

# THE ROLE OF TEACHERS IN MARSHAL ARTS

**Nebojša Vasić**

University of Zenica, Pedagogical Faculty, Bosnia and Herzegovina

*Professional paper*

## Abstract

The role of teachers in marshal arts is determined by the philosophical and spiritual eastern traditions which essential ideas are incorporated in the various forms of fighting styles; particularly in aikido and tai-chi. The quintessence of traditional marshal arts is reflected in the sophisticated ethical values such as tolerance, kindness and non-violence. The teachers or marshal art instructors convey the spirit of harmony and serenity with "meditation in movement" (kata, kumite, kihon) by insisting on the development of "inner wisdom" and "inner energy". The unity of softness and strength (yin and yang) is one of the central ideas which comprises both spirit and body and is never reduced to a sheer muscular force, which is symbolized by springy branches and flexibility of seemingly weak forms of life. Namely, softness is the sign of life while rigidity is the sign of death; therefore the true nature of bushido is gradually revealed in the contemplation of dynamic equilibrium or "the immovable centre". Marshal art teachers are those who follow the ancient ethical principles and emanate the spirit of reconciliation and harmony. The external form of marshal arts could be misleading for those who do not understand the ultimate goal of all traditional fighting styles; personal development and enlightenment of the invincible way of the warrior of peace.

**Key words:** empty hand, yield, kindness, celestial wisdom, non-negotiable principles, aikido, karate, judo, tai-chi, moral strength, flexibility, deadly weapon, tolerance, true meaning, imaginary opponents, softness, meditation in movement, meekness, etymology.

*To practice properly Aikido, you must:  
Calm the spirit and return to the source.*

*Cleanse the body and spirit by removing all malice, selfishness, and desire.*

This topic is related to the concept of teaching (coaching) in marshal arts according to the ancient traditional eastern values which are still alive in the modern strategy of transmitting ethics and techniques in karate. Before defining the fundamental teaching principles in marshal arts we should analyse the notion (etymology) of karate. Strictly speaking, karate means "empty hand" or the naked body used as the mighty weapon. Karate is developed in the Ryukyu Islands (Okinawa, Japan) from autochthonous fighting methods as a powerful marshal art using kicking, punching, elbow strikes, knee, head and open-handed techniques such as knife-hands (fingers), locks, grappling, throws, restraints as well as vital point strikes. Karate is consisted of two words and, loosely translated; *kara* means "empty" while *te* means "hand" (in other words fighting with bare hands and feet). Consequently, the core principle is to turn the body into an effective (even deadly) weapon. Karate is nowadays regarded as a sport<sup>1</sup> and a self-defense system depending on the emphasis of certain karate schools and their ethical or philosophical values. Some coaches or instructors insist on traditional approaches, which encapsulates primarily ethical principles and precisely defined movements (such as the

fighting with imaginary opponents – *kata*<sup>2</sup>), while others focus more on competitions – or karate as a sport. Apart from that rather rigorous distinction there is also so-called "holistic approach" which comprises both competitive and traditional aspects.

Karate in more flexible and overwhelming meaning covers almost all traditional eastern marshal arts such as; aikido, tae kwon-do, ju-jitsu, judo, kung fu, tai chi and Shinto ryu. Namely, these schools of marshal art share the same outlining principle – fighting with bare hands and feet ("empty hand"). We will mention only essential features of various marshal arts which make them unique; aikido<sup>3</sup> uses the power of the circular or spiral movements and the ability to use an attacker's force as a source of effective self-defence techniques, tae kwon-do is the Korean marshal art which emphasis is on high kicking



AIKIDO

<sup>1</sup> It is understandable that traditional concept of marshal arts is not a kind of sport, but *the way of life* which spirit cannot be reduced to modern competitions. This is the frequent source of misinterpretations of the core values of eastern marshal arts.

<sup>2</sup> The first movement in karate is not attack but defense – which transmits the idea of the non-violence nature of marshal arts.

<sup>3</sup> Aikido is possibly the most sophisticated form of marshal arts – see more in the original teachings of its charismatic founder Morihei Ueshiba (*The Art of Peace*).

techniques, ju-jitsu as one of the oldest marshal arts insists on evasions, blockings, throws and strangleholds, judo bases its fundamental techniques on balance and disequilibrium (imbalance), Chinese kung fu as possibly the most esoteric and intriguing art is mainly inspired by animal movements, tai-chi uses two crucial polarities (*yin* and *yang*) in its meditative forms for health and well-being and Shinto-ryu as the form of powerful self-defense in everyday situations (a real-life context).

