

Philosophical Essay on Bioaesthetics in Aikidō: Reflections on a Life Along the Martial Way

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ABSTRACT: Aikidō is a martial path founded by Morihei Ueshiba around 1940. The Nippon Budokan Foundation, an institution of considerable influence in Japan, defines *Aikidō* as a form of *budō*. *Budō* constitutes a physical culture that embodies Japanese tradition and spirituality, expressed through martial arts. In this thesis, martial arts are understood as bodily practices and techniques aimed at the formation of the subject, with *budō* serving as a guiding principle that shapes the subject's mode of being in relation to practice. As a philosophical essay, this work draws upon the notion of the aesthetics of existence present in Foucauldian reflections. Foucault's conception of the aesthetics of existence refers to a set of spiritual practices in which care of the self is imperative, with the objective of such practices being asceticism, enlightenment, and the formation of the moral subject. *Aikidō*, conceived as a technique of the self, governed by the imperative of *budō*, situates life as a work of art and the subject as the one who produces its own subjectivity—its very self.

KEYWORDS: Aikido. Budo. Aesthetics of Existence. Bioaesthetic. Martial Way.

I. INTRODUCTION

The martial path founded by Morihei Ueshiba received the designation of *Aikidō* approximately in 1942. Aikidō was among the practices that contributed to the recovery of Japan after World War II, being closely linked to education as well as to the knowledge embedded in the nation's cultural traditions. In the literature, *Aikidō* is understood as a martial path [1]. The idea of "path" present in *Aikidō*, expressed through the term "*budō*," is related to the Chinese concept of "Tao" [2]. When we examine the ideograms that constitute the expression *budō*, we encounter the meanings of "Bu," as "a path established by the gods that is true, good, and beautiful" [3, p. 26], and "Dō," as a notion describing a "spiritual path" [3, p. 11].

In the characterization of *budō*, we observe that Japanese practices bearing the suffix *Dō* (道) are understood as "paths." Examples include *Karate-dō*, *Jūdō*, *Aikidō*, *Kendō*, *Kyūdō*, among others. These terms have approximate translations that respectively signify: the path of empty hands; the path of *Aiki*, or the harmonization of energies; the path of the sword; and the path of the bow. Although this expression is Japanese, it is possible to discern similarities with other practices such as *Hapkido* and *Taekwondo*, which originate from Korea.

Throughout the investigation of the historical context and the philosophical aspects that shaped this martial path [4], as well as in the book (only in Portuguese) *Aikidō, care of the self, and physical education: tracing a path toward an art of living well* [5], we have delved into the meaning of *budō*. Further examination of this concept in the literature on *Aikidō* reveals that it is directly connected to the history, philosophy, and bodily techniques of Japan.

When considering practices designated as *budō* as bodily techniques, we draw upon Marcel Mauss [6] and analyze them as gestures and techniques that constitute historical, social, and cultural knowledge. These practices synthesize and simultaneously express the specific context of a group or society at a given time, shaped by their distinct modes of movement, the resources and instruments employed, the clothing worn, and other elements.

According to Kalina and Barczyński [7], people around the world associate martial arts with the term *budō*. However, this association has increasingly been redirected toward the field of combat sports and defensive arts, whereas *budō*, in the Japanese context, remains an important element of the nation's education and spirituality, reaching millions of practitioners worldwide.

In order to clarify the theoretical foundations employed in this study, our principal reference is the Japanese work *Budō: Martial Ways of Japan*, by the Nippon Budokan Foundation [1], through which we sought to discuss the concept of *budō*: a progressive method that moves "from the microcosm of 'technical exploration' to the macrocosm of 'self-exploration,' [...] a 'Path' (*dō* or *michi*) toward self-discovery" [1, p. 45]. This is the concept that underpins our philosophical thesis.

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Based on Franco's study [8], *budō* is reflected upon as a way of living and educating the body. This study is philosophically grounded in the notion of the aesthetics of existence found in the works of Michel Foucault, among which we highlight *The History of Sexuality 3: The Care of the Self* and *Hermeneutics of the Subject*. According to the philosopher, the aesthetics of existence expresses the "elaboration of one's own life as a personal work of art" [9, p. 290].

