

How Yoseikan Can Make a Difference

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The Relevance of Martial Arts

We live in a confusing, frustrating and dangerous world. In the United States, from where I am writing this article, we have handguns, drug wars, gang violence, and we are at war in Afghanistan and Iraq. I am often asked, “How can you practice martial arts, when the whole world around you is so violent?” This is a good question to ask a pacifist such as myself and I have spent a great deal of time thinking about this very question

I have reached a few conclusions that I want to share with my fellow budoka. These conclusions are my own but I find them to be valid for me today and I teach it in my dojo, though probably too often for some of my students’ taste.

I will start with a bit of history from the life of the founder of Yoseikan, Minoru Mochizuki Sensei. During World War II, Master Mochizuki was sent to Inner Mongolia to govern as a foreign occupier of that country. It would have been easy to govern in a “martial law” fashion, with little flexibility, limited concern for the needs of the oppressed people and stern control of all situations. Anyone who might think that this was Master Minoru’s style does not know who the man was.

In fact, Master Minoru was a sensitive and forward looking governor during his time in China. In later years, he returned to visit China and when it was discovered who he was, there was a local celebration to honor him and his work. Most would agree that this is most unusual treatment for someone who was an uninvited conqueror of a country. In a violent world, a master martial artist acted with compassion and concern. This is truly the way of a martial artist and it is this attitude that provides the direction for this article.

Yoseikan and its Meaning

When I began the study of Yoseikan Budo several years ago, one of the first lessons I was taught in the dojo was that budo meant the way of putting an end to conflict. That has been the hallmark of my practice since, to end conflict. Yoseikan, as I learned in the dojo, means “the place where what is right (or true) is taught”. A better Western translation is that it is the “place where what is right for you” is taught. I learned early that Yoseikan Budo meant that as I practiced on the mat, I was to use Yoseikan knowledge and techniques in the way that worked best for me to stop the conflict. I also learned that Yoseikan Budo extended beyond the mat and into every aspect of my life. Wherever and whenever possible I am to use who I am (the best way for me) to put an end to conflict.

I believe that all Yoseikan practitioners have only to look at the above example, the life of Master Minoru Mochizuki, to see how the philosophy of Yoseikan is to be lived out on

and off of the mat. The world we live in today is crying out for people with the courage and conviction to be peacemakers to become involved and to act. In my own dojo, I teach my children's class that they are to be peacemakers as young representatives of Yoseikan Budo. For children, this means that they are to help themselves and their friends to avoid confrontation and conflict at school and at home. They are to be true practitioners of budo. In the following paragraphs I will attempt to explain why the principles that I think are relevant for Yoseikan practitioners and all sincere martial artists.

Basic Principles

Principle One - Understanding Violence and its Consequences

The first principle that is relevant to the Yoseikan practitioner is a deep understanding of violence and its consequences. From the very first day on the mat, the new student begins to experience violence first hand. It begins with ukemi (falling skills). In those first experiences of hitting the mat with your body, the student gets immediate feedback in a violent manner. Hands, hips, shoulders, even heads make contact with the mat and it feels violent and it hurts. If you do not learn how to do these falls properly, you will continue to experience the pain and, perhaps, injury. In the case of learning to fall, the student experiences violence that is their own doing. Violence can be a powerful teacher and change agent for the student.

As the student gains experience in falling and follows the teacher's instructions, falling ceases to be a violent experience. Violence always abates as knowledge and skills grow. In a sense, the student makes peace with the mat and with the idea of falling. Closely following this first experience with violence, the student begins to learn punches, kicks, throws (projections), and joint locks that can be very violent. As the student advances and he or she develops an appreciation of the danger that goes with these skills, the student wants to learn control the danger and violence. As their control increases, the amount of violence decreases. Students again learn that as knowledge and skill grow, violence is tempered.

The final or ultimate level of skill is achieved when, after long practice, the student learns that violence begins with the mere intention to do harm. This intention is recognizable long before any actual physical attack is launched. The aggressor's words, movements and body language all inform the skilled practitioner of the coming violence. The skillful student realizes that the desire to do violence is the first violent act and is as dangerous as any technique. The years of practice inform the practitioner of the probable outcome of violence. The lesson for the advanced student is to be vigilant and aware at all times of violence in all of its forms. It is only at this level that martial artists are capable of preventing violence.

