

The Meaning of “Butoku” and the Origin of “Bu”

By Mitsuru Yoshiyama

There is a tendency in modern kendo for a kendo artist to repeatedly hit their opponent or to try to avoid being hit by their opponent. I have to wonder if this type of kendo is the true form of kendo which our ancestors accomplished. I would like to discuss how I believe true kendo should be practiced by studying the meaning of the Chinese character, or kanji, for “bu”, which is the origin of kendo, and also by studying the meaning of the kanji for “butoku”, which originated from the meaning of “bu”.

The kanji characters Japanese people use today are originally based on Chinese characters. By studying various types of literature about the meaning of “bu”, one learns that the meaning varies as well according to the era in which the literature was written.

For example, in China during the era “before Christ”, or B.C., “bu” meant “to defeat opponents with weapons”. However, around 600 B.C., around the time of the battle between the nations of “So” and “Shin”, a particular general argued that “bu” meant “to stop fighting with a shield”. On the other hand, some Japanese historians who study Chinese classics argue that based on the history of the kanji character itself, it is appropriate to think “bu” means “to march or advance with weapons”. Although, in spite of the true meaning of the character, some are of the opinion that the meaning of the character is “human will”, “the mind”, or “a spirit of bringing about peace”. As in this example, I would like you to understand that the meaning of a specific kanji can be defined based on the culture of each era or by individual opinion.

Secondly, I would like to discuss the meaning of the character “toku” from the perspective of Chinese Confucianism. Generally, “toku” in Confucianism consists of the five aspects of “jin”, “gi”, “rei”, “chi”, and “shin”. These are the aspects that many philosophers and religious leaders such as Moushi conceived. These five aspects can be translated as follows:

- Jin: the spirit to care about others
- Gi: the spirit to pursue justice
- Rei: the spirit to respect others
- Chi: the spirit to develop wisdom and wit
- Shin: the spirit to trust others

Confucianism teaches one to activate these five aspects in one’s daily life.

However, I doubt many pursuers of Budo can answer clearly and correctly the question, “What is the meaning of `toku`”? Perhaps this is because, like “bu”, the kanji

for “toku” was interpreted differently through out history. First of all, “toku” consists of two parts to its character form: “choku” and “shin”. “Choku” means “straight” and “shin” means “soul” or “spirit”. Therefore, it is not difficult to deduce the meaning as “to live with a straight spirit”.

Accordingly, “toku” can be summarized as follows:

- Jin: to have a straight soul to care about others
- Gi: to have a straight soul to pursue justice
- Rei: to have a straight soul to develop wisdom and wit
- Shin: to have a straight soul to trust others

This is the original meaning of “toku”, and it teaches one how to live a righteous life.

The argument so far is my own interpretation from studying an old Chinese literature called “Shinju Sashiden”, as well as the use of a standard Japanese dictionary. In “Shinju Sashiden”, there is also a definition for “butoku”. I would like to introduce another philosophical point based on my impressions after reading the various episodes in this old literature and would like to quote one episode.

“Buyu Shichi Toku” or “Butoku has seven virtues” :

1. People who master Budo can avoid violent disasters.
2. People who master Budo can avoid fighting.
3. People who master Budo can keep their own force or power because they do not have to fight.
4. People who master Budo can be accomplished or achieve because they know themselves well.
5. People who master Budo can help other people live peaceful lives because they know how to live peacefully.
6. People who master Budo can settle struggles and reconcile conflicts.
7. Therefore, people who master Budo can enrich people and nations.

The essence and meaning of Buyu Shichi Toku can be inspirational and offer spiritual guidance to national leaders as well as practitioners and students of Budo.

Therefore, if not only Budo followers, but also people around the world can understand and appreciate the meaning of these kanji characters and manifest the spirit of Budo in their daily lives, I believe a war-free and peaceful world is possible.

I believe that the Japanese people as a whole living on this small Asian island nation are people who long for world peace through a Budo-type spirit.