It is undeniable that discourses in Physical Education foster the idea of a lifestyle centered on care for the body and health. However, in a search conducted in the CAPES database of theses and dissertations, as well as in the SciELO collection of academic journals, we did not identify studies whose keywords associate "aesthetics of existence" or "stylistics of existence" with "physical education." By contrast, when searching with the term "lifestyle," the number of studies exceeds one million. To some extent, these data reinforce the hypothesis of Mendes and Gleyse [10, p. 509], who argue that the theme of care of the self, as discussed by Foucault, remains scarce in studies within the field of Physical Education in Brazil and France, while emphasizing "other concepts addressed by this French philosopher, such as disciplinarization, biopower, and biopolitics, for example."

The art of living, *tékhnē tou biou*, which is "a kind of spiral between the form of life and education" (Foucault, 2010, p. 395), is constituted upon bodily techniques and spiritual knowledge. The techniques of the self composes the spirituality, which, in turn, is sustained by the imperative of care of the self and is described as the aesthetics of existence or a mode of living. This theme was discussed by Foucault in the *History of Sexuality* collection and in *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*. In our studies, we identified that Foucault investigated morality in Greco-Roman society and during the emergence of Christianity. With the reconfigurations that care of the self underwent in the Christian period, beginning in the fourth century, we observe that spirituality came to be grounded in the notion of renunciation of the self—that is, based on a different understanding of the precept of knowing oneself, and on the notions of salvation and purification. Regarding the techniques of this period, those of confession, abstinence, and sacrifice stand out [11, 12, 13].

The articulation between the different concepts of *budō* and the aesthetics of existence emerges as a philosophical reinterpretation of life through bodily techniques associated with combat sports, martial practices, and forms of struggle. Accordingly, this philosophical essay is theoretically grounded in Nippon Budokan Foundation [1] and in Michel Foucault's notion of the aesthetics of existence [14, 11, 12, 13, 15], with the objective of reflecting on *budō* and its relation to life and modes of living through the lens of bioaesthetics.

II. BIOAESTHETICS WITHIN THE MARTIAL WAY OF AIKIDŌ

Bioaesthetics is a concept to exam life in its different ways of manifestation and expression. This essay structures the bioaesthetics through one of Japan's martial ways, also known as *budō* [1]. Historically, studies were conducted [16, 17, 18] and identified that *budō* has historical roots strongly marked in at least two periods of Japan: the Tokugawa era (or Edo, 1603–1868) and the Meiji era (1868–1912). During the Tokugawa period, through the precepts of *bushidō* (the way of the warrior) and the role of the samurai, as well as the social and cultural reorganization that followed the incorporation of Neo-Confucian philosophy and other religious systems such as Buddhism and Shintoism, significant changes occurred in modes of thought, values, social conduct, and other aspects essential to Japanese society. In the Meiji era, modernization and the process of re-signifying the traditional practices of *bushidō* transformed them into activities that carried historical, philosophical, religious, and spiritual knowledge, thereby preserving the ethical conduct of the former samurai [18].

Róbert [19] asserts that Confucius was one of the prominent figures of the fifth century BCE who founded a religion whose precepts were later reappropriated by *budō*. His conception of morality and behavior was integrated into martial techniques, which were to be employed solely for purposes of self-defense, in the sense of avoiding the incitement of violence, unnecessary fights, or conflicts.

For Tai [20] the practices carried out by the samurai can be regarded as arts of governing. In the author's interpretation, due to the strong influence of Confucian thought, these practices were redefined from the civic and military context into spheres closer to other arts, such as etiquette, poetry, dance, among others [20, 21].

After the Meiji era, another significant moment was World War II, during which, following Japan's defeat, various martial practices were prohibited in the country. With their subsequent reauthorization, *Aikidō* was among the practices reinstated, due to its close connection with the education of the Japanese people, while still preserving cultural and spiritual knowledge [16, 18].

Morihei Ueshiba [3, p. 118] considered that the *budō* of *Aikidō* should be practiced in a way that encompasses more than the technical dimension:

Aikidō must become the true budō. Aikidō is not a martial art for competition in tournaments. Those who practice Aikidō strive to open the eyes of the heart and to cultivate true sincerity. In Aikidō, we practice in order to realize misogi [the notion of purification]. We do not wish to remain stagnant; we seek to move freely. With strong determination, we aim to refine the spirit. Those who possess courage will hear the voice of aiki [an esoteric knowledge that links individual energy with that of the

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cosmos]. They will not attempt to reform others; above all, they will reform themselves. This is Aikidō. This is our message. It is our individual duty.

The perspective of refining and reforming oneself is found in Foucault's discussions [9, p. 291], where he concludes that "the subject constitutes itself through practices of subjection or, in a more autonomous manner, through practices of liberation." In this sense, the practices carried out in the mode of living compose the production of subjectivity and are constituted as an aesthetics of existence, an art of living.