The role of teachers (instructors or coaches) in marshal arts will be profoundly understood if we clarify the gist of marshal art philosophy. Therefore we will expand the meaning of the most prominent marshal arts in order to realize the role of marshal art instructors, particularly in aikido and tai-chi. Aikido has been treated as one of the most sophisticated and subtle marshal art which is an effective discipline for the development, utilization and integration of all man's spiritual, mental and physical powers. Under careful scrutiny aikido is revealed as a way of integration (inner balance), what is confirmed by its etymology; "method or way (*do*) for the coordination or harmony (*ai*) of mental energy or spirit (*ki*)". Purely in its practical aspect aikido is an art of self-defense with predominance of references to *ki*<sup>4</sup> ("inner energy") as the mystical form of energy to be employed. *Ki* or "inner energy" differs from western psychological notions of "will power", the "will to live" etc., in other words it is mental as opposed to physical in the restricted Occidental sense of mental power which center (or the seat) is a point approximately two inches below the navel. In aikido the fusion of body and soul is one of the central ideas which implies much more than the muscle power. Aikido is based on necessity of self-defense actions (reactions) against an unjustified attack with substantial ethical considerations and non-negotiable principles. The principles of moral strength (ethical principles) are derived from the ancient religious and metaphysical traditions (Shintoism, Confucianism, Taosim and Buddhism)<sup>5</sup>. The behaviour and manners of aikido student in the *dojo* (gymnastic hall) is prompted by deep reverence for the place, for the fellow-students and for the instructors who transmit the celestial wisdom in the form of marshal arts. We will better understand the philosophy of aikido with the symbol of the classic Chinese *yin* and *yang*

icon as the symbolical insight into the dynamic union of the complementary opposites which govern all phenomena in the universe. The black dot in the white half and the white dot in the black half are designed to hint all of life and nature is in perpetual (incessant) state of flux. The complementary opposites are not advocates for shallow eclecticism or devaluation of clearly distinguished moral virtues – as it is often misinterpreted. In more pragmatic sense it means that if you are attacked by a force (*yang*) and you apply the same force (*yang* again), a clash of energies results in disharmony and mutual injuries in which more powerful force wins. Aikido is a discipline that tends not to confront violence with violence, which means that a sheer force (*yang*) should be met by "inner force" or *yin*. Aikido is not only an effective system of self-defense, it is (above all) a means of self-cultivation, improvement and enlightenment (mediation in movement). Instructors or coaches are inspired by the charismatic founder of aikido who cherished the spiritual beliefs of non-violence (*ahimsa*), universal values and the final goal – illumination of the individual self.



**Morihei Ueshiba** – the founder of Aikido

<sup>4</sup> *Ki* is gradually developed through rigorous training and secret techniques (breathing, meditation, special diet, the energy of Sun etc.)

<sup>5</sup> Without deep insight into the eastern spiritual paths the essence of marshal arts is elusive and full of paradoxes. We must seriously study the eastern mind if we want to grasp the ultimate meaning of marshal arts.

From the perspective of true meaning of marshal arts we gradually gain deep understanding of the principle roles of marshal art instructors. Therefore we will continue on with the analyses of the most prominent schools of self-defense disciplines, such as tai-chi which is an ancient meditative form of physical and spiritual exercise that began in China as a martial art. It has developed over the centuries and nowadays it is practiced by millions of people all over the globe to improve and maintain their spiritual and physical health. Tai-chi (like aikido and other traditional marshal arts) is more than just a physical exercise – it represents a way of life and it reflects deep insight into human nature. This peculiar marshal art is easily recognized by its graceful and captivating movements which increase our energy, reduce stress levels, improve concentration and foster inner balance (serenity). The initial noticeable benefit is usually feeling of relaxation, well-being and attentiveness. Tai-chi instructors insist on regular (daily) practice as the key to an unstoppable progress allowing your Tai-chi to be relaxed and flowing. We can easily deduce that the principal aim of tai-chi is to teach the disciple to unwind and get the state of “undisturbed mind” or “relaxed attentiveness”. Relaxation in tai-chi leads to usage of the mind and body as efficiently as possible without wasting precious energy in trivial and unnecessary movements. Our mind becomes more tolerant and calmer – thus able to cope more efficiently with daily challenges. Tai-chi instructors emanate this positive energy and fortify the inner strength which is flexible and therefore much more durable than typical western rigidity. Moreover, the softness of inner power is mightier than mere physical strength which naturally dissipates and fades away through time. Tai-chi is also referred to as an internal kung fu because of its emphasis on the internal aspects of body and mind (breathing, flexibility, serenity) – as opposed to external tension, muscular strength and typical detachment of analytical mind.

