

真 善 美

SHIN

ZEN

BI

THE SEARCH FOR TRUTH, GOODNESS AND BEAUTY IN JAPANESE CULTURE

The search for Truth, Goodness and Beauty is universal and can be found in all cultures. In the West it is found in the writings of Plato in the 14th century where Truth, Goodness and Beauty are defined as "primary values" of reality. Indeed, these values can be found discussed throughout the tradition of western thought - from Socrates to Freud.

The Japanese were no less engaged with these values in their own culture, although they were not part of a rationalized philosophical framework until the introduction of western philosophical concepts in more modern times. Historically, the Japanese searched for the realization of these ideals directly in the pursuit of spiritual insight, through practice rather than through intellectual speculation.

As universal values that defines aspects of the ultimate reality, Truth, Goodness, and Beauty are represented as distinct qualities but directly experienced as an inseparably interrelated whole. Plato considered that such values as Truth, Goodness, and Beauty, were not merely human ideas, but parts of a perfect pattern embedded in the nature of things.

Shin, Zen, Bi - Truth, Goodness and Beauty, as they are understood in the traditional Japanese arts, seem to follow this assumption closely - with Truth as absolute rather than relative. It is that which is revealed in the moment. Japanese traditional culture places great emphasis on the living moment and the endless examination of our relationship to this moment of Truth.

Goodness has an ethical and social purpose, and in the Japanese arts it is the moral structure that brings together Truth and the external expression of Beauty. It is more than a concept - it is an expression of the natural order that is the order of things. Moral training requires the cultivation of *Heijoshin* - the ordinary mind or awareness that is not disturbed but is harmonious in every circumstance. To achieve this the practitioner of a traditional Japanese art must confront desire and those negative reactions that confound relationship. Goodness cultivated in this way transcends a conceptual moral framework and expresses Goodness in its deepest sense.

The acquisition of Beauty, the outward manifestation of Truth that stimulates and fulfills the senses, is the supreme goal of all arts in all cultures. In the western tradition of aesthetics, Beauty, being visible, is the main and most accessible of the "primary values". It opens up awareness, drawing the viewer towards what is Good and True. But while the West has separated aesthetic appreciation into ideas of beauty, in the East it is still the silent immediate experience of *Bi* (Beauty) that is inseparable from the Truth and Goodness of the moment.

Considering the relatively short period of time that Japanese culture has been exposed to western rationalism it is not so surprising that Japanese philosophical, ethical and aesthetic values have remained embedded in a deep tradition of worship and respect for a higher order emanating from the natural world - a relationship that is nonverbal and directly experienced.

In a traditional Japanese art or discipline this is a vital understanding for a deeper level of practice. To a westerner used to operating on meaning rather than intuition or feeling - or unable to surrender self-orientation to the recognition that our mind, body and spirit are not our own - such a framework of experience can be frustrating. to those who can accept it, it can be illuminating and can give insight into oneself and the world that is often difficult to find in our present western culture.

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