The theme of the aesthetics of existence as an inventive production of the self does not, however, signify a return to the figure of the sovereign, foundational, and universal subject, nor an abandonment of the political field [...]. The aesthetics of existence, insofar as it is an ethical practice of subjectivity production, is both subjected and resistant: it is, therefore, an eminently political gesture [22].

In the intertwining of the aesthetics of existence with the meaning of the "martial path," we encounter the implication of life itself. This understanding of path encompasses the nuances of the practitioner's life throughout a long period of engagement in a given martial practice, to the point of being regarded as a "philosophy of life."

The expression "philosophy of life" arises to reinforce the possibility of personal transformation through budō, the martial path. Following Foucault's approach, Castro [23] described that the aesthetics of existence represents a mode of subjection to a set of rules and values to which the subject becomes bound. At this point, a deeper analysis of the aesthetics of existence is proposed.

In Foucault's discussions, the practices and recommendations that enable the subject to become his own object of analysis—whether through examination, concentration, memory, resistance, vigilance, among others—compose a body of knowledge referred to as spirituality. Such spiritual practices aim at ascension—*askésis* or asceticism, in Foucault's words [12, 15]—of the subject by and for himself, fostering a permanent and attentive consciousness. For Foucault [12, p. 94], *askésis* (the asceticism of the moral subject) is defined as follows:

The moral askésis is part of the paideia of the free man who has a role to play in the city and in relation to others: it does not require different procedures; gymnastics and tests of endurance, music and the learning of virile and vigorous rhythms, the practice of hunting and of arms, the care taken in presenting oneself well in public, the acquisition of aidos, which ensures respect for oneself through respect for others—all of this is, at the same time, the formation of the man who will be useful to the city and the moral exercise of the one who seeks to master himself.

The expression "spiritual practices" or "spirituality," in Foucault's studies [12], demonstrates a simultaneous relation to the fields of health and ethics. This mode of living reflects the form of subjection to rules, conduct, and exercises, with the purpose of shaping an ethical subject (Foucault, 2010). It is this complex that defines the notion of *tékhnē tou bíou*, of the aesthetics of existence, or the art of living [11, 13, 24].

Foucault [11, p. 15] referred to spirituality as a series of "searches, practices, and experiences such as purifications, asceticisms, renunciations, conversions of the gaze, modifications of existence, etc., which constitute, not for knowledge, but for the subject—for the very being of the subject—the price to be paid in order to gain access to truth."

Daily training in the martial paths is what leads to the construction of the subject's mode of being and the development of personality; it is what defines Japanese spirituality [19]. Regarding this spirituality related to *budō*, according to Róbert [19], it is conceived to promote tranquility and a modest lifestyle, with the aim of enabling us to gain knowledge of ourselves. According to the author, the spiritual values inscribed in the practices are described as follows: the formation of correct character, the spirit of justice, courage, perseverance, goodwill, compassion, courtesy, sincerity, honesty, honor, fidelity, self-control, wisdom, a sense of duty, and preparation for death.

On the theme of asceticism, we highlight the studies of Cynarski and Obodynski [25], which address 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, inner harmony, morality, the ascetic form of education, and psychosomatic training.

In this reflection on a path, a mode of living that transforms the subject, or of asceticism, Foucault [15, p. 282] understands it as consisting of "a certain number of exercises in which the subject places himself in a situation to verify whether he is capable or not of confronting events and of employing the discourses with which he is armed."

At this juncture, it is essential to clarify that the expression "*aesthetics of existence*" is a notion employed by Foucault to address the techniques of the self, particularly those present in Greek philosophy. In approaching the concept of bioaesthetics, we

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extend this framework to encompass life itself, the uses of the body, and the diverse expressions and manifestations of existence, thereby apprehending such phenomena as a form of language.

For example, art in Japan is connected to various fields of activity. Taking as reference a famous exhibition of the time, during the Meiji period, the Vienna World Exposition held in 1873, Japan was invited to present on “agriculture, sciences, calligraphy, musical instruments, industry, and architecture” [26, p. 51].

The conception of aesthetics and art in Japan represents forms of knowledge that were gradually developed and underwent the process of intervention by Western culture. The term aesthetics in Japan became present in discussions beginning with the Meiji Restoration, as part of the vocabulary and conceptual terminology [26]. For political reasons, this construction of knowledge about aesthetics represents not only “the change in the perspective of the gaze (from Japan to the West and vice versa), but also the construction of discursive practices and their statements” [26, p. 50–51].