In view of these above ideas, it is my belief that, since Yoseikan practitioners (and other martial artists as well) are the most knowledgeable about violence and the most experienced with its results, we all have an obligation to stop violence whenever we are

aware of its existence. We know people can get hurt, we know we can get hurt and we know that we possess the skills to prevent it. It is our obligation to accept the responsibility that accompanies this knowledge. We are responsible for avoiding conflict, controlling ourselves and assisting those who cannot stand for themselves.

Principle Two – Self control

The second principle a Yoseikan practitioner must understand is self-control. The ability to do great harm to another carries with it the responsibility to control ones mind, body and emotions. This control develops over time, based on good habits, diligent practice, and proper instruction. Instructors often joke that the most dangerous student is the beginner, but this is not a joke. The new student has no control, no experience, and no habits to rely on. It is only after the student learns an appreciation for the violence they are capable of that they can begin to learn and exhibit self-control.

Control begins as an external element. This means that the teacher must control the new student in all aspects of practice: body, mind and emotion. As the teacher gives the student consistent lessons over time, new habits are learned. At first the student does not understand why things are done a certain way, but as their skills and knowledge grow, so does their understanding. In the beginning the teacher does not allow the student to range too far from the basics but gradually, the teacher begins to let the student experience more and more in techniques and their application. Time teaches the student what they are capable of and this knowledge begins to temper the student. The student begins to show internal control and the teacher can allow the student to experience a wider range of techniques and tactics, with less concern for their safety and control.

As the student develops self-control, their skills improve more quickly. The ultimate expression of this skill can be found in kyoei randori. If you observe two of our highly skilled practitioners doing this randori, you can see that it is a calm and deliberate conversation. There is no time to think, you must rely on your habits, knowledge and self-control. The purpose of kyoei randori and of Yoseikan competition is to learn about oneself and to be able to control oneself.

The ability to control ones body, mind and emotion also involves appropriate self-knowledge. The student who is in control knows what they are capable of, knows their own limitations, know their own weaknesses and their own strengths. This is true self-control, true self-awareness. In the world we live in, the Yoseikan practitioner is responsible for controlling themselves in all areas of life. In a very true sense, the wise Yoseikan practitioner lives life as a continuous kyoei randori, always giving and receiving, always trying to find a balance of give and take and always seeking more self-control and self-awareness. We know what we can and cannot do, we know our limits and because we know ourselves in this way, we know the weaknesses of others. We know that people will want to be violent, self-centered and selfish. Our ability to control ourselves makes us responsible for being examples of this control. Self-control is the first and most important step in ending violence.

Principle Three – Defending the Defenseless

Why do we practice Yoseikan? Yes, we practice to develop ourselves physically, emotionally, and mentally. We practice in order to learn to control ourselves and to enjoy the fellowship of being with other people. There is something more, however. We learn in practice that we must protect the innocent or defenseless person as well. How do we do this? When you practice Yoseikan (or any martial art) you are responsible for your partner at all times. It takes no talent to throw your partner hard. The talent is shown when you can throw your partner effectively and softly. Even in competition, Master Kano's rule of jitakyoei applies: mutual benefit, mutual prosperity. When we throw our partner, we control their fall. This separates the skilled practitioner from the beginner. As one's skills improve, the responsibility for the opponent increases. A beginner cannot control what happens to their partner. The skilled person knows exactly where and how their partner will land and seeks to control the fall or technique.

Again we see that the ability to do harm (violence) to another person carries a powerful responsibility. In the real world, away from the mat, this responsibility continues. If we are attacked on the street, we have a right to defend ourselves but we do not have the right to inflict unnecessary damage on another human being. In this case, the attacker is in many ways defenseless. The attacker does not know what we are capable of and, therefore, does not know the danger they are in. If we are true to the idea of budo, we must do only what is necessary to stop the conflict. In the United States, there are many instances of a person defending themselves and then inflicting damage on the attacker and being charged with a crime as the result of their actions. In many of these cases, the judges find that the person with the skills to do violence to another person must demonstrate great control of themselves.