Apart from the peculiar features of various marshal arts it is relevant to clarify the connection between zen<sup>6</sup> philosophy and traditional ways of the eastern self-defense strategies and concepts. Zen (as the ancient spiritual way of Buddhism) promotes deeper comprehension of the instructor's roles in marshal arts. By reading and thinking about zen we become more aware what is expected from marshal art instructors and which roles of marshal art instructors are

the most significant when it comes to practical teaching and acquiring “divine wisdom”. Zen insists on an unmistakable impression of the deepest calmness and kindness, even to the point of being misunderstood as pathetic, sappy or sentimental. Zen masters (like master of marshal arts) are characterized by the immovable equanimity and boundless compassion combined with a vigorous vitality symbolized by the force of storm and lightning. Zen contributed to the development of deadly marshal art techniques and to the stern principle of bushido – the Samurai's code of chivalry. We can anticipate seemingly paradoxical nature of zen in the fusion of the peace of Nirvana with the brutality of unleashed physical force and the common tasks of everyday life. Let us quote Takuan<sup>7</sup>:

*What is most important is to acquire a certain mental attitude known as “immovable wisdom”...“Immovable” does not mean to be stiff and heavy and lifeless as a rock or piece of wood. It means the highest degree of mobility with a center which remains immovable. The mind then reaches the highest point of alacrity ready to direct its attention anywhere it is needed...There is something immovable within, which, however, moves along spontaneously with things presenting themselves before it. The mirror of wisdom reflects them instantaneously one after another, keeping itself intact and undisturbed.”*

Although ju-jutsu or judo means literally “the gentle art” its philosophy becomes visible in powerful even frightening deadly force which is inspired by the principle of defeating one's opponent by yielding to him and using his strength. The origins of the non-violent response is found in the philosophy of *wu-wei*<sup>8</sup> which is, according to legend, first revealed through observing the snow fall on the tree branches. While rigid and thick branches crack beneath snow, thin and flexible (springy) branches simply yield and throw snow to the ground without being damaged (broken or bent to the point of breaking). The “submissiveness” of young and flexible branches (more likely twigs) could be misleading; namely the strength of rigidity is the “symptom of death”, while freshness of green branches symbolizes the invincible power of life. Thus Lao Tzu says: *Man at his birth is tender and weak; at his death he is rigid and strong...Thus rigidity and strength are the concomitants of*

<sup>6</sup> Zen is typical for Japanese mind – it reflects the suddenness and spontaneity “miles away” from classical western tradition of analytic mind, scientific observations and philosophical verbosity.

<sup>7</sup> Alan W. Watts, (1958), *The Spirit of Zen*, Grove Press, New York (page 105)

<sup>8</sup> *Wu-wei* means „non-resistance” – which is not a sheer submissiveness or passivity, but the highest form of harmony between micro and macro cosmos.

*death; softness and weakness are the concomitants of life."*

We should never underrate the strength which appears as the weakness in the eyes of "street wisdom". The mundane philosophy is the perverted form of divine wisdom; therefore – where ancient sages find the highest form of celestial knowledge the blindness of the worldly people finds vulnerability and feeble-mindedness. Such is the ontological gap between perennial philosophy of marshal arts and the triviality of the earthly mind.

The perfection of marshal arts is in the following; the more force one uses to in attempt to defeat a master, the more one is likely to be hurt. This reminds us on the elusive substance of water; the faster we try to grab water, the faster it leaks through our fingers. Master of marshal arts makes himself as elusive as water, he does not hesitate for a moment but yields, evades and vanishes from the line of attacks – which disappears in the emptiness of superior mind and loses strength all in vain.

Let us quote marshal arts experts in order to understand the essence:

*"I fear not the man who has practiced 10,000 kicks once, but I fear the man who has practiced one kick 10,000 times."* (Bruce Lee)

*"You may train for a long time, but if you merely move your hands and feet and jump up and down like a puppet, learning Karate is not very different from learning a dance. You will never have reached the heart of the matter; you will have failed to grasp the quintessence of karate-do."* (Gichin Funakoshi)

*"To win one hundred victories in one hundred battles is not the highest skill. To subdue the enemy without fighting is the greatest skill."* (Sun Tsu)

*"You are here for no other purpose than to realize your inner divinity and manifest your innate enlightenment. Foster peace in your own life and then apply the Art to all that you encounter."* (Morihei Ueshiba)