Prior to the twentieth century, Japan did not possess a conceptual framework regarding the beautiful or the fine arts (*bijutsu*). Its conception was inherent to nature, as we can observe in the words of Geiner [26, p. 51]:

Until the Meiji period there were beautiful cherry blossoms in spring, but not an idea or conception of beauty abstracted from nature. Only in the second half of the nineteenth century, with government intervention and the more incisive presence of Westerners in Japan, did the conception of the beautiful begin to take shape.

The premise that we transform our own life into a work of art is the foundation of bioaesthetics. In Greiner’s discussions [26], aesthetics in Japan presented a notion of beauty related to Nature, expressed in various cultural practices such as literature, calligraphy, martial weapons techniques, floral arrangements, dances, theater, among others that composed the bodily techniques of the Japanese people and their way of living at the time. Although conceptually different, considering the Western and Eastern way of thinking, culture and philosophical approaches, the notions of aesthetics in Japan, from the Foucauldian perspective of the aesthetics of existence, allow us to analyze the discourses that permeate such practices, which include martial arts as an element fostering the Japanese ethos.

Based on Foucault’s analyses [12] in the *History of Sexuality 2: The Use of Pleasure*, the philosopher refers us to this mode of subjection, associating it with an ideal of life and of beautiful existence, whose constitution is achieved through practices and techniques of the self, which may be translated as an art of living. In Castro’s interpretation [27, p. 150], “an individual, then, accepts certain ways of behaving and certain values because he decides and wishes to realize in his life the beauty they propose. Life, as *bios*, is regarded as the material of a work of art.”

Bioaesthetics, therefore, when associated with the martial paths, *budō*, is grounded in art and martiality, intertwined within a single notion. The idea of turning life into a work of art is reinforced when we consider Foucault’s studies, especially in *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, where art is extended to life and this stylization of the self becomes a path of personal development. This discussion is described by Frédéric Gros as an ethics of the self, as we can observe below:

The ethical elaboration of the self is, above all, the following: to make one’s own existence—this essentially mortal material—the site for the construction of an order that is sustained by its internal coherence. Yet from the word “work” we must retain here more the artisanal than the “artistic” dimension. This ethics requires exercises, regularities, labor; but without the effect of anonymous coercion. Formation, in this sense, proceeds neither from civil law nor from religious prescription [9, p. 35].

In *Aikidō*, the expression “philosophy of life” may be considered an important synonym that conveys this mode and this art of living. By aesthetics of existence, we may understand it as the manifestation of a culture of the self, just as Foucault [11, p. 162] affirms:

If we call culture a hierarchical organization of values, accessible to all, but also the occasion for a mechanism of selection and exclusion; if we call culture the fact that this hierarchical organization of values demands from the individual regulated, costly, sacrificial conduct that polarizes the whole of life; and finally, if we call culture the circumstance that this organization of the field of values and access to these values can only be achieved through regulated, reflected techniques and through a set of elements that constitute a knowledge, then, to that extent, we may say that in the Hellenistic and Roman era there truly was a culture of the self.

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Recognizing *Aikidō* as a form of Japanese culture of the self, the idea of constant practice, of refinement through movement, leads the subject along an intrinsic path toward self-knowledge, toward the uses of the body, the mind, or the soul or spirit. In Greek philosophy, this form of culture of the self would be represented by the imperative of care of the self, that is, a set of spiritual practices that constitute the subject's mode of living [13].

The culture of the self permeates the aesthetics of existence and is considered by Foucault as a form of freedom within the play of power, of the government of the self and of others. It is a way of describing the subject's occupation with himself and the care of the self as the principle that "grounds its necessity, commands its development, and organizes its practice," and according to which "one must apply oneself to oneself, occupy oneself with oneself (*heautou epimeleisthai*)" [24, p. 56].

In modernity, according to Sikorski [28], the *bugei*—the practices that constitute modern budō—represent an educational system and a tool for character formation through martial arts, with the aim of fostering decorum, emotional stability, seriousness of intention, self-overcoming, self-discipline, and ascetic training. As reported by Kisshomaru Ueshiba [29, p. 287], *Aikidō* "confers the highest priority to mutual love among human beings," and its spiritual objective refers to "working for the well-being of all humanity, promoting love and peace, and at the same time plunging ever more deeply into training and practice with the aim of realizing the true essence of the universe" [30, p. 152].

