



Shibui

W.G. von Krenner

The Japanese have a special word to describe the bitter taste one experiences after biting into an unripe persimmon. This taste called Shibui, has a meaning far beyond taste.

Shibui sometimes translated as rustic simplicity or austere elegance. Shibui has long been associated with an intimate understanding of the truth and beauty that is the essence of Zen and Zen related arts. It is an aesthetic concept that rejects kitsch and tasteless elaboration.

Those of us who train to transcend ourselves and practice Aikido as a vehicle toward this goal should develop a understanding and familiarity with Shibui and things Shibui in order to grow and realize awareness of the true heart or “being suchness” of things.

To begin to understand this concept, we begin by looking at things outside the Dojo. The peaceful setting of Cha-no-yu, the Japanese tea ceremony is one of many Japanese arts where Shibui is the soul and spirit of the art.

During the turbulent years of the 17th century, when a Samurai was at the constant danger of death in battle it was in the austere practice of this ritual that he began to develop a deep appreciation for this enigmatic contradiction.

The utensils, especially the Chawan or tea bowl were chosen on their ability to best reflect the achievement of the state sought by the practice of the ceremony itself, Shibui and Zen.

To that end the best utensils have always been those whose feeling and look are best to encourage an atmosphere of calm serenity that will aid in the self separation from the negative and destructive outside world.

This aesthetic of the Shibui tea bowl can help us to identify our own path and the goal of training.

Those qualities and fundamentals which give the bowl its Shibui are the same things we should look for within the Do of Aikido.

The Chawan with Shibui has:

Simplicity

**Implicitness
Humility
Tranquility
Naturalness
Normality
Coarseness
Strength
Emptiness**

When we scrutinize the objectives of “the way” we find that there too, perfection can be measured by the same standards.

Look at the great masters and you will see that they demonstrate a life style that parallels the goal of the best Zen potters works.

They are recognized by their simple tastes and ways, shunning publicity preferring to be plain.

They are implicit - stressing inner meaning in themselves as well as recognizing the “suchness” of all things in the universe.

They are modest, never seeking credit or rewards for their helpfulness to others.

They revere silence and tranquility, finding these in a world where serenity and quietness are difficult to locate.

They lean toward natural things and actions, making them spontaneous people who do not live their lives mechanically.

They are normal in that they are content while moving about the commonplace without complaint.

They tend to be rough, yet at the same time refined, having human imperfections like the repairs in a tea bowl.

Finally, they are filled with a wondrous emptiness that enables them to absorb their world with an awareness that invites us to follow them.

They are warriors because they have defeated themselves and in doing so, have lost the need for further battles.

The observance or practice of any ritual without deep understanding of its aims is meaningless and without any value. Good Aikido and correct training holds out the promise of tranquility, precision, courtesy, dignity, awareness and selflessness. To gain these qualities we would do well to reflect on the tea bowl and great art, becoming Shibui ourselves.

This is the astringent taste of hard training, the nuance of restrained beauty in our art.