All we have said so far leads to the most essential role of marshal art instructors; it is to convey the message of peace, tolerance, reconciliation and harmony through rigorous training, reflections and meditation. The idea of eternal wisdom is hidden in the abundant forms of various marshal art traditions and one needs time and lucidity to decode the cryptic nature of seemingly aggressive ways of dealing with potential physical confrontations. The core of marshal arts is moral strength and marshal art teachers are responsible for transmitting the true (non-violent) nature of *bushido*. All visible forms

of fighting, *kata*, *kihon* and *kumite*<sup>9</sup> signify the philosophy of marshal arts which has nothing in common with the stereotype of bullies and bloody combats in which all lose. The nobility of karate is thus the divine vocation of marshal art instructors, displayed in their ordinary life, in simplicity as the sign of true wisdom. The calmness, serenity and amiability, the need to forgive insults and find peaceful solutions is the greatest achievement in all marshal arts. If we all understand that we cannot hurt anyone without hurting ourselves than there is a hope that the true spirit of *bushido* will prevail – against all odds, obstacles, ignorance and prejudice. Those who could kill easily with one blow, who know the secret of vulnerable points, who are able to mutilate and paralyze with one finger are overfilled with gentleness – they treat everyone with honest respect, their kindness is iconic and they do everything to avoid conflicts, confrontations and fighting. The one who understands the kindness, submissiveness and meekness of best marshal art instructors will answer with benign smile – they know the truth behind words, they grasped the meaning of marshal arts, they deserve to be called teachers. No one else.



**Funakoshi Gichin** – the founder of modern karate



The symbol of shoto-kan  
**(the tiger in the cage)**  
**The image of self-discipline**

<sup>9</sup> *Kata* is an imaginary battle (or fighting), *kihon* is strictly controlled practice (attack and defense), while *kumite* is a free fighting.

## ULOGA UČITELJA U BORILAČKIM SPORTOVIMA

Stručni rad

### Sažetak

Uloga učitelja u borilačkim vještinama je uslovljena drevnim istočnjačkim filozofskim i duhovnim tradicijama čije su suštinske ideje inkorporirane u različitim formama borilačkim školama, posebno u aikidou i tai-čiu. Najdublja bit borilačkih vještina je izražena u profinjenim etičkim vrijednostima kao što su; tolerancija, ljubaznost i nenasilje. Učitelji borilačkih vještina, pomoću "meditacije u pokretu" (kata, kihon i kumite), prenose duh harmonije i dubokog smirenja insistirajući na razvijanju "unutarnje mudrosti" i "unutarnje energije". Jedinstvo mekoće i snage (jin i jang) je jedna od osnovnih ideja (borilačkih vještina) koja obuhvata duh i tijelo i koja se nikada ne može reducirati na nivo isključivo fizičke snage – što je simbolizirano slikom elastične grančice i fleksibilnošću prividno slabih formi života. Nježnost je znak života dok je rigidnost znak smrti i zato se istinski duh ratnika (bushido) postepeno otkriva u kontemplaciji "dinamične harmonije" ili "nepokretnog centra". Učitelji borilačkih vještina slijede drevne etičke principe i oni emaniraju duh pomirenja i harmonije. Vanjska forma borilačkih vještina može zavarati one koji ne razumiju konačni cilj tradicionalnih istočnjačkih škola borenja; razvoj ličnosti i prosvjetljenje nepobjedivog puta "ratnika mira".

### LITERATURE:

1. Fay Goodman (2010). *The Ultimate Book of Marshal Arts*, Hermes House, London.
2. Gičin Funakoši (1988). *Karate-do, moj životni put*, PANPUBLIK, Beograd.
3. Graham Bryant & Lorraine James (2006). *Simply Tai Chi*, Hinkler Books, Australia.
4. John Little (2007). *Bruce Lee – umjetnik života*, biblioteka OSOBA, Zagreb.
5. Lao Tzu (1997). *Tao Te Ching*, Wordsworth Editions Limited, Great Britain.
6. Westbrook, A. & O. Ratti (2001). *Aikido and the Dynamic Sphere*, Tuttle Publishing, Tokyo.
7. William Scot Wilson (2004). *The Lone Samurai*, Kodansha international, Japan.
8. Yamamoto Mishima (1985). *Samuraj*, biblioteka vid, Beograd.
9. Yamamoto Tsunemoto (2000). *Hagakure, The Book of the Samurai*, Kodansha international, Tokyo.
10. Yamamoto Tsunemoto (2001). *Bushido – The Way of Samurai*, Garden City Park, New York.

### Correspondence to:

Nebojša Vasić, PhD  
University of Zenica  
Pedagogical Faculty  
e-mail: neb.vasic@gmail.com

*Received: 17 September 2011*

*Accepted: 16 October 2011*