



**Robert E. Carter, *The Japanese Arts and Self-cultivation***

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THE EASY STYLE of writing and the information contained in *The Japanese Arts and Self-cultivation* make it a basic text to refer to when one wants to approach the particular issue of Japanese ethics. In his latest book (a companion to his previous *Encounter With Enlightenment: A Study of Japanese Ethics*, CARTER 2001), the philosopher Robert E. Carter offers us a clear guide to some religious, philosophical, and historical traditions within Japanese arts, to counter forcefully the prejudice that Japan does not have an ethics comparable to that of the West. The author's many years of experience in this field are clearly evident, and despite the fact that it is intended for a general audience, it is also useful for researchers interested in exploring new topics in the field of Japanese studies.

The first chapter of the book is devoted to presenting the core of what Carter intends for "self-cultivation"—the common issues—stressing the main points of complexity in the Japanese approach to body-mind interaction, meditation, enlight-

enment, and *ki* (energy). From the second chapter Carter explores the Japanese approach to ethics by screening in depth five examples of its traditional arts: aikido (ch. 3), landscape gardening (ch. 4), sado (tea ceremony, ch. 5), ikebana (flower arrangement, ch. 5), and pottery making (ch. 6). Each one of these chapters is projected to present these arts within the most important philosophical paradigms, theoretical characteristics, and historical issues involved, likewise to make clear the complexity of ethics and self-transformation. In the conclusion the author seeks to summarize and explain his point of view about what essentially makes Japan one of the most interesting fields to study ethics. This part closes by providing several points to ponder as Carter's discussion of self-cultivation touches on a wide range of issues.

Generally speaking, the various arts of Japan presented are supposed to be perceived in a wholly pragmatic manner rather than as mere artistry and aesthetic expertise. People in Japan seem able to appreciate that the application of the philosophical, social, ethical, and psychological dimensions of such training might lead to personal development. In a word, this is an "ethics" that is clearly articulated by Carter in this book. Carter uses an overall comparative approach to characterize the very Japanese positions and further moves on to elucidate his thesis. In his words, the most intriguing match point of these arts is that they are physical practices. However, from these arts that are perceived as practical skills, towards pathways to self-realization (for example, one's connection with the universe in aikido on page 31), to ethical cultivation with a strong social focus (using the rocks as metaphor on page 72), the point that Carter seeks to clarify is that practice of the different arts impacts different aspects of self-development, from an individual to a social-oriented level. Hence, these arts perfectly fit the Japanese approach to the cultivation of ethical behavior through concrete and physical action, instead of a so-called "Western approach" to ethics that is predominantly analytical and cerebral. *Mutatis mutandis*, the author concludes that morality and ethics are not learned in Japan through words, rules, or principles, but by physical and practical training. This is a very significant insight.

Unfortunately, Carter seems to suggest that in Japan morality, as well as ethics, is not based on a fear of punishment or a promise of rewards, but is dependent on the cultivation of specific social attitudes, in particular with reference to society and others having the ability to come together in correct human relations. That could be true, but the logical fallacy, in my opinion, is that instead of proposing significant evidence, the author provides quite creative and very commonsense ideas about thousand-year-old traditions, religious heritages, and esoteric contents.

Let us examine further the idea of a distinction between "punishment/rewards" and assumed Japanese ethics. I cannot agree with Carter's point, because there actually are rewards and punishment in self-development through Japanese arts. We are able to see differences only if we fail to theoretically analyse what really is the nature of punishment and rewards. This position is clearly defined in the sociological analysis of religious and ethically-related thought. In 1987, Stark and Bainbridge published their theory of religion, based on the classical notions of exchange theory, which

they hoped would provide such an analytical framework for forthcoming research. They argued that when people greatly desire a reward that they cannot acquire, they will accept compensators for these rewards in the form of “explanations that are not readily susceptible to unambiguous evaluation” (STARK and BAINBRIDGE 1987, 36). That’s exactly what we find in all of the arts as explained by Carter. At this level there is no difference, say, between Japanese budo (martial arts) and de Coubertin’s Olympic ideal, and that is why this evidence is not able to sustain a scientific theory, and Carter needs to rely on his readers to take his “guessing” at face value.

As a researcher in the field of martial arts, I personally find this book more helpful than many other similar books on my shelf, as there are times when I need to access quickly a variety of topics with no time to read in depth. However, as a sociologist, I cannot avoid pointing out once again my sense of perplexity on some points: several of the cases used are taken from the author’s personal experiences and lively interviews with masters of these arts that are hardly reliable as scientific samples. Moreover, most of the quotations come from professional literature that should be handled as an object of research instead of as supporting material. Carter’s discussion tells us something important about martial arts as Japanese arts, but I find that sometimes he allows for superficial statements and more than a few oversimplifications. With respect to aikido, respondents were not selected giving attention to the overall phenomenon, relevant literature, international debates, and the most advanced research in the field of Japanese martial arts. Most of Carter’s findings seem to come out of thin air, and this is mainly due to the overconfidence shown toward his respondents, who have presented aikido from their own point of view as a coherent ethical system. But what there is, instead, is a disorganized and only partially coherent collection of religious, ethical, and metaphysical beliefs which are only more or less shared by practitioners, and which are either transmitted by word of mouth or found in scattered publications mainly written by practitioners. In my opinion, this is the reason why in this book relevant definitions are often weak, frequently already disavowed by scholars, and based on no empirical evidence, a limitation that seems to pervade the book as a whole.

In conclusion, I believe that this book might be of great interest for those interested in ethics in general, and in Oriental ethics and arts specifically, and to the general public as well. The concise nature of this text enables points to be made effectively without having to wade through many theoretically-oriented books to find something interesting. This huge effort has been accomplished by Carter within the context of relevant philosophical debates, and allows readers the opportunity to form their own opinions. As a result, this book is a wonderful resource for everyone involved in any field of Japanese studies. For undergraduate students the book is reasonably simple, but even so allows for designing one’s research with a kind of a “road map” which covers most of the ethical issues in Japanese arts. For teachers the structure of the book is clear and very helpful, providing vivid explanations of more important or challenging concepts. But overall the book offers mere opinions

or documents for further discussion instead of a polished, comprehensive, scientific analysis. As the author himself emphasizes, there are many unanswered questions and areas needing more rigorous study.

#### REFERENCES

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