According to Dodd and Brown [31], *budō* represents a form of self-development as part of a lifelong process that constitutes Japanese spirituality. In this sense, *budō* is considered an art of living or an art of life, as it fosters an ideal of honest and just living—or at the very least, one based on principles such as stopping violence, promoting peace, mastering the ego, and being one's own master. Other studies reinforce this perspective of personal development [32, 33, 34, 35, 36, 37, 38, 19, 39, 21].

The notion of a way of living intertwined with *budō* signifies that the subject must assume a "martial art"—in the Westernized expression of the term—as a path, a *Dō*, to be followed throughout the practitioner's entire life [40]. By understanding *budō* as a way of living, we are considering the subjection of individuals to exercises, to a labor upon themselves. Not merely as one of the forms of manifestation of a cult of the body, this occupation with oneself is what characterizes the care of the self and of the other.

We may understand, therefore, that bioaesthetics becomes a philosophical foundation for reinterpreting the martial paths. It is a form of cult of the body that appropriates philosophical and religious aspects and aims at self-improvement, personal development, happiness, and a good life [34]. Other studies can be cited in relation to the theme of the cult of the body associated with *budō*, such as Martins and Kanashiro [33], Weinberger [41], Miller-Lane [34], Espartero, Villamón and González [40], Fernandes [42], Matsui, Larsson, Yamahira et al. [43], Dodd and Brown [31], Róbert [19], Franco and Mendes [16], Barczynski, Graczyński and Kalina [44], and Sasaki [36].

As we have seen previously, the field of ethics in budō derives from the code of conduct formed from the way of life of the samurai, or bushidō. Sousa [45] assures that this path was strongly marked by Zen Buddhism, Shintoism, Confucianism, and Taoism. Regarding the representativeness of the samurai, it has an influential role of the image of these warriors in the social imagination, which fostered an idea of morality, rectitude, determination, and conduct. This entire configuration of spiritual practices within a way of living aims at self-mastery, or what Foucault calls the government of the self.

CONCLUSIONS

Budō is a way of living that enables its practitioners to know and to refine themselves—whether physically, emotionally, or spiritually—through ethical experiences promoted by martial arts training [20, 40] and through cognitive maturation and personality development [19]. Therefore, *budō* emerges from the union of culture, religion, and martiality, and is sustained by arguments that establish it as an imperative placing the subject in a lifelong process of self-constitution. The notion of aesthetics of existence allows us to reinterpret this concept of Oriental origin within our Western context. Looking more deeply into the discourses that permeate *budō*, several authors point out that it is a significant reductionism to compare *budō* to a combat sport. To assume such an attitude would be to disregard its philosophical and spiritual aspects, which shaped the Japanese nation and contributed to society.

We can see how the discourse of philosophy of life is laden with profound meanings. The concept of aesthetics, of life as a work of art, leads us back to the care of the self, to the occupation with oneself, in the same way as a sculptor who works upon himself, perfecting his craft and knowing himself more deeply to the point of acquiring new or refining existing skills, his way of living, and of carrying out his craft. It is a similar reflection of the Stoic practice of examination, "a review of the way of employing future time, and we equip ourselves, we reactivate the principles we shall need in order to put them into practice, to fulfill our duty" [11, p. 180].

The way of living is different from a hobby. It is an activity without end, enriched by life experiences, by relationships, and by the different ways of moving the body. In most accounts, we perceive that life is not separated from *budō*; it is a form of subjection to a code of conduct, to the guidance of a master—or director of conscience [11]—which presents itself as a cult of body, mind, and spirit. It is a practice for freedom, happiness, the government of the self and of others. It is a way of living that is not dissociated from others.

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Spirituality and martiality are the notions that, in our interpretation, establish the fabric of bioaesthetics within *budō*. The techniques of the self and the knowledge inherent in the cultural traditions of the martial paths constitute the structure and organization of *budō* as an *áskesis*—a path of asceticism, of enlightenment, of health, of cult of the body, of self-control, of developing temperance, of being one's own master. *Jūdō*, *Kendō*, *Aikidō*, *Kyūdō*, *Shōrinji Kempō*, *Sumō*, *Karatedō*, *Naginata*, and *Jukendō*, as described by the Nippon Budokan Foundation [1], are observed as arts of living.

Here we find arguments to conceive the martial path as a dispositive in a philosophical matter, in the sense of a bioaesthetics, which takes into account experience and life as a work of art [45]. This means that these are arts whose spiritual values are encoded in techniques, spaces, rituals, in the relations between master and disciple, and among other subjects, so as to promote a way of living the body.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

We would like to acknowledge the financial support from CAPES – Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel.

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