There is another aspect to this principle and that is the spirit and meaning of the word, budo. If we say we practice Yoseikan Budo, then we must take responsibility for the actions that are necessary to stop the conflict. The philosophy we train under demands that we defend the defenseless, that we be aware of danger and do our best to protect those who cannot protect themselves. This is the highest level of budo, of stopping the conflict. This was the dream of Morihei Ueshiba, that aikido was the way to teach peace throughout the world. The creator of Yoseikan Budo, Hiroo Mochizuki has discussed his belief that Yoseikan Budo can be a vehicle for bringing peace to the world. If every country had a Yoseikan Budo practitioner in it, how could we ever have a war? Would Yoseikan do violence to Yoseikan? The answer of course is no. This is one of the hopes for Yoseikan Budo, that we can bring peace to a world that desperately needs it. We must take budo seriously and this means defending the defenseless. This also means that we must recognize those who cannot defend themselves. The defenseless take many forms, people in poverty, people in war, people who are sick, and people who are hungry. You never know who is a Yoseikan practitioner when we are not wearing a uniform and every person can learn Yoseikan, we should treat them as potential students.

Principle Four – Be an agent of change

This fourth principle involves our responsibility to share what we know. Yes, we always want to find new students for Yoseikan. It is good to have new partners to practice with and new students to teach. Beyond finding new students though, we have a responsibility to share what we know with the world. I hear people speak of how much they love Yoseikan Budo and how much it has helped them. I see very few of these same people doing public demonstrations and recruiting new students. If we believe that Yoseikan Budo is a great martial arts system (as I do) then we have an obligation to introduce it to as many people as possible.

On the mat we are responsible for the students behind us (kohai) and to the students ahead of us (sempai). The students ahead of us need sincere partners to improve their skills. We are responsible for the growth of our teachers and those senior to us in Yoseikan Budo. We do this with our enthusiastic practice and diligent training. As we improve, those ahead of us are inspired to improve as well. The students who are behind us need our self-control and our ability to take care of our partner, in order for them to grow. Also, we learn to sacrifice our bodies to help our partners learn new techniques and refine old ones.

Beyond the mat, however, we must accept the responsibility for making a difference in our world. We should be making as much difference in the world around us as Yoseikan Budo has made in our individual lives. What does this mean? It means being a good family person and carrying out our responsibilities to our families. It means being a good boss or a good worker, to live by jitakyoei when we are at work. It means being a good citizen in our community and country. We should be involved in the world around us. We must be involved in the world around us if we are to be true to the spirit of Yoseikan Budo.

To truly be an agent for change in the world, we have to tell others what violence can do. We have to share our skills in avoiding and dealing with violence. We need to educate those around us about violence and how to stop it. We must be peace makers and have the courage to speak up in a world filled with violence. Within Yoseikan Budo, we do this by being good students and good teachers. Outside of Yoseikan Budo, we must be examples of non-violence, of true budo.

Conclusions

I have outlined my ideas as to what Yoseikan Budo practitioners are responsible for: understanding violence and its consequences, self-control, defending the defenseless, and being an agent for change in the world. I believe that these principles are at the heart and soul of the philosophy of Yoseikan Budo. Masters Minoru and Hiroo Mochizuki have given us all much more than a system of techniques. They have given us a blue print for how to conduct our lives on and off of the mat.

If we are to be true to what our founders have created then we must follow these principles. If Yoseikan Budo has truly helped us in our lives, then we are responsible to give back to Yoseikan Budo as much as it has given us. I believe it is possible to realize Master Hiroo Mochizuki's dream and the dream of Ueshiba Sensei, to live in a world of peace. It is our responsibility to be good students of Yoseikan Budo and to make a difference in the world. It could be true, that Yoseikan Budo would be in every country, and there could be no more wars, only peace. It is the duty of each Yoseikan practitioner to work toward this dream, first in your own life, then in the world right around you and then to a larger world.