and world. The ascetic practices highlighted in this article

show an aesthetic of their own, which is also part of a specific movement in aikido: stretching, meditation, weapon techniques, fall techniques, and etiquette and order rituals that can be done individually or collectively. It is from these that we can clearly point out that it is in the daily performance of these techniques of the self that spirituality is manifested.

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